



**STATEMENT BY MR. NIRUPAM SEN, PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE,
ON STRENGTHENING OF THE COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN
AND DISASTER RELIEF ASSISTANCE OF THE UNITED NATIONS,
INCLUDING SPECIAL ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE AT THE 77TH PLENARY
MEETING OF THE 59TH SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON
JANUARY 18, 2005**

Mr. President,

In the early hours of the morning of Sunday, 26 December 2004 disaster struck. A massive earthquake in the west coast of northern Sumatra triggered powerful tsunamis that in a matter of hours wreaked untold damage to people living in the coastal areas and islands of India, as also Sri Lanka, Maldives, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Seychelles and Somalia and some other countries. We reiterate our condolences to all the affected countries. The death toll in India itself has been estimated at 10,700 with over 5,600 others missing. At a Special Meeting of leaders convened by ASEAN in the aftermath of the natural disaster, Mr. K. Natwar Singh, External Affairs Minister of India said, and I quote, "Existing vocabularies are inadequate to describe the intensity and magnitude of the horrendous catastrophe that hit a dozen countries of the Indian Ocean. The light went out of so many homes in so many countries in so short a span of time – only in a few minutes".

India did not avail of external assistance in dealing with the crisis. It, however, deeply appreciated the offers of help that poured in from several countries, the United Nations and non-governmental organisations. We would like to add our tribute to the tributes paid to the United Nations and to the personal commitment and dedication of the Secretary General. These spontaneous offers of support and solidarity at a time of crisis were critical in assuring the people of India that they were not alone in dealing with the enormity of the loss they had suffered. In a sense, the foundations of the UN have been strengthened not just by what it did in coordinating relief efforts but above all, by the colossal international solidarity shown by ordinary people throughout the world, by their contributions, and reflected in the actions of their governments.

India's experience of handling natural disasters has enabled it to develop well-defined mechanisms for disaster management at all levels. The lessons we learnt from the Orissa cyclone of 2000, the Gujarat earthquake of 2001 and other disasters have helped effect a paradigm shift in our approach to disaster management. This has proceeded from the conviction that development cannot be sustainable unless disaster mitigation is built into the development process at all levels. As a result, we were able to respond to the disaster

promptly through a massive effort launched by a well-oiled machinery, experienced and trained personnel and with the resources required to successfully deal with the unexpected disaster within our existing capacity. It also became clear to us that while our situation was serious, there were other affected countries where the need for immediate relief through the international community was even greater. Indian Air Force planes and Indian Naval ships have formed an almost continuous "bridge" of relief assistance to Sri Lanka and the Maldives in solidarity and friendship. Many hundred sorties were flown to deliver relief supplies and for search and rescue. The planes and ships also brought field hospitals, doctors and paramedical staff. Naval ships have completed surveys of Galle and Colombo harbours and are helping to restore telecommunications and communications in Trincomalee. Indian Naval ships have similarly delivered relief supplies and set up field hospitals in Aceh in Indonesia.

In India, the worst impact of the Tsunami was on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. With 1,300 island territories (with their fragile ecosystems) India has a special empathy with the needs, situation and vulnerabilities of Small Island Developing States (SIDS). At the recently concluded International Meeting of Small Island Developing States in Mauritius, India, therefore, outlined and discussed bilaterally with many of the States an expanded programme of cooperation to address these vulnerabilities. The Mauritius Declaration and the Strategy Document emphasised the need to do this and in this context, the need to set up early warning systems. As early as in 1994 itself, the Barbados Programme of Action had noted the importance of early warning systems and, therefore, of technology (telecommunication links and satellite facilities). In India, we have seen that cyclones used to wreak havoc in the coastal regions of Andhra Pradesh. However, now early warning systems using remote sensing and satellite technology have stopped such happenings. The Government has announced an allocation of several billion rupees for putting in place Tsunami early warning systems. With our capacities in the field of sensors and satellites, we are prepared to cooperate with the international community and particularly with the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian region for establishing such a system.

India was part of the Tsunami Core Group, initially consisting of the United States, Japan, Australia and India, established to facilitate a coordinated effort to deal with the disaster. India was invited because it had the military assets, capabilities and the resources to concretely help out with the relief efforts. In the context of the Core Group's operations in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, the Secretary General had the following to say yesterday, "I must say that the core group which the U.S. put together, made up of the U.S., Australia, India, Japan, Canada and Singapore, had made a real difference. Without their heavy lifting and clearing up for us to move in, it would have been a logistical nightmare. The roads were destroyed, airports were not easily usable, but they have been extremely helpful in doing that, and making sure with helicopters we could reach those who were difficult to reach. So the Government had allowed us to go in".

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the effort was on search, evacuation and relief. This has now shifted to the establishment of communications networks, prevention of outbreaks of epidemics and relief and rescue operations in the far-flung Nicobar Group of islands of India. Supplies to inaccessible areas have been air dropped. For the Andaman and Nicobar Group of Islands, an Integrated Relief Command has been constituted for effective action. There is a Calamity Relief Fund for immediate expenditure. There is an existing mechanism of 8 battalions of paramilitary forces equipped as Specialist Search and Rescue Teams and this has been extremely useful in dealing with the aftermath of the Tsunami. Within the first week of the disaster itself, the Government of India had incurred expenditure of US \$ 250 million on the relief and rehabilitation effort within India and a substantial amount in neighbouring countries. It has also given due importance to alleviating the psychological impact of the disaster through trauma counselling, early

reopening of schools and access to TV sets. Fortunately, resource mobilisation in India itself has been successful with contributions from the Indian public, from ordinary people amounting to at least US \$ 120 million, of which US \$ 100 million had been received in the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund alone by 10 January.

The focus is now on the phase of reconstruction and rehabilitation. It is axiomatic that those who suffered most were the poor, particularly those whose dependence on the sea made the crisis so much harder to bear. The Government of India, in cooperation with the United Nations and the international community, is committed to rehabilitating those affected by the crisis at the earliest possible. In the moving phrase of John Ruskin "This green tide that eddies by our doorstep is full of floating corpses". The response is one of sustained political will and international solidarity to carry out reconstruction to restore the livelihoods of the living and protect them to the extent possible from future disasters. In this effort, the role of the United Nations (agencies like UNDP) and multilateral institutions (like the World Bank) in implementing quick, creative and concrete programmes is critical. As the Sanskrit saying, many thousand years ago in India, has it "Vasudhaiva Kutumbhakam" ("the World is one family").

Thank you, Mr. President.

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