

RED CROSS - BILLIONS OF POOR URBAN DWELLERS FACE DISASTER RISK

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Nairobi - Over 2 billion urban dwellers in developing nations face a high risk from natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods, the Red Cross said Tuesday.

'For the first time in human history more people live in towns and cities than the countryside, but the world has not kept pace with this change,' International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) Secretary General Bekele Geleta said.

'This is why more people live in slums and informal settlements than ever before, which will lead to more people being affected by urban disasters than the terrible earthquake which struck Haiti earlier this year.'

In its [2010 World Disasters report](#), launched in the Kenyan capital Nairobi, the IFRC said that in any given year over 50,000 people can die as a result of earthquakes and 100 million can be affected by floods - a point illustrated by the devastating flooding in Pakistan.

The worst-affected are often vulnerable city dwellers in slums and settlements, currently standing at around 1 billion, according to the IFRC.

'From our point of view, urban is the new rural,' Matthias Schmale, the IFRC's Under Secretary for Development told journalists in Nairobi. 'The majority of the world's population is cramming into cities.'

By 2020, 1.4 billion people will be living in slums or settlements - which have no services and no hazard-reducing infrastructure - raising the risk factor, the IFRC said.

The report called on governments and aid agencies to act to protect vulnerable populations, saying both had failed to adapt to the new environment.

'The crisis of urban poverty, rapidly growing informal settlements and growing numbers of urban disasters arises from the failure of governments to adapt

their institutions to urbanization,' said David Satterthwaite, the report's lead writer.

'It stems also in part from the failure of aid agencies to help them to do so - most aid agencies have inadequate or no urban policies and have long been reluctant to support urban development at a sufficient scale.'

Schmale pointed to the difference between the death tolls in the earthquakes in Haiti and Chile as an example of how good governance and infrastructure can affect the death toll in a natural disaster.

'Good governance counts, especially from local governments and authorities, it is about investment into the right things,' he said. 'The earthquakes in Haiti and Chile are compared in the report ... they were of similar magnitude and with very different outcomes.'

Over 200,000 people died in Haiti's earthquake, while fewer than 1,000 perished in Chile.

Potential climate change-related disasters are also far more likely to affect poor urban dwellers, the report said.

More than half of 37 cities in Africa with over 1 million residents lie in low-elevations coastal zones, the IFRC said. As an example, the report said a sea-level rise of just 50 centimetres would flood 2 million people from their homes in Alexandria, Egypt.

Slum dwellers are also plagued by deaths from communicable diseases, traffic accidents and fires, the report said.