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13TH Ministerial Session of the European and Mediterranean Major Hazards Agreement

Statement by Eladio Fernández - Galiano, Executive Secretary of the European and Mediterranean Major Hazards agreement (EUR-OPA)

Check against delivery

Disasters have been striking Europe and the world in the last months. Let me recall with sadness the terrible fires the island of Madeira this year, but also the earthquake that hit Central Italy in August left nearly 300 hundred people dead and as many wounded. Early this month Hurricane Matthew devastated Haiti, leaving a toll of over 1.500 people dead and 35.000 homeless, just six years after one of the most devastating earthquakes in the region ever. All those disasters combined may hinder the capacity of some countries to develop and prosper.

As you know, the Council of Europe is an organisation focused on the protection of Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law. We worry about the most vulnerable people and know well that disasters affect them more than other groups of citizens and create or increase inequalities within our societies.

In 1987 the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe created an instrument to promote governmental co-operation in field of Disaster Risk Reduction and dealing with emergencies "the European and Mediterranean Major Hazards Agreement (EUR-OPA)". Next year we shall celebrate with you all the 30th anniversary of this Partial Agreement, which is also open to countries of European neighbourhood, in particular Mediterranean states that are not Member States of the Council of Europe.

In the last six years, since the last Ministerial Session of the Agreement held in St Petersburg in 2010, we followed the guidelines you gave us to focus in different areas of work, including those connected to Council of Europe values. The Committee of Permanent Correspondents adopted its Resolution 2011 -1 on Ethical Principles relating to Disaster Risk Reduction and contributing to people's resilience to Disasters which provided a conceptual platform to build further work on vulnerable groups. We continued our activities related to children, promoting their risk education and awareness and also carried out specific programmes on resilience of people with handicaps and migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.

One of the General Principles in the Ethical Principles adopted by EUR-OPA, is the Principle of Non-discrimination that is to be applied to people with disabilities. This group of citizens is confronted with a number of difficulties regarding disaster risk reduction. They may have problems in obtaining the correct information on prevention or even in receiving alerts in the case of emergency situations. There may be physical barriers to enter or leave a building or emergency services may not be prepared to efficiently handle people with some disabilities. We have produced some guidance and a toolkit of good practice, in the understanding that promoting disaster risk reduction for them benefits the whole society and improves efficiency

of rescue services during emergencies. Disability is just part of human diversity. Promoting human rights by Including People with Disabilities in Disaster Preparedness and Response is much at the heart of the Council of Europe's mission.

In a similar way the EUR-OPA Agreement has focussed its attention on migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Many European cities have over 10% or even 15% of migrants. Some of them have arrived recently and may not be fluent in the national language. They often live in more risky places or may not be familiar with risks the locals know well. We have known in the last two years an unprecedented flow of refugees from war areas into Europe. They are a vulnerable group that needs special attention and which can also contribute with their intelligence and their skills to the resilience of all. Later today you shall be presented with a Recommendation addressing the problem of the resilience of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.

Europe is now undergoing a period of uncertainty, in which European values seem questioned by populism and the generosity, openness and diversity of our societies, which have been essential to our economic success and are part of our identity, are no longer seen as important assets but as problems. Irrational dislike or fear of migrants plays an important role in the way some people oppose European construction or think it has gone wrong. The vote of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union is a worrying sign. Yet migrants contribute to make our society more vibrant and successful, more intelligent, more resilient. We cannot forget that values are at the heart of European construction, they are part of our common DNA. The Council of Europe has been very active since 1949, the year of its creation, in promoting legal standards in human rights, democratic governance, rule of law and we are also naturally concerned by the security and wellbeing of all people on our continent.

Our Organisation has been working during ten years with a hundred cities on migrant issues in a programme called Intercultural Cities. Cities are indeed at the frontline of refugee integration response as refugees move mostly to urban centres in the hope of finding a sense of community, safety and economic independence. Cities often have to react in a matter of days and find pragmatic solutions that alleviate the plight of distressed people without fuelling resentment within the local population. It is important that migrant feel safe in cities, safe also from disasters.

Later you will be also be presented with some guidance for future work for the EUR-OPA Agreement, which we have based largely in the priorities defined last year in Sendai, the well-known Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. We have teamed with our colleagues in UN-ISDR and the European Commission to harmonise and find appropriate synergies in the field, so that states do not receive from all these international organisation conflicting messages, taking also care of the mandate, specificities, strengths and constrains of each organisation.

Earlier this month, in the annual meeting of the European Forum for Disaster Risk Reduction held in Helsinki the participants called for strengthened coherence and mutually reinforcing implementation between the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and other recent international agreements and processes, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement on climate change and the New Urban Agenda. We also endorsed the Actions of the EFDRR Road Map in support of the implementation of the Sendai Framework and agreed to implement it, as appropriate, through the establishment of working groups on emerging issues.

It is important to acknowledge in this context the excellent scientific and technical work which the network of specialised Centres of the Agreement has carried out over the years with the support of governments and other partners. There have been many innovative projects these last six years, providing the Agreement with a solid technical base on which governments can rely. In the Medium Term Plan that will be presented, you will decide which areas of work to prioritise, so that from words we may pass to action.

I do not want to close my speech without thanking Minister Constança Urbano de Sousa and her staff for their excellent hosting and the insuperable hospitality of this country and of this luminous City of Lisbon.

Muito obrigado