

**Aruba, October 17, 2012** - Natural disasters are getting more frequent and more destructive by the year. But prevention is more effective than cure.

Natural disasters are more frequent, and their effects more destructive, than at any time in recorded history. The number of people vulnerable to them has risen by 50,000 to 60,000 per decade since the early 1970s. At least half of their casualties are children. We like to think of ourselves as victims, but are we not also instigators? What we used to describe as Acts of God are sometimes and to some extent Acts of Man.

In the capacity as UNICEF Ambassadors for Humanitarian Emergencies people have travelled to some of the most afflicted countries in the world and obtained an insight into the destructiveness of these disasters. Climate change, deforestation and the desertification of arable land have all had their part to play and children are always the most vulnerable.

One example is Somalia, where the effects of two decades of civil war have been aggravated by persistent droughts and falling water tables. Another is Darfur, a continuing emergency that now gets none of the attention it received eight years ago: not that its problems are solved, they are merely ignored. It is off the radar; but hundreds of thousands of people remain displaced in south west Sudan by a conflict that set Arab nomads in competition with African farmers for dwindling resources of water and arable land. The Janjaweed, Arab militia backed by Khartoum, were responsible for some appalling atrocities, including ethnic cleansing and the poisoning of village wells. The desertification played a part: the conflict may come to be seen as the first war of climate change.

Natural and man-made disasters connect with each other. One of the countries most affected by the catastrophic tsunami of December 26th 2004 was Sri Lanka. When the great wave swept all before it on the eastern shore of the island one of the places it struck hardest was Batticaloa, the waterside headquarters of a brigade of Sri Lankan army. To defend themselves against the Tamil Tigers (the war was then still in progress) the Sri Lankan soldiers had laid a belt of landmines around the garrison. The landmines were swept away by the tsunami. There were maps of the old minefield, but not of the new one.

Again it was the children who were chiefly vulnerable. A high proportion of landmine and anti-personnel mine casualties in all conflicts

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