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STATEMENT BY

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**Dear Mr. Schaar,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I would like to begin my presentation by stressing my distinct pleasure to address such an esteemed audience at the “International Disaster Reduction Conference”. Let me also take this opportunity to extend my thanks and appreciation to all the organizers of this event. I am confident that our deliberations today and over the next two days will be more than successful.

There is no need to explain the damages inflicted by natural disasters, either in the form of human loss or their impact on national economies. In today’s world, it would not be an exaggeration to state that the negative impact of natural disasters is almost tantamount to the losses caused by devastating armed conflicts. We know that the situation becomes even worse for more vulnerable societies. However, we also know by experience that no country, rich or poor, is immune from natural disasters. Hurricane Katrina last year was the most vivid example on this fact. Therefore, responding effectively to natural disasters is the common challenge of our century.

Early and effective preparation constitutes the only way to enhance the response capacities for natural disasters and thus to alleviate their negative impacts on our societies as much as possible. It appears that in every disaster-stricken country or region, several initiatives, sometimes ad hoc or on a regional basis, commence after the disaster takes place, thereby rendering the rescue efforts mostly ineffective.

Legal arrangements, physical mitigation and preparedness are the key elements in providing emergency assistance and relief in response to disasters.

On the other hand, international assistance and solidarity are required to support the national and local humanitarian efforts, so that they can quickly and efficiently reach the affected communities. In order to achieve this goal, significant preparatory framework is necessary.

“International Disaster Response Law (IDRL)” Program, in this sense, is a unique tool for states, international and non-governmental organizations to better address the operational challenges in international relief operations by minimizing legal and administrative obstacles that could be faced during such operations. A sustainable development can only be possible through a collective mitigation strategy.

Waiting until a disaster has stricken and then to start devising rules for the access of international actors, seriously hampers the speed and efficiency of humanitarian efforts. Therefore, countries need to develop and expand their existing laws on disaster response in order to ensure that international relief can arrive in the vital first hours, rather than days after a disaster.

Nevertheless, legal research and consultations so far indicate that the scope and implementation of existing regulatory frameworks fall short of this ideal, sometimes even in developed countries, where there is a relatively relaxed regulation of flow of persons and goods.

Visas, customs, and registration of foreign actors seem to be the most crucial obstacles in times of a natural disaster. It is expected that national laws provide opportunity for adequate information sharing with international actors; a central focal point with the government to address international aid issues; expedited visa procedures for relief personnel; speedy customs clearance requiring minimum documentation; exemption from duties and taxes on relief personnel, goods and equipment.

Influx of aid workers and entry of international relief goods and equipment, lack of knowledge of the value of relief material, lack of efficient communication and coordination could pose serious problems affecting the national efforts of the country concerned. Even though NGOs have an increasing positive role in this field, sometimes it may be difficult for some countries to adequately monitor and coordinate the efforts of foreign NGOs, most of which perform well, but some of which seem to have a comparatively poor performance. However, I believe it should always be kept in mind that each state has the responsibility first and foremost to take care of victims of natural disasters occurring on its territory. Therefore, promoting an all-encompassing legislation in the shape of IDRL does not mean a decay of political sovereignty of states.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,
Distinguished Participants,**

Having presented some general thoughts on the subject, I would now like to share with you the bitter, yet highly informative experience Turkey has encountered in the recent years.

Due to its geology, topography and meteorological conditions, Turkey has always been vulnerable to various kinds of natural disasters. These disasters, coupled with physical and social vulnerability, have caused excessive losses of life, injury and damage to property.

The two fatal earthquakes of 1999 claimed more than 18 thousand lives in Turkey. Around 43 thousand people were injured. More than 400 thousand buildings collapsed or were seriously damaged.

On the other hand, since these earthquakes have hit the industrial heart of the country, we estimate that approximately 20 million people have been indirectly affected.

In the wake of these unfortunate disasters, a national consensus was reached to introduce radical changes to the country's disaster policies in order to bring about sustained economic growth and welfare of the citizens. In addition to the present legislation concerning emergency relief organizations and the state of emergency), fundamental amendments in the national legislation were introduced and new laws were enacted.

In this period, the magnitude of the catastrophes steered the Government to submit an urgent bill to the Parliament. This bill permitted the Government to pass whatever legal instrument was deemed necessary through an instrument known as the statutory decree. The bill was passed just ten days after the August 1999 earthquake. During seven months following the earthquake, the Government promulgated 7 new Laws and 32 statutory decrees to improve the national disaster management system and to better respond to the needs of the victims in the disaster-stricken areas. "Compulsory Earthquake Insurance" was introduced, obliging all existing and future-privately owned property to contribute to the "Turkish Compulsory Insurance Pool", administered by a new entity called the "Natural Disaster Insurance Council" in order to create a fund for use in disasters to provide shelter to the homeless.

As part of the restructuring efforts, new central organization for disaster management, namely General Directorate of Turkish Emergency Management attached to the Prime Ministry and the National Earthquake Council were established.

Currently, the General Directorate of Turkish Emergency Management, the General Directorate of Disaster Affairs of the Ministry of Public Works and Settlement and the General Directorate of Civil Defense of the Ministry of Interior have overall responsibilities with regard to disaster management in Turkey. In terms of humanitarian assistance to be sent to countries in need, the coordinating body is the General Directorate of Turkish Emergency Management.

Moreover, municipalities and governorships are also responsible in terms of coordination of post-disaster activities as well as mitigation efforts.

The Turkish Red Crescent Society is an integral part of the disaster management structure in Turkey. It has representations at national, provincial and district levels. It is active in the areas of disaster preparedness and response, blood-transfusion services, HIV/AIDS, and first-aid training. The Turkish Red Crescent Society also has a very well equipped "Disaster Operation Center" in Ankara. In the aftermath of 1999 earthquake, just like other relevant bodies, the Turkish Red Crescent Society has also initiated a restructuring process with a new mission and vision.

Turkish Armed Forces is an important part of central and local disaster management in Turkey. Following the August 1999 earthquake, it was decided to improve its capabilities on specialized search and rescue missions in order to better cope with large-scale natural disasters. Therefore, a battalion size special unit, with the acronym of "DAK" was formed to conduct search and rescue operations.

There are many ministries, state agencies and institutions the duties and responsibilities of which are clearly indicated in the "Regulation Concerning the Fundamentals of Emergency Aid Organizations and Planning Associated with Disasters". On the other hand, there are many NGOs, foundations, associations, search and rescue groups involved in disaster preparedness and response activities. A significant majority of these organizations engage in direct relations with international organizations.

The new structure and legal instruments have established the elements of disaster management legislation in Turkey. However, we are well aware that an effective disaster management system can not be created with legislative efforts alone. There is still a need to increase the national disaster management capacity and awareness through review and – if necessary - reformulation of these instruments in order to adapt ourselves to the specific modern concepts of disaster management. Avoiding duplication and overlapping of authorities in the existing disaster management system, providing sufficient financial and material means, ensuring active participation of the communities at risk, educating public and training technical personnel, supervising the disaster-resistant building regulations especially in rural areas are some of the elements on which we focus our attention in Turkey.

Having in mind that national studies should be supported by international efforts as well, Turkey also increased its contributions vis-à-vis humanitarian aid. I am

glad to claim that Turkey has over the last ten years become an “emerging donor country”. Almost 250 million Dollars spent for humanitarian effort only in 2005 and hosting the OCHA Donor Support Group meeting in İstanbul in April 2006 are solid indicators of this fact.

Nowadays Turkish Government, Red Crescent Society and NGOs are also very active in the sending humanitarian assistance to Lebanon.

On the other hand, Turkey has started to actively join the emergency preparedness activities of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs via Government and NGO participation.

The most visible example of its thematic contribution is the UN General Assembly Resolution 57/150 of 2002. One of the lessons drawn from the 1999 earthquakes was the recognition of the importance of strengthening international urban search and rescue assistance and rendering it more efficient. It is in this vein that, Turkey has assumed the responsibility to present a Resolution on this topic to the 57th General Assembly in 2002. Resolution 57/150 was first of its kind and a product of long and lengthy deliberations and discussions. It was co-sponsored by 58 states.

Operative paragraph 3 of this Resolution, urged “*all States to simplify or reduce the customs and administrative procedures related to the entry, transit, stay and exit of international urban search and rescue teams and their equipment and materials taking into account the extent of utilization of the Guidelines of the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group*”. This was one of the unique aspects of this resolution. Turkey believes that this Resolution should be followed up. That is why we raise the importance of this resolution in every pertinent humanitarian fora.

I would also like to draw your attention to a particular case study recently conducted by the Turkish Red Crescent Society on the IDRL work in Turkey.

As you might know, the IFRC and the Turkish Red Crescent Society have co-sponsored the “European Forum on IDRL” in Antalya, Turkey” on 25-26 May 2006. 22 national societies, 11 Governments, 9 UN agencies and 4 NGO networks attended the Forum to discuss the common legal response in international disaster response. The Forum, being the first of five consultative regional forums that IFRC will organize on this issue until the 30th International Conference in 2007, aimed at reviewing common legal issues encountered by European actors; analyze present situation on international, regional and national regulatory frameworks; and identify means to strengthen those frameworks. The Turkish Red Crescent presented a detailed and comprehensive case study to this

Forum. We believe its contents are interesting to all. In our view, hosting of this Forum and presenting a case study at the Forum shows the commitment and support of the Turkish Red Crescent Society and Turkey to this issue.

Dear Participants,

As my closing remarks, I would like to reiterate once again that the world is increasingly becoming interdependent. Therefore, we have to act in a spirit of partnership and solidarity to ensure a better world, to save human lives and to protect our environment. Bilateral, multilateral, regional and international cooperation significantly enhance our ability not only to minimize the effects of disasters and ensure preparedness, but also to respond effectively and recover easily through the transfer of technology, and sharing of information and resources.

There are still some problems which should be addressed. To this end, comprehensive approaches should be brought to disaster legislation and disaster response operations, with a working cooperation of public and private institutions, NGOs and international organizations.

While looking at this matter, I believe we should ask the following questions to ourselves:

- How can we reach the affected people in the shortest time and in the most efficient way?
- How can we increase the cooperation among all the actors?
- Could there be an International Disaster Reduction Law that is acceptable to all?
- If not, how can we come up with an optimal compromise?
- And of course, how can the obstacles of domestic legislations be lifted?

The more we find concrete and working answers to these questions, the smoother the whole system will function. I believe it is our collective duty to bring about new solutions to these questions at hand.

Thank you very much.