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## Disasters the 'new normal'

By John Holmes

The 2007 global catalogue of calamities — [hurricanes in the Caribbean](#), [droughts in Africa](#), [wildfires in the USA](#), massive flooding [throughout Asia and Africa](#) — reads like a Hollywood disaster script. But these catastrophes were very real for tens of millions of people whose lives were turned upside down.

As we enter a new year, it's tempting to think the worst could be over. But nothing is further from the truth, given the increasingly visible effects of global warming. Instead, 2007 represents the 'new normal' of extreme weather events that calls for a rapid transformation in how we prepare for and respond to nature's hazards.

Climate change is already transforming our planet. If the world's scientists are right, the onslaught of droughts, flooding, intensive storms and heat waves last year is but a curtain raiser on our future. Even if no single event can reliably be attributed to global warming, the trends as [cited by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) are clear — and clearly accelerating.

In just a generation, the number of disasters triggered by these natural hazards has increased threefold, while direct and indirect losses have multiplied fivefold. Rapid urbanization and rising population density in coastal mega-cities such as Dhaka, Lagos and Sao Paulo mean the [threat of a mega-disaster](#) is also rising rapidly.

## Economic toll rising

In 2006, [426 disasters](#) affected 143 million people and resulted in \$35 billion in economic damage. The number of floods and related disasters was 43% greater than the 2000-2004 average. Last year, my office at the U.N. issued an unprecedented [15 funding appeals](#) for sudden natural disasters, five more than the previous annual record.

All but one of these disasters resulted from extreme weather. Thankfully, 2007 did not spawn a catastrophe on the scale of the [2004 tsunami](#). But the magnitude of a disaster is not measured solely by the death toll. The ripple effect from lost livelihoods has a devastating effect on local prosperity and undermines development.

Hundreds of millions more people could require humanitarian assistance as climatic changes generate [devastating consequences](#) for global food and water supplies and

adversely affect public health, migration flows and, not least, political stability, as battles for resources intensify. While all countries will suffer, not all will suffer equally. Those that are [least responsible](#) for causing global warming are likely to pay the first and heaviest price.

### **We need to adapt**

Irrespective of whatever emission cuts may occur in a post-Kyoto Protocol future, it is impossible to rewind the clock on the greenhouse gases already in the atmosphere. Their effects are irreversible, leaving us no choice but to adapt.

Adaptation means reducing our exposure to known risks and mitigating their possible effects. The key point is this: A natural disaster need not automatically result in human catastrophe.

Simple, cost-effective measures will strengthen our resilience, save lives, and prevent the pauperization of millions tomorrow. When Cyclone Sidr struck Bangladesh in November, some [40,000 volunteers with bullhorns](#) and bicycles helped move more than three million people out of harm's way.

We can also build safer — and smarter. U.S. property owners who implemented all the recommended hurricane protection methods suffered [only one-eighth](#) as much damage from Hurricane Katrina as those who did not. In China, the [World Bank estimates](#) that a \$5 million investment in non-structural flood prevention along the Yangtze River averted damages of \$15 million during the 1996 floods, with millions more saved in subsequent years.

The 'new normal' requires massive improvement in how we prepare for and respond to these natural disasters. Prevention is always better than cure. Adaptation is an essential investment in our future. There is no time to lose, and much to gain by acting immediately, before the next disaster strikes.

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