

SPEECH BY COL (RET'D) GEORGE ROBINSON, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER,
OFFICE OF DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND MANAGEMENT
NATIONAL CONSULTATION ON EARTHQUAKE SAFETY IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Planning, Economic and Social
Restructuring and Gender Affairs, Mr. Joseph Howard

Principal and Pro Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies, Professor
Clement Sankat

Chief Fire Officer

Director of the UWI Seismic Research Centre Dr. Richard Robertson,

Leaders from the UWI Community

Representatives from the ODPM

Representatives from the UWI Seismic Research Centre

Distinguished Participants in this two day Consultation

Members of the Media

Good morning!

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Earthquakes cannot be eliminated. However, the injury, loss of life, and property damage associated with them can be reduced and recovery accelerated. This can be accomplished by making earthquake-loss reduction part of an on-going programme, rather than a hasty response to hazard impact. An earthquake-loss-reduction programme entails three basic elements: (1) understanding the nature and extent of the earthquake risk, (2) taking actions to reduce the risks, and (3) establishing policy to guide the development of effective risk-reduction programmes.

Seismic risk reduction is a complex challenge requiring input from many technical and policy disciplines working together to understand the complex issues associated with earthquakes. Seismic risk reduction therefore, is a prime example of a current problem that requires a problem-focused rather than discipline specific approach to cut across political, social and technological boundaries to find lasting solutions. The Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management is pleased to partner with the UWI Seismic Research Centre to initiate such a conversation. We intend to initiate similar conversations on some of the key risks facing our country with some of our partners and collaborators.

Understanding the complex challenges in seismic risk reduction requires understanding the context of the problem. Environmental constraints, development pressures, demographic changes, technical challenges and a fragmented institutional and policy framework all shape the nature of these challenges.

By working together, the seismic research community, funding agencies, practitioners and policy makers can reduce seismic risk and build strategies that promote risk reduction. Encouraging collaboration among the many disciplines and defining research activities around critical problems are important steps in this direction. This multi-disciplinary community must continue to work together to address the complex challenges that remain to be solved.

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Perception of risk is an important issue. Without the society's understanding of the type and level of risk, it is very difficult if not impossible to develop and implement strategies for earthquake risk reduction. Our Society confronts many different risks. Unless it is clear to our citizens how earthquake risk fits into their hierarchy of risks, it is very hard for them to 'get excited' or do something about that risk. So the first and foremost requirement for our society to implement needed risk reduction strategies is to understand the earthquake risk and how it relates to other human-made or natural risks.

There is a widespread perception that to do anything about mitigating earthquake risk, the immediate or short-term costs would be considerable. The technical community has propagated this perception. The message has been that earthquake-resistant structures require specialised knowledge and that the cost is enormous to build earthquake-resistant structures or to upgrade existing structures to some acceptable level of resilience.

However, mitigating earthquake risk also includes raising awareness of the citizens and self-help solutions. Community based retrofitting of schools and other important structures can also be achieved without great costs. Development of disaster management plans and implementing those plans can help post-disaster recovery. Risk transfer options such as insurance pools can be developed. Implementing some of these options can make a great impact on the risk profile of that community.

This consultation over the next two days will highlight attention to seismic risks through rigorous scientific assessment of the likely consequences of seismic activity. The physical, economic and social impacts expected from earthquakes would be clearly visualised and evaluated and societal stakeholders are expected to contribute fully to this exercise.

We at the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management are of the view that Comprehensive Disaster Risk Management has applicability wherever seismic hazards confront communities in Trinidad and Tobago where our development is heavily dependent on industrialisation and the built environment. The ODPM has adopted a

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CDM Policy Framework in keeping with the global shift from a focus solely on preparedness and response to comprehensive disaster management. Consequently, we are now placing greater emphasis on prevention and mitigation. The hallmarks of CDM are the comprehensive scope of its risk assessments, which extend from the geologic sources of seismic risks to their societal consequences. It includes the broad range of consequences that are assessed, from physical impacts on the built environment to economic and social impacts on affected populations.

We are interested in the mitigation options that would be examined during the discussion among stakeholders of the impact of mitigation initiatives on seismic consequences and the levels of associated uncertainty. We are of the view that when expected consequences reach acceptable levels, the next issue for examination will be the development of seismic response and recovery plans tailored to these impacts.

Some of the expected outcomes of this consultation are:

- Further assessment of the hazard to refine expected impacts,
- Reconsideration of what is acceptable, or
- Reduction of expected consequences through mitigation
- Future collaboration with agencies involved in this consultation on their plans and programmes that can have an impact on seismic risk reduction

Our participation in this National Consultation in Earthquake Safety is in keeping with the ODPM's adoption of a more scientific and proactive approach to fulfilling its mandate. We also embrace the opportunity to partner with the University of the West Indies Seismic Research Centre once again and to deepen relationships with some of our key stakeholders. I look forward to two days of productive discussions as we map a way forward for earthquake safety in Trinidad and Tobago.

Ladies and Gentlemen thank you very much and enjoy the consultation