Disaster Hot Spots on a Crowding Planet

By Andrew C. Revkin

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The New York Times Map, adapted from the new United Nations study of global disaster risk, uses color to chart the highest combined risk of death from landslides, earthquakes, floods and cyclones. White areas are not estimated. Redder means more risk; greener less. (Click here for larger version.)

J. Adam Huggins for the International Herald Tribune Rapid urbanization is greatly amplifying the risk from disasters in countries facing inevitable hazards like earthquakes and cyclones. Here, a crowded street in Delhi, India.

It’s becoming increasingly evident that the path toward more or less 9 billion people will see terrible losses in inevitable disasters. The United Nations has been making the case for more proactive efforts under the rubic of “disaster-risk reduction” since the world’s nations proclaimed the 1990’s the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. I touched on this shortly after the tsunami swept the Indian Ocean, in a piece called “The Future of Calamity.”

A new global assessment of countries’ exposure to hazards and efforts to limit losses is being released at a conference in Bahrain on Sunday. I have a news story that provides highlights, but the 200-page document itself, the Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction, is worth a deep dive.

Some experts on disaster preparation aren’t happy with some aspects of the report, but many told me it’s still a helpful window on the outsize vulnerability of a few places on the planet where the costs of calamity are highest. A prime factor contributing to increased vulnerability is urbanization, with about one billion people already crammed into what are euphemistically called “informal” settlements in and around cities, better known as slums, and 25 million more moving in each year. These communities are usually built on steep slopes, floodplains or other vulnerable spots. Another is ecological damage, like the loss of mangroves in Myanmar that appears to have allowed the flood surge there to propagate inland more readily. The report projects that human-caused climate change will progressively tip the odds toward more trouble. But it stresses that increasing resilience to disasters can help limit climate risks, as well, even as it reduces poverty and potentially boosts global security.

I’ll be adding some experts’ perspectives on the report in the comment space below as they come in. Here’s a video produced by the United Nations summarizing what officials there see as the main points:
disasters, geography, resilience, risk, Sustainability

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By 2050 or so, the world population is expected to reach nine billion, essentially adding two Chinas to the number of people alive today. Those billions will be seeking food, water and other resources on a planet where, scientists say, humans are already shaping climate and the web of life. In Dot Earth, reporter Andrew C. Revkin examines efforts to balance human affairs with the planet’s limits. Supported in part by a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, Mr. Revkin tracks relevant news from suburbia to Siberia, and conducts an interactive exploration of trends and ideas with readers and experts.
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