

Games are helping kids prepare for disasters

New methods used to teach survival skills

Story by MICHAEL CASEY

AP

In the 1950s, American children were taught to "duck and cover" in the event of a nuclear explosion.

Now Asia is stepping up its campaign to prepare school children for calamities. But instead of preparing for a nuclear Armageddon, the United Nations says schools are turning to games, plays and stories to teach children how to survive the earthquakes, tsunamis and floods that routinely ravage the region.

"The 2004 tsunami and the Pakistan earthquake in 2005 have been catalysts in getting people to recognise the crucial importance of disaster risk reduction," said Gary Ovington, a regional emergency education specialist for Unicef. He was speaking on the sidelines of a three-day disaster preparedness conference in Bangkok which ended last week.

"There has certainly been a lot more being done in the past three years," he said. "Before, it was hovering in the wings and now the whole issue of disaster-risk reduction and school safety has taken centre stage."

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which killed as many as 230,000 people in 11 countries, was marked by a failure to warn many communities about the impending waves.

It prompted the UN and six government donors, including the United States, to create a 4.42-billion-baht tsunami warning system, which is expected to be fully operational at the end of 2008.

While the early warning system has mostly fallen into place, efforts to teach communities how to respond to impending disasters have gone more slowly.

That is where the schools come in.

"In addressing school children, we're actually looking at educating future generations who will be able to address these issues in their families and community," said Michael Annear, head of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies Southeast Asia regional disaster management unit.

Most curricula aim to help children understand natural threats, teach them how to escape a disaster and show what can be done to avert potential hazards.

In Japan and the Philippines, students practise earthquake drills and learn to identify disaster-proof homes. Indonesians in coastal communities are taught how to recognise the telltale signs of an impending tsunami and to evacuate to higher ground.

But the information must be packaged in a fun and interactive way to have an impact on children, experts said.

"You need repetition for kids to learn things but things also must be fun," said Derek Elias, a programme specialist for Unesco.

At the workshop, campaigns featuring cartoon characters like Mr Warning in Thailand and adaptations of popular board games ranked among the most popular means of spreading the disaster preparation message.