

Media's role in covering natural disasters debated

"Human misery is bigger news than a safe population"

Staff Reporter

CHENNAI: The media's role in mitigating the impact of natural disasters went through a process of critical appraisal at a day-long workshop conducted by Madras University on Sunday.

The workshop which was organised by the Centre for Natural Hazards and Disaster Studies, Madras University, in collaboration with UNESCO and Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre, Bangkok, brought together the media, government officials and research scholars to discuss the issue of the role of the media in today's disaster-prone world.

In his keynote address, Director General of Meteorology, Regional Meteorological Centre, R.V. Sharma said the vulnerability, especially of

developing countries, to disasters was increasing. Ninety per cent of disasters occur in the developing countries. The toll is much greater as the levels of preparedness were less. Builders, for example, did not follow the standards required to withstand seismic activity and public places such as hospital lack disaster mitigation schemes to deal with casualties.

Dr. Sharma stressed the need for any development plan to have a built-in component of disaster preparedness.

Additional Secretary to the State Finance Department J. Radhakrishnan said there have been many instances that media and information networks had enabled the government to reach people and help them in times of disaster. However, according to

him, the media should also focus on pre-disaster patterns. He quoted the World Bank figure of one US dollar used in preparation saves seven US dollars post disaster expense plus human misery. "Unfortunately human misery is bigger news than a population that has been made safe and sound," he said.

The media has a role in lobbying for administrators to become more responsive. "Journalists should be more pro-active in reporting disaster risk related issues instead of reporting only after the disaster," he said.

The workshop culminated in a healthy vibrant exchange of views and issues amongst member of the media, scientists, NGO workers as well as bureaucrats from the Meteorological Department.