SAINT LUCIA

STATEMENT

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TO THE

WORLD CONFERENCE ON NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION

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" A SAFER WORLD FOR THE 21ST CENTURY "

Mr President

On behalf of the Government and people of Saint Lucia, I have the honour to join with other Delegations in congratulating you and your colleague members of the bureau on your election to lead these important deliberations most crucial to the reduction of loss of life and property as we move towards a safer world for the 21st century.

Allow me to convey to you the best wishes of my Prime Minister, the Right Honourable John Compton for the success of this conference.

We know that your considerable diplomatic skills will continue to guide as through these proceedings with the aim of a successful conclusion, to the ultimate benefit of the millions of people whose quality of life and viability are dependent on the extent of our achievements here in Yokohama.

Mr President

The specific concerns of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction have been under review by the Saint Lucia government since 1989, when the Cabinet of Ministers appointed a Broadbased Committee to prepare and plan for the Decade.

Mr President,

Permit me to refer to our world dominance of cricket, and the fact that my country has produced two nobel laureates. We have the world's only drive-in volcano.

Saint Lucia is uniquely blessed with a topography and geology that support a myriad of flora and fauna-from our world known twin mountain peaks "The Pitons" and we offer a Caribbean Sea, a vital part of our Tourism Industry to well over 348,000 tourists who visit yearly.

Mr President, we in the Caribbean are blessed by nature with perhaps the most attractive cruising waters in the world. The Caribbean Sea is our patrimony. We are happy to share its beauty with others but we must ensure that it is protected from environmental degradation and that those who use it share the cost of its protection and adhere to conduct which ensures this. Our sea lanes which are the highway from the countries of the South to those of the North must be protected against the dumping of toxic wastes and against oil pollution from tankers which ply our waters. Our small Island States cannot by themselves protect these waters. For this protection we expect the cover and enforcement of international conventions designed for this purpose.

It may sound like paradise, Mr President, but we are located in the path of Tropical Cyclones and within an Active Earthquake Zone.

Saint Lucia and the countries of the OECS are prone to natural disasters resulting from hurricanes, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes; as well as to floods, droughts and landslides which tend to be more localized. Although such natural phenomena occur intermittently, their effects are all-pervasive, affecting virtually all aspects of the economy and the social and physical infrastructure.

The costs of rehabilitation are high, and are becoming increasingly difficult given the limited availability and high cost of insurance protection. In addition to loss of life and injuries, losses in the productive sectors and costs to the physical infrastructure amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars per year. In particular, provision needs to be made for insurance protection for socially and economically vulnerable groups.

In some instances, development activities have increased the risk of damage from natural hazards through the construction of hotels and other properties close to the shoreline, the removal of mangrove trees, the filling of sand ponds and swamps, offshore dredging and sand mining on critical beaches, deforestation of watersheds, dumping of waste in river beds, and road building.

Because of it's utilization as a major international transit route, the Caribbean Sea is particularly vulnerable to man-made disasters: ship accidents, oil spills and toxic and hazardous substance accidents. Saint Lucia and the other countries of the OECS have only very limited disaster/spill contingency planning and in-country response capabilities to deal with such disasters. In most cases, equipment and assistance would have to be sought from other countries.

Moreover, countries like Saint Lucia and the other Small Island Developing States [SIDS], are likely to be affected by global environmental changes, such as the warming of the atmosphere and the consequent climatic changes in temperature and precipitation. Critical ecosystems are also at risk. Global warming is expected to cause changes in the strength, frequency and paths of the hurricanes and/or extension of the hurricane season. However, reliable data for forecasting these impacts more specifically are generally absent.

Preventive measures are difficult. The small size of our countries, their location in the hurricane and earthquake belts, together with the difficult terrain in some islands, mean that it is extremely difficult to avoid placing people and their developments "in the way" of such risks. A shortage of flat land in many cases means that considerable development takes place in areas immediately adjacent to the shoreline.

Moreover, financial constraints make it almost impossible to ensure that all infrastructure is designed and built to withstand environmental and natural hazards affecting our sub-region. Nevertheless, a Caribbean Unified Building Code [CUBIC] has been developed by the CARICOM Secretariat for the Caribbean. Based on CUBIC, a simplified user-friendly Code has been transmitted to all OECS countries by UNCHS/UNDP. In some countries this Code has already been tailored to their specific needs.

Their small size also means that the individual countries are unable to produce adequate human or other resources to manage these disasters when they occur. Nevertheless, we in Saint Lucia have established A Disaster Management Office which is staffed on a full time basis. We have prepared a National Disaster Plan for mobilizing resources for planning, training and managing a disaster or major emergency. There is need for assistance in updating and revising these, and for constantly testing them for effectiveness and response time. There is also a need for additional determination of the critical skills required to alleviate post-disaster distress or of the manpower requirements to satisfy the needs.

Saint Lucia is a member of the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency [CDERA] and the Regional Security System [RSS] and has been receiving technical assistance through the OECS/French Cooperation/PAHO Eastern Caribbean Disaster Project which is headquartered in Saint Lucia. The Department of Regional Development and Environment of the Organization of American States [OAS] has provided considerable technical assistance for the development of policy-making tools of disaster management.

The Saint Lucia delegation would like to express its sincere thanks to the British Government to its office in Castries for the continuous assistance it has been receiving in the field of Oil Spills Training and Disaster Management Training.

Also, the delegation is very grateful to the Government of the Republic of France through its Ambassador in Castries for the tremendous support and assistance which it has been receiving in all areas of disaster preparedness.

Special mention must be made of the new cooperation agreement now in it's draft stage between the Government of Saint Lucia and France to enable us to continue cooperating in the various aspects of disaster preparedness.

Beginning in 1983 it has pioneered the incorporation of disaster mitigation in the development planning process. In Saint Lucia, it has assisted with a nation wide landslide hazard assessment, with the development of a vulnerability analysis methodology, and detailed vulnerability maps of ten coastal communities.

Saint Lucia is also the beneficiary of the Caribbean Disaster Mitigation Project, a 5-year project implemented by the OAS with funding provided by the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance of the United States Agency for International Development [OFDA/USAID].

The Project aims to develop sustainable mechanism to reduce the vulnerability of housing, lifetime infrastructure and economic activity to natural disasters.

In addition, the Saint Lucia based OECS Central Secretariat, recognizing that in time of disaster the Secretariat is called upon to carry out certain functions, is in the process of systematizing its response activities. A Disaster Preparedness Technical Group and a Disaster Response Advisory Group are being established at the Secretariat to coordinate the activities and responses of the various units.

Mr President, Saint Lucia is also heartened by the recognition which has been given to the impact of outrageous insurance costs, especially in so far as these costs affect not only our ability to recover from natural and man-made disasters, but our ability to attract investment capital for our development. We have over the last year alone, witnessed in some cases, as much as a 500% increase in insurance costs for coverage against risks such as hurricanes and earthquakes. I should point out, Mr President, that this does not include coverage against sea level rise brought on by the much feared global warming.

It is against this background that Saint Lucia will lend its fullest support for proposals aimed at creating a special fund which small island developing nations may access, to provide more affordable insurance coverage against natural disasters and we hope that this fund could be launched here at this conference.

Small islands are most vulnerable to the impact of natural disasters because of the limited size of their economies. In many cases, islands rely on a few key industries for economic activity. Very few small islands have any significant natural resources such as minerals or petroleum. Agriculture, tourism and fisheries normally make up the prime industries, contributing a substantial part of the Gross Domestic Product [GDP], but small scale manufacturing activity is also fairly commonplace. Each of these industries is susceptible to the ravages of tropical cyclones and associated phenomena, namely intense rainfall and flooding, violent winds, landslides and coastal storm surges. Agricultural crops are flattened by strong winds, fields are flooded and valuable topsoil often washed away by heavy rains. Foreign visitors are forced to leave due to damaged hotels and the flow of tourist comes to a halt. Fishing fleets or individual boats are often damaged or destroyed. An increase in unemployment, a slowdown in economic activity and the reduction in valuable foreign exchange earnings are some of the results.

Disaster-related GDP reductions of 20-30 per cent in a single year are not uncommon. Such disasters might have an impact lasting several years. For example, Hurricane Allen destroyed the entire banana crop and severely damaged most hotels [located nearly near the coast] on my island, Saint Lucia, in 1980. The return to full banana production took well over one year to be achieved, and it was much longer than that before tourism returned to normal. Since bananas and tourism make up the two principal industries on Saint Lucia, significant unemployment and a dramatic loss of earnings ensued. Large numbers of private homes, public utilities and other infrastructure sustain intense damage in these cases. These problems are magnified by the fact that many of the Island States are not only small, but consist of a number of small islands, like the Maldives with some 1300 islands of which only 200 are inhabited. In such cases, communications are easily disrupted by a natural disaster. The recovery process itself has an impact on continuing development, as government funds earmarked for capital projects, or funds from foreign aid, are often diverted into the recovery process. The extent of the human suffering can be missed by the foreign media who have other better things to cover.

Even though tropical cyclones frequent the oceans, the chances of any one small island being hit very often by one of these severe storms are not very great. In addition, tropical cyclone activity tends to occur in cycles. A period with a normal or above normal number of these storms in any one region may be followed by a decade or more of very little activity.

On an annual basis the tropical cyclone represents a much greater risk than "geological" events such as volcanic, seismic and tsunamis disasters which have a lower frequency and a very long return period. But historic records show that the disasters which result from these events have the potential to be even more catastrophic than tropical storms.

The significant developments which have taken place on many small islands have received a sudden jolt in recent years, because of the impact of some major disasters around the world due to tropical cyclones and other natural hazards. Most insured property on small islands tend to be reinsured with the big international companies. Those international companies now face tremendous losses due to the escalating cost of damage caused by "the big ones" like Hurricane Gilbert in Jamaica in 1988, Hurricane Andrew in the Bahamas and the USA in 1992 and Cyclone Kina in Fiji in 1992, coupled with losses due to the California earthquakes of 1991 and 1993 and the 1993 Mississippi floods. Small islands are now being classified as high-risk areas because of their vulnerability to natural disasters. As a result, insurance rates have risen dramatically by 300 to 400 per cent in many places, or insurance companies are withdrawing coverage altogether against tropical cyclones. Consideration of the impact of these changes on the development of small island states is important. With the insurance costs of private, commercial and industrial property becoming too expensive, and new development projects thus becoming

financially risky, the sustainable development of the islands is being affected. A big fear for some insurance experts, is that new lulls in the activity of tropical cyclones and other major hazards will lead to renewed complacency and a fall of insurance rates. Then the question will be" Who will pay for the next big disaster?"

This is a crucial question for the Small Island Developing States. It is easy to see that any direct hit by a tropical cyclone on a major population centre on an island or elsewhere, will lead to significant damage and likely loss of life. But it is important to ask the question whether the increased damage cost is really due to above normal storm activity, or due to the effects of global warming on tropical cyclones, or whether it is due to other factors such as the increasing development in vulnerable areas, sub-standard infrastructure and the like, or even to mistakes within the insurance industry itself. As indicated before, tropical storms in each oceanic basin have their own cycle of activity. The activity in the Caribbean area has remained near or below the long-term average for over a decade, although a few large and strong storms struck the islands during that time. In the southwest Indian Ocean, with a number of small developing island states, statistics for the last few cyclone seasons suggest below normal activity, but direct hits on some of the islands have also occurred, such as cyclone Hollanda in Mauritius in February 1994. As will be discussed later, any significant global warming has serious consequences for coastal areas and flat islands, but it is uncertain whether it would have any significant impact on the number or intensity, or even the general area of occurrence of tropical cyclones. There is no evidence that there has been any increase over the last few decades.

These facts do not in any way suggest a reduction in risk; far from it, for even a return to historical levels of tropical cyclone activity would continue to produce the type of losses that have been experienced. What can be done to focus the attention of the appropriate authorities on corrective measures to reduce the risks, the damage and thus the cost of rehabilitation, instead of accepting the notion that there will automatically be an uncontrollable escalation of disasters. Corrective measures and building standards must be aimed at the specific hazards which affect an island or community. What is applicable for one may be unsuitable for another. Tomblin suggests that changes in buildings styles and construction materials have had a great impact on the relative vulnerability of housing to earthquakes and tropical cyclones. The general move to masonry in place of traditional wood or tapia as a building material, has resulted in houses with greater mass and hence with a greater resistance [except the roofs] to destruction by the tropical cyclone, but conversely, it has resulted in much greater exposure to damage by earthquakes. Similarly, growing industrialization has resulted in the building of earthquake-susceptible structures such as dams, refineries, pipelines, electric power transmission grids and harbour facilities. For example, the earthquake of 1974 in Antigua produced ground failure in artificial land-fill, severely damaging

the island's only oil refinery and newly-built deep water harbour, both built on that type of ground.

I look to this conference to formulate an effective Action Plan to the year 2000 and beyond, to limit the devastating impact that disasters have on our environment, development and health.

From Yokohama, I look forward to taking to the Caribbean and to Castries positive measures to be taken before a disaster, ways of confining damage to the minimum and ways to ensure that short-term relief and rehabilitation efforts contribute to a longer-term sustainable development and vice-versa.

Saint Lucia, Mr President, as part of its plans to achieve sustainable development is working towards attaining by the year 2000:

* A comprehensive national assessment of risks from natural hazards, with these assessments taken into account in our development plans.

* Mitigation Plans at national and local levels involving long-term prevention and preparedness and community awareness.

* Ready access to Early Warning Systems and broad dissemination warnings.