

Future Danube Flood Actions Depend On International Cooperation

VIENNA, 21 April (UN Information Service) -- International efforts to prevent and reduce flood impacts in the Danube River Basin will be strengthened by the end of the year by the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR).

"The floods currently ravaging countries in the Danube Basin, as in 2002 and 2005, are again providing lessons that greater international efforts are needed for the long-term," says Philip Weller, the ICPDR's Executive Secretary.

Recent floods have caused the Danube to rise to its highest level in more than a century. Heavily affecting Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro, and Hungary, they have led to thousands of families being evacuated from their homes and to huge economic losses.

Following the disastrous Danube floods of 2002, Danube countries agreed to strengthen their flood prevention and reduction efforts through the ICPDR. Earlier efforts were largely coordinated at national and bilateral level. In December 2004, Danube countries adopted the 'Action Programme for Sustainable Flood Protection' for managing the risk of floods to protect human life and property. The Programme was developed by the ICPDR's Expert Group on Flood Protection with members from every Danube country.

Key elements of the Action Programme include the development of a new international flood warning system, mapping high flood risk areas, giving rivers more space such as creating new water retention zones, and an end to new building in natural floodplain areas.

The new flood warning system, overseen by the ICPDR, will supplement national systems and give up to 10 days' warning of expected floods. Trials for the system will be introduced by end of the year. The system is being developed by the Italy-based European Union Joint Research Centre.

"The ICPDR and the Danube governments began a process in 2002 to better manage floods," says Weller. "We will now accelerate that process and the implementation of the Action Programme, including development of the new flood warning system."

Danube national governments are now focusing their attention on flood response and short-term relief measures. In June, the ICPDR will review how Danube countries responded to the current floods. The assessment will inform how the Action Programme should be accelerated and revised if necessary. A priority international activity list, agreed by all Danube countries, will then be finalized in December.

"We are convinced that peak flood prevention can only happen in Romania if upstream countries in the Danube Basin are also helping to implement an effective Danube flood action programme agreed to by all Danube states," says Sulfina Barbu, Romania's Minister for Water and Environment.

Floods Europe-wide

Between 1998 and 2005, Europe faced over 100 severe floods causing 700 deaths, the displacement of half a million people and at least 25 billion euros in insured economic losses. In response, on January 18, 2006, the EU Commission proposed a new directive on the assessment and management of floods to reduce and manage flood risks. (Visit: http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/water/flood_risk/index.htm)

On May 17-18, Austria's EU Presidency will host the 'European Conference on Flood Risk Management' in Vienna. The conference aims to raise awareness of the impact of floods on people and the environment, and to present a wide range of flood management strategies applied by countries across Europe. The outcomes should provide input to ongoing discussions related to the new EU floods directive. (Visit: www.wassernet.at)

The ICPDR is currently helping to develop the new EC floods directive and will present its own flood strategy at the May workshop in Vienna.

More about ICPDR

The International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) is an international organisation consisting of 13 cooperating states and the European Union. Since its establishment in 1998, the ICPDR has grown into one of the largest and most active international bodies of river basin management expert in Europe. ICPDR deals not only with the Danube itself, but with the whole Danube River Basin, which includes also its tributaries and the ground water resources.

The ultimate goal of the ICPDR is to implement the Danube River Protection Convention. Its mission is to promote and coordinate sustainable and equitable water management, including conservation, improvement and rational use of waters for the benefit of the Danube River Basin countries and their people. The ICPDR pursues its mission by making recommendations for the improvement of water quality, developing mechanisms for flood and accident control, agreeing standards for emissions and by assuring that these are reflected in the Contracting Parties' national legislations and applied in their policies.

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