Dr. Chen Zhu, Minister Health of the People’s Republic of China, Professor Li Chunsheng, President of the Chinese Society for Emergency Medicine, Dr. Demetrios Pyrros, President of World Association for Disaster and Emergency Medicine, Dr Judith Fisher, Chair, Scientific Committee for the World Congress on Disaster and Emergency Medicine and distinguished guests and delegates,

On behalf of the Director General of the World Health Organization, Dr Margaret Chan and the Regional Director for the Western Pacific Region, Dr Shin Young-soo, I would like to echo the previous speakers in offering you a warm welcome to this, the 17th edition of the World Congress on Disaster and Emergency Medicine.

It is remarkable to see so many passionate people from many nations here today who are committed to making communities and countries safer and healthier places. I do not need to remind you about the devastating effects of emergencies and disasters on health, whether they be caused by natural hazards, epidemics, industrial incidents or wide-scale conflict and violence. The attention of world media and the international community is often swayed by the large-scale disasters, but also, we are mindful of other emergencies which require concerted action by health workers and their partners at the local level with the support of the health and disaster management systems.

The way in which different sectors, neighbouring communities, and sometimes different countries, come together to deal with emergencies and disasters is a unifying force for good in our global society. The sheer scale of emergencies underscores the need for effective coordination and cooperation in response and recovery; moreover, we need to build effective working relationships to reduce risks and build capacities before events occur. Conferences such as this one are a critical part of capacity development, to share experiences, build networks, and identify knowledge and practice which will help us and our partners to perform more effectively in all aspects of disaster health.

In this regard, I am delighted that you have joined us here in Beijing. have In my time as the WHO Representative to China, I have seen how the Chinese government and its people have been able to marshal their resources to respond to major disasters throughout the country. The Chinese government has also put greater investment into disaster risk reduction, emergency preparedness and effective disaster recovery to reduce future risks. This week you will have an opportunity to learn from your Chinese counterparts about their experiences.

The World Health Organization has been working with the World Association of Disaster and Emergency Medicine for many years. One notable example of our collaboration to strengthen the evidence base was the collection of papers from the Phuket conference which reviewed the multinational response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami. These papers were published in the Journal of Prehospital and Disaster Medicine in 2005, and I am pleased to see that in this Congress, WHO’s Office for South-East Asia and WADEM will present a retrospective of the health response and recovery from the tsunami in 5 affected countries.

WHO also acknowledges that WADEM, as a member of the Global Health Cluster, is making a substantial contribution to inter-organizational efforts to improve the leadership, accountability and coordination of the international health response to humanitarian emergencies. In this respect, I would like to pay special tribute to WADEM’s representative on the Global Health Cluster, Dr Marvin
Birnbaum, for his continuing commitment to strengthen the international role of WADEM and the partnership with WHO.

WHO is grateful to WADEM for the opportunity to participate actively in this World Congress, and for the time allocated on Friday for discussion of strategic directions in global health. We give credit to the organizing committee, and the many speakers, for developing a scientific programme reflecting a broad appreciation of health aspects of emergencies and disasters, and thus making the Congress more widely relevant.

WADEM has continued its traditional focus on pre-hospital services and emergency and disaster medicine, but this Congress has also a greater emphasis on public health, disaster risk reduction, and safer hospitals, which have become key pillars in a more proactive approach to disaster risks. One of our main challenges is to give much greater emphasis to prevention, mitigation and preparedness before disasters occur. This was underscored recently at the Global Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction, in Geneva in early May, where a plan was presented to promote health through a multisectoral platform on disaster risk management for health.

You may be aware that the World Health Organization is undergoing significant reform, with guidance from our Director General on future priority areas for WHO. One of these priorities, which is most relevant to this audience, is in the area of strengthening of organizational, national and international capacities for vulnerability reduction, emergency preparedness and rapid response to health emergencies from all sources of risk.

This priority is also reflected in a new Resolution on strengthening national emergency and disaster management capacities and the resilience of health systems which was adopted by the World Health Assembly, comprising 193 Member States of WHO, a couple of weeks ago. Member States expressed concerns that risk factors such as poverty, climate change and rapid urbanisation are expected to increase the incidence of emergencies and disasters in communities and countries in the future.

To respond to these challenges, the Resolution urges Member States and partners to strengthen all-hazard health emergencies and disaster risk-management programmes, implementation of safe hospitals programmes and strengthening of the local health workforce for their vital role in emergencies. The Assembly also requested the WHO Director-General to ensure that WHO has enhanced capacity and resources to provide the necessary technical guidance and support to Member States and partners for developing such programmes.

Countries have made progress on building capacity to deal with the risks of disasters, but much more needs to be done. WHO and other international partners are providing support at national and local level, through the Global Health Cluster for international humanitarian response to disasters, safer hospitals initiatives, and capacity building programmes, focussing on pandemic preparedness, mass gatherings and climate change adaptation.

WHO’s support to countries is reflected by the work of our country office in China, supported by our Regional Office and Headquarters. This included two high profile events, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the 2010 Shanghai Expo, where the Chinese Government and the respective organizing committees, presented mass gathering events which were not only enjoyable, but safe and healthy, and capable of responding effectively to any major emergency which could have arisen. The legacy for China is a much stronger capacity nationally, and in these cities in particular, for dealing with health emergencies.

The WHO-China Office also cooperates with the Ministry of Health, China CDC, academic institutions and universities on strengthening health emergency management systems and services. For many years, Chinese delegates have participated in the Public Health Emergency Management training courses for the Asia Pacific region organized by the WHO Western Pacific and South-East Asian Regional Offices and the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center in Bangkok. Participants have
subsequently adapted these courses for implementation by Chinese institutions at national and sub-national levels.

WHO has also responded to Chinese government requests to coordinate health sector activities for emergency response and disaster recovery, for example, during the earthquakes in Wenchuan and Yushu. Working in close contact with the Ministry of Health, and with the UN and other partners, we facilitated the delivery of medications and equipment to assist local authorities to restore essential functions of damaged health facilities and disrupted services, including the prevention and control of communicable diseases.

These experiences, like many around the world, have reinforced the need for joint action among health and non-health actors, agencies, regions and countries, working together to improve health outcomes for people’s whose health is at risk of emergencies and disasters.

This week, my WHO colleagues from HQ, Regional and the Country Offices will participate actively in a range of formal and informal discussions during the Congress. We will seek your advice on how WHO can better target our efforts to support your work and to make an impact on reducing morbidity and mortality at the local level. As always, WHO is ready to listen, learn and work with you to benefit the increasing number of people whose health is at risk from emergencies and disasters. I wish you all a most productive and successful congress.