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Disaster 'a blessing in disguise'

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The tsunami disaster could be a blessing in disguise if reconstruction is carried out with a long-term view of sustainable development, according to a UNDP seminar yesterday to recommend steps towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Certainly, the massive seismic waves have put several Asian countries backward but with generous international assistance together with efforts by national governments and local civil society organisations, like universities, the well-planned reconstruction could be crafted to enable them to reach sustainable development, said Dato Lee Yee Cheong, co-author of the MDG final report submitted to the UN secretary-general on Monday.

Mr Lee, also president of World Federation of Engineering Organisations, believed the MDGs, which included halving poverty by 2015 and improving conditions for women and children and having them benefit from science and technological development, should not be derailed by the tsunami disaster. But he was afraid the poorer continents or regions like Africa, the Caribbean, and land-locked states in Asia might be forgotten.

"We have to encourage the international community towards equitable allocation and sustainable aid for the rest of the poor countries as well," said the Malaysian academic, who co-wrote the final report with renowned economist Jeffrey Sachs.

The report was a result of 2 1/2 years of intensive analytical and diagnostic work of 10 taskforces of 250 odd members, and would be subject to a summit review at the September UN General Assembly.

Joana Merlin-Scholtes, resident representative of the United Nations Development Programme, said it was of utmost importance not just to think about the immediate emergency response, but to start focussing on the medium to long-term work of restoring livelihoods, getting people back on their feet, rebuilding social infrastructure, rehabilitating the environment and mitigate the impact of tsunami on the long-term MDGs.

Mr Lee, also chair of the MDG Taskforce on Science and Technology, expressed dismay that the availability of technology, including military satellites and intelligence gathering network, had not contributed to the warning of last month's disaster.

"There is no mechanism or centre to link information and inform all the countries. Now Asia agrees to have an early warning system but I hope it will be an early warning of natural disasters not just tsunami in the Indian Ocean," he said.

He also suggested the system must be a global network and not just a separate one in the Pacific or Indian oceans and the UN should be the host of this task.