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Natural Disasters

By Bryan Walsh

The Kashmir earthquake, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, floods in Bombay and Guatemala, the Indian Ocean tsunami—is the world entering an era of more frequent natural catastrophes? In its 2005 World Disaster Report, released this month, the International Red Cross counted 360 natural disasters in 2004, up from 239 in 1995. But the truly striking feature is the sharp increase in the number of people killed by catastrophes: 901,177 from 1995 to 2004, according to the Red Cross, compared to 643,418 people in the previous decade.

One explanation for the numbers is beyond dispute: population growth. More and more people are living in at-risk areas, whether it's the hurricane-hit coastlines of Florida, the floodplains of eastern China or earthquake zones in Indonesia. Even in alpine Kashmir, where the latest quake struck, the population has increased by an estimated 60% between 1981 and 2000. No matter where natural disasters hit, they will affect more people today than they would have done in the past—and will affect more still, tomorrow. Bangladesh, prone to floods and earthquakes, could add up to 100 million people to its population of 144 million by 2050.

We can't easily change demographics, and we can't prevent earthquakes or hurricanes from happening. So preparation against nature's hammerblows will become increasingly vital, especially in Asia, where an estimated 90% of the people affected by disasters over the past decade lived. Earthquake experts refer to the "seismic gap"—the difference between rich and poor cities' abilities to withstand an earthquake. In 1989, for example, a 7.1-magnitude quake killed 63 people in San Francisco; in 2003, by contrast, a 6.5 temblor destroyed 80% of the city of Bam in Iran, and killed 26,000. Closing the seismic gap doesn't need to cost the earth—Bangladesh has managed to sharply cut death rates from flooding simply by building platforms that allow people to escape high water. But it has to be done. A 2004 study by Tearfund, a Christian relief agency, found that less than 10% of the money spent on disaster aid by government agencies and the World Bank went to preparation. If that doesn't change, we may look back on 2005 as an easy year.

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