IFCEM FIRE SAFETY: GATEWAY TO THE NEW DECADE

Fire and Disaster: Challenges and Change

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Assalamualaikum and good morning to all.

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this important meeting and to begin today's session on Fire and Disaster: Challenges and Change. Before I do that, let me take this opportunity to thank all of you in the Fire and Rescue Services all over the world, for your untiring efforts and sacrifices during this annus horribilis of the pandemic. You have gone beyond the call of duty to be first line responders in many countries during this health crisis.

At almost every speech that I have given or heard recently, it has started with how the world was "shaken" by some recent anecdotes or statistics on disasters including wildfires. Obviously, I am inclined to do the same today too, but am certain that these are all points that will be better covered in the coming sessions.

What I will say is that the frequency and scale to which these fires are happening are an alarming call for action to the overarching – and yet still under-addressed – impacts of climate change.

Having worked in the disaster and humanitarian field for more than two decades, the one common thread for many of these disasters is that they are human induced. From floods, fires and landslides to political and social conflicts – mankind is at the center. Even the COVID-19 crisis has its roots from the unrestrained environmental destruction like wildlife trafficking and deforestation that increase

the risks of zoonotic outbreaks. With global warming that melts permafrost and polar ice shields, viruses that we do not even know exist or thought to have eradicated for centuries may resurface causing large-scale infectious disease outbreaks. While we are recovering from this pandemic, we must be mindful that this is certainly not the last. Many countries are already talking about Disease X – a deadlier pandemic and it is only a matter of when, not if.

Earlier this year, the renowned TIME magazine had featured on its cover a work by a team of Malaysians. The cover photo depicted a map of a burning world made of 50,000 matchsticks, depicting the extent of the global climate crisis. No matter who we are or where we live, without a commitment and action to mitigating the climate crisis, we literally risk a burning world. Thinking and acting in terms of the planet's health is the way to go.

The United States are already reviewing its forest, conservation and industry regulations to be climate-conscious. Old methods of conserving the forest that end up promoting megafires are now being adapted to controlled and prescribed burns, induced by the increasingly dry climate brought about by global warming. Australia is doing the same but as one article described it – it is almost like playing a game of chess with Mother Nature, as the climate crisis is also narrowing that window for controlled burns. A 2020 study reported that the 2019-2020 fires in Australia emitted more carbon dioxide than the country's annual emissions from fires and fossil fuels! We are living in a feedback loop of our own doing that without somewhat radical system changes – political commitment that translates into climate legislations, a change in our traditional view of a 'healthy economy' and community-driven efforts – will persist.

And yet, as COP26 in Glasgow comes to a close soon, we are not seeing enough commitments to net zero carbon. We are not seeing the leadership alarmed enough and at the rate we are going, 1.5C is at most an optimistic and some say unrealized dream, and the reality is we may even exceed 2C by 2030.

The Fire and Rescue Department play such an integral part in emergency and crisis preparedness and response. But at this juncture, we need every individual, for every level of decision-makers to include climate considerations into their processes.

This must begin with behavioural change without which even the best of policies will not be implementable. An understanding on how we humans can literally ignite fires, at home, and in our external environments must begin with early education and parents and adults modeling good behaviours. Understanding that climate change and global warming, increasing risks of droughts can so easily ignite fires is crucial and the behaviors that must ensue to minimize these risks.

Planetary health is pivotal in our approach to solutions. Human health and well-being cannot be attained and sustained without planet health. We thrive when the planet is allowed to do so. So, whether it is preventing the next pandemic or the next fire and disaster including severe weather events leading to cyclones and floods, the successful application of planetary health is crucial.

The cost of preventing the next pandemic is just 2 percent of the current COVID-19 bill. Yet, it seems to be the hardest 2 percent investment to be agreed upon. Likewise, prevention of fires and other disasters will require upfront investment to increase awareness, preparedness, and early response.

Our inactions should come under fire, not the planet.