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FIRST INTERNATIONAL FLASH FLOODS WORKSHOP LAUNCHES

GENEVA/SAN JOSÉ, COSTA RICA, 10 MARCH 2006 (WMO) – The first international workshop to address the threat of flash floods gets underway 13 March in Costa Rica. The event is hosted by Costa Rica's National Meteorological Institute and organized by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), in partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The Workshop: "Realizing Flash Flood and Disaster Resilience through New Partnerships and Technologies" will bring together around 100 experts from some 80 countries.

With a tendency to strike with little or no warning and a capacity to trigger massive landslides, flash floods are among the most destructive types of natural disaster and pose complex problems for communities, decision-makers, National Meteorological and Hydrological Services (NMHSs) and relief organizations – especially in developing countries. Recently, the Philippines, Bolivia, Bangladesh, Guyana, China, India and the Dominican Republic/Haiti have been hit by catastrophic flooding, while areas of Europe were inundated during summer 2005.

Mr. Michel Jarraud, WMO Secretary-General, stresses the importance of increasing the lead-times of early warnings: "WMO is in a critical position to support the development of flash flood forecasting systems by facilitating the implementation of necessary infrastructure and forecasting techniques and through the coupling of meteorological and hydrological models. The use of Numerical Weather Prediction (NWP) products is a way to provide an increase in the lead-times to a greater degree than could be achieved by the use of radars alone." NWP uses complex computer programs to provide predictions on many atmospheric variables. Forecasters examine how these predictions will interact to produce the day's weather.

The key objectives of the workshop are to provide an overview of flash flood prediction capabilities available for application in flood prone regions; identify weak links in establishing end-to-end operational flash flood warning systems and how to fill these gaps; showcase best practices and case studies and share tools, science and system integration in flash flood risk reduction; present project briefs for establishing or improving flash flood forecasting services and open dialogue with donor and finance organizations.

Although flash flood mitigation poses challenges, solutions already exist or, are under development. According to NOAA: "We have successfully implemented a flash flood forecasting system in Central America that we believe will assist many other developing countries in the world. NOAA is now planning to apply this system in the Mekong River Valley with funding from USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) in the next two years." Other potential solutions range from low-cost prediction materials (such as a simple rain gauge activating an alarm) to sophisticated forecasting centres. The workshop ends 17 March.

WMO is the United Nations' authoritative voice on weather, climate and water

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