

## **Message to the victims of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan**

As we recall the devastating earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster of March 11<sup>th</sup> 2011, which robbed the life of more than fifteen thousand Japanese and left countless families in mourning, I would like to pay tribute to the decisive determination, tireless efforts and courageous work of all those who have been associated with the process of reconstruction of affected areas, and very especially to the tenacity, solidarity and extraordinary resilience of families concerned.

Children were particularly affected by the severity of the natural disaster. Many lost their parents, family members and friends; in many cases, homes were destroyed, families forced to separate and children left without basic necessities including food, water and clothing; over seven thousand schools were damaged and many teachers lost their life.

Still today, many children remain in temporary accommodations, surrounded by devastation and distress and by the uncertainty of potential health damage provoked by nuclear radiation. Others have been evacuated into new locations where they endure the challenges of psychosocial distress and, in many cases, try to rebuild their lives even when kept apart from close members of their families.

Despite the tremendous threats to their health and well-being and the risk of depression, anxiety and other symptoms of traumatic stress disorder, children find the strength to create a sense of normalcy in their lives. They are involved in reshaping their protective environment and promoting their active participation in school and recreational activities, finding ways to learn, to play and to develop in a healthy manner.

In this moment of remembrance, children's courage and resilience remain a remarkable example and a renewed source of inspiration for their families and for us all.

Let us, however, not forget the urgency to protect children's rights and the imperative of supporting their crucial process of healing and social reintegration. It is vital to support the rebuilding of their homes, but not less important to ensure children's reunification with their families. It is essential to secure children's healthy growth and development and their right to education and recreation, but it is also important to recognize that success will only be possible in an environment where the risks of radiation and contamination have been securely prevented and eliminated.

It is critical to help children overcome the stress, trauma and sense of fear, and the emotional and psychological distress associated with last year's devastating natural disaster. We must help children surmount the demolishing quake that has forever shaken the references of their lives. To shape their future, communities will continue to draw upon the strength and resilience that has already been so evident throughout the recovery process. I look forward to continuing to learn from children's experiences and determination, and to join hands with them and their families in launching a new stage in their lives.