

Zud Natural Disaster, Prevention and Recovery : Elbegdorj Tsakhia

Introduction by chair:

The second speaker is Mr. Elbegdorj. He was served as prime minister of Mongolia until last January and also is Chairman of Mongolia's Democratic Party. He got Master in Public Administration from Harvard University. Many participants here may have never heard, but he will talk about Zud, a main disaster in Mongolia. He will also mention about Mongolia itself.

Presentation:

Thank you for introduction. I am a scientist and also politician. I do not prepare the presentation material of Power Point, because I wanted to learn about natural disasters from you all. All of you, here, are specialists in this field.

Chair asked me to mention about my country, Mongolia. When I was asked "Little bit talk about your country," I explains my country by separating to three parts. This year, Mongolia celebrates the 800-years anniversary of the establishment of the Mongolia Empire, which has been the biggest country ever-existed in the history. The second part is that Mongolia had been governed by the communist party for 70-years from 1920. Since 1990, political and economic reforms have been advanced simultaneously. I myself organized a party for democratic movement in Mongolia. There were many confusions and conflicts in the democratic movement era, but we achieved a lot. Currently, there are two big political parties in Mongolia.

Regarding economic reform, almost of the land was owned by the country 17 years ago. Currently, 90% of the Mongolian GDP is produced by private sector. I served as prime minister twice in the past. In my last administration in 2005, we were able to get a surplus in the budget and also achieve 10% economic growth.

Today's topic is natural disaster, so I prepared and my presentation will be plain. Once Genghis Khan said, "It is easy to conquer the world on back of horse, but it is a lot of trouble to actually govern it." This is true for today. I, myself, am a son of herder. More than 40% of people in Mongolia are still herders. It must be difficult for you to image the world without cars, fast-food restaurants, and high-speed Internet access. However, we, Mongolian, still live depending on horses and livestock.

We have very specific natural disaster in Mongolia. It is said "Zud." Since there is no appropriate English corresponding to the word, we simply say zud. It occurred about once per 20 years. Lately frequency of natural disaster is increasing and zud occurs once per 5 or 6 six years, resulting in miserable situations.

There are three types of Zud. The heavy snowfall is called the “white zud.” The second is the formation of an impenetrable ice layer over pasture thus preventing animals from grazing. The third is called the “black zud” which is lack of grazing pasture in long harsh winter following summer drought. The Zud combining these three types of zud occurred from 1999 to 2003 for three years in succession. Population of Mongolia is 2.7 millions, while livestock is 20 millions. We lost 1,000 livestock in three years. Mongolian herders live with livestock, which actually served as food and transportation tools. Loss of livestock means lost of everything to live.

The other big problem is a traditional lifestyle of Mongolian. Usually, Mongolian families live far away to each other because they need huge space to live. They also move constantly, so communication is difficult.

I think that Mongolian is now unlucky. We lost 800 lakes and rivers in the past five years in Mongolia. Natural disaster is not only problem in nature, but social problem. When people lose everything and get poor, they get back to nature to hunt and cut trees, which further worsens situations.

In Mongolia, we are now experiencing mining boom. Investment is good and many companies come to Mongolia. But if they dig everything, the nature will be destroyed, thus causing loss of lakes and river. By which, climate will change to become dry, causing drought.

Mongolian yellow sand is famous, too. Genghis Khan could not conquer Japan, but yellow sand comes over to Japan, causing problem in Japan. I frequently talk to my friends, “Natural disasters have no border.” It is common problem for all of us. In this sense, theme of today’s session is timely. Partnership among countries to work together is more effective than one country takes action alone. I believe that momentum of mutual-assistance will rise through conferences like this.

I think that we are lucky generation. We have now new technologies never imagined and further a number of new technologies are being realized. When I was child, it took two days for my father to ride a horse to inform zud occurrence to local community or government. But currently people can communicate with cellular phones with those thousands of kilometers away and know price of cashmere on back of horse every morning. People can inform occurrence of disaster within two minutes.

Technology is splendid, but expensive. For example, one cellular phone equals to 3 to 4 horses. I think that leaders of developed countries should pay more attention to developing

countries. Cooperation between countries is necessary. Funds are necessary to receive benefits of technological advancement and to educate how to utilize technologies. I think that some foundation is needed in our region.

Mongolia is a small country. But disasters strike it on large-scale, sacrificing everything. I think forum like this provides a meaningful opportunity to learn why natural disasters happen. We, Mongolia, will make further efforts, learn about natural disasters, and deepen partnership with other countries.

Lastly, I repeat that today I come here to learn from you, not teach something to you. I wish that I will work with you together.

Thank you very much.

Question and Answer:

Q: As I heard that zud is harsh to kill people, does it cause significant social impact, for example, economic impact by loss of livestock?

A: When Zud hits, almost sheep or goat die. If people lost them, they have to migrate to towns. This induces new problems such as unemployment, crime, and school. Zud causes big social problems in Mongolia, not limited to herders. If one-thirds of livestock are lost, one-thirds of herders have to settle down. In Mongolia, there are no big towns or cities. The country is composed of small counties, which can not sustain or help all the damaged people. Then people move to Capital to increase population and cause new problems. The Mongolian government reserved special foundation for zud. Since zud occurs locally, the government buys livestock in other areas and gives those to herders in damaged-area. This foundation mitigates damage to a degree, but it takes 5 or 10 years to recover all the damages. Partnership is not an assistance covering one winter, but should be long-term help. I think that permanent structure must be established.