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PREVENTION CHEAPER THAN CURE

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DEAN DAVID ELLWOOD (above), who said that more disturbing than the US government reaction to Hurricane Katrina was its incapacity to prevent a disaster in the first place

Global challenges worsened by govt inaction

TAKE it from a man who is in the business of training administrators — governments just cannot be relied upon to act on disasters until they are in their face.

The common failing is the focus of a new research initiative at the Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, said its dean, Dr David Ellwood.

He was in Singapore this week to renew his school's tie-up with the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, which will lead to more faculty and student exchanges, and joint research projects.

In an interview with The Straits Times on Tuesday, Dr Ellwood spoke about the whys of government inaction that costs lives and public funds.

Last year's Hurricane Katrina in the United States, which killed more than 1,600 people, was a case in point, he said.

But more disturbing than the widely criticised slow and ineffectual government reaction, he said, "was our unwillingness and incapacity to prevent a disaster in the first place".

"Hurricane Katrina did not destroy New Orleans, the breaking of dykes destroyed New Orleans," he said in reference to the city which was flooded when the storm surge breached the dykes protecting it.

"The dykes could have been strengthened. We had known that for years, yet we will probably spend 10 times as much money to repair the damage of Katrina than would have cost to prevent it," he said.

"Katrina is an example of a much larger problem that taints governments around the world," said the dean, who heads the 70-year-old institution known as the "mother of all public policy schools".

The same dither shows up in responses to pandemics, global warming or the drastic fall in fertility rates in developed countries, even though it clearly puts their economies and social stability at risk, he said.

"Frankly, we are at the beginning stages to understand why this is so," he said, dwelling on the theme at a public lecture that drew more than 300 people. Pointing to a few factors, he said sometimes it was a matter of probabilities and costs.

"It is often very difficult to get governments to take seriously something like an earthquake, tsunami that has a very low probability of happening at one time but has high cost associated with its solution."

Governments also choose to waffle when there are "very strong differences between the public good and the private interest". For instance, Aids, where the cost of developing drugs is very high but public interest demands that they be sold cheap.

Also at fault is the human "tendency to focus on the here and now, and not the future".

"We are going to have to look for answers in each of these domains," he said.

"Whatever the reasons, many countries are not acting in time. But I would say Singapore is better than most in thinking about some of these issues," he said, quoting from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day speech, where he had stressed that the country had to remake itself to survive challenges ahead.

The Prime Minister, the dean made sure to point out, was a Kennedy School graduate.