**Main Address by Noel Arscott M.P., Minister of Local Government and Community Development, on the occasion of the Inaugural Launch of Earthquake Awareness Month, 2016**

****

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

As we meet for the first time in 2016, allow me to extend to you every good wish for the year. We are all familiar with the making of resolutions at the end of a year, with a view to planning and making improvements to our lives in the year to come. One of the resolutions of the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Management (ODPEM) was to extend the traditional Earthquake Awareness Week to a Month of activities. This is intended to more effectively communicate earthquake awareness to our population, with a view to influencing appropriate behavior change as an urgent priority.

**Seismic Road Map**

That decision, which was made in 2014, also coincided with an initiative by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and ODPEM, with support from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, to undertake a Seismic Risk and Safety Forum. In keeping with this, several partner Agencies participated in the development of a ***Seismic Road Map for Jamaica***.

The Road Map was presented to my Ministry in May 2014, and seeks to improve Jamaica’s capacity to prepare for, respond to and recover from the impact of an earthquake. It outlines the short, medium and long term priorities for the Government of Jamaica, which include improving and updating earthquake response plans, enforcing the National Building Code; creating a national steering committee to guide the implementation of the Road Map, and the integration of seismic risk planning in the urban planning and development processes. Since that time, several steps have been undertaken to achieve the objectives set out in the Seismic Road Map. This document is a significant keystone in the path to seismic resilience.

**Hillside Manual – Geology**

The United Nations estimates that over 60-million people have been displaced by crises globally. It is known that Jamaica has lost an estimated US$1 billion to disasters over the last 20 years, and the impact of natural disasters on people who occupy precariously located areas, is of great concern. They are the ones who are first in line for the most devastating consequences of disasters, as they often live in dwellings that are substandard, and risk losing their lives and possessions.

One of the major factors resulting in Jamaica’s vulnerability to earthquakes is unplanned development, particularly on hillsides in urban and rural areas. This improper creation of residential settlements is a huge contributor to massive land slippages, debris flows and soil erosion. In the event of an earthquake, communities become increasingly vulnerable to loss of life and property. One of the responses to this has been the development of a ***Hillside Development Manual***, to assist builders and home owners to understand the value of minimizing interference to natural slopes.

The Manual, which was launched in July 2014, also aims to prevent inappropriate developments on hillsides, especially in hazard-prone areas, promote public health and safety through creative planning and design, protect fragile hillsides and other environmental resources and preserve the beauty of hillsides.

Since the Manual’s introduction, it has been referenced as a guiding document in the recently published ***Kingston and St. Andrew Development Order*** and the newly published ***National Works Agency Drainage Guidelines.*** There has also been an increase in the number of requests for assistance from the general public, developers and other government entities for geological and geotechnical advice regarding lands for development in hillside areas.

Apart from the important work that ODPEM is doing, two of the critical legislative and regulatory tools in the effort to manage earthquake risk, are the National Building Bill and the new National Building Code respectively, both of which are at advanced stages of development.

They are critical to the effort to prevent new squatter settlements from being built, promote sustainable development, and establish and enforce internationally-accepted building standards and rules, for individuals and entities providing construction material and services. When the Bill and Building Code are completed and approved, the public can be assured that this Ministry, through all the Local Authorities, as well the Bureau of Standards, will be enforcing their provisions rigorously.

The Ministry and ODPEM are also particularly empowered under the current Disaster Risk Management Act, which came into force in April last year, to take all necessary steps to prevent, as well as respond to conditions that are likely to result in disastrous consequences to any section of the population, in any area.

We are serious about managing seismic risk, by ensuring that our people live and work in physically-sound and properly-planned structures.

**Micro Zonation Pilot Project**

This year, ODPEM is also poised to support deliverables under the **Strategic Programme for Climate Resilience**, as part of the **Pilot Programme for Climate Resilience** initiative. Although the project focuses primarily on Climate Resilience, it will also feature a seismic micro zonation component that will target the Upper Rio Minho watershed. This will focus primarily on identifying areas with potential for hazardous earthquake effects.

The upper Rio Minho watershed is the second most active seismic zone in the island. It is clear that any investments made in climate resilience should also involve the consideration of seismic risks, given the sudden and rapid nature of earthquakes.

The recent technology-transfer efforts of the Agency and its international partners, in pilot communities under the Management of Slope Stability in Communities project (MoSSaiC), is also critical to the earthquake mitigation effort. Four densely populated communities in St. Andrew and in Portland benefited from an extensive range of interventions, and are now less prone to possible earthquake induced landslides.

Five specialist areas containing 18 subjects were taught to the residents, including Building Code Awareness, Basic Construction Techniques and Fire & Landslide Safety. The plan is for this methodology to be replicated in more communities across Jamaica.

ODPEM continues to work diligently, at the policy level and on the ground, to prevent and respond to emergencies. An earthquake, however, is a particularly daunting experience in the mix of disasters to which Jamaica is vulnerable. It is arguably the hardest of the disasters to prepare for, and, depending on its intensity, one of the most costly and physically difficult to respond to.

When World Population Day was observed last year, the emphasis was on vulnerable populations in emergencies. This was also one of the areas of focus at last year’s Official Opening of the World Humanitarian Consultation Summit in Jamaica. This very consideration is uppermost in my mind as I endorse the theme for Earthquake Awareness Month 2016: **“Earthquake Awareness:** ***Don’t be scared, be prepared*.”**

I urge every Jamaican to be receptive to the messages of ODPEM, as it continues to serve as Jamaica’s national disaster mitigation Agency.