



Can Southeast Asia afford to Wait? Coping with Floods and Humanitarian Emergencies

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THE NEWS has been coming in thick and fast. Floods and landslides caused by heavy rainfalls in parts of Southeast Asia seem to have become normal occurrences. As if this is not enough, we also hear of severe warnings about the colossal consequences of global climate change. Disaster-stricken countries must be finding themselves overwhelmed by the immensity of the tasks in coping with all these natural disasters. Consider the latest flooding to hit Indonesia's capital, Jakarta: Despite calls to step up efforts for disaster preparedness to avoid humanitarian emergencies caused by torrential rains and devastating deluge, disaster response remains woefully inadequate.

One wonders how much more warning does it take for states to prioritise human security in their security agenda? To be sure, the region has already experienced several crises that could have triggered off alarm bells about the inability of states to cope with new, emerging security threats. The December 2004 tsunami should serve as a massive lesson of the human tragedies awaiting a region that cannot prepare itself. The grim tasks of undertaking disaster relief operations, providing humanitarian assistance and post-disaster reconstruction and development are all feeding into a vicious cycle. Natural disasters generate complex emergencies such as population dislocation, disruption of public services and threats of infectious diseases, all of which require urgent and coordinated responses from a broad range of state agencies.

Unfortunately, as vividly illustrated by the latest floods in Jakarta, many states in and outside Southeast Asia are least prepared to cope with these complex humanitarian emergencies.

Indonesia's 'Katrina'?

The Jakarta floods have come just a few days after Indonesia declared a state of emergency due to the resurgence of the health threat from the H5N1 virus (bird flu). Images of submerged houses and vehicles, people wading through chest-deep waters and others perched on rooftops awaiting evacuation, have once again highlighted the horrendous plight of individuals and communities in disaster-stricken areas.

Latest reports have so far revealed that about 340,000 people have been rendered homeless as a result of the floods. Some have been swept away by strong water currents while others have died from electrocution. A crisis of this magnitude inevitably draws a grim reminder of a similar disaster that hit the American city of New Orleans in 2005. The damage that was caused by the fury of hurricane Katrina was catastrophic. It resulted in most of the city being submerged in flood waters after the Mississippi breached its levees and burst into the city — catching state authorities totally unprepared. The woeful lack of preparations in a city of the

richest and most developed nation in the world resulted in the loss of over a thousand lives, mostly the old and infirmed; an estimated half a million people dislocated; immeasurable misery to hundreds of flood victims and incalculable damage to the city's infrastructure, property and livestock.

The greatest tragedy from the Katrina disaster was the fact that even in the world's richest country, disaster preparedness was found lacking. A TIME magazine report in the aftermath of Katrina had noted post-mortem analyses that pointed to the fact that "Katrina was in the cards, forewarned, foreseen and yet still dismissed until it was too late. That so many officials were caught so unprepared was a failure less of imagination than will..." Hence, from this page of recent history, it is more often the lack and/or failure of disaster response systems that results in humanitarian emergencies of massive proportions.

Human Security: Is the region doing enough?

Asia is a region where major natural disasters often occur. Yet, despite this, are states doing enough to protect their people from the risks and emergencies that come with these disasters? Consider the 2006 Global Risks Report that was released at the 2006 World Economic Forum (WEF). The report had ranked pandemics and natural disasters as among the highest in the list of risks currently confronting the international community. More importantly, the report observed that despite the interplay of these multiple global risks and their combined ripple effects, "disaster planning and crisis management suffer from a number of shortcomings". Among these are limited investments of resources in health systems and varying responses to different assessments of threats.

These observations certainly reflect the situation in Southeast Asia. With memories still fresh of the catastrophic devastation wrought by the 2004 earthquakes and tsunami, one would have expected more vigilance from state authorities in the region to deal with future disasters. But there appears to be little evidence of this.

The recent cases of devastating floods and even landslides across the region brought on by heavy rainfall has seen affected countries -- the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia -- grappling with the lack of capacity to provide immediate disaster assistance. This is particularly so to victims in the remote areas where poor infrastructure hindered transportation of basic supplies, including health services. With the erratic changes in climatic conditions, brought on among others, by climate change, there are enough reasons for raising the urgency in disaster preparedness in these countries.

One need not wait for this type of disaster to strike before nation-wide responses are switched to emergency mode. As images of natural disasters unfold and captured vividly in television footages, the unfortunate lag in response time often results in unnecessary loss of lives and human misery.

No time to lose

The latest floods in Jakarta proved to be another example of such delayed reaction, stemming from inertia in crisis management. One could argue, for instance, that the damaging effects of the December 2006 floods that laid to waste many parts of the Malaysian state of Johor, could also happen to Jakarta — given the torrential rains at this time of the year. Moreover, given the experiences of similar floods in 2002 that submerged parts of Jakarta, not to mention the capital's problematic drainage system, it would have been a logical step to re-assess Indonesia's national strategy to mitigate the potential risks from such disasters.

But from the various reports of lack of evacuation warning and delayed assistance to victims of floods, it seems that much remains to be done in terms of disaster mitigation or risk reduction in Indonesia. The same applies to other countries in the region that face the same problems — annually and even several times in a year.

With the looming threats of climate change, it may do well to examine the extent to which disaster risk reduction has become a national priority among states across the region. There is also a need to assess the institutional capacity of states to support strategies to face natural disasters. Are there sufficient regional mechanisms to complement national measures? How can regional states promote greater cooperation in disaster management? There is clearly a need to address these challenges before the next big wave strikes.

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