



Southeast Asian Responses to the 2023 Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes

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Executive Summary

This policy report analyses the humanitarian responses of Southeast Asian countries to the 7.8 magnitude earthquakes that hit Türkiye and Syria in February 2023. It traces the emerging role of Southeast Asian states in responding to a humanitarian crisis outside the region and identifies lessons from their emergency response operations.

Based on semi-structured in-person and online interviews with participants on the ground, the report assesses the scope and limitations of the Southeast Asian states' humanitarian responses and the implications for cooperation between them. Considering the limited experience of the Southeast Asian response teams with disaster responses of such a scale and outside of the region, they faced challenges including obstructions in emergency preparedness and limited communication and coordination.

Looking ahead, the report identifies areas of potential development for Southeast Asia's disaster management mechanisms through:

- (1) the establishment of a regional framework on humanitarian diplomacy to consolidate the region's ambitions of global leadership on disaster management; and
- (2) the adaptation of existing ASEAN mechanisms for disasters outside of the region.

Introduction

On 6th February 2023, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck southern and central Türkiye and northwestern Syria. This was followed by another 7.5 magnitude earthquake nine hours later just 95 km north. The two earthquakes caused widespread damage and loss of life, with over 62,000 casualties, more than 100,000 injured, approximately 3.3 million displaced and an estimated US\$34.2 billion in direct damage.¹

When a country experiences a natural hazard event that overwhelms local and national disaster management systems, governments can call for international support. In the aftermath of an earthquake the first 72 hours are the crucial period, in which response must be activated to save lives. As outlined by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), there are five key areas that determine the success of a humanitarian response effort:

1. Emergency preparedness.

Before a crisis occurs, it is important to build relationships between local and national governments, civil society, non-government organisations (NGOs), UN agencies and the private sector. Preparedness also involves situational awareness – including collecting population and territorial data in at-risk areas and determining the capacity of organisations to respond – and engaging in exercises and contingency planning.

2. Deploying skilled staff.

Having a skilled staff readily available for deployment when the need arises is essential. In this context, if a government requests international assistance, OCHA has qualified personnel available to provide support to the government.

3. Knowing the specific context.

The national government and UN country team should assess the impact of the disaster to develop situational awareness of its scale.

4. Assessing response capacity.

The national government and OCHA should assess the response capacities of governments and partners.

5. Mobilising funding and planning operations.

The national government and international community should mobilise funds and plan and execute operations. At this stage, monitoring efforts should be established to track when, where and how assistance is delivered and how needs

¹A. Kadir Yildirim, “Lessons From the 2023 Kahramanmaraş Earthquake”, Baker Institute for Public Policy, 10 October 2024, <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/lessons-2023-kahramanmaras-earthquake>; Rashmin Gunasekara et al, “Global Rapid Post-Disaster Damage Estimation (GRADE) Report: February 6, 2023 Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes Türkiye Report”, The World Bank, 20 February 2023, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099022723021250141/pdf/P1788430aeb62f08009b2302bd4074030fb.pdf>

are changing so that gaps and duplication can be identified. Checks should also be undertaken to ensure that humanitarian principles are upheld throughout the response.²

The immediate call for international assistance by the government of Türkiye triggered the largest urban search and rescue (USAR) response since the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) was founded over 30 years ago. The World Health Organization's Emergency Medical Team (EMT) Secretariat also issued a call at the onset of the disaster, which activated 38 international emergency medical teams.

This report assesses the humanitarian response to the 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria, focusing on Southeast Asian humanitarian responses in Türkiye. It is based on a study undertaken in September and October 2024 by the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) team at RSIS. The team undertook semi-structured interviews with 24 participants online and in-person in Istanbul, Ankara and Gaziantep, under Nanyang Technological University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) project number 2024-447.³ The participants represented organisations and countries involved in the earthquake response. These interviews explored the gaps and challenges in the humanitarian response effort with a focus on Southeast Asian responses. They explored the level of emergency preparedness, capacity and experience of the Southeast Asian responders, and the perceptions of the wider international humanitarian response effort. This policy report documents the findings and analyses the data collected to identify challenges and areas for improvement.

Assessment: Response to 2023 Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes in Türkiye

Türkiye experiences thousands of earthquakes of varying intensities each year, with over 30,000 earthquakes in 2024 alone.⁴ However, the devastating earthquakes of 6 February 2023 have proven to be the country's deadliest earthquakes since 1900.⁵

National Coordination Mechanisms

Türkiye's main national coordination mechanism in the face of a disaster is the T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı, or the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD). Formed in 2009, its role is to "prevent disasters ... minimise disaster-related damages, plan and coordinate post-disaster response, and

² OCHA, 2017, "5 Essentials for the First 72 Hours of Disaster Response", 10 February, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/5-essentials-first-72-hours-disaster-response>

³ In line with university ethics, references to interviewees are anonymised through the use of codes.

⁴ Statista, "Number of Earthquakes in Turkey from 1990 to 2024", Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1309531/turkey-number-of-earthquakes/>

⁵ Rashmin Gunasekara et al, "Global Rapid Post-Disaster Damage Estimation (GRADE) Report".

promote cooperation among various government agencies”.⁶ AFAD is also involved in coordinating Türkiye’s international disaster response operations.

Part of AFAD’s mandate is derived from the Türkiye Disaster Response Plan, or *Türkiye Afet Müdahale Planı* (TAMP), which lays out all response action required in case of any disaster or emergency. The plan defines the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholder institutions and communities at national and local levels, including ministries, public institutions, the private sector and NGOs.⁷ During the response to the 2023 earthquakes, AFAD had responsibility for coordinating all internal and external disaster management activities within the country. Together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, AFAD received and coordinated relief.⁸

The Red Crescent Türkiye (TRC) was the second national body activated in disaster relief efforts. It is the largest humanitarian organisation in the country, with an auxiliary role to the government. The organisation has been a key part of previous humanitarian operations. As the only NGO covered under TAMP, TRC became the lead for the coordination of food and nutrition. TRC also worked with the Ministry of Family and Social Services and UN bodies to provide cash assistance to those in need through existing TRC cash platforms.⁹ In terms of international aid, TRC coordinated the response of other Red Cross/Red Crescent organisations from around the world.¹⁰

International Response from Southeast Asia

International aid played a significant role in Türkiye’s response to the earthquake. Over 100 countries provided monetary assistance, in-kind aid and personnel, with 199 international rescue teams operating in the field at the peak of the response.¹¹ Many of these teams were internationally accredited with the aforesaid INSARAG.¹²

Southeast Asia was heavily involved, with all ASEAN countries, except Myanmar, responding to the disaster (Table 1). Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam deployed teams on the ground.¹³

⁶ AFAD, “About Us”, <https://en.afad.gov.tr/about-us> (accessed 1 January 2025).

⁷ F. Oktay, “The Preparation and Integration of Turkey’s National Disaster Response Plan”, WIT Transactions on The Built Environment 150, 2015, <https://www.witpress.com/Secure/elibrary/papers/DMAN15/DMAN15001FU1.pdf>

⁸ Interview with GF3A, Turkey, September 2024

⁹ Interview with NW1A and NF4A, Turkey, September 2024.

¹⁰ Interview with NW1A and NF4A, Turkey, September 2024.

¹¹ Daniel Eike, “INSARAG After Action Review: 2023 Türkiye and Syria Earthquakes – A Reflective Commemoration of INSARAG’s Largest International Search and Rescue Operation”, OCHA, April 2024, https://insarag.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/INSARAG_AAR_Turkiye_Syria.pdf

¹² INSARAG, “INSARAG – USAR Directory”, https://vosocc.unocha.org/usar_directory/membercountriesoverview.asp#region2 (accessed 16 February 2025).

¹³ AHA Centre, “A Milestone Towards One Asean One Response Beyond the Region”, <https://thecolumn.ahacentre.org/posts/aha-centre-diary-1/vol-85-a-milestone-towards-one-asean-one-response-beyond-the-region/>.

Table 1: Southeast Asian Responses

Country	Type of Response (Cash/In-kind Assistance or Personnel Deployment)	INSARAG External Classification (IEC); year of establishment	Details of Response
Brunei Darussalam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cash 	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Donated US\$523,980 to the Earthquake Humanitarian Fund for Türkiye.
Cambodia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cash 	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Donated US\$100,000 in humanitarian assistance.
Indonesia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In-kind Assistance Relief Teams 	Yes; Medium USAR team (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Donated 140 tons of food and logistical materials Sent personnel from various ministries, including BNPB and the Ministry of Health, with 62 search and rescue personnel. Established a field hospital.
Laos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Letter of Sympathy 	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> President Thongloun Sisoulith sent a letter of sympathy to his Turkish counterpart.
Malaysia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cash In-kind Assistance Relief Teams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yes; Heavy USAR Team (2016) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sent the Special Malaysia Disaster Assistance and Rescue Team comprising 70 personnel, followed by a second team of 72 personnel. Donated RM20 million (US\$4.54 million) in humanitarian aid.
Myanmar	NA	NA	NA
Philippines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cash Relief Teams 	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sent an 85-member inter-agency disaster response team, including members from the Office of Civil Defense (OCD), Department of Health, Philippine Army, Philippine Air Force and the Metro Manila Development Authority. Donated US\$100,000 in humanitarian aid.
Singapore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cash Relief Teams 	Yes; Heavy USAR Team (2008)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Donated US\$100,000 through the Singapore Red Cross. Sent a 20-member advance team, followed by a 48-member contingent comprised of the Disaster Assistance and Rescue Team (DART), medical doctors, paramedics, search specialists, hazardous materials specialists and operations support personnel.
Thailand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cash Relief Team 	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Donated US\$100,000. Sent the Thai National USAR team comprising 42 members.

Viet Nam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cash • In-kind Assistance • Relief Team 	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Donated US\$100,000. • Donated 25 tons of humanitarian aid. • Sent two delegations of 100 personnel.
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Challenges for ASEAN Member States

Considering the scale of the disaster, participation in the response to the Kahramanmaraş earthquake was a lesson for the international SAR teams. There were several challenges for ASEAN member states (AMS) that participated in on-the-ground operations.

1. Limited Emergency Preparedness

Emergency preparedness was a key challenge for the responders. The urgency of the situation in Türkiye, the need to respond within the 72-hour “golden time period” and the geographical distance between Türkiye and Southeast Asia meant that time was short.¹⁴ Countries with no pre-existing plans/mechanisms for such overseas aid missions were delayed as a result of bureaucracy – in some cases arriving after the first 72 hours.

Moreover, the lack of familiarity with the local context led to situations where some of the international search and rescue teams were ill equipped – regardless of their levels of INSARAG External Classification (IEC) – for an earthquake response occurring during the winter months.¹⁵ For example, some teams had to borrow winter clothing, shelter, batteries, fuel and other supplies from other teams. In some cases, equipment that had been brought over by these teams could not work due to the cold.¹⁶

2. Coordination and Communication

Of the six AMS that dispatched USAR teams, only Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have INSARAG External Classified (IEC) medium or heavy SAR teams (see Table 1).¹⁷ As a result, some states were unfamiliar with the practices and coordination mechanisms of the INSARAG teams. This lack of familiarity limited their access and communication with the other USAR teams on the ground, impacting effectiveness. Although AFAD coordinated these SAR operations, the scale of the disaster meant that beyond exercising broad oversight, AFAD had little on-the-ground capacity for more detailed communication. Coordination and

¹⁴ The “golden time period” refers to the first 72 hours after a disaster, which offers the highest probability of survival. After this time, the probability of finding survivors is lower as a result of lack of food and water, as well as continued exposure to the elements.

¹⁵ Interview with GW1A and GT2A, Turkey, September 2024.

¹⁶ Interview with GW1A and GT2A, Turkey, September 2024.

¹⁷ “INSARAG – USAR Directory”

communication was left to experts like the USAR Coordination Cell, the main INSARAG body that coordinated the USAR teams on the ground.¹⁸

Moreover, there was little formal communication between the teams deployed by the AMS because of the bilateral nature of AMS responses. However, informal communication channels were still used between embassies. For example, several embassies used WhatsApp to share transport options for those trying to reach the earthquake-affected zones to participate in the response operations.¹⁹

Perceptions of International Aid

The term “solidarity” was often used by local actors to describe the international response to the 2023 earthquakes. For example, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan mentioned the “solidarity displayed” in his opening address to the International Donors’ Conference organised a month after the earthquakes.²⁰ Similar sentiments were aired by local actors during the interviews conducted by the RSIS HADR team. Two common observations that underlie these perceptions of “solidarity” are highlighted below:

1. Pre-existing Relationships

The first observation is that pre-existing relationships played a significant role in the aid response. For example, South Korea and Türkiye have had a long relationship dating to the Korean War of 1950–1953 since Turkish soldiers had also fought in that war.²¹ The Korean Red Cross, which worked with Türkiye’s relief agencies to launch aid campaigns for the earthquake, highlighted Türkiye’s participation in the war, reflecting the Korean people’s “sense of gratitude to Türkiye” for its past support.²²

Pre-existing relationships also seemed to instil more trust in the Turkish government. For example, Japan and Türkiye have been long-time partners in earthquake management. As a result of this past collaboration, Japan was heavily involved in not just the immediate aftermath of the earthquake but in the post-disaster recovery period as well through projects ranging from disaster reconstruction to psychosocial support.

2. Türkiye’s Humanitarian Diplomacy Policy

Another observation is the belief that at least part of the reason for the significant international response to Türkiye’s earthquake was the goodwill the country had

¹⁸ Daniel Eike, “INSARAG After Action Review”.

¹⁹ Interview with GW1A and GT2A, Turkey, September 2024.

²⁰ Diyar Guldogan, “Türkiye Will Never Forget Int'l Solidarity Shown after Earthquakes: President”, Anadolu Agency, 21 March 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkiye-will-never-forget-intl-solidarity-shown-after-earthquakes-president/2850882>

²¹ Murat Tamer, “Turkey-Korea Brotherhood: A Solid Bond Strengthened by Tragedies”, *The Korea Times*, 16 February 2023, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/11/113_345575.html

²² <https://www.turkiyetoday.com/turkiye/south-koreas-earthquake-relief-deepens-75-year-friendship-with-turkiye-46468/>

cultivated through its past humanitarian diplomacy. Türkiye's investment in humanitarian diplomacy has been evident in recent years. For example, from 2002 to 2019, Türkiye's official development aid increased significantly from US\$85 million to US\$8.66 billion.²³

In the case of the response to the 2023 Kahramanmaraş earthquakes, Türkiye's overarching humanitarian diplomacy directly influenced some state responses.²⁴ After the appeal for international help, offers of assistance from countries and organisations around the world poured in, with some specifically citing Türkiye's past support and aid for their countries.²⁵ For example, Malaysia pointed to the fact that Türkiye was a "friend" that had previously "assisted [them] beyond normal methods" as the reason for responding.²⁶

Overall, there is a sense that people-centred mechanisms were key to the sheer outpouring of support for Türkiye's call for international aid. While the scale of the disaster was large, it was the relationships that Türkiye had cultivated over time – either long-term or those that had been developed because of Türkiye's humanitarian diplomacy – which left a mark on the local actors who were interviewed.

Policy Recommendations

Overall, the Southeast Asian response to the 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye proved to be a learning experience. The AMS gained a sense of the complexity of such an engagement, lessons that can be used in a national and/or regional context. Moreover, the number of AMS who participated in Türkiye's earthquake response indicates that the region has grown in its capacity to respond to disasters, even those outside its immediate vicinity. It is also clear that there is room for improvement. Two emerging ideas for consideration are as follows:

1. Strategic: Humanitarian diplomacy for ASEAN

ASEAN could develop a regional framework on humanitarian diplomacy to guide efforts outside the region. This would support ASEAN's ambitions of global leadership in disaster management.

²³ Volkan Şeyşane and Görkem Tanriverdi-Şeyşane, "States as 'Humanitarians': The Turkish Brand of Humanitarian Diplomacy", *Marmara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilimler Dergisi* 10, no 1 (2022): 153–178, <https://doi.org/10.14782/marmarasbd.993408>.

²⁴ S. Nanthini, "Türkiye's Humanitarian Diplomacy: Global Response and Reciprocity", IDSS Paper, 10 December 2024, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip24102-turkiyes-humanitarian-diplomacy-global-response-and-reciprocity/>.

²⁵ *Al Jazeera*, "Major Earthquakes Hit Turkey, Syria: Who Is Stepping Up to Help?", 19 February 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/6/major-earthquake-hits-turkey-syria-which-countries-offered-help>

²⁶ Prime Minister's Office, Malaysia, "Malaysia Gives Special Attention Because Türkiye Quake Worst In History", 14 February 2023, <https://www.pmo.gov.my/2023/02/malaysia-gives-special-attention-because-turkiye-quake-worst-in-history/>

Such a framework would build upon the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), in which one of two objectives is to jointly respond to disaster emergencies. It would further contribute towards the implementation of the “One ASEAN, One Response (OAOR) declaration responding to disasters as one in the region and *outside the region* to achieve faster response, mobilise greater resources and establish stronger coordination to ensure ASEAN’s collective response to disasters.”²⁷

Considering that the disaster landscape is only likely to become more unpredictable given the ever-intensifying climate crisis and rising geopolitical tensions, this is an opportunity for ASEAN to use its expertise and experience in disaster management and emergency response to further consolidate ASEAN centrality. Disaster management is an area where ASEAN has tangibly demonstrated solidarity on the ground, dispelling the myth that it is just a talk shop.²⁸

2. Operational: Adapt existing ASEAN disaster mechanisms outside of the region

In the Türkiye response efforts, communication and coordination among AMS was limited. Considering ASEAN’s goal of OAOR, there is a need to activate the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) – the operational engine of the AADMER – as a platform for a more integrated ASEAN approach.

Currently, the AHA Centre hosts the Web Emergency Operations Centre (Web EOC), which could be adapted to serve as a platform for member state activities outside the region.

Using the Standard Operational Procedure for Standby Arrangements and Coordination of Joint Disaster Relief and Emergency Response Operations (SASOP) and the ASEAN Joint Disaster Response Plan (AJDRP) as the basis, the AHA Centre could be tasked with developing a common framework for operationalising OAOR outside the region.

Activation of the AHA Centre to disaster response operations outside the region would facilitate communication, coordination and effectiveness.

²⁷ ASEAN, “One ASEAN One Response” declaration, 2016, <https://mneawp.asean.org/asean-declarations>

²⁸ Said Faisal and Adelina Kamal, “The Tsunami that Shaped ASEAN’s Political Mindset in Governing Disasters”, in *Disasters and Humanitarian Action: Dynamic Shifts, Reflections and Anticipating Future Directions*, ed. A. D. B. Cook (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2025) p. 53.

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