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From Aceh to Chile: Is ASEAN Prepared for Another Disaster?

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The latest natural disaster in Chile, like the one in Haiti, comes as yet another test of Southeast Asia's readiness in global humanitarian relief -- five years after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. How prepared is ASEAN for another human tragedy?

THE LATEST earthquake disaster in Chile is yet another wake-up call for Southeast Asia. The region needs to be constantly ready to face the new phenomenon of increasingly frequent natural calamities; the next one may well be in the neighbourhood, again. The Chilean disaster, which triggered tsunami alerts throughout the Pacific, comes barely weeks after the one in Haiti. How has this heart-stopping trend shaped our humanitarian instincts for the plight of others, and how have public responses influenced relief policies of states?

The Case of Southeast Asia

In January, at the height of the disaster in Haiti, Singapore joined the rest of the world to extend humanitarian assistance to the Caribbean state. In stark contrast to the swift and impressive humanitarian relief extended to Aceh during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the aid to Haiti stood at US\$50,000. The paltry size drew gasps of disappointment amongst some Singaporeans. The Straits Times ran no less than two commentaries by its staff writers. The first on 23 January, tellingly, was entitled "Is Singapore doing too little for Haiti?". The second article, barely a week later, was headlined "Disaster Relief and the politics of Giving". The writer characterised the aid as "realist tokenism".

Reactions in the blogosphere were more unkind. Some said they were utterly ashamed at the small figure. Others suggested it would have been better not to give at all. How was it, they asked, that South Korea, being in the same Asian region as Singapore, could send an aid mission to Haiti, on top of an aid package of US\$1 million?

The government's response to the criticisms was swift. Just two days after the 23 January article, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement urging Singapore's aid to be seen in context. Singapore, the ministry said, did not see itself as a major donor country and, for obvious resource constraints, could not extend the same amount of assistance for every disaster around the world. Aid had to be prioritised. That meant some would get more while others less. Where not much could be done by Singapore to make a difference to the global humanitarian relief efforts – due to distance and speed of delivery, for instance -- a symbolic show of sympathy would be better than doing nothing, the MFA spokesman said.

Doing the Right Thing

The significance of all this: It shows how sensitive the government has become to the humanitarian instinct of citizens to tragedies elsewhere. In future, we can expect more of such public pressures on the state to do the right thing. Interestingly, Singapore is not the only country where the state has to react to the criticisms of citizens over humanitarian issues.

In Thailand, the government too came under public criticism for giving too little aid to Haiti – even less than Singapore's at US\$20,000. The amount of assistance was raised twice until it reached at least US\$380,000. In addition, Thailand also extended rice aid and dispatched medical teams. Thais felt embarrassed that its government's offer of aid was less than even Cambodia's and Indonesia's. Jakarta, perhaps in gratitude for the world's assistance to Aceh during the 2004 tsunami, offered a wide-ranging list of humanitarian workers as well as medical supplies.

ASEAN's Disaster Preparedness

Other ASEAN countries have also been responsive to the growing trend of global humanitarian relief efforts. The Philippines pledged a medical team while Malaysia set up a special Foreign Ministry Fund to mobilise assistance from Malaysians.

The 2004 tsunami that wreaked havoc in Aceh and other parts of Asia was the first major disaster to test ASEAN's capacity to deal with humanitarian tragedies. The Chilean disaster would not be the last. We can expect more natural disasters to come that will challenge the humanitarian instincts of governments and the peoples of the region. Is ASEAN prepared to deal with the next major calamity? Has the grouping developed its capacity to deal with such a future? A quick look at the evolution of the region's disaster preparedness shows that some fundamentals are taking shape.

In July 2005, barely a year after the tsunami off Sumatra, ASEAN foreign ministers met in Vientiane, Laos to sign an Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response. The pact covered the A to Z of disaster management -- from disaster risk identification, prevention and mitigation to disaster preparedness and emergency response. Completing the systems-building are institutional arrangements such as setting up "national focal point and competent authorities". In other words each member state will have a focal point that acts as the link with ASEAN's region-wide effort.

In fact, an ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre) has been provisioned for. Presumably it is to coordinate all the national focal points in the 10 member states – to forge a cohesive response to any major disaster in the region. It is no exaggeration to say that the AHA Centre is one of the most important institutions to emerge within ASEAN, given the growing need for humanitarian relief around the world.

Will it Work the Next Time?

Indeed, disaster preparedness is one of the key elements of the ten-year Roadmap for an ASEAN Community by 2015. The roadmap was adopted by ASEAN leaders at their 2009 summit in Cha-Am,

Thailand, thus enshrining disaster preparedness as a must-do strategy for the future.

Clearly, ASEAN has been responsive to the urgent need to build a region-wide system and infrastructure to prepare for disasters and tragedies ahead. This system is however work-in-progress. It would not be a surprise if there are gaps in capacities both at the regional as well as national levels. But as the ASEAN states respond to the crisis in Chile, as they do to Haiti and others, it would be timely to see how the AHA Centre – in other words, ASEAN as a group -- plays its role in global relief efforts.

When the next disaster strikes anywhere in the region – or elsewhere around the globe -- let's hope ASEAN lives up to its name as an important part of the global community.

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