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New Series on Haze Issue

Transboundary Pollution: Arrival of the Haze Refugee?

By Alan Chong and Tamara Nair

Synopsis

The 'climate refugee' is not a new phenomenon. We are most likely set to see thousands displaced within their own countries or across borders as a result of adverse weather in future. This year's forest fires of Indonesia might be a harbinger. We need to be prepared for such forms of evacuation, restoration and reintegration at national or even regional levels.

Commentary

WHEN EVACUATIONS of residents of villages and towns are being ordered, it is often the case that the enemy is imminently at the gates. One might think that this is a plotline from Syria, Afghanistan or northern Iraq. But this is increasingly likely in Southeast Asia. The mortal danger at the door is neither insurgent nor terrorist. It is environmental pollution.

After two months of smog generated by forest burning, Indonesia has ordered naval vessels on standby for evacuation orders. Additionally, air-conditioned temporary living quarters have been constructed in parts of Sumatra and Kalimantan to house those who do not wish to evacuate to sea. This prospect portends the arrival of the surprisingly conventional category of the haze refugee. There are three aspects to this.

Running from home: internal displacement challenges

Although not refugees in the legal sense, internally displaced persons (IDPs) can be

considered as such given that they are no longer in their habitual residence, have faced interference in patterns of daily life and have no idea when things will get back to normal and they can return. This is exactly what is happening to the citizens of Palangkaraya, central Kalimantan. They will be headed to Banjarmasin where several naval vessels are prepared to take them elsewhere or off shore until the haze situation clears up.

Although this is clearly a case of a desperate situation calling for desperate measures, certain things remain uncertain in the lives of the evacuees. The recovery and reintegration needs, even for short periods of time, need to be clearly outlined at the outset. With the influx of haze refugees coming in to new regions, host communities need to be prepared for their entrance. And if children are the priority for evacuation, strong measures for family reunification should already be in place.

In the case of haze refugees offshore, special plans and facilities should be made available to them, especially so in the case of women and girls. Although it is understandable that their freedom of movement will be curbed, physical security in evacuation, stay and return must be ensured.

The onus of ensuring these 'safety' measures for haze refugees is on the state. From unsuccessful attempts to prevent the arrival of the 'enemy' at the gates, it now falls upon the government and its 'arms' of defence to ensure proper evacuation, secure stay and appropriate return and reintegration for the evacuees.

Territorial surrender

Evacuation from the effects of forest burning is also tantamount to ceding territory to an enemy. The 'enemy' has either achieved its objective of acquiring land, or ejecting civilians as an indirect means of securing victory. The reader might now balk and exclaim that we are pushing this analogy too far! This is far from the case. The tangible enemy is the entire range of irresponsible environmental practices. People are losing their rights to live, work and play uninterrupted in their location of choice. Displaced persons become alienated from the local power structures that had hitherto kept them rooted to a municipality.

The appointment holders within these power structures are themselves displaced from office by the emergency declared upon their jurisdiction. The land upon which human existence is defined on a day-to-day basis becomes uninhabitable and momentarily not even arable. Under these circumstances, sovereign government is momentarily in retreat. Instead, the exercise of sovereignty has meant protecting the civilian population by evacuating them.

Renewed roles for the military and police

Leaving aside the headline making 'water bombing' raids against the fires over the past month or so, there is a lot more the military and police forces can do on the ground in Kalimantan and Sumatra. Unsafe and illegal environmental practices can and have been defined by the law as such. Police forces can collect evidence with the aid of the latest forensic science, and enforce the law to the letter. Even where local power structures are a major consideration for policing, the police can assert

the overriding importance of national security in preventing the increase in incidences of uninhabitable land.

Indirectly, they are also employing the law to protect the law abiding home owning citizenry. The military can do more than transport water to douse fires underway. It can fulfil its traditional mandate of protecting the population by cordoning off the uninhabitable areas and conducting evacuation missions. Beyond that, the military, especially in Indonesia, can exercise martial law on behalf of the central government in disciplining errand forestry companies and their agents as well as casting a thick net of surveillance by aerial and ground measures.

Better still, military forces with their heavy airlift, sealift and land logistics capabilities can restore normalcy and advance reconstruction efforts once the fires are put out. Ultimately, why the haze refugee emerges and how he or she can be returned to civilian normalcy is a conjoined challenge of smart public policy combating the 'enemy'.

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