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International Disasters in Asia Pacific: Indonesia's Civil-Military Responses

By Margareth Sembiring and Jonatan A. Lassa

Synopsis

Long a recipient of international assistance during 'natural' disasters, Indonesia has been recently stepping up its joint civil-military humanitarian responses in the Asia Pacific. What does this mean for Indonesia and the world disaster response?

Commentary

THE INDIAN Ocean Tsunami (IOT) which battered Indonesia's Aceh in 2004 left Indonesia partly paralysed and spurred a fresh beginning in Indonesia's disaster management policies and practices.

Over the years the government had put in place various measures at different levels to respond to disaster events and had received numerous humanitarian aids from the international community. The IOT 2004, however, served as a wake-up call as it was evident that the existing measures at that time were not adequate to cope and respond to the calamity and resulted in the presence of international assistance at an unprecedented level. In 2007, Indonesia began its disaster policy reform, marked by the birth of the Indonesian Disaster Management Bill 24/2007 and the subsequent establishment of the Indonesian National Agency for Disaster Management (BNPB) in 2008.

New Paradigm

Frequent tragedies, coupled with global initiatives such as the Hyogo Framework for Action in disaster risk reduction formulated in 2005, compelled the Indonesian government to infuse a new paradigm into disaster risk management approaches. Necessary regulations and budget were put in place to create the BNPB, which plays a central command role in coordinating and deploying disaster responses.

Since its establishment, the BNPB has forged a number of cooperation with countries and international organisations such as, among others, the United States, Japan, Australia and the United Nations in building up its capacity and capability.

The new arrangements embodied in the BNPB, though still imperfect, seem to be progressing well. Experiences in large scale and complex reconstruction operations have given Indonesia practical advantages in disaster management realm. In fact, lessons from disaster responses in Aceh have been adopted by ASEAN to respond to the Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008. The BNPB has further amassed a wealth of knowledge and experiences during subsequent disaster events such as the 2009 West Sumatra earthquake among others.

In 2011, the UN Secretary-General awarded the Indonesian President as first global champion of disaster risk reduction, and just a few months ago James Fleming from the USAID's Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance affirmed Indonesia's growing significance as a role model for developing countries in disaster management.

Rise of Indonesia's Disaster Diplomacy

The increasing prominence of the BNPB has begun to garner acknowledgements from neighbouring countries. In 2014, Indonesia's BNPB engaged the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) comprising Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Island and Vanuatu in potential cooperation in disaster management, including climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction.

More recently in early June 2016, Indonesia and Fiji signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on disaster management which encompasses, among others, exchange of knowledge and expertise in disaster risk reduction, prevention, and preparedness, human resource development, climate change adaptation and recovery, and joint trainings and workshops.

The MoU which came in the aftermath of tropical cyclone Winston that hit Fiji in February 2016 indeed signifies Indonesia's burgeoning role in disaster diplomacy.

It is important to note that Indonesia has been active in helping other countries in need as evidenced in the administering of assistance to the Philippines a number of times between 2011 and 2013 (including in response to typhoon Haiyan), the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, the 2010 Haiti earthquake, the 2015 Vanuatu tropical cyclone, and this year's Ecuador earthquake and Fiji tropical cyclone. The extent of the assistance, however, was mainly humanitarian in nature, such as the providence of instant foods, drinking water, medications, tents, blankets, and the deployment of small teams of personnel.

The MoU signed between Indonesia and Fiji, which in essence suggests an acknowledgement of Indonesia's competence in dealing with large scale disasters, therefore marks a step-up in Indonesia's role in responding to international disasters.

What Next for Indonesia's Disaster Diplomacy

The rise of Indonesian disaster diplomacy in the Pacific, however, is perceived by some as part of Indonesia's strategy to calm down critical voices from both CSOs and the Small Island States such as Solomon Island. They recently raised their concerns about human rights abuse in West Papua at the 32nd session of the Plenary Meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Some are of the view, therefore, that Indonesian humanitarian support in the Asia Pacific is laden with political motives rather than pure humanitarian aid.

Indonesia's bilateral engagements on disaster management are not the only things that matter as Indonesia is also playing an active role at the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre). Indonesia's regional involvement is set to expand as it takes on the chairmanship of the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM), the subsidiary body that oversees the implementation of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency (AADMER) under the Conference of Parties (COP), this year.

Indonesia could be well-placed to become a role model in disaster management, but its credibility needs to be strengthened through the improvement of its domestic working mechanisms. In its national progress report on the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action (2015), Indonesia's disaster management efforts remain hampered by myriad of issues.

These include a lack of communication and coordination among government agencies and institutions; a lack of institutional capacity, technical know-how, budget, and human resources at local level; and a lack of community participation and ownership in disaster risk reduction programmes and decision-making processes.

Additionally, Indonesia's continuing battle with persistent forest fires and transboundary haze problems would give rise to questions over the effectiveness of its disaster management practices.

Indonesia might be on its way to increasing the presence of its civil-military responses to natural disasters at regional and international levels. For this to happen, however, it is imperative for Indonesia to ensure that it addresses the gaps not only in its domestic disaster management efforts but also in its commitment to solve problems in West Papua.

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