

*RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.*

## **Laos Dam Collapse: The Regional Response**

*By Lina Gong*

### **Synopsis**

*The dam collapse and floods in southern Laos in late July shows that disaster response in Southeast Asia comprises different types of cooperation. Given the increasing complexity of disasters, a cooperative mode that involves coordination among multiple actors is essential.*

### **Commentary**

DEVASTATING FLOODS hit the Province of Attapeu in Southern Laos on 23 July 2018. According to the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre), nine people were killed, 111 missing and 16,000 directly affected as of 25 July. While the area had continuous heavy monsoon rains before the tragedy happened, the disaster was caused not by natural events but the collapse of a saddle dam of the Xe-Pian Xe-Namnoy hydroelectric power project in Attapeu.

In response to the flood, multiple actors in the region have provided emergency aid and assistance, supplementing the government-led efforts. As the emergency response has been hampered by factors like remote location of the affected areas and limited capacity of local authorities, a multi-actor approach was needed which pooled together resources and capabilities from across the region with the consent of the Laotian government.

### **Coordinated Response in ASEAN**

The “ASEAN Declaration on One ASEAN One Response” that was adopted in September 2016 in Vientiane shows that ASEAN member states are committed to collective disaster response. AHA Centre was established in 2011 to facilitate member states to achieve this goal.

In the wake of the dam collapse, AHA Centre has released regular situation updates, provided relief items and dispatched personnel to facilitate coordination between the Laotian government and external actors. By mapping out the needs on the ground and managing the incoming relief items, AHA Centre has offered strong support for the national government in dealing with international assistance.

While AHA Centre has achieved progress in becoming a key regional actor in disaster response, many aspects of its operation still rely on the contribution and cooperation of individual member states. AHA Centre's relief items were transported from its warehouse in Malaysia to Vientiane by the Royal Malaysian Air Forces.

Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, among others, deployed specialists to assist search and rescue, in addition to their aid donation. Bilateral assistance thus constitutes a critical component of regional disaster response as member states complement each other in expertise and resources.

### **Prompt Response from Northern Neighbours**

Northeast Asian countries, namely China, South Korea and Japan, have been generous in offering assistance through various channels. China was among the first to respond to the collapse. As the two countries happened to be holding joint medical rescue exercise in Vientiane when the dam collapsed, the fully-equipped Chinese rescue and medical teams arrived in the affected area two days after the disaster.

The South Korean government provided relief items and cash and dispatched teams of rescuers and medical staff. Japanese relief goods that were transported from the warehouse of Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in Singapore arrived on 27 July.

The respective response of the three Northeast Asian countries has been driven by different factors. The early and swift deployment of Chinese assistance has been built on strong bilateral relationship and mutual trust particularly when the military dimension has been involved.

South Korea has paid special attention to the flood as two South Korean companies are implicated in the project. Japan as a traditional donor to Southeast Asia has developed strength in responding to emergencies. The extensive presence of Japan's international aid system in the region has enabled its prompt response.

### **Active Role of Private Sector**

The role of corporate actors was particularly noticeable as the deluge was caused by man-made factors. The South Korean firms, namely SK Engineering and Construction and Korea Western Power, have been at the focus of international attention as the stakeholders of the hydropower project. SK Engineering and Construction as the main contractor donated US\$10 million, brought in helicopters to assist rescue, and pledged to work with local authorities in building temporary shelters for the affected communities.

Chinese enterprises that operate in Laos like China Power and China Railway No.2 Group responded quickly with relief items as well as necessary equipment like electricity generator and excavator. They also helped repair roads and bridges to reopen access for rescue and relief efforts to the cut-off areas.

Singapore's business community has also been mobilised to donate water, food and clothes to the survivors. As many of these foreign companies operate in the affected areas or nearby, they were well-positioned to provide initial assistance to the affected population.

## **Way Forward**

The emergency response to the dam collapse in Laos reflects the trend in addressing non-traditional security (NTS) challenges like disasters induced by a mix of human and natural causes, which involves not only the national government concerned but also regional bodies, foreign governments and militaries, as well as private actors.

The multiplicity of actors diversifies sources of capacity, but coordination is essential for optimal use of expertise and resources. Within Southeast Asia, the AHA Centre has become the primary platform for coordination among ASEAN member states. As AHA Centre develops further, it is worth assessing whether there is need for the organisation to build expertise and capacity beyond coordinating, given that the region is likely to face threats from different types of disasters.

The three Northeast Asian countries have strong capacity in disaster response, which can be complementary with ASEAN member states. It is important for these countries to strengthen collaboration with the AHA Centre, given the growing role of the regional organisation in disaster management.

Despite the presence of the ASEAN+3 framework, cooperation remains primarily on a bilateral basis, as in this case. As the involvement of foreign actors, particularly militaries, in the affairs of a sovereign state is sensitive, deepening mutual trust is critical for enhancing cooperation between ASEAN member states and their northern neighbours.

The dam collapse highlights the need to build the capacity of the private sector in disaster preparedness and response, so as to strengthen the state response. As Southeast Asian countries aim to enhance connectivity, more infrastructure projects are expected. While high safety and quality standards reduce the likelihood of man-made disasters, it is still necessary for companies to be prepared for those induced by natural causes, like making emergency response plans and coordinating with local authorities.

Disaster response in this region comprises multilateral, bilateral and cross-level cooperation. To maximise the benefits of cooperation, coordination between states, regional organisations and private actors can and should be strengthened further.

---

*Lina Gong is a Research Fellow with the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, (NTU), Singapore.*

---

**Nanyang Technological University**

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)