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## **PNG Seeks to Re-Engage Southeast Asia: Role of Disaster Preparedness**

*By Alistair D. B. Cook and Yen Ne Foo*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Following the recent political turmoil in Papua New Guinea, the new prime minister James Marape signaled a shift in its foreign policy away from traditional partners to re-engage Southeast Asia. How can ASEAN help PNG develop its national capacity, such as in disaster preparedness?*

### **COMMENTARY**

AFTER MONTHS of upheaval in Papua New Guinean politics, with MPs moving into opposing camps and switching allegiances, the new prime minister James Marape was voted into office on 30 May 2019.

The next day, he held a press conference where he outlined a shift in foreign policy away from 'traditional partners and reliance on traditional partners'. He identified Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Philippines as countries to further develop ties with, particularly in trade and investment.

#### **New Focus & Responding to Disasters**

The prime minister outlined that the government would identify a development focus for each province – natural resources, industry or tourism – as a way to redistribute development across the country and diversify the economy, amid a spate of natural disasters.

It will be important to ensure sustainable development in the long term and improve disaster preparedness and response capacity in the immediate term given the exposure of Papua New Guinea to natural hazards and the recent detrimental effects this has had on its population.

On 25 February 2018, a 7.5 magnitude earthquake struck the Southern Highlands province. One major aftershock registered at 6.2 Magnitude on the Richter scale and many more continued to strike through to March. The earthquakes and the aftershocks affected over half a million people across the Enga, Gulf, Southern Highlands and Western provinces.

These affected provinces are rural and sparsely populated, making communications and access to the affected communities a challenge. Access to markets, public services and incoming humanitarian aid were severely compromised because of damaged roads and landslides. This was compounded by poor infrastructure and low investment in the province.

### **Disasters Amid Capacity Gaps**

In many cases, aid to affected populations could only be delivered using light aircraft. The ramifications of these operational challenges are multiplied when overlaid with the political and security environment of the Highlands – home to government protests last year and ongoing tribal fighting.

Recent natural disasters, particularly the 2018 Highlands Earthquakes, cast a spotlight on the capacity of different levels of government in Papua New Guinea. Capacity in this sense usually means access to adequate funding, the size of the institution and the level of technical expertise.

During our recent fieldwork in the country, we were told that there were many capacity gaps. These included the lack of government-endorsed needs assessment tools; a small pool of in-country disaster risk reduction experts; a reliance on outside help [but at the expense of an understanding of Papua New Guinea's complex operating environment]; a lack of strategic assets such as aircrafts and trucks; and a lack of standard operating procedures for receiving and redistributing international relief materials.

It is clear there are multiple avenues for cooperation with others to build national capacity.

### **Living Next Door to ASEAN**

Papua New Guinea's relationship with Southeast Asia was established after its independence from Australia in 1975. PNG shares a land border with Indonesia's West Papua province, and was mooted as a candidate for ASEAN membership in the 1980s.

Although this did not happen, PNG was given ASEAN observer status in 1976 and special observer status in 1981. It became the first non-ASEAN member state to accede to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and is a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum. Outside the ASEAN platform, PNG and ASEAN Member States have strong bilateral trade relations.

In 2017, Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand were among PNG's

top 10 trading partners according to IMF data while the PNG economy hosts a growing Southeast Asia-origin migrant labour force and businesses.

Further, students from PNG have increasingly travelled to countries like the Philippines and Indonesia as cheaper alternatives to Australia for education, taking advantage of English-language instruction and direct flights.

While PNG-Southeast Asia relations are growing, they have generally been limited to the areas of trade and investment. Opportunities for other forms of engagement between PNG and ASEAN Member States have been under-explored. It is time to consider disaster management as an opportunity for collaboration between ASEAN and PNG as a way to contribute to building national capacity.

This is logical given ASEAN's ambitions of becoming a global disaster management leader through its AHA Centre, as well as PNG's proximity to and longstanding relations with ASEAN Member States.

### **Balancing Vision with Tangible Policy**

Asking the PNG government to invest more heavily in disaster management as a state function can seem counterproductive when the government has so many competing development priorities.

However, there does need to be a rethinking of how Papua New Guinea can institutionalise and operationalise disaster management in a way that maximises the impact of its capacity and resources. This is crucial to prepare for and respond to the next disaster. This would likely be folded into a sustainable development programme as a way to achieve a diversified economy throughout the country.

External partners have an important role to play in supporting PNG to improve its disaster management and inform its development strategy, two sides of the same coin. With PNG's exposure and vulnerability to disasters, it is logical to enhance partnerships with countries that have developed strong capabilities for disaster management. ASEAN, its Member States and the AHA Centre's capabilities in this respect and their potential contribution are great candidates.

A PNG-ASEAN collaboration in disaster management would serve to expand the relationship between PNG and ASEAN Member States more holistically. It would fulfil the complementary objectives of enhancing PNG's disaster resilience. At the same time, this can help develop ASEAN's AHA Centre as a global disaster management leader as laid out in its ASEAN Vision 2025 on Disaster Management.

A PNG-ASEAN collaboration provides a means towards fulfilling the ASEAN Declaration on One ASEAN, One Response – responding to disasters as one, both inside and outside the region. ASEAN should share its knowledge and experience with a close neighbour while turning the ASEAN vision 2025 on disaster management into a reality.

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