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TYPHOON KESTANA: ASIA'S KATRINA

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The devastation and catastrophe wrought by Typhoon Kestana on the Philippines' capital Manila reflect a huge gap between rising vulnerabilities and preparedness at the national and regional levels. As more climate change results in more devastating cyclones, how can the region better prepare for future emergencies?

TROPICAL CYCLONES and flooding are nothing new to the Philippines. On an average, the country experiences about 20 typhoon storms annually. Yet, when typhoon Kestana hit the country, the deluge caused the worst floods in more than 40 years, with the death toll rising to at least 250, and displacing more than 500,000 people. This suggests that there remains a gap between what is known about the increasing vulnerabilities of populations as a result of climate-related disasters and what is effectively being done about it. The Kestana experience is only a preview of what is to come for low-lying regions in Southeast Asia unless immediate efforts are done to address this gap.

The Science, the Insecurities and Ill-preparedness

Kestana and its aftermath have vividly shown the kinds of human insecurities that stem from the effects of climate change.

Firstly, the heavy rainfall as a result of Kestana reflects the severe impact of climate change as indicated in climate change studies. These studies have predicted the emergence of more intense and frequent storms. Secondly, the coastal and low-lying areas that have been inundated by Kestana – in particular the National Capital region and Central Luzon – have already been highlighted in scientific reports as highly vulnerable to tropical cyclones and flooding. The International Development and Research Centre's report on Climate Change Vulnerability Mapping in Southeast Asia is the latest of these findings. Thirdly, the intense rainfall has opened the floodgates to a plethora of human insecurities – damaged properties, significant population displacement, destruction to agricultural crops that threaten economic livelihoods and food security, and the threats of infectious diseases stemming from the lack of clean water and sanitation.

Yet, while these climatic effects are not uncommon to the Philippines, government officials found themselves struggling to cope with the humanitarian emergencies that are unfolding days after the typhoon's aftermath. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, government officials have largely been reactive in their response to the disaster. There continues to be a lack of improvement made in the Philippines' disaster preparedness capacity. In an interview with Al-Jazeera, a member of the Philippines' National Disaster Co-ordinating Council also admitted that the authorities were inadequately prepared to respond to several affected provinces all at the same time. Thus, the assumption that annual floods would only affect a few provinces occasionally has strained limited resources, especially at the local government level.

The failure to think in the long term and acknowledge the relevance of scientific evidence render the country even more vulnerable to predicted climatic impact, resulting in haphazard responses— a little too late.

Thirdly, while government agencies are now doing their utmost in responding to humanitarian emergencies, the lack of effective rescue and relief assistance available to all affected citizens only heighten their insecurities. News reports of food aid shortages and the lack of sanitation facilities have led to anger and frustration towards perceived government inefficiency.

Faced with the daunting task of reaching out to hundreds of thousands of victims, the Philippines has appealed to the international community for humanitarian assistance. While efforts are on-going, one thing is certain: reactive measures are unsustainable and will not guarantee the security of communities in the long run.

Whither the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management?

It is an irony that Kestana occurred in the same month the Philippines ratified the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER). As all member states have finally ratified the agreement since it was signed in 2005, AADMER will enter into force by the end of 2009.

This reflects a collective will to build a more rigorous regional disaster response. Having to experience a series of humanitarian emergencies and being a vulnerable region to various climatic hazards, ASEAN has learnt to cooperate and coordinate on disaster management. Even before the AADMER was ratified, a comprehensive framework was initiated under the ASEAN Regional Programme on Disaster Management (ARPD) 2004-2010. A number of activities have also been implemented. This indicates a substantial amount of progress on the part of the regional bloc in improving its preparedness.

However, looking at recent developments, ASEAN appeared to have failed to act in a timely manner.

This calls for further strengthening of the regional capacity on disaster management. The ARPD has set a platform for a comprehensive approach to disaster management but the existing framework continues to be under-utilised. The newer AADMER is designed to put in place structures, mechanisms and strategies for regional cooperation on disaster management. In order to serve its purpose, at least three points are critical.

Firstly, an integrated disaster management starting from risk reduction, responsive relief and sustainable rebuilding should be implemented equally. However, developing a reliable and responsive relief could be a practical starting point. Secondly, an ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) should be formed soon. The first task of this centre would be to adopt operational guidelines for the coordination and cooperation of ASEAN member states. The AHA Centre should be able to build effective partnerships with other international organisations such as the World Health Organization, the Asian Development Bank, the United

Nations as well as with ASEAN dialogue partners through ASEAN-related frameworks such as ASEAN+3, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asian Summit. Thirdly, apart from mainstreaming disaster management into development plans, ASEAN should factor climate change into its political, security, social and economic policies.

Clearly, a declaration focusing on sustainable development is far from enough. ASEAN environmental cooperation and policies need to be revisited and geared towards developing a more comprehensive approach to building state and community resilience.

An Opportunity to be seized

Disasters such as Typhoon Kestana have once again provided an opportunity to revisit existing national and regional disaster preparedness mechanisms. There is also need to realise different components of the AADMER. ASEAN and its member states should not wait for another disaster to build momentum to advance national and regional disaster preparedness.

Against the scenarios of climate-induced vulnerabilities, it is imperative that disaster preparedness mechanisms be strengthened in parallel with long term initiatives on sustainable development, in order to build societal resilience in ASEAN.

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