



## **Coping with Floods and Humanitarian Emergencies: Can Southeast Asia Afford to Wait?** by Mely Caballero-Anthony

Floods and landslides caused by heavy rain in parts of Southeast Asia; severe warnings about the colossal consequences of climate change: disaster-stricken countries are being overwhelmed by natural disasters. The floods that hit Indonesia's capital Jakarta last month show that disaster responses remain woefully inadequate – despite calls to step up preparations to avoid these emergencies.

The December 2004 earthquake and tsunami that killed hundreds of thousands was just one of the human tragedies that has hit the region and should have triggered alarms about the inability of states to cope with new, emerging security threats. Natural disasters generate complex emergencies such as population dislocation, disrupted public services and threats of infectious diseases that require urgent and coordinated responses from a broad range of state agencies. Yet, many states are still not prepared to cope with these complex humanitarian emergencies. This gap was vividly illustrated in the latest crisis in Jakarta.

### ***Indonesia's 'Katrina'?***

Only days after Indonesia declared a state of emergency in response to the resurgence of the H5N1 virus (bird flu), Jakarta is again on high alert as authorities cope with floods triggered by torrential rains in and around the capital. Images of submerged houses and vehicles, people wading chest-deep through waters, while others perched on rooftops awaiting evacuation have again highlighted the horrendous plight of individuals and communities in disaster-stricken areas.

About 340,000 people were rendered homeless by the floods, with people swept away by currents, and some dying from electrocution. A crisis of this magnitude inevitably draws comparisons with the disaster that hit New Orleans in 2005. The damage caused by hurricane *Katrina* was catastrophic: most of the city was flooded, catching authorities unprepared for the crises that followed. The stunning lack of preparations in the richest and most developed nation resulted in the loss of over 1,000 lives – mostly the old and infirmed; an estimated half a million people were dislocated; and incalculable damage to the city's infrastructure and property.

According to TIME magazine, post-mortem analyses pointed to the fact that “*Katrina* was in the cards, forewarned, foreseen and yet still dismissed until it was too late. That so many officials were caught so unprepared was a failure less of imagination than will...” In other words, it is more often the lack and/or failure of disaster response systems that results in humanitarian emergencies of such massive proportions.

## ***Protecting Human Security: Is the region doing enough?***

Major natural disasters are all too frequent in Asia. Yet, the region has been slow to respond. According to the Global Risks Report released at the 2006 World Economic Forum (WEF), pandemics and natural disasters top the list of risks confronting the international community. Yet, the report observed that “*disaster planning and crisis management suffer from a number of shortcomings.*” Among these are limited investments of resources in health systems and varying responses to different assessments of threats.

These observations reflect what has been happening in Southeast Asia. Following the devastation wrought by the 2004 earthquakes and tsunami, one would have expected regional authorities to be more vigilant about similar disasters occurring. Yet, there is little evidence of action.

After the recent floods and landslides brought on by heavy rainfall, affected countries (the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia) didn't have the capacity to provide *immediate disaster assistance* – particularly to victims in remote areas where poor infrastructure hindered transportation of basic supplies, including health services. This situation will only get worse as climate change creates increasingly erratic weather and the urgency of disaster preparedness will increase.

### ***No time to lose***

Governments usually wait for disaster to strike before switching to emergency mode. The lag in response time often results in unnecessary loss of lives and more misery.

The floods in Jakarta were another example of such delayed reaction, stemming from inertia in crisis management. December 2006 floods laid waste to many parts of the Malaysian state of Johor; it didn't take much imagination to see the same could happen to Jakarta given the torrential rains at this time of year. Moreover, Indonesian planners had only to recall similar inundations in 2002 that engulfed parts of Jakarta, and the capital's poor drainage system to see the need to re-assess the national strategy to prepare for, deal with, and mitigate the risks of such disasters.

The looming threat of climate change only underscores the need to make disaster risk reduction a national and local priority throughout the region and to assess the institutional capacity to support these strategies. There must also be regional mechanisms and strategies to complement national measures, the development of which would also promote regional cooperation in disaster management.

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