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Dr Mahathir Mohamad [TEMPO/ Ramdani]

## Main Story

Malaysia

The Malaysian Insider, 14 September 2010

### Singapore was cause of Malaysia's racial problems, says Dr M

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 14 – Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that racism in Malaysia was clearly the result of Singapore's short membership in the country, and not because the island was "turfed out" as suggested by the republic's founding father Lee Kuan Yew recently.

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## In Focus

AsiaViews, Edition: 33/VI/November/2009

Natural Disasters in Southeast Asia:

### How Prepared Are We?



AP PHOTO/AARON FAVILA

The recent spate of disasters in Southeast Asia signifies the importance of being prepared. But despite the significant progress that has already been made over the years, there remains policy gaps that governments need to fill.

#### Will the region ever be prepared?

The Vietnamese and Indonesian governments were praised for their success in responding to Typhoon Ketsana and earthquakes, respectively. The Vietnamese government was able to monitor the coming typhoon and early warnings and evacuations were able to minimize the casualties. In Indonesia, disaster response coordination functioned effectively despite the multitude of disasters hitting the country within the same week. Responding to the most severe quake in Padang, the government was confident enough to announce that the emergency phase would last for just one month, the Humanitarian Response Plan in support of the government would last for 90 days, and the reconstruction and rehabilitation stage would take place from November 2009 to March 2010. The designated agencies in Vietnam and Indonesia, namely the Ministry of Defense and the National Agency for Disaster Management respectively, took decisive action and played an effective coordinating role between government agencies, civil society and international assistance.

In stark contrast, the Philippines government was criticized for its lack of preparedness in dealing with Typhoon Ketsana. The government was overwhelmed by the situation that quickly unfolded. It was fortunate that through the collective acts of voluntarism, local communities and civil society were able to boost the early stage of the relief efforts and reduce the severity of the crisis.

Even a strong state with abundant resources and advanced coordination capacity like the US could still be beleaguered and slow in providing emergency aid response, as proven in the Hurricane Katrina experience in 2006. It indicates that a perfect disaster preparedness plan simply does not exist because when a disaster strikes, local capacity also collapses. Local authorities themselves become disaster victims, losing their homes and possibly families and friends.

Nevertheless, states in the region should find ways to incorporate existing knowledge and implement the best approach available to avert the calamities of disasters. Scientists are predicting an increase in the number and severity of disasters to hit Southeast Asia at least in the next decade. Moreover, the threat of climate change is expected to aggravate the intensity and frequency of these disasters, leaving states and communities in the region even more vulnerable.

#### Averting humanitarian crisis

Although the exact timing and magnitude of disasters are unpredictable, there are ways to reduce risk so that a humanitarian crisis can be minimized, if not prevented. Disaster preparedness should go beyond emergency relief and incorporate long term aspects focusing on strengthening resilience in various areas.

*First*, infrastructure resilience. Improved urban and rural planning is important. Proper evacuation routes should be built to support early warning mechanisms. Moreover, shoddy construction is often responsible for the increased death toll in disasters. Therefore, governments should apply stricter rules regarding building codes and increase supervision of compliance to these standards.

*Second*, community resilience. A community-based disaster risk reduction plan such as building better awareness of disasters, education and training for early warning and early action should be pursued. This should focus not only on communities which are most at risk, but also on those who are most vulnerable within these communities.

*Third*, mainstreaming disaster risk reduction plans into national and local development and climate adaptation policies. There is no single dominant factor responsible for disasters. Disaster risk reduction should therefore consider the complex combination of poor urban planning, development inequalities, deforestation, environmental degradation and climate change.

*Fourth*, review of past relief efforts. Reducing the delivery time for aid, improving access to remote disaster-struck areas, eradicating corruption, and strengthening communication between central and local authorities are some of the issues that arose from the recent disasters. Such a review should also involve relevant non-state actors.

*Lastly*, regional support. Regional initiatives from ASEAN are heading in the right direction. The ASEAN Disaster Management Agreement, entering into force in December 2009, is expected to strengthen existing initiatives on disaster management. The agreement allows for disaster risk identification, monitoring and early warning, prevention and mitigation, preparedness and response, and technical cooperation and research. The ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management will be the focal point for implementation.

#### **One step ahead of disasters**

Staying ahead of disasters will depend on how swift states in the region are able to learn from past experiences and improve their preparedness. It requires the involvement of various government agencies, NGOs, international institutions and most importantly, local communities. A people-centered approach is imperative because technology alone will not save lives. Strengthening community resilience against the impact of disasters is a concrete way to save lives and prevent these disasters from crippling ongoing development in the region.

**By Irene A. Kuntjoro, Associate Research Fellow at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.**

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