

STOP SWEEPING FOOD ISSUE UNDER CARPET

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THE unfolding food crisis and its devastating impact on human security require no less than a global, multilateral response.

The short-term policies adopted by governments to address food shortages are not sustainable in the long run, given the severity and complexity of the problem. The Association of South-east Asian Nations (Asean) should act to initiate regional frameworks to address the crisis, before it gets any worse.

The daily reports of rising food prices across the globe and the upward spiral in the price of crude oil appeared to have caught many governments by surprise. Some very poor African communities are reduced to literally eating dirt — mud cookies made from a mixture of mud, salt and vegetable oil.

In some parts of Asia, reports of riots breaking out over food shortages have raised the spectre of potential conflict, raising the urgency for governments in the region, particularly in South-east Asia, to act expeditiously.

New head of S'pore-based
Centre for Non-Traditional
Security on why Asean must
address crisis immediately

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GRAIN DRAIN: A rice factory in Thailand, where a 4-5 per cent inflation rate was forecast last week amid record rice prices. BLOOMBERG

For many developing countries in Asia, food takes up a large portion of the income of the poor. According to the World Bank, the share of food in the consumption basket of the average household in East Asia and South-east Asia ranges from 31 to 50 per cent, and could be as high as 70 per cent in countries such as Bangladesh.

This is in stark contrast to

developed countries like the United States, where only 15 per cent of household income is spent on food.

The surge in the price of crude oil to historical highs has further fuelled Asia's food price inflation. Higher fuel prices translate into higher costs for shipping and warehousing, as well as higher prices of kerosene that is widely used for cooking.

Moreover, high crude oil prices have made the switch to biofuels more attractive, thereby exacerbating the food crisis. Enticed by the lucrative returns from this new market, farmers have been growing cash crops such as palm and corn instead of staple crops.

The old saying, "a hungry man is an angry man", is now being played out in some parts of the world. In Bangladesh, about 20,000 factory workers rioted over high food prices and low wages, injuring at least 50 people. In Indonesia, about 500 protesters took to the streets, demanding that the government bring down food prices.

Governments in some of the worst-hit countries have scrambled to contain the situation. These include

giving the poor additional food hand-outs. Some rice-producing countries are curbing exports of the staple, while in other countries, rice hoarders are criminalised. In the Philippines, the army has been deployed to guard rice warehouses and escort the transport of the prized grain.

Despite these efforts, the severity of the food crisis renders national action inadequate. Multilateral cooperation on regional and global fronts is needed as the state of food security is far more complex and interconnected in nature. The critical factor in this crisis is not so much the volume of supply but more about implementing the appropriate policies concerning the distribution of food.

The head of the UN World Food Programme Josette Sheeran says it is the poor governance in food security that creates the problem of food being in the wrong places and at prices the poorest cannot afford. Many of the short-term policies such as providing food aid, controlling food prices and curbing grain exports are clearly insufficient and unsustainable.

What is needed is a rethinking of food policies to allow for better

global governance on food. In this regard, initiating a regional framework on food security is a small but significant step forward, and what better way than for Asean to kick start such a process.

Asean needs to convene a regional meeting quickly — as proposed by the Philippines government — to address food security issues affecting the region. The meeting could also include the Asean+3 counterparts — China, Japan and South Korea — as they are also stakeholders of the food supply and demand dynamics in the region.

This is of critical importance to Asean since its member countries, Thailand and Vietnam, are two of the world's top rice exporters, while another member, the Philippines, is one of the world's largest rice importers. Food security should therefore form an integral part of Asean's broader objectives of creating a community that is secure and peaceful.

Asean can begin by taking measures to strengthen the implementation of the Agreement on the Asean Food Security Reserve, given the scenario of dwindling stockpiles and spiralling food prices. The bloc should also maximise the benefit from the pilot project on East Asia Emergency Reserve with China, Japan, South Korea and the UN World Food Programme and also the Asean Food Security Information System, so that adequate supplies of rice can be provided where and when they are needed.

With the food crisis now called the silent tsunami, Asean must act before the crisis spirals into catastrophic proportions.

Associate Professor Mely Caballero-Anthony is the head of the Centre for Non-Traditional Security that will be officially launched at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, on Tuesday. Ms Sofiah Jamil and Irene Kuntjoro are, respectively, Research Analyst and Associate Research Fellow at the centre.

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