The history of humanitarian action in East and Southeast Asia: Asian perspectives

Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore, 29–30 January 2013

A major conference on the history of humanitariansim in East and Southeast Asia took place at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore, on 29–30 January 2013. It brought together diplomats, senior figures from the humanitarian sector and academics to explore a range of historical aspects of Asian humanitarianism. The conference was part of a long-term research project undertaken by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) entitled ‘A Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action’.

Co-organised by HPG and ISEAS, the conference explored the key events creating humanitarian need across East and Southeast Asia, the responses and actors involved and how these have evolved. Focused panel discussions offered analyses of the evolution of humanitarianism in China and Myanmar; crises resulting from mass atrocities in Cambodia, the North Korean famine, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and local and international humanitarian responses.

Keynote session
Mr Tan Chuan-Jin, Acting Minister for Manpower and Senior Minister of State, Ministry of National Development, Singapore, delivered the keynote address at the conference. Minister Tan shared his own experience of leading Operation Flying Eagle’s Humanitarian Assistance Support Group in Meulaboh, Aceh, as part of Singapore’s disaster relief support in Aceh following the 2004 tsunami. Mr Tan shared his views on the importance of timeliness, access and cultural sensitivity in delivering humanitarian assistance to local communities. He shared the challenges faced in ensuring the ‘precise application of aid’ relevant to local needs. An added challenge was the issue of interoperability among the different agencies and entities involved in the response, including among and with the various donors and United Nations (UN) agencies. Mr Tan’s presentation emphasised the importance of taking into account the culture and lifestyle of the people whom the humanitarian assistance is supposed to help, and obtaining the support of both national and local authorities. These were recurring themes in the panel discussions that followed.

Conference panels
Four case studies were presented on the first day: Cambodia, North Korea, China and Myanmar. Humanitarian stories from Aceh were presented on the second day, together with a comparative overview of post-disaster reconstruction experiences of countries in East, Southeast and South Asia. Discussants in the final panel reflected on emerging trends in humanitarian action. There was acknowledgement by key humanitarian agencies in the UN system that the international humanitarian community needed to be more sensitive to, and aware of, local needs, culture and capacity. Local context and contacts (or networks) matter in gaining access to victims in crisis areas, especially in situations of armed conflict. There is recognition that, despite the complex framework and networks of humanitarian assistance, and existing procedures and processes, each humanitarian crisis is unique. It is thus important for humanitarian actors to adapt to and work within existing conditions to provide the ‘best’ response. In some situations, the best response is usually the ‘best
fit’ to existing circumstances. Other areas to address are the tendency of response efforts to be donor-driven and the dangers of creating aid dependency.

**Country case studies**

**Cambodia**

Benny Widyono’s case study of the humanitarian crisis in Cambodia caused by the Khmer Rouge regime gave rise to further discussion on the lack of an alternative strategy for humanitarian action in Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge fell, as the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was unable to contain the remnant Khmer Rouge armed forces; and the complex Cold War power influences over the issue of Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia resulting in the ouster of the Khmer Rouge regime and Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia. Cold War politics contributed to the Khmer Rouge movement’s rise to, and stay in, power even after its ouster till its ousting in 1979, and also influenced the issue of developmental aid to Cambodia after the fall of the Khmer Rouge.

In just four years, between 1975 and 1979, killing, torture, hunger and starvation caused by the Khmer Rouge regime left 1.7 million people (about 25% of the country’s population) dead and the rest permanently scarred in ways not yet fully comprehended. The international humanitarian response to the disaster was complicated by Cold War politics. The impasse in providing developmental assistance continued until a political solution was finally made possible by the Paris Peace Agreements on Cambodia in 1991.

Prince Sihanouk’s unsuccessful efforts to maintain a neutral stance regarding the Khmer Rouge, the US’ secret bombings of east Cambodia and the Chinese government’s support to the Khmer Rouge prolonged Khmer Rouge rule until January 1979. The Vietnamese army and Cambodian rebel forces established the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). However, the United Nations (spearheaded by China, the United States and ASEAN) recognised the Khmer Rouge regime rather than the PRK as the legitimate government of Cambodia. The PRK thus faced political ostracism and an economic embargo. In 1982, ASEAN persuaded the Khmer Rouge to establish a Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) with two resistance forces, the Royalist FUNCINPEC led by Sihanouk and the anti-communist KPNLF led by Son Sann. The West and ASEAN countries provided lethal aid together with relief efforts to the refugee camps along the border(s). These became the stronghold of the CGDK against the PRK. The PRK itself received aid from the Eastern Bloc and Vietnam. The political stalemate and the economic suffering of the Cambodian people continued until October 1991, when the Paris Peace Agreements were signed, giving rise to UNTAC. UNTAC successfully repatriated 370,000 refugees and conducted elections leading to the establishment of the Royal Government of Cambodia. ‘Lavish’ foreign aid and investment finally flowed in, helping Cambodia on the path to economic growth and relative political stability.

**North Korea**

Emma Campbell’s analysis of the decision by humanitarian NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) to pull out of North Korea also touched on the issue of the politicisation of humanitarian action in countries under authoritarian regimes. Throughout the period of the famine there were allegations by a number of NGOs and commentators that aid was being used as a political bargaining tool by both donors and the recipient. The main issue continues to be gaining as much access as possible to the target population and ascertaining the extent of their vulnerability.
In the 1990s, North Korea faced a nationwide famine that led to death from starvation and disease of up to one million North Koreans. Dealing with the food crisis in tandem with the security and political challenges presented by this authoritarian and isolated regime gave rise to a number of ethical and practical problems for the international community. For many organisations and governments, concerns over aid diversion and the possibility of perpetuating a totalitarian regime led to the decision to withdraw or withhold humanitarian support. The history of humanitarian aid during the height of the North Korean famine in the mid-to-late 1990s highlights three predominant themes that characterised the challenges faced by humanitarian actors during this period: 1) the intransigence of the North Korean authorities; 2) access to information; and 3) the relationship between aid and the international community’s political and security goals. Policy suggestions for ongoing humanitarian efforts in North Korea include the promotion of humanitarian engagement and the separation of humanitarian aid from the foreign policy objectives of the international community.

China
Miwa Hirono’s paper explores the evolution of China’s approach to humanitarianism and how this relates to the contemporary politics of China’s role as a humanitarian actor. While the paper does not deny the ‘pragmatic’ aspects of China’s foreign policy, it asserts that the current debate on humanitarian action fails to address the history and traditions of moral obligation that have driven the way China provides humanitarian assistance. It is important for Western donors to understand these traditions and principles, to facilitate constructive engagement with China and minimise tensions with, and suspicions of, China. To resolve this impasse in understanding, Hirono provides a broad historical overview of China’s conception and implementation of humanitarian action.

There are three important aspects to China’s approach to humanitarianism today. These are societal vs. individual needs; imperialism vs. philanthropy; and infrastructure centredness vs. human centredness. Understanding this may aid further dialogue with China on what constitutes legitimate forms of international humanitarian assistance. China’s assistance is provided on a government-to-government basis, bypassing a broader range of civil society actors, even when the recipient government may be part of the problem that has caused the humanitarian crisis. The Chinese government justifies its approach as ‘win-win’ since it serves to enhance the stability (and autonomy) of the recipient state.

Myanmar
Moe Thuzar traces Burma/Myanmar’s history of humanitarianism. Although largely a collective social construct, humanitarian action in Burma had political overtones under colonial rule, particularly from the 1920s up to independence in 1948. The post-independence parliamentary government in the 1950s tried to bring major social movements under the ruling party’s aegis. Even so, spontaneous action was not as strictly regulated as it was by either the colonial government or by the authoritarian military regimes of 1962 and 1988. Under authoritarian rule, collective social action still had some limited space to operate, but humanitarian needs passed below the international radar until Cyclone Nargis in 2008.
The Nargis response served as one of the catalysts for change in the country. It highlighted both the weaknesses and the strengths of ASEAN mechanisms in addressing, and providing humanitarian responses to natural disasters. Nargis also created the rationale for an ASEAN coordinating mechanism on humanitarian action. This originated from the various individual and collective responses to natural disasters by ASEAN members. However, ASEAN’s role is not as evident in facilitating responses to current humanitarian needs following communal clashes in Rakhine State, Meiktila and other towns in central Myanmar, and the armed conflict in Kachin State. Looking at the historical evolution of humanitarian action in the country, it is worth exploring (and strengthening) the role of local and civil society actors in providing assistance in emergencies, even when these are not perceived, or do not perceive themselves to be, ‘humanitarian’ actors.

Trends in post-disaster responses in Asia
Patrick Daly’s overview of the main trends in post-disaster responses in Asia from the 1950s to the present highlights some interesting findings. He first mapped out the main patterns of disasters in 18 Asia countries, showing the range, frequency and impact of different forms of natural disasters, with a brief disaster profile for each of the countries surveyed. This was followed by a more specific look at a selection of the most devastating disasters, in terms of extent of physical damage. This allowed for an in-depth look at approaches to post-disaster reconstruction used by different countries, in different political and economic situations through time. The data showed that most of the disasters in the region came in the form of lower intensity, mildly destructive regular events – with the vast majority of events across the region being storms or floods. However, the majority of the damage caused in terms of financial costs stemmed from a limited selection of infrequent but intense events, such as earthquakes and tsunamis.

The study showed that 1) most of the funding for disasters in Asia from both private and public sources was spent on relatively few events; and 2) there are changing approaches to post-disaster reconstruction over the past several decades. Responses in most countries were typically restricted to emergency humanitarian activity, with little coherent and centralised emphasis on large-scale reconstruction. Additionally, in many countries the main burden of cost was commonly left to the individual, with states and NGOs playing a much more limited role. Since the 1990s, however, there have been several major shifts in post-disaster aid, including a closer integration of reconstruction and development (and thus longer term commitments), a rapid expansion of the international humanitarian sector, and a neoliberal emphasis upon participatory engagement.

Local humanitarian histories in Aceh
Ronnie Delsy’s paper explores local concepts of humanitarianism within the Acehnese culture as well as local humanitarian responses to the conflict and the 2004 tsunami. The main ideas of humanitarianism in Aceh are based on Islamic values that have been adapted into local traditions for centuries. The paper examines how Acehnese survived the disaster and the (religious and traditional) values that influenced their actions. Despite the presence of hundreds of international agencies in Aceh, the involvement and support of local actors remained important and should be discussed further, especially in terms of the nature and evolution of local humanitarian concepts and practices. From a social perspective, the role of local actors should be considered as an explanation for the emphasis placed on local expertise in humanitarian interventions. Considering this
assumption, the success of the humanitarian operation in Aceh is thus closely linked with the contribution of its people and culture.

Discussion highlights, main trends and further research

Highlights of the conference discussions are summarised below, identifying main trends and areas for further research and examination.

Humanitarian action as a political instrument

This was a recurring theme in all four country case studies. The linking of politics, foreign policy and security/development objectives to humanitarian assistance also came out in discussions of humanitarian agencies’ activities in Aceh after the 2004 tsunami.

An emerging trend is the role (and reach) of regional organisations such as ASEAN to ‘intervene’ in a constructive manner in responses to humanitarian crises in member countries. Here, too, the tendency to conflate the ‘political’ and ‘humanitarian’ ASEAN needs to be examined further.

ASEAN assumed different roles in responding to humanitarian crises in Cambodia (in the 1970s) and Myanmar (Cyclone Nargis in 2008). For the Cambodia situation, ASEAN was playing the role of ‘antagonist’ against the regime in Kampuchea/Cambodia at the time, keeping the issue on the UN agenda and, as highlighted by Benny Widyono, using the humanitarian situation as an instrument to politicise the issue. In responding to the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar post-Cyclone Nargis, ASEAN took on a new role: that of facilitator, enabler and convener (of different interest groups) around a shared objective.

A relevant observation here is the impact of disasters as the ‘push factor’ to accomplish difficult goals or to get governments moving. With the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and 2008 Nargis, ASEAN managed to complete the drafting and adoption of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management (AADMER) after the tsunami, and to get the document ratified by the remaining signatories in 2009 after the Nargis disaster. ASEAN’s role in resolving the Cambodian conflict was more of a political nature. Still, ASEAN’s convening role in bringing different parties into a dialogue led to the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994.

For Cyclone Nargis and Myanmar, successes are attributed to the different parties setting aside their political differences. However, the ASEAN model may not be applicable in conflict-related humanitarian situations. For example, the situation in Myanmar with the Rohingya and Kachin conflict highlights the ‘boundaries’ of how countries perceive (and accept) humanitarian assistance in Southeast Asia, where it is often equated with development assistance. Although ASEAN became a humanitarian actor with its response to Nargis, its role is still limited to disaster-related humanitarian assistance. This is reflected in the title of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance for disaster management (AHA Centre) established in November 2011 in Jakarta.

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1 Ten member states needed to ratify the document for it to enter into force; only six (including Myanmar) had ratified it by the time Nargis struck in May 2008.
The perspective of history in tracing humanitarian action is highlighted by the China case study. Historically, how the leadership and people of China perceive humanitarianism has thrown into relief tensions between society and the individual, between imperialism and philanthropy and between infrastructure-centredness and human centredness. This influences how people perceive humanitarian action and the respective responsibilities for it, and more, how the Chinese leadership sees its role as a humanitarian actor. For example, China defines ‘emergency’ in the context of disasters as well as related to issues of social instability. This is highlighted in China’s 11th development plan. Additionally, it helps to explain China’s attitude towards its overseas aid and assistance programmes. Although the motivation is to further China’s national interests abroad, programmes are perceived (and justified by China) as enhancing the stability and growth of the recipient countries.

The diversity of disasters, actors and responses
Overall, the behaviour of major country decision-makers in times of natural disaster in Southeast Asia is not very different from that in other regions of the world. The survey on post-disaster reconstruction highlighted the diversity of natural disasters in Southeast Asia. A time-series comparison of disasters showed that mega-disasters which require massive emergency humanitarian operations, while dominating the headlines, occur relatively infrequently compared to ecological events such as floods. It is therefore important not to homogenise the incidence of disasters in this region. Still, a ‘benefit’ of mega-disasters is that mitigation and preparedness mechanisms are established in the affected country, with the help of humanitarian agencies. Bangladesh was cited as a positive example of this.

An emerging trend is the reluctance of middle-income economies to request international assistance when disasters occur. The government of Thailand dealt with the 2011 floods in Bangkok without international support. A negative example of dealing locally with the problem can be found in the 2012 floods in Jakarta, a cyclical event that local residents have endured for over three decades. This merits further study, including whether there are governance issues behind resource allocation for disaster mitigation, response and coordination at local and municipal levels.

The contributions of civil society organisations are gradually increasing in early relief and recovery efforts, as well as post-disaster reconstruction. This was seen in Aceh and Myanmar. An interesting phenomenon that should be further explored is the contribution from ‘extra-national’ civil society. These are the diaspora of the country where the disaster occurred, who mobilise resources and support for disaster relief and reconstruction through remittances and social movements.

Another topic for study is the role of the media in reporting disasters and their aftermath, including responses to the humanitarian crises arising from them. It is important for international and local media to continue reporting after the initial ‘dramatic’ crisis of the disaster has passed, to ensure that longer-term processes of rehabilitation, rebuilding and aid effectiveness are assessed. Over the decades, the humanitarian sector has developed its own media reporting on these processes, providing platforms that bridge this ‘information gap’ within traditional media.

It is important to recognise that religion plays a powerful role in coping with disasters, resilience and healing. The project’s aim to increase awareness of the inclusive and exclusive aspects of
humanitarianism requires a deeper understanding of the relationship between humanitarian action and religion, particularly the beliefs of local communities in disaster-stricken areas. This would provide a new dimension to the principles upholding the impartial and secular nature of modern humanitarian assistance.

Another powerful player is the military. The impact of the military’s role in responding to disasters is related to how it is perceived by the local population. China, Myanmar and Indonesia all have different experiences and stories to share.

Finally, the region needs to be prepared to respond to new types of disasters, such as the triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear reactor meltdown experienced in Fukushima, Japan, in 2011. The humanitarian response to such disasters requires preparedness and awareness on a scale that governments and communities in the region – and perhaps even the international humanitarian community – may not be ready for.

Measuring the costs of humanitarian crises
The survey on trends in post-disaster responses provided an empirical approach to measuring the damage caused by disasters. It raised the issue of comparing costs across countries with different levels of income. It also occasioned questions on measuring the long-term impacts and costs on societies. In addition to economic impacts, there are social and psychological impacts that affect the recovery and rehabilitation of disaster-affected communities. Measuring the cost of these impacts will require qualitative or interpretive research. Measures to build disaster resilience may benefit from this type of research.

Concluding thoughts
The conference discussions highlighted the importance of a historical perspective. The term ‘history’ encompasses the different histories of humanitarian action in the region, as the different case studies highlight important variations in approaches to humanitarianism; the context in which humanitarian crises arise; and the experiences and impacts of different crises on local communities. Looking at histories of humanitarianism therefore provides the basis for dialogue critical to more effective humanitarian action.

The complex relationship between humanitarian action and politics provides the spur to probe further the complexities of agency (who has the responsibility to act, why they have that responsibility and how they can act on that responsibility); the legitimacy of state (and other) actors; the emergence of humanitarian or disaster diplomacy; and the terms of engagement which shape the norms of consent and assent. The barriers that still exist between international and local humanitarian actors require further study. Technical language that is clear and culture-neutral may have negative connotations in local cultures and vernaculars (e.g. terms such as ‘capacity-building’).

In the end, modern humanitarian action is a dynamic process, with constant feedback loops involving a broad range of actors. It is hoped that this research project will add value to the current debate by sharing the perspectives of the new actors highlighted by the case studies.