

Press Release

Covid-19, a Litmus Test for ASEAN

As seen here: https://globalnation.inquirer.net/186811/covid-19-a-litmus-test-for-asean?fbclid=IwAR3CM4iDmq1VHoqwJLJGMo0RjMcBlbY98_OQw10jtbOsrQbP0eE9Sp6bD4A

With over 13,000 cases of COVID-19 in the ASEAN Region, many countries are still treating the pandemic as a security issue rather than a health and medical issue. This was an observation shared by the civil society groups in South East Asia in a web conference discussing the region's present and future condition in time of COVID-19 on 13 April.

"In Myanmar, more people are killed by the Army, much more than the COVID-19," Thet Swe Win the Co-Founder of Myanmar COVID-19 Response Center, said. Myanmar has 4 recorded COVID-19 deaths while 142 civilian deaths in Arakan State during the week.

In the Philippines, police force and the military are mobilized to enforce quarantine measures. Police are also tapped in Thailand to apprehend curfew violators since it imposed the partial lockdown in various cities and provinces starting March 24.

Sriprapha Petcharamesree, former Thai Representative to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) and Programme Chair of SHAPE-SEA (Strengthening Human Rights and Peace Research and Education in ASEAN/Southeast Asia) said even before the pandemic, the political trend in the region is not democratic.

"Although countries have implemented varying measures to response to COVID-19, a worrying trend is the use of repressive laws, such as emergency powers," she said.

Lockdown

Following the example of Wuhan which became the epicenter of COVID-19, various countries try to imitate its success in flattening the curve.

In the Philippines, a month-long total lockdown was imposed but extended until April 30. In Myanmar, the 10-day lockdown started on April 13 while Jakarta in the Indonesian capital started on April 10. Other cities and provinces will follow suit depending on their governors. Thailand and Laos closed their borders starting March 21 and imposed month-long restrictions on movement.

Deasy Simandjuntak, of ISEAS- Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore and an expert on Indonesian issues, said that some sort of lockdown are considered depending on the socio-economic situation of the country.

Simandjuntak explained that to contain infection, countries need to suppress and flatten the curve.

“To suppress means to slash the infection daily and the only way to do it is to restrict movement or lockdown. To flatten the curve does not mean lower numbers of infection but measures are done so our hospitals will not be burdened.”

To flatten the curve measures such as physical distancing, track and tracing, and testing are implemented.

Right to Health is human rights

ASEAN countries are left to their own devices in addressing the pandemic. Hence, the relevance of the organization is now in question. Civil society and human rights groups identified the human rights facing the people particularly the marginalized and vulnerable groups which are mostly left out and have become collateral damage.

Among the human rights issues discussed in the forum were food insecurity, domestic violence, stigmatisation and xenophobia. Lack of support and discrimination against health workers and infected patients are one of the trends in the region.

'In Myanmar, the number of COVID-19 cases appear low because there aren't enough facilities for testing. But what we're most worried about the social impact of the virus: victim-blaming and shaming, as well as anxiety,' Thet Swe Win said.

He also said that migrant workers returning to Myanmar are reluctant to reveal their true travel history to health care professionals which may result to more infections.

Although some countries may not be able provide adequate measures to assist their citizens, denying them basic services like food, medical care and necessary services is inexcusable. Dr. Lee Edson P. Yarcia, also a lawyer and Health Law and Policy Reform Consultant from the Philippines emphasized that under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the States have the obligation to ensure the right to health standard.

“States have obligations to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights even during pandemics,” he said.

Freedom of Expression

COVID-19 has become an excuse to impose draconian measures and emergency laws which suppress freedom of speech and as well as the legitimate call of the people for improved health and medical services.

“When a government chooses not to disclose data, it creates a false sense of security. Government suppresses information for fear of social and political unrest,” Simandjuntak said.

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The Indonesian government allows the police to arrest people criticizing the government.

Dr. Yarcia mentioned that in the Philippines, social media has becoming a tool to resist abuses from the government. The National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) are also actively pursuing cases against government critics. Due to the backlash in the social media, the NBI steps back.

Dr. Yarcia said that monitoring and documentation process on the abuses of the authorities in times of pandemic are important in transitional justice later on.

"Government accountability can be pursued. Challenge government more, mobilize our networks and resist any forms of abuses from our governments," Dr. Yarcia said.

COVID-19 and the ASEAN

To remain relevant, the ASEAN member countries particularly the AICHR is urged to develop monitoring systems to monitor the human rights impact of the pandemic and to develop a common position on human rights. Despite the challenges, particularly the COVID-19 which definitely lead the region to joblessness, economic slow-down, high rate of poverty, optimism remains.

However, Yuyun Wahyuningrum, Indonesian Representative to AICHR said that the main challenge in the ASEAN is the reluctance to transparently share information making it difficult for ASEAN as a regional entity to move forward in overcoming COVID-19.

"COVID-19 introduced us to the new normal. We have explored further on how AICHR work, open to more inputs and opportunities for change," Wahyuningrum said.

Dr. Yarcia emphasized that the member countries must go back to the ASEAN Post-2015 Health Development Agenda Goals for 2020 which states, "to promote resilient health system in response to communicable diseases, emerging infectious diseases, and neglected tropical diseases."

The webinar on ASEAN Community and COVID-19: An Assessment of an Infected Region's Present and Future Condition is the second part of the six series webinar starting April and May 2020 on: The Status of Human Rights in the Time of COVID-19 Pandemic in Southeast Asia organized by Asian Forum for Human Development (Forum-Asia) and SHAPE-SA