

**SUMMARY REPORT OF THE ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM INTERSESSIONAL  
MEETING ON DISASTER RELIEF  
19-20 FEBRUARY 1997, WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND**

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***Introduction***

As agreed by Ministers at the third ASEAN Regional Forum in Jakarta on 23 July 1996, an ARF Intersessional Meeting on Disaster Relief was held 19-20 February 1997 in Wellington, New Zealand. The meeting was organized by New Zealand and Thailand, and jointly chaired by Mr. Neil Walter, Deputy Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Trade of New Zealand, and Dr. Sukhum Rasmidatta, Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand.

The meeting was attended by 19 ARF members. The United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies participated as guest speakers. The meeting welcomed in particular the delegates from India and Myanmar, noting that this was the first ARF intersessional activity attended by those countries. In addition to Foreign Ministry and Defence officials, many countries were represented by other agencies involved in disaster relief work. Their participation was welcomed as contributing to a substantive discussion and marking a further expansion of the scope of the ARF's activities. A list of delegates is attached as Annex A.

The Agenda is attached as Annex B. A number of countries, as well as the UNDHA and IFRC representatives, made presentation under particular agenda items, which helped to stimulate a free-flowing discussion. The following is a summary of the key points made.

***Item 1: National delivery of disaster relief (ie the domestic response to disaster)***

- All participants agreed on the importance of discussion of disaster relief as an aspect of comprehensive security, and a valuable confidence building measure for the ARF. Country presentations underlined the enormous capacity of disasters to damage local economies and social stability and hence the security of states.
- In addition, participants recognised that major disasters do not respect political boundaries, but are a common problem for all states of the region. Partnership and cooperation among states are essential in dealing with disasters.
- Although the role of defence authorities in relation to disaster relief varied between ARF members, it was agreed that their role was always significant, in view of the unique resources, skills, discipline and assets available to national defence forces.
- There was broad agreement on the benefits of a comprehensive approach to disaster management, involving national plans of action, effective coordination and clear lines of authority. The importance of a proactive approach in terms of enhanced preparedness and prevention was also emphasised, in order to mitigate the incidence or impact of disasters.

***Item 2: International Delivery of Disaster Relief (ie international reprise to disaster in another country)***

- Participants recognised the value of international cooperation in providing disaster relief in cases when national authorities request assistance. Regional cooperation of this nature could enhance mutual confidence and hence regional security and reinforce the sense of good neighbourliness among ARF participants.
- Nonetheless it was noted that international cooperation must be fully sensitive to the needs and approaches of the recipient country. International efforts should supplement, not supplant, national mechanisms. They should foster self-sufficiency, and enhance local preparedness.
- Information and communications were acknowledged as key elements in effective relief.
- Public awareness of the work of ARF members in this area was felt to be beneficial to the ARF's wider objective of enhancing cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.
- It was noted that there is no single pattern of relations between countries relating to disaster relief. Existing arrangements within the region, ranging from formal bilateral agreements, to multilateral guidelines, and less formal understandings between states were useful.
- Responses needed to be flexible, appropriate to need, and well-targeted. There was often a place for military teams in dealing with the aftermath of disasters, whether provided by individual countries or through the UNDHA. Cash donations are often the most valued form of immediate relief assistance. They make it possible for all to contribute according to their means and thus demonstrate the benefits of cooperating among neighbours.
- The delegates emphasised, both from the donor and recipient points of view, the importance of delivering assistance with the full involvement of the recipient government.

***Item 3: Enhancing cooperation in delivering disaster relief among ARF members***

- There was a useful exchange of information on existing sub-regional cooperation including in the South Pacific, in ASEAN, in North America and in the European Union. The synergy between diverse national capabilities and regional cooperation was emphasised.
- The presentations underlined a common appreciation of the need for a comprehensive approach to disaster management, including attention to all stages of prevention, mitigation, relief and recovery. They also agreed on the value of building on the existing momentum of sub-regional activity, and to explore scope for further strengthening cooperation.
- Participants agreed that activity in the ARF should complement efforts underway in other fora related to disaster relief, including the UN International Decade for National Disaster Reduction. The meeting noted that UNDHA plans to organise a regional meeting of military and civil defence authorities involved in disaster relief in Indonesia later this year.

- It was recognised that further cooperative activities should be voluntary, and undertaken in a step-by-step manner.

### *Conclusion*

All participants agreed that the meeting had been useful in underlining the scope and value of regional cooperation in disaster relief. Discussions were conducted in an excellent atmosphere. The following points were agreed:

- key points of contact in national disaster relief organisations to be exchanged.
- exchange of information and informal networking on national approaches to disaster relief is useful and should continue.
- value of continuing discussion on this topic, including perhaps a further ISM to be hosted by Thailand.

In addition a number of innovative and useful proposals were made, which warrant further study:

- cooperation in enhancing disaster preparedness in the region, in particular through the sharing of expertise, research and training, for example:
  - a "train the trainers" workshop, and other courses in areas of national expertise;
  - making wider use of the training resources of existing national and regional institutions within the region, such as the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center in Bangkok;
  - establishment of expert groups and a directory of experts;
  - exchanges and cooperation on preventive, preparedness and response measures on maritime disasters in the region;
  - exchanges and cooperation in meteorological services to provide early warning of disasters;
- enhancement of operational delivery of disaster relief in the region:
  - building upon existing regional cooperation and development of common approaches to disaster management appropriate to the Asia-Pacific region;
  - exploring scope for standardisation of procedures in such areas as communications, possible delivery points, planning, medical support, airspace clearances and customs facilitation, as well as integration of prevention, mitigation and preparedness initiatives;
  - a regional data-base of national disaster relief capable/assets and requirements building on existing arrangements;
  - facilitation of faster exchanges of information and responses when a disaster occurs.