

IN FACE OF CRISES, DISASTERS

ASEAN urged to implement social protection

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MANILA, Philippines — ASEAN must put people's human rights, particularly to social protection for the poor who are most affected, at the center stage of its response to both the global financial meltdown and the series of disasters that have visited some member-nations of the regional bloc.

This was the call made by 30 southeast Asian grassroots leaders in the two-day regional roundtable strategizing meeting at the Asian Institute of Management, a couple of weeks before the ASEAN Summit in Thailand.

Tina Ebro, coordinator for Asia of the Asia Europe People's Forum (AEPF), pointed out the need to work together not just locally or nationally, but also regionally and globally, as the scope of the crises expands beyond political borders.

The leaders and experts from the region are meeting to build a consensus for an agenda on transformative social protection as a democratic and human rights response to joblessness, death, and destruction brought by man-made and natural calamities.

"We (in the Philippines) are still reeling from the onslaughts of the recent typhoons...People moved as zombies—shocked, helpless, overwhelmed. But this story is not ours alone. Destruction also struck our neighbors in Laos, Vietnam, and Indonesia, India, and islands of Samoa and Tonga," Ebro said in a statement e-mailed to media outfits.

"So today we have come together—people from southeast Asia, south Asia, and Europe—to realize how together we can act more urgently, more concerted, and more forcefully to confront this crisis brought about by climate change, and the other devastating crises we are confronting, which in fact are interlocking—food security, fuel prices, and financial and economic meltdown. We have come together to chart a way for our people to survive and live with dignity," she said.

Sandeep Chachra, ActionAid international coordinator for governance and economic justice, said disasters symbolize the lack and inadequacy of social protection, especially among the poor and vulnerable.

He said governments normally grant social protection measures during crises, but these stop-gap cash transfers (for instance \$40 a year to poor families in Indonesia) must be expanded to ensure employment and livelihood with corresponding socio-economic and cultural rights as embodied in international conventions.

Chachra also suggested that governments go against International Monetary Fund recommendations and expand fiscal policies such that "they spend more so that local development can happen, creating wealth locally."

Ebro said these crises are "golden opportunity" to push the agenda of social protection especially for the poor—guaranteed jobs and livelihoods with wages and working conditions that are in accordance with ILO standards, adequate and affordable food where no one goes hungry, universal health

service, free and quality education, socialized decent housing, universal access to water and electricity, giving subsidized water and electricity for the poor , and better quality of life that is environmentally sustainable.

“But this struggle need not be protracted and too long. Because in this day and age, the world has the know-how, the infra-structure, the abundance, and the intellectual capacity to make the earth a green and pleasant place to live, where all can live in dignity,” she said.

“There is no excuse for this mess. There is no reason for continuing a social system that feeds the greed of the few. So after this meeting, we hope to have champions for this cause because disaster or no disaster, crisis or no crisis, social protection is a must for all, especially the poor and vulnerable,” she added.

The output of the meeting, which is part of the “Reclaim People’s Dignity” Campaign that started in Beijing last year, will be presented to ambassadors from ASEAN and Europe on October 14, as well as at the ASEAN People’s Forum on October 18 and to other progressive parliamentarians in Asia and Europe in the coming months.

[ASEAN, or the Association of Southeast Asian Nation, groups together Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.]

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