

Opening Remarks

By H.E. Dato Lim Jock Hoi, Secretary-General of ASEAN

“ICRC-ASEAN Secretariat Platform on Challenges and Humanitarian Action in ASEAN”

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Excellencies,

The ASEAN Committee of Disaster Management representatives,
Distinguished Guests, Ladies, and Gentlemen.

Good morning everyone and thank you all for being here at the *ASEAN-ICRC Platform on Challenges and Humanitarian Action in ASEAN*. This event marks yet another opportunity for ASEAN to recognize the contributions of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the unique role they play in the service of the region. The ICRC has been a crucial actor in the alleviation of human suffering in the aftermath of both natural and man-made disasters in ASEAN. As such, it is an honour for me to grace this event in a partnership of the ICRC to launch the first of the series to both commemorate the assistance rendered over the years and provide a platform for productive dialogue between practitioners, policy-makers, and think-tanks in the region.

In line with the theme of this event, "Challenges and Humanitarian Action in ASEAN," it is opportune for us to have a moment of introspection and have constructive discussions on how ASEAN may sufficiently prepare itself and effectively respond to the disasters in the region.

I recognize that our ASEAN has been facing the changes in the humanitarian landscape these recent years. Firstly, the ASEAN region is one of

the most disaster-prone regions in the world, and extreme climate events are projected to increase in frequency and intensity due to climate variation and change. Last year alone, ASEAN saw a total of 424 disasters reported in the region, compare with 118 in the year 2017¹. Of these, ASEAN responded to 23 incidents, the highest frequency of disasters that ASEAN has responded to since the inception of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre). Additionally, with the changing demographics of the ASEAN population, the number of economic loss and fatalities are bound to increase proportionally. We are facing the rising challenge of massive displacement of people due to natural disasters like tsunamis and typhoons, secondary impacts like dam collapse or dump site fires, and climate change impacts including slow-onset droughts and floods. Disaster response and humanitarian assistance arising from natural disasters remain to be one of the fundamental challenges for ASEAN.

Secondly, in 2018, the ASEAN leaders instructed the AHA Centre with the support of the ASEAN Secretariat to respond to humanitarian emergencies in the Rakhine State, Myanmar, broadening the scope of work of ASEAN in humanitarian response. With that, ASEAN ERAT team has been deployed to conduct the needs assessment to identify the areas for collaboration of ASEAN to support the Government of Myanmar to facilitate the repatriation process. Such recent developments stress the need for ASEAN to rapidly mature in our humanitarian response strategies to meet the needs of affected Member States with heightened sensitivity particularly when it involves conflict and security issues.

ASEAN must be ready to be the first and foremost support to any affected Member State. As our closest neighbours, we must be able to rely on each other

¹ Source from AHA Centre statistics at <https://www.instagram.com/p/BsUug5HhTEk/>

before seeking help from partners further away who may not be able to lend their support expeditiously. Keeping the people-centered focus in ASEAN's priorities, the needs of the ASEAN people must be the primary concern, including their well-being, safety and security, and their social and economic health. Understanding that no disasters impact every community the same way, humanitarian efforts in all forms should similarly take into consideration the local context and localize efforts to tailor to the individual needs and respect the wishes of the affected states.

In spite of the hurdles, I urge participants of this dialogue to be optimistic in confronting these challenges. ASEAN already has institutional arrangements in place to respond to disasters such as the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Management (AMMDM), the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM) some of whom are present today, the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), the ASEAN Vision on Disaster Management 2025, and of course, the One ASEAN One Response (OAOR) mechanism. ASEAN recognizes the cross-sectoral nature of humanitarian actions and that effective disaster response strategies would necessitate the involvement of other sectors particularly at the strategic level. This may concern coordination, monitoring and policy development, as well as in addressing emerging issues such as mental health. As such, ASEAN also has mechanisms in place for cross-sectoral coordination such as the Joint Task Force on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (JTF on HADR) and Technical Working Group on Civil-Military Coordination (TWG-CIMIC). In addition to these, the AHA Centre as ASEAN's coordination body and engine of AADMER stands ready to respond to any large-scale disasters in the region. These ongoing mechanisms collectively lay the groundwork for ASEAN's coordinated and comprehensive response to disasters in the region.

Acknowledging the need for practical and flexible arrangements, more focus should be placed on maximizing the existing mechanisms already in place.

However, governments cannot work alone in the cycle of disaster management and humanitarian assistance, whether it is in the stage of early warning, preparation, response or recovery. In my view, we need to further advance the 'ASEAN Way' towards a strong coordination mechanism involving key stakeholders, such as policy makers, industry players, academics, and civil society. The AADMER Partnership Group, a consortium of NGOs, is an excellent example from which we have been able to mobilise resources and knowledge to support the implementation of the AAMDER Work Plan.

Nevertheless, ASEAN must not be complacent in our strategies and continue to nurture cooperative relationships with other actors in the region including international organisations like the ICRC. The Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies are unique partners for ASEAN, strategically positioned with access to disaster areas that are inaccessible to other NGOs and in some cases even the United Nations. In 2017, under the Chairmanship of the Philippines, ASEAN released a statement on its engagement with the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, recognising the organisations' work and contribution as first responders in disasters and their close collaboration with local authorities and communities. In late 2018, I met the President of ICRC, Mr. Peter Maurer, at the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly where he reaffirmed ICRC's intention to expand relations with ASEAN. We value the continued partnership and cooperation, and contribution of the ICRC to the ASEAN region.

As the ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance Coordinator, I am thrilled to observe the sharing of ASEAN perspectives and in raising awareness of ASEAN's overall response in disasters. With that, I also observed the changing the paradigm of international response to regional and local response, whereby our regional organizations are now focusing more in education, awareness and

capacity building of the National Disaster Management Organizations (NDMOs). I also look forward to the presentations from our partners in hopes that it may be taken in constructively to enhance ASEAN's response mechanism further.

Before closing my opening remarks, I would like to thank the Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, Kung Phoak, and Mr. Alexandre Faite, Head of ICRC for Indonesia and Timor Leste, for their initiative in actualizing this ASEAN-ICRC Platform. I commend ASEAN and ICRC's existing cooperation and hope for continued engagement in the future. I wish distinguished guests a productive and meaningful discussion at the dialogue sessions today.

Thank you.