

Asia's Security Depends on Opportunities for All

Surin Pitsuwan

The Straits Times, 15 January 2004

AS EAST Asia emerges from the rubble of the devastating financial crisis of the late 1990s, many social and economic structural problems are still hidden behind the facade of bullish stock markets, real estate rebound and export growth. Traditional security concerns - from the Taiwan Strait and the Korean peninsula, to the fragility of law and order in Indonesia - are hovering ominously over the entire region.

Frantic efforts to integrate Asian economies are moving apace, while at the same time Asian countries have become more conscious of the fact that security, social, political and economic problems have assumed a more region-wide character. No nation can solve them alone; no state can stand in isolation from others any longer.

Recently, I was privileged to take part in two exercises which provided rich insights into how we can conceive a more comprehensive definition of security, as well as how we can achieve it. First, the Human Security Commission, co-chaired by Mrs. Sadako Ogata and Professor Amartya Sen, demonstrates that security encompasses health, education and human rights. Creating education and employment opportunities, particularly for women, can break the cycle of malnutrition, poor family planning and the risk of HIV infection, which threatens numerous Asian countries. The fulfilment of basic social needs such as a clean environment, access to safe drinking water and provision of health care, for example, are the fundamental building blocks for sustaining our resources and maintaining our workforce and, therefore, social peace. Without these, long-term economic prosperity and hence national stability are at risk.

On the whole, we in East Asia have been fortunate to experience a drastic reduction in poverty over the past several decades. But who will ensure it continues?

Though the experiences of China and South Korea in reducing poverty, for example, show what determined governments can accomplish, many governments have fallen short on everything from public health to environmental protection.

In the findings of the World Economic Forum's Global Governance Initiative, another task force in which I have been fortunate to participate, expert assessments point to government underperformance worldwide, on issues from peace and security to hunger and human rights. They further emphasise that reducing poverty is not just about faster economic growth; indeed, the experience of South-east Asia demonstrates the dangers of relying too heavily on international financial flows.

Moreover, the problems are too big for governments to handle alone. Governments, businesses and civil society need to find more effective ways of collaborating to solve socio-economic and environmental problems. Many examples exist, such as micro-credit schemes in China and health-care training in Thailand, but these are unfortunately scattered anecdotes illustrating what can be accomplished, rather than reflections of widespread reality.

East Asia is already the world's population centre and is rapidly becoming the world's centre of global economic growth and activity. It will soon have the greatest energy demand as well. When

people speak of the need for better global governance, they are talking about us. How can the broader division of labour called for in both the Human Security and Global Governance reports be translated into our region, our cultures and our present political systems?

Some of our biggest challenges in ensuring stability and security relate to demographics. In our booming cities - Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Manila and Shanghai - rural migration adds tremendous pressure to our archaic public services. Cheap labour and the absence of environmental safeguards attract foreign investment and the relocation of sunset industries. The dynamism we see belies exploitation and human suffering, threatening our social peace, political stability and security in the long run.

We still see obvious signs of abject poverty across the region, both urban and rural. The traditional approach to poverty alleviation through social welfare and government handouts in the form of populist programmes has proven time and again to be short-sighted, creating more problems in the long run.

Long-term and sustainable growth can only be ensured by human empowerment through the right kind of universal education. Social inequity must be eradicated by equal economic opportunities for all. Once our people are well-equipped with knowledge and skills, they will be protected from any abrupt adversity of the 1997 kind.

To become great nations does not mean copying the development models of the West, but it does mean placing greater emphasis on equity and opportunities for all than we currently do. This is not only a matter of economic growth - and ultimately national security - but also a principle of justice to which we should all aspire.

The writer is a former foreign minister of Thailand, and now MP.

Copyright 2003 Singapore Press Holdings.