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Although small, Singapore's response to aid fellow South-east Asian neighbour Indonesia in the aftermath of the devastating tsunami is being hailed by a regional development expert as a pivotal step in the global race to rid the world of poverty.

BANGKOK, Jan 18 (IPS) - "Singapore going to Aceh to help the victims is good because it will ensure that the rehabilitation efforts will be more sustainable due to regional ties," Lee Yee-Cheong, co-author of a major U.N. plan of action to combat poverty, told IPS.

Such regional efforts will also ensure that the developed nations in Europe and North America will be able to meet their commitments to help lift the millions of poverty-stricken people in other corners of the world, he added.

Singapore has been among the first Asian nations to help Indonesia cope with the tsunami that destroyed the western coast of the northern Aceh province on Dec. 26. Initially, the rich city-state dispatched five C-130 military transport planes loaded with relief ranging from tents to food and medicine. It has also pledged 15 million dollars as part of a package to help reconstruction efforts.

Singapore's push for a regional effort to help the countries severely hit in South-east Asia, namely Indonesia and Thailand, was reflected in a call by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on Dec. 30 for an emergency summit meeting in Jakarta of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Indonesia took the heaviest blow from among the tsunami hit countries in ASEAN, with 114,000 people killed out of the over 160,000 people who died from the post-Christmas tsunami. Thailand has lost 5,300 people, Malaysia lost 68 people and Burma lost 64 people.

The 10-member South-east Asian bloc also includes Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines and Vietnam.

The other Asian countries affected by the tsunami include Sri Lanka, where over 31,000 people died, and India, where there were close to 10,000 victims.

The need to single out Singapore's small but significant contribution to help the relief effort for the tsunami victims is with reason.

U.N. officials are worried that the unprecedented amount of aid flowing from the world's richest countries to help the estimated five million people displaced by the tsunami may undermine aid needed to help the 1.2 billion people living on less than one U.S. dollar a day.

On Tuesday, U.N. officials drove home that point during the launch here of a report, 'Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals'.

"We don't want donor interest in fighting poverty in Africa, for example, to be washed away by the Asian tsunami," Joana Merlin-Scholtes, U.N. resident coordinator in Thailand, told a seminar at the local launch of the U.N. study.

"The big hearted global response from governments, the rich and the poor alike, gives us hope that our global village can and will achieve the U.N. Millennium Development Goals," added Lee, the co-author of

report.

Two weeks after the tsunami struck, Western donors, including Australia, Germany and the United States, had pledged money for relief that exceeded by five times the amount the United Nations had estimated for the initial emergency assistance.

By Jan. 7, the amount pledged stood at five billion U.S. dollars, far in excess of the amount of 977 million dollars U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan had appealed for urgent tsunami relief at the Jakarta donors' meeting.

For Merlin-Scholtes, such an overwhelming response sent a powerful message that the developed world still cared about victims in the developing world. "The tsunami puts an end to the myth of aid fatigue among taxpayers and voters in rich countries," she said.

"The generous response to the tsunami tragedy is sending a very powerful message that ordinary citizens in richer countries do in fact support aid, if they clearly see the need," she added.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were a set of eight targets agreed to by leaders of 189 countries during a summit meeting in 2000. The targets included a commitment to halve the number of people living on less than one dollar a day by 2015 and halve the number of people suffering from hunger by the same year..

The MDGs also aim to ensure that all children are given access to complete primary education by 2015 and end discrimination against women at all levels of education by that year.

"According to our estimates, the total cost of supporting the MDG financing gap for every low-income country would be 73 billion dollars in 2006, rising to 135 billion dollars by 2015," states the U.N. report.

However, developed nations that pledged to commit 0.7 percent of their national income to fund programmes in the developing world to meet the MDGs have fallen behind their annual financial commitments, the report adds.

"So far, only five countries have met or surpassed the 0.7 target: Denmark, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden," states the report.

According to U.N.'s Merlin-Scholtes, the global body has to drive home the message that "long term investment in the MDGs is just as important as helping people in emergency situations." (END/2005)

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