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The tropics in distress – Southeast Asia marked by climate change

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- Despite an ever-increasing number of natural disasters, Southeast Asian nations have so far failed to discuss at length – at either national or regional level – climate change and the necessary reduction of CO_2 emissions.
- Southeast Asian governments reject mandatory targets for emission reduction due to their growth and development goals, insufficient financial, institutional and technological capacities, and because in their eyes the historical responsibility for today's climate issues lies with others.
- Based on the principle that the polluter should pay, Southeast Asian politicians expect the advanced industrialized nations to continue to make the largest contributions towards reducing CO_2 emissions. But in doing so they overlook the fact that the Southeast Asian country of Indonesia is the world's third largest CO_2 emitter, and that the success of any future climate agreement will depend to a great extent on Indonesia's willingness to make concessions.

After the sea level had risen by one meter in the year 2050 due to climate change, the coastal metropolises of Bangkok, Jakarta and Manila, and their 70 million inhabitants, drowned in mud. Before the Mekong was reduced to a mere runlet, due to greater than normal snowmelt in the Himalayas it swelled each year to an uncontrollable torrent, which washed millions of tons of fertile cropland into the sea. Cyclones, increasing in intensity from year to year, ravaged the landscapes of Southeast Asia, and the resulting aridity gave rise to forest fires, which destroyed the last remaining tropical rainforests in Malaysia and Indonesia. Singapore, which up to then had managed to hold out against the rising sea level owing to its efforts to embank the island, was flooded by countless malnourished people weakened by pandemics, in search of a new home.

This is one possible climate scenario currently being discussed by experts in Singapore behind closed doors. That their concern is indeed warranted was substantiated at a hearing of the US House of Representatives on June 25, 2008, in which the

Chairman of the National Intelligence Council, Dr. Thomas Fingar, predicted a bleak future for Southeast Asia as a result of climate change. It is therefore all the more surprising that these developments are still being largely ignored in Southeast Asia. While according to polls 75% of Japanese and South Koreans view global warming as a very serious problem, only 42% of Malaysians and Indonesians share this opinion.

The lack of public debate is consistent with the political silence in Southeast Asia on this issue. There are several reasons for this: Despite decades-long efforts to achieve a regional identity, ASEAN members continue to think in terms of national structures. So far, the region comprising 570 million inhabitants has not succeeded in drawing up a climate agreement that goes beyond a mere declaration of intent. Instead, ASEAN members hide behind the excuse that they are too small and

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insignificant as nations to be able to influence the climate policy negotiations dominated by Europe, the US, Japan, and China. Besides, the governments of these countries are much more concerned with topics of everyday politics. Developments that affect the population directly, such as the increase in oil and food prices earlier this year or the current economic downturn, are the central topics of public debate. The fact that these developments are not seen in the context of climate change suggests a lack of appropriate political advice in this region. Besides tackling current problems, governments focus primarily on the economy. The nations insist on their right of development. In order not to jeopardize economic growth, they are unwilling to change their present CO_2- and energy-intensive methods of production.

Energy policies in the region are rooted in this mindset, with cost-effective energy supply being one of the most important prerequisites of economic growth. For this reason, coal, in particular, is regaining popularity in the region. Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia plan to expand their coal-fired power plants significantly. Indonesia, the second largest net coal exporter, exports approximately 73% of mined coal, and utilizes 75% of the remaining coal to produce energy. As a result of the increasing demand on the world market that countries such as Australia and South Africa will soon no longer be able to meet, Indonesia's coal output will continue to increase. The Indonesian government's plans to expand coal-based energy production are expected to double greenhouse gas emissions from energy generation.

Apart from coal, the governments of the region are also increasingly interested in nuclear energy. This trend is alarming. While Indonesia is one of the most earthquake-prone regions globally, Myanmar is seeking political advice from North Korea, and in view of the existing political instability there is no guarantee that radioactive material will not get into the wrong hands. Furthermore, the problem of the disposal of radioactive waste has yet to be solved. Nuclear energy is also very costly, and the capacity of planned power plants will not be nearly sufficient to meet ever increasing energy demand. In view of the considerable safety risks for the population, the question arises as to whether Southeast Asia's new interest in nuclear energy might extend beyond its civilian use.

With respect to alternative energies, Malaysia and Indonesia, in particular, are pressing ahead with the cultivation of oil palms for the production of bio fuel. This has led to a significant reduction of forested land in both countries. In the period 1990–2005, approximately 55% of the increase in palm oil production in Malaysia and Indonesia was achieved at the expense of forest areas. Indonesia plans to replace 5% of its diesel consumption by palm oil by 2025. Cultivable land of 1.4 million hectares – the equivalent of 2.5 times the size of Bali – is required for this purpose.

The region's energy policies include significant government energy subsidies. Malaysia, for instance, is expected to spend USD 15.56 billion on fuel subsidies in 2008. Indonesia has budgeted USD 38 billion for energy subsidies for 2009. The resulting artificially low prices lead to an increase in energy demand, and give industries and households no incentive to adopt energy-saving measures.

Energy generation and consumption are responsible for the greatest part of worldwide CO_2 emissions. According to the Asia Pacific Energy Research Center (APERC), carbon dioxide emissions resulting from energy generation and consumption in Southeast Asia will quadruple in the period from 2002 to 2030 (943 million t), while the region's total emissions will nearly triple (2,582 million t). This corresponds to an annual increase of 4.2%. Despite current economic growth and rapidly increasing energy consumption, the Southeast Asian nations do not rank among the world's top CO_2 emitters, either today or in the forecasts for 2030. This is another reason for the lack of interest in the topic of climate change – the region simply does not feel responsible.

However, these statistics ignore the fact that 20% of global greenhouse gas emissions are caused by deforestation. In terms of greenhouse gas emissions due to land utilization in general and deforestation in particular, Indonesia is among the world's biggest greenhouse gas emitters. After the US with 6,005

$MtCO_2e$ and China with 5,017 $MtCO_2e$, Indonesia takes third place globally with greenhouse gas emissions of 3,014 $MtCO_2e$. Indonesia, which has the world's third largest area of rainforest, at approximately 120 million hectares, clears about 1.08 million hectares annually, especially on the islands of Sumatra and Borneo. As a result of deforestation, forest fires and loss of peat lands, Indonesia emits 2,563 $MtCO_2e$ annually.

A comparison of CO_2 emissions caused by land-use and land-use change with the emission reduction targets laid down in the Kyoto protocol highlights the significance of the issue of deforestation in the context of climate protection. Indonesia's annual emissions from land-use and land-use change alone exceed the Kyoto-protocol emission reduction targets of all the industrialized nations.

Even though Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Cambodia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam have ratified the Kyoto protocol, they are not obliged to comply with regulatory requirements for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions due to their developing nation status. As a matter of fact, they reject outright mandatory reduction targets in climate change policy discussions.

In view of their growth and development targets, as well as their lack of financial, institutional, and technological capacities, and given that they bear less historical responsibility for today's climate problems, the attitude of Southeast Asian governments appears rational to a certain extent. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether they should be allowed consciously to repeat the mistakes made in ignorance by industrial nations in the past, simply because they bear less historical responsibility – particularly considering that today the means are available to enable carbon-neutral and energy-efficient economic growth and avoid adverse effects on the climate. This, however, would require a comprehensive technology transfer from industrial nations to developing countries. Furthermore, it can be expected that the consequences of energy-intensive economic growth based on "climate dumping" would burden developing countries disproportionately. Besides an increasing number of natural disasters, to which developing countries cannot respond properly due to their inadequate infrastructure, both energy subsidies and the containing of environmental damage give rise to enormous costs.

Despite the occurrence of more and more natural disasters in the region, so far there has been no political debate on climate adaptation measures to protect the population in the future. Based on the principle that the polluter should pay, Southeast Asian politicians expect the advanced industrialized nations to continue to make the largest contribution towards reducing CO_2 emissions. As stated in the declaration of ASEAN+6, the politicians of the region stand behind the concept of "common but differentiated responsibilities." Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong addressed this mindset in his speech at the Bali summit meeting: "Given the wide range of situations of different countries, the post-2012 framework cannot use a one-size-fits-all approach."

To gain the approval of Southeast Asian governments, any future climate agreement must, above all, recognize the great importance of economic growth for the region. Rhetorically, the political priority of poverty reduction, the battle against disease and malnourishment, and the general improvement of standards of living are emphasized. From the politicians' viewpoint, this can be achieved only through economic growth and resources. Singapore's Prime Minister speaks on behalf of the whole of Southeast Asia when he says: "Poverty is not a solution to global warming."

APERC forecasts per capita emissions of approximately 4.2 t for Southeast Asia in 2030, as compared to 10.8 t in Japan, 21.9 t in Australia, and 23 t in the US. Based on these forecasts, the Southeast Asian governments argue that economic growth in the region must not be jeopardized by unfairly burdening them with measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Thus it is rather unlikely that the governments of the region will agree to observe mandatory emission reduction targets. The adoption of binding energy and emission efficiency targets would appear far more likely. The first positive developments along those lines are already taking place on a regional level. For example, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum aims to improve the energy efficiency of its members by 25%.

Lastly, Southeast Asia's passivity in climate debates up to now and their flat refusal to adopt any mandatory reduction targets can also be interpreted as negotiation tactics. The countries of the region want to be compensated by the industrial nations for concessions, be it in the context of energy consumption, preservation of forests, or the reduction of CO_2 emissions in general. Hence, Southeast Asia's willingness to participate actively in the global battle against climate change will depend largely on financial and technological transfer services rendered by the industrial nations.

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