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STRENGTHENING SEARCH AND RESCUE COOPERATION

The search for MH370 has been the largest search and rescue mission ever undertaken with some 27 nations having contributed at various times. The collective response is very welcome. In the early stages of the search, however, cooperation was not as smooth or as effective as the international community and especially the relatives of the passengers and crew could reasonably have expected.

As ASEAN moves towards its objectives of establishing a political and security community by 31 December 2015, and an Open Skies policy also in 2015 which will generate more flights and greater competition, it is timely to consider the development of arrangements for closely coordinated regional search and rescue missions.

National sensitivities will always be an issue in sharing information especially if that information might expose important capability gaps, knowledge of which could be considered detrimental to a country's security. But such concerns should be balanced by the need to be able to respond to an emergency in a manner that gives those affected a degree of comfort that everything is being done to achieve a resolution which even if it can't save lives, will bring a degree of closure to families who have lost loved ones.

The region is not starting from a blank sheet when it comes to ideas for a regional approach to SAR. For instance, ASEAN has an existing humanitarian assistance mechanism known as ASEAN Emergency Rapid Assessment Team, a capability that was first deployed in the wake of Cyclone Nargis. Should its mandate be widened to include SAR operations?

Unfortunately little progress has been made in taking forward some of the excellent work done by the ASEAN Regional Forum inter-sessional meeting on search and rescue that took place in Singapore back in 1997. The Co-chairs' report of that

meeting suggested increased sharing of training facilities and expertise to enhance the capabilities of SAR personnel, the development of a registry of training courses, available to ARF member countries, and the expansion of both bilateral and multilateral training programmes.

It called for standardised SAR manuals and procedures, and the development of exercises both on paper and in the field, and the attachment of SAR personnel to Rescue Coordination Centres of other ARF member countries to share expertise and knowledge.

Other proposals included regular workshops, the preparation of a set of guiding principles and code of conduct on SAR cooperation, the facilitation of interaction among existing SAR agencies, whether civilian or military as a confidence building measure, and the establishment of an internet website between Rescue Coordination Centres.

The report also noted the importance of good media management including the provision of timely and accurate information. It highlighted the desirability of training officials in the management of media issues.

But it was not until 2010 that ASEAN picked up on some of these ideas in the Declaration of Cooperation in the Search and Rescue of Persons and Vessels in Distress. The Declaration encouraged members to designate a national Rescue and Coordination Centre, to establish direct communication channels to share information, and promptly extend support upon request to assist in SAR operations.

The Declaration also encouraged members to intensify capacity building for SAR missions, to promote cooperation with dialogue partners, and to maintain a directory of national Rescue and Coordination Centres. It called for developing and strengthening coordinated regional approaches to SAR, and for regional policies, operational mechanisms, and a communication system to prepare for and ensure a rapid and effective response to a distress situation.

The general thrust of this Declaration was given further emphasis in the Chairman's statement following the 23rd ASEAN Summit held in Brunei last October. The statement noted that ASEAN leaders looked forward to "developing the ideas of establishing hotlines of communication to further enhance trust, confidence, and to respond to emergency situations at sea". Although there no mention of SAR operations for missing aircraft, the ideas put forward in both the Declaration and the statement, are welcome indications that ASEAN recognises the need to adopt a coordinated approach.

That said I would suggest that early attention needs to be given to the ratification of the SAR Convention. Prior to the loss of the MH370, of the ten ASEAN's only Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam had ratified the Convention, and none have ratified since. This is significant as the revised Convention that came into force in 2000 clarifies the responsibilities of governments, and places greater emphasis on a regional approach and coordination between maritime and air SAR operations which is exactly what the ASEAN Declaration of 2010 called for.

The South Pacific, which has a significantly higher proportion of countries having ratified the SAR Convention, provides a useful pointer to regional SAR cooperation. At a June 2013 maritime SAR workshop, delegates committed to a plan to accelerate acceptance of a non-binding arrangement to promote regional SAR cooperation among 24 South Pacific countries and territories.

The Secretariat of the Pacific Islands Forum is coordinating the development of the arrangement in collaboration with SAR authorities in Australia, France, New Zealand and the United States. A similar non-binding regional arrangement that facilitated responses to SAR emergencies in the South China Sea would be a significant and very practical confidence building measure.

The disappearance of the MH370 was a wake-up call for the region to focus on SAR capacity-building. There are two regional forums that could take this work forward. One is the expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum and the other is the ADMM+. The latter has an Expert Working Group on maritime security that is currently co-chaired by Brunei and New Zealand which has now included SAR on its work agenda.

In conclusion more can and should be done nationally and regionally by the countries represented here today to enhance the region's ability to respond quickly, effectively and in close collaboration in such emergencies. The early ratification of the SAR Convention would be an important signal of intent by those yet to ratify. Regionally the challenge could be taken up by this forum and the ADMM+ to move forward and grip up some of the ideas suggested in this paper.

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