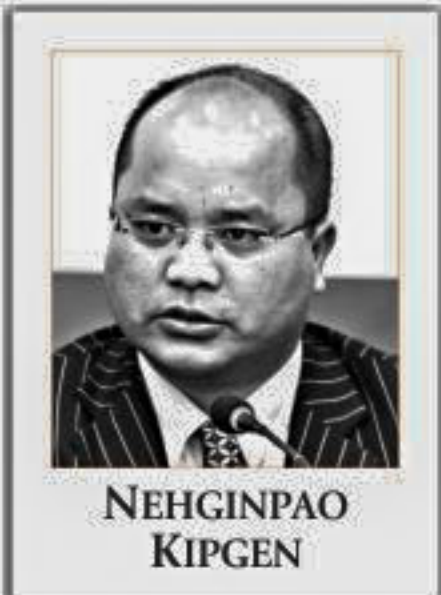


SOLVING THE ROHINGYA CRISIS

The unique benefits of Asean's involvement



At the end of the 33rd Asean summit in Singapore on November 15, Singapore formally handed over the symbolic gavel of Asean chairmanship to Thailand, which it last held in 2009. The one-year rotating term will officially begin on January 1, 2019.

As the incoming chair, Thailand hinted what the regional group should or could do when Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha told his Asean colleagues that the regional bloc is capable of playing an important role in addressing the situation in Rakhine State in a constructive, tangible and sustainable manner.

Prayut suggested that the Asean Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management enhance its humanitarian assistance to the affected people, as well as support the repatriation of Rohingya refugees and to ensure the improvement of quality of life for all communities in Rakhine State.

As the Rohingya crisis has become a regional or international issue, Myanmar needs to open up its doors for Asean to collectively help address the problem. The engagement of Asean member states should not be seen as an interference in the internal affairs of a member state. Rather it should be viewed as fellow Asean members trying to strengthen the internationalisation of the issue, which in many ways is Myanmar's own initiative.



Asean should attempt to address the Rohingya conundrum by involving the Rohingya community, the government of Bangladesh and UN agencies.

PHOTO: AFP

For example, in August 2016, the Myanmar government formed a nine-member state advisory commission on Rakhine, chaired by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Among others, the commission recommended citizenship verification, rights and equality, and documentation, and talked about the situation of the internally displaced and freedom of movement as well as a ministerial-level appointment to coordinate the effective implementation of the commission's recommendations.

A year later in September 2017, the government established a 10-member advisory board for the committee for implementation of the recommendations on

Rakhine State to advise on enacting the recommendations of the Kofi Annan commission.

And in May 2018, Myanmar invited the UN Security Council members to visit the conflict-ridden areas of Rakhine State. The council members, among others, urged the Myanmar government to conduct a transparent investigation into alleged human rights abuses in northern Rakhine or face the potential of military officials being referred to the International Criminal Court, and to speed up the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh with the help of UN agencies.

The international community's pressure

was largely responsible for the signing of a tripartite agreement on June 6 between Myanmar and two UN agencies—United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and United Nations Development Program (UNDP)—which would help with the voluntary return and reintegration of displaced refugees, assess conditions in Rakhine State for those who are considering returns, and support programmes that benefit all communities in Rakhine State.

Since it has already engaged UN agencies and international experts, Myanmar should welcome Asean's goodwill gesture to help address the protracted Rohingya problem. An attempt to oppose the Asean's desire to engage will only hamper the cohesion and strength of the organisation, and invite criticism from the international community.

Many in Myanmar, including the military leadership, are likely to be more receptive and comfortable working with its fellow Asean partners than the intervention of Western governments. Moreover, historically and culturally, Myanmar has largely been in good terms with the incoming Asean chair.

Asean should attempt to address the Rohingya conundrum in a mutually acceptable manner by involving the Rohingya community, the government of Bangladesh, as well as the UN agencies with which Myanmar had signed the MoU—UNHCR and UNDP.

Besides leaders' summits, Asean should also explore other platforms such as the Asean Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and the ADMM-Plus for possible ways to cooperate with the Myanmar military, which not only controls the security matters of the country but also retains significant political power.

The longer the Rohingya crisis is kept unaddressed, the greater the chance it could be exploited and manipulated for the purpose of radicalisation by religious extremists. The role of ADMM and ADMM-Plus are particularly important for addressing such potential threats and for strengthening security and defence cooperation for peace, stability, and development of the region.

It is true that the Asean grouping has not taken any substantive measures on the Rohingya issue in the past, but given the recent developments within the organisation we can only hope for a more active and engaging role from Asean.

But the fructification of such engagement will largely depend on the openness and receptiveness of Myanmar, as well as the level of commitment from Asean member states, particularly the incoming chair of the group.

While there may be some concerns about the infringement of Myanmar's national security and sovereignty, it may now be too late for the country to oppose the presence or involvement of the international community. There is even a possibility that the absence of relevant international organisations may be counterproductive.

Moreover, in light of a number of unsuccessful initiatives of the Myanmar government since the quasi-civilian administration of President Thein Sein in 2012, the participation of Asean may help bring some new thinking and fresh ideas, which may pave the way for a possible solution to the protracted problem.

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People must build smart communities

TRINH THANH THUY

PEOPLE are talking industry 4.0 and 5.0, but in these efforts to build a smart digital environment, there is a serious lack of attention to those on the ground, or more accurately, to measures for improving the lives of the poor and destitute.

Even with the recent adoption of the Asean Smart Cities Framework by Asean leaders in Singapore, with the promise "that no one is left behind", the focus is mainly on the "urban centres".

Meanwhile at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) meeting in Papua New Guinea Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, warned that the transition from old to new technology was causing disruptions that would make skilled and unskilled workers less important and irrelevant in the workforce.

The world has become more connected and convenient than ever with the internet, and digital innovations will transform the world.

But half the world's population are not connected to the internet and will not necessarily benefit from these digital innovations.

More and more we are seeing fake news, scams, hate speeches, accusations of social media being taken advantage of by foreign influencers for political purposes, and governments attempting to "regulate" social media.

But why are governments chasing corporate service providers on the internet and social media?

Why don't they think outside the box? Tech giants have brought so many benefits to users, mostly for "free". Naturally most people subscribe to these services because they can benefit from these applications.

Why can't governments do the same, invest public money on innovations that bring greater benefits to citizens, create a reliable digital platform on which people can live, work, create, do business and even safely entertain, and

provide services that are ideally free or at a lowest possible affordable cost?

And why should there be platforms supported by governments? Because the cost of applying state-of-the-art innovations globally will be out of reach for most small companies and individuals.

What is lacking in the online environment now is trust, reliability and inclusivity. Here we have a strong tool that can address the issue: blockchain.

David Lang, chief product officer of Infinity Blockchain Labs, once said: "In the near future people will use blockchain technology like the internet and we can imagine that each company will build its own trustworthy network based on blockchain technology and then connect them together."

Several Vietnamese tech giants including Viettel and FPT have succeeded in applying blockchain to services.

Taiwanese smartphone maker HTC has offered a blockchain phone with shipping planned from December. Several others, including Switzerland-based start-up Sirin Lab, Chinese handset makers including Lenovo Group and Indonesia-based start-up Pundi X have announced similar plans.

This makes the application of blockchain to create "trustworthy networks" more feasible than ever, not only among companies but all types of communities.

Just one important note: everyone of us needs space for creation, for dreams, for jokes, friendly boasting, fiction, entertainment and so on, things which need not always be true, but that has always been the way of life.

The virtual world reflects real life. So to ensure creativity, freedom of thought and individual privacy there should be separate systems/networks: one type for real business/administration and the other for "fiction".

Why don't we make full use of the existing communal relations, groups, structures, and help them form various

types of smart communities?

I would call them "cell smart communities". Although I understand the pioneering role of smart urban centres, transformation from existing communities/structures into smart ones will probably be less disruptive.

Currently, there is a serious lack of a strong and reliable connection between the virtual world and the physical world. There are a lot of instances where people are living a dual life—online and offline—with no connection between them.

It is not a must that the two have to



be connected, but if connected, verified and acknowledged by the relevant communities then there will be much less cheating.

People will have incentives to behave better, good people or good deeds will be duly encouraged and promoted, bad people or behaviours will be traced and discredited, trust among human beings, which is being eroded day by day, will be enhanced, people will be more responsible for their own actions and their community.

If every piece of information is virtually checked this way by the smart

community at the source, it is likely to be more accurate, hence less need for "management" and therefore much "freer".

Actually, this is also the way peer reviewing is working for scientists. If success stories and failure lessons are all verified and spread freely, there are less chances for lies or fake news.

Blockchain technology should be applied in ways that should not only enable and enforce top-down regulation but also the other way around, avoiding asymmetric information. That will mean both the citizens and the

but improved by the formation of "cell smart communities". These could be a locality (village, commune, district, provinces or even nations), professional groups (scientists, lawyers, artists) or simply groups of like-minded people (religious groups, NGOs).

In Vietnam, we still have very strong farmers' associations, women's association, youth associations and village chiefs. Besides there are a lot of professional associations and groups that can be strengthened again by forming "cell smart communities", one does not exclude another.

What is really needed is the commitment from governments, communities and (credited) volunteers who will enable and ensure the inclusion of all members of the society to make full use of it.

How? Incentives, free apps, free beneficial features and convenience will help the system thrive and even generate values.

Everyone looking for a job can easily look for an appropriate position without going through an intermediary and/or fear of being cheated by unscrupulous employees as the credit system is verified by blockchain technology.

Even those who have not found employment can do volunteer work to raise his/her credit in the meantime.

The involvement of public administrators like governments is especially important to ensure the system receive impartial, timely funding for public benefits and to ensure revenues are fairly shared.

I may sound simplistic or utopian, but I believe all the technologies are already there or certainly within reach, for the building of such smart communities.

Trinh Thanh Thuy is Editor-in-Chief, Viet Nam News, Vietnam.

The Asian Writers' Circle is a series of columns on global affairs written by top editors and writers from members of the Asia News Network and published in newspapers, websites and social media platforms across the region. Copyright: The Statesman/Asia News Network

QUOTABLE Quote

THEODOR ADORNO
(1903 - 1969)
German philosopher, sociologist, psychologist and composer

Intolerance of ambiguity is the mark of an authoritarian personality.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	26 Some nest eggs	6 Wherewithal
1 British raincoats	27 Nearest star	7 Hotel feature
5 Glowing coal	28 Sewing aid	8 Changes over time
10 In a frenzy	29 Maroons	9 Set free
11 Pitching great Tom	33 Brick carrier	12 Gasps, say
13 Lounging attire	34 Cut short	16 Stepped down
14 Convict's hope	35 Craps roll	21 Writer Swift
15 Drape's kin	37 Bee's home	22 Code
17 Pasture	38 Show mercy	23 Baltimore team
18 Sources of answers	39 State frankly	24 Nobelist Nelson
19 Carpet cleaner, for short	40 Jazz instruments	25 Contented sound
20 Concealed	41 Brooklyn team	27 Publicity acts
21 Witty remark		29 Play part
22 Halley's discovery		30 Ingenuous
25 Sits for a portrait		31 Golf course chunk
		32 Large amounts
		36 Puzzle

DOWN

1 Senator Rubio
2 Love affair
3 Mongoose foe
4 Drawings
5 Spotted

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S	V	E	L	T	E		S	L	I	D
C	A	M	E	I	N		H	A	N	A
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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

5-21

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

Next time try it without stopping to dunk your brother.