

Human Security Now: Reclaiming a People-Centred Regional Order

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I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the Nelson Mandela Centre, Chulalongkorn University, the Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, and the University of Queensland for the kind invitation to deliver this year's Surin Pitsuwan Oration. It is truly an honour to be here.

This is also, for me, a deeply personal and poignant occasion. As some of you may know, I had the privilege of working closely with Dr Surin during his tenure as Secretary General of ASEAN, serving as his Director of External Relations. Even prior to that, he was a trusted source of counsel on ASEAN and global affairs. A consummate statesman-scholar, Dr Surin embodied the spirit of a Renaissance man. His intellectual breadth, moral clarity, and diplomatic leadership left an indelible imprint on ASEAN and global affairs. His enduring commitment to human security and regional cooperation continues to shape ASEAN's evolving role on the world stage. Above all, he was a friend and a mentor.

As I reflected on what to share in this Oration, I found myself returning to the many occasions when I had the privilege of engaging with Dr Surin – often as a sounding board as he tested and refined his ideas ahead of major regional and global engagements. In that spirit, and in light of the current state of international order, I asked myself: what might he have wanted to say today—or indeed, what would he expect us to say and discuss? It was this reflection that prompted me to recalibrate the title of my presentation from *Human Security Now: Navigating Turbulence in a Fractured World—to Human Security Now: Reclaiming a People-Centred Regional Order*.

Allow me to begin by recalling a few lines from Dr Surin's speeches over the years:

“The pressing need for human security, the desire for equality and social justice, and the calls for greater accountability and transparency in the way we manage our economy and conduct our politics are challenges that are not confined to any one nation. They are the challenges of the 21st century” – (July 1998, as Foreign Minister of Thailand)

“Human security may indeed be the rallying cry that pulls the ASEAN countries together and which refocuses them on the vital necessities of their citizens” – (ASEAN-ISIS Conference on Human Security, 21 July 2000)

“Human security is more than welfare... there is an element of fulfilment, of human rights, of human development, there is an element of fuller freedom...only by refocusing state security, and regional security, on genuine human security will we ever be protected from calamities beyond our control” – (Speech as Member of the Commission on Human Security at the ASEAN-UNESCO Concept Workshop on Human Security in South-East Asia, 2007)

These reflections, offered across different moments in Dr Surin’s public life, underscore a consistent and deeply held conviction: that security must ultimately be measured not by the strength of the state, but by the well-being and dignity of its people.

Ladies and Gentlemen, for most of modern history, when we spoke about *security*, we were really speaking about the security of the state. Security meant borders, sovereignty, and deterrence. And the assumption—often left unspoken—was that if the state is secure, its people will be secure as well.

But over the past three decades, this assumption has been steadily eroded.

We have seen societies where the state remains intact, yet people continue to experience profound insecurity—whether from poverty, disease, environmental degradation, displacement, or internal conflict. We have also seen crises where threats do not emerge from outside borders, but from within them.

It was in response to these realities that the idea of *human security* emerged in the 1990s, asking a deceptively simple but profoundly important question: what if the true measure of security is not whether states are safe, but whether people are? This shift—from protecting states to protecting people—was not merely conceptual. It represented a deeper rethinking of how we understand risk, resilience, and stability.

Over time, this idea became anchored around two interrelated dimensions: freedom from want—ensuring access to livelihoods, resources, health, and education—and freedom from fear—protection from violence, conflict, and coercion.

Today, these ideas are widely accepted. They are embedded in policy discourse, development frameworks, and regional cooperation agendas. And yet, if we look more closely at the world around us, **we encounter a troubling paradox.**

Even as human security has become more widely accepted as a concept, the conditions it seeks to address have, in many respects, become more acute. Empirically, the trajectory is clear.

In the early 2000s—around the period when the human security agenda gained global traction—armed conflict fatalities had declined significantly from the peaks of the 1990s. By 2004, global conflict deaths stood at just over 20,000. But two decades later, the trend has reversed.

Data from Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) and the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) show that by 2024, annual fatalities from armed conflict had risen to over 160,000—an almost eightfold increase. At the same time, the number of armed conflicts globally has expanded markedly. From just over 110 conflicts in the early 2000s, the total has risen to nearly 184 in 2024, including increases across intrastate, non-state, and even interstate conflicts. This resurgence is not confined to one region. It reflects a broad-based intensification of violence across multiple theatres—from Europe to the Middle East and parts of Africa and even here in Asia.

Perhaps even more striking is the trend in displacement. Globally, the number of forcibly displaced persons has more than doubled over the past decade, reaching over 120 million people by 2024. Taken together, these trends point to a sobering conclusion: **We are not witnessing a decline in insecurity—but its transformation and expansion.**

Ladies and Gentleman, we are now living in what the United Nations Development Programme has described as a *poly-risk world*—an environment in which multiple forms of insecurity overlap, interact, and reinforce one another.¹ ² Conflict intersects with economic volatility. Climate change amplifies displacement and food insecurity. Technological disruption reshapes both opportunity and vulnerability.

But perhaps most starkly, we are witnessing a resurgence of large-scale, protracted conflicts whose human consequences extend far beyond their immediate theatres. The ongoing war in the Middle East—particularly the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in Gaza and in Lebanon—has brought into sharp relief the limits of existing international mechanisms to protect civilian populations in situations of extreme violence.

¹ Arif Abdullah Khan, “Integrating Human Security in a Poly-Risk World to Build Resilience”, *United Nations Development Program [UNDP]*, 31 December, 2025. <https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/blog/integrating-human-security-poly-risk-world-build-resilience>;

Additional information: The source presents the UNDP’s development of a *Human Security for Poly-Risk (HSPR) Methodology*, which aims to advance the practical implementation of Human Security, by recognizing “that security is not only about protection from shocks, but also about empowerment, dignity, and participation.” The framework notes how today’s development challenges rarely unfold in isolation, and requires a blend of top-down protection mechanisms with grassroots level empowerment. The Poly-Risk framework is currently being piloted, with Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, **Indonesia**, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka, and **the Philippines** involved in consultations (see next source for more information on this).

² United Nations Development Program [UNDP], “Advancing Human Security in Poly-Risk Contexts”, 3 February, 2026. <https://www.undp.org/nepal/stories/advancing-human-security-poly-risk-contexts>

Beyond the immediate loss of life, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, and the displacement of entire communities, such conflicts generate cascading human security effects: the collapse of health systems and access to basic services; acute food insecurity and livelihood destruction; long-term psychological trauma and societal fragmentation; and the erosion of trust in international humanitarian norms and institutions.

At the same time, these crises expose a deeper structural concern. Despite the existence of international humanitarian law and normative frameworks such as the Responsibility to Protect, **the ability of the international community to respond effectively remains uneven—and often politically constrained.**³

In this sense, the challenge is not simply the proliferation of risks. It is the widening gap between normative commitments and operational capacity. This is precisely the dilemma at the heart of the human security agenda today.

We have, over the past three decades, developed a more sophisticated understanding of insecurity. But we have not necessarily developed the institutional tools—or the political consensus—required to address it at scale. This global condition is not abstract. Nowhere is it more visible than here in Southeast Asia, a region that has itself grappled with every dimension of this challenge.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how quickly a health crisis could cascade into economic disruption and social vulnerability. Environmental challenges—from transboundary haze to extreme weather events—have shown how ecological risks translate into livelihood pressures, public health concerns, and even diplomatic tensions. And in situations of internal conflict, the limitations of regional mechanisms become even more apparent.

Human security, therefore, is not a theoretical agenda for this region. It is a practical and urgent one. If we turn to ASEAN, we find an organisation that has, over time, increasingly embraced the language of human security.

The experience of the Asian Financial Crisis was pivotal in this regard. It revealed that economic instability could not be separated from social and political consequences. The resilience of states depended fundamentally on the resilience of their populations.

Since then, ASEAN's institutional frameworks—from its community blueprints to its longer-term vision statements—have consistently emphasised a people-oriented and people-centred approach. We see this reflected in commitments to

³ United Nations, *Human Security in an Evolving Global Landscape*, January 2026; UN

social protection, public health, disaster resilience, and environmental sustainability. In operational terms, mechanisms such as the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response and the work of the AHA Centre demonstrate that ASEAN is capable of building functional, cooperative responses to shared challenges.

These are not insignificant achievements. They have enabled coordination, built trust, and strengthened ASEAN's identity as a regional organisation attentive to the well-being of its people. But here, we encounter a central tension. ASEAN has embraced the language of human security. Yet its practice remains uneven.

The concept is most comfortably applied in domains that are perceived as politically neutral—natural disasters, pandemics, environmental risks. But it becomes far more sensitive when insecurity arises from how states treat their own populations. In other words, there has been a tendency to emphasise freedom from want, while approaching freedom from fear with greater caution.

This reflects the enduring influence of ASEAN's foundational norms—sovereignty, non-interference, and consensus. These principles have helped sustain regional cooperation, but they also shape its limits. As a result, many of the most complex human security challenges in the region—issues of displacement, minority protection, and internal conflict—remain framed primarily as domestic matters.

Human Security and the Responsibility to Protect

These tensions become even more pronounced when we consider ASEAN's engagement with the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). R2P emerged from similar concerns as the human security agenda, particularly the need to prevent mass atrocities. While the scale and geopolitical context may differ, the underlying patterns are strikingly similar. Contemporary crises are no longer single-dimensional. They are multi-layered—combining armed conflict, humanitarian collapse, economic disruption, and institutional constraint.

While ASEAN member states supported the principle at the global level, its regional application has remained cautious.⁴

⁴ Kassim, Yang Razali. "ASEAN and R2P." *The Geopolitics of Intervention: Asia and the Responsibility to Protect* (2014): 57-71; Bellamy, Alex J., and Mark Beeson. "The responsibility to protect in Southeast Asia: can ASEAN reconcile humanitarianism and sovereignty?." *Asian Security* 6, no. 3 (2010): 262-279.

Additional information: ASEAN member states endorsed the 2005 World Summit Document. However, beyond this, support for R2P has remained at a rhetoric level without implementation. This divergence stems from a mixture of scepticism of R2P legitimising foreign intervention, together with the foundational norms of non-interference and consensus-based decision-making, where tension emerges.

Nonetheless, several Southeast Asian states have consistently voiced **approval** of R2P:

- **Singapore** has remained arguably the strongest R2P proponent among traditional ASEAN members over time as a consistent member of the "Group of Friends of R2P" since its launch in 2009;

Concerns about sovereignty, selectivity, and external intervention have led ASEAN to emphasise dialogue, capacity-building, and humanitarian assistance, while avoiding coercive or enforcement-based measures. What we see, therefore, is not rejection—but adaptation. A careful incorporation of global norms, filtered through regional sensitivities.

This was reflected in 2013 when Dr Surin was requested to form the Southeast Asia High Level Advisory Panel on the Responsibility to Protect at the request of then-UN Under-Secretary-General Adama Dieng. The Advisory Panel’s report did not seek to import the norm wholesale; instead, it placed R2P into the region’s own political landscape, highlighting the substantial progress the region had made towards democratic and peaceful norms. It framed R2P as a supplement to existing regional norms of sovereignty and non-interference, while placing greater emphasis on the responsibilities that come with sovereignty.⁵

Owing to this regionally sensitive approach, recommendations made by the Advisory Panel focused on mainstreaming R2P in the region through awareness-raising and dialogue-based activities. It also recommended that R2P be integrated into ASEAN’s existing frameworks, allowing it to play a vital role in realising ASEAN’s aspiration of achieving a ‘sharing and caring’ ASEAN Community.

Yet, we see a recurring pattern: the presence of established norms, but an uneven capacity—or willingness—to operationalise them. In this sense, the current crisis in Myanmar and ASEAN’s response should not be viewed in isolation. It is part of a broader global condition in which the gap between normative commitment and practical response has become increasingly visible.

ASEAN, the Myanmar Crisis and R2P

If Gaza highlights the limits of global governance in protecting civilians, Myanmar raises a parallel question at the regional level: what can, and what should, a regional organisation do when human insecurity unfolds within its own

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- **the Philippines** was an early vocal proponent, vocal in viewing *sovereignty as responsibility* in 2004-2005 during the Darfur Crisis and *has* also been a member of the Group of Friends of R2P;
 - **Thailand** also vocally indicated support in the lead-up to the World Summit 2005;
 - The accession of **Timor-Leste** into ASEAN in 2025 has seen the organisation gain another vocal proponent of R2P, owing to its own historical experiences of mass-atrocities. It has also publicly criticised the Myanmar junta amid the current civil war.

Support from these countries sharply contrast the much more **sceptical position** taken by **Vietnam**, who explicitly rejected the R2P as a norm in the build-up to the 2005 World Summit (despite later endorsing the Outcome Document).

However, in the next five years, signs appeared to show a **regional warming** to the principle, where at a 2009 UNGA debate, **Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore** voiced strong support and both **Vietnam** and **Myanmar** now voiced support of the principle.

⁵ High-Level Advisory Panel on the Responsibility to Protect in Southeast Asia, “Mainstreaming the Responsibility to Protect in Southeast Asia: Pathway Towards a Caring ASEAN Community,” September 2024, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/responsibility-to-protect/HLAP%20Report_FINAL.pdf

borders? Myanmar today represents the most significant human security challenge facing Southeast Asia.

Since 2021, the country has experienced a convergence of crises—armed conflict, widespread human rights violations, economic collapse, environmental shocks, and large-scale displacement. More than half of the country’s 55 million population is currently exposed to a conflict where breaches of International Humanitarian Law have become normalised through regular instances of targeted airstrikes against civilians and essential civilian infrastructure.⁶

The latest numbers report 3.5 million internally displaced people—a 72% increase in only a year—⁷where minority groups, including the Rohingya, are disproportionately targeted and exposed to violence, while denied basic medical services and humanitarian aid. In the Rakhine state alone, which is the home to many of Myanmar’s ethnic minorities, the effect of these human-induced atrocities is a figure of 2 million people at the risk of starvation, according to recent UN data.⁸

As a result of the civil war, humanitarian catastrophes, and absent governance, Myanmar is experiencing a total collapse of basic needs for its people. Since 2020, the economy has contracted by 9% and roughly half the population is now classified as living in poverty.⁹ The compounding effects of Typhoon Yagi in 2024 and the severe earthquake last year have worsened conditions, as limited resources and the junta-imposed humanitarian blockade have left behind severe infrastructural damage and losses in agricultural production.

When all these factors are taken together, we see a country where the UN has reported 21 million people face food insecurity—including 12 million facing acute hunger.¹⁰ More concerning: these numbers are increasing on a year-to-year basis with no end in sight to the civil war. This is precisely the kind of multi-dimensional crisis that human security frameworks are intended to address.

And yet, ASEAN’s response—centred on the Five-Point Consensus—has struggled to produce meaningful outcomes. The reasons are structural.

ASEAN’s approach is built on dialogue, mediation, and humanitarian assistance. But it lacks enforcement mechanisms. At the same time, the principles of non-interference and consensus limit the extent to which ASEAN can exert pressure

⁶ Humanitarian Action, 2026, <https://humanitarianaction.info/plan/1505/article/myanmar-4>

⁷ OCHCR, March 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/03/third-myanmars-population-faces-food-insecurity-un-human-rights-experts>

⁸ OCHCR, March 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/03/third-myanmars-population-faces-food-insecurity-un-human-rights-experts>

⁹ UNDP, January 2025, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-01/undp_four_year_outlook-myanmar_enduring_polycrisis_jan2025-2.pdf

¹⁰ UNOCHA, 2026, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2025-quarter-4-dashboard-jan-dec-2025>

on its own members. The result is a situation in which ASEAN remains engaged—but with limited impact. Myanmar, therefore, is not only a humanitarian crisis. It is a test of ASEAN’s institutional model.

This brings me to the final part of my remarks.

ASEAN and Human Security: Reclaiming a Human (People)- Centred Regional Order

If ASEAN is to move from rhetorical commitment to more effective practice, what might this require?

The challenge is not one of abandoning ASEAN’s framework, but of deepening and extending it in ways that better align with the realities of today’s risk environment.

First, ASEAN needs to move from reactive responses toward preventive and anticipatory approaches. While it has developed strong mechanisms for disaster response, it lacks comparable systems for identifying early warning signals such as rising displacement, escalating violence, or deteriorating socio-economic conditions. Institutionalising early-warning and early-action mechanisms—possibly anchored within the ASEAN Secretariat or relevant bodies—would enable preventive diplomacy and reduce the likelihood of crises escalating.

A comprehensive data collection network on key drivers including voluntary and involuntary migration, hate-speech patterns, and developments to unresolved grievances would help provide the backbone. This can be coupled with routine consultations with civil society and human rights groups, together helping alert ASEAN to emerging trends before it is too late. Thus, when red flags are visible, this would allow ASEAN to already be aware of the issue and prepared to de-escalate—replacing reactive responses with *proactive* engagement.

Second, ASEAN needs to engage more effectively with external partners. The Myanmar crisis has demonstrated that ASEAN faces structural limitations when acting alone. At the same time, external actors such as the United Nations, Japan, the European Union, and China are already involved. ASEAN’s strength lies in its regional legitimacy and convening power, while external partners bring additional resources and leverage. A more coordinated approach would allow ASEAN to retain its central role while enhancing the overall effectiveness of responses. Rather than pursuing divergent strategies, a unified approach would strengthen collective leverage over the parties involved—pressing them to meet their minimum responsibilities, including on humanitarian access, and bringing them to the negotiation table. Together, this would substantially improve the prospects of reaching and protecting civilians at the heart of the crisis.

Third, there is a need to strengthen humanitarian capacity and protect humanitarian space. The AHA Centre provides an important institutional foundation, but its current mandate and resources are insufficient for complex, conflict-affected environments. Addressing this requires increased funding, stronger coordination with international humanitarian actors, and more flexible delivery modalities, including cross-border assistance where necessary. Humanitarian assistance must not be held hostage to political considerations.

If achieved, ASEAN would be significantly better placed to play a central role in the creation of a humanitarian corridor. Current limitations from the junta's humanitarian blockade place serious structural and physical constraints on the idea. Yet, it remains one of the most direct ways to respond to the crisis facing the Myanmar population. Through a stronger ability to navigate war-torn spaces and with greater capacity to be at the centre of both international and local aid actor networks, a strengthened AHA Centre can help make a humanitarian corridor a feasible endeavour. The successful transnational operation against scam centres in 2025 highlights how, with enough external pressure from bordering states, and when working with multiple actors inside Myanmar, concrete action is indeed possible.

Fourth, ASEAN must more fully integrate climate and environmental risks into its understanding of security. Climate change is no longer a peripheral issue—it is a driver of food insecurity, displacement, livelihood disruption, and potential conflict. Rising sea levels, intensifying floods, and prolonged droughts are already interacting with existing vulnerabilities, while some of the very solutions to the climate crisis—from hydropower to critical mineral extraction—carry their own environmental costs. This demands a more integrated approach that treats environmental risks as core components of human security, attending carefully to how they interact with existing political fragilities and socio-economic conditions.

Planning, early warning, and resilience-building efforts are crucial tools to this end, and require engagement directly at the community-level to comprehensively understand how climate-related events impact livelihoods. Trends in rural-urban migration and unemployment must be analysed and addressed through community-supported measures before they escalate into crises.

Finally, there is the question of how ASEAN interprets the principle of non-interference. While this principle has been foundational to ASEAN's success, there is increasing recognition that a strict interpretation may limit its ability to respond effectively to severe crises. A gradual shift toward the principle of non-indifference—one that maintains respect for sovereignty while recognising a

responsibility to act in situations of significant human suffering—may offer a pragmatic middle ground.¹¹

Taken together, these adjustments do not represent a radical departure from ASEAN’s existing framework. They represent an evolution—one that seeks to align ASEAN’s long-standing principles with the realities of an increasingly complex and interconnected risk environment.

Let me conclude with one final reflection.

Across different regions—from the Middle East to Southeast Asia—we are confronted with a similar and uncomfortable reality. The frameworks we have developed over the past three decades have significantly shaped how we understand insecurity. But they have been far less effective in shaping how we respond to it.

This reflects deeper tensions—between sovereignty and responsibility, between political constraints and humanitarian imperatives, and between normative ambition and operational capacity. In this context, ASEAN’s aspiration to be a people-centred community carries particular significance. Because its credibility will not be judged by declarations, but by how it responds when human lives are at risk.

The question is *not* whether ASEAN should abandon its foundational principles. It is whether those principles can continue to evolve in ways that remain responsive to a changing world. A more preventive approach. Stronger partnerships. More effective humanitarian action. A deeper integration of emerging risks. And a willingness to act—carefully, but meaningfully—when crises demand it.

These are not radical departures. They are necessary adaptations. Because ultimately, the test of any regional order is not whether it can maintain equilibrium among states. It is whether it can protect the dignity, security, and future of the people who live within it. Dr Surin understood this. He spent his career insisting that the dignity of people must be the measure of statecraft. It falls to us—to this region—to carry that conviction forward. The stakes, from Gaza to Myanmar, could not be higher.

¹¹ Sebastian Strangio, “Malaysian FM Calls for Soul-Searching over ASEAN Non-Interference,” *The Diplomat*, October 2021.