

Environment crucial to human security

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THE world today is increasingly becoming insecure.

But most would understand this in a narrow sense, namely in the context of national security, that is, the vulnerability of the nation state being attacked.

Thus, the focus is mainly on protecting the state — its boundaries, peoples, institutions and values — from outside intrusions.

Unfortunately, nowadays it is not only the state that is less secure, but also the individual.

There is then an urgent need to conceptualise the notion of human security, taking into account the complex interrelated threats associated with war and genocide, and the resulting mass displacement of people.

The importance of human security is underscored by the fact that about 2,8 billion are said to suffer from poverty, ill health and illiteracy as compared to about 800,000 people a year said to have lost their lives to violence per se.

To quote from the 2003 Report of the Commission on Human Security, human security means protecting people from critical and pervasive threats and situations, and creating systems that give people the building blocks of survival, dignity and livelihood.

Human security connects different types of freedoms as well — freedom from want, freedom from fear and freedom to take action on one's own behalf.

To do this, it offers two general strategies: protection and empowerment. It means building on people's strengths and aspirations.

Protection shields people from dangers. It requires concerted effort to develop norms, processes and institutions that systematically address insecurities.

Empowerment enables people to develop their potential and become full participants in decision making.

Protection and empowerment are mutually reinforcing, and both are required in most situations. More commonly it affects health as an individual right.

Consider the HIV/AIDS threat. Since 1981, 65 million were infected by the AIDS virus resulting in the death of 25 million.

This is a potential health catastrophe, perhaps the worst in recent times that will affect millions of future generations.

Health is one of the major determinants of human security.

Often, human security is linked to the violence of having no access to vital treatment in life-saving situations, especially in the developing countries.

This is compounded by an overall inequitable distribution of medicines, brought about by an unjust intellectual property rights regime that renders medicines unaffordable.

Thus while proponents of human security agree that its primary goal is the protection of individuals, consensus seems to break down over what threats individuals should be protected from.

Using a 'narrower' concept of human security which underpins the Human Security Report, the focus is on violent threats to individuals, and recognising that these threats are strongly associated with poverty, lack of state capacity and various forms of socio-economic and political inequity.

The concept of human security should be broadened to include hunger, disease and natural disasters.

This is because these kill far more people than war, genocide and terrorism combined.

Of late, there is a tendency to broaden 'human security' to incorporate the notion of environmental security.

A great deal of human security is tied to people's access to resources and vulnerability to environmental change, which in turn is tied up with how people use the country's resources and the environment.

Malaysia must embrace the larger concept of security to protect the citizens and environment.

It is important to secure the environment against transgressions that threaten lives, like the recent landslide in Hulu Klang.

Failing to cope with broadening concept of national security would mean Malaysia will soon be perceived as an insecure nation in human terms.

This we must avoid.

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