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COMMUNICATION, GLOBALIZATION & HUMAN RIGHTS*

Rukmantoro Hadi Sumukti

0. INTRODUCTION

It is a great honor and pleasure for me to accept the invitation from Asian Media and Communication Centre (AMIC) in Singapore to address this distinguished audience made up of participating senior journalists and representatives of NGOs, government and academics from Asia Pacific here in Bangkok, Thailand from 24 to 26 November 1999. I would like to thank AMIC for trusting me to talk about a very important subject which is especially relevant at this juncture as we are entering a new century full of uncertainties. I do hope I will be able to deliver what AMIC and the audience expect to hear on the subject. I would also like to thank Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University (IDSS/NTU) Singapore for granting me permission and leave to accept AMIC’ invitation. Please bear with me if the human rights issues raised in my talk sound to be of common knowledge or too rudimentary for professionals in the field.

*A paper presented at the seminar organized by Asian Media and Information Centre (AMIC) on Media and Human Rights at Bangkok, Thailand, from 24 to 26 November 1999.
As we know the aims of this seminar are as follows:

1) to increase journalists’ awareness and understanding of human rights issues that impact on the rural poor in Asia in the 21st century;

2) to examine how media practitioners and institutions can meet the challenges and exploit opportunities arising out of developments on human rights in the region;

3) to identify guidelines and measures that can assist media in improving coverage on human rights issues affecting the rural poor in Asia;

4) to provide a forum for knowledge sharing and networking among communication professionals, human rights activists, lawyers and academics.

In light of the four objectives listed above, please permit me to dwell on the topic in greater details.

1. HUMAN RIGHTS

A. General

The rights of all men and women on this earth are the same and are stipulated in the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights.
Therefore, the rights of all individuals must be mutually observed, upheld and protected irrespective of their sex, age, color of the skin, ethnic origin, physical handicap, religious belief, social status, political orientation, and the like. As a matter of fact, since human beings live in social as well as natural environments, we must also observe the rights of animals and plants for their and our survival, issues which do not fall into the scope of this seminar. We must uphold the principle of human rights not because we wish to avoid violating the principle of human rights adopted by the UN whose members now number 188 nations, but rather because we firmly believe in and are fully committed to that principle.

B. Human Rights of Asians

If human rights are universal, why must we confine ourselves, at least in this seminar, to those of Asians? Are we saying that the rights of the peoples on the continents of Africa, America, Australia and even Europe are not our concern? The answer, of course, is “no”, but to be effective and successful we must limit the scope of our preoccupation and apply the principle of division of labor.

Even if we now say “let bygones be bygones”, we must not disregard historical facts about Asia and the Asians. With few exceptions, the rights of the peoples of Asia have been violated beginning from the sixteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century, the end of
World War II, when newly independent countries emerged. Even at the end of the century the people of East Timor is only about to embark upon a plan to set up an independent state of Loro Sae under the auspices of the UN. It was the Western Europeans – the Dutch, English, French, Germans, Portuguese and Spaniards – who deprived the Asians of their rights for various reasons, mainly economic, political and religious interests. At first they treated Asians as equal business counterparts, but later on the Westerners began imposing their requirements such as monopoly in trade and production once they considered themselves in better bargaining position vis a vis the Asians. The Europeans also began imposing their religion, sometimes by coercive means, upon Asians whose beliefs were much older than Christianity. Ultimately most of the peoples of Asia, except Japan and Thailand, fell into European hands: Bangladesh, Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Singapore and Sri Lanka under the British, Indonesia under the Dutch, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam under the French, East Timor, Goa and Macao under the Portuguese, the Philippines under the Spaniards and the United States. Japan escaped from Western domination, except immediately after World War II, but Japan controlled Korea and Taiwan.

After World War II most Asian peoples became independent but the ordeal of some of them continued, either because their rights were breached by foreign powers such as those of the Indonesians by the Dutch
during the independence war and of the Vietnamese by the Americans during the Vietnam war, or because they disagreed with their own rulers such as those in Indonesia, Myanmar and others. As far as human rights violation in Indonesia is concerned, the list is very long as it is associated with socio-political upheavals such as the “3rd July 1946 Affair”, the Madiun Affair (1948), the Darul Islam uprising (1949-62), the PRRI/Permesta rebellion (1958), the overthrow of Soekarno (1965), the purge of PKI and the Malari, Tanjung Periuk, Lampung, Haur Koneng, Aceh and East Timor incidents during Suharto administration (1965-1998), the overthrow of Suharto (1998) and the bloody incidents in Java, Aceh, West Kalimantan, West Timor (Kupang), Maluku (Ambon), East Timor and Irian Jaya during Habibie administration (21 May 1998-21 October 1999). In summary, the number of infringement and violation of the rights of Asians is considerable and deserves serious attention and remedies.

C. Human Rights of Rural Poor in Asia

In the preceding paragraphs I pointed out the need to observe, respect and protect the rights of humans without regard to non-merit factors and without exception. If we confine ourselves to human rights issues of rural poor in Asia, are we not discriminating against the rich in the region? The answer is again “no” as long as we are consistent in
words and deed in applying the principle of human rights. For example, when the United States adopted the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the Americans did not discriminate against White Americans because admittedly Native American Indians, Black Americans and other minorities of foreign descends, including many White Americans hailing from non-Western European regions, had been deprived of economic, educational and political opportunities until that year. Similarly, when the Indonesian government offered extra help to rural and urban economically disadvantaged people, the action should not be construed as discriminatory because those poor people, many of whom were illiterate and lacked the necessary knowledge and skills to earn decent living, needed a helping hand. Unfortunately, however, in many instances the assistance did not reach the intended recipients.

When talking about human rights issues affecting the needy in rural and remote Asia, we must first look at their three basic needs, namely, food, clothing and shelter, and determine whether they regularly acquire them to survive. Rice is the staple for most Asians, but corn, sago and edible roots are the main diet for others. In relatively “friendly” climate such as the lowland of Southeast Asia light clothing adequate for decency is all that is needed. However, in more “severe” climate in Asia’s northern hemisphere and even in tropical highlands, heavier clothes are needed. Similarly, many poor Asians living in “friendly” climate are
satisfied with makeshift dwelling places called homes which provide them cover from the ill effect of the sun, rain and other factors that bring about inconvenience and discomfort, but those living in colder climate require suitable dwellings which provide warmth.

In addition to food, clothing and shelter for survival, needy Asians like other humans, need clean water which is not always easy to come by. Except for those living in the highlands of Asia where clean water is usually abundant, they depend on water manually drawn from the wells dug in their limited piece of land. In many cases they use water which does meet sanitary standards for cleanliness much less for consumption, from nearby streams and rivers. The subject of contaminated water the rural and urban poor in Asia use for consumption and cleaning needs leads us to the topic on their rights to be physically fit to meet challenges and exploit opportunities to survive.

Water, however, is not the only requisite for people to maintain their health and cleanliness. These poor rural Asians usually depend on traditional potion and medicine which may not necessarily be effective enough, if at all, for preventive and curative purposes. On the other hand, modern medicine, even over the counter drugs, is neither accessible nor affordable. The use of supplementary diets such as vitamins never crosses the minds of these needy Asians. Is it any wonder that many of them are in poor physical condition.
Because humans have the tendency to abide by the principle of least effort, they favor things readily available for use or consumption and this habit often leads to laziness. They are prone to become consumers rather than doers and producers. Active and productive people need knowledge and skills through education and training, even at the lowest level to include the “three Rs” — reading, writing and arithmetic. Unfortunately, educational and training facilities in remote areas of Asia are either scanty or non-existent and ironically if they are available, many school age children stay away from schools to help their parents to earn a living to make ends meet. These deprived under-age children work in the field tilling the lands, become itinerant vendors of food and drink, and do other menial jobs to help their parents. The lazy ones usually end up becoming beggars, petty criminals and other socially unacceptable forms of activity. Poverty, illiteracy and remoteness have made these innocent villagers social outcasts and marginal community members whose rights as humans have often been exploited or violated. The saying “A mind is a terrible thing to waste!” is appropriate in referring to the plight of these poor villagers, especially those living remote areas.
II GLOBALIZATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Let us define what we mean by globalization at least for the purpose of this seminar. It is a process by which human ideas, ways of life and products of their activities are transferred across national boundaries world wide either deliberately or otherwise. Globalization has been made possible by virtue of advancement in human knowledge and the sciences which impacts on communication, transportation and technology, especially information technology. Geographic distance of the world is no longer an impediment between and among nations provided that appropriate equipment is available and used. As a result nowadays we use the metaphors “borderless nations”, “shrinking world” and the like to describe the symbolic disappearance of national boundaries. This is true as far as Western European countries are concerned. For instance, what began in 1957 as a concept of a “united Europe” became a reality in that part of the world thirty years later. Western Europeans need no formal documents to visit and work in the European Union (EU), travel between Britain and France has been made faster because of the underwater tunnel built to connect the two countries, and with exception to the British pound sterling, a common currency called the Euro was recently adopted.
Unfortunately, during the same period the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has not been able to achieve what EU has achieved, but its membership has grown from five in 1967 to ten in 1999 covering all of the nations in Southeast Asia and during that period because of ASEAN’s adherence to the policy of non-interference in domestic affairs of each member state, the region has enjoyed a period of relative calm and stability except for inter-ethnic and inter-party conflicts in Indonesia. Ironically, a region where poverty is rampant, except perhaps in Singapore, average citizens of ASEAN countries have not reaped any tangible benefits from the exclusive club and their national leaders have not been able to get together to devise a system of mutual coexistence to alleviate poverty throughout the region. To the rural poor the concepts of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs), Preventative Diplomacy (PM) and Conflict Resolution (CR) of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) are incomprehensible. What they need is the fulfillment of their basic human needs through steady income earning, educational opportunities and health maintenance programs.

Globalization has both good and bad effects. The good include but are not limited to the following: transfer of knowledge about cleanliness and good health habits, population control and family planning, eradication of illiteracy, time management, productivity and quality control, democratic principle and civil society, respect for the right of
others, and the like. Some of the bad impacts of globalization include undue emphasis on individualism, adoption and use of inappropriate technology, imposition of Western standards on Asian values, disregard for traditional views and practice, and so on because we realize that modernity does not necessarily mean superiority.

III COMMUNICATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Let us now examine the relationship between communication and human rights in general before discussing both in the context of globalization. There are many ways in which people communicate and interact with one another. The most basic means of human communication is language which Edward Sapir, the greatest linguist of the 20th century, defines as “a structured system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which members of a community communicate and interact.” Therefore, language is intrinsically spoken while the written symbols used to represent the language variously called orthography or syllabary - depending on the nature of relationship between the units of sounds and symbols representing them – are developed later to record and facilitate learning and transfer from one place to another as well as from one generation to another. There are of course other means of representing language such as the use of kanji to represent Japanese
words or ideas. *Kanji* was based on a similar Chinese writing system. In essence, language, both spoken and written, is used as a means of communication and the effectiveness of the messages communicated by means of language is contingent upon the ability of the audience to understand them. Therefore, media practitioners should consider the listeners' level of knowledge of the language used. The use of sophisticated words and technical jargon coined from other languages with which the audience is unfamiliar should be avoided or minimized. The mother tongue of the audience is preferred if the target listeners are made up of a homogeneous language users. The use of appropriate audio-visual materials will enhance understanding because, as we say, “a picture is worth a thousand words”.

In the context of globalization and its impacts on the rural poor in Asia, it is the responsibility of human rights activists, civil rights lawyers, media practitioners and institutions, and concerned academicians to enhance their knowledge of foreign languages to be able to understand and interpret issues pertinent to and beneficial for their clients most of whom are illiterate and economically deprived to be able to claim their rights. Therefore, human rights professionals must establish networking and a forum for knowledge sharing to be able help their clients better and more efficiently. This spirit of sharing is implied by the Indonesian phrase *gotong royong* “mutual cooperation” or the proverb *Berat sama*
“If (the burden) is heavy, we will carry it on our shoulders; if it is light, we will carry it in our hands.” This appeal is especially relevant if we bear in mind that the tasks and responsibilities of human rights professionals are not only numerous but also complicated because on the one hand they deal with deprived humans whose temper tends to be short, while on the other hand the professionals have to face the privileged and people with power whose authority is being challenged and consequently are insensitive to the demands of the needy. It is true that human rights activists in Asia Pacific tend to be more proactive, but their opponents are prone to be more authoritarian in dealing with their challengers. Without close cooperation among civil rights activists everywhere will their tasks become more onerous if not impossible to accomplish.

IV THE MEDIA, GLOBALIZATION AND THE RURAL POOR IN ASIA

As I pointed out in section I.B. above, most Asians have been subjugated by Westerners for centuries and as a consequence many tend to be submissive even if their rights are violated. After their countries became independent and their national leaders publicly declared that the goal of nationhood was to establish a just and prosperous society, the national goal has remained to be nothing but a slogan and appears to be
even more far-fetched. During the colonial period, these citizens who were deprived of their rights would have been regarded as heroes if they had challenged their colonial rulers who in many instances used local sycophants in their oppressive operations. Since independence many of these innocent people seeking to assert their rights have often been labeled traitors because their demand for the protection of basic rights runs counter to the good of the community. For example, when the Suharto administration decided to build a dam in the Kedung Ombo village in the Boyolali district of the Central Java province in Indonesia, the villagers protested vehemently but the government went ahead with the project despite their protest. The entire village, including their ancestors’ burial grounds, was submerged under water. What these villagers demanded was fair compensation for their properties on which the dam was to be built. There are many other examples of human rights violations similar to that in Kedung Ombo during Suharto’s rule, but suffice for me to say that the Indonesian media helped the poor villagers by exposing the case to the public but without success because of the authoritarian nature of the Suharto administration.

The role of the media, both as institutions and practitioners, in helping the rural poor in Asia is to serve as a bridge between the people and government at the national and local levels because media reports travel both ways. The media should inform the public whether the needy
have enough food to eat regularly and that their diet is nutritious. For example, the *Pikiran Rakyat* daily in Bandung, in its 5 November 1999 edition reported the death of the wife and three daughters of Misja, head of a *pra-sejahtera* "below poverty level" family living in the village of Legokukul, Cisolok sub-district, Sukabumi regency, West Java, Indonesia for eating poisonous mushroom to supplement their meager diet. The death could have been prevented if there had been adequate transportation to take the victims to a nearby clinic or hospital. A similar incident involving the consumption of non-edible mushroom which took the life of Ojon, the head of another impoverished family, but saved those of his wife and child because of the proximity of the family's residence to the clinic was reported by the same paper. The *Jawa Pos*, a Surabaya daily newspaper, had reported a day earlier that villagers living in the remote village of Puncak Jaya in West Irian (New Guinea) whose income was far below that of urban people had to pay 10,000 rupiahs (USD 1.50) for a liter of gasoline while those living in urban areas only spent 1,000 rupiahs (USD 0.15) for the same amount of gasoline. Obviously, this irony should be made known to the authorities to have this kind of injustice stopped.

By the same token, the media must also inform the economically and socially deprived citizens of government programs to aid the rural poor. However, this method is easier said than done because centrally designed and administered poverty alleviation programs are usually made
known using the national language which the poor, most of whom are illiterate, cannot fully understand, not to mention the unethical conduct of some corrupt government officials who do not care about the plight of the disadvantaged, or, worse, take advantage of those needing the help. Media practitioners and institutions must avoid using language which can hamper the transfer of knowledge to the rural poor and instead utilize any means – linguistic, audio-visual aids and other appropriate resources – to help them understand the message and ultimately make use of the available programs to aid them.

In the context of globalization and its impacts on the rural poor in Asia, the media must help convince the government of the need for the poor to be afforded appropriate education and training to be able not only to survive as consumers of available goods and services, but also to become productive citizens. For example, if the poor are intended not only to become self-sufficient but also contribute to national economy, they must have access to modern amenities such as affordable electricity and running water, radio and television placed at the office of the village chief, good roads and means of transport, and so on so that the goods and services they produce are marketable to other members of the society. The same amenities can also be used to fight the bad effects of globalization which are too numerous to itemize in my brief remarks.
V. CONCLUSION

To sum up media practitioners and institutions have to assume the role of communicators in a two-way transfer of information. As far as their role in the context of poverty alleviation in general and that of the rural poor in Asia in particular is concerned, there are a number of guidelines and considerations to be observed and adhered to if the media professionals wish to accomplish their mission successfully.

On the analogy of the economic principle of “supply and demand”, the media must first look at the “target population”, namely the rural poor living in remote areas in Asia who by nature tend to be overlooked by the national governments in their social welfare programs primarily because of their remoteness. National governments have the tendency to look at the urban poor because they are visible and audible, forgetting that many of the urban poor are originally emigrants from remote and rural areas who have to leave to meet their basic needs for survival. The media must determine whether the need of the rural poor for food, clothing, shelter, health care, income-earning skills, physical mobility for the conduct of economic activity, amenities which include but are not limited to electricity and tenable transportation and communication means, facilities to practice and enhance spiritual life, and so on has been met in terms of quantity and quality. Media findings of their investigation are then made public. On the basis of media findings, which result from what I call
proactive role of the media, the national governments can then appropriate actions depending on need and availability of resources. The government actions may take the form of institution of non-existent poverty alleviation programs or improvement of inadequate programs already in existence.

It is the role of the media to disseminate information to the rural poor not only about existing programs designed to help the needy in remote areas in Asia, but also about the good and bad impacts of globalization on them, a topic which will be discussed at length in our three-day seminar. In assuming this role, media professionals must take into account the considerations about the target audience namely the rural poor in Asia I raised earlier, such as their literacy, language proficiency, general knowledge, culture, and availability of media facilities. At this juncture, because for most of them the satisfaction of their basic rights as humans is of major concern and preoccupation, the discussion of non-tangible benefits of globalization should be deferred until such time that it is deemed appropriate.

Having mentioned the above points which are by no means comprehensive, much less exhaustive, a remark for the ten-to-twenty minute inaugural opening of this seminar, I would like to end my talk and to thank you for your kind attention and consideration.

Singapore, 28 October 1999