

# ASEAN envoys meet despite COVID-19 to put Korea partnership back on track

June 15 gathering marks 1st in series of roundtables with ambassadors for Korea Times' 70th anniversary

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The COVID-19 pandemic has made it difficult for ASEAN and Korea to follow up on their 2019 commemorative summit in Busan and spur cooperation through more frequent people-to-people exchanges.

Under the circumstances, a roundtable hosted by The Korea Times last week, as described by ASEAN-Korea Centre Secretary General Lee Hyuk, was "timely and meaningful" in helping ASEAN ambassadors to interact and facilitate partnerships between the two regions.

Mediated by Korea Times President-Publisher Oh Young-jin, the roundtable at the newspaper office in central Seoul, June 15, was the first in a series of meetings with ambassadors planned this year to mark the 70th anniversary of the nation's first English-language newspaper.

Sponsored by the ASEAN-Korea Centre, a Seoul-based intergovernmental organization promoting relations with ASEAN, the June 15 gathering attracted heads of diplomatic missions from all 10 ASEAN member states.

The 10 guests were nine ambassadors — Pg Hj H Nouriyah PLW Pg Hj Yusoff of Brunei Darussalam, Long Dimanche of Cambodia, Umar Hadi of Indonesia, Thiang Boupha of Lao People's Democratic Republic, Dato' Mohd Ashri Muda of Malaysia, Thant Sin of Myanmar, Eric Teo Boon Hee of Singapore, Romane Kanaruk of Thailand, Nguyen Vu Tu of Vietnam — plus Charge d'affaires Christian L. De Jesus of the Philippines. Secretary General Lee joined them.

The event was only the second time the guests have been able to meet since the spread of the coronavirus in Korea. The first time was on May 29 during a meeting hosted by the Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy.

Under the theme "Korea-ASEAN efforts to fight COVID-19," the envoys spoke about their respective countries' experiences in dealing with coronavirus, their views on what is happening in Korea and how ASEAN and Korea can cooperate better in combating the pandemic.

"Facing the challenges of the coronavirus, the world, including ASEAN and Korea, are treading through an exceptional, unique and painful time," Lee said in his congratulatory speech.

He reckoned having trouble in face-to-face exchanges with ASEAN makes the ambassadors "more important than ever" because they play a larger role in bolstering cooperation with Korea.

"They should be a key player in keeping the momentum of cooperation," Lee said. He viewed the role of the media, especially the English newspapers here, is also important in "bridging the communities of ASEAN and Korea."

"In that regard, the roundtable is both timely and meaningful," Lee added.

The longest-serving ASEAN ambassador in Korea and the interim chair of ASEAN Committee in Seoul (ACS), a group of Southeast Asian ambassadors here, Cambodian Ambassador Long Dimanche The Korea Times and the ASEAN-Korea Centre for organizing the roundtable.

"This is a great platform for discussion," Long said, adding ASEAN sees Korea as a model country when it comes to COVID-19 response.

He underlined that each Southeast Asian country, while taking measures to stop the coronavirus, also has been working within ASEAN, as well as through the ASEAN-Korea network and expanded frameworks such as ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan and Korea).

"Nothing is better than putting an issue on the table and discussing it together," he said. "The more we talk within ASEAN and meet with dialogue partners, the more information and experiences we get in order to figure out the appropriate ways to overcome this pandemic."

As of June 22, the numbers of confirmed COVID-19 cases by ASEAN countries were 141 in Brunei, 129 in Cambodia, 46,845 in Indonesia, 19 in Laos, 8,587 in Malaysia, 290 in Myanmar, 30,682 in the Philippines, 42,313 in Singapore, 3,151 in Thailand and 349 in Vietnam.

Brunei and Laos have no more active cases, while Cambodia has two, Indonesia has 25,610, Malaysia has 289, Myanmar has 84, the Philippines has 21,362, Singapore has 6,697, Thailand has 71 and Vietnam has 21.

On death tolls, Brunei reported three, Indonesia 2,500, Malaysia 121, Myanmar six, the Philippines 1,177, Singapore 26 and Thailand 58. Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam reported no deaths.

## ASEAN Plus Three crucial in combating pandemic

Cambodia has suspended T-visa, E-visa and visa on arrival issuance to ASEAN and all countries' citizens.

Other types of visas are still issued as normal, but a health certificate and insurance are required.

The implementation of social distancing, personal hygiene and avoiding large-scale meetings or gatherings is strongly recommended for all people.

The government has reserved \$800 million to \$2 billion to support the economy. It has contributed \$20,000 to the United Nations COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund to further strengthen global solidarity and multilateral cooperation to overcome this global crisis together.

The ASEAN cooperation includes ministerial meetings and the ASEAN Response Fund to COVID-19 that have helped member states to exchange information, experiences and knowledge and to mobilize financial resources.

Cambodia appreciates Korea for providing supplies worth \$300,000 in May. This includes test kits through the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA).

In relation to cooperation with Korea, all ASEAN leaders recognized the efforts of China, Japan and Korea during the Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on COVID-19 held online in April.

The summit recognized the importance of ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve, which is a mechanism to enhance food security in ASEAN Plus Three, as well as support for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), medical professionals and healthcare workers and migrant workers.

It stressed further the important flow of economic and people-to-people exchanges, trade, investment and essential goods along the border as the growth engine of the global economy, as well as highlighting the significance of the signing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) this year despite the health crisis.

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The more we talk within ASEAN and meet with dialogue partners, the more information and experiences we get in order to figure out the appropriate ways to overcome this pandemic.



Korea Times President-Publisher Oh Young-jin, fifth from left, and ASEAN-Korea Centre Secretary General Lee Hyuk, third from left, pose with heads of diplomatic missions from 10 ASEAN member states during a roundtable at The Korea Times office in Jung-gu, central Seoul, June 15. From left are Charge d'affaires Christian L. De Jesus of the Philippines, Singaporean Ambassador Eric Teo Boon Hee, Lee, Myanmar Ambassador Thant Sin, Oh, Vietnamese Ambassador Nguyen Vu Tu, Cambodian Ambassador Long Dimanche, Brunei Ambassador Pg Hj Nouriyah PLW Pg Hj Yusoff, Indonesian Ambassador Umar Hadi, Thai Ambassador Romane Kanaruk, Lao Ambassador Thiang Boupha and Malaysian Ambassador Dato' Mohd Ashri Muda. Sponsored by the ASEAN-Korea Centre, the meeting was the first in a series of roundtables with ambassadors planned this year to mark the newspaper's 70th anniversary. Korea Times photo by Shim Hyun-choi

## Roles of ambassadors, media increasingly important

The roles of ambassadors and media are increasingly important to bring ASEAN-Korea cooperation back on track amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ambassadors and their embassies have a larger role to play in promoting and facilitating partnerships with Korea, and therefore helping face-to-face exchanges that have been "almost impossible" and "virtually non-existent."

The media, particularly English newspapers in Korea, can contribute to enhancing mutual understanding and promoting the spirit of solidarity and camaraderie by providing information and positive narratives.

The pandemic has disrupted many parts of ASEAN-Korea relations, with year-on-year trade volume decreasing by 27 percent in April as an example.

But there is a need to see the disruption in a positive light, and identify opportunities that the crisis has opened up.

ASEAN and Korea can take full advantage of this situation to expand the horizons of cooperation into areas such as healthcare and digital technology.

While ASEAN-Korea Centre (AKC) programs remain unchanged on public engagement and outreach, many have been moved online as outdoor events and large-scale on-site gatherings are difficult. To accommodate the increased reliance on online programs, the AKC website is being upgraded.

The AKC started the "staying connected with AKC" initiative recently. It includes research articles on various topics related to ASEAN and ASEAN-Korea relations, social media challenges and promotions and online lectures.

Among the upcoming programs are "ASEAN-Korea online economic business matchmaking program" (July 13-Aug. 14), "Seminar on economic impacts and perspectives of COVID-19 in ASEAN" (July 14) and "Seminar on ASEAN-Korea tourism in a post-pandemic world" (late August).

## COVID-19 does not stop ASEAN from being resilient

ASEAN is and will remain strong and resilient in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

ASEAN successfully weathered challenging times in the past including the Asian financial crisis in 1997. ASEAN, together with Korea, will always promote coordinated efforts in the fight against COVID-19 based on the spirit of solidarity and collaboration.

Indonesia itself has made a lot of progress in coping with the COVID-19 pandemic situation. Indonesia is applying the approach of massive testing, aggressive tracing, quick treatment and active public participation. Indonesia continues to improve its testing capacity from previously 10,000 specimens per day to currently 26,000 specimens per day. The improved testing capacity was vastly improved by Indonesia's success in developing and producing its own RT-PCR test kit.

Not only has Indonesia been able to produce its own COVID-19 test kit, Indonesia has also successfully developed and produced its own emergency ventilators to treat COVID-19 patients. In addition to joining the global race in developing a COVID-19 vaccine, Indonesia is also taking part in joint collaborative research and development of a COVID-19 vaccine with biotechnology companies from other countries, including Korea.

Indonesia and ASEAN will always promote coordinated efforts with Korea in the fight against COVID-19 based on the spirit of solidarity and collaboration.

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## ASEAN, Korea urged to keep market, investment open

Brunei has been emphasizing containment measures and community engagement and adopted a whole-of-nation approach involving all relevant agencies.

The approaches include three major components — maintaining public wellbeing, protecting jobs, providing support for individuals and supporting and assisting businesses.

The country newly built the National Isolation Center Building in Tutong District to treat confirmed positive patients as well as an additional National Virology Laboratory to increase the capacity and accelerate the testing process for COVID-19.

The Monitoring Centre offers services for foreigners, citizens and residents of Brunei who have traveled abroad and are undergoing self-isolation accordingly.

The government set up a relief fund with over 14 million Brunei dollars (12.2 billion won).

Regarding cooperation within ASEAN, it has activated communication and mobilization of regional health mechanisms to support member states' measures on a governmental level.

Brunei health professionals have been sharing experiences, medical expertise and data on emerging health crises and trends through the ASEAN Plus Three network of experts on public health.

In terms of ASEAN-Korea cooperation, the two sides can benefit from enhanced capacity-building and research opportunities in areas of epidemiology, clinical treatments and information and communications technology (ICT) among others.

It will be important to for the two sides to keep markets open for trade and investment and ensure regional supply chains and the flow of essential goods and services.

The existing mechanisms such as ASEAN-Korea Free Trade Area (AKFTA) and signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) planned this year would help advance economic integration.

## Health ministers' dialogue can help in tackling virus

If the COVID-19 pandemic continues spreading, business, trade and investment will decrease and domestic production will not return to normal soon.

Accordingly, Laos will carry out economic measures such as a mitigation policy on tax, banking credit and other necessary policies.

In the case of the pandemic in Korea, we see the number of deaths is quite low compared to other countries. I would like to offer our solidarity with the Korean government's efforts to tackle this unprecedented global health crisis.

It will be important for ASEAN and Korea to cooperate to produce a vaccine and hold high-level meetings on healthcare.

We support moves to hold an ASEAN-Republic of Korea (ROK) health ministers' dialogue by using the ASEAN-ROK Cooperation Fund.

To minimize the negative repercussions on the global economy, we support maintaining the essential flow of economic and people-to-people exchanges, trade, investment and food and creating an environment for economic restoration by using financial measures.

## Pandemic is opportunity for Asia to lead transformation

Malaysia has been pursuing an aggressive mass-testing campaign and rigorous contact tracing.

Malaysia has also implemented the nationwide Movement Control Order (MCO) for more than three months.

The country has moved on to a new phase of MCO, called Recovery MCO with practices related to standard operating procedures (SOP) such as social distancing and other new normal ways of doing things including maximizing webinars.

Malaysia is also among the first countries to work with the World Health Organization for the "Solidarity Trial" research project in finding a potential cure for COVID-19. This involvement in a globally coordinated trial allows us to collect data, compare safety and effectiveness of treatment protocols using different drug combinations.

A coordinated and integrated recovery plan will be fundamental to ASEAN's future and resilience post COVID-19.

To stem the current economic downturn, ASEAN will need an ASEAN Economic Recovery Plan, in which I believe our Plus Three Partners, especially Korea, can play a crucial role to assist ASEAN as a regional block to ensure our economies are revived and the welfare of 660 million citizens of ASEAN is preserved.

With Korea's assistance, I am confident that ASEAN will maintain its market stability and prevent the potential risks of an economic recession.

On that note, Malaysia will share our findings with experts from ASEAN and Korea to pursue joint efforts in search of a vaccine.

I also would like to support the statement made by McKinsey Managing Partner Choi Won-Sik in his keynote speech during the 2020 Korea Times Forum in May 2020 that suggested the COVID-19 pandemic should be an opportunity for Asian countries to lead the transformation towards a new business environment.

The next "normal" will emerge from Asia with the beginning of the "Asian Century" after the pandemic, which should not slow down the arrival of the future of Asia.

## No country can work alone in opening economy

Singapore has been able to keep one of the lowest death rates in combating COVID-19 by being aggressive in testing, especially for migrant workers who account for more than 90 percent of the infected.

Singapore will continue to watch the situation and take calculated moves to slow the spread of the disease but gradually reopen the economy in a calibrated way.

But no country can do this alone. Each country is safe only when all countries are safe as the virus does not recognize borders. We need to work together, bilaterally, regionally and even globally.

ASEAN should take it one step at a time to make sure that the virus does not rear its head again, with some member states geared toward opening up their economies and exploring "fast lane" arrangements with Korea and other partners.

ASEAN and Korea should make sure the momentum is not lost after the ASEAN-Republic of Korea Commemorative Summit in Busan in November 2019.

Accordingly, ASEAN countries welcome the appointment of Park Bo-kyeong as the third chairman of the Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy.

We can learn from each other on handling COVID-19 going forward, including digitization cooperation.

We should all continue to support open and free trade and multilateralism, and not close up.

We should not despair and should start preparing for the "new normal." We can take the ASEAN-Korea relationship further forward which will be mutually beneficial for people — a core element of the New Southern Policy.

## Incheon serves as hub to bring Myanmar people home

Myanmar is a developing country. Thus due to financial restraints, medical equipment and supplies are in critical need during this kind of period.

However, I can say that now Myanmar can prevent the spread of the coronavirus by successfully controlling local transmission in our country.

Since this pandemic occurred in Myanmar, the government has set up Community Based Facility Quarantines, where food and daily required items are being provided by government agencies and local donors.

At the same time, State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has made good use of social media by communicating with local people to provide awareness information on the coronavirus, although she has had no experience in the past.

As a result, most local communities are following her guidance such as making masks, washing hands frequently and adhering to social distancing. Public awareness is one of the crucial things in combating the COVID-19 pandemic in Myanmar.

On behalf of the Myanmar government, I would like to thank the Korean government and other Korean donors who have donated COVID-19-related medical supplies to Myanmar during this difficult time.

With regard to our embassy in Seoul, we are arranging a relief flight weekly to bring home Myanmar nationals who are stranded throughout the world.

Since Incheon International Airport has been kept open for travelers, our government has designated the airport as a transit point for Myanmar nationals. So our embassy is trying its best to accommodate all our citizens who wish to return home.

We, ASEAN, regularly organize meetings or conferences to assist each other by enhancing cooperation within ASEAN, with the ASEAN health ministers' meeting in April being an example.

## Thailand plays role for online ASEAN summit

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global challenge that requires not only consolidated global cooperation to end to this crisis, but also a coordinated effort to revive the global economy.

ASEAN and Korea should work closely to guarantee their equitable access to COVID-19 vaccine and treatments as global public goods, and encourage an exchange of information and knowledge on vaccine and medical treatment development as well as capacity-building to strengthen our preparedness in the long term.

The Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19 was held in April, in accordance with Thailand's proposal for the establishment of the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund to help procure crucial medical supplies and equipment for a frontline response and to support prevention efforts in all member states.

The Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on COVID-19 was also convened in April via a video conference.

The meeting supported Thailand's proposal to establish the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund. The Fund will also be used for R&D of medicines and vaccines to increase greater self-reliance in future crises.

I wish to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to Korea for its contribution of \$5 million from the ASEAN-Republic of Korea Cooperation Fund to the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund.

The Korean government has attempted to establish fast-track procedures to facilitate international business travel with a view to restoring supply chain connectivity as well as trade and investment with its economic partners.

Thailand is interested in applying this approach, and we hope to learn from the experience of Korea.

Korea is an important strategic partner of Thailand and has an effective system of controlling the spread of COVID-19.

Therefore, we should discuss a way forward for reopening our business travel and people-to-people exchanges when it is appropriate.

## Vaccine cooperation can bring region, world closer

The notable measures taken by the Philippines in combating COVID-19 include one of the world's longest Luzon-wide Enhanced Community Quarantine from March 17 to May 30, a stimulus package worth approximately \$533 million to help affected workers and business-people, providing approximately \$590 million funding to accredited hospitals and expanding testing capacity across the country.

It should be noted the Philippine response to the COVID-19 outbreak has achieved relative successes within a short period.

The government has strengthened its expanded targeted testing capacity. From a single national reference laboratory — the Research Institute of Tropical Medicine (RITM) — a few months ago, we now have 43 accredited COVID-19 testing laboratories as of May 27.

Our testing capacity has also increased to 32,100 tests per day as of May 24 by using Real-Time Reverse Transcription-Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) machines as the gold standard, way past our original target of 30,000 tests per day.

The Philippines expresses its sincere appreciation for the assistance extended by Korea within the framework of ASEAN Plus Three (APT), in particular the donation of 950 metric tons of rice under the APT Emergency Rice Reserve (APTERR).

We are likewise very grateful for Korea's donations of \$500,000 worth of medical supplies in the form of test kits.

Our partnership is unique in that both ASEAN and the ROK can look forward to expanding cooperation in preventing and controlling emerging and re-emerging infectious and communicable diseases as well as in disaster preparedness and responses against pandemic and emerging infectious diseases (EIDs), as outlined in the proposed ASEAN-Republic of Korea Plan of Action (2021-2025).

The Philippines' Department of Health has conveyed its concurrence to the project proposal "Enhancing the Detection Capacity for COVID-19 in ASEAN Member States using the ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund."

I understand that clinical trials in Korea through the International Vaccine Institute and Seoul National University Hospital on vaccine research have begun this month.

We would appreciate it if the Philippines and other ASEAN countries may be made priority recipients of COVID-19 testing kits and the vaccine being developed by Korea, once available.

A vaccine may ultimately be instrumental in controlling this worldwide pandemic with finality.

I am confident that with our initiatives, together with cooperation with our partners like ASEAN and Korea, we will be able to adjust public health and social measures fully so that COVID-19 transmission is controlled.

## Active prevention is behind Vietnam's return to normal

With regard to COVID-19 infection, we still have cases coming in but we successfully stopped them at the border and put them in isolation. That is why there have been no infections recently.

The ban on international travel is still effective. The success of Vietnam owes to rigorous isolation which had tremendous impact in the beginning, on incoming foreigners.

The Korean people who were under quarantine were surprised, some were upset in the beginning, but they have come to understand measures of Vietnam.

Vietnam has returned to normal. Still, we continue to be careful and not be complacent.

Both having successfully contained the virus, Vietnam and Korea are discussing how to normalize business trade with essential business people already coming in.

It was good to see cooperation between ASEAN and Korea over the related issues during the ASEAN Plus Three Summit on COVID-19 in April.

## 'Seoul's swift, transparent measures led to nationwide quarantine success'

By Park Won-soon

COVID-19 puts the world at a civilizing crossroads. The unprecedented coronavirus pandemic has changed the entire environment surrounding us all of a sudden ranging from the international order and economic structure to our daily lives.

We, human beings, are heading for a new future that we have never experienced before. In this era of crisis and chaos, the world is now paying attention to Seoul, wondering about the know-how that has helped this mega-city with a population of 10 million maintain not only its function as a city as well as its democratic system but also how it has maintained the death toll at near zero.

The key to (Seoul)-Quarantine and K(orean)-Quarantine lies in the two principles: swiftness and transparency. Based on the lessons learned from the MERS crisis five years ago, Seoul quickly conducted tests for the virus to a great extent, traced contact and implemented self-quarantine measures when many parts of the world hesitated to respond to the coronavirus. Seoul has taken various innovative approaches and used our sophisticated smart technologies to combat the new coronavirus: "drive-thru" and "walk-thru" testing stations, anonymous testing and the use of GPS to strengthen the city's pre-emptive response to COVID-19.

The leading players of S-Quarantine and K-Quarantine and the best vaccine against the virus are our residents. Each resident has taken the initiative in responding to COVID-19, following the government's guidelines and being willing to join the Social Distancing campaign.

Residents of Seoul themselves have shown solidarity and cooperation: for example, some donated their masks for the vulnerable people and landlords voluntarily reduced monthly rent. Going beyond the national solidarity led by our mature citizens, Seoul has recently taken the lead for transnational solidarity. We have provided medical supplies to the neighboring countries and launched an online platform named Cities Against COVID-19 (CAC), to share the city's successful experiences and know-how with the world. While many countries closed their borders and imposed travel restrictions, Seoul moved in the opposite direction by opening our door wider to the world. A few weeks ago, Seoul hosted an international video conference titled CAC Global Summit 2020 to discuss future directions in the post-COVID-19 era with the world's city mayors, scholars and experts. It was the first of its kind to recognize new opportunities with other cities of the world in times of crisis. The summit has drawn much attention from home and abroad, with its video clips on YouTube receiving 21 million views as of June 11. At the Mayoral Meeting held during the summit, a total of 42 mayors and governors from around the world endorsed the Seoul Statement that promises constant cooperation in a "new normal" era, and agreed to create an inter-city alliance called the Cities Alliance Against Pandemic (CAAP) to fight together against infectious diseases.

Even in the post-COVID-19 era, Seoul will continuously adhere to our values of openness, cooperation and solidarity. A change may be a crisis to those who stay complacent, but it can be an opportunity for those who are prepared with an insight into the future. Korea's efforts in the fight against coronavirus have proven that the most democratic way is the fastest path to a solution. Likewise, global solidarity and cooperation will be our path to a new chapter of human civilization brought by COVID-19.

Especially, ASEAN has special relations with Seoul as it is geographically very close to Korea and I was once sent as a special envoy to the ASEAN countries by President Moon Jae-in.

In fact, many ASEAN cities have been our major partner cities with which we shared the city's outstanding policies, and now amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Seoul has been providing support to them including information sharing and medical equipment donations.

The ASEAN cities have also promised to join our efforts to create the CAAP, and Seoul will not cease to go together hand in hand with the ASEAN cities down the road.



Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon delivers a speech during the Cities Against COVID-19 Global Summit 2020, an online conference hosted by the Seoul Metropolitan Government from June 1 to 5. Courtesy of Seoul Metropolitan Government

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