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**Briefing for  
ASEM Foreign Ministers Meeting  
March 1999**



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INTERNATIONAL SECRETARIAT, 1 EASTON STREET, LONDON WC1X 8DJ, UNITED KINGDOM



# **MYANMAR**

## **Briefing for ASEM Foreign Ministers Meeting March 1999**

The 10th anniversary in August 1998 of the military's violent suppression of the mass pro-democracy movement brought no discernable improvement in Myanmar's human rights situation. The cumulative effect of over ten years' repression has further impoverished an already poor country. More than 1500 people are imprisoned for political reasons, hundreds of thousands of people have been forced into labour, depriving them of the right to earn a living, and members of ethnic minorities continue to be killed by the army both during forced portering and forcible relocation campaigns. Prison conditions are extremely poor, and torture is common.

Since September 1998 the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC, Myanmar's military government) has stepped up its campaign to destroy political opposition groups, including the National League for Democracy (NLD, led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi). Hundreds of people were arrested for political reasons in 1998, including NLD members, students and young people. Six of these people were sentenced to death in April 1998 -- the first time the death penalty had been applied against political activists in several years.

After a May 1998 meeting the NLD demanded that the SPDC convene the parliament elected in 1990 by 21 August 1998. The party declared that they would convene it themselves if the SPDC did not do so. The SPDC responded by claiming that such a move would be "illegal", and in early September they began to arrest hundreds of NLD members in a pre-emptive move. Most of these people remain in detention, as the standoff between the NLD and the SPDC continues. At the same time the SPDC has been reporting thousands of resignations among NLD members and the closure of over 40 NLD branch offices around the country. However it is widely believed that NLD members have been threatened into forcibly resigning from the party.

The authorities' unwillingness to resolve the country's longstanding political impasse is matched by its inability to solve its economic problems. The SPDC has not dealt with the enormous discrepancy between official and unofficial rates of exchange of the *kyat*, Myanmar's official currency; its foreign reserves are reportedly very low; and trade with other countries is extremely sluggish. The overall Southeast Asian economic crisis has meant that some of Myanmar's largest potential investors have been unable to commit any further resources to the country. Whole swathes of the Karen and Shan States have been denuded by forcible relocations of farmers into military areas. All of these factors contribute to an increasing impoverishment of the population, with vulnerable groups of course being most at risk. The infant mortality rate and malnutrition incidence

among children are extremely high, and universities have been closed for at least half of the last ten years, depriving thousands of an education and professional skills.

Although the SPDC has agreed cease-fires with 17 armed opposition groups, fighting between a number of ethnic minority groups and SPDC troops continues, particularly in the Shan and Karen, and Karenni States. The SPDC's counter-insurgency tactics of cutting links between armed groups and civilians has meant that hundreds of thousands of ethnic minority villagers have been forced from their land in the last three years. Since March 1996 SPDC has carried out a massive forcible relocation program in the central Shan State, as more and more Shan villagers lose their farms and are killed if they try to return to their homes to collect food. At least 80,000 have fled to Thailand, but they have never been allowed to settle in refugee camps there, and so have joined the large pool of migrant labour. However with the Thai economic downturn many of them have lost their jobs.

The Karen people in the Papun District in northern Kayin State and in the Tenasserim Division have also been forcibly relocated on a large scale. After observing a Burmese troop buildup in the border areas, the Thai Army reports that they are expecting a dry season offensive at any time. As a result, this will have regional implications as some 7,000 ethnic minority refugees are expected to flee into Thailand. Other ethnic minorities, including the Karenni, Mon, Chin, and Rohingyas, continue to suffer from forced labour in particular. Although there are reports that the army's use of forced civilian labour has decreased in central areas among the majority Burman population, ethnic minorities continue to be targeted for work on infrastructure projects as the military claims it is "developing" ethnic minority areas.

Repeated calls by other governments, the UN, and the opposition itself for tripartite dialogue among the SPDC, the NLD, and ethnic minority leaders have gone unheeded. The SPDC continues to deny the UN Special Rapporteur access to the country, although the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General was able to visit Myanmar in October 1998. In July Thailand and the Philippines initiated a new policy of "flexible engagement" with regard to intra-ASEAN relations, and both countries called on the Myanmar authorities to exercise restraint in its dealings with the opposition. In August the International Labour Organization (ILO) published a comprehensive report on the situation of forced labour in Myanmar.

The SPDC appears to be entrenched in power, and at the same time the people do not appear willing to risk imprisonment or worse by participating in a popular uprising against military rule. As the SPDC continues to arrest more and more political activists, there are fewer people to continue the struggle for democracy and human rights. It is therefore crucial that both ASEAN and EU countries step up discussions with the SPDC about improving the human rights situation in Myanmar. At international fora such as ASEM, countries should routinely engage in a meeting dedicated to finding new solutions to the severe human rights and humanitarian problems besetting the country.

**Amnesty International calls on the Member States of the European Union in their meetings with counterparts in Asia, either individually or in concert, and as part of the ASEM process to raise the following concerns and recommendations:**

- ◆ **Human rights violations in Myanmar have a regional impact, with security implications for the country's neighbours. For example, the ill-treatment of ethnic minorities has caused hundreds of thousands of refugees to seek refuge in Thailand, and Rohingyas to flee into Bangladesh:**
  - **Burmese refugees must be offered international protection — and they should not be returned home until it has been established that the human rights situation in Myanmar has undergone a fundamental and lasting change.**
  
- ◆ **The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Commission for Human Rights thematic mechanisms and country rapporteurs, and other international human rights monitoring and reporting operations (both inter-governmental and non-governmental) should be given access to monitor the situation of human rights and of returning refugees.**
  
- ◆ **Human rights violations in Myanmar remain a complicating factor in ASEAN's external relations. The EU should use its influence with ASEAN members to improve the situation. There are many immediate practical steps the SPDC could take to alleviate the human rights situation in advance of any longer term political settlement. For example:**
  - **release ill or elderly prisoners of conscience for humanitarian reasons.**
  - **begin to eliminate forced labour in ethnic minority areas, which would allow the population to survive and possibly prevent further refugee outflows into neighbouring countries.**
  - **improve prison conditions, including the provision of proper food, sanitation, medical care, and the elimination of torture.**