

ASEAN: Taking up the human rights challenge

If the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is to seriously address regional security, it must take up the challenge of promoting and protecting the full spectrum of human rights - economic, social, civil and political, Amnesty International said ahead of the ASEAN Ministerial and Regional Forum meetings in Bangkok next week.

"Human rights violations and impunity are the root causes of much conflict and instability in southeast Asia. ASEAN leaders and dialogue partners should include human rights protection in any discussion on conflict prevention and resolution," the organization said.

The admission of North Korea to the ASEAN Regional Forum is a welcome step towards ending the seclusion of North Korea and the secrecy surrounding its human rights situation. The ASEAN Regional Forum should use the opportunity to address reports of public executions, inhumane conditions of imprisonment and torture. Since early 1999, and especially from March 2000, thousands of North Koreans have been forcibly returned by the Chinese government and may face imprisonment or even the death penalty.

Amnesty International is also calling on ASEAN members and dialogue partners to include the human rights situations in Indonesia, Philippines, Myanmar and Laos in formal and informal discussions.

Violence and instability in Indonesia poses serious problems for the region. While sectarian violence continues in the Moluccas, daily attacks on civilians in Aceh go largely unreported. Despite the implementation on 2 June 2000 of an agreement to halt military operations between the

armed opposition group, GAM (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka), and the Indonesian military, violations including torture, disappearances and killings of civilians by both sides continue. A systematic approach to investigation and prosecution must be developed for all those responsible for past and present human rights violations in Aceh and elsewhere in Indonesia.

In southern Philippines, the escalation of armed conflict between government forces and the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has resulted in the internal displacement of as many as half a million civilians. ASEAN members should urge the Philippines to take effective measures to safeguard the civilian population.

Amnesty International condemns the grave human rights abuses carried out by another Muslim separatist group, Abu Sayyaf, which took over 80 civilians hostage in a series of incidents since March, including 21 foreign nationals taken from Malaysia. The group combined criminal demands for ransom with political and religious demands and grievances over the treatment of Filipino migrant workers in Malaysia. The incident highlights how the security situation in one country, aggravated in part by unresolved human rights concerns, impacts on neighbouring countries in the region.

Myanmar was admitted to ASEAN in 1997 under a cloud of controversy and since then the human rights situation has not improved.

Amnesty International is urging ASEAN to find a way of improving the policy of constructive engagement with Myanmar so that it improves the human rights on the ground.

Hundreds of thousands of refugees have spilled into Thailand from Myanmar, causing major problems for the Royal Thai Government. ASEAN countries should acknowledge that political and ethnic repression

is the source of this refugee flow and openly discuss this with the military government.

While the government in Laos is encouraging tourism to boost the economy, the country remains closed to human rights monitors. Prisoners are subjected to torture and ill-treatment, individuals are arrested and detained for their peaceful political and religious beliefs and the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly are severely restricted by the government.

After an unprecedented protest in Vientiane in October last year, at least five men remain unaccounted for after they were arrested by Lao police. Amnesty International fears they may be subject to torture and ill-treatment and appeals to ASEAN members to raise their cases with Lao authorities.

"The ASEAN Regional Forum meeting is an opportunity for member states and dialogue partners to tackle human rights concerns in the region -- and they should take up the challenge," Amnesty International said.

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