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ASEM 2: Human rights crucial to long-term stability

LONDON -- Heads of state from the European Union and Asia gathering in London for the second ASEM summit will not achieve long term stability and genuine partnership without respect for human rights, Amnesty International said today.

An "ethical" engagement policy with human rights at its centre should be key to the "three pillars" of development to be discussed at ASEM 2 -- economic development, security and people-to-people links.

"One of the major contributing factors to the Asian economic crisis has been the failure of political, legal and institutional development to keep pace with rapid economic and social change," Amnesty International said. "This has not only led to many countries in the region coming unstuck -- it has also left them singularly ill-equipped to deal with the political and social fallout."

"The crisis has been fuelled by weak legal institutions, unchecked corruption and a lack of transparency and accountability. Critics who have spoken out on these issues have been jailed or silenced by authoritarian governments, and international investors have been prepared to turn a blind eye to the human rights violations which have caused political instability."

"It's no good papering over the cracks with financial assistance and economic restructuring packages. Unless these deep-rooted problems are tackled by governments at the ASEM 2 summit, long-term political and economic stability will remain unachievable."

According to Amnesty International, the current prospects for the region are deeply troubling, particularly when viewed from a human rights perspective. The economic crash will compromise many people's enjoyment of basic economic rights -- the right to employment, to a livelihood for their families and to a roof over their head. Instead of addressing the underlying causes, some governments have sought to blame outsiders and react to discontent with a hardline response.

Regional security is threatened by ongoing conflicts in Indonesia, Cambodia, Myanmar, and the Philippines, where human rights abuses have led to political and economic instability as well as having a knock-on effect through massive refugee flows and demands on resources to house and feed those people who have fled their countries.

"Human rights problems also fuel regional insecurity, causing conflicts and refugee movements," Amnesty International said. "Thailand is already dealing with the consequences of human rights abuses in Cambodia and Myanmar. Will other countries wait for similar problems to spill over from Indonesia?"

"Rather than sidelining human rights from the summit, the EU should be operating an ethical development policy at ASEM 2," Amnesty International said. "Economic rescue packages, financial aid and business investment should be within the framework of ethical principles, so that human rights in the region are guaranteed both in the short and long term."

For all the talk about the importance of "people-to-people" links, many governments continue to harass non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working for human rights and development, some

governments continue to challenge the universality of human rights, and NGOs themselves have been largely excluded from the ASEM governmental agenda.

“The free exchange of ideas, experience and information should be at the heart of ASEM’s people-to-people agenda,” Amnesty International said. “But how can genuine links be built when many governments curb freedom of expression and association?”

“ASEM governments should realize that development across both the Europe and Asia regions is about the development of people – their standard of living and their ability to interact with each other free of restrictions and barriers,” Amnesty International said. “The leaders gathered in London should mark the 50th anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by making 1998 the year that human rights become central to ASEM’s business.”

Amnesty International has human rights concerns about all ASEM countries – including Europe, where the organization has documented cases of ill-treatment in almost every country of the EU. Amnesty International is calling on ASEM in general to reaffirm the universality and indivisibility of the UDHR and participating governments to ratify and implement other relevant human rights instruments; to provide for proper NGO participation and access to ASEM working groups and other initiatives; to develop an operational dialogue on human rights; and address human rights in discussions on regional issues and as part of any dialogue with business.

BACKGROUND

The economic crisis brings with it the prospect of increased political dissent and social unrest which may be met with a heavy handed response by states. New political currents have emerged in many countries, which, if not given a proper outlet, threaten to spill over into violence and instability.

Some governments’ response to the crisis may involve human rights violations. The struggle for competitiveness and foreign direct investment, will see further downward pressure on wages and working conditions and a continuing crackdown on independent trade union activity. Civil disturbance, crime and other problems may be met with an iron fist.

The Indonesian authorities have reacted to anti-government demonstrations by rounding up members of the opposition, including respected economists and using the draconian anti-subversion law to detain its critics. At least 330 people have been detained since the beginning of the year, and President Suharto has been granted greater powers to deal with “social unrest” and “subversive acts.”

The lack of real human rights protection in Cambodia continues to provide a threat to the security and stability of South-East Asia, with refugee flows to neighbouring countries, to add to existing refugee movements from Myanmar. The international response to the crisis following last year’s coup fails to tackle the underlying problems of impunity for human rights violations and to address the need for free and fair elections – putting Cambodia at risk of a continuing cycle of violence.

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