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Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM): Still failing the human rights test

If ASEM Foreign Ministers again fail to put human rights issues on the agenda as they gather in Berlin, it will cast doubts on the credibility of the ASEM process, Amnesty International said today.

“Serious human rights violations occur regularly in both Europe and Asia. ASEM Foreign Ministers can no longer bury their collective heads in the sand when it comes to discussing human rights issues,” Amnesty International said.

“So far the ASEM process has failed many victims of human rights violations in both regions. Unless the political dialogue process starts to address human rights issues now it risks losing touch with reality.”

The Asian economic crisis has shown that human rights protection and respect are fundamental to establishing transparent and accountable systems of governance. Without freedom of expression and association, efforts to build economic reforms or address underlying issues such as corruption will remain fundamentally flawed. ASEM has so far failed to address this basic link.

In Europe, asylum procedures increasingly fail to protect refugees' human rights and risk sending people directly into situations where they are at risk of torture, arbitrary imprisonment or death. Similarly, issues of racism and police ill-treatment in the region, particularly against vulnerable groups such as migrant workers, also need to be addressed urgently.

Civil society and independent non-governmental organisations have largely been left out or forced to the fringes of the ASEM process. They must be included as key components of the development of any meaningful relationship between the Europe and Asia, especially as many of the concerns taken up by ASEM governments have a direct impact on civil society.

“ASEM leaders missed a golden opportunity to place human rights at the heart of the Asia-Europe relationship when they met in the 50th anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1998,” Amnesty International said. “A meaningful partnership between Asia and Europe should have human rights and civil society at its very heart.”

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