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ASEM: BUSINESS TAKES PRECEDENCE OVER HUMAN RIGHTS

As the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) ended in Bangkok last Saturday with triumphant communiqués, Amnesty International expressed its disappointment at the omission of human rights from any of the agreements made at the summit.

“In December 1994, the European Council declared that ASEM should make a “continuing contribution to the common pursuit of a world based on democracy, the rule of law and the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms,” Amnesty International said. “The outcome of ASEM shows that the European heads of states have made a complete u-turn from these commitments.”

“The fact that European governments allow themselves to be told to shut their mouths about human rights sends a bitter signal that, given the choice, business is what counts.”

The Chairman’s statement which closed the official summit omits any reference to human rights, and instead focuses on calls for increased two-way investment and trade liberalization. Where “fundamental” rights, are mentioned, the official statement refers to non-intervention in internal affairs.

This is runs counter to the principles mutually agreed in the 1993 Vienna Declaration of the World Conference on Human Rights, which states that the “promotion and protection of all human rights is a legitimate concern of the international community”, Amnesty International said.

The human rights organization highlighted the contrast between the Chairman’s statement which closed the official summit and the Final Declaration of the Asia-Europe NGO meeting held in parallel.

The recommendations included in this Final Declaration signed by more than 100 NGOs, both Asian and European, demonstrate that the protection of human rights is a universal concern, shared by all the peoples of Asia and Europe.

In contrast, while the Chairman's statement from the official summit sets up a series of concrete initiatives in the field of trade and investment ties, no concrete mechanism is foreseen to address the many demands expressed by the representatives of civil society present at the NGO Forum.

European leaders had indicated that in a first meeting it would have been difficult to address concrete and controversial issues. However, at the very least, ASEM should have ensured that they could properly be addressed in the future, by setting up mechanisms to enable ASEM states to address, monitor, and act regularly upon specific human rights issues which come up, Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International calls on Asian and European governments to ensure that human rights are included high on the agenda for the next ASEM, scheduled for London in 1998.

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