

## **HUMAN RIGHTS AND REGIONAL SECURITY - A CHALLENGE FOR THE ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM**

**Statement by Rory Mungoven, Asia-Pacific Program Director, Amnesty International**

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The meetings this week between ASEAN governments and their dialogue and consultative partners on regional security underline the importance of ASEAN as a regional grouping in securing stability and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. One of the stated aims of the first meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994 was "*the enhancement of political and security cooperation within the region as a means of ensuring a lasting peace, stability and prosperity for the region and its peoples*". If this goal is to be met, it is vital that the regional security agenda is addressed more comprehensively, by all the participants.

Human rights and regional security issues are inextricably linked. The security of nation states begins with the security of the civil society of which they are composed. The security problems that beset the region - notably in Cambodia, North Korea, East Timor, Bougainville and Myanmar - are the projected shadow of human rights violations.

In Cambodia, serious human rights violations committed in recent weeks are again thwarting the country's development, constraining its full participation in regional affairs, and posing a threat to the stability and security of the Asia-Pacific region. Thousands of Cambodians are gathering at the border with Thailand, in fear of more fighting.

Far from being an "internal affair", human rights issues directly engage the international responsibilities and national interests of other states. They belong squarely on the agenda of regional security discussions such as those in Kuala Lumpur this week. Conflicts cannot be resolved, confidence cannot be built and multilateral cooperation cannot be strengthened unless regional security issues are addressed at their root cause - the violation of human rights. Poor security in any one country in the region has direct consequences for the Asia-Pacific region as a whole; the long history of refugee flows in Southeast Asia, currently continuing from Myanmar, East Timor and now again Cambodia, is a sad illustration of this point.

Human rights considerations must be at the heart of confidence building and preventive diplomacy if regional security cooperation is to meet the objective of the ARF and become more comprehensive and effective. Ensuring respect for humanitarian law and principles should be a basic first step in managing any conflict. Countries in the region which are called upon to provide safe haven to refugees should abide by international standards for their protection. Encouraging greater respect for human rights in neighbouring countries is the best way of stemming refugee flows. Adherence to international human rights standards should be an integral part of promoting stable government and the rule of law.

The initiative taken by the ASEAN states in creating the ARF and pursuing greater security within the Asia-Pacific region is an important one. Equally important is the firm stand taken by ASEAN ministers in recent weeks over the situation in Cambodia, which demonstrated a clear awareness that regional security and stability are everyone's business. This is in fulfilment of the explicit

commitment made by ASEAN states and all their partners in the 1991 Paris Accords to promote respect for human rights in Cambodia. Now that ASEAN has admitted Myanmar as a member state, it is to be hoped that a renewed effort will be made to push the Myanmar authorities to initiate dialogue with opposition and ethnic groups, and bring an immediate halt to the ongoing human rights violations committed by the armed forces, before that country too descends further into conflict and chaos.

ASEAN members have already demonstrated their concern about events in Cambodia – and their humanitarian efforts to help those in need of protection have served as an example to all members of the ARF. Further action to bring Cambodia back on the track of development and stability should include setting clear benchmarks for the Cambodian authorities that include protection for human rights.

Just as human rights considerations were integral to the settlement of Cambodia's ongoing conflict in the 1991 Paris Accords, so too will they be integral to any durable solution to the current crisis. Protection for human rights must be at the forefront of efforts to promote peace and normalise government in Cambodia. The violent suppression of opposition in Cambodia will in no way help to restore peace and security in the country or the region. Elections held without full guarantees for freedom of expression and association will not advance the cause of national reconciliation and stable government.

Representatives of all the governments gathered in Kuala Lumpur for the fourth meeting of the ARF should press for the following measures to protect human rights in Cambodia:

**1. concrete steps to restore respect for human rights and the rule of law –**

- the Cambodian authorities must clarify the status of all prisoners, give assurances as to their safety, welfare and fair treatment, and afford ongoing access to them by independent human rights monitors;
- the circumstances of reported summary executions of political opponents must be revealed and anyone responsible for such abuses brought to justice;

**2. increase scrutiny and monitoring by the international community –**

- the tenure of the UN Centre for Human rights in Cambodia must be extended and its reporting, monitoring and training functions strengthened;

**3. confidence building measures ahead of elections –**

- clear benchmarks should be established to ensure future elections take place in a free and fair climate, allowing full freedom of expression and association, regardless of political affiliation and preventing violence or other forms of harassment against candidates and party activists;

**4. end impunity for past abuses –**

- the efforts made in recent weeks to prepare the way for an individual state or international tribunal to bring to justice those implicated in the gross human rights violations during the 1975-1979 period should not be allowed to dissipate.

By agreeing to promote these steps, ASEAN and its partners will not only help to restore peace, stability and respect for human rights in Cambodia. They will also strengthen ASEAN as a political community, and further enhance the role of the ARF throughout the whole of Asia and the Pacific.

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