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ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM: Human rights integral to regional security

Human rights should be an integral part of efforts to promote regional security in Asia, Amnesty International said as ASEAN governments and their dialogue partners begin their annual meetings in Manila this week.

“Human rights and security issues are inextricably linked,” Amnesty International said. “Many of the security problems which beset the region –particularly in Cambodia and Myanmar –are the projected shadow of human rights violations.”

Amnesty International welcomed moves within ASEAN towards greater dialogue and intervention among its members on difficult issues such as human rights. Over the past year, senior ASEAN ministers including Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan and Philippines Foreign Secretary Domingo Siazon have spoken openly of the need for ASEAN to rethink its doctrine of “non-interference”.

“Far from being an ‘internal affair’, human rights issues directly engage the international responsibilities and national interests of other states,” Amnesty International said. “A poor human rights situation in one country has direct consequences for its neighbours. ASEAN members would do well to listen to Thailand, which once again is on the receiving end of refugee flows from Myanmar and Cambodia.”

“Open and critical dialogue on these issues can only strengthen ASEAN, both in terms of cooperation among its members and the grouping’s position in the international community. If there is one lesson from the crisis which has beset the region over the past year, it is that problems cannot be swept under the carpet.”

Recent developments in Indonesia suggest that there is now a critical mass within ASEAN moving towards greater openness and reform on human rights, Amnesty International argued. “ASEAN members should be encouraging each other down the path of reform, not holding each other back.”

The worldwide human rights organization particularly urged ASEAN members, with backing from the ARF, to step up efforts aimed at bringing about concrete improvements in the human rights situation in Myanmar and Cambodia.

“In admitting Myanmar to the regional grouping, ASEAN members raised expectations that engagement would produce results. One year on, things have only got worse,” Amnesty International said. “As the tenth anniversary of the military crackdown in Myanmar approaches, ASEAN and its partners should press the authorities for a positive gesture –such as a prisoner amnesty –which would help defuse rising tensions and build confidence.”

“ASEAN should also keep this lesson in mind as it considers the possible admission of Cambodia after the forthcoming elections and set clear benchmarks for progress on human rights. Cambodia’s security and development will continue to be compromised until fundamental human rights problems are addressed, in particular weakness in the rule of law and absolute impunity for those in power.”

Amnesty International noted the great potential the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and other dialogues have to promote comprehensive approaches to security in the region. But human rights considerations must be at the heart of confidence building and preventive diplomacy if regional security cooperation is to be effective.

“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.”

In pursuit of this goal, Amnesty International urged ARF members individually and collectively, to:

- promote training programs in international human rights and humanitarian standards for military and security personnel
- secure more widespread ratification and adherence in the region to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, and ensure effective cooperation with UNHCR
- ratify the newly adopted statute of the International Criminal Court and strengthen its provisions to ensure that the court will be just, fair and effective
- support the Nobel Laureate’s initiative to establish an international code of conduct on arms and security transfers based on human rights principles
- join international efforts to prohibit the recruitment into armed forces and participation in hostilities of anyone under the age of 18 years
- ratify and implement the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and their Destruction –the “Ottawa Agreement”

“In pursuing these initiatives, ARF members will not only strengthen the security framework in the region, but help persuade the great powers –such as the United States, China and India –which are dragging their feet on these important issues,” Amnesty International said.

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**To arrange an interview with Amnesty International delegates in Manila, please contact:
Donna Guest: mobile telephone: +44 831 667 215
Amnesty International Press Office, London: telephone: +44 171 413 5729**