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Human rights should dominate ASEAN agenda

Amnesty International called on ASEAN member states to move human rights to the top of the agenda of the ASEAN summit, scheduled to take place this weekend in Thailand, if they are to demonstrate their commitment to the ASEAN Charter.

“The treatment of the Rohingya boat people has highlighted the urgent need for regional action on human rights,” said Donna Guest, Amnesty International’s Asia Pacific Deputy Director. “ASEAN must act now to address human rights concerns in Southeast Asia, many of which are having a negative impact regionally and even globally.”

On the eve of the summit in Thailand, Amnesty International said that while ASEAN has made a start in recognizing human rights concerns in the region, much more needs to be done.

All members of ASEAN have now ratified the ASEAN Charter, which contains several provisions addressing human rights, including one that calls for the establishment of a human rights body. Amnesty International said that this body must be strong, professional, independent, and representative and apply international standards. The organization also called on all ASEAN states to ratify key human rights treaties, which the human rights body can then assist states in implementing.

“One of the challenges facing a future ASEAN human rights body is the dire human rights situation in Myanmar,” said Donna Guest. “Violations in this ASEAN member state have been going on for decades, and include crimes against humanity. To be worthy of its name, the body must be empowered to effectively address human rights in Myanmar.”

On 21 February, the Myanmar government set 24 political prisoners free, but there are still more than 2,100 political prisoners behind bars, the highest number for more than 20 years.

The recent crisis of the Rohingya boat people, Muslims from western Myanmar who fled persecution, illustrates the regional dimension of human rights problems. Last month, Amnesty International wrote an open letter to the governments of Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand after thousands of the minority Rohingyas left Myanmar on boats sailing for Thailand and Malaysia. Hundreds went missing, feared drowned, while the Thai military forcibly expelled approximately 1,000, who had arrived in southwest Thailand.

In the last year ASEAN governments have shown that they can work together to solve regional problems. ASEAN took the lead in forming the Tripartite Core Group with the UN and the Myanmar government to provide urgent assistance to the survivors of Cyclone Nargis in May 2008.

“Human rights must be addressed regionally as well as nationally and internationally - adding a regional tier of protection has proven invaluable in other regions,” said Donna Guest. “Unless ASEAN seizes the opportunity to establish a robust mechanism with powers to receive complaints, investigate, and publicly report on the human rights situations in all 10 member countries, they will lose credibility.”