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ASEM SUMMIT MUST INCLUDE STRONG COMMITMENT TO HUMAN RIGHTS

As 25 heads of state and governments gather in Thailand for the first Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), Amnesty International today called on the summit representatives to include in the agenda a firm commitment to human rights.

Governments attending the summit want the meeting to promote dialogue between Europe and Asia, particularly on trade and investment. However, any dialogue which does not include a recognition that the protection of civil and political rights is complementary to sustained economic growth and development would be a hollow one, the human rights organization said.

“Trade and human rights are not mutually exclusive,” Amnesty International said. “Development is about the way people are able to live and participate in their society, not just about dollars. At the very least, all the governments present should reaffirm that human rights are universal and indivisible.”

“In addition, ASEM governments should follow up this affirmation with concrete steps to ensure that human rights are respected throughout Europe and Asia. Previous international summits have included fine words, but these are not backed up by action.”

The conference should lead to an ongoing dialogue, which enables ASEM states to address, monitor and act regularly upon specific human rights issues which come up, the organization said.

“Human rights concerns are not confined to one side of the Asia-Europe conference table,” Amnesty International said. “Police ill-treatment is a problem from Germany to Indonesia and prisoners of conscience are in jail from Greece to China”.

The organization urged governments at the summit to put aside previous arguments between Asian and European governments about the inclusion of human rights in strategies for regional cooperation and development, and take into account the wishes of the peoples they represent.

“This is not the West telling Asia what to do,” Amnesty International said. “The demand for human rights comes from the people of Asia themselves. Governments should listen to what the people in the region are asking for.”

In preparations for the summit, governments have used perceived differences in cultural values as an excuse for not including human rights in their discussions.

“Try telling the mother of the young Indonesian woman tortured to death for her peaceful work promoting workers’ rights, or the parents of all those killed in Tiananmen Square that their deaths can be somehow excused as part of an Asian cultural tradition,” Amnesty International said.

The 1993 Vienna Declaration passed at the UN World Conference on Human Rights states that "*all human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated*", and "*the promotion and protection of all human rights is a legitimate concern of the international community*". ASEM member states must use their previously stated commitment to upholding this Declaration as a basis for any regional cooperation and development, the organization said.

Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) are also in Bangkok for a parallel NGO forum, and Amnesty International is calling on governments to recognize the crucial role played by NGOs in promoting close cooperation between the two regions. Many members of these NGOs are the targets of state repression; ASEM member states should ensure that they can carry out their activities without intimidation and with adequate protection.

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