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APEC: IF APEC MEANS BUSINESS, HUMAN RIGHTS ARE APEC'S BUSINESS

MANILA -- As Heads of State gather in the Philippines for the fourth Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) leaders summit, Amnesty International asserted the place of human rights in economic development.

“The human person should be at the very centre of social and economic development,” said Ross Daniels, of Amnesty International’s International Executive Committee. “Quality and security of life cannot be measured solely in terms of GDP growth and *per capita* income. Genuine, sustainable development embraces the place of individuals in civil society, their personal security and their capacity to determine and realise their potential.”

“Economic development should occur hand in hand with human rights. If APEC means business, then human rights should be APEC’s business. All participants should ensure that human rights issues related to economic development are taken into account in the individual action plans of the member countries.”

In an address to the parallel non-governmental organizations (NGO) Forum in Manila, Amnesty International -- which is one of Asia-Pacific’s largest NGOs, with over a quarter of a million members in 15 of APEC’s 17 countries -- also called for a framework within the APEC process to ensure that NGOs and ordinary people are able to participate in a process which will have profound effect on their lives.

Economic globalization poses new risks and opportunities for international human rights cooperation. The role of the nation state is changing in the face of the global market place, as business assumes greater control and responsibility for more and more aspects of people’s lives.

The organization called on APEC governments to ensure that their national and international policies, including in the area of trade and aid, promote all aspects of the economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights for all members of society. Through their cooperation in multilateral fora like APEC, governments should develop mechanisms and procedures that enable these rights to be monitored and protected.

Businesses should assess the human rights impact of their projects, use their influence with governments, and ensure the rights of their employees are maximised, including their freedom of expression and association in the workplace, the organization said.

Mr Daniels also warned that human rights in Asia are under threat as the result of a debate on cultural interpretations led by governments such as China, Malaysia and Singapore.

“Much attention has been paid to attacks in the region on the universality of human rights in the name of so-called ‘Asian values’. But increasingly the debate is turning on the indivisibility of human rights and the place of human rights in development,” Mr Daniels said. “The argument that human rights may block development is merely an excuse for draconian measures limiting people’s legitimate freedoms.”

“Economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights form one indivisible whole. The right to food and the right to freedom -- which includes the right to organize -- cannot be separated. When people risk imprisonment, torture, summary or arbitrary execution or ‘disappearance’, they stand no chance of enjoying fully their socio-economic rights and the benefits of development.”

Amnesty International highlighted patterns of human rights violations in the region arising in the context of economic development.

Economic liberalisation and growth have deepened the marginalisation of the poor and vulnerable groups and contributed to further violations of their human rights. In turn, those who have campaigned against such abuses have themselves become targets of repression.

China, Indonesia and South Korea are just some of those governments which have placed restrictions on independent trade union activity in the struggle for competitiveness and foreign investment. This week, the Indonesian government re-imposed a four-year prison sentence on independent trade unionist Mucthar Pakpahan, a sentence from which he was acquitted in October 1995 and which was clearly aimed at silencing his criticism of the government’s labour policies.

Indigenous peoples in Canada, Indonesia, Mexico and the Philippines have suffered human rights violations as a result of pressures on traditional land use, while migrant labourers, particularly women, throughout the APEC region have also been victims.

Socially and economically disadvantaged groups in Australia and the United States have been the victims of a disproportionately high number of death sentences, executions and deaths in custody.

“According to President Ramos of the Philippines: “APEC is what we make of it”. As current chair of APEC, President Ramos and the other economic leaders attending the summit share an obligation, responsibility -- and ultimately an interest -- in making it a place where people can realize their full human and economic potential,” Mr Daniels said.

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