

Calling on ASEAN to Forge Ahead Together with the People: Statement ahead of the 28th and 29th ASEAN Summits

(Bangkok/Jakarta, 5 September) – In view of the 28th and 29th ASEAN Summits taking place on 6-8 September in Vientiane, Lao PDR, the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) reiterates its call on ASEAN to show concrete steps towards realising its commitment to advance the promotion and protection of human rights in the region. FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 58 members across Asia, 24 of which are based in Southeast Asia.

At these Summits, the ASEAN leaders will discuss the ‘ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together’, a strategic document adopted during the 27th Summit in Malaysia in November 2015 which was to be the overall vision for the ASEAN Community over the following ten years. That makes the upcoming Summits a moment to reflect how the ASEAN Community is faring on that journey towards 2025.

FORUM-ASIA welcomes the commitment of ASEAN to inclusivity, human rights, and democracy. As stated in the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint 2025, ASEAN aims to realise ‘*An inclusive and responsive community that ensures our peoples enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms as well as thrive in a just, democratic, harmonious and gender-sensitive environment in accordance with the principles of democracy, good governance and the rule of law*’.¹ Therefore, a rules-based, people-oriented, and people-centred community can only be fully realised through the promotion and protection of human rights, fundamental freedoms, and social justice.

The realisation of ASEAN 2025 in the context of human rights should therefore be done, among others, by strengthening the work of the ASEAN Intergovernmental on Human Rights (AICHR), the ASEAN Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC), and other sectoral bodies which are relevant to human rights and in line with the commitments of the APSC Blueprint to promote the mainstreaming of human rights across all three Pillars of the ASEAN Community. In particular, we encourage ASEAN to provide the AICHR not only with more resource support, but also stronger institutional modalities to work effectively as a regional human rights body.

However, contrary to ASEAN’s aim to be a people-centred and people-oriented community, FORUM-ASIA observes a trend of shrinking civil society space in the region. We witness, in most ASEAN countries, that participation in the public sphere and the exercise of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association are being restricted through draconian laws. New laws introduced to limit online freedoms have resulted in the curtailing of the right to freedom of expression and information. What is more concerning, we also observe increasing harassment and attacks against human rights defenders, particularly of those who advocate for the promotion and protection of human rights in the region.

As the upcoming Summits will also be a venue for ASEAN leaders to meet with ASEAN’s dialogue partners, FORUM-ASIA urges the ASEAN leaders to discuss ways to improve the human rights situation

¹ See Article 8.8.2 of the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint, <http://www.asean.org/storage/2015/12/ASEAN-2025-Forging-Ahead-Together-final.pdf>.

in the region. We prompt the ASEAN leaders to stop the harassment of human rights defenders, to release those who are detained and criminalised, and to repeal laws that are being used to curtail the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

We hope ASEAN's dialogue partners will see the region not only as a potential economic partner, but also as a peaceful, stable and resilient community with enhanced capacity to respond effectively to challenges. We look forward to an ASEAN region that is outward-looking within a global community of nations that forges ahead together with its people who enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms, a higher quality of life, and the benefits of community building.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 58 member organisations in 19 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratization.

For further information, please contact:

- ASEAN Programme, FORUM-ASIA, asean@forum-asia.org