

Civil society groups convey concern about human rights to ASEAN leaders

(Bangkok, 2 November 2019) – Today, for the first time in five years, a formal inter-face meeting took place between ASEAN Foreign Ministers and representatives of ASEAN civil society groups. The civil society organisations came as representatives of the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN People's Forum (ACSC/APF), which was held in Bangkok in September 2019.

The ASEAN civil society groups had an inter-face meeting with ASEAN Foreign Ministers hosted by H.E. Don Pramudwinai, the Thai Foreign Minister earlier in the day. Other Member States in attendance to the meeting included: Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam.

'We appreciated having the opportunity to meet with the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, and to share concerns and recommendations from civil society in person with them. The ACSC/APF has long been a platform for civil society from our region to raise issues and areas of concern of our people,' said Chalida Tajaroensuk, Co-Chair of the ACSC/APF 2019.

'It is encouraging that ASEAN leaders recognised the importance of this by meeting with us today. However, it was disappointing that the Governments of Brunei and Laos did not attend the meeting. Additionally, commitments made by ASEAN Member States over the last years, when it comes to human rights, democracy and development, require much more and bolder action,' added Suntaree Saeng-ging, the other Co-Chair of the ACSC/APF 2019.

With Vietnam taking over as Chair of ASEAN in 2020, the group of civil society representatives specifically called on the ASEAN Member States to ensure the host country will provide sufficient political space and appropriate protection for the ACSC/APF to be held in Hanoi next year.

It is in the interest of Vietnam, as next year's host of the ASEAN Summits, to showcase its commitment to civil society and the participation of ASEAN's people by facilitating the holding of a vibrant ACSC/APF. It would reflect well on Vietnam if it welcomes civil society representatives from across the region to discuss key issues, including on sustainable development and the environment, in a consultative manner.

'During the exchange, we specifically highlighted: the need to address the Rohingya crisis; proposals to establish an environmental pillar; and the impact of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) on the ASEAN people,' added Rachel Arinii Judhistari of FORUM-ASIA, 'It seemed there was some willingness to listen to our suggestions on partnership building, but when we raised concerns about human rights and environmental issues this interest seemed to evaporate. In addition, we strongly recommended the ASEAN Foreign Ministers to inform and engage the public about the plan to review the Terms of Reference (ToR) of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) through the creation of panel of experts. A robust review to strengthen the protection mandate is needed to address the current human rights deterioration in ASEAN.'

The civil society representatives conveyed to the ASEAN Foreign Ministers serious concerns from both non-governmental organisations and local communities about a number of issues, including: peace and security; human rights; democracy; access to justice; the impact of trade, investment and corporations people; ecological sustainability; the protection of digital rights; the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, especially as the result of the Rohingya crisis; and decent work, health and social protection.

‘Human rights and fundamental freedoms are trampled on every day in the ASEAN region. We are seeing increasing attacks on human rights defenders, often justified by newly passed repressive laws, and the continued persecution of minority groups and marginalised peoples who are unable to defend themselves,’ said Phil Robertson of Human Rights Watch, ‘ASEAN urgently needs to address these human rights issues, but to do so it needs to override its non-interference principle that freezes the abusive status quo in place. A good place to start would be to critically review the mandate of the AICHR, and make changes to its ToR to seriously strengthen its role in the protection of human rights in the region.’

At the end of the press-conference, FORUM-ASIA launched its latest publication, which critically reviews more than a decade of failure by ASEAN’s human rights commission to seriously address pressing human rights issues in the region. The report, ‘A decade in review: Assessing the Performance of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR)’, comes as the state of human rights in ASEAN member states continues to deteriorate.

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