

On the 50th Anniversary of ASEAN, civil society demands stronger and more forceful human rights mechanisms

(Bangkok, 8 August 2017) – On its 50th anniversary, the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) calls on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to address the deteriorating human rights situation in the region. It should honour five decades of regionalisation by promoting human rights as an integral part of its efforts to adapt and maintain its relevance in a changing regional and global environment, in particular by strengthening the protection mandate of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR).

‘To remain relevant in the next 50 years, ASEAN needs to be strategic and forward looking in its plan to address human rights, a plan to advance the quality of life of the people. While acknowledging its commitments to the promotion of democracy, human rights, transparency, and good governance as stipulated in the ASEAN Charter, it is the actual implementation of such commitments that is most important,’ says John Samuel, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA, ‘ASEAN needs to address major human rights challenges in the region, such as: the migrant and refugee crisis; the impact of businesses on human rights; shrinking democratic space; and the protection of human rights defenders. To address these issues, the AICHR, which is an essential component of the overall human rights architecture of ASEAN, needs to be able to work independently without government interference.’

The ASEAN region is home to 639 million people and represents the world’s third largest market. Nevertheless, the value of ASEAN cooperation lays beyond numbers and economic partnership, it relies heavily on the socio-cultural advances to achieve peace and security within the region and beyond. ASEAN Member States have agreed to uphold such commitments as part of the ASEAN 2025 Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint to adhere to the human dimension of ASEAN cooperation and support the region's aspirations to advance the quality of life of its peoples.

Unfortunately, there has been a steady rise of intolerance and shrinking of democratic space in the region. This has materialised through the targeting and killing of human rights defenders, in particular of women and people with diverse sexual orientation and gender identities, and abuse of state powers through the use of repressive laws against civil society. The human rights situation in ASEAN countries continues to deteriorate.

Eight years after its inception, the AICHR continues to be criticised for being silent on human rights violations taking place in different countries in ASEAN. Many question the efficiency of AICHR as it lacks independent enforcement powers. This will remain the case as long as the mandate of the AICHR, as stipulated in its Terms of Reference, focuses more on the promotion than on the protection of human rights. Opening itself to genuine and inclusive engagement with civil society and national human rights institutions can help the AICHR to transform itself into a rights-respecting body.

As the celebrations for 50 years of ASEAN take place in the Philippines, the current Chair of ASEAN, FORUM-ASIA reminds the Member States that its true value lies in what it offers its peoples. Ensuring human rights protection for all the people of the ASEAN region will ensure its relevance for the next 50 years.

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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 democratisation.

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