HIGH LEVEL DIALOGUE ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN ASEAN

8–10 May 2019 | Jakarta, Indonesia | Aryaduta Hotel
On 8 - 10 May 2019, thirty-three representatives from national, regional, and international civil society organisations (CSOs) met in Jakarta to deliberate the 10 years evolution of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), and how the institution needs to fully function for the promotion and protection of human rights in the region.

The meeting discussed, among other things, the progress made and challenges faced by AICHR in the past decade. CSOs also conversed how the institution has shown its relevance by trying to address pressing human rights issues surrounding ASEAN.
CSOs' Strategy Meeting

Conducted a day before the formal opening of the dialogue, the CSOs' strategy meeting brought together forty CSOs to build on and review FORUM-ASIA’s AICHR+10 report. An outcome document of the high level dialogue was drafted, which includes recommendations to the AICHR.

Initial points from the meeting include:

- AICHR can still utilise their Terms of Reference (ToR) creatively despite flaws in institutional building;
- AICHR can issue immediate statements, request information from ASEAN governments, and consult with the United Nations (UN) and CSOs;
- CSOs need to see political commitment on the part of ASEAN Member States (AMS) and AICHR representatives in fully utilising their mandates.
The high level dialogue commenced with words of welcome from the organisers, namely FORUM-ASIA, ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) and Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

In the opening plenary, Hon. Kasit Piromya, Hon. Jerald Joseph, H.E. Hassan Wirajuda, Hon. Dato Rozian Abd Ghani, Hon. Charles Santiago, Hon. Abdurrahman Fachir, and Hon. Eva Sundari all stressed the urgency to strengthen AICHR’s protection mandates, to create a high level panel to initiate AICHR’s ToR revision, and to maintain AICHR’s independence. FORUM-ASIA also launched its publication assessing AICHR’s ten-year performance titled “A Decade in Review: Assessing the Performance of the AICHR to Uphold the Protection Mandates.”
The Knowledge Expo enabled participants to network with others, share their experiences, and distribute their publications.
The townhall session, attended by Rohingya rights advocate Kyaw Win, Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA) Director Tess Bacalla, JATAM's Merah Johansyah, and Women’s Legal and Human Rights Bureau’s Jelen Paclarin discussed crucial issues such as the Rohingya crisis, ongoing state crackdown on freedom of expression, business and human rights, and sexual violence of women human rights defenders (WHRDs). The AICHR representatives of Indonesia and Malaysia were allowed to respond to the issues raised, promising to maximise their current protection mandates. Commentaries from Members of Parliament (MP) in Malaysia and Indonesia urged CSOs to have strategic communications that will enable AMS to look outside of the non-interference and consensus approach in moving forward.
Group Discussions / Presentations

Participants were divided into groups to consolidate further on initial plans and projects. Some points groups raised were:

- The non-interference principle should not be arbitrarily used against measures meant to address pressing human rights issues in the region;

- AICHR representatives need to be more visible and accessible at the national level together with civil society;

- Request for transparency with regard to financial transactions by AICHR offices;

- Initiate an open dialogue for other CSOs who are not accorded with consultative status; and

- Establish an efficient complaints mechanism to be used by the peoples of ASEAN to track and record cases of human rights violations.
Closing Remarks

The closing remarks, led by Professor Emeritus Vitit Muntarbhorn, SUARAM Executive Director Sevan Doraisamy, CSIS Executive Director Philips Vermonte, and H.E. Amara Pongsapich all re-affirmed the proactive role that AICHR must take in strengthening AICHR-CSOs relationship, reviewing the ToR to maximise their protection mechanisms, and engaging meaningfully with human rights defenders.

Speakers also thanked the organisers as the event explored various perspectives and ideas on how to improve AICHR to fulfill its potential.