

Press Release
SAPA Working Group on ASEAN
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Civil Society groups: ASEAN backslides in its commitment to be more people-oriented, should work harder for the protection of human rights and the environment

Bangkok, Thailand – Fair trade advocates, indigenous groups and human rights activists today lamented the apparent shrinking space for participation of civil society groups within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Members of the Solidarity for Asian Peoples' Advocacies' Working Group on ASEAN said in a press conference today that ASEAN made no particular progress in terms of civil society engagement in the one year of chairmanship of Vietnam. They scored this year's host of the 17th ASEAN Summit for stifling participation in the ASEAN Peoples' Forum (APF) which was held in Hanoi last month.

“It was so different from what happened in Thailand in 2009 where the process was open and participatory. Some officials of the ASEAN Secretariat even graced the civil society conference. This year, there will be no interface with the civil society in the ASEAN Summit in Hanoi. Vietnam tried very hard and was very concerned to be a good host but it failed,” said Jenina Joy Chavez of the Focus of the Global South. Ms. Chavez was referring to the alleged banning of some civil society groups in participating in this year's APF.

Representatives of the migrant domestic workers and the indigenous peoples also took turns in taking ASEAN to task for its failure to recognize their rights and called on the regional body to act on key international human rights instruments.

“While all member-states of the ASEAN have favorably voted for the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), many of them have not made any efforts to implement this. We continue to experience discrimination. We are not cultural artifacts and we are not tourist attractions to be viewed at,” said Robie Halip, Regional Coordinator of the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact Foundation.

Ms. Halip said that the ASEAN member-countries should review their national legal framework to incorporate provisions of the UNDRIP and designate a focal person for indigenous issues amongst the members of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights or AICHR.

Meanwhile, Marissa De Guzman of the Migrant Forum in Asia, accused some ASEAN countries of abandoning their own citizens when they voted against the adoption of an International Convention on Domestic Workers during the International Labour Conference in June of this year.

“There are four million migrant domestic workers in the world and most of them are women from Southeast Asia. Yet, while the rest of the world is falling in line to recognize the right of the domestic workers, only two member-countries of ASEAN voted for the proposal, two rejected it and the other remained silent,” Ms. De Guzman said.

Atty. Nepomuceno Malaluan of the Institute Freedom on Information for his part pushed for the adoption of an ASEAN Protocol on Freedom on Information and called on the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia to take the lead.

“International organizations like ASEAN are bound by international law to recognize the peoples’ right to information. Over 80 countries already had freedom of information legislations,” Atty. Malaluan said. He added that aside from being a right in itself, access to information is important in exercising the peoples’ right to participate and to freely express themselves.

Lastly, noting the scale of natural disasters being experienced by the region in recent years, Ms. Premrudee Daoroung of the Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (TERRA), recommended that `ASEAN should establish a Fourth Pillar on the Environment to complete the foundations of the ASEAN Community. Presently, ASEAN has three pillars on the Political-Security, Economic and Socio-Cultural.

“ASEAN region is now the biggest hub for environmental disaster due to large-scale development projects that caused environmental degradation. It is time for ASEAN to highlight environmental issues and not hide them under the socio-cultural pillar,” she said.

Leaders of the ten member states comprising ASEAN are now in the Vietnamese capital city of Hanoi for the 17th Summit to talk about sustainable development, climate change, and post economic crisis recovery, among others.

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