

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ASEM FROM THE ASIA EUROPE NGO CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF ASIAN EUROPEAN NATIONS

OVER 350 women and men representing 100 peoples' organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) participated in the First Joint Asia-Europe NGO Conference with the theme 'Beyond Geo-politics and Geo- economics: Towards a New Relationship Between Asia and Europe' from Feb 27 to 29 in Bangkok. This conference was held as a parallel to the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) scheduled to be held March 1-2, between 10 Asian and 15 European heads of state.

The conference unanimously endorsed the withdrawal of France from French Polynesia and New Caledonia supervised by the European Union (EU) and of Indonesia from East Timor under the auspices of ASEAN. The NGO meeting also called on the Asian governments to reject the Multilateral Investment Agreement promoted by the European Union and the World Trade Organization. The conference also demanded that ASEM governments end repression and harassment of NGOs and end the climate of fear in which they currently operate in some countries.

At the same time, the conference recognized the challenges confronting Asia and Europe and decided to work towards forging a shared vision and a common programme of action between the two continents that goes beyond a narrow obsession with economic growth.

The participants were of the view that by centring relations on mere geo-political and geo-economic considerations, ASEM is primarily serving the narrow interests of dominant elites in the two regions.

It is in this context that the participants sought to put forward an alternative vision that would be people-centred, socially just, economically equitable, ecologically sustainable and politically participatory. Such a vision would embody respect for human rights and human dignity and nurture the spiritual, moral, intellectual and cultural lives of all individuals and communities in both regions.

Towards this end, the conference urged transparency and accountability in the future ASEM process. The participation of citizens in the decision-making process of governments in both continents should not be just limited to parliamentarians and business people.

Participants agreed that organizations of workers, women, indigenous and tribal communities, popular organizations and NGOs have to be also included. In this regard, the conference declaration expressed the desire to look forward to a continuing dialogue and to the establishment of the mechanisms that would facilitate this. This demands social commitment and political will on the part of governments of Asia and Europe.

As part of this process, the 25 governments should ensure that women's human rights are respected and promoted and that the benefits of economic development are shared more equitably.

The conference endorsed that respect for human rights should be central to Asia-Europe relations and emphasized that participating countries in ASEM are all signatories to UN summit declarations (Rio 1992, Vienna 1993, Cairo 1994, Copenhagen and Beijing 1995). Conference participants reminded the ASEM governments to remember their obligations and responsibilities under these covenants and give the utmost respect to the protection of human rights.

1. Towards Sustainable People-Centred Social and Economic Relations

We support efforts to increase mutually beneficial trade and investment between Asia and Europe. But we are concerned that agreements such as the GATT Uruguay Round only serve to strengthen the economic power of already powerful economic actors. Northern powers push trade liberalisation while increasing protection of their own economies through the decisions of multilateral institutions, unilateral trade sanctions and massive internal subsidies. Combined with the opening up of developing countries' agricultural markets as mandated by the WTO, subsidised American and European agricultural exports will further threaten small-holder agriculture in developing countries. For example, European Common Agricultural Policy involves major subsidisation of agricultural production and threatens small-holder agriculture in developing countries. In addition, within the EU, the top 20 per cent of farmers mainly benefit from such subsidies.

Contrary to the expectations generated by the United Nations summits, the process of globalization and the demands of dominant lifestyles have caused widespread social and cultural disruption, new economic chasms, ecological devastation and political disenfranchisement.

We are also concerned that European relations with Asia will focus predominantly on trade, and therefore on the fastest growing countries in the region, the ten countries invited to ASEM, and will disregard other countries especially those in South Asia where poverty rates remain scandalously high. The EU should promote coherent policies in trade and development cooperation that take into account the inter-relationships within the region as a whole.

In addition, newly proposed investment agreements, for example under the WTO, would give foreign companies the right to enter all economic sectors. Governments would lose their right to regulate foreign investment. In the process, they would lose control over macroeconomic policies and ultimately over their country's natural resources. If such a WTO agreement were to be concluded, there would be disastrous consequences, especially for developing countries. Local farms, banks and other enterprises would not be strong enough to compete with multinational companies. Many of them would have to close down. Worldwide, vulnerable groups would suffer most.

Finally, we are particularly concerned that current patterns of trade and investment are increasingly based on the exploitation of women at work, in their communities and in their homes.

2. Democracy and Human Rights

We believe that respect for human rights should be central to Asia-Europe relations. While the struggle for human rights can only be fought within the context of cultural and social realities in each country, we do not believe that cultural particularism can be used to justify violations of human rights or that such violations are 'domestic' affairs. Neither do we believe that accountability for human rights violations is only an Asian responsibility. We oppose violations of the human rights of the people of Northern Ireland and former Yugoslavia, as well as those of East Timor and Burma. In both Europe and Asia, the rights of migrant workers are systematically ignored and violated.

We believe in the universality of human rights as well as the indivisibility and interdependence of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. Cutbacks in social expenditure have eroded the socio-economic rights of the poor and vulnerable in many European countries. Europe should also be held accountable for 'trans-border human rights violations' resulting from its economic relations with developing countries. European investments help prop up military regimes, gross violators of human rights, in countries such as Burma and Indonesia.

Many governments in Asia should be condemned for systematic violations of human rights. Many have internal security laws which allow arrest without warrant, detention without trial and imprisonment of people for proscribed political beliefs. Formally democratic countries frequently ignore the social and economic rights of their people. Local communities of farmers, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples and urban dwellers are often deprived of their rights to land and livelihoods to make way for so-called development projects without proper compensation or alternative livelihoods.

Many governments systematically encourage the occupation of indigenous peoples' land and strip them of resources. Governments and multinationals must recognise and respect that indigenous peoples' identity and livelihood are based on their land and resources, and are related to their religious, cultural, linguistic and economic systems.

We oppose the cynical manipulation of workers' rights as an instrument of international competition in trade and investment. We demand the repeal of laws setting barriers to the organisation of unions and other workers' organisations. We support concerted international action against gross violations of workers' rights including child labour, strike bans, and the torture and imprisonment of labour organisers.

Migration, and specifically labour migration, is increasingly an integral part of the economies of sending and receiving countries. Between Asia and Europe, population mobility is significant yet basic information, details of problems and policy formulation remain inadequate. It is important to include on the agenda of the Asia-Europe Meeting: transnational migration, its problems (especially human rights violations of women migrant workers), its prospects and impacts. Human trafficking is an integral, if unfortunate, part of labour migration. The numbers of people trafficked across national borders is growing, as is the network of traffickers who profit from the illicit trade. The

illegal status of trafficked persons in host countries makes them more vulnerable to exploitation in manual, domestic and sexual labour.

3. Politics and Security

We welcome ASEM's attention to political and security issues. Wars and conflicts of all types in Asia and Europe victimise hundreds of thousands of civilians. Under these conditions, poverty eradication and economic growth are meaningless. We support all efforts to actively seek political solutions to armed conflicts with international mediation. The fundamental need for nuclear disarmament and regulation and reduction of the arms trade demand broad public discussion and the conclusion of transparent and equitable international agreements.

Anti-personnel landmines are a particularly insidious weapon of war whose legacy remains long after the conflict has ceased. Landmines kill and maim soldiers and civilians alike, resulting in ongoing costs of health care and rehabilitation, lost productivity and waste of formerly productive farmland, along with great personal loss.