

EU Special Envoy for Burma/Myanmar, Mr. Piero Fassino
Opening remarks to the “ASEAN and Myanmar: The Way Forward” panel
22nd Asia-Pacific Roundtable, Kuala Lumpur, 2 - 5 June 2008.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all I would like to express my sincere thanks for inviting me to this prestigious conference which deals with security issues in the Asia-Pacific. In this context I think that it is appropriate to discuss the issue of Burma/Myanmar as the situation in this country has its security dimension, an impact on the stability of the region and implications for the integration process within the ASEAN.

Before coming to a Burma/Myanmar issue, please allow me to share with you some thoughts on the regional integration process and the EU - ASEAN relationship.

First, I wish to underline that throughout several decades the EU has achieved high level of economic integration and political unity, including in the field of foreign policy. By its nature the EU is supportive of other integration processes in the world; therefore, we express our full support to the integration process within the ASEAN, not only in economic and trade fields, but also on political and security matters.

The EU commends ASEAN for having embarked on adopting a Charter which will allow the grouping to establish and fix clear principles of the integration and modalities to deal with pressing issues.

Second, the EU is interested in developing its relationship with the ASEAN in all fields. In the past our relations have focused on economic and trade issues. In 2007 our ministers decided to broaden the scope of our interaction. The Nuremberg Declaration is a clear manifestation of this process. Last November, the EU - ASEAN Summit reconfirmed our will to go ahead along this line through adopting the Action Plan. A very important achievement of the last year was that the EU and ASEAN decided to include political and security issues into our agenda. The success of the Aceh Monitoring Mission was helpful in broadening our cooperation.

Third, ASEAN integration process is not only about economics and pure political issues. The decision of ASEAN Leaders in November to establish a Human Rights Body reflects a growing awareness that any successful regional grouping should be based on clear values and principles which include the protection of human rights.

Coming back to Burma/Myanmar, what is the EU position and what are our messages to ASEAN partners?

We have been addressing the situation in the country over the past weeks and months very often. However, lately the terrible humanitarian catastrophe which hit the country has been at the forefront of our pre-occupations. The EU immediately reacted by significant contributions to emergency aid and we would be prepared to do more. We have been pushing the Burmese authorities to grant and improve access to international experts. On 26 May, the EU Council welcomed the 19 May ASEAN Foreign Ministers' decision to establish a mechanism aiming at the expeditiously delivery and distribution of aid. The EU especially commends the generous decision of the UNSG Ban Ki Moon to travel to Yangon in order to urge Myanmar authorities to allow full access to relief assistance and to international aid workers.

At the same time, also the political developments remain high on our agenda. We have constantly supported Mr. Gambari's initiatives for further political process, and will continue to do so in the future. Therefore, we are disappointed that the authorities have disregarded such suggestions. However, we continue to pursue the UN track as it is the broadest possible international platform.

We continue to underline that only a process that involves the full participation of the junta, the opposition and the ethnic groups will lead to national reconciliation and stability. In light of this we have also called on the authorities to release political prisoners. We especially regret the renewal of house arrest for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, as this decision will certainly not help achieving a better future for the country.

The internal political situation in Burma/Myanmar needs to stay central in our dialogue. We remain convinced that the international community must co-ordinate the efforts in order to press the authorities towards internal dialogue and national reconciliation. I believe that the Asian countries can play a very special role in achieving this goal. If China, India and Japan can significantly favour this process, ASEAN countries are especially well positioned to encourage the authorities to progress along these lines. The opening of a fruitful and honest internal dialogue is all the more relevant now, since we believe that the referendum is certainly not likely to solve the main political issues in the country.

We are therefore counting on an active stance of Burma's neighbours to enlarge the political space in the post-referendum phase. We trust that ASEAN will continue to take forthcoming positions, as ASEAN Member States have a clear interest in seeing Burma/Myanmar address its economic, political and governance problems in view of ASEAN's 2015 regional integration project. It would be indeed very difficult to successfully establish ASEAN communities without real progress in Myanmar.

In this regard, let me reiterate once again that the EU favours a genuine political process with the participation of all political forces, including army and ethnic minorities, leading to national reconciliation and stability.

I am convinced that ASEAN partners remain a crucial part of the international efforts to bring about national reconciliation and improved human rights in Burma/Myanmar. I have noticed that on numerous occasions some ASEAN member states have expressed clearly their concerns. Recent ASEAN actions in the context of the Nargis cyclone have showed that the ASEAN has real capabilities and capacities in dealing with the authorities in Yangon. I highly appreciate that ASEAN took such an active role, including at the International Conference in Yangon on 25 May.

I hope that acting together we will not only be able to overcome the consequences of the cyclone, but also to properly address the equally important political situation.

Let me now open the floor to interventions.