



## Myanmar: ASEAN must move beyond consensus to facilitate cross-border humanitarian aid

(Bangkok, 6 May 2022) – In the lead up to the high-level meeting on ASEAN humanitarian assistance to Myanmar taking place today, civil society organisations voiced their grave concerns in a webinar<sup>1</sup> titled ‘Beyond ASEAN’s Five Point Consensus: Humanitarian Assistance in Myanmar’ held yesterday.

‘We condemn ASEAN’s inaction and its failure to make tangible progress in addressing Myanmar’s catastrophic political, human rights, and humanitarian situation. The junta has shown no intent to respect nor implement the Five-Point Consensus, undermining ASEAN’s spirit by continuing its systematic violations that amount to atrocity crimes. The junta is the root cause of the humanitarian catastrophe, and they must not be given a seat at the table to make decisions on how aid is carried out to the most vulnerable,’ said the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), Progressive Voice and CIVICUS.

‘The number of people in need of protection and asylum will only rise as the humanitarian crisis and food insecurity caused by the junta’s ongoing violence worsens, driving people to seek refuge in neighbouring countries. Cross-border assistance through local civil society and humanitarian organisations, who have served the conflict-affected communities for decades, must be supported in order to effectively provide humanitarian aid to those most in need,’ said the rights groups.

Myanmar’s situation has become dire since the military’s failed coup attempt on 1 February 2021. From 1 February 2021 to 15 April 2022, there were 10,786 armed clashes and attacks on civilians recorded, more than in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, or Afghanistan in the same period.<sup>2</sup> Conflict and violent bloodshed between military forces and local defence groups has caused the number of internally displaced persons in Myanmar to skyrocket. Based on estimates by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, this number has surpassed 800,000 people.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Key Issues Discussed***

It is crucial for ASEAN leaders to recognise that channelling humanitarian aid through cross-border routes, local humanitarian networks and ethnic service providers is imperative to ensure civilians have access to life-saving aid. The webinar was joined by: Naw Htoo Htoo of Karen Human Rights Group; Salai Za Uk Ling of Chin Human Rights Organization; Adelina Kamal, Associate Senior Fellow of ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute and Former Executive Director of the AHA Centre; and Kasit Piromya, ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) Board Member and former Thai Foreign Minister. The event was moderated by Marzuki Darusman of Special Advisory Council for Myanmar.

Panellists in the webinar, among other things, discussed the following:

- It is vital for ASEAN members to move beyond relying on the ASEAN-led humanitarian mechanism, including the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) as the operational entity for aid provision. The AHA Centre was set up to address natural disasters. It does not have a mechanism to provide aid to those in need and in which its main partner that would deliver aid in the affected country is the main perpetrator of atrocity crimes and cause of the humanitarian disaster. It must not be manipulated for the junta’s own political and tactical advantage. ASEAN should join forces with the United Nations in taking a lead coordinating role with local humanitarian organisations on the ground as their equal partners, leveraging their extensive expertise in managing humanitarian crises. ASEAN and the UN must exert collective global pressure

<sup>1</sup> <http://l.forum-asia.org/AseanMN.YouTube>

<sup>2</sup> ACLED data as of 15 April 2022

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR (11 February 2022) UNHCR steps up aid for displaced in Myanmar as conflict intensifies

in urging the world to allow humanitarian access, including through cross-border aid efforts. Support channels through the State Administration Council of Myanmar (SAC) cannot be seen as neutral nor viable. SAC has stated that ASEAN must focus solely on humanitarian aid but humanitarian aid must work in tandem with other four principles agreed upon by ASEAN. SAC has also blocked the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy to Myanmar, Noeleen Heyzer from attending the ASEAN's consultative meeting on Myanmar.

- Cross-border channels are critical in ensuring ethnic groups are able to receive aid. Through such routes, a larger and a more diverse population can be reached. Airports and seaports are not the sole entry points for humanitarian aid. There are diverse local networks that have been delivering aid to communities in dire need. The junta asserts that airports and seaports are the only entry points as means to keep humanitarian aid under their control.
- Humanitarian aid cannot be supplied through the junta, which is the cause of the crisis and the principal aggressor. Relying solely on the junta to channel humanitarian aid is not feasible because they are not in a position to fully operate in the country, especially along the Thai-Myanmar border. Trusted local non-state actors and the broader existing network as a potential entry point in the border must be considered, including ethnic community-based health or faith-based organisations that have been providing health, education and other essential services to conflict-affected populations along the borders for decades.
- ASEAN should suspend SAC's participation in all decision-making and activities, including and especially those involving aid distribution.
- Meanwhile, other ASEAN countries should welcome Malaysia's call for the regional group to talk to the National Unity Government and National Unity Consultative Council who represent the will of the people, and discuss how ASEAN could best address the humanitarian needs of the crisis-affected people.

The panellists agreed on the need to move beyond the Five-Point Consensus and the AHA Centre, and urge ASEAN to provide humanitarian aid through cross-border channels. They also called on Myanmar's neighbouring countries to play a stronger proactive role to protect regional human security and stability.

The webinar, organised by FORUM-ASIA, Progressive Voice and CIVICUS, discussed recommendations for the ASEAN's high-level humanitarian consultative meeting today that will discuss ways and means of providing humanitarian assistance to Myanmar, as well as for the upcoming ASEAN-US Special Summit on 12 - 13 May. A recording of the webinar is available here: <http://l.forum-asia.org/AseanMN.YouTube>

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**The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)** is a network of 85 member organisations across 23 countries, mainly in Asia. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. The FORUM-ASIA Secretariat is based in Bangkok, with offices in Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. [www.forum-asia.org](http://www.forum-asia.org)

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**Progressive Voice** is a participatory rights-based policy research and advocacy organisation rooted in civil society, that maintains strong networks and relationships with grassroots organisations and community-based organisations throughout Myanmar. <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/>

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