



16 May 2023

ASEAN Must Stop Enabling Myanmar Junta's Atrocities

Responding to the outcome [statement](#) made by the Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) following the 42nd ASEAN Summit, Progressive Voice, ALTSEAN-Burma and Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) express deep concern and disappointment on the lack of strong measures from the regional-bloc to stop the Myanmar military junta's atrocity crimes.

The statement highlighted two areas on the ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus (5PC): ASEAN Chair's work on creating a "conducive environment for facilitating an inclusive national dialogue"; and humanitarian delivery through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre).

However, the rights groups believe that to effectively implement any of these objectives, it is imperative for ASEAN to condemn the illegal military junta's atrocities and prioritize the cessation of violence by the junta, particularly on the airstrikes in the country. ASEAN continues to fail to fulfill its international obligations to address the atrocities committed by the military and as a Charter-based regional entity equipped with intergovernmental human rights bodies including the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) and ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women (ACWC), ASEAN has become increasingly complicit in enabling the military junta's atrocities.

As leaders of ASEAN gathered in Indonesia on 10 May, Myanmar military [killed](#) at least 18 people, including five children in Nyaung Pin Thar village in Karen State. Images circulating on social media reveal the harrowing sight of charred bodies, predominantly those of women, children, and elderly individuals who were mercilessly and inhumanely slaughtered. This massacre follows the 11 April killing in Pa Zi Gyi village in Sagaing Region, where an "enhanced-blast" type ammunition was [used](#) to cause maximum deaths in an aerial attack, killing nearly 200 people, just one month before the ASEAN Summit. Such actions show the military junta's total disregard for human life and the 5PC, requiring the ASEAN leaders to immediately act to stop the junta's violence.

The impotence of ASEAN, and the feeble statement issued by its Chair in the face of the junta's escalating barbarism will only enable the junta to commit further atrocities in Myanmar.

In April, General Min Aung Hlaing, head of the illegal junta, [increased](#) defense spending for 2023-2024 by 51%; this has grave implications for conflict escalation in the country, with related threats to regional stability.

The Failure of the AHA Centre

While ASEAN may commend itself for its partial delivery of humanitarian aid, the prevailing conditions on the ground underscore the fact that the crucial task of delivering lifesaving aid in conflict-affected areas has been primarily carried out by the courageous local Myanmar frontline humanitarian responders.

Meanwhile, the junta's presence in the AHA Centre's Governing Board continues to [undermine](#) the AHA Centre's credibility and ability to act independently and impartially. As [called](#) on by Myanmar's National Unity Government (NUG), ASEAN must remove the junta's representation from the AHA Centre's Governing Board.

Although ASEAN leaders [issued](#) a statement denouncing the attack on AHA Centre Convoy in Shan State, its weak response to the military's atrocities raises serious doubts about ASEAN's commitment to hold perpetrators accountable. As a category five Cyclone Mocha approached Bangladesh and Myanmar, the Myanmar military conducted [airstrikes](#) in the Yebyu, Thanintharyi Region and attacked villagers in Kani, Sagaing Region—which was in the direct path of the cyclone—displacing thousands.

As the AHA Centre [coordinates](#) with the military to respond to the aftermath of Cyclone Mocha, it must ensure that aid is not weaponized by the military for its tactical and political advantage, as the previous military junta did [during](#) the 2008 Cyclone Nargis.

On Legitimizing and Enabling the Military Junta's Atrocities

It is also deplorable that ASEAN's defense partners have deep and sustained engagement with the Myanmar military at multiple levels, continuing to legitimize the illegal military junta.

During the ASEAN Navy Chiefs' Meeting (ANCM)—which was held alongside the 42nd ASEAN Summit—the junta's navy head Moe Aung, a sanctioned war criminal responsible for numerous grave human rights violations, was appointed as the 2024 leader for ANCM, with the support of Indonesia, the current chair of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM).

ASEAN continues to allow the junta to lead other defense and policing related bodies within ASEAN, holding the co-chair of the ADMM Plus Experts' Working Group on Counter Terrorism, the chair of the ASEAN Air Chiefs Conference (AACC) and the Executive Director position of ASEANPOL.

Regarding Rohingya Refugees

Furthermore, ASEAN's endorsement of the recent pilot "repatriation" of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar—during a time of nationwide political, human rights, and humanitarian crises caused by the same genocidal military—clearly shows ASEAN's further failure to uphold its international human rights obligation.

The current situation in Myanmar lacks any conditions for a safe and dignified return of Rohingya, hence such a project will only grant legitimacy to the illegal military junta. This pilot repatriation plan has been [rejected](#) by the Rohingya who visited Rakhine State as part of the project.

It is deplorable that the Chair's statement also fails to acknowledge and respect the identity of the Rohingya, thereby perpetuating the erasure of their cultural and ethnic heritage that has long been denied by the Myanmar military in its genocidal campaign against the Rohingya community.

Call to Action

With only a few months left for Indonesia to implement the 5PC during its Chairship, civil society organizations (CSOs) have proposed ASEAN to take five concrete [points of action](#) to effectively address the Myanmar crisis.

These include: 1) ending violence and protecting civilians; 2) formally engage legitimate stakeholders of Myanmar, including the NUG, National Unity Consultative Council, Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations, and civil society; 3) expanding the Special Envoy's mandate; 4) providing direct humanitarian assistance through

local frontline humanitarian providers; 5) and for the Special Envoy to immediately cut ties with the military junta and formally engage with the NUG and legitimate stakeholders of Myanmar.

The CSOs stress the [urgency](#) for ASEAN to implement these actions within three months after the ASEAN Summit held in May 2023. Failure to do so may lead the people of Myanmar to reassess whether their beloved country's ASEAN membership still aligns with their best interests and pursuit of federal democracy. If not, this may potentially result in Myanmar initiating the process of leaving ASEAN.

The Myanmar military's flagrant disregard for the ASEAN 5PC and the UN Security Council resolution on Myanmar—which called for an end to violence—highlights the urgency for ASEAN to back a new UN Security Council resolution under Chapter VII of the UN Charter that includes measures such as targeted sanctions and an arms embargo as well as a referral of the situation in Myanmar to the International Criminal Court.

ASEAN must follow the brave leadership displayed by Myanmar's people, who have resisted the military for over two years, to end its complicity in the military's atrocity crimes.

ASEAN must act in accordance with the rule of law based on its own Charter and in compliance with international human rights obligations.

For more information, please contact:

Khin Ohmar, Progressive Voice; info@progressive-voice.org

Debbie Stothard, ALTSEAN-Burma; debbie@altsean.org

Communication and Media Programme, FORUM-ASIA; communication@forum-asia.org