



MEDIA RELEASE

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551 civil society organisations urge ASEAN and Dialogue Partner defence ministers to cancel ‘counter-terrorism’ training to be hosted by Myanmar military junta and Russia

The Myanmar military junta and the Russian Defence Ministry – while both waging war against civilians and committing grave international crimes – will co-host a ‘counter-terrorism’ field training exercise for the militaries of ASEAN and Dialogue Partner countries in September.

The training exercise will focus on defeating ‘terrorists’ in a border area. This would provide direct support to the Myanmar military junta to improve its capacity to wage war against the people of Myanmar while simultaneously supporting the Russian military to continue its atrocities against the people of Ukraine.

Held under the ASEAN Defence Ministers-Plus Experts’ Working Group on Counter Terrorism (ADMM-Plus EWG), the training involves representatives of defence ministries cooperating to share and develop their military capabilities.

The planned training exercise follows a related ADMM-Plus EWG tabletop training exerciseⁱ held in Myanmar in August, which was also co-hosted by the Myanmar military junta and Russia.

The Myanmar military junta has openly claimed that these training sessions will help their campaign against resistance groups, including the democratically elected National Unity Government and People’s Defence Forces.ⁱⁱ

Due to the potentially grave consequences, 551 Myanmar regional and international organisations and allies have sent an open letter urging ASEAN Member State governments to:

1. cancel the upcoming training exercises co-hosted by the Myanmar military junta and Russia; and
2. exclude Myanmar military junta members from all ADMM-Plus meetings and activities.

If the Myanmar military junta is not excluded from ADMM-Plus activities, these organisations appeal to ASEAN Member State governments and Dialogue Partners publicly refuse to attend all ADMM-Plus activities involving the Myanmar military junta.

The states that participate in counter-terrorism training alongside the military junta may risk being complicit in the junta’s subsequent offensives against those it accuses of being ‘terrorists’ in Myanmar.

The decisions of some ADMM-Plus Dialogue Partners – Australia, New Zealand and the United States – not to participate in the recent tabletop training in Myanmar or the upcoming training in Russia have been most welcome.ⁱⁱⁱ Notably, representatives of Japan, Singapore and South Korea’s defence ministries were also not present in photographs of the recent training in Myanmar.^{iv v}

The rest of the ASEAN Member States – Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam – and ADMM-Plus Dialogue Partners – China and India – have so far given no indication of whether they will attend the upcoming field training or not.

Spokesperson for Defend Myanmar Democracy, Naw Aung, remarks: “ASEAN is helping the Myanmar military junta to develop its capacity to further its campaign of terror against the people of Myanmar.”

“This provides false legitimacy to the military junta and seriously damages ASEAN’s credibility to assist in solving the political crisis in Myanmar caused by the junta.

“We welcome the decisions of the defence ministers who have chosen to boycott these training sessions and urge the others to follow their example.”

Chairperson of Progressive Voice, Khin Ohmar, states: “By joining this military exercise, ASEAN members and Dialogue Partners risk aiding and abetting the illegal military junta to commit further war crimes and crimes against humanity against civilians. The Myanmar junta is a terrorist organisation and must not be afforded recognition on a regional stage, let alone be allowed to host an offensive exercise against so-called borderland terrorists.”

“ASEAN must halt its negligent business-as-usual approach and reform its modus operandi to support the will and aspirations of the Myanmar people for federal democracy, human rights and justice and accountability.”

Executive Director of the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), Mary Aileen Diez-Bacalso, stresses: “It is utterly shocking and disappointing to see how the Myanmar military junta is tasked to oversee counterterrorism exercises despite its gross human rights violations and blatant disrespect for international humanitarian law.”

“ASEAN must stop assisting Myanmar’s military by enhancing its capabilities. The people of Myanmar deserve an effective and committed response from ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners.”

BACKGROUND

- The training also violates the ASEAN Charter, which states adherence to the principles of peaceful settlement of disputes, democracy, respect for and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.^{vi}
- Under both international law and Myanmar national law, the military junta itself meets the criteria for a terrorist organization^{vii}.
- The Myanmar military junta is able to co-host these training sessions because ASEAN has allowed the military junta to take up the rotating co-chair of the ADMM-Plus EWG on behalf of Myanmar since 2021.^{viii}
- Myanmar military junta representatives also currently lead ASEAN’s Air Chiefs Conference and Navy Chiefs Meetings.^{ix x}
- ASEAN considers most ADMM activities as “non-political” and “technical”. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar, ASEAN claims that participation in military meetings and training “are not in breach of its prohibition on Myanmar political level participation in its meetings.”^{xi}
- ASEAN has excluded the junta from meetings at the head of state and foreign ministers’ levels.^{xii}
- ADMM has also previously excluded the junta’s former ‘defence minister’, Mya Tun Oo, from participation in ministerial meetings in November 2022.^{xiii}
- Australia^{xiv}, New Zealand^{xv xvi} and the United States^{xvii} also publicly boycotted ADMM-Plus meetings that they would normally attend as Dialogue Partners in 2022 due to the fact that they were co-chaired by the Myanmar military junta and Russia. Japan and South Korea also did not attend these meetings.
- The United Nations Special Rapporteur for the situation of human rights in Myanmar recommends that ASEAN must not allow Myanmar military junta personnel to participate in any ASEAN meetings, especially defence-related ones. He also calls on ASEAN Member States to: “not attend if the invitations to the junta military personnel are not rescinded.”^{xviii xix}

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ⁱⁱⁱ Myanmar Now, 'Russia and Myanmar junta to host ASEAN counter-terrorism exercises despite boycott by dialogue partners', *Myanmar Now*, 22 June 2023, <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/russia-and-myanmar-junta-to-host-asean-counter-terrorism-exercises-despite-boycott-by-dialogue-partners/>

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^{vii} Special Advisory Council Myanmar, *Briefing paper: The Myanmar military is a terrorist organisation under law*, 14 December 2021, <https://specialadvisorycouncil.org/2021/12/briefing-paper-the-myanmar-military-is-a-terrorist-organisation-under-law/>

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