



10th October 2007

8th Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights: “Freedom of Expression” in Siem Reap, September 2007

Dear participants,

Countries in Asia and Europe are converging around the principle of freedom of expression, recognising not only its intrinsic value for realising everyone’s full human potential, but also its indispensable contribution to developing tolerant, prosperous and harmonious societies. This was a key conclusion from the 8th Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights in Siem Reap, Cambodia, on 27-28 September 2007. The seminar, on “Freedom of Expression”, brought together about 140 participants from governments and various sectors of civil society, representing 38 of the 43 ASEM countries, the European Commission and the ASEAN Secretariat.

A range of recommendations addressed to ASEM partners at the international, regional and national levels emerged from the seminar, among which include the following:

1. All ASEM states should ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and its First Optional Protocol. Article 19 of the ICCPR enshrines freedom of expression as a rule of international law, and offers the most important guarantee for the enjoyment of freedom of expression in all its aspects at the national level.
2. ASEM states might consider requesting the Human Rights Committee, which monitors the implementation of the ICCPR, to prepare a new General Comment to guide states on the scope of Article 19 freedoms, duties and responsibilities. The last General Comment, adopted in 1983, predates the digital revolution in media and communications.
3. ASEM states should disseminate and abide by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Human Rights Defenders 1998. Freedom of expression is one of the crucial rights identified in the Declaration, to enable human rights organisations to fulfil their advocacy and monitoring roles.
4. ASEM states should ratify the UNESCO Convention on the Promotion and Protection of the Diversity of Cultural Expression.

5. International organisations should continue their capacity-building programmes, specifically in democratising countries, to translate international frameworks into national legislation.
6. The regional human rights systems of Europe offer significant protection for freedom of expression, among other rights. It was strongly suggested that Asian ASEM members would benefit from a similar regional Human Rights mechanism. ASEAN's intention to create a human rights mechanism should be supported by all ASEM countries. The host of the meeting, the Prime Minister of Cambodia Samdech Hun Sen, strongly endorsed that idea in his address to the participants.

This seminar is the latest in a series initiated on the occasion of the first meeting of ASEM Foreign Ministers in Singapore in February 1997. It was decided that informal seminars on human rights be held within the ASEM framework. The aim of this initiative was to promote better mutual understanding and co-operation in the area of political dialogue, particularly on human rights issues, as well as to build a bridge between representatives of civil society organisations and officials from ASEM Governments.

The multidisciplinary spirit and the variety of backgrounds of participants are among the most important aspects of this series. For the past eight seminars an academic, an NGO activist or trade unionist and an official from the relevant ministries of each ASEM country participated to the meetings.

The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) holds the secretariat of the series, co-organised with the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Swedish Raoul Wallenberg Institute (RWI). Supervision of the seminar is entrusted to a Steering Committee, which consists of the following members: France, Sweden (through the RWI), China, Indonesia, the European Commission and ASEF.

Enclosed is a brief three-page memorandum of the Seminar's main conclusions as a prelude to a more comprehensive report to be circulated for your comments by the end of October or early November 2007.

Yours sincerely,



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