

THAILAND

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The 14th ASEAN Summit: Fighting the Global Economic Crisis and Fostering Human Rights

The 14th ASEAN Summit took place from 28 February to 1 March 2009 in Cha-am/Hua Hin, Thailand. Thailand is the present chair of ASEAN. Originally the summit was scheduled for December 2008 but had to be postponed due to domestic turmoil in Thailand.

It was the first meeting of the heads of government of the 10 ASEAN member states Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia after the ASEAN Charta came into force at the end of 2008.

The Cha-am/Hua Hin Declaration paves the way for the establishment of a single Asian market by 2015. This market will reach a GDP of approximately USD 2,000 billion. The ASEAN integration process is modelled after the three pillars of the EU focusing on politics and security, the economy and socio-cultural issues. Moreover, also following the EU, an ASEAN hymn called "The ASEAN WAY" was introduced at the summit to enforce a common identity.

ASEAN responds to the global financial and economic crisis

The 14th ASEAN Summit provided a crucial opportunity for the heads of government to discuss collective measures to combat the financial and economic crisis. The ASEAN member states are strongly dependent on foreign investments, export and tourism. As a result of the global crisis, Singapore already has to deal with economic recession, Malaysia and Thailand are expecting negative growth and also Indonesia is facing an economic slowdown.

In the days leading up to the summit, the members of ASEAN+3 decided to raise the budget of the "Chiangmai Initiative" from USD 80 billion to USD 120 billion to be better able to protect each other's currencies. In addition, on the summit policy plans were formulated to strengthen SMEs and eliminate bilateral and sub-regional trade barriers.

Furthermore, the ASEAN members signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Australia and New Zealand which was termed an important contribution to overcome the global financial crisis. Similar agreements have previously been concluded with China, South Korea and Japan. Another FTA with India is pending to be concluded during the course of the year. Free Trade Talks between ASEAN and the EU have been held since 2007. An FTA between ASEAN and the EU would lead to the largest free trade area in the world, comprising a population of more than one billion people.

In their concluding documents of the summit, the ASEAN members call for a "concerted effort of the industrial and the developing states to restore financial stability, and guarantee the well-functioning of financial markets". In particular, they urge for "a brave and quick reform of the international financial system". "We will do what we can to prevent protectionist measures being taken to overcome the crisis", said Thai prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva in his concluding speech of the summit. Abhisit will advocate ASEAN's position at the G-20 summit on 2 April 2009.

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Human rights pose a great challenge

Above all, the ASEAN summit was dedicated to the protection and promotion of human rights according to the motto "ASEAN Charter for ASEAN People". The members discussed the fields of responsibility of the ASEAN human rights body which is planned to start its work within this year. It was concluded that the agency should only examine human rights abuses in member states that are willing to cooperate. Thus, human rights advocates have criticized that the agency might only fulfill an alibi function.

This year's ASEAN summit was extensively dominated by ASEAN's traditional principle of non-interference. On the one hand, this became apparent through the debate on the human rights body. On the other hand, it was also very much evident in ASEAN's dealing with Myanmar's human rights abuses. ASEAN urged Myanmar to allow all political parties to participate in the 2010 elections which are the first elections in almost 20 years. Moreover, it also advised Myanmar to release its approximately 2100 political prisoners. However, eventually its members could only reach a consensus on closer future cooperation with the UN in democracy building. The human rights abuses in Myanmar pose a great challenge to ASEAN. ASEAN is a hybrid regional alliance consisting of two communist states, one military dictatorship, one absolute monarchy and young democracies. In case of common ASEAN intervention, its members fear losing their sovereignty.

By the same token, the Rohingya problem was insufficiently addressed at the ASEAN summit. The Rohingya are a Muslim ethnic group in Myanmar. Because of strong discrimination, many Rohingya seek asylum in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. Earlier this year the Rohingya had raised controversy when Thai authorities towed around 1000 refugees out to sea where they had come from, and hundreds probably died. During the summit the representatives of the ASEAN member states supposedly referred to the Rohingya as "illegal migrants in the Indian Ocean". The issue shall be discussed again under the aspects of country of origin, transit and destination at the Bali Conference in spring this year.

On the summit, for the first time since ASEAN's almost 50 years of history, a meeting between the heads of governments and representatives of NGOs, youth groups and private enterprise took place. Before the summit, the Myanmar's head of government General Thein Sein and his Cambodian counterpart Hun Sen had threatened to boycott the meeting if activists of their countries would participate. Owing to the great pressure, the representatives of civil society from both countries voluntarily withdrew their participation.

On the other hand, however, Vietnam's president Nguyen Minh Triet surprised the gathering with a statement encouraging civil society to determine the frame for the institutionalization of their talks with ASEAN leaders. The talks present a significant step towards a heightened transparency and responsibility of ASEAN towards its more than 570 million population. Vietnam will take over the chair of ASEAN next year. The statement of its president bears a positive message for the future.

For Thailand, holding the ASEAN summit this year provided the chance of regaining international confidence after the long-lasting political chaos of the previous years.