



ASEAN vital to nations in region

by Rodolfo C. Severino

in: Asia News Network of 27th of July 2009

- 1 For some people, the fact that the foreign ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and their counterparts from other parts of the world managed to meet in Phuket, Thailand, without incident was accomplishment enough. They remember the political turmoil that forced the deferment or even cancellation of previous high-level meetings on Thai soil and under Thai chairmanship.
- 2 For others, the attendance of the U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton was enough to confer significance on the gathering. They concluded this in the light of U.S. previous perceived neglect of Southeast Asia by the United States.
- 3 But even without these considerations, the Phuket meetings were eventful enough.
- 4 First, the ASEAN foreign ministers approved the terms of reference for what they decided to call the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. This cleared the way for member states to appoint their representatives to the commission and ASEAN heads of government to formally launch the body later in the year.
- 5 Not surprisingly, not everybody is happy with the commission's terms of reference. After all, they are the result of compromise through arduous negotiations among 10 governments. Most of the unhappiness seems to arise from the emphasis on the "promotion" rather than on the "protection" of human rights and the absence of provisions for monitoring the human rights records of member-states and for enforcing standards.
- 6 However, it must be remembered that ASEAN is an association of sovereign states, with no supranational body wielding authority over all the member states and no regional legislature or

court. Nevertheless, the establishment of an ASEAN human rights body, together with the adoption in the new ASEAN Charter of norms pertaining to the internal behavior of states – democracy, human rights, good governance, the rule of law and social justice – are clearly steps forward.

7 Second, ASEAN demonstrated once again that it is vital to the interests of powers located in the Asia-Pacific region or with interests in the region.

8 The United States finally signed on to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in South-east Asia. If it had not done so, the United States and Canada would have remained the only participants in the ASEAN Regional Forum not to accede to the treaty. The United States would have continued to raise suspicions that it has not ruled out the use of force here or interfering in the internal affairs of other states, all violations of provisions in the treaty. The United States, which has already appointed the first ambassador to ASEAN, then announced that it would open a mission to ASEAN in Jakarta, according to the ASEAN Secretariat.

9 ASEAN ministers indicated their readiness to amend a protocol to the treaty so as to enable the European Union, to accede it though it is not a sovereign state. The EU had declared its desire to do so.

10 China pledged \$10 billion for infrastructure in ASEAN, mainly the completion of transportation links, and \$15 billion in commercial credits to ASEAN member countries.

11 The ASEAN-India trade-in-goods agreement seems ready for signing, while the comprehensive economic agreement among the ASEAN countries, Australia and New Zealand, covering trade and investments liberalization and facilitation, has been signed. An ASEAN convened three important foreign ministers' consultations in Phuket: the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) on political and security issues, the ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan and South Korea) process, and the East Asia Summit (EAS), consisting of the 10 ASEAN countries plus Australia, China, India, Japan, Korea and New Zealand.

- 12 The ARF participants—the 10 ASEAN countries and 17 others, including China, the European Union, India, Japan, North and South Korea, Russia and the United States—discussed vital security issues pertaining to the Asia-Pacific region, including the situation on the Korean Peninsula, and future cooperative activities.
- 13 The ASEAN-Plus-Three foreign ministers reviewed the work of the process in recent months. The 13 countries had pooled their financial resources to provide \$120 billion to assist countries with balance-of-payments difficulties. They also adopted collective measures to combat the new H1N1 virus. They set up an emergency rice reserve and conducted a forum on nuclear-energy safety. The EAS foreign ministers discussed proposals for a workshop on trade finance and a possible common position on climate change.
- 14 All in all, it was a week of achievement, more than most such events in the past.

Rodolfo Severino, former ASEAN Secretary-General, is head of the ASEAN Studies Centre at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. The opinions expressed here are his own.