

Global Union Federations, Asia Pacific, Statement ASEAN action on Myanmar welcome, but missing critical elements

Unions across ASEAN and the Asia and Pacific region have recognised the Five Point Consensus statement, released by ASEAN leaders after their joint summit in Jakarta on the 24th April on Myanmar, as a welcome, albeit partial, step forward.

Union leaders recognise that while important points were omitted from the statement, a public position from ASEAN leaders is an important development in the struggle of the people of Myanmar to end the military's reign of terror. In this struggle workers and their unions play a vital role. We welcome the leadership of President Jokowi of Indonesia to ensure the statement proceeded.

ASEAN's principles of consensus and non-interference mean that it is extremely rare for the 10 member body to release statements relating to political situations in the region. In that context the statement reflects the lowest common denominator acceptable to all ASEAN nations and consequently omits key concerns. The presence of the military junta and exclusion of the National Unity Government of Myanmar at the meeting, inevitably lead to a diluted outcome.

Point one of the consensus says "there shall be an immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar and all parties shall exercise utmost restraint".

Yet the statement fails to recognise that lethal violence was instigated and perpetrated by the military who have killed more than 750 citizens. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) recorded three deaths on the 25th of April, the day after the release of the ASEAN statement.

Point two says that "there shall be constructive dialogue among all parties... to seek a peaceful solution" and point three that a special envoy of the ASEAN chair, assisted by the ASEAN Secretary General shall mediate a dialogue.

Yet a dialogue process will be meaningless if political leaders remain imprisoned and if trade unionists, activists and even health workers who assist the injured, remain at risk of arrest, torture and imprisonment. Trade unionists have been arrested, tortured and harassed in door to door searches, while others are hiding in fear. The military has imposed widespread restrictions on workers' rights and curtailed freedoms of speech and assembly, blocked social media and declared 16 labour-related organisations illegal.

Global unions are actively monitoring the situation of arrested union leaders including Mi Mi Aung, an active member of the building and wood union (BWFM), Ma Myo Ae from Solidarity Trade Union Myanmar (STUM), lecturers from four different universities, school teachers, health workers, public servants, food industry union leaders, journalists and others who took part in strike actions against military rule.

Point four commits to humanitarian assistance. Point five commits to sending an ASEAN delegation and envoy to "meet with all parties".

A glaring omission from the statement is the demand to release all political prisoners from prison, to cease making arrests and to nullify convictions. The junta has arrested at least 3431 citizens who joined the civil disobedience movement. Of them they have sentenced 79, including 20 death sentences.

Further, the statement fails to recognise that the rights to freedom of assembly and association must be restored. Finally, ASEAN leaders must call for the restoration of a civilian government and an end to military power and influence in Myanmar.

