

PRESS RELEASE

Press Releases in preparation of AEPF

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ASEM faces democratic challenge as People's Forum opens

Privileged access for business lobbyists undermines ASEM's credibility.

This has been stated in a recent analysis published by the Corporate Europe Observatory.

By contrast, civil society concerns have consistently been sidelined at the official ASEM summit.

More than 400 civil society representatives have gathered in Helsinki for the Asia Europe People's Forum, (AEPF), held in advance of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) between 38 Asian and European leaders and the European Commission. The AEPF will discuss issues of peace, economic security and human rights. It is calling on ASEM to become more transparent and people-centered.

"The challenge ahead of us is to reshape globalisation, which gathers its benefits and downside unequally", says Sirpa Pietikäinen, Chair of the AEPF Finnish Organizing Committee. "The AEPF can play an important role by deepening civil society cooperation between Asia and Europe. ASEM should listen to these voices if it wants to achieve a just and inclusive globalization."

A recent analysis published by the Corporate Europe Observatory states that "privileged access for business lobbyists undermines ASEM's credibility". By contrast, civil society concerns have consistently been sidelined at the official ASEM summit.

"Our realities and visions for a more just and equal economic and social development have been largely excluded from ASEM since 1996. This has contributed to the lack of social dimension in ASEM's practice, despite growing social and economic inequalities in much of Asia and Europe", says Andy Rutherford of One World Action UK and the AEPF International Organizing Committee.

The AEPF will focus on peace and security on its opening day, with environmental security among the key themes. "China has given up its traditional goal of energy self-sufficiency, putting it on a potential collision course with neighbouring countries as they compete for scarce energy supplies", says Wen Bo, China Director of Pacific Environment. The issue of energy security will be discussed at ASEM and is also expected to be high on the agenda of the China-EU summit, which takes place on 9 September in Helsinki.

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Asia Europe People's Forum reminds ASEM about labour rights

PRESS RELEASE: The AEPF demands the issue of ratifications of the ILO's fundamental conventions to be taken onto the agenda of ASEM.

The NGO's state, that the negative sides of economic globalization need to be taken into consideration in the summit.

Several of the ASEM countries have not ratified the fundamental ILO conventions, concerning freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, the elimination of forced labour, the elimination of child labour and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment.

In addition to this, companies and suppliers of multinational corporations in many poor ASEM countries do not carry their corporate social responsibilities: the salaries of the workers are not sufficient for living and working days are often too long.

- The multinational corporations need more internationally binding conventions, as well as sufficient mechanisms to follow the implementation of those conventions, says Päivi Pöyhönen from FinnWatch network.

The most problematic countries within ASEM are China and Burma.

- ASEM should put pressure on Burma to respect human rights, including workers' right of association as well as the abolition of compulsory labour, with all political and economical means available, says Marjaana Valkonen, the Director of the International Affairs department of the Central Organization of Finnish Trade Unions, SAK.

The Asia Europe Peoples' Forum demands from ASEM a more determined attitude towards China: The host country of the next ASEM should ratify the ILO conventions concerning fundamental principles and rights at work.

The agenda of ASEM is dominated by economic issues, and it should take into consideration the negative effects of economic globalization, too, such as the growing amount of cheap labour.

- The rapid economic growth of Asia as in some cases led to neglecting the basic rights of workers, such as problems in workplace security, says Hannu Ohvo, the Director of the Trade Union Solidarity Center of Finland.

The Asia Europe Peoples' Forum also brings attention to the ASEM Labour and Employment Ministers Conference in Berlin in early September. This conference should make sure, that the issues on its agenda - including ILO conventions - will play a remarkable role also in ASEM a few

days later.

The Asia Europe Peoples' Forum is an international NGO forum organized right before ASEM. It brings some 400 active citizens from around 30 countries to Helsinki, Finland. The aim of the AEPF is to have an influence on ASEM, making it more transparent and opening its access to the civil society. AEPF also deals with issues neglected by ASEM, such as social justice, human rights and democracy.

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AEPF criticizes Burmas' participation in ASEM

The lack of open discussion about the participation of Burmas' military junta in ASEM6 reflects ASEM's unsatisfactory attitude towards the civil society.

The EU sanctions against Burma have been in force for nearly ten years. Among other things, the sanctions include a visa ban on members of the military regime, the members of the government and senior military and security officers. For instance, in 2005, the Netherlands denied Burma representatives visas to ASEM economy minister's meeting.

The Burma military junta was admitted to take part in the previous ASEM in 2004 under the condition that opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi would be released from house arrest and her party, NLD, guaranteed access to political process. None of this happened, and EU sanctions were tightened further.

Now Finland, however, is ready to invite the representatives of the military government to Helsinki.

- If the representatives of Burma military junta are invited, we must call for ASEM to discuss the situation and push for democratic changes, Pietje Vervest of Transnational Institute, the Netherlands, states. Vervest is a member of the international organizing committee of AEPF.

The aim of the AEPF is to affect the ASEM process, making it more transparent and opening civil society's access to ASEM. AEPF deals with topics, which are undermined by ASEM, such as human rights, social justice and democracy.

Unlike ASEM, participation in the AEPF is open to all European and Asian NGO's. In addition to ASEM country representatives, there will be organizations outside of ASEM, such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

AEPF-6 theme

The AEPF 6 theme is People's vision - Building solidarity across Asia and Europe

The theme of the Helsinki's AEPF6 is People's Vision - Building solidarity across Asia and Europe.

The theme of the AEPF6 sets the founding for the AEPF 6.

AEPF 6 will be the biggest international development related NGO forum that has ever been organised in Finland, in which hundreds of participants from both Asia and EU will take part.

The Conference Plenaries and workshops are organised around three main focus areas: 'Peace and Security', 'Economic Security and Social Rights' and 'Democratisation and Human Rights'.

As the AEPF 6 takes place in Helsinki, Finland the meeting can ideally show an example of the Scandinavian traditions on dialogue between civil society and government; this can also lead to fruitful outcomes of the AEPF 6.