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EU: Asean unable to change Yangon

Ashraf Abdullah in Amsterdam

THE European Union believes that Asean's policy of constructive engagement has been unsuccessful in bringing about positive changes in Myanmar, the under-developed but resource-rich nation.

"Several years of constructive engagement have, in fact, made things worse in Myanmar. More members of the National Liberal Democratic Party are disappearing, more people are getting killed and the narcotics trade is increasing."

"If Myanmar was a member of the European Union, it would have been expelled," head of the EU's Southeast Asia unit Gwyn Morgan said yesterday.

He said although Myanmar had only been a full member of Asean since July, the association started its constructive engagement several years ago.

Asean accepted Myanmar as a full member in July amid strong protests from its western trading partners who felt that including it in the regional grouping was tantamount to approval of Yangon's human rights abuses and failure to hold talks with the NLDP which is led by Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

Morgan said if Asean wanted to include Myanmar in the Asia-Europe meeting in London in April next year, the regional grouping would have to submit its formal proposal to the European Commission.

"But if it does, the commission will not even bother forwarding the proposal to the Council of Ministers for further deliberation," he told a seminar for Asian journalists organised by the European Journalism Centre.

Morgan said countries which became members of Asean or the EU did not automatically obtain membership of Asem.

"It has been agreed that Asem members should comprise the 15 countries of EU, the seven countries of Asean, as well as China, Japan and South Korea. If Asean or the EU wants to expand Asem to include new members, then all 25 countries must agree unanimously," he said, adding that Asean had tacitly accepted that a consensus system should be observed when Asem decided on issues concerning new memberships.

He said even if the EU accepted the applications of several Eastern European nations for membership of the union, they would be unable to automatically take part in Asem.

Morgan said there was a likelihood that Asean would not seek immediate expansion of Asem.

"Asean is in a difficult position because while it knows that a proposal to include Myanmar will be shot down, it also cannot ask for Laos to be included because it will be unfair to Myanmar," he said.

Myanmar and Laos were only accepted as members of Asean two years after the inaugural Asem in Bangkok.

Morgan said the EU had decided that none of its member States issue visas to officials of Myanmar's ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council.

British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook had said earlier the decision by the EU to deny visas to members of the SLORC rendered Myanmar's participation in Asem next year impossible.

Responding to Cook's statement, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Asean might boycott Asem if Myanmar was refused participation.

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