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Of Britain's stance on Myanmar and that of European Union

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BRITISH Foreign Secretary Robin Cook who visited Asean countries early this month surprised them when he accused the Myanmar Government of human rights abuses and of profiting from the drugs trade and said the country would not be admitted to a summit of Asem II. According to Cook, Myanmar is the largest single producer of opium in the world.

Despite continuing heavy Western criticism of Yangon's record on human rights and its flourishing drugs trade, Asean admitted Myanmar on July 23.

Cook ruled out Myanmar's participation in the meeting because of European Union sanctions against the ruling military junta. The sanction to deny visas to Myanmar officials will make their participation at the Asem summit in London in April 1998 "impossible".

In singling out Myanmar and its ruling junta for its "apparent willingness to abet and profit from the drugs trade", Cook warned that his Government would re-focus the resources of its intelligence and law enforcement agencies and make the issue a top priority for its secret service agents.

He argued that it was Britain's right to bar Myanmar from the summit because Asem was not a bloc-to-bloc meeting but a voluntary dialogue between nations.

The act of denying visas to Myanmar officials was quoted by Cook as the EU's honest difference of approach as to how to resolve the issue and persuade Yangon's State Law and Order Restoration Council to change.

In Europe, the member countries have taken the view of not having dialogue with a government that is both as repressive as SLORC and as irresponsible in its connivance with the drug barons. Until the military junta is prepared to recognise the democratic rights of the people, and most certainly until it is prepared to co-operate with the rest of the world in trying to take action against the menace of heroin, it will be extremely difficult for the Governments of the developed world to recognise the Myanmar Government as an acceptable interlocutor and partner.

Myanmar retaliated to Cook's condemnation by saying it was "the century's greatest hypocritical statement" and slamming Britain as "the world's number one culprit", by saying that the problem was a "direct result of Britain's colonial strategy 150 years ago".

As a senior Yangon official stated, Britain should actually be taking the lead in assisting the victim countries clean up the mess she originally created instead of pointing fingers at Myanmar to cover up her own faults and seeking to victimise the country as it did in colonial times.

Myanmar was a British colony from the mid-19th century until independence in 1948. The opium trade provided major revenues for Britain from many of its territories in Asia.

Myanmar, which accounts for two-thirds of the world's opium production, argues that it has stepped up efforts to limit poppy cultivation by hill-tribe people and trafficking in drugs.

As a matter of fact, Cook's statement has upset some Asean countries. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad reacted strongly to it by warning that Asean would boycott the summit if the EU barred Myanmar from attending. For Dr Mahathir, discrimination against Myanmar means discrimination against Asean.

Cook's statement has also surprised Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas. Alatas said the issue of Myanmar's participation had not been decided by the participants of Asem.

Although Myanmar was admitted to Asean in July, this does not imply the country's automatic entry into Asem. A decision on membership is based on individual participation, not on membership of a regional organisation and it is not a meeting of Asean on the one side and the EU on the other.

However, since Myanmar is part of Asean, and all Asean countries are members of Asem I, it seems ridiculous for any non-Asean member of Asem I to refuse Myanmar membership of Asem II. Alatas does not understand why Cook touched on this matter since there has been no discussion at all on the issue.

In fact, other countries such as Australia, New Zealand, India and Pakistan, have also applied for membership. Alatas described Britain's accusations on drug trafficking as "merely its own bilateral problems with Myanmar".

The EU must be aware that the highlighting of abuse of human rights and democracy in Myanmar would have the potential of wrecking the blooming relations between EU and Asean.

While Europe is more willing to acknowledge that a Western political blueprint could not be imposed on Asia, many Europeans congratulate themselves for being more sensitive to Asian sensibilities. Europe has a long tradition of separating moral issues from state-to-state relations.

This explains the EU's unwillingness to take a clear position on political and human rights questions and its Governments giving the impression of not being terribly concerned about the issue. This does not mean that Europe does not believe in human rights and democracy. In some respects, it is Europe that has a better record of political standard and tolerance than the US.

Why then has the EU's stance on human rights changed? Cook's statement came too soon. It contradicted the compromising stance of the EU and might jeopardise EU-Asean relations.

Some consider EU's new stance on human rights being purposely taken in order to test its power strength in the region as the US has done from time to time. For Britain, some consider its stance totally hypocritical and taken in order to cover up the pain of losing pride in being the British empire for so long until the handover of Hong Kong to China in July.

A number of queries now surface. Is Britain's statement representative of the EU as a whole?

Has the EU changed its stance on its tolerance of Asean over human rights issues?

Is it true that, like the US, the EU will, from time to time, put its influence and power to test on Asean countries over the human rights issue?

It appears a bit too early to answer these questions now. The next few months before Asem II could reveal the answers to these queries.

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