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`Asean too soft on Myanmar'

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Asean Governments have been "too soft for too long" with Myanmar, according to the Asean Inter-Parliamentary Caucus on Myanmar today.

Interim president Datuk Zaid Ibrahim said continuing the soft approach towards Myanmar would not solve the situation there.

"Asean MPs feel that their Governments have definitely been too soft, too long with Myanmar.

"The military Government has not kept its promises to us - why are we protecting them?"

Zaid said Myanmar's internal problems were becoming a burden to Asean, and regional leaders should be firm with Myanmar.

"They must speak with one voice and tell the military that what they are doing is unacceptable and that if they persist, Myanmar may be suspended from Asean," he said after closing a two-day gathering of Asean parliamentarians on Myanmar.

In a statement issued today, those present pushed for the urgent unconditional release of democratically-elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the restoration of her civil and democratic rights.

"We also note with grave concern Myanmar's scheduled assumption of the Asean chairmanship in 2006, which in the absence of substantial and meaningful democratic reforms, would be severely detrimental to Asean," said the statement, which will be forwarded to regional leaders in time for the Asean Summit scheduled for tomorrow and Tuesday.

Zaid stressed that if positive steps were not taken by the military-run state, Asean should review or suspend Myanmar's membership and chairmanship in 2006.

"Admitting them into Asean was not a mistake. When the former Prime Minister (Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad) pushed for its membership in 1997, the Myanmar Government promised all sorts of things, and we believed they would toe the line. Unfortunately after all these years, they've done nothing."

"The first step would be to release Suu Kyi. She represents the voice of the people, their aspirations. Her detention is unacceptable."

Myanmar has been ruled by the military since 1962. General elections were held in 1990, but the current Government refused to hand over power although Suu Kyi's party won a landslide victory. She has been detained since May 2003.

The statement also called on United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan to urgently convene a Security Council meeting to formulate a roadmap towards democratic and constitutional reform in Myanmar.

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