

ASEAN FACES MYANMAR TEST

Escalating violence in junta-ruled country testing bloc's strength, says Indonesian minister

LABUAN BAJO (Indonesia)

SOUTHEAST Asian nations are at a "crossroads", a senior Indonesian minister warned yesterday, as escalating violence in junta-controlled Myanmar loomed over a regional summit.

Myanmar has been ravaged by deadly violence since a military coup deposed Aung San Suu Kyi's government more than two years ago and unleashed a bloody crackdown on dissent.

Asean, long-decried by critics as a toothless talking shop, has led diplomatic attempts to resolve the crisis. But those efforts have been fruitless, as the junta ignores international criticism and refuses to engage with its opponents, which include ousted lawmakers, anti-coup "People's Defence Forces" and armed ethnic minority groups.

An airstrike on a village in a rebel stronghold last month that reportedly killed about 170 people sparked global condemnation and worsened the junta's isolation.

It also fuelled calls for Asean to take tougher action to end the violence or risk being sidelined.



Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim at a meeting with Indonesian President Joko Widodo during the 42nd Asean Summit in Labuan Bajo, Indonesia, yesterday. BERNAMA PIC

"Asean is at a crossroads," Mahfud MD, Indonesia's coordinating minister for politics, legal and security, warned yesterday on the first day of the summit.

"Crisis after crisis is testing our strength as a community. And failure to address them would risk jeopardising our relevance," he said according to a copy of his remarks, listing Myanmar among the emergencies facing the bloc.

Human Rights Watch said yesterday that last month's airstrike in the central Sagaing region was a "likely war crime", and urged Asean to "signal its support for

stronger measures to cut off the military's cash flow and press the junta for reform".

Pressure on the regional bloc increased on Sunday after a convoy of vehicles carrying diplomats and officials coordinating Asean humanitarian relief in Myanmar came under fire.

Few details have been released about the shooting in eastern Myanmar's Shan State, but a foreign diplomat in Yangon said diplomats from the embassies of Indonesia and Singapore were in the group.

Singapore confirmed two staff

members from its embassy in Yangon were in the convoy but were unharmed.

The shooting happened days before the Asean summit on the Indonesian island of Flores, where foreign ministers and national leaders will continue efforts to kick-start a five-point plan agreed upon with Myanmar two years ago after mediation attempts to end the violence failed.

The foreign ministers held talks yesterday while their countries' leaders were scheduled to meet today and tomorrow.

Reuters