Myanmar (Burma) Day
Brussels, 29 October 2008

The Dutch Interchurch Organisation for Development Cooperation (ICCO), the European Commission, Burma Centrum Nederland and the Euro-Burma Office jointly organised "Burma/Myanmar Day 2008" in Brussels on 29 October 2008. The first panel discussion was focused on the 'Aftermath of Cyclone Nargis', while the second discussion concentrated on 'Political Options for the Future'.

The high-level conference brought together over one hundred and fifty policy-makers, policy analysts, Burmese actors and civil society, European civil society, UN officials and government representatives for an in-depth discussion on Myanmar.

PANEL ONE - Aftermath of Cyclone Nargis

The devastating effect of Cyclone Nargis in the Irrawaddy Delta region was acknowledged by all speakers. The impact is comparable to the Indian Ocean Tsunami and is the country's worst natural disaster. The Burmese military regime's lack of ability to respond adequately to the crisis, plus its stalling of international aid efforts in the first weeks after the crisis were criticized.

However, the work of the Tri-partite Core Group (TCG - ASEAN, UN and the military regime) was seen as somewhat successful. This tri-partite core group was not only able to successfully broker access for international humanitarian organizations to cyclone affected areas, but also conducted a credible 'Post Nargis Joint Assessment' (PONJA). Dialogue is continuing with the Myanmar government on the tri-partite level. This step towards deepened dialogue with military regime and international and regional actors on humanitarian issues was seen as a positive development. There was no consensus on whether the mandate of the tri-partite group should be expanded beyond the remit of humanitarian affairs.

So far, humanitarian organizations working in the cyclone affected region have been able to successfully deliver aid without jeopardizing their humanitarian role. Cyclone Nargis has opened up access for humanitarian workers to cyclone affected areas in an unprecedented way. It is hoped this can be replicated across the entire country – particularly those areas suffering from humanitarian crisis such as the Chin State or Northern Rakhaing State

The significant role played by Burmese people themselves working as volunteers in responding to the crisis was both recognised and praised. Without such a large scale 'people to people' response (both those living inside the country and border based groups), the disaster would have had a much greater impact. International and national humanitarian organizations are already developing disaster preparedness measures which can be used in the future.

The capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of their communities is key and urgently needs to be developed. Engaging and building capacity of traditional community leaders as well as emerging civil society is critical. Some participants argued that there is currently a trust building exercise occurring between local groups, the authorities and the military. These channels for engagement should not only be maintained, but also encouraged to grow and develop.

PANEL TWO – Political Options for the Future

The current political problem in Myanmar (Burma) was defined not only as a question of ideology but also ethnic issues rooted in constitutional crises.

A sustainable political transition needs resolution through negotiations. In 1994 the UN Security Council called for Tri-partite dialogue towards a transition in Myanmar (Burma) - between the Burmese military regime, the 1990 election winners (NLD etc) and the ethnic nationalities.

The possibility of multi-party talks on Myanmar (Burma) was discussed, which would follow a similar format to the North Korea Six Party Talks, only with the inclusion of the UN. The principles of national sovereignty, territorial integrity of the Union and national control of the process of change would need to be maintained. A multi party talk could have a number of possible concrete benefits – increased humanitarian aid and cross border assistance, technical assistance from the World Bank and stronger strategies to combat social issues, such as health and education.

It was generally agreed that elections in 2010 are a foregone conclusion. The current constitution is unlikely to be reviewed. The government will proceed with its plans. With this in mind, it was also generally agreed that the best course of action would be to use the opportunity to look at new dynamics created by the 2010 transition, and to use these new developments, rather than ignore them. Some participants believed that within military's new proposals are the seeds of its own decline in that the generals are introducing a new complicated system that they may not be able to control.

The 2010 elections will in fact be three concurrent elections for the upper chamber, the lower chamber and the state legislatures. In the worst case scenario, these assemblies will be used to merely rubber stamp policies. In the best case scenario, these assemblies will be engaged assemblies which check and counter-balance the military's power. Few people within the Burmese military regime currently know where their future lies – if they will be transformed into civilians or remain in the military ranks. This situation affords those working for change in Myanmar (Burma) some space to use this opportunity to its greatest potential. The elections may also be a small, but a necessary opportunity to spread democratic values and information throughout the country.

In addition, the importance of the impact of economics on politics inside the country should not be overlooked. The Myanmar 2010 elections will change the political economy of the country and the country is about to embark on a time of great political insecurity. The elections could potentially cause greater economic problems for the country. The situation will also be aggravated by the current international financial crisis. Many people leave the country to work as illegal migrants, but if the external jobs cease to exist, the country will not be able to cope with Burmese workers if they are repatriated. The worsened political and economic situation could create a wider debate within Myanmar (Burma) itself.