

# Europe Trips Itself At ASEAN-EU Summit

by Michael O. Billington

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations-European Union (ASEAN-EU) Summit, on Dec. 9 and 10 in Vientiane, Laos, could have been the opportunity for the EU to become part of the historic transformation taking place in Asia. The opportunity was lost, by the European nations.

Two weeks earlier, at the Nov. 24-25 meeting of the ten ASEAN nations plus China, Japan, and South Korea (ASEAN-Plus-3) in Singapore, the East and Southeast Asian nations took the first steps toward the creation of a new, independent, development-oriented monetary system for Asia. Their intention is to create a structure capable of serving as a new world monetary system when the current International Monetary Fund (IMF)-based system collapses. Instead of recognizing the potential for escaping from the economic disaster now sweeping the Western economies, by joining forces to undertake the great projects envisioned by the Asian nations—such as the Mekong River Project, the Chinese Three Gorges Dam and water projects, and the Eurasian Land-Bridge connecting Asia and Europe—the EU chose instead to make fools of themselves. They attempted to provoke division among the Asian nations, and insulted them by sending low-level delegations and dictating the agenda.

The meeting was the first ASEAN-EU Summit in three years, in what was intended originally to be an annual event. The EU objected when Myanmar was invited to become a member of ASEAN in 1997, and has stuck to the politically correct posture of boycotting any talks, in protest of alleged human rights abuses against the “democratic” opposition in Myanmar led by Aung San Suu Kyi. The ASEAN nations refused to allow Europe to dictate their handling of internal affairs, and simply refused to concede to meeting without Myanmar in attendance, as a full-fledged member of ASEAN. Apparently recognizing that their boycott was achieving nothing, while hampering their relations with Asia, the EU finally relented, and agreed to attend a foreign ministers’ conference in Laos—with Myanmar in attendance.

## Euro Snub

However, the EU members immediately began backtracking, with all but four of their members planning to send lower-level delegations, rather than their foreign ministers. This almost led several of the ASEAN nations to downgrade their own delegations in response, but in the end, all the ASEAN foreign ministers attended.

Then, unexpectedly, the EU conference, being held in Nice during the days preceding the summit in Laos, was held over due to acrimonious disagreements among the EU members. As a result, *no* European foreign ministers showed up in Laos, clearly indicating Europe’s priorities. Singapore Foreign Minister S. Jayakumar said, “There is considerable unhappiness and disappointment on the part of my Asian colleagues, because all the ASEAN ministers are there in full force, but on the European side there are only two or three full ministers,” and no foreign ministers at all. In addition, the “concession” of the EU to meet with the Myanmar delegation in attendance created little good will, because the EU delegates all carried on at length about the supposed horrors of Myanmar’s human rights record. ASEAN Secretary General Rodolfo Severino said, “They wasted a lot of time that could have been spent on other issues, basically addressing their own domestic audiences. The lecturing tone annoyed a number of delegations.”

In fact, the Myanmar delegation had already answered the criticism through a surprise announcement that it had lifted restrictions on several of the opposition leaders, and will soon lift restrictions on Suu Kyi and the president and vice-president of her National League for Democracy, Aung Shwe and Tin Oo, respectively. To confirm their intentions, they also will allow complete access to an EU “troika” delegation to Myanmar in January 2001.

Myanmar was not the only point of attack by the Europeans, who seemed incapable of understanding that their pompous attitude is incongruous with their increasing economic and political instability. The Dutch, for instance, the former colonial masters of Indonesia, insisted on including references to the Indonesian internal conflicts in Irian Jaya and Aceh in the final documents. Without referencing the fact that these ethnic, religious, and racial disturbances are being supported by certain Western intelligence services, Dutch Minister of State Van Mierlo hailed this blatant affront to ASEAN’s policy of non-intervention in one another’s internal affairs: “In the long run this is the most important part. It’s a departure from the non-interference principle.”

In fact, several ASEAN nations are experiencing severe destabilizations, at a time that the ASEAN-Plus-3 developments promise the greatest period of peace and development in the history of Asia. In every case, the primary cause of the instability derives from the 1997-98 economic destruction of the Asian economies by global speculators and the IMF. Not only have the economies never recovered from this assault, but the current world breakdown is thrusting Asia into a second round of financial and economic crisis. The moves toward the creation of a new monetary system, by the ASEAN-Plus-3, is not only a necessary defense for Asia against the collapse of globalization, but it presents the Western nations with the best hope for their own survival—if they have the sense to recognize it. If the ASEAN-EU Summit is any indication of that sensibility, the Europeans are digging their own grave.