



The Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights Series

Background Paper

On the occasion of the first meeting of ASEM¹ Foreign Ministers in Singapore in February 1997, Sweden and France had suggested that informal seminars on human rights be held within the ASEM framework. The aim of this initiative was to promote mutual understanding and co-operation between Europe and Asia in the area of political dialogue, particularly on human rights issues.

Six seminars were held successively in Lund (Sweden) in December 1997, in Beijing (China) in June 1999, in Paris (France) in June 2000, in Bali (Indonesia) in July 2001, in Lund (Sweden) in May 2003, and in Suzhou (China) in September 2004.

The formula chosen is as follows: the participation of two representatives from universities and NGOs invited by the organisers and one official representative for each of the 13 Asian ASEM countries, and in order to have a balance representation between Asia and Europe, 1 representative from the civil society and 1 official from each of the 25 European ASEM countries; an agenda structured around the 2 main topics related to the subject of the seminar, with discussions held in two working groups; closed room debates to allow free and direct exchanges of view; a set of recommendations elaborated collectively to be sent to the relevant institutions in ASEM countries as informal contribution to the official Asia-Europe dialogue.

Supervision of the seminar is entrusted to a **Steering Committee** made up of the following partners: France, Sweden (the Raoul Wallenberg Institute), China, Indonesia, the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), and the European Commission. This Committee sets the seminar's guidelines and how it should be organised. The technical preparation is delegated to three

¹ Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is a biennial Summit Meeting of thirty-nine partners consisting of thirteen Asian nations - Ten of the ASEAN countries plus China, Japan and South Korea - , the twenty-five member states of the European Union, and the European Commission. It has broad scope beyond the economic dimensions to embrace the political, social, environmental and cultural areas. ASEM is an informal, open and evolutionary dialogue process without a formal agenda or a permanent secretariat (www.aseminfoboard.org). The only permanent institution within the ASEM process is the Asia-Europe Foundation formed in 1997 and based in Singapore (www.asef.org)

coordinators (Mr. Frederic Tiberghien, State Counsellor, France, Prof Göran Melander, President of the Council of Directors, Raoul Wallenberg Institute, Sweden and M. Bertrand Fort, Director for Intellectual Exchange, ASEF, Singapore), in liaison with the host country's partners. The funding of meetings is divided into three equal parts among France, the Raoul Wallenberg Institute and the Intellectual Exchange Department of the Asia-Europe Foundation (which holds the secretariat of the Series).

The experience of the first series of six seminars has shown the usefulness of the chosen formula: a climate of confidence and mutual understanding, in accordance with the ASEM spirit, has grown stronger during this seven year process; the topics selected by the Steering Committee, which focus on issues of common interest to the two regions, have made high quality discussions possible; the high level of participation of the ASEM partners shows the strong interest of the partners for these meetings.

Topics debated in the six Asia-Europe seminars already implemented were:

- Lund (December 1997): Access to justice; regional and national particularities in the administration of justice; monitoring the administration of justice.
- Beijing (June 1999): Differences in Asian and European values; right to education; rights of minorities.
- Paris (June 2000): Freedom of expression and right to information; humanitarian intervention and the sovereignty of States; is there a right to a healthy environment?
- Bali (July 2001): Freedom of conscience and religion; democratisation, conflict resolution and human rights; rights and obligations in the promotion of social welfare.
- Lund (May 2003): Economic Relations: Human Rights and Multinational Companies, Human Rights and Foreign Direct Investments.
- Suzhou (September 2004): International Migrations: Protection of Migrants, Migration control and management.

After each conference, the outcomes of the discussions are gathered in a publication that may be used by governments and civil society as a reference on the state of play of the debate on Human Rights in ASEM countries.

7th Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights

The 7th Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights will be held in **Budapest, Hungary**, one of the new ASEM countries, on **23-24 February 2006**.

The Steering Committee met in Paris on 28 of February 2005 and agreed on the topic "**Human Rights and Ethnic, Linguistic and Religious Minorities**" for this upcoming Seminar. This topic will bring together two working groups composed of officials and members of the Civil Society to discuss on the civil and political rights of minorities and their economic, social and cultural rights.