Asean’s sad policy on Burma

While it is clear to everyone that the Burmese junta does not care about Asean nor the international community, the point was reinforced once again this past week. When Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar visited there recently, he cut short his three-day trip by one day and came home empty-handed. Of course he will file a report for the Asean ministers but so far he has put a brave face on the debacle because Malaysia is the current chair of Asean. Lie does not want to antagonise Burma any further.

It is interesting that Asean, since the admission of Burma in 1997, continues to defend Rangoon, even though this pariah state has not made any positive contribution to Asean's well-being or reputation. And yet, Asean has continued to offer its goodwill to the military junta.

Indeed, the Burmese junta leaders did not offer any face-saving concessions to the Asean envoy at all. Albar was unable to meet the opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, although a visit could have eased political tensions between the junta and the opposition if the envoy had been allowed to mediate and promote some national reconciliation dialogue. Instead, it was shown that Asean has already exerted its fair share of pressure on Burma.

But that is simply not the case. Although Asean went the extra mile at the last Asean summit by expressing its concerns, the pressure was still insufficient because Burma, as a member of Asean, did not respond with anything resembling goodwill. The saddest thing about Burma’s membership is that Rangoon expects the group to treat it like a family member, but it seems that it has never occurred to the junta leaders that they should do likewise to Asean. There is no mutual trust or rapport.
Another interesting point is Albar’s visit followed a trip by Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to Rangoon. Yudhoyono has appointed a special envoy to Burma, signalling Jakarta’s growing interest in engaging the junta-led state. With its expansive political clout, Indonesia may be able to talk to Burma. After all, at one time, the Suharto regime was the darling of the military junta. But efforts undertaken by Indonesia should be reinforced by other members, particularly Malaysia.

The time has come for Asean to take a tougher stance on Burma. Asean leaders should warn Burma that its behaviour will no longer be tolerated. Furthermore, the eminent people drafting the Asean charter should conduct their work with Burma’s growing intransigence in mind. This is important because whatever transpires in Burma in the future will impact on the drafting process and the charter’s contents.

And how could Asean members settle on a charter with integrity and references to basic respect for human rights and democratic values when one of its members is actively suppressing its own people? The drafters have to be realistic in establishing norms and values that Asean members can follow in the real world.

It is also an open secret that Asean leaders, as well as other members of the diplomatic community, are still upset about the lack of information regarding Burma’s new capital Pyinmana. The junta leaders failed to inform other countries about the relocation, another example of their willingness to abrogate international diplomatic practices.

Many embassies, including Thailand’s, have already been established in Rangoon and the task of relocating to the new capital is difficult, given constraints in budget allocations. In the future, communications between the host and foreign missions will be all the more difficult.

Without concerted Asean and international collaboration, which should include India and China, Burma will continue on its destructive path. Both the Asian giants must display diplomatic finesse and responsibility to ensure that their competition for influence in this beleaguered country does not worsen the political nightmare in Burma.