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Headline: Consensus works best for Asean, say diplomats

# Consensus works best for Asean, say diplomats

It is needed if 10 states with wide differences are to work together effectively, says Vivian

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Consensus and quiet but active diplomacy remain Asean's best shot at success, said Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and other diplomats at a conference yesterday.

They made the case for this working style for a grouping of 10 sovereign states with wide differences, as they addressed dissatisfaction with how Asean is handling the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar's Rakhine state. Asean is often criticised as being a toothless tiger due to its policy of non-interference and seeking consensus from all members, they noted.

Every member state has a virtual veto, but "it is a design feature. It is

not a bug", said Dr Balakrishnan. "It is necessary if you are going to try and put together 10 sovereign states with such wide differences to work together effectively," he added at the Societal Leadership Summit.

About 450 people attended the one-day conference organised by the Singapore Management University's Institute for Societal Leadership on Asean's 50 years and its progress in the next 50.

"This is a very testing time," said Dr Balakrishnan, addressing the ongoing Rakhine crisis and territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The Rakhine crisis is complex with no quick fixes, and a situation that extremists want to inflame so moderates are forced to take sides, he said.

Asean was unable to forge a common statement on the crisis, with

Malaysia dissociating itself from the statement made by the Asean chair at the United Nations General Assembly last month.

But there was universal agreement within Asean that the violence had to stop immediately.

All also agreed that humanitarian assistance should reach all communities regardless of race or religion, and that Myanmar should be supported in identifying a long-term solution to the root causes of the conflict. "We are trying to be a voice of caution, reason and moderation in the midst of a very difficult situation," Dr Balakrishnan said.

Former Asean secretary-general Ong Keng Yong, who is ambassador-at-large, said: "The impression that the outside world has of Asean is we are like an ostrich, we put our head in the ground and don't want to talk about anything."

"There is a lot of work going on, and officials are constantly trying to find diplomatic solutions while try-



Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and artist Tan Swie Hian unveiling a sculpture to mark the golden jubilee of Asean at Singapore Management University yesterday. Also present were former Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (left) and Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

ing to help the Myanmar authorities manage the humanitarian crisis."

Former Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono also recounted instances when he engaged in behind-the-scenes diplomacy with fellow Asean leaders.

"Indonesia may be the largest country with the biggest economy and population, but at the Asean table we are all equal. We cannot impose views on others," he said.

He added that he was delighted that Myanmar had turned a new

page in its democratic chapter.

"I hope the challenges that they face now - including with the Rohingya - will prove to be a test that will reaffirm their commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law," he said.

The leaders also unveiled a granite sculpture titled Asean50, to mark the golden jubilee of Asean.

Created by local artist Tan Swie Hian, it is of a stylised Asian arowana with 10 scales symbolising the 10 Asean countries.

Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong was asked at a panel session what advice he had for Dr Balakrishnan on how to steer Asean through next year.

Mr Goh replied: "Listen. Listen to the other nine leaders and align the interests with Singapore's. Don't advance Singapore's interest when it's out of line with the interests of the others. You will not succeed."

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