Myanmar to send rep to regional summit for first time in three years

AFP- Myanmar will send a representative to a regional summit this week for the first time in three years, a diplomatic source told AFP Tuesday, as the junta struggles to quell a civil war.

The conflict will be high on the agenda as leaders from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) meet in Laos from Wednesday, though more than three years of efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis have had no impact.

ASEAN barred Myanmar's junta leaders from its summits in the wake of their February 2021 coup, and the generals have refused to send "non-political representatives" instead.

But Myanmar – one of 10 ASEAN member states – has sent a senior foreign ministry official as its representative to the three-day meeting in Vientiane, a Southeast Asian diplomat involved in the meetings told AFP.

Weeks after seizing power, the junta agreed to a "five-point consensus" plan aimed at restoring peace, but ignored it and carried on a bloody crackdown on dissent and armed opposition to its rule.

"The significance is that in a sense they are accepting the five-point consensus," the diplomat told AFP.

"They may have thought that it's better to have their own voice heard rather than be on the outside."

Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing attended an emergency ASEAN summit on the crisis in April 2021, but the bloc has refused to invite him to regular gatherings since.

Aung Kyaw Moe, permanent secretary at the Myanmar foreign ministry, attended a meeting of foreign ministers on Tuesday ahead of the main summit, AFP journalists saw.

The move comes two weeks after the military issued an unprecedented invitation to its enemies for talks aimed at ending the conflict, which has killed thousands and forced millions to flee their homes.

The junta has been reeling from battlefield defeats to ethnic minority armed groups and pro-democracy "People's Defence Forces" that rose up to oppose its coup.

Last weekend, Indonesia hosted talks on the Myanmar conflict involving ASEAN, the European Union and the United Nations, as well as numerous anti-junta groups.

– Call for action –

ASEAN, long criticised as a toothless talking shop hamstrung from taking firm action by its principle of making decisions by consensus, has made little progress in its efforts to resolve the Myanmar crisis.

The topic has dominated every high-level meeting since the coup, but the bloc has been divided, with Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines leading calls for tougher action against the generals.

Myanmar's neighbour Thailand, which regularly hosts thousands of people fleeing the conflict and has held its own bilateral talks with the junta, called for a more effective response from ASEAN.

"ASEAN must play a crucial role in restoring peace to Myanmar as soon as possible," Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra said on Monday.

"We will focus on working with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who will assume the ASEAN Chairmanship next year, and

utilise diplomatic mechanisms to resolve this issue as swiftly as possible.”

Myanmar’s key ally China, which will join the ASEAN summit on Thursday, wants to see a deal to end the conflict on its doorstep, though it insists it will not interfere in “internal affairs”.

The South China Sea will be another key topic for leaders, after months of violent confrontations between Chinese and Philippine vessels in the disputed waterway.

Beijing claims almost the entire South China Sea, brushing off rival claims of several Southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines, and an international ruling that its assertion has no legal basis.

As well as ASEAN and China, the United States, Japan, South Korea, Australia and Canada are all expected to attend the talks.

AFP