

ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM

Jakarta bombings loom over meet

PHUKET (Thailand) – Asian foreign ministers gathered yesterday ahead of the continent's biggest security dialogue, under the shadow of the Jakarta bombings and North Korea's missile tests and nuclear ambitions.

Political repression in Myanmar will also be on the agenda for days of talks in the Thai resort island of Phuket culminating in the annual Association of South-east Asian Nations (Asean) Regional Forum (ARF).

The 27-member ARF, which includes Asian nations, the European Union and the United States, meets on Thursday with a debut appearance by United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, after talks between ministers from the 10-member Asean.

Friday's twin suicide bombings at hotels in the Indonesian capital which left eight people dead have unexpectedly thrown the South-east Asian terror network Jemaah Islamiyah back into the spotlight. But the main challenge to the grouping will be the international outrage over Myanmar's trial of pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi.

Myanmar, Asean's most troublesome member since joining the bloc in 1997, showed its defiance earlier this month by refusing to allow United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to meet the opposition leader during his visit.

The presence of Mrs Clinton will also add to the pressure on Myanmar's ruling generals, while China, the junta's key backer, will also be at the forum.

But historically there has been little that anyone can do to force the regime's hand, said Ms Bridget Welsh, an associate professor of political science at the Singapore Management University.



Security is beefed up all around Phuket. EPA

"Most certainly Clinton's presence will build pressure, but pressure alone has proven not to be effective. The aim should be to broaden the dialogue with the region to allow for more points of discussion," she said.

Asean spoke out strongly against the trial of Aung San Suu Kyi but has faced international criticism in the past for failing to take on Myanmar.

Ms Welsh recommended that Asean take a carrot-and-stick approach. "Asean has little traction on this issue. It needs to continue to illustrate its concerns for the issue of the trial and political pressure, while simultaneously engaging in the area of humanitarian relief," she said.

The international community has struggled to find any leverage with Myanmar's military, which has ruled the country since 1962 and kept the Ms Suu Kyi in detention for most of the last two decades.

Asean foreign ministers are further set to endorse a final version of the bloc's new human rights body, which has faced criticism for being unable to tackle violators like Myanmar.

Thousands of troops and police will throw a ring of steel around Phuket to prevent a repeat of anti-government protests which derailed an Asean summit in the coastal city of Pattaya in April. AFP