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January 11, 2016

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We are writing on behalf of Human Rights Watch to express our serious concerns about the upcoming summit with leaders of the 10-country Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) scheduled for February 15-16, 2016, at the Sunnylands estate in California.

While we recognize that your administration has an interest in forging closer ties with ASEAN members, we question whether those interests are served by hosting a high-profile summit in the United States. As you know, several ASEAN leaders preside over states that deny basic freedoms, and use intimidation, torture, and unlawful violence to maintain their hold on power. Many of these leaders and their governments routinely engage in crackdowns on civil society organizations and the media, while allowing high-level corruption and cronyism to flourish.

This summit contradicts previous US policy not to issue official invitations to the United States to leaders such as Prime Minister Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha of Thailand, who seized power in a 2014 military coup, and Prime Minister Hun Sen, who carried out a coup in 1997 and has ruled abusively in Cambodia for over 30 years.

Instead of strengthening US policy to ensure it robustly promotes human rights and democracy in ASEAN countries, this summit is likely to empower abusive and authoritarian leaders, while serving as a propaganda coup for them in their own countries. We are also concerned that the summit undermines other US government commitments on human rights, sending the message to ASEAN governments that human rights are a lower priority than other economic, political, or security issues.

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For these reasons, we regret that this summit is going forward. But it is not too late for you to ensure that the agenda gives priority to obtaining commitments to improve human rights in the ASEAN region. To ensure that human rights are a core component of the summit, we offer these key recommendations:

First, we urge you as host to place human rights and democracy squarely and officially on the summit's agenda. Relevant agenda items should include: free and fair elections in all ASEAN countries; excessive restrictions on civil society groups; freedom of expression, association, and assembly; abuses against human rights defenders and other activists, including environmental campaigners; women's rights; political use of the courts; high-level corruption; protection of refugees and asylum seekers; human trafficking; and the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people.

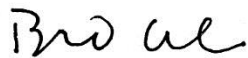
Second, consistent with your administration's *Stand With Civil Society* initiative, you should take steps to ensure civil society participation in the summit, by holding sessions in which governments hear directly from leaders of civil society, including human rights and environmental groups from the region, as you directed during the August 2014 US-Africa Summit in Washington, DC. The agenda for these sessions should include the human rights issues noted above. Civil society groups should also be invited to attend the government forums as observers.

Third, the US government should communicate to ASEAN governments that they will need to undertake, ahead of the summit, immediate steps to release significant numbers of political prisoners and drop charges against those facing politically motivated prosecutions. We urge you to communicate to these governments that if they do not take significant actions before the summit, you and other US government officials will raise specific prisoners' cases during the summit and publicly discuss relevant cases with the media. (We are sending a list of key cases under separate cover.)

Finally, we urge you to make sure ASEAN governments understand that all summit participants will be vetted under the Presidential Proclamation of August 4, 2011, which bars entry into the United States to individuals who have participated in "serious human rights and humanitarian law violations and other abuses." We also encourage you to ensure there is greater public understanding as to why and under what auspices Prime Ministers Prayuth and Hun Sen have been invited and why they meet the proclamation's requirements.

The US government's increasing diplomatic involvement in Asia can be a force for positive change if the promotion and protection of human rights and democracy are made a consistent priority. The US rebalance toward Asia will stand the test of time only if it integrates these values and principles. In the ASEAN context this means making tough decisions about raising human rights issues even when others do not want those issues raised, and ensuring that US diplomatic partnerships go beyond traditional government-to-government relations, so that the United States is not only making common cause with ASEAN leaders but also with the 615 million people who live in the ASEAN region.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brad Adams". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Brad" and last name "Adams" clearly distinguishable.

Brad Adams
Executive Director
Asia Division