

US senator secures American's release from Burma
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An American who swam to the home of Burma democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi flew out of the army-ruled nation Sunday after a US senator secured his release from a sentence of seven years' hard labour.

John Yettaw headed to neighbouring Thailand on a military plane alongside leading Democrat Jim Webb, a day after the senator held landmark talks with Burma's reclusive junta chief Than Shwe and also met Suu Kyi.

Webb said he was hopeful the junta would heed calls for the release of the detained Nobel laureate, who was this week sentenced to another 18 months of house arrest on charges sparked by Yettaw's bizarre stunt in May.

A tired-looking Yettaw flashed the sign-language gesture for "I love you" as a US embassy van drove him from a military airport in Bangkok to hospital, an *AFP* photographer said. He and Webb disembarked separately from the plane.

"What he (Yettaw) did was regrettable, I believe that it was hurtful to the person he was trying to help," Webb, who is close to US President Barack Obama, told a news conference in Bangkok.

He denied that he had offered Burma's rulers anything in exchange for Yettaw's freedom and said he urged them to free Suu Kyi to allow her to participate in elections due in 2010.

"I'm hopeful that as the months move forward they will take a look at it," he said.

Yettaw was not at the news conference, and Webb said the diabetic and epileptic 54-year-old was receiving treatment after suffering a "medical incident" on Sunday as Burma authorities gave him his deportation order.

"He's not a well man," Webb said.

Yettaw, a father of seven, was arrested on May 6 after using a pair of home-made flippers to swim across a lake from Suu Kyi's crumbling mansion, where he spent two days uninvited.

The devout Mormon said at his trial that he was on a "mission from God" to warn Suu Kyi that he had had a vision in which she was assassinated by terrorists.

He was handed over to US diplomats on Sunday at Rangoon's notorious Insein prison, where hundreds of dissidents are jailed in grim conditions, and then driven to the airport.

Burmese activists angered

Webb's dramatic intercession for Yettaw angered Burmese activists, who called it a propaganda coup for the junta, with Suu Kyi and her two female aides still languishing in detention.

"This will surely make a negative impression among the people of Burma," said Aung Din, the executive director of the US Campaign for Burma and a former political prisoner who led

1988 protests against the regime.

Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) did not criticise Webb, but said the ruling generals should have freed their leader at the same time.

"The whole thing happened because of Mr Yettaw. If they release him why can they not release citizens of their own country?" NLD spokesman Nyan Win told *AFP*.

The Burmese regime sparked international outrage by extending Suu Kyi's detention, which will keep the 64-year-old locked up during elections promised by the junta in 2010.

The military has ruled the country since 1962 and refused to recognise the NLD's victory by in the country's last elections in 1990.

The UN Security Council expressed "serious concern" about her detention on Thursday while the European Union extended sanctions against the regime.

The US senator's visit could however herald a possible softening of Washington's stance towards Burma, in line with previous statements by the Obama administration about reviewing US policy.

Webb said he would discuss his visit with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. He urged China to end its silence on Burma and use its clout to help solve the country's political stalemate, adding that Western sanctions had allowed Beijing to increase "dramatically" its influence in the country.

His Burma visit has echoes of former US President Bill Clinton's recent trip to North Korea to secure the release of two jailed US journalists.

- AFP

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