

Clinton wants to engage diplomatically with Burma
Malaysiakini.com
Sep 24, 2009

The Obama administration, sketching out a new policy toward Burma, pledged to engage diplomatically with the country's military rulers in a bid to promote democratic reform there.

Speaking at the UN General Assembly in New York, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton raised the possibility of an eventual easing or lifting of sanctions if US engagement produces political changes in Burma, renamed Myanmar by its military junta.

Clinton told reporters that "we believe that sanctions remain important as part of our policy, but by themselves they have not produced the results that had been hoped for on behalf of the people of Burma."

The United States and European Union have imposed sanctions on Burma due to its refusal to recognise the last elections in 1990 and prolonged detention of the victor, democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi.

"So going forward, we will be employing both of those tools pursuing our same goals, and to help achieve democratic reform, we will be engaging directly with Burmese authorities," the chief US diplomat said.

Taking a less confrontational international approach than his predecessor George W Bush, President Barack Obama has already taken steps or announced plans to engage hardline regimes in Tehran, Pyongyang, Damascus and Havana.

Clinton said she could "preview" the new approach toward Burma, because a policy review begun by the administration days after it took office in January was almost complete.

She made the information public after briefing foreign ministers from a group of countries concerned about the situation in Burma that was chaired by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

"2010 will be a very critical year for Burma," Ban said after the meeting. He echoed calls by other members of the international community for the release of political prisoners so that they can take part in elections next year.

Critics have dismissed the planned polls as a sham designed to entrench the military's hold on power.

Basic objectives have not changed

Clinton said the "basic objectives" of US policy toward Burma have not changed. "We want credible democratic reform, a government that responds to the needs of the Burmese people, immediate, unconditional release of political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi," she said.

Aung San Suu Kyi has spent 13 of the last 19 years in detention since the junta refused to recognize the National League for Democracy's landslide victory in the country's last elections in 1990.

The junta, Clinton added, must also engage in a "serious dialogue with the opposition and minority ethnic groups."

A senior US official said the Obama administration sought to change its policy partly because the military rulers themselves showed signs of wanting to improve relations with the United States.

Clinton outlined the new US stand on sanctions to the foreign ministers from countries of the Group of Friends Burma, which includes a cross-section of countries like Indonesia, Vietnam, Japan, China, Britain and France.

"Lifting sanctions now would send the wrong signal, and we will maintain our existing sanctions until we see concrete progress towards reform," according to a copy of her prepared remarks released by the State Department.

"But we will be willing to discuss the easing of sanctions in response to significant actions on the part of Burma's generals that address the core human rights and democracy issues that are inhibiting Burma's progress," she said.

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