

**ASEAN Lawmakers Call for Continued Myanmar Sanctions - Too Late?**  
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**By Our Correspondent**

***AIPMC warning comes as Obama administration says it will lift restrictions on US business***

With the rest of the world rushing towards rapprochement with Myanmar, a caucus of Southeast Asian legislators has bucked the tide, urging the US government to maintain sanctions on business activities and warning that "a gold rush in the Southeast Asian nation could fuel further human rights abuses, risk fragile ceasefires and arrest ongoing democratic reforms rather than bolster them."

That warning, in a prepared release from the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC), came just as the Obama administration in Washington, DC Thursday said it would lift most of the prohibitions on American businessmen on Sunday, May 20, with bipartisan support from Congress, opening the door to the first significant investment in Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, in decades. "So today we say to American business: Invest in Burma," Secretary of State Hilary Clinton said Thursday.

"We consider that the western governments are in a bit too much of a hurry," said Putri Adena Astrid, a Jakarta-based spokeswoman for the Asean legislative group, in a telephone interview with Asia Sentinel. "We would like to remind them that the situation is not really settled. Most of the investment is happening in the ethnic areas, and we really want to remind western governments that they should keep the sanctions until they settle the issues."

The caucus doesn't speak for ASEAN itself, which after several years of negotiations agreed in 1997 to admit what was then Burma to membership, calling for "constructive engagement" with the country, then considered a pariah nation. Caucus members include both ruling and non-ruling political parties in countries including Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and Cambodia.

Myanmar has been the focus of an almost unprecedented change of direction that began with national elections in November 2010 that were universally condemned as rigged to keep the military in power. However, President Thien Sein, leading a cadre of reformers, has managed so far to keep the military in the barracks and largely out of politics. The country remains deeply corrupt, however, and is one of the world's most poverty-stricken, even as Chinese, Korean and western businessmen rush in to take advantage of Myanmar's rich national resources, particularly in ethnic areas.

But, warned Kraisak Choonhavan, a Thai lawmaker and vice president of the Asean caucus, in the statement: "As everyone with any knowledge on Myanmar will attest, the changes we have seen to date are far from irreversible. It is ludicrous to reward the current government's untested reforms by paving the way for a gold rush. Fighting in Myanmar's ethnic areas continues and many of the ethnic leaders are concerned that these reforms are just a ploy to pave the way for 'development' projects on their lands."

Kraisak called for a political settlement between Naypidaw and the armed ethnic groups which have maintained a decades-old rebellion against the central government.

"Without a clear political settlement between the central state and the armed ethnic groups, any major investments will likely lead to further human rights abuses, land grabbing, corruption and enrich military leaders and their cronies who control most of

the country's wealth," Kraisak said. "Before ethical and responsible investment can take place, Myanmar must first reach a negotiated political settlement with the armed ethnic groups with which it has been fighting for decades, and must also draft and institute tough labor and environmental laws as well as other legislation that regulates the actions of businesses, especially foreign investments, and protects the rights of the people and the environment."

The AIPMC instead aligned itself with the United Nationalities Federation Council (UNFC) for Western governments to maintain remaining political, military, financial and economic sanctions on Myanmar until the Burmese military halts its offensives in Kachin State.

"AIPMC also supports the UNFC's call for genuine political dialogue and negotiation between the ethnic groups and the Union of Myanmar. AIPMC continues to urge all ethnic parties to work together under the umbrella of the UNFC to push for a negotiated political settlement with the Burmese government and an end to all armed conflict in Myanmar."

The Chiang Mai, Thailand-based independent news organization Irrawaddy reported, however, that the Burmese army has intensified its offensive against the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in the northeastern area of the country, with further casualties, even as Kachin and central government representatives met with United Nations officials. Four soldiers were killed and at least 10 were injured in an hour-long firefight near Namhsan in northern Shan State's Kyaukme District, the news site reported.

"The government recently stopped UN convoys out of fear for the safety of our staff," the UNHCR's spokesperson in Asia, Kitty McKinsey, told The Irrawaddy on Thursday. "We regret that right now we are not able to serve people who need our help and are trying to get access to camps for internally displaced people where no fighting is going on."

The Obama administration, the caucus warned, "really should consult with the people on the ground -- the Obama administration should be talking to civil society organizations both inside Myanmar and those working from outside on the Thai-Myanmar border to get their views. If you speak to the ethnic leaders, they will tell you that a rush of unregulated outside investment in their areas is probably their biggest concern right now -- it will wreak havoc of mammoth proportions."

The caucus demanded that the US government first create a definitive list of regulations and rules in close consultation with NGOs dictating how US companies can do business in the country, and that the regulations be enforced to ensure that US companies don't fuel human rights abuses with their investments.

"Everyone wants to see a prosperous Myanmar where the people truly benefit from democratic and economic progress. Sanctions can and should be lifted, but they must be done gradually and in response to concrete reforms, and remain in line with Washington's stated policy to use sanctions as a means for empowering reformers and reducing the influence of hardliners," said Eva Kusuma Sundari, AIPMC President and a member of the Indonesian Parliament.

"It is unforgivable that at the last moment, the world turns its back on these people and gives in to the greed and avarice of businesses whose only agenda is financial profit.

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