

Burma sanctions will be eased, says Hillary Clinton

Monday 9 April 2012, by [The Guardian](#) (Date first published: 5 April 2012).

US secretary of state says Aung San Suu Kyi election victory allows Washington to relax travel and financial sanctions

Hillary Clinton has declared the US is ready to relax sanctions on Burma to recognise its fledgling democratic transition. Washington would ease a ban on American companies investing in or offering financial services to the country, the secretary of state said.

Clinton stressed the Obama administration wanted to move cautiously and said Burma had a long way to go in shaking off decades of military rule. But she hailed as a “dramatic demonstration of popular will” the election of Aung San Suu Kyi to the lower house of parliament on Sunday in a byelection that delivered a landslide victory to her party.

“We fully recognise and embrace the progress that has taken place and we will continue our policy of engagement,” Clinton said in a brief appearance before reporters three days after Suu Kyi’s party won 43 of 45 seats available in the byelection.

The package Clinton unveiled on Wednesday reflected a modest first step toward lifting the complex web of US sanctions that have contributed to the country’s isolation for decades.

The US will seek to name an ambassador to Burma after an absence of two decades, to set up an office of the US Agency for International Development and to support UN development programmes.

Clinton gave no details but said the US was committed to “beginning the process of a targeted easing of our ban on the export of US financial services and investment as part of a broader effort to help accelerate economic modernisation and political reform”.

US officials speaking on condition of anonymity said areas might include agriculture, tourism, telecommunications and banking but no decisions had been taken.

Clinton said the US was ready to allow private US aid groups to pursue non-profit activities on projects such as democracy building, health and education, and to give select Burmese officials and politicians permission to visit the US, relaxing longstanding visa bans.

Washington wants Burma to free all political prisoners, lift restrictions on those who have already been released, seek national reconciliation, especially with ethnic groups that say they have long been oppressed by the central government, and to end military ties to North Korea.

“This reform process has a long way to go. The future is neither clear nor certain. But we will continue to monitor developments closely and meet, as I said when I was there [in Burma], action with action,” Clinton said.

President Thein Sein, a general in the former junta, has surprised the world with the most dramatic political reforms since the military took power in a 1962 coup.

The civilian administration under Thein Sein has released more than 600 political prisoners following an amnesty in October 2011. Activists say hundreds more may still be in custody but the exact number is not clear.

Walter Lohman of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative thinktank, welcomed the cautious US approach, saying some steps should wait until after a 2015 election in which 75% of parliamentary seats in Burma will be contested.

"We need to reserve some ammunition for the real goal: the 2015 general election. Let's not give it away too quickly," he said.

Economic analysts say it will take time for the US to unravel the full scope of its sanctions on Burma, first imposed in 1988 and subsequently expanded by five laws and four presidential directives.

A US official described the sanctions as "byzantine" and said Washington would focus on easing them so as to benefit the most people while avoiding giving advantage to areas - possibly including timber and gems - dominated by "repressive" elements of the authorities.

Some sanctions can be lifted readily but others are tied to specific progress on issues ranging from drug trafficking and money laundering to preventing the use of child soldiers - making them more difficult to remove. In the first instance, Washington plans to use waivers, licences and other steps to ease rather than repeal legally binding sanctions.

Aung Din, head of the US Campaign for Burma advocacy group that helped put in place sanctions on Burma, suggested the US may have gone too far, too fast.

"What they have achieved from the United States for giving 7% of seats in the Parliament to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is enormous," he said, saying she hoped the administration would take its time easing sanctions to ensure the political progress in Burma was "irreversible" and to consult rights groups.

P.S.

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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/apr/05/hillary-clinton-burma-sanctions-eased?intcmp=239>