

WASHINGTON—US President Barack Obama will raise the issue of Burma during his meeting on Friday with leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) and impress upon them the need for Burma to have a free and fair election, the White House said Thursday.



"I'm sure the President will address the issue of Burma," Special Assistant to the US President and Senior Director for Asian Affairs Jeff Badar told reporters at a news conference in New York. "I expect that that issue will probably be raised by others as well."

"Our expectation—I mean 'expectation' in the sense that this is what we want, not what we foresee—is free and fair elections in Burma; the need for there to be true national reconciliation; the release of political prisoners and Aung San Suu Kyi," Badar said.

The second US-Asean leaders' meeting was scheduled to be held in New York at a time when the Obama administration is attempting to boost ties with Southeast Asia. The first meeting was held in Singapore in Nov. 2009.

Although Burmese Prime Minister Thein Sein attended the first meeting, he will not attend the meeting on Friday. Burmese Foreign Minister Nyan Win will attend, but is unlikely to be in direct contact with Obama.

The joint-statement issued in connection with the first meeting in Singapore called for Burma's achievement of national reconciliation and a free, fair and inclusive election.

"We also underscored the importance of achieving national reconciliation and that the general elections to be held in Myanmar [Burma] in 2010 must be conducted in a free, fair, inclusive and transparent manner in order to be credible to the international community," the statement said.

"We called on the Government of Myanmar [Burma] to help create the conditions for credible elections, including by initiating a dialogue with all stakeholders to ensure that the process is fully inclusive," the statement continued.

However, since that time the military regime in Burma has taken steps to ensure that opposition activists such as pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, the 88 Generation Students group and more than 2,000 political prisoners have been barred from the November polls.

Other key stakeholders, including ethnic political parties that have connections with armed cease-fire groups which have refused to transform into members of the regime's border guard force, are also excluded from the election process.

Meanwhile, Badar said that the US has tried to rebuild relations with Asean since the beginning of the Obama administration.

“We felt that the region had not gotten the attention that it needed and deserved in much of the previous decade. So, for example, on Secretary of State Clinton's first trip to the region, she went to Jakarta. The President has now decided that we should participate in the East Asia Summit. We have appointed our first ever resident ambassador to ASEAN, who is going to be stationed in Jakarta,” Badar said.

“I would expect at the meeting tomorrow there will be substantial discussion about the future of multilateral institutions—what we call wonkishly 'architecture'—in the region. As I say, we're joining the East Asia Summit,” he said.

Badar also said that US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will be going to Hanoi next month for the Asean Summit, which is the first time the US secretary of state has participated in the meeting. The summit traditionally includes all the Asean countries plus South Korea, Japan, China, Australia, New Zealand and India.

“The US and Russia will be participating for the first time and President Obama will be participating next year,” Badar said.

“So we'll be talking about how we can make that organization into a cooperative framework. We'll be talking about nonproliferation issues—the expectations that the countries of the region will rigorously enforce their obligations under U.N. Security Council resolutions, particularly vis-a-vis North Korea and Iran. We'll be talking about trade and investment. As you know, we're negotiating a treaty, a trade promotion treaty with a number of the Asean countries. So trade and investment will be on the agenda. Those are the highlights,” Badar said.