

WASHINGTON — Burma's United Nations Ambassador, Thant Kyaw, told an incredulous UN committee on Wednesday that his country has no political prisoners.



"There are no political prisoners in Myanmar [Burma], and no individual has been incarcerated simply for his or her political beliefs," Thant Kyaw told a committee that deals with human rights questions.

The UN envoy intervened several times during the meeting when top UN officials and diplomats from other countries raised the issues of human rights in Burma and the Nov. 7 election.

He asked at least twice for his country to be referred to as Myanmar and not Burma during presentations by the Special UN Rapporteur on human rights in Burma, Tomás Ojea Quintana.

Quintana told the committee: "Now is the time to end the widespread and systematic violations of human rights that have been occurring in Myanmar for decades."

The UN Secretary-General's Special Adviser on Burma, Vijay Nambiar, said the continued detention of political prisoners and the absence of outside observers at the Nov. 7 election could undermine the credibility of the election. Denying that Burma had political prisoners, Thant Kyaw said: "Since 1989, the Myanmar Government, with a view to enabling prisoners to contribute to nation building, has granted amnesties on 15 occasions to a total of 115,000 prisoners who had shown good conduct."

Thant Kyaw said the year 2010 was "extraordinarily important for Myanmar, as elections on 7 November are an important step in the transition towards a peaceful, modern and developed democratic State," he argued.

The election would be free and fair, he said. It was a multiparty contest where the people of

Burma would be exercising their democratic right to elect representatives reflecting their interests.

Nambiar told the committee that the election would be only one step in the transition process in Burma. Reversing two generations of non-democratic rule and improving living conditions would take time, he said.

Thant Kyaw, meanwhile, rejected as totally unacceptable Quintana's proposal for a commission of inquiry into alleged crimes against humanity in Burma. There were no grounds whatsoever for such an inquiry, he said.

“International statistics have shown that casualties in Myanmar due to armed conflict since the Second World War are less than one per cent, compared to other internal conflicts,” he said. “There is no impunity for the Myanmar military regarding human rights violations and, from 1990 to April 2010, punitive actions against 210 military personnel have been taken.”