

Burma's military regime has not signaled that it wants regional help in holding the country's first election in 20 years, said the secretary-general of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) in Vietnam on Sunday.

"We don't have any clear signal that member states of Asean will be asked to help, but the offer is on the table," Asean Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan told reporters on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum on East Asia.

Surin recently told BBC that Asean expects a credible and transparent election in Burma, but added that the organization cannot interfere in the details of the poll and that no election is perfect.

The European Union (EU) is currently seeking a deal to send an election mission to Burma, and its Foreign Chief Catherine Ashton reportedly said during last month's EU-Asean ministerial meeting in Spain that she hoped to finalize an agreement with Burmese Foreign Minister Nyan Win on an "exploratory" EU mission to Burma.

Prior to that, Burmese officials told Kurt Campbell, a top US diplomat, that Burma does not need regional or international monitoring groups since it is "rich with election experience."

Meanwhile, Burma's state-run media reported on Sunday that Prime Minister Thein Sein has left for a two-day economic forum in Vietnam where he will be joined by hundreds of senior regional officials and CEOs from the world's leading enterprises.

The trip is the first international appearance of a high-ranking Burmese government official since a highly publicized report was released last week claiming that the regime is trying to develop nuclear weapons with the help of North Korea.

Asean, the 10-member regional bloc that Burma belongs to, has made no official response to the report which is mostly based on an interview with a Burmese army defector.

The Asean secretary-general's office in Indonesia did not respond when contacted for a comment on Monday.

However, on Friday US State Department spokesman Philip Crowley responded to the report, saying, "We continue to encourage Burma to meet its international obligations, including those in the area of nonproliferation.

"We share international concerns for Burma's intentions and its relationship with North Korea. And we expect Burma, just as we expect all countries, to live up to their international obligations. We continue to watch transactions between North Korea and Burma," he said.

Writing for the exiled news agency *Democratic Voice of Burma*, Robert E. Kelley and Ali Fowle, the authors of the report on Burma's nuclear programs, noted that Burma is a signatory to the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free-Zone and any undertaking to produce nuclear weapons would be a violation of that agreement.