

The secretary-general of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), Surin Pitsuwan, said on Thursday he hopes there will be freedom of speech and travel prior to the upcoming Burmese elections on Nov. 7.



Pitsuwan told reporters in Da Nang, Vietnam, "I hope that Myanmar [Burma] will prove the skeptics wrong and Myanmar will respond positively to freedom of travel and expression during the lead up to the elections." He is in Vietnam to attend the 42nd Asean Economic Ministers Meeting.

His comments followed a recent statement released by the Foreign Minister of Vietnam that welcomed the decision by Burma to set the date for the elections. It also said regional governments "encourages Burma to further accelerate progress in the implementation of the roadmap for national reconciliation and democracy, including preparations for the planned elections leading to a constitutional government."

The Asean secretariat issued a press release on Thursday saying: "It is certainly a welcome relief in the sense that the date is now definite. Not only has Asean been anxious about the preparations for the general elections in Myanmar, but the entire global community has been concerned that it would not be free, fair and effective as a mechanism of national reconciliation.

Asean also stressed the need for Burma to continue to work with Asean and the UN in this process and expressed its readiness to render assistance as deemed appropriate by Burma in accordance with the Asean Charter.

"Asean will keep close consultations with Burma in this regard," said the statement.

Meanwhile, the Burmese opposition, regional human rights activists and the international community still have doubts that the Burmese election will be free and fair, partly because it lacks the participation of the main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD).

The NLD recently announced that it would boycott the election. Detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi also urged the Burmese people to monitor the election process closely and to report voting irregularities.