

WASHINGTON — US President Barack Obama on Friday urged the Burmese leadership to embark on a process of national reconciliation by releasing all political prisoners, including Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.



Obama renewed his call during a meeting with the leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) in New York, held on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly. The meeting was attended by Burmese Foreign Minister Nyan Win, but there was no direct contact between him and the US president.

“The president believes in the importance of democratic reform and protection of human rights and renews his call on Burma to embark on a process of national reconciliation by releasing all political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi and by holding free and fair elections in November,” the White House said in a statement after the meeting.

In a joint statement issued together with their US counterpart, the Asean leaders said they “welcomed the continued US engagement with the government of Myanmar [Burma]” and expressed hope that “Asean and US engagement encourages Myanmar to undertake political and economic reforms to facilitate national reconciliation.”

Reiterating a call made at the first US-Asean meeting in Singapore last November, the statement said this year's election in Burma must be “conducted in a free, fair, inclusive and transparent manner in order to be credible for the international community.”

“We emphasized the need for Myanmar to continue to work together with Asean and the United Nations in the process of national reconciliation,” the joint statement said.

Meanwhile, in Washington, the State Department reiterated that the US does not believe that the election in November will be legitimate.

“We have made it clear all along that we think the Nov. 7 elections are going to lack legitimacy,” State Department spokesman Mark Toner said.

“We obviously remain concerned about the oppressive political environment in the country and we urge the authorities to release all the political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, and I believe there’s 2,100 additional political prisoners,” he said.

“We don’t believe those elections can be free or fair, and we continue to urge the Burmese authorities to begin a genuine political dialogue with the democratic opposition ... and also the ethnic minority leaders, as a first step towards national reconciliation,” Toner said.