

WASHINGTON—The 14-nation “Group of Friends” on Burma formed by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Monday urged the Burmese military junta to make the forthcoming November elections inclusive, participatory and transparent and repeated its call to release all political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi.



The third meeting of the group convened by Ban at the level of foreign ministers, however, concluded on the sidelines of the ongoing General Assembly of the United Nations, without any surprises, as countries differed on the next step forward.

Briefing reporters at the conclusion of the hour-long meeting, Ban said that the coming months will be critical for Burma, as the country prepares for its first-ever elections in two decades. Members of the group, he said, expressed their encouragement, concerns and expectations regarding the current process.

“They clearly reiterated the need for the election process to be more inclusive, participatory and transparent. Members called for steps to be taken for the release of political detainees, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi,” he said, adding that this is essential for the elections to be seen as credible and to contribute to Burma’s stability and development.

The group reviewed developments in the country and discussed ways to intensify their common efforts to help the government and people of Burma achieve a successful transition towards a credible civilian and democratic government, he said.

Responding to questions, the secretary general said that during his meeting with the Burmese foreign minister, who attended the meeting, he conveyed his expectation that the election should be conducted in a fair, transparent and inclusive manner.

“I took note of the fact that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's voting right was registered in their bulletin and also I urged them to release all political detainees, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. That is the way to make this election inclusive and participatory,” he said.

Ban said he is going to continue his dialogue with the Burmese authorities when he visits Hanoi to participate in Asean and the UN Summit meeting.

“I’m sure that I will have an opportunity to engage with the Myanmar [Burma] authorities there,” he said.

Asked about establishing a commission of inquiry into possible crimes against humanity by the Burmese government as recommended by the special rapporteur on human rights in Burma, he said he has taken note of it, but it is something which needs to be decided by the member states.

He said the group reiterated its commitment to work together to help Burma address its political, humanitarian and development challenges.

“At this critical stage in Myanmar’s transition, it is all the more important that the group, and especially Myanmar’s neighbours, encourages Myanmar to engage meaningfully with my good offices. The group encourages the government of Myanmar to adopt a more constructive and forward-looking approach in its response to the international community’s call for engagement,” Ban said.

Talking to reporters, British Foreign Secretary William Hague said the United Kingdom is concerned about the situation in Burma.

“This is essentially a sham election. We have long called for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and the permitting of legitimate opposition in Burma, and we want the international community to retain as much pressure as possible on the regime which still does not respect anything that resembles democracy or a properly open election,” he said.

Meanwhile, expressing concern that voting would be restricted in ethnic areas, a top Obama administration official on Monday said that there is no sign of legitimate general elections in Burma.

“The US position has been very clear over the course of the last several weeks that we are disappointed by the steps that the government has taken in advance of the upcoming election, and we see no signs that there will be legitimacy associated with this process,” Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell said.

“The recent reports that balloting will be deeply restricted in ethnic areas are worrisome,” he told reporters in response to a question during the course of a conference call.

At the same time, Campbell acknowledged that things could be a bit different after the elections are over and the new government is formed.

“We also recognize that after the elections, there may be a different correlation of players, different relationships, different actors that may emerge that could create the opportunity for some sort of engagement that would advance not only American interests, but the interests of others in the region and the dispossessed inside the country as a whole,” Campbell said.

He refrained from answering questions on establishing a UN commission of inquiry into possible

crimes against humanity by the Burmese Government as recommended by the Un special rapporteur on human rights on Burma.

“I don’t think I’ll have very much to say on that issue at this time. I think what we have tried to indicate is that we have not ruled anything out either on this issue or others, including sanctions on the way forward. We are looking at what transpires in November in terms of the way forward. We reserve the right to take steps either to respond to positive steps or negative ones,” Campbell said.

Earlier in the day, the State Department spokesman P. J. Crowley said Burma has been a major issue of discussion with Asean leaders being held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York.

“We have attempted ourselves to engage Burma directly. We hope that Burma will begin a constructive dialogue with ethnic groups within its population. We’ve been disappointed with the electoral process that Burma has put forward this year. We don’t believe that what they have announced and what they plan will result in a credible election,” Crowley said.

“But we will continue our discussions with other countries in the region, because we recognize that to see progress, not only the United States, but other countries that have relations with Burma have to send a clear message that they have to make fundamental changes in their policies and their approaches,” Crowley said.