

NEW YORK — The UN's human rights envoy to Burma appealed Thursday to its military rulers "to send a strong signal" to the world that it will hold a genuine election, by releasing democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi and almost 2,100 political prisoners.



UN envoy Tomas Ojea Quintana cast more doubt on the legitimacy of the ruling junta's planned Nov. 7 election, the first in two decades.

"I believe that the Myanmar [Burma] government needs to send a strong signal to the international community about its commitment to hold genuine elections. An unconditional and immediate release of prisoners of conscience would be such a signal," said Quintana, an Argentine lawyer.

A day earlier, he presented his annual report to the UN General Assembly about his latest efforts.

In the report, Quintana noted that more than 130 political prisoners were released in September 2009, two months after he was last allowed to visit Burma.

But he told reporters Thursday that none have been let go since then, and he reiterated UN demands that all be freed and allowed to take part in the election.

"It is clear that the process remains deeply flawed. Freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly and association, have been further restricted," said Quintana, who has been the special human rights investigator for the UN in Burma since May 2008.

"There has been no release of prisoners of conscience. I repeat: Conditions for genuine elections are limited under the current circumstances. The potential for these elections to bring meaningful change and improvement to the human rights situation in Burma remains uncertain,"

he said.

Suu Kyi's lawyers said Thursday that Burma's highest court has agreed to hear a final appeal to release her from house arrest. A hearing in the case has been scheduled for October 29 in the junta's new capital, Naypyidaw. She has previously lost two appeals.

Her house arrest is due to expire soon anyway, but only on Nov. 13, a week after the election.

The ruling junta has insisted the election will be a major step toward democracy. Government critics have called the upcoming elections a sham designed to cement nearly 50 years of military rule.

A UN diplomat who follows Burma closely said there were no plans for any action by members of the Security Council, the UN's most powerful arm, before the election. The diplomat said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's chief of staff, Vijay Nambiar, had wisely declined an invitation by the ruling junta to visit soon after the election.

Burma is not on the council's official agenda. The diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the diplomacy toward the isolated Asian nation, said such a visit would have risked validating an electoral process which is going to be flawed.

"I think there's more or less a resignation on the part of the international community that the November elections will go ahead probably in the framework that they're set in," Nicholas Haysom, Ban's political affairs director, said last month. "But I think there's also an increasing focus on what to do after the elections. I think the international community is taking stock. Developments after the elections may offer real opportunities for constructive engagement, or may not — may be more of the same."

A so-called "Friends of Myanmar" group has been meeting at the U.N. that includes about 15 countries, including Burma's neighbors, interested Asian and European nations, and the five permanent UN Security Council members: the US, Russia, China, Britain and France.

Burma told other nations last month during the UN General Assembly's annual ministerial meeting that it is striving to ensure its first elections in two decades are "free and fair."

He spoke a day after foreign ministers from key nations warned the military junta that the release of Suu Kyi and other political prisoners is "essential" for Nov. 7 elections to be seen as credible. The 65-year-old Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace laureate, has been held by the junta under house arrest for 18 years in Rangoon.

Suu Kyi led the now-disbanded National League for Democracy party amid massive pro-democracy protests in August 1988 and officially registered it the next month after the demonstrations were violently suppressed by the junta. The party won 1990 elections by a landslide, but the results were not recognized by the military, which took power in 1962 when the country was known as Burma.