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Burma courts West, but rights doubts linger

Reform is here to stay, says the regime as it tries to reshape its role

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NAYPYITAW: Burma's government, in a first extended interview with a major Western news organisation in years, has called on the US to abandon "unjust" economic sanctions and has vigorously defended its human-rights record.

The interview with the country's Information and Culture Minister comes as US President Barack Obama and Asian leaders head to Indonesia for a summit at which Burma is seeking to boost its international reputation, and is a strong signal the country is trying to reshape its role in the world.

Since elections a year ago that Western governments decried as a sham, the government has surprised critics with reforms, including freeing dissident and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi from years of house arrest, easing media reins and pushing to make Burma attractive for foreign investors.

Burma has embarked on an "irreversible" reform process, said Information and Culture Minister U Kyaw Hsan, who made clear he was speaking on behalf of the government. He blamed US sanctions for delaying the country's development and said they made Burma more reliant on Chinese companies and local businesspeople — often described by foreign critics as government cronies.

"When we are striving for

development, we cannot be choosers — we have accepted what is best for the country," he said.

He chided Western nations for hectoring Burma, and acting as if its political system should mirror their own. "If we receive international co-operation during this time, we will be able to move forward much faster in our development process and of course this will be of interest to both sides," Mr Kyaw Hsan said.

The minister blamed some of Burma's reputation problems on people who "hold a grudge against the government" and those who wanted to embarrass it.

Sceptics of the recent reforms — which have also included steps to permit labour unions, make it easier for investors to lease land, and start rationalising a complex foreign-currency regime — say the government is trying to con Western leaders into easing sanctions without fundamentally changing the country's political system, which is still dominated by current and former soldiers.

They note that reports of human-rights violations have continued this year.

Ms Suu Kyi has welcomed recent reforms but has not yet advocated lifting sanctions.

But even some of the harshest critics concede they see progress — including that the government is now willing to discuss its performance with foreign journalists.

"It would have been inconceivable only six months ago" for a Western journalist to have an ex-

tended interview in Naypyitaw, said Sean Turnell, a Burma expert at Macquarie University in Sydney. "They seem to have discovered that having international legitimacy is important to them."

Mr Kyaw Hsan said the decision over whether to release more prisoners was up to the country's President, Thein Sein. As for sanctions, Mr Kyaw Hsan said they "are based on one-sided allegations" and are "having adverse effects on the majority of Burma people".

With the latest changes in Burma, "today is the best time and opportunity for the international community to show their co-operation in the Burma reform process" and start easing the sanctions, which he said had forced more than 150 companies to leave.

Mr Kyaw Hsan insisted there were no systematic human-rights abuses, despite repeated assertions by officials from the UN and other international groups that they are widespread.

Although "there may be some violations of law from time to time" in Burma's military, any cases that arise are investigated and punished, he said.

David Mathieson, a Burma expert at Human Rights Watch in Thailand, rejected suggestions the military was free of human-rights violations. There was "a culture of abuse within the military, and Kyaw Hsan should know that".

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