

US President Barack Obama used a landmark encounter with the prime minister of military-run Myanmar yesterday to demand freedom for detained democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi.

"I reaffirmed the policy that I put forward yesterday in Tokyo with regard to Burma," Obama told reporters, using the former name of the country that has kept Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest for most of the past two decades.

White House spokesman Ben Rhodes said the president reiterated a speech he made in Japan on Saturday when he urged Myanmar's ruling generals to release the opposition leader and all other political prisoners.

"So privately he said the exact same thing that he said publicly in enumerating the steps that the government of Burma must take — freeing all political prisoners, freeing Aung San Suu Kyi, ending the violence against minority groups and moving into a dialogue with democratic movements there," Rhodes said.

Obama made the call to Myanmar Prime Minister Thein Sein as he sat down with friends and foes alike at the first summit between a US president and ASEAN.

Officials at the meeting said Thein Sein did not react to the unprecedented face-to-face demand over Myanmar's most famous citizen, but thanked Washington for its new policy of engagement with the military regime.

Before opening the talks in a hotel ballroom, Obama and all 10 ASEAN leaders stood in a line on a stage, crossing their arms to shake hands with the leader on either side.

Thein Sein sat nearly opposite the US president as the leaders assembled at a round table, reporters noted before they were ushered out.

The meeting on the sidelines of an APEC forum was aimed at injecting some much-needed warmth into US relations with a region that has felt neglected, with Washington consumed by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (李顯龍) applauded the US for moving past the Myanmar issue, which has hamstrung relations between Washington and the Southeast Asian region for many years.

"That ... the US president considers it worthwhile to have a summit meeting with all 10 ASEAN members, notwithstanding difficulties which they have, particularly with Myanmar, I think that's very significant," he said.

For Obama, it was an opportunity to enlist the support of Myanmar's neighbors in his new

Free Aung San Suu Kyi, Obama tells Myanmar PM

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strategy of engagement to push for democracy and the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners.

In his speech in Tokyo, the US leader offered Myanmar's generals the prospect of a better relationship if they agreed to reform, but said sanctions would remain until they took concrete steps.

"That is how a government in Burma will be able to respond to the needs of its people," he said on the first leg of his debut tour of Asia. "That is the path that will bring Burma true security and prosperity."

In a joint statement released after the talks, the US and ASEAN leaders did not mention Aung San Suu Kyi, but warned the junta that elections planned for next year must be "free, fair, inclusive and transparent" to be credible.

Myanmar's critics have demanded that Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, be allowed to participate in the elections. It won 1990 elections in a landslide, but was never allowed to rule.

ASEAN groups Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

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