

## Clinton's Visit to Myanmar Raises Hopes and Concerns

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BUSAN, South Korea — Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#)'s trip to [Myanmar](#) this week is raising hopes for greater freedom in the isolated country, but also concerns that the Obama administration is rushing to reward the leaders of one of the world's most repressive countries.

"Sending the Secretary of State is a pretty big deal," said David J. Kramer, the president of Freedom House, which ranks Myanmar among those nations it annually designates as "not free." "I do worry that we are moving a little too quickly."

Mrs. Clinton's two-day visit begins on Wednesday, after a stop here in South Korea to attend an international aid conference. It comes after a year of political changes inside Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, that has startled administration officials and gradually overcome their initial wariness.

Her visit is a test of both the depth of those changes and of President Obama's largely unsuccessful policy of seeking to engage countries long shunned by the United States — from Iran to Syria to North Korea.

"I see it as an elaborate dance that could have some unexpected consequences," said Janet Benshoof, the president of the Global Justice Center, who has long advocated on behalf of democracy in Myanmar.

Mr. Obama announced the first significant shift in American relations with Myanmar in decades during his trip to Asia this month, citing "flickers of progress" that merited reaching out. He did so even though Myanmar's government maintains a repressive grip on power and commits what human-rights groups say are war crimes in military operations that have displaced more than 100,000 people this year alone.

"Military abuses continue with impunity in ethnic areas," Human Rights Watch said in a report released before Mr. Obama's announcement. The report cites government campaigns in Kachin, Shan and Karen, regions of Myanmar where minority groups have clashed with the military regime for decades. "The government continues to suppress dissent through a raft of repressive laws and the lack of an independent judiciary."

The decision to send Mrs. Clinton was debated among the White House, the State Department and members of Congress, following a series of exploratory visits to Myanmar by the

administration's special envoy, Derek Mitchell, who was confirmed in the position only five months ago.

While some officials pushed for reciprocal gestures to encourage more changes, others warned that initial efforts to reach out the country's leaders in 2009 proved fruitless.

The decision came together only after Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Obama telephoned Myanmar's opposition leader and Nobel peace laureate, [Daw Aung San Suu Kyi](#), who was released from house arrest last November. Her endorsement of the administration's strategy offers significant political cover to a policy of reciprocal diplomacy that could still backfire. Mrs. Clinton plans to present her with an award from Freedom House, a Washington-based democracy advocacy group, during the visit.

The secretary of state and her aides have said that Mrs. Clinton will raise many difficult questions with Myanmar's new president, U Thein Sein, a former general who was prime minister during some of the harshest periods of crackdown, including the suppression of protests by monks in 2007.

After taking office in March, Mr. Thein Sein unexpectedly began taking steps to open the country's political process, relaxing restrictions on the media, labor unions and political parties like the one led by Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi.

Among the issues Mrs. Clinton will raise are suspicions of illicit military cooperation with North Korea on missile technology and possibly nuclear technology, and the continued detention of at least 1,600 political prisoners. She will also press Mr. Thein Sein's government to open the political process further and to resolve the ethnic conflicts.

"Now, let's not get carried away," Mrs. Clinton said in a television appearance after her trip was first announced. "There is still a lot to be done, and it has to be tested."

Ms. Benshoof, who argues that the government has committed enough violations of international law to warrant a referral to the International Criminal Court in The Hague, said she did not oppose Mrs. Clinton's visit in itself. Its success or failure, she said, would depend on how hard she pushed Mr. Thein Sein to account for the regime's behavior, past and present.

"Look, Chamberlain went to Munich," she said. "I don't condemn him for that. Turning over Czechoslovakia to the Nazis is another matter."

It has been more than a half-century since an American secretary of state visited the country. John Foster Dulles went to what was then called Burma on Feb. 26, 1955, hoping to enlist it in a defense alliance against China. (The military government changed the country's name to Myanmar in 1989. but most members of the opposition do not recognize the new name; neither does the United States government, as a matter of policy.)

Once the military assumed power in 1962, China became the country's main political and economic partner. Now, administration officials say that they think the Burmese leadership is trying to ease its international isolation at least in part to become less dependent on the Chinese.

Mrs. Clinton will begin her visit on Wednesday in the country's remote capital, Nay Pyi Daw, and travel to its principal city, Yangon, on Thursday. In addition to the new president, she will meet members of the newly installed parliament, which has held two sessions this year, deliberating to a degree that was unthinkable until recently.

One senior Obama administration official familiar with the evolving diplomacy said he was convinced that the country's leaders were embarking on a path of profound change, but were uncertain of how to proceed after so many years under an isolated, dictatorial military junta.

He cited a small but striking scene: Seeking to learn something about legislative and electoral politics, some new parliamentarians were passing around a DVD containing episodes of "The West Wing."

"They're coming out of a cave," he said.