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US Senator Urges Flexibility on Burma Policy

September 12, 2011

An influential U.S. senator says the United States should be prepared to adjust its policy on Burma sanctions if the government in that country continues its process of opening up.

Senator Jim Webb, the chairman of a Senate subcommittee responsible for East Asian affairs, made the remark Monday as the Senate conducted a routine vote clearing the way for the U.S. sanctions to be renewed.

Webb said there are “clear indications” of a “new openness” from the new government in Burma, and the United States should be prepared to take advantage of opportunities for improved relations. He noted that even if the sanctions are renewed, the law allows the U.S. president to waive the ban on imports from Burma if it is in the national interest.

Webb visited Burma in 2009, becoming the first member of the U.S. Congress to visit the country in more than 10 years. During that visit, he met with the then military ruler Than Shwe and with pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who was still under house arrest.

Webb, a member of President Barack Obama's Democratic Party, has criticized U.S. and European sanctions on Burma in the past, calling them impediments to the economic and political growth of the Burmese people.

The new Burmese government which took office at the end of March has eased permitted visits by international human rights observers and opened a dialogue with some of its critics. However more than 2,000 political prisoners remain in custody.