

Britain to offer military training to Burma to help end ethnic conflicts
By Damien McElroy, Foreign Affairs Correspondent
14 July 2013

Britain will offer Burma military training and official assistance to tackle its internal conflicts during a groundbreaking official visit by President Thein Sein to meet David Cameron that was due to begin on Sunday night.



An ethnic Rakhine man holds homemade weapons as he stands in front of a house that was burnt during fighting between Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingya communities in Sittwe. Photo: REUTERS

Hugo Swire, the Foreign Office minister of state, told The Daily Telegraph that Britain was determined to take a leading role in helping Burma to develop a more democratic system and resolve ethnic tensions.

In particular the Foreign Office has sought to use its historic experience in the former colony to defuse tensions between the military-backed government and Rohingya Muslims.

Clashes between the Rohingya and Buddhist radicals with close links to the government have left hundreds dead over the past year, while more than 140,000 people remain displaced across Rakhine state.

"We don't underestimate how much needs to be done in Burma but it is critical we are engaged in helping the Burmese undertake changes," Mr Swire said. "The right way to proceed is to have the Burmese here and to send our officials over there to help them through their difficulties."

Mr Swire was the first European minister to visit Rakhine in December. Thein Sein has called for religious tolerance and the former general has dismissed as "pure fabrication" allegations that the Burmese army has colluded in the violence.

However, official reports into the clashes alleged that the Muslim population in the east of the country was not native to Burma but imported from Bengali regions under the Raj, and many Rohingya are denied citizenship to this day.

Mr Swire said he confronted that view, which is widely shared in Burma, with Foreign Office records "stretching back centuries" to show the Muslim community should be viewed as an established part of Burma.

Following a request made to Mr Cameron by the opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, and a visit to Burma by the outgoing chief of the defence staff, Gen Sir David Richards, a defence attache will be appointed in Rangoon.

The new post is designed to oversee the establishment of military to military contacts between the Burmese armed forces and their UK counterparts.

Burma remains subject to an EU arms embargo on the sale of weapons but other sanctions have been dropped.

Burmese military staff will be given training in human rights and the law of armed conflict from their British counterparts, reviving a relationship that goes back centuries.



A soldier stands as people collect pieces of metal from the rubble of a neighbourhood in Pauktaw township that was burned in recent violence

However, campaigning groups claim they are not reconciled with the new policy of engagement adopted by European and US leaders on Burma. Pro-democracy organisations in Burma have said the regime has maintained a repressive military and security apparatus.

Baroness Kinnock of Hollyhead, representing the Burma UK campaign non-governmental organisation, said Mr Cameron, who meets Thein Sein on Monday, was rewarding a leader who had not delivered on promised changes, claiming increased pressure on the regime would be better than conciliatory gestures. She reflected anger that the Government was also looking to develop trade ties with Burma, including a move to expand financial services.

"Promoting trade, before securing major advances on human rights encourages Thein Sein to believe that his government can continue to act with impunity. William Hague and David Cameron should send Thein Sein away with a flea in his ear, not a pat on his back," she said.

A petition organised by the campaign group Avaaz calling on Britain and France to issue an ultimatum on the violence to Thein Sein during the meetings has drawn more than one million signatures. Campaigners will line Whitehall with black tombstones during the meeting.

"The Rohingya in Burma face intimidation and terror and the parallels with the Rwandan genocide are clear to see. David Cameron used to hug a hoody, now he is more interested in hugging generals – we hope he speaks out when he meets President (Thein) Sein and demands an end of the violence," said Sam Barratt, the spokesman.

But Mr Swire said the campaigners were misreading the intentions of the Government, which maintains a close working relationship with Miss Suu Kyi, the freed democracy leader who hopes to be president. "It is wrong to think we are not keeping up the pressure on Burma. There has indeed been a lot of talk from the Burmese government but we want to see a lot more walk the walk."

Officials said Mr Cameron had no plans to follow President Barack Obama and succumb to Burmese pressure to refer to the country as Myanmar, the name the military regime chose for the country in the 1990s.

© The Telegraph, 2013