

Burma's President Thein Sein in first European visit
By BBC News
25 February 2013

Burma's President Thein Sein is embarking on his first European tour, where he is expected to engage in high-level European Union talks.

The president will fly to non-EU state Norway and then visit Finland, Austria, Belgium and Italy, say officials.

He is expected to firm up bilateral ties and discuss Burma's reform process and rights-related issues, reports say.

Last year, Thein Sein visited the US, the first Burmese leader to do so in 46 years. The five countries the Burmese president is visiting are not Europe's largest, but every step on the world stage involving this once most isolated of countries is carefully watched for signs of how well its democratic transformation is progressing, reports BBC South East Asia correspondent Jonathan Head.



Thein Sein will be visiting 5 countries in Europe

Western sanctions against Burma have been loosened following the series of reforms introduced since the end of outright military rule in 2011 by the Thein Sein-led civilian administration.

These include freeing hundreds of prisoners - political detainees among them - and introducing more press freedom.

By-elections in April 2012, seen largely as free and fair, resulted in a landslide win for the Aung San Suu Kyi-led pro-democracy opposition, which now has a small presence in parliament. Ms Suu Kyi, held under house arrest for many years, now serves as leader of the opposition.

The US, the EU and Australia, among other countries, have already eased most sanctions against Burma. In April, the EU lifted all non-military sanctions for a year during a visit by foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton.

Later in the year, European Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso also offered Burma more than \$100m (£66m) in development aid.

But amid the reform process, serious problems remain unresolved.

Two months ago Burmese troops launched an assault on ethnic Kachin insurgents in the north-east of the country, endangering a peace initiative with Burma's minority groups - widely seen as a precondition for democratic progress.

Ethnic conflict in western Rakhine state has left more than 100,000 Muslim Rohingyas displaced.

How Thein Sein responds to inevitable questioning about these issues during his European tour will influence how quickly his host countries are willing to put their faith in the new Burma, and replace sanctions with much-needed aid and investment, our correspondent says.

Thein Sein is expected back in Burma on 8 March.