

Good first step, but don't get hopes up yet



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WASHINGTON: A good first step towards real engagement but do not get your hopes up just yet.

Analysts here offered this prognosis on last week's rare meeting between top US and Myanmar officials, saying that much more difficult negotiations lie ahead before the two countries can break the familiar patterns governing their difficult ties.

"We can't expect miracles," said Mr Thant Myint-U, historian and author of the book *The River Of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History Of Myanmar*.

"And the worst thing would be to saddle (Senator) Jim Webb's efforts with the kind of unrealistic expectations that have doomed so many attempts in the past to bring about positive change in Myanmar."

Mr Webb, the senior senator of Virginia and chairman of the US Senate's foreign relations subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, held direct talks last week with Myanmar's top leader Than Shwe and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who is under house arrest.

The hour-long meeting with the Nobel laureate was considered something of a diplomatic coup, given that the Myanmar government had rebuffed recent requests – including one from United Nations chief Ban Ki Moon – to meet her.

During his visit, Mr Webb also secured the release of Mr John Yettaw, the American who was sentenced to seven years in jail this month for intruding into Ms Suu Kyi's heavily guarded home. Mr Yettaw flew home from Thailand yesterday.

"The American media has been concentrating on the release of Mr Yettaw, but that's not really significant," said Professor David Steinberg, director of Asian studies at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service.

"What is really important here is that we have a senior congressional leader who has gone to Myanmar and they have given a signal. They are really interested in improving relations with America."

Analysts, however, said it was difficult to say with precision what the next step should be until major questions raised in the wake of Mr Webb's visit were cleared up. For one thing, there remained some uncertainties about the nature of the re-

marks that Ms Suu Kyi made to Mr Webb.

Speaking to reporters in Bangkok on Monday, Mr Webb said he did not want to misrepresent Ms Suu Kyi's views, but added it was his clear impression from her that she is not opposed to lifting some sanctions and that there would be some areas she would be willing to look at.

However, Dr Bridget Welsh of Singapore Management University said it would be important to sift out the nuances and caveats in Ms Suu Kyi's comments about the sanctions, which the US had imposed broadly since 1997 and then ratcheted up several times over the years.

The opposition leader's views weigh heavily on the polarised debate on Myanmar policy in Washington, and these latest remarks made to Mr Webb could potentially affect the tenor of future discussions and policy changes.

Added Dr Welsh: "A lot of people claim to speak for Aung San Suu Kyi... but the reality is that we haven't seen how her position has shifted as the international terrain changed. So people tend to follow a position that has been articulated in the past or impose their own."

Another question frequently asked here is whether new information gleaned from the recent visit would affect the Obama administration's review of US policy towards Myanmar, which began earlier this year.

There has been growing recognition in Washington that the US sanctions do not work, but there are few signs of agreement on what a new and effective policy would look like.

And then there is the question of whether Mr Webb or another team of diplomats is better placed to capitalise on the current momentum and push for further talks.

Dr Welsh cautioned against piling too much expectations on one particular envoy to deliver all the results.

One sign of progress that outsiders can keep a lookout for, however, is whether both sides manage to upgrade their diplomatic representations in Washington and Naypyidaw. Both countries are currently represented by a charge d'affaires instead of an ambassador, after the US downgraded its level of representation in Myanmar in 1988 to protest against the junta's crackdown on domestic protests.

"There are steps that could be taken and the start of the process is what is important now," said Prof Steinberg. "Quiet diplomacy is what is needed with the Burmese."