

'Dramatic journey' ahead for Myanmar

By **ROBIN CHAN**

A UNITED Nations official yesterday applauded the decision by the United States to lift sanctions on Myanmar, saying it would start a dramatic economic journey for the once-closed nation.

But he urged businesses to act responsibly with fair contracts, transparency and respect for human rights.

"The expected investment and positive changes will contribute to alleviating poverty by cultivating a private sector that is sustainable and forward-thinking," said Mr Puvan Selvanathan, who chairs the UN Working Group on Human

Rights and Transnational Corporations and Other Business Enterprises. He was speaking at a media briefing on the sidelines of a nine-day workshop on business and human rights being held this week.

Called the Summer Institute in International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, it is organised by the US-based War Crimes Studies Centre and East-West Centre, and hosted by the Singapore Management University's School of Law.

The US formally eased sanctions on Myanmar last week, and also appointed its first ambassador to the country in 22 years, in a show of support for the new government's reforms.

While the move opens the doors to investments from US firms, Mr Selvanathan said he hoped that contracts would be awarded fairly and transparently, and human rights would be safeguarded.

He also urged Myanmar's government and business community to show that the country can be developed sustainably and equitably.

"This type of balanced development, if demonstrated in Myanmar, will be celebrated throughout the region and the world," he said.

Mr Selvanathan, whose group champions better business practices towards human rights, said there is a need to "convey a

sense of urgency" on human rights, just as there has been on the environment.

At the workshop, SMU Assistant Professor of Law Mahdev Mohan floated an idea for Singapore to help drive this goal through what he called a "Singapore consensus".

The Republic, he said, could push this agenda in the region through its influence in Asean.

"(The Singapore consensus) is driven by pragmatism and an eye for detail, and most importantly, by economic considerations and development... but making sure that human rights are not compromised along the way," he said.

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