The government on Thursday called for Myanmar to release pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi in advance of elections scheduled for next year, expanding upon its initial reaction to her recent conviction and adopting a message more in line with other ASEAN countries.

Speaking after a signing ceremony for a Japanese loan and aid grant, Foreign Affairs Minister Hor Namhong emphasised that Myanmar's ruling junta should allow Suu Kyi, who has spent 14 of the past 20 years under house arrest, to participate in the elections.

"That is the problem, whether Ms Aung San Suu Kyi will be able to participate in the 2010 elections or not," he said. "ASEAN has previously told Myanmar that we want to see an election that is transparent, democratic and fair."

A court at Yangon's Insein Prison on Tuesday found Suu Kyi guilty of breaching her house arrest and sentenced her to three years in prison and hard labour, a punishment the head of the ruling junta commuted to 18 months' house arrest.

In response, Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesman Koy Kuong on Tuesday described the decision to commute the sentence as an indication that Myanmar, formerly Burma, was "on the way to democratisation". He declined to comment further, describing the trial as Myanmar's "internal affair".

Hor Namhong's comments Thursday were similar to a Tuesday statement in which Thailand, the ASEAN chair, expressed "deep disappointment" with the verdict and asserted that only "free, fair and inclusive" elections would "pave the way for Myanmar's full integration into the international community".

That statement called "for the immediate release of all those under detention, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi".
Kek Pung, Cambodian chairperson of the Working Group for an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism, said Thursday that she welcomed the government's decision to vocally push for Suu Kyi's release and suggested that Koy Kuong's initial comments had been wrongheaded.

"It's really very difficult to accept [the August 11 sentence]. It's not a sign of a democratic country," she said.

Rupert Abbott, director of programmes and development at the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights (CCHR), said the rights group "congratulated" Hor Namhong for his remarks.

Kek Pung said ASEAN countries should speak out more forcefully on the issue, particularly following the July adoption of terms of reference for a regional human rights body. The body - expected to be known as the ASEAN Inter-Governmental Commission of Human Rights - was approved during the 42nd ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Phuket.

But both she and Abbott said the nature of the rights body - which has been criticised for focusing too much on the promotion of human rights rather than their protection - could make it difficult for Cambodia and ASEAN to do much more than publicly reprimand the ruling junta for rights violations.

Meanwhile, Abbott also said the government should work to improve the rights situation in Cambodia.

"I don't think that in recent years the government has behaved at the same level as the Burmese junta," he said. "But I do think the government has itself cracked down on the opposition here and, like the junta at the moment, has used the courts to do so. We urge the government to practise what it might preach abroad."

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY ROBBIE COREY-BOULET