

**BBC** WORLD SERVICE

Director, BBC World Service

**The Rt. Hon. Hugo Swire MP  
Minister of State  
Foreign & Commonwealth Office  
King Charles Street  
London SW1A 1AA**

15<sup>th</sup> September 2015

Dear Mr Swire,

Thank you for your letter to the BBC Trust, which has been passed to me to reply as Director of the BBC World Service.

I fully understand the British government's position on the use of the name 'Burma', and I am grateful that you acknowledge the BBC's independence in this matter.

This is a complex issue and it may help if I explain the evolution in the BBC's thinking.

As you indicate, the nation's military leaders changed the English language version of the country's name to Myanmar in 1989. The name change was opposed by pro-democracy campaigners and by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. It argued that the name had been changed by a military junta that had no legitimacy.

In the UK, most of the media initially kept the word Burma, in part because it was the term most commonly understood by people in Britain, but also because changing might have been interpreted as an act of support for a military government that was considered illegitimate.

In 2013, however, as you suggest, BBC News decided, after much reflection, to make a change in the way it referred to the country's name and started to move from 'Burma' to 'Myanmar', by referring to both names and without abandoning the former.

While there were good reasons for not doing this in 1989 when the military government changed the official English name of the country, we thought that it was, at this point, appropriate to reconsider.

In doing so, we recognised the risk that there would be a number of people in Burma and the UK who would object to strongly to the change and see it as an endorsement of the government.

For us, however, the issue was about what would be most helpful to our audiences.

We began to make the change because we risked sounding out-dated and out-of-step with sentiment and usage inside the country and around the world. Whatever the debate about how the name-change had taken place, a quarter of a century later the vast majority of the population of Burma had grown used to calling the country Myanmar.

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Today, our reporters in the country are constantly asked why we insist on using 'Burma' and they feel increasingly uncomfortable doing so when so many of the people we interview in the country are using 'Myanmar'.

The name Myanmar is now extensively used nationally and globally by news and other organisations. Reuters, the Economist, the Financial Times, AP, Washington Post, CNN and others have all moved to use Myanmar rather than Burma and the name is becoming recognisable and familiar to our audiences.

We made one important proviso in our decision: we needed to take all our audiences along with us, so we believed the transition should be gradual.

The BBC Burmese Service was founded in 1940. It has covered independence, uprisings and long years of military rule. It plays a vital role in bringing accurate, impartial news to the country, reaching an audience of many millions inside the country, irrespective of the name that might be used.

I hope this helps to answer your concerns.

Yours sincerely,



**Fran Unsworth**  
Director, BBC World Service