

Joint Statement on current political situation and peace processes by community based organizations from Shan State, Burma

June 12, 2012

On June 4 and 5, 2012, about 80 people from various community-based organizations, including women's, youth, environment, community development, media, health, education, literature and culture groups, migrant workers groups, as well as monks and farmers from Shan State held a forum to discuss the current political situation in Shan State, especially the ongoing peace negotiation process.

Key concerns raised by participants about the current situation are as follows:

1. Communities remain in daily fear of the expanding Burma Army, which now numbers over 180 battalions in Shan State, a quarter of their total troop force. The twelfth Burma Army Regional Command has been set up in Shan State since the 2010 election. Despite recent ceasefire agreements, armed clashes continue, and the Burma Army continues to target civilians for abuse with impunity.
2. The 2010 elections, and introduction of "democracy," have not improved the lives of the people of Shan State, as the 2008 pro-military constitution puts the Burma Army outside the law, and elected representatives have no power to curb the army's abuses, or to protect the rights of local communities.
3. The current ceasefire talks with various armed groups in Shan State have not yet resulted in political dialogue to address the structural root causes of the conflict, specifically the lack of rights for ethnic peoples and continued Burma Army dominance. Dialogue addressing these issues is the only way that a sustainable peace can be achieved.
4. The structural political problems are directly impacting the economy of Shan State, particularly our most important sector, agriculture, as the majority of our people are farmers. The combination of the pervasive Burma Army presence and lack of power of the state government to protect farmers, their lands, and their freedom to farm is one of the main problems in Shan State. The current ceasefire process with the armed groups, where 'development,' i.e. large-scale economic investment, is being encouraged before a political solution, will further damage the agriculture sector. This is because investment without safeguard policies to ensure local communities' free, prior, informed consent, and the protection of their livelihoods and environment, will cause more people to lose their lands to mega-development projects such as oil and gas pipelines and hydropower dams, as well as mining and other large-scale extractive industries. Such abusive investments will only further fuel conflict.
5. The drug production and abuse crisis in Shan State will also not be solved without addressing the Burma Army presence and the ongoing political instability.
6. The current government structure at the state level is also too weak to push for the right for ethnic languages and culture to be taught in schools in Shan State.
7. While efforts of the international community to support the peace process in Burma are appreciated, unfortunately current efforts so far are mainly aimed at pushing ethnic nationalities under the 2008 military-led constitution. As the constitution itself, which puts the Burma Army outside the law, and denies ethnic people equal rights, is at the heart of the conflict, such attempts to force ethnic people under this constitution will only perpetuate the conflict.
8. While Burma Army troops continue to commit human rights violations with impunity, it is not safe for IDPs and refugees to return to their homes in Shan State.

9. The huge presence of the Burma Army in Shan State, and their failure to withdraw any troops since the start of the ceasefire talks, are key factors preventing local communities and civil society groups in Shan State from taking part in the current peace process. As a result, peace negotiations have only been between armed groups. However, in order for genuine and sustainable peace to be achieved, communities and civil society groups must take a leading role in the process.

We therefore make the following recommendations to all stakeholders in the peace process:

1. The 2008 Constitution is an obstacle to resolving the social and political problems in Shan State and Burma. These problems can only be solved through structural political reform, resulting from negotiation between political parties, armed groups, and civil society.
 2. The Burma Army should reduce the number of its troops and withdraw from conflict areas in Shan State, which will allow civil society to take a leading role in the peace process to ensure sustainable peace in our land.
 3. Foreign governments and donor organisations wishing to support the peace process should be neutral, and should not use their funds to pressure ethnic groups to come under the 2008 constitution. Decisions about provision of humanitarian aid must be made together with local community-based organizations, and aid must be delivered directly to local communities.
 4. The Burmese government and foreign investors must immediately stop all large-scale resource extraction projects currently underway in Shan State, including oil and gas pipelines, large hydropower dams, and mining and logging ventures. Only after there is a genuine political settlement of the conflict, and proper safeguard policies for local communities are in place, should such projects be reconsidered.
- Signed by:

- (1) Koung Jor Refugee Camp Committee
- (2) “Lin Mawk Mai” (Land Regeneration) Group
- (3) Migrants Worker Federation
- (4) Shan Education Committee
- (5) Shan Farmers Groups
- (6) Shan Health Committee
- (7) Shan Human Rights Foundation
- (8) Shan Relief and Development Committee
- (9) Shan Sapawa Environmental Organization
- (10) Shan State Organization
- (11) Shan Women’s Action Network
- (12) Shan Youth Power Group
- (13) Shan Youth Network Group
- (14) Shan Youth Power
- (15) Workers’ Solidarity Association
- (16) Youth from Shan State

Media Contact:

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|-------------------|----------------|--------------------|--------------|
| 1) Ying Harn Fah | 089 – 262 7848 | 3) Nang Moan Kaein | 081 992 1121 |
| 2) Sai Khur Hseng | 081 – 672 2031 | 4) Nang Charm Tong | 081 603 6655 |

Website: www.shanhumanrights.org, www.shanwomen.org, www.shansapawa.org,