

The Palaung State Liberation Front/ Ta'ang National Liberation Army

Author | Paul Keenan

With the possibility of the signing of a draft nationwide ceasefire agreement, questions remain over what will happen to those groups that the Government does not wish to include as signatories to the first nationwide ceasefire agreement. One of the most active groups in Northern Shan State in relation to the conflict is the armed wing of the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF) the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), which is a member of the UNFC and NCCT.

The TNLA was created by remnants of the PSLF after its ceasefire agreement with the Government in 1991.

Despite the original ceasefire, remnants of the Palaung State Liberation Army (PSLA) had remained at Manerplaw the KNU's headquarters near the Thai-Burma border. These units continued to fight with the Karen and other ethnic forces. The Nationalities Democratic Front (NDF) supported the PSLA's remaining units to form the PSLF on 12 January 1992 and they continued to mount joint operations against Government forces with the Wa National Organisation (WNO) on the Thai-Burma border.

In October 2009, the reformed PSLF held its 3rd congress and formed the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). The TNLA was formed under the political wing of the PSLF. It started military activity in the Palaung area in 2011 with the training and

support of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which it now supports in their conflict with the Burma Army. The PSLF Chairman is Tar Aik Bong and the TNLA's Commander-in-Chief is Tar Hul Plang.

According to the PSLF its aims and Objectives are:

1. To obtain freedom for all Ta'ang Nationals from oppression.
2. To form Ta'ang full autonomy that has a guarantee for Democracy and human rights.
3. To oppose and fight against dictatorship and any form of racial discrimination
4. To attain national equality and self-determination
5. To establish a genuine federal union that guarantees autonomy.

It is currently active in northern Shan State and claims to be able to field more than 4,000 troops.¹ There were originally five battalions but this has been expanded to twenty-one operating in Brigade areas 1, 2, and 3 and it also has two tactical operation commands.²

According to its founder and Chairman, Tar Aik Bong, the group originally wanted a nationwide ceasefire, political dialogue, and self-rule of Ta-ang areas as part of a greater Shan State. He also has noted that:

The main aims of PSLF/TNLA are to attain national equality and self-autonomy, but, due to the current increase in opium plantations and drugs smuggling and drug addiction issues in the region, the TNLA has to operate these two objectives jointly: a war on drug eradication and, at the same time, national liberation.³

It is expected however, that a Central Committee meeting to be held in June will review their political aims in relation to the current situation.

The TNLA had an unofficial meeting with U Aung Min, on 9 November 2012, on the sidelines of a UNFC meeting, and met with the UWPC (Union Peace-making Work Committee) in July 2013, in Muse and both sides agreed to meet again to sign a genuine cease-fire agreement and to reduce the armed conflict. However, clashes in Ta'ang areas increased and no further attempts were made by the Government to contact them.

At the end of August and in September 2014, the group's leaders sent two official letters to President U Thein Sein and Min Aung Hlaing, commander-in-chief, asking for a second round of negotiations and received no reply.

Since then there has been no attempt at further negotiation and the group has found itself sidelined throughout the peace process. This despite the fact that the TNLA is currently one of the most active armed ethnic groups in the country.

According to TNLA sources, its troops had killed 178 Government soldiers in the first six

months of 2014.⁴ According to Tar Aik Bong there are 50 Burma Army Battalions operating in Ta'ang areas and this has led to an increase in abuses against the local population.⁵ As he notes:

We, PSLF/TNLA will try our best to protect the dignity and prosperity of our people. TNLA will never carry out any offensive wars against invading Burmese army and other armed groups, but take defensive positions to protect our people. But if there is Burmese army or any other armed group's launching offensive attacks on us, we will defend our people and our mother land with our lives.⁶

Throughout 2014, the TNLA was engaged in numerous battles with the Burma Army and local military supported militias that are involved in the drugs trade. According to Tar Aik Bong:

. . . the problem is that drugs are offered as financial payment through which to mobilise and maintain local militias in an area where the Burma Army's resources were already thinly stretched. Rather than providing direct payment, the Burmese army has effectively allowed militia groups to control the lands to grow opium

which they have been given license to generate income in whatever ways they like. According to the interests and benefits both for the Burmese military, and militias groups, they let all opium farmers and producers freely operate and participate in the stages of narcotic production in the Ta'ang regions.

In addition to major drug eradication efforts, the TNLA has also actively supported the KIA in its conflict with the Government jointly engaging Burma Army units.

By 2015, the TNLA was supporting the MNDAA Army of Pheung Kya-Shin in attacks against Burma Army units in Kokang. Although the MNDAA has a long history of involvement in the drugs trade, Tar Aik Bong insists that the MNDAA are not currently involved in narcotics and therefore there is no obstacle to being allied with them.⁷

The fighting in Kokang between TNLA/MNDAA troops against the Burma Army has been extremely fierce and has forced over 60,000 people to flee to China. Due to the ever-volatile situation, which has included airstrikes against TNLA/MNDAA troops, the TNLA issued a statement on 15 February:

. . . our PSLF/TNLA seriously urge and call upon Myanmar government and Tatmadaw as follows, for ending the civil war that has been going for more than half

a century in Myanmar country, cohabited by the indigenous nationalities, including the Burman nationality.

(a) To negotiate by the two sides for the reduction of clashes and ceasefire;

(b) To immediately halt military offensives in our Ta'ang Region;

(c) To protect the innocent civilians in times of battles.⁸

It also states:

Our PSLF/TNLA has called upon the Union President and government several times, for negotiation to resolve and reduce armed clashes between the two sides. However, after the meeting at Museh in July 2013, there has been no meeting between the two sides.⁹

Despite the TNLA's calls for further negotiations, there has been no attempt made by the Government to engage the group. The Government's reaction, in part is further compounded by TNLA support for the MNDAA in the Kokang conflict.¹⁰ Primarily, however, the Government has tried to marginalise the group due to its size, despite the fact that the group's military wing has doubled.

The TNLA was a participant at the UWSA held Ethnic Summit, along with the Arakan Army, and it is hoped that their participation may be able to strengthen their position in future attempts to negotiate.

Notes

¹ Email correspondence with Tar Aik Bong, 30 April 2015

² Email correspondence with Tar Aik Bong, 23 April 2015

³ <http://www.burmalink.org/taang-palaung-leader-tar-aik-bong-without-proper-political-solutions-will-lasting-peace/>

⁴ '178 Govt Troops Killed by TNLA This Year: Rebel Leaders', Lawi Weng, The Irrawaddy, 18 July 2014

⁵ <http://www.burmalink.org/taang-palaung-leader-tar-aik-bong-without-proper-political-solutions-will-lasting-peace/>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Email correspondence with Tar Aik Bong, 23 April 2015

⁸ 'Statement of Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF) for Reduction-Cessation of Battles between Two Sides in Ta'ang Region', Statement # (3/2015), 23 February, 2015

⁹ Ibid.

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<http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/13108-tnla-arakan-army-join-kokang-fight.html>