Minorities, Money And Getting It Wrong in Myanmar

By Bertil Lintner

Myanmar has been riven by armed ethnic conflict for decades, despite numerous efforts to reach peace agreements. The latest iteration of those efforts has notably involved financially well-heeled foreign peace-making groups that have little understanding of the historical complexity of the underlying issues, but who are eager to claim credit for any progress in the peace process, writes Bertil Lintner. China, meanwhile, seems to hold many of the cards.

THE EUPHORIA knew no bounds. When it was announced that a text had been drafted for a proposed ceasefire agreement between the Myanmar government and some of the country’s many ethnic resistance armies, The Center for Humanitarian Dialog, a Swiss-based peace and reconciliation outfit that runs several Myanmar-related projects, hailed it as “the most comprehensive ceasefire agreement in Myanmar’s history” which “will set the stage for resolving the longest-running conflict in Southeast Asia.” Vijay Nambiar, special advisor on Myanmar to the Secretary General of the United Nations, also called the drafting of the proposal “historic” and UNICEF even suggested that it “could be a dawn of a new time of progress for the most disadvantaged children in Myanmar.”

That was on March 31, 2015. Four years on, it is evident that Myanmar’s so-called peace process has been a complete failure. Even as the foreign peacemakers were congratulating themselves in the capital Naypyidaw and in Yangon, the reality on the ground remained depressingly unchanged. Airstrikes and other attacks were continuing against Kachin and Palaung rebel forces in the north and northeast of the country. When what was termed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was nevertheless signed on Oct. 15, 2015, it was announced that “eight groups” were behind it. But five of the signatories had no noteworthy armed forces, and one, the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, had been a government-allied militia since it broke away from the main group, the Karen National Union (KNU), in 1994.

That meant that only two of the signatories — the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) and the KNU — were actually engaged in armed struggle against the government before signing the NCA. Groups representing 80 percent of Myanmar’s armed rebels refused to sign the agreement because they saw it as surrender, not the beginning of a comprehensive settlement for peace and the establishment of the federal union that they envisaged.

‘PEACE,’ FOLLOWED BY FIGHTING
The ultimate irony is that Myanmar has seen the heaviest fighting in decades since a government led by President Thein Sein, a former army general, assumed office in March 2011 and launched its so-called peace process. In fact, Myanmar’s civil war has not been this intense since the country’s military, the tatmadaw, launched offensives against communist forces and ethnic Karen rebels in the 1980s. On Feb. 13, 2018, the government proudly announced that two more groups had signed the NCA — a Mon rebel army and a Thailand-based NGO representing the Lahbu, another ethnic minority.

But, at the same time, the war had spread to Kokang, an area populated by ethnic Chinese in the northeastern corner of Shan State. In October 2016 and August 2017, Muslim insurgents from a group called the Arakan Rohingya Sal...
Then, early this year, the Arakan Army, a group drawing its supporters from the Buddhist majority of the Rakhine State, clashed with the security forces, prompting another crackdown — and the flight of Rakhines and other Buddhists across the country’s western border.

The conflict never seems to end, despite, or because of, the involvement of a host of foreign peacekeepers with little or no understanding of Myanmar’s ethnic problems. They — the governments of Norway and Switzerland, the European Union and a host of other governmental and private outfits — have also brought with them hundreds of millions of dollars, turning peacemaking into a lucrative industry that has achieved nothing when it comes to alleviating the sufferings of the people in the frontier areas. Most Western donors have even aided the groups that have signed the NCA, diverting money away from projects in actual conflict areas.

FOREIGN DO-GOODERS IN THE DARK

Reports produced by the foreign peacekeepers also reflect their lack of knowledge of the situation in the field. The Center for Humanitarian Dialogue issued its fanciful interpretation of what happened in March 2015, while the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), a government-funded Norwegian outfit, listed in a policy brief numbered 1/2019 what was purported to be the armed strength of 18 rebel forces in Myanmar — and managed not to get a single number right. The Pa-O National Liberation Organization (PNLO), an NCA signatory, is supposed to have 800 soldiers. It did not consist of more than a couple of Pa-O exiles in northern Thailand and a tiny token force on the Thai-Myanmar border when it signed the agreement. Since then — and in order to gain some credibility as an armed force — it has been able to “borrow” some troops from the main Pa-O group, the Pa-O National Organization/Army, which entered into a ceasefire agreement with the authorities in 1991. But even so, the armed strength of the PNLO is nowhere near 800.

Likewise, the Chin National Front (CNF) — which controlled no territory at the time of the signing of the NCA — was “given” three villages in Chin State also to shore up its credentials. It is listed in the PRIO report as having 200 soldiers; informed observers would put the figure at less than half that number. The Karen Peace Council, an NCA signatory like the PNLO and the CNF, is supposed to be a formidable force of 4,000 fighters; in reality, it is more like 200. On the other hand, the PRIO plays down the armed strength of a non-signatory, the Arakan Army, saying it has 1,000 troops where other estimates are on the order of 4,000 to 5,000.

The Stockholm-based Swedish think-tank, the Institute for Security and Development Policy produced reports suggesting that the Kachin Independence Organization, another non-signatory, was likely to split into different factions because of tribal issues and conflicts between Kachins who were in favor of the NCA and those who were opposed to it. In reality, the Kachin Independence Organization and its armed wing, the Kachin Independence Army, has remained remarkably united, even in the face of massive tatmadaw onslaughts against its bases along the Chinese border and in western Kachin State.

A popular practice to “push the process forward” has been to invite representatives of the tatmadaw, the government, and the ethnic armed groups — whether they have signed the NCA or not — on study tours to other conflict areas across the globe, including Northern Ireland, Colombia, South Africa and Guatemala. The main player behind those trips is a UK-based outfit called Intermediate, founded and led by Jonathan Powell, who served as former Prime Minister Tony Blair’s chief of staff from 1997 to 2007.

But the value of such trips is being questioned. A foreign analyst in Myanmar described it as “an endless parade of international peace junkets that preoccupy ethnic leaders while the actual negotiations have bogged down.” In late 2018, the RCSS and the KNU — the two main signatories of the NCA — even withdrew from talks with central authorities because those had produced no tangible results. Meanwhile, “those who address ongoing conflicts and point out the problems are cast as spoilers of the progress,” the analyst said. A Myanmar human-rights worker cynically referred to developments as a “peace opera.” One might add that it is an opera where too many divas aspire to be the lead performer, and no one wants to sing in the choir.

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

Instead of spending vast amounts of money on “studying” processes in other countries that bear little or no resemblance to Myanmar’s long-standing ethnic and political conflicts, it would be much more useful to examine Myanmar’s own past experience of peace efforts — and why those, without exception, have failed to end the wars. In 1956, when then army chief General Ne Win took over from the elected government of Prime Minister U Nu and formed a military-controlled “caretaker government,” some communist and ethnic rebels laid down their arms under an official amnesty. No political concessions were offered. Some surrendered while others formed bands of local armed men engaged in trade. On March 2, 1962, when the military seized absolute power after a short interregnum with a new civilian government also led by U Nu, the new junta promised serious peace talks. Those commenced in 1963 and attracted a wide range of ethnic and political rebels. But, again, the ruling military demanded surrender, offering nothing more than “rehabilitation.”

Unsurprisingly, the talks broke down. Some old and new armed bands were converted into home guard units called ka kwe ye, but there was not enough money in the central coffers to pay them, so they were allowed to trade in opium to finance themselves. The two most notorious Golden Triangle drug lords, Lo Hsing-han and Zhang Qifu (alias Khun Sa), actually began their careers as ka kwe ye commanders and were arrested only when they established links with the ethnic rebels they were supposed to fight.

In 1980, the government announced a general amnesty for rebels, political prisoners and dissidents. Officially, 1,431 rebels surrendered. This figure was, most likely, a gross exaggeration, but the amnesty also led to the surrender of a right-wing insurgency on the Thai border led by U Nu. In 1980, peace talks were also initiated with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). The talks lasted for months, but the government’s offer was again rehabilitation in exchange for surrender. Needless to say, those talks broke down as well.

After the pro-democracy uprising that swept Myanmar in 1988, thousands of urban dissidents fled to the border areas where they linked up with ethnic groups such as the KNU and the KIA. But those groups had only a few guns to spare with the Bamar activists — unlike the CPB, which has warehouses full of weaponry supplied by China during 1968-78. However, few pro-democracy activists fled to the CPB-held areas along the Chinese border in northeastern Myanmar.

The situation changed when, in March-April 2019, the Arakan Army launched attacks on security outposts on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, provoking a massive response from the tatmadaw. More than 700,000 Rohingya Muslims, a Muslim community in Rakhine State, fled into Bangladesh to escape what UN investigators and human-rights advocates have described as “ethnic cleansing.”
1989, the hill-tribe rank and file — most of whom were ethnic Wa from the frontier areas — of the CPB rose in mutiny against the party’s ageing, predominantly Bamar leadership. They were driven into exile in China while the CPB subsequently broke up into four ethnic armies, the largest of which was the United Wa State Army (UWSA). Now, the junta that assumed power in Yangon in September 1988 faced the real danger of Myanmar’s own past experience of peace efforts — and why those, without exception, have failed to end the wars.
to-party” relations, China is able to send diplomats to take part in the peace process at the same time as its security agents are arming the UWSA. While Sun Guoxiang, the main Chinese diplomat who attends talks in Naypyidaw and elsewhere, he promotes peace and continued dialogue, another game is being played out from behind the scenes. China does not want to see more war in northern Myanmar, but the UWSA has to be kept strong enough to deter the tatmadaw from attacking it.

For China, the UWSA is an effective bargaining chip when it wants to put pressure on the Myanmar government not to stray too close to the West. The threat posed by the UWSA, and China playing the role as the sole arbiter in talks between the rebels and the government and the tatmadaw, are also useful tools when the Chinese want to protect their investments in Myanmar. That became especially important after then-President Thein Sein in September 2011 decided to suspend a US$3.6 billion Chinese hydroelectric power project at Myitsone in the far north of the country. The Chinese have also had to deal with ongoing protests against a Chinese mine project in Letpadaung, northwest of the central city of Mandalay. Tellingly, when Aung Min, then a government minister, met the protesters at Letpadaung in 2012, he told them that “we don’t dare to have a row with China. If they feel annoyed with the shutdown of their projects and resume their support to the communists, the economy would backslide. So you’d better think seriously.”

The West’s inability to understand not only the fundamentals of Myanmar’s civil wars but also the role that China is playing in the process is a recipe for disaster. A completely new approach is needed to bring to an end decades of war in the frontier areas. Myanmar’s ethnic conflict is a political problem demanding a political solution, not merely a repeat of what happened in the 1950s, 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s. The alternative is to leave Myanmar wide open to Chinese penetration and exploitation. And that is not in the interests of Myanmar, its long-suffering people — or those in the region and beyond who are becoming increasingly wary of the rise of China and what it means for the rest of the world.

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