

AUTHOR | Paul Keenan

Securing Agreement

The Peace Process Steering Team's role in the peace process

On October 15, 2015, the government led by the then president U Thein Sein and eight ethnic armed groups signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. The original signatories were the PNLO, the Karen National Union (KNU), the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), the Chin National Front (CNF), All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF), Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), the Karen Nation Union Peace Council (KNUPC) and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). The original eight groups would be later joined, in February 2018, by the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Lahu Democratic Union (LDU).

To ensure a common negotiating position the original eight groups formed the Peace Process Steering Team on 26 March 2016 under the leadership of General Mutu Say Poe of the KNU and General Yawd Serk of the RCSS as deputy leader. The team stated,

Purpose:

1. to provide leadership (guidance and supervision) when meeting with non-signatory groups and the new government.
2. provide direction when making urgent decisions.
3. direct projects for the JMC (Joint Monitoring Committee) and the UPDJC (Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee)

Guidelines:

1. Convening of NCA signatory EAOs, together with observers and technical advisors, totalling 79 persons;
2. Reassess NCA implementation;
3. Welcome the new government for its peace commitment and the EAOs readiness to cooperate;
4. The necessity for all EAOs to participate and be represented in the forthcoming 2nd Union Peace Conference;
5. Believe in the need for all EAOs' enthusiastic participation until an agreement to form a federal union is achieved through political negotiations;
6. The formation of EAO Peace Process Steering Team (EAO PPST); and
7. Pledge to adhere to the NCA and cooperate with the new regime and the Tatmadaw (Military) to implement the agreement.¹

AUTHOR | Paul Keenan

Two days later on March 28 2016, at the 2nd EAO-8 summit, the Delegation for EAO Unity (DEU) led by Khaing Soe Naing Aung with members including Padoh Kwe Htoo Win, Than Khe, Saw Kyaw Nyunt, Lian Sakhong, Dr Sui Khar and Mi Su Pwint. The purpose of the DEU was ostensibly to focus on further discussions with non-signatories EAOs and meetings with the then United Nationalities Federal Council's Delegation for Political Negotiation (DPN) about how both can work together under an NLD government.²

Numerous meetings have taken place between the PPST and the Myanmar Peace Centre (MPC) prior to the election, and the NLD's successor peace broker the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre (NRPC). The PPST has actively involved itself in the various Union Peace Conferences that have taken place under the auspices of the NLD government.

The first UPC saw 73 proposals made but resulted in no agreements. The second saw agreement on 37 points, and the third UPC on 14 points. The agreement or Union Accord currently covers political, economy, social, land and environment categories, however, a major sticking point has been with the composition of a single armed force and the ethnic states non-cessation.

However general dissatisfaction with the peace process and perceived disagreements within the organisation itself led to the KNU suspending its participation in the NCA process,³

... in order to create meaningful participation of the organization in the peace process and to seek enough time for the creation of the unified participation of the whole organization.⁴

In response to what was perceived to be a lack of movement on the peace process, General Mutu resigned his position in the PPST in March 2019. He was replaced by KNU Secretary-General Ta Doh Moo.

General Mutu was quoted as saying the peace process had deviated from the goal of creating a federal democratic union that includes ethnic equality and rights of autonomy.⁵ He also noted that

The ethnic armed organizations that comprise the PSST have common goals for reaching a federal system, but their views on what kind of federal system they want differ from those of the ethnic armies implementing the terms of the NCA.⁶

The PPST also formed a working group to discuss with government officials three agenda items outlined in a letter to Aung San Suu Kyi and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.

These issues related to earlier assurances by Min Aung Hlaing to secure peace by 2020 and by Aung San Suu Kyi that three Union Peace Conference sessions would be held in 2019; a review and renegotiation of all NCA mechanisms to ensure they are fair for all parties; and the formation of a consensus among differing opinions on the degree of federalism.⁷

In May 2019, the PPST held its fourth conference, which included the participation of the KNU and formed two working groups with one group responsible for addressing the deadlock and federal issues while another group would work on the structure of all-inclusive participation.⁸ At the same meeting, EAO leaders discussed the possibility of transforming the Peace Process Steering Team (PPST) into the Peace Process Consultative Meeting (PPCM), but there were disagreements on how or if this should take place.⁹

According to Ta Doh Moo,

AUTHOR | Paul Keenan

We came back because the PPST decided they would reform the team, so if they reform, we'll continue our cooperation . . . We wanted to leave because the PPST did not [want to] make changes [within the team].¹⁰

The reason for restructuring the PPST into the PPCM was to ensure equal participation of all members, large or small, after the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Lahu Democratic Union (LDU), which had previously been observers, were made full members in August.

Colonel Solomon, LDU secretary, noted

From now on, we can have an open discussion and raise our concerns to be taken into consideration, and we can make decisions along with others in the team.¹¹

Most recently, the PPST terms of reference (TOR) have been revised, it is likely with these new changes that the PPST will still continue to be the main negotiating body with the government while the PPCM could be reconstituted later.¹²

At a meeting in December, the following main issues were discussed

1. To review and adopt the 9-point draft agreement to be submitted to JICM
2. To propose the date of JICM, between 7-10 January
3. Adopt the redrafted TOR for NCAS-EAOs
4. Discuss implementing international agreements and instruments signed by Myanmar together with building national reconciliation and peace.
5. To discuss ways and means to counter C-in-C's speech on 28 October which went against the NCA.¹³

8th Joint Ceasefire Implementation Committee Meeting (JICM)

The JICM is the highest-level meeting in the peace process and is attended by top government and security officials and the leaders of the NCA.

The 8th Joint Implementation Coordination Meeting (JICM) was held at the National Reconciliation and Peace Center (NRPC) in Nay Pyi Taw on 8 January 2020.

The Meeting was attended by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and government representatives including Deputy Commander in Chief of Defence Services Vice Senior General Soe Win.

The Ethnic Armed Organizations were represented by the Acting Leader of the Peace Process Steering Team (PPST) and Chairman of Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) Sao Yawd Serk.

The meeting produced an eight-point agenda agreement,

1. Creation of a framework for NCA implementation
2. Continuation of the process beyond 2020
3. Step by step implementation
4. Agreement on Union Accord Part 3, which includes a framework for political dialogues and ceasefire monitoring

AUTHOR | Paul Keenan

5. Convening the 21st Century Panglong Union Peace Conference in the first trimester of 2020
6. Formation of a working group for interpretations of terms used in NCA
7. To work for all inclusion of non-signatory EAOs
8. To hold the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee (UPDJC) and the Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC) meetings within two months.¹⁴

On the 17 January, the PPST once more held a meeting. Here, Yawd Serk reportedly said,

In laying down future tasks, we have to do so in agreement.¹⁵

He also noted that the goal of building a Federal Union depended on the groups' constant engagement in the peace process and keeping

... the affairs of the Union in the forefront, rather than the affairs of one group.¹⁶

And that,

I would like to request you to discuss the views of the organizations rather than the opinion of individuals... and work hard.

The PPST continues to remain, at this moment in time at least, the main negotiating body for armed ethnic groups in the peace process. While there have been a number of pitfalls throughout its history, it is hoped that it can once again find common and equal consensus with all the groups it represents. For the peace process to move forward in 2020, as an election looms, it is hoped there is an increased urgency for all parties in the peace process to compromise and achieve substantial results.

AUTHOR | Paul Keenan

Notes

¹ Sai Kheunsai, Learning to share: The EAO8 Summit # 2, SHAN, 28 Mar 2016, in Deciphering Myanmar's Peace Process

² EAO Coordination Team Meeting in Rangoon 21-22nd October 2015, KNU HQ Facebook. 22 Oct 2015, in Deciphering Myanmar's Peace Process

³ 'Analysis: Why Did the KNU Temporarily Leave Peace Talks?', Nyein Nyein, The Irrawaddy, 29 October 2018

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/karen-general-quits-as-head-03072019165910.html>, accessed 12 November 2019

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/nca-signatory-eaos-form-working-groups-address-peace-process-deadlock>, accessed 13 November 2019

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ 'Formal Peace Talks Will Resume in Step-by-Step Process: EAOs', Nyein Nyein, The Irrawaddy, 26 August 2019

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Personal conversation with EAO advisor, 25 November 2019

¹³ Email correspondence with EAO advisor, 9 December 2019

¹⁴ <https://elevenmyanmar.com/news/eight-point-agreement-reached-at-jicm>, accessed 17 January 2020

¹⁵ 'Rebel Groups Told to Unite to Save Myanmar's Peace Process' Nyein Nyein, The Irrawaddy, 17 January 2020

¹⁶ Ibid.