Inter-ethnic Conflict in Myanmar

Contesting control in Shan State

While most media attention continues to focus on the domestic political problems that have engulfed the country since the 1 February military takeover, little has been said about continuing inter-ethnic fighting in Shan State between the Restoration Council Shan State (RCSS) the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP) and its ally the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA).

A large part of the current discourse in relation to the military takeover suggests that armed ethnic organisations will be able to come together in a 'Federal Army' to free the people in the cities. But if there is one thing the continuous fighting in Shan State suggests is that there remains much discord between ethnic actors themselves.

Clashes between the two Shan factions have been a constant and have also heavily involved the Ta'ang National Liberaion Army (TNLA) which has sided with the SSPP. In large part the increase in fighting was exacerbated in 2015 after the RCSS signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). After the NCA was signed, the RCSS established bases in Namtu, Hsipaw and Kyaukme townships. The move sparked fighting between the RCSS and the Shan State Progress Party, which controlled some areas outside of major towns there, and the TNLA. Similarly, the SSPP also allied itself not only with the TNLA, but also the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the then Kachin based Arakan Army (AA).

Politically, the SSPP/SSA had no particular objective and instead sought guidance in such matters from the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD). However since the emergence of the TNLA, the SSPP seems to have allowed the Ta'ang group to hold major influence over the SSPP in its current strategy making processes. It also appears the TNLA's territorial ambitions are perhaps driving, or at least adding to current hostilities with the RCSS in which the SSPP is playing a part.

In 2018, media reported that the RCSS claimed it had the right to operate wherever there are ethnic Shan while the SSPP and TNLA say it belongs in the south of Shan State only. However, according to one individual close to the RCSS it had said that it will operate in every township outside the Self-Administered Zones (SAZs) and Self-Administered Division (SAD). Meaning the TNLA should not operate outside the 2008 constitutionally mandated Namhsan and Mantong. If it wants to, it must be in agreement with the RCSS.[1] The RCSS/SSA has maintained control in the north through its Brigade-701 in Muse District, Namkham Township. The claims to have set up Task Force 701 in 2006 after the PSLA was disarmed and SSA 3rd Brigade was ordered to move south of Lashio-Mandalay Road.

The TNLA claims the RCSS used its membership in the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement with the central government as justification for stationing fighters in the north of Shan State.[2] A claim the RCSS has vehemently denied.The TNLA has also accused it of not consulting them on territory demarcation or joint operations, obstructing established administrative structures of TNLA and SSPP and forced conscription on pretext of combating drug addiction.[3] For its part, the RCSS claims that local ethnic Shan in Northern Shan State invited them to set up bases in the area to protect

them against TNLA oppression, which the SSPP allegedly failed to do due to its alliance with the TNLA against the Tatmadaw.[4]

Most recently, it has been suggested that one of the main reasons for the continuing conflict is the fact that Northern Shan State has become a key point for border trade between Myanmar and China, especially with China's Belt and Road Initiative. China has plans to build a railway link to Myanmar. It has therefore been posited that the underlying reasons for continuing ethnic conflict is related now more to business interests and securing territorial gains rather than previous grievencies or ideological issues.[5]

<table>
<tr><th colspan="3">SHAN</th><th colspan="2">Palaung</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">21 May 1958: 'Noom Suk Harn' - Shan independence movement founded</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">1964: SSA is the mainstream Shan resistance army founded by the wife of Shan King and first Burmese president Sao Shwe Thaike, and is a leading representative of the Noom Suk Harn movement</td><td colspan="2" rowspan="3">1963 - Apr 1991: Palaung armed movement (PSLA/PSLP)</td></tr>
<tr><td>SURA (1969)</td><td colspan="2" rowspan="2">SSA-SSPP (formed 1971)</td></tr>
<tr><td>+ joined with Khun Sa (SUA)
= Mong Tai Army MTA (1985-1996)</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">SURA
(1997) renamed RCSS - took over the Shan armed resistance
after agreeing to form one SSA with the SSPP, but retained separate leaderships.</td><td colspan="2" rowspan="2">SSPP signed a 1989 ceasefire with the Burmese government</td><td colspan="2">PSLA 1991 ceasefire the Palaung were designated Special Region 7.</td></tr>
<tr><td>1992-Apr 2005: PSLF faction set up by exiles in Thailand</td><td>PSLA (disbanded in 2005)</td></tr>
<tr><td>2009: 2 SSPP brigades + HQ transformed into Govt PMF</td><td>one brigade revived the armed resistance → SSPP/SSA-N (Pang Fa)

2011-2012: SSPP expanded into 12 brigades</td><td colspan="2">2009: PSLF Revival under TNLA by Palaung exiles in Thailand and China</td></tr>
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Source: Briefing 8: Inter-Shan State Conflict, Luffa Political Consulting, 11 May, 2019

Roots of Conflict

Conflict between the RCSS/SSA-S and PSLF/TNLA had originally erupted in Shan State on 27 November 2016 in Namhkam and Manton townships, near the China border. Reports from the Ta'ang claim that members of the SSA-S had crossed into their areas, which they designate as Kyaukme, Namhsan, Manton and Namkham Townships, without seeking 'permission'.[6]

According to the TNLA, the RCSS was supported the next day by the Myanmar Army. Captain Mai Aie Kyaw, a spokesman for the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) speaking to RFA stated,

> We've been fighting against the RCSS (Restoration Council of Shan State) since 27 November . . . During the last three days, government forces have joined the RCSS in fighting us.[7]

In another interview, Captain Mai Aie Kyaw said the blame actually laid with the Myanmar Army and the fact that the RCSS had signed the NCA,

> We are not sure about their intentions, but the fighting broke out after the RCSS signed the nationwide ceasefire agreement . . . They [the Myanmar Army] are creating the fighting. They fought alongside the RCSS on the frontline.

According to local media reports, the RCSS/SSA-S troops had been passing through a contested area in the Shweli River valley after returning from a workshop on the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) held at the group's base on the Thai-Burma border.[8]

To address the issue the PSLF issued a statement on 10 December blaming the RCSS for the incident,

1. We, the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF/TNLA), strongly condemn the RCSS/SSA's act of military aggression, with the help of Myanmar Tatmadaw, by entering into Ta'ang Region, where battles have been raging between Tatmadaw and Ta'ang national army troops, as it is a setup that could lead to serious conflict between fellow ethnic nationalities.

2. After signing the NCA, the Southern Shan State Army, the RCSS/SSA, with the help of Myanmar government troops, has been expanding its troop presence constantly, in our Ta'ang Region. As the combining of forces with the Myanmar troops and engaging in area control operations, regardless of our repeated warnings, is an undertaking, which should not be done against a fellow nationality, we, the Ta'ang Army PSLF/TNLA, inevitably have to respond militarily.

3. The Southern Shan State Army, the RCSS/SSA, with a force of over 500 troops and by acquiring aid from Myanmar government army, has been launching expansion drive successively into PSLF/TNLA Brigade-2 Area in Mogok, Kyaukme and Namtsan Townships, Brigade-1 Area in Kutkai and Nam kham Townships, and

Brigade-3 Area in Mantong and Momeik Townships. Clashes between the two sides have been happening constantly.

4. Our PSLF/TNLA has been endeavouring to reduce armed clashes, as much as possible, during the political transition period, between the time of 2015 election and the emergence new election-winning NLD government. However military clashes have become ferocious, because the RCSS/SSA, together with Myanmar Tatmadaw, has been performing to the gratification of Myanmar military leaders.

5. For that reason, we, the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF/TNLA), declare our position that we strongly protest and condemn the act of current Myanmar Tatmadaw and Southern Shan State Army, RCSS/SSA, which have been working with concrete intention and primarily for prolonging more than ever the fire of Burma's civil war, by launching aggressive military expansion.[9]

As a result of the clashes, the RCSS decided to meet with the UNFC on the 15 December in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The meeting was attended by three representatives from the UNFC including military chief General Bee Htu from the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), Twan Zaw the from Arakan National Council (ANC), Naing Shwe Thein from the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and three representatives from the RCSS/SSA-S including Lt. Gen. Yawd Serk, Lt. Col. Sai Nguen and Lt. Col. Sai Muang. However, no TNLA representatives were present during the discussion.

According to Lt. Col. Sai Nguen, three issues were discussed.

> Firstly, we discussed how we could work together in the political arena in the future, Secondly, we discussed long lasting ethnic unity. And finally, we discussed the recent fighting between the RCSS/SSA-A and the TNLA/PSLF.[10]

He further added, in relation to the conflict with the TNLA,

> We agreed that we will solve the problem by peaceful means . . . The UNFC will report what we have discussed with them. In the near future, both sides will hold a meeting again in order to find a solution . . . For RCSS, we always think of TNLA as an ally. We never had a problem and fought each other in the past. We never think of the TNLA as our enemy.[11]

Despite such sentiments clashes continued to be reported throughout December and into February 2016.[12] On January 18, the TNLA/PSLF Information Department posted on their Facebook page that fighting had broken out between TNLA Battalion No. 256 and RCSS/SSA-S troops, but claimed that it was due to the RCSS/SSA-S troops trespassing into territory under TNLA control.

Mai Aik Kyaw, a spokesperson for the TNLA, told local media that the RCSS/SSA-S was not previously operating in the disputed area, but had arrived in the middle of November and was now fighting alongside Myanmar Army troops. According to him

> We fought with RCSS troops first before 8 o'clock and then the government troops advanced to our positions. They fired both small arms and heavy weapons.[13]

He said the government's Light Infantry Division No. 77 came in as a reinforcement unit and a combined force of RCSS and LID 77 clashed with the TNLA near Lwepaik village, Mai Ngau sub-township, at about 1 p.m. he reiterated

> The RCSS invaded our territory to loot us . . . They fought us with government troops. It means a NCA signatory force fought a NCA non-signatory force by taking assistance from government troops,[14]

However, the RCSS/SSA-S deny they had encroached onto TNLA territory, Sai Hseng Murng, the organisation spokesperson claimed that TNLA troops had attacked them and had been advancing further into areas controlled by RCSS/SSA-S every day. He also noted that the RCSS/SSA-S had sent letters to TNLA several times requesting a meeting to discuss the conflict, and that,

> We [ethnic groups] don't want to have a problem among each other.[15]

On the 24 January, Myanmar media reported that the TNLA had asked the UNFC and the Shan State Progressive Party (SSPP) to intervene to help end the fighting with the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS). The report quoted Colonel Tar Phone Kyaw, general secretary of the TNLA as saying,

> We are seeking to end the ongoing clashes. We have already informed the UNFC and the SSPP about the clashes. We requested both organisations to intervene to stop the clashes with the RCSS.[16]

The RCSS spokesperson Colonel Sai La also struck a similar conciliatory tone,

> We don't want clashes. We want to be on good terms with all ethnic groups. We will be glad if the TNLA gives the green light.[17]

Prior to the NCA signing, on the 21st May 2011, Shan State People's Resistance Day, Lt. General Yawd Serk, leader of the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), announced that:

> *'There is only one Shan State Army now. SSA 'South' and SSA 'North' [does not] exist any longer.'*[18]

He then continued:

> *'. . . It is clear that we have the same enemy and fighting for the same ideal. We just need to work out the details,'*

Despite such a statement the details remained to be worked out. Both sides had two constitutions which needed to be re-written and the SSPP had a 21 member committee which needed to be accommodated in a future Shan State council. While such problems were not insurmountable it was unlikely that any changes would occur that year.[19]

There is no doubt that the RCSS/SSA,, has been providing some military support to the SSPP/SSA in operations against the Myanmar Army since conflict began in their area on the 13th March 2011. As Yawd Serk notes:

> *'We have been helping and supporting the SSPP since it was attacked, though we operate separately,'*[20]

Despite this, the SSPP/SSA continued to face territorial losses On the 13 June 2011 the SSPP/SSA were forced to retreat from its Kawng Sao Merng base, located one mile east of its former Hsengkaew HQ, Hsipaw Township, after an intense shelling campaign and an attack involving three battalions of BA troops. On the 22 June 2011, Mongao-based Infantry Battalion 33 attacked SSPP/SSA 27th Brigade at the Ta Pha Hsawng crossing of the Lawng river, a tributary of the Pang, between 3 townships: Kehsi, Mongyai and Hsipaw forcing the 27th Brigade troops to retreat a day later.

According to Shan sources the conflict resulted in the loss of most of the SSPP's bases in an offensive that involved 25 Burma Army battalions.

EAO Background

The RCSS

The Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS)/Shan State Army – South (SSA-S), under the command of Lt. General Yawd Serk, is currently believed to be one of the strongest of the ethnic resistance groups with more than seven thousand troops.[21]

In total it has 5 fixed bases, the Loi Taileng H.Q. (opposite Pang Mapha District, Mae Hong Son), Loi Moong Merng (opposite Muang District, Mae Hong Son), Loi Lam (Wiang Haeng District, Chiang Mai), Loi Hsarm Hsip (opposite Fang district, Chiang Mai) and Loi Gawwan (opposite Mae Fa Luang District, Chiang Rai).[22] The SSA-South was the first group to formally agree to a ceasefire with the government on 3 December 2011.

The SSA-South was not a member of the United National Federal Council but was a member of the six-state military alliance which included the KNU, CNF, ALP, KNPP and the KNO.[23] On 21 May 2011 the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), announced that it was combining with the Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army (SSPP/SSA), formerly the Shan State Army – North. The SSPP/SSA had faced a government offensive that had begun in March 2011 and the SSA-South had fought alongside its troops. Fighting in the area around the SSPP/SSA Headquarters stopped in December and BA forces were withdrawn. The RCSS/SSA agreement with the Burmese government does not extend to the SSPP/SSA.[24]

The SSPP

The original Shan State Army (SSA) was formed on 24 April 1964 by the Mahadevi of Yawnghwe during the rule of Ne Win's Burma Socialist Program Party while the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP) was founded in 1971, as the political wing of SSA. However, it received a major setback in 1989 with the collapse of its main ally, the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which removed its main source of arms and ammunition.

Although the SSA finally made a peace agreement with the government, a small number of SSA cadres led by Sao Sai Lek - the SSA's commander since 1983 - remained active and joined the rival Mong Tai Army (MTA) led by Khun Sa. The MTA became a powerful alliance of Shan nationalist groups, including the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA) led by Moh Heng and Khun Sa's Shanland United Army (SUA).

Sao Sai Lek died in January 1995 and in January 1996, Khun Sa surrendered to the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and disbanded the MTA. A faction of former SURA fighters led by Yawd Serk refused to surrender and resurrected the SURA, before merging with other scattered Shan forces under the Shan State Army (SSA) banner. Active on the southern border with Thailand, the 'new' SSA became known as the Shan State Army - South (SSA-South) to distinguish it from the original SSA, which was still at peace with the government, and which became known as the Shan State Army - North (SSA-North).

In 1989, the SSPP signed a ceasefire in 1989 after negotiations with the SLORC and was able to obtain a degree of autonomy for the areas under its control, establishing the *Special Region 3* of the Shan State. This area included Nam Kham, Langkho, Hsipaw, Kyauk Mae, Mong Hsu, Tang Yang, Mongyai, Kehsi and Lashio Township. The size of the armed group at that time was of about 4.000 fighters. Even after having signed a ceasefire, the Burmese military continued to attack the Shan State Army-North areas.[4]

In 2005, due to the agreement to build the oil-gas pipelines, all armed groups came under pressure from the Myanmar military. SSNA and PSLA were disarmed. SSA 3rd Brigade was was ordered to move its base north of the Kyaukme- Lashio road to south of it. The SSNA units that refused to surrender joined the RCSS. Force 701, of the SSA North, on the Chinese border that had not been part of the 1989 ceasefire pact also decide to join the RCSS. That's how the RCSS came to be in the north by filling in the vacuum left by SSA, SSNA and PSLA.

Although the SSA-N was more conciliatory towards the government than other armed Shan separatist groups, in 2005 it abandoned its base rather than disarm. The Myanmar army put pressure on the SSPP to transform into BGF in 2010. The SSPP/SSA brigade 3 and 7 transformed into BGF in the following year but brigade 1 led by Lt. Gen. Pang Fa rejuvenated the SSPP/SSA and have kept the ceasefire agreement even though the Shan army has been some clashes with Burma army.

In 2009, another opportunity arose for the two SSAs to join hands if not merge, when the SSA north was pressured to become People's Militia Force (PMF). It instead reestablished the SSPP/SSA, formed new brigades some of which returned to north of the Mandalay-Muse highway. Later came the newly formed TNLA, out of PSLA units that had been training in the Wa areas.

At first, their relations were normal, if not exactly good. They even had occasional joint operations together.

Everything changed after RCSS signed the NCA. Both claimed RCSS was intruding and SSA South units coming to the north were attacked.

The PSLF and Ta'ang National Liberation Army

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 Myanmar 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. 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.[25]

Notes

[1] Email correspondence with RCSS advisor 17 May 2021
[2] https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/weeks-fighting-rival-armed-groups-continues-northern-shan.html, accessed 13 May 2021
[3] https://www.luffaconsulting.com/post/briefing-8-inter-shan-state-conflict, accessed 14 May 2021
[4] Ibid.
[5] Email correspondence with Shan Analyst, 16 April 21 and https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/human-casualties-will-cost-war-rcss-moves-north.html, accessed 13 May 21
[6] 'SNDP demands release of detainees amidst Shan and Ta'ang clashes' SHAN, 7 December
[7] 'Myanmar Military, Shan Army Launch Offensive Against Ta'ang Rebels', RFA, 1 December 2015
[8] 'SNDP demands release of detainees amidst Shan and Ta'ang clashes' SHAN, 7 December
[9] 'PSLF/TNLA Condemns RCSS/SSA's Act of Military Aggression Conjointly with Tatmadaw', 10 December, 2015
[10] 'RCSS/SSA-S: "We never think of the TNLA as our enemy"', SHAN, 16 December 2015
[11] Ibid.
[12] 'Clash Between Rebel Groups in Myanmar's Shan State Forces Villagers From Homes', 10 February 2016
[13] 'Ta'ang soldier killed in clash with government troops', Phanida, Mizzima, 19 January 2016
[14] Ibid
[15] 'RCSS/SSA-S and TNLA trade trespassing accusations as clashes continue in northern Shan State', SHAN, 19 January 2015
[16] 'Warring rebels call for negotiations', Eleven Myanmar, 24 January 2016
[17] Ibid.
[18] 'SSA 'South', SSA 'North' declare 'We are one", SHAN, 23 May 2011
[19]Personal conversation with Shan analyst, 6 June 2011
[20]'SSA 'South', SSA 'North' declare 'We are one", SHAN, 23 May 2011
[21] Email correspondence with SHAN, 9 December 2009
[22] 'Shan Army set to cast a wider net', SHAN, 8 June 2009
[23] The alliance was originally formed on 13 March 1999 and consisted of five original members. Although the Kachin National Organisation (KNO) joined later it does not have any armed units, it was also an associate member of the UNFC
[24] 'SSA South we still support the UNFC', 21 December 2011
[25] Email correspondence with Tar Aik Bong, 23 April 2015