

Viewing cable 09BEIJING2481, PRC DOWNPLAYS CONFLICT IN BURMA'S KOKANG REGION

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 002481

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP/CM AND EAP/MLS - LAURA SCHEIBE

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [BM](#) [CH](#)

SUBJECT: PRC DOWNPLAYS CONFLICT IN BURMA'S KOKANG REGION

REF: RANGOON 567

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey Carlson. Reasons 1.
4 (b, d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. China's Nansan border region adjacent to the Kokang region of Burma is calm, and refugees have already begun to return to Burma, ConGenOff observed August 30 and [3](#)1. PRC government statements and Chinese media accounts downplayed the seriousness of the conflict between ethnic Kokang fighters and Burmese military forces and disputed UNHCR claims that 10,000-30,000 refugees had fled to China. Chinese scholars did not anticipate that recent events would impact China-Burma relations and suggested that current instability could create an opportunity for increased U.S.-China cooperation on Burma. End summary.

SITUATION ON THE GROUND AT PRC-BURMA BORDER

[1](#)2. (SBU) Consulate Chengdu PolOff (ConGenOff) visited the border region August 30 and observed that the PRC-Burma border crossing at Nansan was closed and the situation calm. On August 31, ConGenOff observed what appeared to be people returning to Burma: several vehicles dropped off refugees at the Chinese side of the border where they continued on foot into Burma. ConGenOff further noted 190 ten-person tents set up near the border to accommodate refugees. The tents were orderly and clean and labeled "Ministry of Civil Affairs

disaster relief." Yunnan authorities had commandeered adjacent apartment buildings and commercial buildings to accommodate refugees. ConGenOff heard from a local resident in direct contact with PRC officials that many Kokang forces had crossed into China over the weekend of August 29-30 and had surrendered their weapons to PLA and People's Armed Police (PAP) representatives. According to this source, the Kokang fighters were held in a separate area from other refugees and would return to Burma following the conclusion of fighting, although ConGenOff was not able to confirm this account. ConGenOff spoke August 31 with a man who claimed to be a Kokang local government soldier who gave up his weapons and came to Nansan. He said he was a PRC citizen who went to Kokang six years earlier and entered the Kokang army. He said he could not return to Kokang because he was a former soldier, but Burmese and other documented Chinese citizens could return. ConGenOff observed many hundreds of cars with Kokang license plates parked in a lot across the road from the refugee camp.

13. (SBU) ConGenOff spoke with one local man involved in construction in Kokang and Nansan who said that the recent intensified fighting brought a "large refugee tide." He quoted official figures of 13,000 refugees but noted that some people have said the number is as high as 30,000. He said 90 percent of the refugees are ethnic Han but Burmese citizens.

14. (SBU) Professor Liu Zhi, Dean of Yunnan University Institute of International Relations, separately noted to PolOff August 31 that the period of active conflict in the Kokang region had been short and the fighting had concluded by August 31. However, the underlying source of conflict, which she characterized as ethnic strife ("minzu chongtu"), did not have a near-term solution. Although Liu was unclear on the approximate number of people that had entered China from Burma, she was confident that they would all soon depart refugee camps and return to Burma.

BEIJING DOWNPLAYS THE SERIOUSNESS OF INCIDENT

15. (SBU) The situation in Kokang was already calm ("yijing pingjingle"), and the number of Burmese that crossed in to China was much fewer than UNHCR's estimate of 10,000-30,000, MFA Asian Affairs Department Burma Division Deputy Director Chen Chen told PolOff August 31. Chen was unable to provide a precise estimate of the number of people, explaining that the local government, not the central government, had responsibility for handling the inflow of people. Chen expressed PRC satisfaction with Burma's response to MFA Spokeswoman Jiang Yu's August 28 public statement calling on Burma to "properly handle domestic problems and maintain stability in the China-Myanmar border region," and urging "Myanmar to protect the security and legal rights of Chinese citizens in Myanmar." He pointed to an August 30 Xinhua article that reported the Burmese government had apologized for the casualties suffered on the Chinese side of the border as a result of fighting in Kokang, expressed gratitude for

the positive treatment China provided to Burmese that crossed the border, and assured China it would protect the legal

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rights and interests of Chinese citizens in Burma.

¶6. (C) MSS-affiliated China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) Burma scholar Song Qingrun separately described to PolOff the situation along the China-Burma border as calm, noted that refugees had already begun returning to Burma, suggested that Burmese forces already controlled most of the Kokang region and characterized Western media reports of the situation as "exaggerated." (Note: Chinese press and official comments downplaying the flow of refugees into Yunnan province notwithstanding, Minister of Public Security Meng Jianzhu visited the border area on August 30 and Reuters reported August 31 that Chinese journalists claimed that their papers had been told not to publish independent reports on this issue.)

FOCUS ON STABILITY

¶7. (SBU) China's primary interest is in maintenance of stability along its border with Burma, according to CICIR's Song. China had encouraged Burma to negotiate with Kokang fighters to resolve the current conflict. While acknowledging that recent conflict in the Kokang region had harmed Chinese economic interests, Song did not believe current tensions would impact the "overall positive atmosphere" of China-Burma relations. Song predicted that the situation in the border region would soon return to normal and cross-border trade would soon resume.

U.S.-PRC COOPERATION ON BURMA

¶8. (C) CICIR Foreign Policy Program Director Ni Xiayun separately commented to PolOff that recent fighting in the Kokang region ran counter to U.S. and Chinese interests in regional stability. Ni suggested that increased U.S.-China cooperation on Burma could have a positive effect on the overall bilateral relationship, similar to the benefit to U.S.-China cooperation derived from the Six-Party Talks. Ni suggested a U.S.-China-Burma trilateral dialogue, a U.S.-India-China-Burma four-party dialogue, or a private U.S.-China channel on Burma as options for expanding U.S.-China cooperation on Burma.

¶9. (U) This message was drafted in coordination with ConGen Chengdu.
HUNTSMAN

<http://www.wikileaks.ch/cable/2009/08/09BEIJING2481.html>