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Hopes have been rekindled that Burma’s ethnic Karen can find a political solution to their conflict with the ruling junta, ending one of the world’s longest civil wars.

On February 1, the day after the commemoration of the 56th anniversary of Karen Revolutionary Day, the Karen National Union (KNU) announced that it is planning to resume peace talks with the ruling military government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

David Taw, Secretary of the KNU Foreign Affairs Department, confirmed that the SPDC was ready to talk and that the KNU will resume peace talks with the SPDC in the first week of March, in Moulmein.

The Karen people, as represented through by the KNU, are demanding self-determination and have been fighting the military government for over 50 years, since the end of the Second World War when the British left Burma.

Over five decades, the KNU has conducted five historical peace talks with a series of Burmese governments. No major agreements have been reached. The distrust of the Burmese government among the KNU has been a major obstacle to successful negotiations. The SPDC has used previous talks as an opportunity to build up military forces. For example, when the last peace talks broke down at the end of 1996, the Army launched a major offensive against two KNU’s Southern districts, displacing thousands and forces thousands of others to become refugees in Thailand.

The hope generated by last year’s talks faded in October when General Khin Nyunt was ousted by junta leader, Senior General Than Shwe. Because of the uncertain political atmosphere, a KNU delegation that had traveled to Rangoon to formalize the ceasefire and to discuss the ground rules to prevent further clashes between both sides was forced to return without participating in any talks. Since then, it has not been clear if the new generals are interested in the continuation of peace talks.

The fragile “gentleman’s ceasefire” is now one year old. Looking back, what are the benefits and what has been happening on the ground behind the talks?

Despite the verbal ceasefire, fighting between the two sides continues all over KNU controlled areas, and the situation has not improved for thousands of Karen civilians who have been uprooted from their homes and have suffered human rights abuses under the repressive regime for decades.

US based Human Rights Watch describes Burma as “one of the most repressive countries in Asia.” It says that the Burmese army continues to commit gross abuses against civilians, particularly in its campaigns against ethnic minorities, in which the army engages in summary executions, torture, and the rape of women and girls.

“The ceasefire has been 50 percent beneficial and 50 percent detrimental” David Taw said. Padoh Mahn Sha Lanpan, General Secretary of the KNU confirmed, “There are some benefits in the sense that fighting takes place less now.” There is currently no major military offensive, but the SPDC troops are carrying out operations in Karen areas in order to gain more control over the areas or to gain “power over the land”. On the other hand, for many Karen civil-
ians the situation did not improve, and indeed some things are getting worse such as food availability and health care.

According to a source in the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the military wing of the KNU, in 2004 there were 169 clashes between Karen soldiers and Burmese troops. In 2003 before the verbal ceasefire agreement, there were 639 clashes. The analysis from the KNU leaders was that the clashes have been continuing because clear ground rules have not been agreed or set.

According to a relief group, the Free Burma Rangers (FBR), Burmese troops started their operations against Karen villagers in Nyaunglynbin district, northern Karen state, from November. More than 5,000 people were displaced in that district and about 20,000 baskets of their rice were destroyed or burnt down. The SPDC troops also carried out operations in Taungoo district, next to Nyaunglynbin.

Regarding Burmese Army operations in Nyaunglynbin, David Taw said that the KNU has sent a protest letter to the generals. Padoh Mahn Sha added that the SPDC gave no response that they will halt operations against Karen civilians. He said that the SPDC used to point out that this is part of their regular military activities.

Although there was no major offensive during the ceasefire agreement, three KNLA bases in three brigades were attacked by Burmese troops. The latest attacked was the base of KNLA battalion 201 during Karen New Year Day celebrations on January 10. Following the attack, over 380 Karen villagers crossed to Thailand. It prompted increased distrust towards the junta in the KNU. Padj Mahn Sha told the Irrawaddy that “They [the junta] haven’t take our ceasefire agreement seriously although they keep on declaring (its existence).”

The resettlement of thousands of displaced villagers, from forced relocation sites and from hiding places in the jungle, to their homes was on the agenda for previous talks but there has not yet been specific discussion on it.

According to the Thailand Burma Border Consortium, a humanitarian organization for refugees and displaced Burmese people, in October 2004, over 190,000 internally displaced Karen people were living in forced relocation sites and in free fire areas in Eastern Burma due to SPDC forced relocation programs and operations to eradicate the insurgents.

Since the talks, human rights abuses against civilians have continued all over KNU controlled areas and indeed are worse in some areas according to relief workers.

A FBR team leader Ti Mad Dog said, “The Burmese Army troops operations in Nyaunglynbin left thousands of people hungry. There are food shortages...The coming year the situation will worsen” he predicts. “The political game is playing on the table, but under the table people can play what they want.” He added that, “The SPDC agrees to talk with KNU just to show good face to the international community, but inside their heart they are still holding the old system to oppress the Karen people and are not interested in peace for the country.”

A villager told Free Burma Rangers “I was very happy about my leaders making a cease fire and believed in it. I made a large farm and now I have lost everything.”

In Tenasserim division over 80 rice plantations in the south of Tavoy were ruined during last November harvest because the army did not allow people in forced relocation sites to go to their rice fields.

A relief worker who does not want to be named said, based on reports he got from different areas, that the human rights abuses have not decreased but it were most likely getting worse. He was particularly concerned about people being forced to serve as porters carrying military supplies, especially in Nyaunglynbin and Taungoo district.

A member of Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP) who spoke with anonymity said, “In general the population of internally displaced people is not increasing. In some districts such as Mutraw, we can say
that the situation is a little bit stable compared to before the talks.” He said people could get more space for making rice plantation. But, for Saw Htee Township in Nyaunglynbin people face more Burmese troops operations against them.”

He said, “We can say that for 20 to 30 percent of Karen population along the eastern border, the suffering is getting worse. About 50 to 60 percent can do farming. It means that people do not have to move many times like before. For example before people had to move 4 to 5 times in a year and now they only have to move 2 to 3 times.”

He feared that it will be worse if the ceasefire breaks and major fighting resumes. He said that the situation would be like the military offensive in 1997/98 that saw thousands of refugees flee to Thailand, while thousands of others were forcibly moved to relocation sites.

For the coming year and the future, Padoh Mahn Sha said the KNU would try to bring political dialogue. In order for political dialogue to happen, “both internal and external political pressure on the military government is required.”

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**TIMELINE OF PEACE NEGOTIATION BETWEEN THE KNU AND A SERIES OF BURMESE GOVERNMENTS**

**First Negotiation:** April 1949

Secret peace talks with the caretaker Government under General Ne Win. In Rangoon, between the KNU’s General Kaw Htoo, Sgaw Ler Taw, Bo Kyin Pe (aka Koe Doh) and Care Taker Government Brigadier Aung Gyi, Aung Shwe and Col Maung Maung. The negotiations broke after ten days. The caretaker government stated that it would only consider the Karen national questions if the KNU entered the “legal fold.”

**Second Negotiation:** February 1960

Three Party Talks: The KNPP (Karenni), KNU (Karen) and NMSP (Mon) – the Revolutionary Council under General Ne Win. August 1963, Rangoon. The negotiation broke down in November 14, 1963 after the Revolutionary Council demanded unconditional surrender from the parties.

**Third Negotiation:** August 1963

Four official rounds of peace conferences between the KNU and State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Key speakers from the KNU side were Padoh Kli Say, Padoh Mahn Sha Lanpan, General Tamlar Baw On the SLORC side major speakers were Col Kyaw Win, Col Kyaw Thien, Lt-Gen Khin Nyunt, and Col Thein Shwe. The KNU rejected the proposal by SLORC demanding that the KNU enter the ‘legal fold’. The SLORC ignored the KNU proposal for a fifth round of talks and started a major military offensive against the KNU in Mergui~Tavoy and Dupalaya districts.

**Fourth Negotiation:**


January 15, 2004, a KNU delegation led by General Saw Bo Mya, met with top SPDC leaders, including General Khin Nyunt in Rangoon and a “gentleman’s ceasefire” was agreed. October 18, 2004 a KNU’s delegation headed by Padoh Htoo Htoo Lay left for Rangoon. The meeting was cancelled after General Khin Nyunt was dismissed.
HIV/AIDS infection has reached epidemic proportions in Burma today. Reports by UN agencies as well as independent health professionals confirm this fact. Estimates suggest at least 5% of the population is infected, although the figures themselves are a matter of debate. The alarming situation has become a national emergency that affects all levels of society, especially non-Burman ethnic minorities and the military.

Recently there have been signs that the military government is changing its attitude towards the epidemic, moving from deep denial towards a more open discussion on the issue, and that it is preparing to take real measures to stop its spread.

**What drives the HIV infection in Burma?**

It is clear that the spread of HIV in Burma is a direct consequence of the high levels of injected drug use in some parts of the country and because of unprotected sexual intercourse. As Burma is one of the world’s largest producers and exporters of opium and heroin, it is inevitably that drugs intended for export leak into the local market. The junta does not yet take a public health approach to drug injection, so sterile needles are not available and sharing has become the norm.

It is no surprise that the public health sector is marginal in a country that spends a very small part of its GDP on these issues. According to UN estimates, the regime cut health care spending from 0.38% of the country’s GDP in 1995-1996 to 0.17% in 1999-2000. By comparison, the US government spends almost 14% of its GDP on healthcare, while Canada spends just over 9%. Burma’s health care system was ranked second from bottom in a 2000 World Health Organization survey of UN member states, ranking behind only war-torn Sierra Leone as the world’s worst healthcare system.

There is no doubt that unprotected paid sex between men and women is a major driver of the epidemic. Sex work is common in places where men are far from their homes and have more money and power than women. Examples are truck routes, border crossing points, and mining areas in particular.

Homosexual sex is not uncommon, at least at spiritual festivals. However, little research has been done on sex between men so it is not known to what extent it contributes to the epidemic.

Burma is a country of various ethnic minorities with different languages and customs. The ongoing civil war, coupled with human rights abuses like forced relocation and work, torture, extrajudicial killings and extortion of money and properties have caused massive internal displacement and an exodus of ethnic groups into neighboring countries. Because of this, the virus can easily travel and mutate between populations in different corners of the country as well as across borders.

Geographical mapping of officially reported HIV/AIDS cases shows that Eastern states or divisions have been hardest hit. The central and delta regions have “moderate” rates and the “lowest” were found on the western border.

**Border areas**

Burma shares a long border with Thailand and China in the east. Expecting high income and better living conditions lots of (mostly young) people cross these borders. More than a million migrant workers are currently working in Thailand while significant numbers are also working along the Chinese and Indian borders in the west. Most of these migrant workers do not have official papers, making them even more vulnerable because of their restricted access to prevention and healthcare services. It also increases their vulnerability to exploitation.

Many are unable to speak the language of the host country and end up in sex, seafaring or construction work, where they are highly vulnerable to HIV infection and have little or no access to information.

Internal migration is almost as dangerous. With few opportunities in the ongoing civil war, lots of people, especially in minority areas, are on the move. This seasonal migration driven by poverty leads to large numbers becoming infected. They gather around gem, jade and gold mines, logging camps and in the fishing communities along the coasts. Health professionals commonly recognize these places as transmission hot spots.

The situation is made worse by limited access to condoms, bad access to health care, social stigmatization of people already infected, media censorship and the repressive government in general. This provides good ground for the epidemic’s future growth.

The area worst hit by the epidemic is Shan state. Dr. Chris Beyrer estimates that more than
10% of adults there are now HIV positive. “That is the worst ever incidence in the region”, he says. “It is on the level of northern Thailand a decade ago. The difference then was the Thai government recognized it and did something about it, whereas the military junta allowing this one out of control”, says Beyrer. 6

In northern Kachin state there has also been a dramatic increase in the number of people living with HIV/AIDS. The rebel Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), which has signed a truce with the military regime in Rangoon, says privately that the area is being devastated by the disease. The former KIO leader Bran Seng, who died several years ago, once said in an interview that he had entered into ceasefire negotiations with Burma’s military rulers for fear that HIV/AIDS was destroying the Kachin people. “I realized that with HIV/AIDS there was a real danger we might win the battle (against the Burmese army), but lose the war (against the disease),” he said. 7

The government’s response

It is hard to say what exactly the government’s position is towards the crisis. The regime first admitted there was problem in early 1999. HIV/AIDS specialists, health workers and diplomats in Rangoon say Burma’s military government has shown an increased degree of acceptance over the last two years. This can be seen by the allowance of intervention from western aid organizations including UNAIDS. A UN joint program has been implemented for the years 2003-2005 involving the Burmese regime, international relief groups, local government affiliated aid groups and the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD). Special care has been taken to ensure that the NLD has a strong say in where they feel the money should be allocated, according to those close to the program. Burma has introduced two programs of promoting 100% condom use and preventing mother-to-child transmission, having expanded the programs to over 50 townships. According to the National AIDS Program (NAP), Burma has also carried out a sexual survey of people aged between 15 and 49 with the assistance of UNAIDS and UN Children’s Fund, and the results are to be used to tailor HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention programs to make them more effective.

However, the regime still needs to make major efforts to bring the epidemic into public consciousness if the country’s problem is to be contained. The regime’s low health care budget and the hesitation to allocate funds to Rangoon by international aid agencies have further postponed any proper advancement in the country’s battle against HIV/AIDS.

Skeptics agree that the regime has recently shown a greater interest in the problem, but they think this is motivated by increasing funding coming in to fight HIV/AIDS, and not by humanitarian concerns. “They have to be interested because there is more money coming in”, stated one western HIV/AIDS specialist based in Rangoon.

Dr. Chris Beyrer has the same view. He states “It is very obvious that the health and well being of the Burmese people is not in the interest of the military junta. Their real only interest is holding on power at all costs. And I think you have to see the failure to respond to the HIV/AIDS epidemic as part of something much larger, which is the failure to respond to the will and aspirations and well being, health and education of the Burmese people as a whole ... They control HIV/AIDS by controlling the information. You control it by controlling the virus.” 8

But what is for certain is that the government approved the UN initiated Joint Program on AIDS. Programming has improved as have staff capabilities; for example younger staff trained overseas are hired and promoted.

Although the regular government budget for programs has not increased in the last two years, several hundred civil servants are assigned to work full time on HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

One of the most obvious changes of the last three years has been greater government openness to talk about HIV/AIDS issues. Interna-
tional NGO’s and government agencies can now talk about it more freely. They can develop education materials with less scrutiny, can use the mass media more quickly and most important of all, can promote condom use. Fewer restrictions underlie distribution, even in places where sex is sold. Billboards promoting condom use are now also seen outside Rangoon, and advertisements, drawings and articles are being published more often in newspapers and magazines. There is still censorship of the media, however, and some photographs, posters and audio materials are not approved. This inevitably leads to further delays in the distribution of this education material.

One of the biggest problems is that not all areas of the country where infections are occurring are covered. People at risk of infection continue to be marginalized and coverage of condom promotion and other activities is still limited. Most staff are vulnerable to pressure by local government officials and traveling to ceasefire and border areas is still difficult, involving lengthy permission procedures. The same is the case for NGOs working along the Thai border. If the Thai government would grant worker status to health volunteers and NGO workers they could do much more for their migrant community.

Despite all these efforts, the level of knowledge and awareness of HIV/AIDS is still extremely low. Information on, for example, condom use is very low as well.  

Uncertain Future?

The political situation in Burma is extremely uncertain. Former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt is now under house arrest on suspicion of corruption. He had chaired a key government committee on health issues and had supported greater involvement of international NGOs in fighting HIV/AIDS. It is now very unclear whether further steps forward will be possible. There was also some hope that a response to the crisis would contribute to a dialogue between the military government and the NLD. This unfortunately not happened. Crackdowns on the NLD have further weakened its structure and party leader Aung San Suu Kyi is still under house arrest.

The level of HIV/AIDS cases depend mostly on patterns of risk behavior in the general population, about which mostly nothing is known. However, HIV prevalence is increasing in Burma and the higher it gets, the less risk behavior is needed to continue its increase. Once a certain point is passed, controlling and preventing new infections becomes extremely difficult. It also becomes more and more expensive for prevention programs and the health care system in general because there are more sick people and orphans to take care about.

The impact of this global epidemic is felt beyond the health care sector. HIV/AIDS has caused changes in the social, economic and security situations in many countries because the most productive age groups are seriously affected. If the people of Burma have the opportunity to unite and work together in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, it will be a very positive example of the country’s political stability and will help the democratization process.

The country will continue to face the negative effects for a long time. The widespread incidence of HIV/AIDS is a security problem in itself, undermining both personal and national security. It can also undermine the already weak capacity of the state to govern and has a devastating impact on the economy. In 1998, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi reaffirmed this view when she said “Burma needs effective education programs and services now. Unless we act urgently, HIV infection could reach epidemic proportions in our country and become a major threat to our social stability and economic potential.”

Endnotes

1 Estimated numbers include: 330,000 (lowest range-170,000, highest range-620,000), UNAIDS report on the global AIDS epidemic 2004; 338911, Xinhua General News Dec 2, 2004; and many others.
2 Studies suggest that the prevalence rate among sex workers is up to 60%.
3 Edging towards disaster, The Irrawaddy, May 2003.
4 Mandalay is a particularly intense transmission location. By determining the types of HIV that infect people there, a team of researchers from the National AIDS Program and Japan has reported that the virus in Mandalay is mutating into unique recombinant forms. This happens when many people with one type of HIV have sex or share injecting equipment with people with another type.
7 See Endnote 6.
9 See Endnote 8.
“It happened during the Karen New Year celebration. Like many other villagers, I was watching people dancing. Then I heard someone saying that SPDC soldiers were coming. I was very afraid. We then just ran as soon as we can. At the beginning we thought that we could hide in the cave behind the mountain near our village. But, because it was not safe enough we finally had to escape to Thailand. Here, I have nothing. We fled without our belongings, our clothes and cooking pots. I am very hopeless.”

This woman was among many forced to flee their homes on January 10 when SPDC troops (Light Infantry Battalion 356) attacked three villages located in Moh Hkee area, 20km from the Thai-Burma border, near the Thai town of Umphang. Karen National Liberation Army forces promptly returned fire, but 380 villagers, mostly women and children, had to take refuge in Thailand. While there, they received humanitarian support from organizations such as the Thailand Burma Border Consortium. After a couple of days, the Thai authorities assured the villagers that the troops have retreated from their villages and strongly “suggested” that they go back. On returning to their villages, they were welcomed by the sound of SPDC bullets. Once again the villagers crossed the Thai border, by now not knowing who to trust or who could protect them. The authorities in Thailand this time imposed a deadline: they would have to return to Burma before the January 26. Luckily, thanks to a courageous monk from the community who went back to the village to negotiate with SPDC troops, the soldiers left the villages on the January 22. Back home, the villagers saw that their homes had been destroyed and their belongings looted, and that their livestock had disappeared. They have also had to deal with the threat of landmines laid in the area during the offensive.

One eight-year-old child who was caught up in the turmoil of this offensive told BI field staff “when the SPDC soldiers entered our village; I would have shot at them if I had a gun.” When asked about his future, he answered without hesitation: “I want to become a soldier [serving in the Karen armed opposition].” His two brothers, one around ten and the other one only four, nodded, together responding that they want to do the same.

In the current context of ongoing peace talks, SPDC military offensives must cease immediately unless Burma is to produce another burnt out generation of desperate people.