Burma Issues
Providing analysis on the situation in Burma and a platform for the grassroots people to share their voices

www.burmaissues.org March - April 2012 Volume 23 Number 11/12

• Ceasefire Positive But Far From Perfect
• There Can Be No Going Back: Burma By-Elections
• The Reality Of The Ceasefire On The Ground
• Raising The Voices Of Ethnic Karen Children In Armed Conflict Zones

Burma Issues is a publication of the Peace Way Foundation and is distributed on a free subscription basis to individuals and groups concerned with the state of affairs in Burma.

Editor Saw David
235/26 Asoke Dindaeng Road, Makkasan, Rajtaevee (Rachathewi) Bangkok 10400, Thailand

www.burmaissues.org

The Peace Way foundation appreciates your ongoing support. If you wish to make a donation, please visit our website (www.burmaissues.org/donate.htm) and use the Paypal link on this webpage.

All donations are greatly appreciated.
The ceasefire between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the incumbent Burmese government, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), has no doubt been welcomed by a lot of people, the most important of whom are the grassroots communities who have been subjected to the world’s longest running civil war, but before they can have true peace in their lives and receive the development they need many problems have to be addressed.

After three rounds of negotiation, thirteen points were agreed upon by the two parties in Rangoon on 6 April.

They include: a ceasefire code of conduct for both armies based on that used by the Tatmadaw (Burmese armed forces); an agreement to implement peace-building groups at the district, township and village track levels; the founding of local ceasefire monitory groups then the inclusion of international monitory groups after demonstrable progress; and plans to resettle and rehabilitate internally displaced people and refugees.

They also include: the initiation of a de-mining process, citizenship accreditation, implementation of a rule of law and a commitment to work together towards “sustainable development”, the clarification of land rights issues, the participation of NGOs and INGOs in the peace building process, and the release of all Karen political prisoners.

If implemented honestly, these points will no doubt be a positive development for the long-suffering people of Karen State.

However, many people are worried that the reforms and negotiations are going too fast and are not addressing key issues at an important time.

The whole process is being controlled by the government through its ‘Roadmap to Democracy’, which means that due to the 2008 constitution it is being controlled by retired and serving generals who have their eyes on the economic prizes Karen State has to offer.

Due to the prolonged cycle of war in Karen State there are a lot of socio-political problems and people do not have experience of political and thus economic participation at the State level so are ill-equipped to safe-guard their economic rights in this time of transition.

The KNU also has very little experience of economic development at this level and has to be careful that any ceasefire agreement doesn’t end up with Karen State’s assets being divided up amongst self-interested parties such as the Generals who will use them for personal gain and to pay for Burma’s monolithic army.

The people of Karen State must be educated and organized so they are ready to take control of their own affairs otherwise the average person will not gain from the distribution of Karen State’s resources.

‘Development projects’ being carried out by unscrupulous businesses are already causing much suffering so sanctions should not be dropped until the grassroots people are prepared for the goldrush that will ensue.

The continued conflict in Kachin State also indicates the government’s limited commitment to peace and gives another clear reason for keeping sanctions.

The current conflict started after government troops broke a ceasefire with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and encroached on their territory to safeguard Chinese backed dam projects.

With the continued presence of Burmese troops in Karen State, a true peace needs to include their withdrawal from a clearly defined and agreed upon area of KNU control otherwise hostilities could resume at the government’s behest, such as what has happened in Kachin State.

This remains the biggest threat to grassroots Karen people and gives a good example of why a true demonstrable peace must come before development, and not vice versa.

A true demonstrable peace must be nationwide and include all ethnicities so entails the inclusion of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) in peace talks.

The withdrawal of Burmese troops and the
UNFC’s involvement were both previously stipulated by the KNU yet are lacking from the 13 points agreed upon in Rangoon.

It is also necessary that more interested parties become involved in the peace-talks.

A meaningful ceasefire agreement would have to have the support of the Burmese army as they could launch a coup if they take exception to the deal being signed on their behalf.

It remains unclear how much control the central government has over certain factions of the army and it is well known that direct orders to stop fighting were disobeyed during the Kachin conflict and the same could happen in Karen State without their complete commitment to a ceasefire.

Different Karen factions also need to be directly involved as the KNU is seen as a father figure to most, but not all.

The relationship between the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and the KNU has warmed but hostility and mistrust remain and it is yet to be seen whether the KNU can negotiate on their behalf, and within these groups there are breakaway factions such as the Karen National Union Peace Committee which need to be taken into account.

The government aligned Border Guard Forces also have spheres of influence and interests such as cross-border trade to protect and have the potential to disrupt a ceasefire agreement should it be deemed unfavourable to them.

To many, the democratic reforms and peace processes seem like a diplomatic game being played by the government in order to woo the International Community and legitimize foreign investment.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy’s inclusion in the political system is welcome, as is potential KNU involvement.

However, the NLD’s participation remains restrained by the 2008 constitution, and the current illegal status of the KNU prevents their entry into parliament.

This puts an importance on the inclusion of exiled CBOs and NGOs as they remain free of the constitution and thus independent.

They also have the most experience in documenting human rights abuses so should be allowed to monitor the progression of the ceasefire.

If they are not involved it cannot be considered a true movement as if Karen State’s, and indeed Burma’s, future is left in the hands of competing business interests all resources will be lost before grassroots people can have a say on their own destiny.

Until these issues are addressed adequately, the welcome peace remains temporary and the lives of grassroots Karen hang in the balance while their affairs are decided by others.

There Can Be No Going Back: Burma By-Elections 1/4/2012

By Saw David

Admittedly, it was my first time in Rangoon. It did not seem to be the dystopia I was expecting. Then again, I had no first-hand experience to compare the current situation to. With the by-elections looming, National League for Democracy (NLD) flags were flying everywhere and Aung San Suu Kyi pictures adorned everything from hotels to state-run buses. Considering that until recently the mere mention of her name could result in a prison sentence, this seemed to give evidence of a country in great
transition. However, I would learn that the popular revolution is not yet complete.

My journey had started a couple of days previously when a Burmese friend of mine in exile in Thailand gave me some things to take to his family in Rangoon. With tears rolling down his cheeks he passed me a letter addressed ‘Mother’ and a digital camera with pictures of himself to give to his daughters to remind them of the father they have not seen since they were babies. Another friend, a former political prisoner, gave me gifts to give to his former cell mate with whom he was imprisoned after taking part in the 1988 student protests. I had reservations about meeting politically sensitive people and passing them packages but was persuaded it was the right thing to do.

I also had reservations about meeting my friend and fixer, who I’ll refer to as Ko Nyin (a pseudonym). We met through an intermediary and I worried we might not recognise each other. I also worried about his security as he insisted on coming to the airport to meet me - a foreigner - on my arrival. While in the queue of tourists and businessmen all eager to enter Burma for different reasons, I discretely squinted over the heads of the immigration officers to look for Ko Nyin. I soon found the young NLD activist as he was banging on the window, waving and calling my name.

“Are you not worried about being seen with me?” I asked him once I had cleared customs. “No, everything has changed now. We are much more free”. He pointed to the stickers on his phone, “Even my phone supports the NLD!”

Ko Nyin had to go to work so I took a taxi to the NLD office below Shwe Da Gon Pagoda. I pointed at the NLD flags fluttering on its dashboard. “So you like the NLD?” I asked the driver. “I was an ‘88 activist, it was impossible to fly these flags before January. I have been waiting two decades to fly these flags freely!” However, it would soon become apparent that the Burmese people aren’t totally free just yet.

In the NLD office I got my first exposure to electoral fraud. “They [the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)] have been giving out voting cards with wax over the boxes you have to tick to vote for other parties. That means they can scrape it off then give a tick for themselves”, an experienced activist told me. Electoral fraud would become a running theme of my time in Burma, as would encounters with the security services.

My first encounter with a security agent was in a cafe on my second day in Rangoon. A football match was being shown involving Yangon United. I was surprised that people wanted their local team to lose. “Do you not support them?” I asked. “No, they are owned by a crony [a businessman linked to the government hence linked to corruption]. We support Manchester United”.

The conversation stopped abruptly when an older man with an impressively pressed shirt and gold rimmed sunglasses ignored the other empty tables and sat in front of me. There was no small talk. “Why are you in Yangon?” he asked. I had a pre-prepared answer, “Well, I hear that Myanmar is very beautiful and have heard that the government is doing good things for the people so thought it would be a good time to visit”. “What guesthouse are you staying in?” I pointed ambiguously in the general direction of my lodgings, “Somewhere over there, I’ve forgotten the name”. “Show me” he demanded.

I was semi frogmarched outside then pointed up a road on the opposite side of where I was staying. Fortunately there seemed to be a guesthouse there. “Ah, yes I know the one. Are you hungry?” I lied “No, I’ve just eaten”. We sat back at the table. The cafe had become dead quiet. “So you like the government?” he asked. I lied again, “Yes, do you?” He sighed, “Yes, but they are moving too fast”, he then unfolded a newspaper with Aung San Suu Kyi on the cover and tapped hard upon her forehead, “But you can only trust the NLD 50%. They want Myanmar to become an English colony again”. He made a slashing movement at her neck, “Her and her supporters have to be careful”. I made my excuses and left. I would see him another three times that afternoon, perched on strategic street corners ‘reading’ a newspaper (always the same one).

After a few hours I took a bus to Shwes Da Gon to meet Ko Nyin. We discussed the political reforms under the glowing rays of the pagoda. He insisted “Don’t stay at the guesthouse. Stay with me and my family. Only, we have to be a little careful as the police check our house three times a week”. Regrettfully I had to decline, out of the fear I would have compromised their security. I wanted to go to Moulmein, Mon State, the next day to gauge the preparations for the by-election. Ko Nyin insisted on coming with me.

The bus arrived in Moulmein early in the morning and we zoomed on our motorbike taxis through the pagodas and over the hill to the guesthouse on the strand, with the NLD flags on our bikes dancing in the morning breeze. Later that day we visited the NLD’s Mon State office. “They are throwing
many obstacles at us” a leading NLD lawyer told me. He went on to say that the USDP had been running a campaign of misinformation telling opposition supporters that they had to mark a tick next to the party they wished to vote for and an X next to the parties they didn’t, a move that would have invalidated their ballot papers and lowered the NLD’s support. There were also known cases of dead and under-age voters being registered by the USDP as well as gerrymandering – the manipulation of political boundaries to suit the incumbent regime. The NLD lawyer was indignant, “They cannot do this to us. We have the popular support. We represent the people!”

It was clear that the NLD does overwhelmingly represent the people in both Rangoon and Moulmein. This was obvious at a campaign speech given by their candidate Khin Htay Kywe. There was no doubt that she had the audience’s support, but this was not without reservations. “They [the candidate and other NLD speakers] are just concentrating on mottos. They are not talking about policies. There is no real substance, but I will still vote for them” one of the supporters told me. Ko Nyin also told me that some supporters had accused the candidate of acting in her own self-interest, an allegation she quickly refuted.

I left the building where the speech was being given and crossed the road in order to get a picture of Khin Htay Kywe leaving. I sat on a step with my camera ready, but my view was blocked by three longyis. I politely asked the three men to step aside. “It’s for your safety. They are filming you” was their reply. Through a gap between the men I could see a jeep drive slowly past, and true to their word I could make out the shape of a man with a camera pointed in my direction.

Later that day Ko Nyin pointed out another man sitting on a bench reading a newspaper, “I think that man is following us. It’s the third or fourth time I’ve seen him today”. I wasn’t doing anything incriminating, but feared for Ko Nyin’s security. I wanted to go to Hpa-an, the capital of Karen State, the next day and we both agreed it would be best to part company and meet up once I returned to Rangoon. There was no by-election in Hpa-an but I felt it important to get another perspective on the democratic reforms in Burma.

The road to Hpa-an itself told a story about the disproportionate effects of the reforms. The smiling faces of Moulmein soon gave way to a more forlorn look, the military presence also increased the further the bus got into Karen State. The unarmed soldiers in Mon State lazily operating checkpoints increasingly morphed into more intense and battle hardened troops with machine guns at the ready. The buildings in Hpa-an also told of disproportionate development; modern ostentatious houses co-inhabited uneasily with concrete blocks and traditional wooden huts.

I went for a walk around town after checking into my guesthouse. One of my first interactions with a local person was when a man sitting at a roadside cafe seemed to indicate that he wanted me to hit him on the leg with his walking stick. As I was unsure whether I was reading the situation correctly, I declined. He seemed a little annoyed by this so took the initiative and whacked himself on the shin. He laughed at my confused expression and the dull thud indicated that he had a prosthetic leg and was probably a victim of Karen State’s uncountable landmines.

In Rangoon and Moulmein I had been struck by how freely the people I talked to gave their political opinions and how openly they criticised the government. Hpa-an was different and people were much more guarded. The NLD flags and t-shirts which had been previously ubiquitous were still apparent, but in much less numbers. I did however see some t-shirts adorned with the legendary Karen hero and martyr Saw Baw U Gyi and Karen flags fluttered defiantly in the warm breeze. I felt this was a small sign of change considering the central Burmese government has tried to repress and indeed vanquish Karen culture for decades.
I wanted to get out of Hpa-an and into the countryside to see if people would talk to me more freely. However, I soon came up against one of the great unresolved problems of the democratic reforms - Burma’s vast and seemingly uncontrollable army; the elephant in the government’s negotiating room.

I hired a motorbike and drove in the direction of Lumbini Garden, the somewhat bizarre collection of 1150 Buddhas at the base of Zwe Ga Bin Mountain. I passed the gates but ran into a column of around 20 military personnel carriers soon after. I looked at the soldiers in the back. They were drinking and unruly and reminded me of a bus of football hooligans on the way back from a match. In their midst were young boys between the ages of 8-14. Unlike the soldiers, they were not wearing fatigues with military insignia but there was no hiding what they were - they were child soldiers, the haunted looks on their faces told me everything I needed to know. At the end of the column a soldier who I took to be an officer stopped me and asked me where I was going. I played dumb and said I was looking for Lumbini. He waved me back in the direction I had just come from so I drove off. A can of beer whizzed past my face and when I looked in my mirrors I saw a soldier being reprimanded by the officer. It wasn’t a serious reprimand, more of a joke between friends.

That night I managed to find someone who was more willing to talk. I asked him what he thought of the ceasefire negotiations between the Karen National Union and the Burmese government. He shrugged his shoulders, “We’re still waiting to see if there will be any benefits for us”. I then asked him what he thought of the reforms and by-elections. He shrugged his shoulders again, “We can see that Suu Kyi is a good honest person who has good intentions but nothing much has changed for us. We are a long way from Rangoon”.

I returned to Rangoon the next day for the by-elections as I wanted to be in Kawhmu, the constituency where Aung San Suu Kyi was standing for election. After getting off the ferry I hired a motorbike taxi with NLD flags on. I felt I could trust its young driver to translate for me. While driving he pointed at a policeman sharing a joke with a NLD activist, “You see, everyone supports the Lady”. We had not been in Kawhmu for long when a local man started shouting. A media scrum ensued. My driver explained, “He is saying that they cannot do this to us. Local NLD activists in Kawhmu Copyright Saw David Burma Issues
Burma Issues field staff member, Saw Hsa Htoo recently returned from a trip to Dooplaya District, Karen State, where he met with local communities totalling around 20 villages. He had a chance to learn about the current situation after the Karen National Union met with the Burmese government to continue their peace process and ceasefire negotiations.

Even though the ceasefire agreement has not officially been signed, the situation on the ground is moving very quickly. Hsa Htoo said, “Now the Burmese army and Karen soldiers are not fighting and have a good relationship. The Karen soldiers are even having secret friendly meetings with Burmese soldiers”.

In what could be another sign of change, a Burmese army official requested KNLA officers to arrange for Karen IDPs and refugees to return back to their villages. In Kaw Kariet Township, Dooplaya District, the Burmese government is implementing a plan to set-up a new sub township called Su Ka Lee to accommodate them.

When the development project started, the villagers weren’t aware of what the government was doing. They worried that their land would be confiscated and did not want other people from other parts of Burma coming and settling. They thought that in the near future, it would create a problem between the Burman and Karen communities. The local Karen people didn’t want to mix with other ethnic groups due to their past experiences of human rights abuses. Now around 100 Burman people from the city have come to work on building construction projects in Su Ka Lee. The government has built a police of-

Postscript: My exiled friend agreed with his brother that it was indeed time for him to go home and has returned to his mother and daughters who he hasn’t seen in person since 2007.

The Reality Of The Ceasefire On The Ground

By Saw Mort and Saw Hsa Htoo

We must protest like we did in ‘88 and 2007. There can be no going back”.

Later on, outside the main NLD office, a huge crowd had gathered and people were in a festive mood. Every result that came in was cheered, with a special roar going up when the NLD’s first win in Naypyitaw was announced. It became clear that despite the corruption the NLD had won a predictable landslide victory and there was no apparent need to evoke the spirit of ‘88 and 2007.

I met Ko Nyin later that night. He face was serious and forlorn. “The police came to my work today. They wanted to know why I was with a foreigner asking political questions, and what guesthouse he is staying at”. My heart sank and my mouth went dry. His expression changed and he started laughing, “April fool!”

We returned to the NLD office and weaved our way through the pulsating crowd. It had grown and there was a traffic jam as cars and buses were being slowed by the people who had moved onto the road. There seemed to be a party on every bus as ordinary people of all demographics celebrated the victory on their way home from work. “This is the moment we’ve been waiting for” said Ko Nyin, “but it’s just the start”.

In the crowd I bumped into the younger brother of the political exile who gave me a letter and camera to give to his mother and daughters. “My brother should be here to witness this” he said, “Everything has changed. I really think it’s time for him to come home”.

I arrived in Rangoon with a pessimistic view of the reforms and the by-election, and it hasn’t left completely. However, the enthusiasm of the people participating seemed to confirm their mantra ‘There can be no going back’. In my brief experience it was clear that there remain obstacles to true democracy and peace: namely the uncontrollable army, the security surveillance apparatus, government corruption, unbalanced reform and development in rural areas and uneasy ceasefire agreements in the ethnic states. It also remains to be seen what influence Suu Kyi and her party can actually have on government policy. There is a worry that her participation will lend the legitimacy the USDP needs in order to deal with the International Community and get sanctions dropped. This could come at a cost to the NLD if the International Community buys into the perception of Burmese democracy and takes its eyes off the country before its many problems are solved. It cannot be denied however that the people I spoke to in Rangoon and Moulmein have tasted a long missing sense of freedom and participation, and they like it.

Postscript: My exiled friend agreed with his brother that it was indeed time for him to go home and has returned to his mother and daughters who he hasn’t seen in person since 2007.
Militarization and chauvinism (Burmanization) are two major factors that have created the ethnic conflict and prolonged civil war in Burma. Burma achieved her independence from British colonial rule in 1948. However, since then the country has never experienced peace, stability, prosperity or development in sectors such as health, education, social welfare, economics, and politics. There are three main issues that resulted from the two abovementioned factors: economic crisis, civil war, and prohibitions of political movement and freedom. Among the three issues described, civil war is a major calamity that concerns me a lot.

The Karen National Union (KNU) has engaged in an armed resistance against the Burmese government, which used to be known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), over the last six decades for self-determination, freedom, and autonomy. However, the prolonged arm conflict has not brought any positive results. Instead, it creates negative consequences in all major aspects for Karen people. For instance, as a consequence of civil war, thousands of Karen civilians have had to abandon their hometowns, agricultural fields, livestock, and properties and seek refuge in Thailand. Other consequences, such as human rights violations like forced labor, land confiscation, sexual violence, extrajudicial killings, forced relocation, extortion, excessive taxation as well as various forms of torture perpetuated by the Burmese army, are common as well.

Additionally, the issue of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in ethnic Karen areas is a major concern. Four main critical circumstances that are en-
countered by Karen in IDP areas are education, healthcare, livelihood, and life security. For me, education is my main concern. Education is recognized as one of the basic human rights in numerous international agreements and it is one of the most desirable components of Karen people. I am convinced that education revives hope and builds a better and brighter future for individuals, especially during the very critical situation. Talking about accessibility and freedom of education for the majority of Karen children in armed conflict zones is impracticable. To those children, education is very precarious and learning is undertaken in constant fear and under constant threat. Always hiding in the jungle without a proper classroom environment or teaching and learning materials, education life for Karen ethnic children is nightmarish.

An initial round of peace talks between the KNU’s representatives and representatives of Thien Sien’s government was held on January 12th, 2012, and there were certain agreements reached and a ceasefire was eventually signed by both parties at the State level on 6 April. However, I have a mixture of feelings - positivity and skepticism - about the results of the peace talks. As an ethnic Karen, I have been longing for peace since I was a little boy and with no doubt, I also believe that the entire Karen population and other ethnic nationalities in Burma are longing for it as well. From an educational perspective, my question is “can we guarantee a genuine peace for Karen school children in war zones?”

Back in 2008, the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) officially promulgated the acceleration of the accomplishment of the Education for All’s (EFA) goal by 2015 with their primary emphasis on allowing unreachable groups - including learners from ethnic minorities and the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children - access to basic and quality education. However, in reality there are thousands of ethnic Karen minority children in war torn zones who are not able to access primary education and for them life is always about fleeing and hiding. Besides, the Burmese government, which is a member of the Association of Southeast Asia Nations, is reluctant to cooperate and collaborate with other countries to make EFA’s goal materialize. Educational opportunity as well as freedom of education for ethnic Karen children is beyond description.

In summary, there are various mechanisms to mitigate the plight of these vulnerable and disadvantaged Karen ethnic children, and one of them is to strengthen advocacy on their behalf through the consistent engagement of mass media outlets such as newspapers, television and radio broadcasts. I am convinced that if their voices are heard and their passion for learning is recognized, a chance for them to learn in a non-threatening environment will be high on the agenda and EFA’s goal will be reached successfully.
News in Brief

• On Saturday 28 April 2012, there was a serious fire which totally destroyed Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School, a neighbouring rations store, and a library, as well as other buildings in Mae La refugee camp, Thailand

• An antimony extraction project located in a KNU controlled area in Papun District, Karen State, will stop at the end of April as it is affecting crops and the local environment

• Two Karen National Union liaison offices are established in Kyauk Kyi Township, Pegu Division, and Dawei Township, Tenasserim Division, to assist future peace negotiations with the Burmese government

• In Taton District, the Border Guard Force group asks villagers who pan for gold to pay 200,000 kyat in tax in order for permission to use their own machine

• In Kachin State, the armed conflict between the Kachin Independence Army and the Burmese military continues. It started in October 2011

• Aung San Suu Kyi is eventually sworn in as a member of the Burmese parliament after her party, the National League for Democracy, win 43 out of 45 seats contested in 1 April 2012 by-election