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A man leaps onto a truck as it forges a creek in a rural part of Burma's Kachin state, February 26, 2012.

Post-Ceasefire, No Signs of Peace in Burma's Kachin

July 19, 2012 VOA

KACHIN STATE, Burma — A year has passed since a cease-fire collapsed between ethnic Kachin forces and Burma's government troops and there are still there are no signs of peace. Tens of thousands people have fled as the Kachin Independence Organization, or KIO, fights for greater autonomy and control over their resources.

People who fled their homes for this temporary camp in Burma's Kachin state are

Democracy and Human Rights Without Borders

bracing for the monsoon season, worrying about food shortages.

Despite an increase in foreign aid flowing into Burma's capital, Kachin groups say little assistance is reaching the conflict zone. May Li Aung heads Wun Pawng Ninghto, an umbrella group of eight local aid agencies. "All of the international community and funding agencies want to help inside of Burma," she explained. "But this is non-government-controlled area and they are also afraid to come here."

Although some supplies have been allowed into KIO-controlled areas, that is not the case in refugee camps on the Chinese side of the border. A recent Human Rights Watch report criticized China for a lack of assistance to the refugees in Yunnan and called on authorities to give aid workers access. Mui Hpu Kaw cares for seven grandchildren, while her four sons fight for the Kachin Independence Army on the Burmese side of the border. She says the uncertain future is almost unbearable. "I only wait to hear the words, 'Let's go home, the fighting's stopped now'. Every time I see someone come to visit the camp, I'm hoping they will say we can go home now," she said. "I pray that I won't die here." Many observers are skeptical of a resolution anytime soon. Former activist Tun Kyaw Nyein, the son of former deputy Prime Minister U Kyaw Nyein, is now a member of the independent, pro-democracy Burma Strategy Group. He says even Aung San Suu Kyi is treading carefully on the conflict. "I understand fully why she is careful in the way she brings up the topics and addresses the issues because there is also the risk of appearing to favor one side or the other when things are so precarious," he stated. "It is going to take some time and its going to take all parties including Aung San Su Kyi and U Thein Sein and the Kachin leaders to overcome this long-standing mistrust."

In the meantime, the displaced Kachin population waits in these growing camps for a resolution to the conflict that drags on -- despite the dramatic changes happening in other parts of the country.

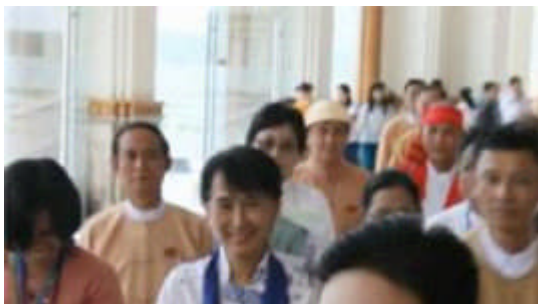
Expert: Aung San Suu Kyi Breaks Norm on Ethnic Minorities in Parliamentary Plea



Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi asks a question during a regular session of Burma's parliament, July 25, 2012, in Naypyitaw.

July 25, 2012 VOA

Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's appeal to parliament to address the poverty in ethnic minority communities is a "significant departure" from traditional calls for reform, says a noted Burma expert. Sean Turnell, a professor of economics at Macquarie University in Australia, called Aung San Suu Kyi's maiden speech to parliament Wednesday "a moment in history" and said using that moment to discuss ethnic minorities was particularly significant. "If there is one unifying figure, it's Aung San Suu Kyi. So in some ways, she's the right person to talk about this particularly intractable problem," he said.



Related video - [click to view](#)

Aung San Suu Kyi focused on the economic plight of Burma's ethnic minorities. Quoting an Asian Development Bank report, she said these groups face the worst poverty in the country. Many of the country's ethnic minorities have fought the military for more autonomy in a decades-long conflict that has displaced tens of

thousands of people. The civilian government that came to power last year reached ceasefire deals with several ethnic rebel groups, but fighting persists in Kachin state and Amnesty International says attacks and human rights abuses against Rohingyas and other Muslims in Rakhine state are increasing. Turnell says Burma observers often talk about the importance of economic reform in the country, but they generally leave the ethnic minorities out of that equation.

"They are very often off the radar when we look at the big multilateral lenders, when we're talking about firms going in to invest and so on," he said. "Very often the consideration for the differences and the terrible deprivation that is there for many ethnic minority areas is not just a political one. There's also an economic dimension."

Many of Burma's ethnic groups live along the Thai and Chinese borders, key trading areas rich in natural resources. Turnell says by using her parliamentary speech to tackle Burma's ethnic situation, Aung San Suu Kyi is turning the domestic issue into a global economic one. "It's usually just extracting firms move in and ship out gas and oil and gems and teak and all the rest of it, so often leaving chaos and environmental destruction in its wake, for not much benefit. So, in a sense, by drawing attention to the economic problems, some of those issues get a bit of a highlight as well," he said. Aung San Suu Kyi long pushed for reform outside the government, advocating change through her National League for Democracy party. Now, after spending years under house arrest, she is joining the political process after being elected to parliament in a rare by-election last April.

Turnell said Aung San Suu Kyi's presence in parliament makes Burma's political reforms more legitimate, but the country is still far from being a democracy.

"So, it's a bit of a gamble for someone like her. But it's a gamble that I think she thinks is worth taking. It's just pushing the country in a progressive direction towards democracy, but it's certainly not there yet," he said.

Burma's Suu Kyi Gives First Parliament Speech



Burma's Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi asks a question during a regular session of the parliament at Burma's Lower House, July 25, 2012, in Naypyitaw.

July 25, 2012 VOA News

Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi has used her first speech in parliament to call for laws protecting the rights of the nation's ethnic minorities. The Nobel Peace Prize winner spoke Wednesday, urging equal rights for all ethnic groups as part of Burma's transition to democracy. "To become a truly democratic union with a spirit of the union, equal rights and mutual respect, I urge all members of parliament to discuss the enactment of the laws needed to protect equal rights of ethnicities," she said. Aung San Suu Kyi's was elected to parliament earlier this year, marking a new phase in her long struggle to bring democracy to her homeland, after she spent nearly 15 years in detention under the nation's military rule.

Her party, the National League for Democracy, is now a mainstream political party, following Burma's landmark April elections and other sweeping changes by the new, nominally civilian government. Aung San Suu Kyi has spoken out in the past in support of ethnic minorities including the Shan, Karen and Kachin. She has been

relatively quiet on the situation in western Rakhine state where longstanding tensions between the Buddhist Rakhines and Muslim Rohingyas erupted into communal violence.

The Burmese government regards Rohingya Muslims as illegal immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh. Amnesty International has said hundreds of Muslims have been arrested and held incommunicado during massive security sweeps through Rohingya areas.

Rights Group: Indigenous Peoples Exploited in Rush for Resources



Boonrian Chinnarat holds a net he once used to catch giant catfish at his house in Chiang Kong district of Chiang Rai province, northern Thailand, Feb. 7, 2011. He blames the disappearance of the fish partly on China's upstream dams.

June 28, 2012 VOA

BANGKOK -- Human rights organization Minority Rights Group International says unprecedented demand for natural resources globally, but especially across Asia, is leading to ethnic conflict and displacement of indigenous communities.

In its [annual report](#) released Thursday, the group says the demand for resources covers such areas as logging and dams, oil, gas or mineral extraction, coastal tourism, commercial fisheries, conservation parks and large scale agriculture.

Carl Soderbergh, a spokesperson for Minority Rights Group International, says the global economic downturn, pressures to boost revenue sources, the emerging bio-fuel market, and resource exploitation has created a "perfect storm" in which minorities and indigenous peoples bear the brunt of demands.

"In terms of the trends globally, there's been an intensification of the exploitation of natural resources pushing into areas populated by minorities and indigenous peoples," Soderbergh said. "We see this with regard to Latin America, in terms of mining in North America, the Alberta tar sands project. In Europe, we see, for example, wind farms and iron ore mining in the Arctic."

In Africa, attention has focused on the leasing of hundreds of thousands of hectares of land for corporations and foreign governments for cash crops. The trends are of concern, said Soderbergh. "This is a wave that has been mounting and increasing over the last 16 years or so. Everyone is chasing, all governments are chasing, a dominant development paradigm in which today minorities and indigenous peoples don't really have a place, and that is the problem," he said.

In Asia and South East Asia, mining development, dam construction and project development have had a widespread impact on the region's hundreds of indigenous communities.

In China, investment in mining has forced herders off traditional grazing lands and ancestral villages in regions such as Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, as well as in Tibet. In Vietnam, over 90,000 people, mostly ethnic Thai, were relocated to make way for the Son La hydropower plant with Vietnamese scientists warning many were left without access to agricultural land. In Cambodia's Prey Lang Forest region, home to the Kuy indigenous people, official land grants of tens of thousands of hectares of forest for mineral extraction, timber and rubber plantations have forced many people to give up traditional livelihoods. Conflict has also been evident in Indonesia where increased palm oil plantation development has been given priority as well as the mining industry in Papua. Nicole Girard, the right's group's Asia Program Director, says conflict over land is on the rise in South East Asia, driven by foreign investment, especially from China. "It's definitely increasing, like the resource exploitation in indigenous peoples' territories. But one of the reasons in South East Asia is because the economies of Laos and Vietnam are opening to more foreign investment, including lots of Chinese investment, including Burma," said Girard.

Increased fighting in Burma's ethnic-Mi-controlled Kachin State over the past year is

directly linked to conflicts over resource investment largely from Chinese business, she adds. In a separate report, the non-government group, [Asia Indigenous People's Pact](#) (IPP) called for Asia's governments to adhere to the [United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People](#) to ensure communities are fully consulted before development projects go ahead. A spokesperson for IPP said the region's governments had a "moral obligation" to respect United Nations agreements. Both groups say indigenous communities back natural resource development, but need the protection of and respect for human rights.

Rights Group Urges China to Protect Burmese Refugees



An elderly Kachin refugee and children, inside a shelter, look after the belongings of others who were out working near the China-Burma border in Yunnan province, China, August 11, 2012.

June 26, 2012 VOA

[Human Rights Watch](#) says several thousand ethnic-Kachin refugees who fled fighting in Burma now face a serious human rights situation in southwest China and risk being forcibly returned to their war-torn homeland. The group says as many as

10,000 people have fled to China's Yunnan province from Burma's Kachin state, where heavy fighting broke out last year between the army and Kachin rebels.

Phil Robertson, the deputy director for the Asia division of Human Rights Watch, says the refugees are in desperate need of humanitarian aid.

"They're facing a very difficult humanitarian situation. You have about 7,000 to 10,000 Kachin refugees scattered around 12 or more makeshift camps," he said. "They're lacking adequate food, no potable water, inadequate sanitation, inadequate shelter."

The group says Chinese authorities have "generally tolerated" the thousands of refugees. But it says officials have repatriated about 300 people to Kachin state since the conflict erupted last year. It has also documented cases where Chinese officials have turned away potential refugees at the border.

Human Rights Watch wants China to provide temporary protection and allow humanitarian agencies free access to the refugee population.

So far, China has provided no aid to the displaced persons and has rejected attempts by United Nations humanitarian agencies to access the refugees.

"China needs to respect refugee rights, and it needs to provide humanitarian access to these refugees, including by UNHCR," said Robertson. "And it needs to recognize that there needs to be some temporary protection for these refugees until it is safe to go home." At least 60,000 Kachin people have been displaced since June 2011, when fighting broke out between the military and the Kachin Independence Army, ending a 17-year ceasefire.

State Media Blames Kachin Rebels for Electricity Shortage in Burma



Recruits of Kachin Independence Army undergo training in northern Burma (file photo).

May 21, 2012 VOA

BANGKOK - Rare street protests of months of electricity cuts are being held in Burma's second-largest city, Mandalay. Burma's state media blames attacks by ethnic-Kachin rebels for worsening chronic power shortages.

Protesters gathered late Sunday in Mandalay, upset with power cuts that have left them with only several hours of electricity a day. Hundreds of people held a peaceful candle-lit walk through the streets and outside the local electric authority, demanding regular supplies of power. Some reports quoted people upset with the government for selling power to China when it cannot meet its own people's needs.

Three out of four Burmese do not have access to electricity, despite the country's huge oil, gas and hydropower resources, much of which is sold to neighbors Thailand and China. Monk U Wirathu took part in the demonstration and spoke to VOA's Burmese Service. He says they protested because officials announced electricity would be distributed only six hours a day. Previously, they were not limited to six hours, but electricity distribution was alternated either day or night. Rangoon, the former capital, is also down to several hours of electricity a day.

Burma's state media blamed the rebel Kachin Independence Army for destroying part of a power grid in eastern Shan State. The New Light of Myanmar newspaper says KIA bomb blasts over the weekend destroyed four electricity towers, reducing

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power nation-wide by 200 megawatts. Colonel James Lum Dau is deputy of foreign affairs for the KIA's political wing, the Kachin Independence Organization. He denies their army would attack the electricity grid and said authorities are always blaming the KIA. "We are not going to do this kind of thing. We have no policy [like this]. And, again, this is the area ... is not the area we are operating. So that, I can deny that this is absolutely impossible," he said. The KIA could not be immediately reached for comment. Lum Dau said Burma soldiers have in recent weeks been moving in on the KIA's headquarters in Laiza, near the Chinese border, leading to fierce clashes. Burma's army and the KIA have been fighting since June, when they broke a 17-year cease-fire. Protests are rare in Burma where the military crushed democracy uprisings in 1988 and 2007. But since last year the nominally civilian government has ushered in reforms, including a law allowing peaceful protest.

The Mandalay protesters failed to get permission for the demonstration, but authorities appear to be tolerating them. Burmese media reported the local electricity chief promised to quickly resolve the power shortage or he would resign.

Burmese State Media: Dozens of Rebels Dead in Clashes in Kachin State

Last updated on: May 03, 2012 8:00 PM VOA

Burmese state media said Friday that heavy fighting in northern Kachin state has killed 29 ethnic rebels and two government troops during the past week.

The state-run New Light of Myanmar said the clashes began on April 27 when government troops responded to an attack on a military post by members of the Kachin Independence Army in a northern border town. It said one KIA member was captured alive and that the military is in "hot pursuit" of fleeing members of the group.

Lanan, a spokesperson for the Kachin Independence Organization, confirmed the fighting to VOA's Burmese service. While he did not give a casualty estimate, he said both sides had suffered losses in the fighting. He also said that government troops

were moving closer to KIO headquarters near the Burma-China border.

At least 60,000 people have been displaced since June 2011, when fighting broke out between the army and Kachin rebels, ending a 17-year cease-fire.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called for an end to Burma's conflicts with ethnic rebel groups during his visit to the country earlier this week.

Rights groups say that, despite Burma's recent political reforms, there has been little progress in human rights abuses committed by the country's military.

Ethnic groups in the northern part of the country have long accused the government of repressing them, and have been fighting for greater autonomy in their traditional states.

China-Backed Hydro Dam Upsets Burma Locals

Last updated on: April 10, 2012 8:00 PM VOA

In September, Burma's reform-minded President Thein Sein appeared to heed environmental concerns and suspended construction of a controversial China-backed hydropower dam in northern Kachin state. But the Myitsone dam project has not been cancelled and locals worry what will happen if construction resumes.

The Myitsone is where the Mali Hka and N'Mai Hka Rivers merge in Burma's north Kachin state to form the Irrawaddy, the country's lifeline.

If the \$3.6 billion Myitsone dam goes ahead, the reservoir will flood an area the size of Singapore, submerging a scenic area popular with tourists.

Senior monk U Yay Wa Ra says the waterline would reach halfway up his temple's pagoda."When the dam project was suspended I felt happy because it meant we could keep the natural beauty of the Myitsone area and we would not lose our temple as well," he said. Hydropower from the dam could produce several thousand

megawatts of electricity, most of which would be sold to neighboring China. China is also backing six smaller hydropower dams planned along the river. The potential profits are huge, but not for local businesses. La Phai Jar Aung sells roasted fish to tourists on the Irrawaddy riverbank. "If the dam project resumes we will not know how to make a living," she said. "There is no business and no work at Aung Myin Thar [the relocation village]. So we would have to stay there and be unemployed."

Aid Access Granted for Burma's North Kachin State



A man leaps onto a truck as it forges a creek in a rural part of Burma's Kachin state, February 26, 2012.

Last updated on: April 10, 2012 8:00 PM VOA

The U.N. office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Burma says the government since late March has granted it unrestricted aid deliveries to most of north Kachin State, where tens of thousands have been displaced by a military offensive.

As many as 75,000 civilians have been displaced in Kachin since fighting broke out in

June between Burma's army and Kachin rebels. Many live in makeshift camps and are in need of food, water, shelter and medicine. Authorities had limited access by the U.N. and other aid agencies to mainly government-controlled areas, even though most of the displaced were in rebel territory. But after months of negotiations, Ashok Nigam, the U.N. Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Burma, said the agencies have been given permission that should allow sustained access to most of Kachin.

"We have succeeded now in terms of being able to provide humanitarian assistance with the United Nations and its humanitarian partners, including international NGOs, who can now go to all areas in Kachin," said Nigam. Nigam said the one exception is the area around the headquarters of the rebel Kachin Independence Army in Laiza on the border with China. He said the agencies are negotiating for access to Laiza and are hopeful they will soon be able to reach all of Kachin state.

Matthew Gray is with the French aid group Solidarites International. He said his group was granted the same access in January, but has been limited by funding. "Now we have the access due to our negotiations at the NGOs, UN level, nationally here and internationally. But now it seems the only block is that we just need the money now to accompany this," said Gray. Gray said his organization provides sanitation supplies and water purification tablets to about 4,000 people. But, he said, food is running out fast and rainy season is coming so shelter may be a problem.

The U.N. was allowed two deliveries, one in December and one in March, to rebel-controlled areas. But the supplies included only enough food to sustain a few thousand people for one month. Nigam said his office is applying to a U.N. Central Emergency Relief Fund for \$5 million to buy humanitarian supplies for Kachin. He estimates a total need of about \$22 million and is calling on international donors to help make up the shortfall.

Kachin Rebels Live in Limbo as War with Burma Drags On

Last updated on: April 08, 2012 8:00 PM VOA

Burma's army and ethnic Kachin rebels have been fighting since June, when they broke a 17-year-old cease-fire. The move sent tens of thousands of civilians fleeing into makeshift refugee camps. Rights groups accuse authorities of preventing aid from reaching camps in rebel-held territory. Four hundred Kachin refugees get regular donations of food and other aid at a Catholic-run camp. The youngest were born while in the camp, enlarging families that fled fighting between the Burmese military and the Kachin Independence Army. Some have lost friends or relatives in the conflict. Others, like farmer Nar San Too, were themselves injured.

"While I was looking for mushrooms in the forest one morning in July last year, a landmine exploded...I stepped on the wire cable of the mine and it exploded beside me," he explains. Tin Tun Kwut Nan says she and her eight family members fled Nan San Village after it was attacked. "We ran from our village in fear," she says. "I don't know exactly how many villagers were killed. Our village was burnt down by Burma's Army." The refugees are supported by donations from local officials, a local Catholic church, and the World Food Program. Volunteer food coordinator Daw Kyar Phyu says most arrived in October and come from 10 different villages.

"They will go back to their villages when there is peace. Now, they are worried for their security so they will not go back their villages where there is no peace yet," she says. Although they are unable to return home, these refugees are still better off than the estimated 30,000 in rebel-controlled areas, where the government has cut-off food deliveries, apart from just a few U.N.aid convoys.

The last delivery in March contained only enough food to feed a few thousand for one month.

As Sanctions Begin Easing, Burma's Economy Under Scrutiny



A man uses an ATM machine at KBZ bank's head office in Rangoon, March 14, 2012.

Last updated on: April 05, 2012 8:00 PM VOA

The election success of Burma's opposition has led to the easing of some sanctions imposed by the United States and pressure from neighboring countries to drop them entirely. Although there is a surge in interest in Burma's economy from foreign investors, analysts warn there remain major economic and political challenges.

Key Facts About Burma

- Adopted a political system based on democratic principals in 2011 after almost five decades of military rule.
- The new government is made up mostly of retired or serving generals.
- Population is estimated at 55 million people.
- The largest ethnic group is Burman, 68 percent of the population.
- 89 percent of the population is Buddhist.
- The military moved the capital from Rangoon to the newly-built city Naypyitaw in 2005.
- At least 2 years military service is compulsory for men and women.

This week, the United States dropped travel bans against some senior Burmese officials and eased restrictions on some U.S. investment and financial services.

Positive reaction

The moves were welcomed by the chief executive of the investment house Leopard Capital, Douglas Clayton. "We're very bullish on the development and we believe that this is the beginning of Myanmar's [Burma's] transformation into a modern economy and that there will be a role for foreign investors to play in that. Sanctions in the past should be unwound because the reasons for sanctions have been largely met," he said. Although the United States has said it is preparing to nominate an ambassador to the country, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton says the reform process still has a long way to go.

ASEAN divided

That position remains at odds with Burma's neighbors in the Association of Southeast Asia Nations, who has called for an end to all sanctions. Despite that show of support from ASEAN, not all members are in agreement. ASEAN politicians within the ASEAN Inter-parliamentary Myanmar Caucus say the lifting of all sanctions could be premature, inviting instability within the country. Kraisak Choonhavan, Thailand representative within the Caucus, says ending fighting in ethnic minority regions should be the priority before sanctions are fully lifted.

"These pressures [to ease sanctions] are strong and much stronger still, as it is represented by the ASEAN call for the lifting of sanctions to please the regime - which remains very much a vicious and undaunting regime on the maintenance of its absolute power over Shan State, Karen State, Kachin State [and] Mon State," said Kraisak Choonhavan.

Human rights

The Burmese government has been holding ceasefire talks with the Kachin and Karen in recent days. Rights organizations say on-going military operations have led to human rights abuses and attacks on civilians in Kachin state in recent months.

Kraisak fears the NLD, Burma's main opposition party, having secured seats in the national parliament in the by-election, may turn its back on ethnic minority

communities' concerns. Other pro-democracy groups say sanctions should be lifted only after all political detainees are released. The Thailand based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) says there are still 900 political prisoners in jail. Human Rights Watch, in a release, called for caution in any easing of sanctions, saying while positive steps by Burma's government should be matched by the European Union, there should be no "wholesale withdrawal of sanctions".

The rights group says a further easing on visa bans and increases in humanitarian and development assistance should be considered by European Union foreign ministers. While the sanctions may remain for now, there already has been a surge in tourism from foreigners eager for a first hand look at the country.

Sean Turnell, an associate professor of economics at Australia's Macquarie University, says Asian investors are already trying to capitalize on the foreign interest.

"Asian investors have always been there of course. But some of them are getting excited about potential Western interest in the sense that if they see a great advance of Western tourists into the country then I think there's a lot of Asian investors interested in hotels and tourist infrastructure," said Turnell. Burma's economy in recent years has grown up with the sanctions, which has led to pain for some industries but benefits for others.

Uneven benefits

Academics and rights workers have argued the trade and financial sanctions hit workers in export-oriented industries such as textiles, forcing many who would prefer factory jobs into informal sectors such as entertainment or the sex industry.

Aung Zaw, editor of the newsmagazine *The Irrawaddy* says there are many businessmen and state-owned enterprises that have benefited from the restricted economic competition resulting from the foreign sanctions. "There are some tycoons, those ministers, whose [business] is not competitive; particular those billionaires inside the country," he said. "They are not competitive enough and they don't want to see sanctions being lifted because they are enjoying so much with the monopoly - they monopolize everything." But all analysts agree Burma faces major challenges

and opportunities as it tries to rebuild an economy long mismanaged after five decades of military rule.

Burma's Minorities Caution Against Embracing Military Government



General Mutu Saipo (C) from the Karen National Union talks with a member of the Burma government negotiation team during a welcome dinner ceremony at Sedona hotel in Rangoon, Burma, April 5, 2012.

Last updated on: April 04, 2012 8:00 PM VOA

As the United States prepares to relax sanctions on Burma in the wake of parliamentary by-elections, ethnic minorities say the military-led government continues to commit atrocities in the east of the country. Activists from Kachin and Karen minorities are urging Western countries to be more cautious in their moves to end Burma's isolation. Kachin state in eastern Burma is home to a people still at war with the military government. The fighting has forced 60,000 people into refugee camps. Hton Wun, a 33-year-old mother of two, is among them.

"We were really afraid of soldiers coming inside the village," she said. "We couldn't sleep at night, we were afraid of what would happen when we were asleep."

Minorities stress human rights issues

Burma's ethnic minorities have long accused the government of repression and brutality. The government stays largely silent on the allegations of human rights abuses, but it is negotiating a ceasefire with the Kachin.

The Karen, another minority in the south and east, signed a cease-fire with the government in January after six decades of fighting. Zoya Phan grew up in refugee camps in the midst of the conflict. Her father was general secretary of the Karen National Union; he was assassinated in Thailand in 2008. Her mother was a fighter in the Karen armed wing. She now lives in London under political asylum.

"We were attacked with air bombs and airstrikes. Each time the bombs dropped on the ground, the ground would shake and we were just so horrified," said Phan.

Phan now works at the Burma Campaign UK, raising awareness of the plight of the country's ethnic minorities.

"In Kachin state, the Burmese army has broken three cease-fire agreements in the past years. And the army continues attacking civilians. Women are being raped and men are also used as forced labor," she said.

Intent on spreading reforms

The jungles of eastern Burma are a long way from the street celebrations that have swept through Rangoon this week following the parliamentary by-elections. Official results show Aung Sung Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party took 43 of 45 seats. The apparent pace of change under current President Thein Sein has this week prompted the United States to ease financial and travel sanctions against the government.

"We are prepared to take steps towards, first, seeking agreement for a fully accredited ambassador in Rangoon in the coming days," said U.S. Secretary of State

Hillary Clinton.

Activist Zoya Phan said the U.S. and its allies should be more cautious.

"It is very important for the West to maintain most of the key sanctions to encourage more positive reforms in Burma. At the moment, if the West lifted all key sanctions, it would be a mistake," she said.

Rapid changes are sweeping through parts of Burma; for the first time, citizens could get access to credit cards. Beyond the big cities, Burma's minorities say they are yet to see the benefits of the West's re-engagement with the military rulers.

Burma Allows Second UN Aid Shipment to Kachin Rebel Areas



Ethnic Kachin people sit in the doorways of shelters at a temporary camp for people displaced by fighting between government troops and the Kachin Independence Army, or KIA, outside the city of Myitkyina in the north of the country, February 22, 2012.

Last updated on: March 25, 2012 8:00 PM VOA

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Burma's government has allowed the United Nations to ship a second round of humanitarian aid to rebel-controlled areas in northern Kachin state. But, the U.N. says the aid is far from adequate for the tens of thousands displaced by fighting between Burma's army and ethnic Kachin rebels. The United Nations was allowed to send a second convoy of humanitarian aid Monday morning for rebel-held areas of Burma's Kachin state. The trucks carried temporary shelters and enough food and medicine to last 2,200 people about a month. An earlier U.N. aid convoy left Saturday with enough supplies for 1,100 people. It is only the second time Burma's government has allowed international aid to enter areas controlled by the Kachin Independence Organization and follows growing international pressure.

Aye Win, a U.N. spokesman in Rangoon, says the aid is not enough. He says there are at least 50,000 people displaced and in need of sustained help. "We'd certainly like the circumstances to be more permissible for further aid delivery," said Aye Win. "And, again, you see, the situation up there, you know, has to be taken into account. And, once we're able to send another convoy we'll certainly do so."

As many as 75,000 villagers fled ongoing fighting between Burma's army and Kachin rebels that broke out in June, ending a 17-year cease-fire. Displaced villagers crowd into churches and makeshift refugee camps along the border with China.

Authorities have allowed international aid to flow to government-controlled areas but previously only allowed one shipment in December to rebel territory. Rights groups condemn the blocking of aid as a violation of international humanitarian law.

The KIO also refused some aid that was offered by the government, apparently concerned that accepting it could be used for propaganda purposes. This month, Human Rights Watch released a report saying despite Burma's recent political reforms, which have won widespread international praise, there has been no significant reduction in abuses committed by the country's military.

The report on the conflict in Kachin included numerous accounts of torture, rape and deliberate attacks on civilians.

Rights Group Says Burmese Abuses Continue in Kachin State



Ethnic Kachin people sit in the doorways of shelters at a temporary camp for people displaced by fighting between government troops and the Kachin Independence Army, or KIA, outside the city of Myitkyina in the north of the country, February 22, 2012.

Last updated on: March 19, 2012 8:00 PM VOA

Rights groups say Burmese military abuses continue in northern Kachin state including torture, rape, and deliberate attacks on civilians. Fighting between Burma's military and ethnic Kachin rebels has displaced tens of thousands of civilians, but authorities are refusing to allow humanitarian aid to rebel-controlled areas.

Abuses continue

Human Rights Watch says that, despite Burma's recent political reforms that have won widespread international praise, there has been no significant change in abuses committed by the country's military.

In a report released Tuesday, the New York-based group details numerous rights violations it says were committed in the last year in northern Kachin state.

Matthew Smith, a researcher with the group, spoke to the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand. "The army has forced men, women, and children to serve as porters on the front lines of the fighting. It has deliberately attacked Kachin civilians and villages," said Smith. "It has killed Kachin civilians, tortured civilian detainees, and committed rape and other forms of sexual violence." Fighting broke out in June between the army and Kachin rebels, ending a 17-year ceasefire.

Human Rights Watch says both sides are guilty of recruiting child soldiers, some as young as 14.

Land mines

They are also laying fresh land mines that at least one side, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) is failing to map at the risk of civilians and even its own fighters. Human Rights Watch says more than 40 KIA rebels were killed by their own land mines in the last year. The clashes have displaced at least 75,000 civilians around the Burma-China border and made them dependent on humanitarian aid.

Although authorities have allowed aid groups to help those in government-controlled areas, they only allowed access once, in December, to 45,000 refugees in rebel-held territory. Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director for Human Rights Watch, says refusing aid violates international humanitarian law.

"This is a decision by the Burma government not the Burma army. But, this is the Burma government," said Robertson. "This is the reform government of Burma that people keep talking about as, you know leading the way and denying humanitarian access in a systematic way." Robertson says international pressure is needed to ensure authorities allow aid to flow sustained and unhindered to those in need.

Human Rights Watch is also calling for Burma to allow an independent, international mechanism to investigate allegations of abuse.

China Hosts Burma-Rebel Peace Talks for Economic, Strategic Benefit



Burmese people living in Malaysia protest to condemn the persecutions committed by the Burmese army towards ethnic minorities, near the Burmese Embassy in Kuala Lumpur (file photo)

Daniel Schearf

Last updated on: February 08, 2012 7:00 PM VOA

Burma has won praise for signing a series of ceasefires with ethnic rebel groups fighting for autonomy. But renewed conflict with one group, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), is threatening peace in a key border area with China.

Burma's resource-rich northern Kachin state has been the site of sporadic fighting since June, when a 17-year-old ceasefire ended with violent clashes.

Since then, thousands of villagers have fled across the border into China. To help resolve the situation, Beijing, which has billions invested in regionally-based trade and energy projects, has been quietly hosting peace talks between Burmese authorities and the rebels. Brian Erikson of Partners in Relief and Development, an **Democracy and Human Rights Without Borders**

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international Christian charity with a specific focus on the welfare of Burmese children, estimates that more than 60,000 people were displaced around the border area.

Those inside Burma, he says, are short on food with many are suffering from respiratory infections exacerbated by cold weather."There are definitely people numbering in the thousands that have fled from a direct conflict with the Burma army ... direct confrontation where armed soldiers forcibly claimed area, property and sometimes people," said Erikson. "And so people fled amidst live rounds of gunfire - I think the majority have fled from fear of this situation."

International organizations and journalists have been granted limited access to Kachin state, leaving specifics of the situation difficult to verify. Details on the Chinese side, where authorities have not acknowledged any refugee crisis but have provided neutral territory for both sides to hold talks twice since November, are also unclear. Raviprasad Narayanan, a researcher at Taiwan's National Chengchi University, says China's role as host is a result of a similar 2009 conflict between Burma's military and a Kokan militia in Shan state, which disrupted trade and sent thousands of refugees fleeing into China."This new round of interest that Beijing has shown, it emerges out of ... the August 2009 Kokang conflict," said Narayanan. "Now you [have] the refugee crisis on China's border, and this [has] created a lot of hiccups, not only for the provincial leadership but also for people sitting in Beijing. Hence they felt that they should not be out of [the] loop at any moment lest they be caught off guard."

A financial stake

The continued fighting in Kachin threatens not only peace, but also billions of dollars in Chinese trade and investments.

After hostilities erupted near the construction site of the controversial, \$3.5 billion Myitsone hydropower dam, Burmese President Thein Sein suspended construction, surprising and upsetting the Chinese.

Beijing has deals to build seven hydropower dams in Kachin state, with the vast majority of the electricity going to China.

China also buys and invests in Burmese minerals, precious stones and logging - not all of it legal - and, in return, sells cheap manufactured goods.

Aung Kyaw Zaw, a Ruili-based Burma analyst, says China is hosting peace talks to protect its economic interests.

"In the northern Kachin area, especially the KIA controlled area, so [much] government capital, Chinese government capital," he said. "They need peace."

Pipelines, arms deals

Maung Zarni, a visiting fellow at the London School of Economics, says oil and gas pipelines that China and Burma are jointly laying across the country are of even greater importance.

When finished, the pipelines will stretch from Burma's western coast and into China at Ruili, just south of Kachin state and not far from the recent fighting, providing a strategic alternative route for African and Middle East oil to flow to China while avoiding the piracy-prone Strait of Malacca.

For China, says Zarni, the pipelines make peace between Burmese authorities and Kachin's rebel armies a strategic imperative.

"The Kachin state becomes extremely vital both to the Burmese military and Beijing in terms of ... providing security for the pipeline as well as the cross-border trading post," he said.

Military analysts say China is also the largest supplier of weapons to the United Wa State Army, the largest of Burma's armed rebel groups, estimated at up to 30,000 fighters and considered the biggest narcotics dealing organization in Southeast Asia.

To balance its interests, China also sells weapons to Burma's military.

Zarni says that, with Burma's economy opening up, Beijing's attention is squarely fixed on officials in the capital.

"China, when it suits its interests, will pressure local ethnic armed groups, especially Wa, and you know I think Kachin as well," he said. "But I don't know to what extent their efforts have been constructive or slanted in favor of the Burmese interests, because, at this point, China is fishing the bigger fish in Naypyidaw rather than fishing along the border with the local ethnic groups."

An end to fighting with the rebels is one of the key demands of Western powers for improving relations with Burma after years of punishing economic sanctions.

The government has so far made deals with, among others, the Wa, the Karenni, the Shan, the Chin, and an historic ceasefire with the Karen, who have fought against Burma's military for six decades.

Burma's President Orders Ceasefire in Kachin State



Burmese people living in Malaysia chant slogans during a protest to condemn the persecutions committed by the Burmese army towards ethnic minorities, near the Burmese Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, October 11, 2011.

Danielle Bernstein

Last updated on: December 13, 2011 7:00 PM VOA

Burma's civilian government is surprising skeptics of its commitment to reforms by ordering the military to stop its campaign against armed ethnic groups in eastern border areas. The move follows pressure from the international community to make peace.

Burmese state media carried a statement from the government's National Human Rights Commission, confirming reports President Thein Sein instructed the military on December 10 to cease its offensive against the Kachin Independence Army (KIA).

The six-month conflict in Kachin state began with a dispute about a joint venture dam project with China on the Dabein River. Burmese troops have been gradually closing in on the KIA headquarters in Laiza. Despite the ceasefire announcement, KIA officials say fighting continues on the front lines and reinforcement troops are arriving.

"This is welcome," said Henry Hkaung, an advisor to the KIA's chief of staff. "But the problem is although Thein Sein has encouraged the army to stop offensive fighting, military offensives are still going on and mostly increasing the number in all parts of the state. The fighting on the front line is still going on, so the military does not listen to Thein Sein's order."

Kachin state is largely made up of hilly jungle terrain, and the KIA and Burmese soldiers have laid land mines, complicating the prospect of a retreat, which could take weeks or months to complete. The announcement follows the United Nation's first mission to the area, where more than 30,000 people have been displaced since the conflict began. U.N. spokesperson Aye Win said the team hoped to distribute aid to the people fleeing fighting living in temporary camps, but also do a more in-depth assessment of needs. He stressed his group's programs in Burma remain underfunded.

"This is the first time that a delivery could be made to Laiza and we hope that we will be able to provide further assistance for the delivery as and when it's needed, as the situation calls for, but the situation of stocks and supplies within the country is

quite dire right now and we try to mobilize as much as we can to be able to replenish stocks and be able to provide more assistance as is needed," said Aye Win.

The Burmese government has also sent a four-person team of observers to assess the situation. The National Human Rights Commission said it visited people affected by the conflict in government controlled areas, but did not access KIA controlled areas.

"Because this is the only way that can bring about peace and restoration of security and law and order in the region so I think this deserved to be welcomed by the commission and not only that we also strongly urge the KIA to reciprocate the gesture of the president," said Win Mra, head of the NHRC. Win Mra says the team did not investigate allegations that the Burmese military has committed war crimes or other human-rights abuses. Outside aid groups that have visited the conflict area in recent months have reported finding evidence of soldiers looting food from civilians, firing indiscriminately into villages and using villagers as human minesweepers and porters. Win Mra said he had not read the reports, but dismissed the allegations. "We do not have definite evidence," he said. "There may be pictures. The problem is that normally these allegations are directed in places where fighting is taking place. Normally, the standard allegation is use of rape as a weapon of war, but our mission was mainly concerned with the humanitarian aspect."

Although ceasefire negotiations between the government and the KIA have so far not ended hostilities, other armed ethnic groups along the border including the Shan State Army South and one faction of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army have recently brokered deals.

As Reform Is Lauded in Rangoon, Conflict Continues in Kachin State



Burma people living in Malaysia chant slogans during a protest to condemn the persecutions committed by the Burmese army towards ethnic minorities, near the Burmese Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, October 11, 2011.

Danielle Bernstein

Last updated on: December 07, 2011 7:00 PM VOA

In June, an incident at a hydropower dam on the Dabein river, a Chinese-Burmese joint venture put an end to a 17-year ceasefire in Kachin state. Six months and tens of thousands of refugees later, the new Burmese government is making progress towards reform, but has left the Kachin behind. During her visit to Burma earlier this month, Hillary Clinton said that the one-year civilian government had indeed made significant progress toward reform, under President Thein Sein; but that there is still great room for improvement.

Among the most pressing issues is the systematic militarization of western Burma, where the Burmese military has continued its campaign against ethnic groups in the border areas.

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Although the Shan State Army South signed a ceasefire agreement with the government, the Kachin Independence Army has been less lucky. Dau Hkaung, advisor to the KIA General Gun Maw, says the Burmese officials have not offered a political solution to the problem. "They announce to the international community that Burma is changing. Burma is changing, this fighting is a small matter, it will be finished in a few days," said Dau Hkaung. "But politically, they intentionally want to eliminate all of the political struggling groups. We assume the government will intensify their fighting seriously. Right now it's truly happen to our area."

Dau Hkaung says the most recent push of the Burmese troops has seen them threatening the border town, Ma Ja Yang, which is of strategic importance because of its proximity to hydropower projects and is a hub for border trade. The government's unwillingness to allow the KIA to participate in upcoming elections has further dampened hope for a political solution to the conflict.

Aid groups have been allowed some access to affected areas, but, according to a recent United Nations assessment, accessing affected populations is problematic - so problematic that it is not even clear exactly how many internally displaced people there are.

The assessment found that food and water shortages are of primary concern, and becoming critical in some parts of the state. La Rip, director of a Kachin organization in charge of keeping track of refugees and IDPs, confirmed the findings of the report.

"Actually it is very difficult to get the exact number still we can get the number we have access to," said La Rip. "At the moment, it is already more than 30,000. The main problem the difficulties for IDPs at the moment is food shortage."

Decades of armed conflict in Burma's western border lands have led to widespread allegations of war crimes perpetrated by the Burmese army, including targeting civilians, forced conscription of child soldiers, use of convict porters and using rape as a weapon of war.

Bryan Erykson recently published a report decrying war crimes in Kachin state and says there are easily more than 30,000 people displaced by the conflict.

"We're looking at skirmishes that take place daily across jungle regions. Many of them just go undocumented, so to try to put together the scale of the conflict is difficult," said Erykson. "I think what we can say is that there are populations of civilians in villages and towns anywhere from 200 people to 2,000 people that are being relocated, forced from their homes. As positions get stronger the pushing goes farther in Kachin-controlled area, and so we're seeing more civilians displaced because of that. Erykson says, as the Burmese troops push further into Kachin controlled areas, more evidence of human rights violations have been found, including torture and extra-judicial killings, as well as evidence of human shielding. The new civilian government has made progress by admitting to holding political prisoners, but has yet to admit to perpetrating war crimes in its border areas.

Burma Ethnic Rebels Cautious About Government Peace Offer



In this photo taken April 17, 2010, recruits of the Kachin Independence Army, one of Myanmar's largest armed ethnic groups, go through battle drills at a training camp near Laiza in Burma.

Last updated on: November 22, 2011 7:00 PM VOA

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Burma's military-backed government has offered a possible path to peace with ethnic rebel groups who have long fought against central authorities for autonomy. A peace agreement is a key demand of Western nations, including the United States, for improving relations with Burma. Although some people are encouraged by the offer, not all rebel groups are convinced it is genuine. The government's new peace offer was disclosed Saturday when an envoy of Burmese President Thein Sein discussed the three-part deal with rebel representatives. The offer calls for a cease-fire, followed by development assistance and then a national conference to discuss political grievances. This is the first time that central government authorities have offered to hold political discussions with the rebel groups. Those who attended the talks say three of the five rebel delegates welcomed the offer. Khuensai Jaiyen, editor of the *Shan Herald Agency for News*, was invited to the meeting as an unpaid advisor for the Shan State Army South. He says the Shan, the Karen National Union, and Chin National Front agreed to the offer, in principal. "They expect it to be sort of like the Panlong conference in 1947, where they can talk about full autonomy in their own internal affairs, human rights and democracy, of course," he said. The 1947 Panlong conference was launched by democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's father, Aung San, and three ethnic groups to reach independence from Britain.

The Panlong Agreement also resulted in a broad outline for autonomy for the ethnic regions. But Aung San's assassination later that year, the government's failure to implement the spirit of the agreement, and military rule fueled ethnic rebel uprisings.

Since then, those ongoing rebellions have been cited by the Burmese government as the reason for having a strong military. Burma's army has dominated the country for more than half a century. David Steinberg, a Burma analyst at Georgetown University in Washington D.C., says the fair distribution of power among ethnic groups is the most serious problem facing the country since independence.

"They're not doing enough to address that. They've rescinded something at least for the moment," he said. "They had this plan for border guard forces, which would integrate the minority armies into the Burma army and basically emasculate them in terms of their ability to revolt against the government. But because of such resistance the new government has shelved that plan." Despite continued fighting,

the nominally civilian government that took office in March, after decades of overt military rule, promised peace talks. But President Thein Sein, himself a former general, told journalists at a press briefing Saturday that negotiations have been difficult.

He says, because the ethnic minorities have different cultures, different traditions and different goals it is impossible to reach agreement when they hold talks. He says they have tried before and failed. He says they talk with them individually and try to find common ground. He says the talks are based on the principles that the rebels accept not to break away from the union and to accept the major guidelines in the 2008 constitution. The two rebel groups at the talks that did not agree to the government's terms are the Karenni National Progressive Party and the Kachin Independence Organization. The KIO and government troops have been fighting pitched battles this year in northern Kachin State. La Ja, a spokesman for the group, says they are not yet ready to accept the offer. He says this is just an initial meeting and there is no reason to decide whether to accept the government offers. He says, if the government wants further discussion, they will have the discussion. He says they cannot say anything conclusive at this point because of the whole situation, including the ongoing fighting. For the three rebel groups that agreed to the plan, Shan advisor Khuensai Jaiyen says one of the main reasons was the government's engagement with democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi - who he referred to using the honorific "Daw." "Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been working quite closely with the present government, especially with the president," he said. "If Daw Aung San Suu Kyi trusts the present government enough, maybe they can also."

President Thein Sein has held direct talks with Aung San Suu Kyi who is set to re-enter politics after 15 years of house arrest. Khuensai says, nonetheless, the rebel groups are still cautious. He says they understand there are risks in dealing with the government, but that they are risks worth taking.

Wary Welcome for Burma Dam Suspension



Burmese activists protest Myitsone hydropower dam project in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Sept. 22, 2011.

Daniel Schearf

Last updated on: September 29, 2011 8:00 PM VOA

Environmental activists in Burma are cautiously welcoming President Thein Sein's parliamentary announcement to suspend construction of a controversial hydroelectric dam in the north. Although the Chinese-backed Myitsone dam project has been opposed by pro-democracy groups and local residents, the rare government concession came as a surprise to many. The president said the project would be terminated because it is against the will of the people, but no official documentation has been issued to corroborate the announcement.

"If they really stop the project it is a victory of the people," said Ahnan, a representative of the Thailand-based Burma Rivers Network who like many in Burma goes by just one name. "But, we cannot trust at all. We don't see any official statement and we don't see any change in the construction site, so we don't know if that really [a] stop or not." Activists have long criticized the project for a lack of transparency, public consultation, and its potential impact on the unique

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environment along the Irrawaddy River. Its construction also would have displaced thousands of villagers in an area where Burma's military has been clashing with ethnic Kachin rebels. Unusually candid criticism of the project surfaced in the media and in small street protests, and democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi wrote a letter urging the dam's suspension. But until Friday, authorities largely ignored those concerns and said construction would go ahead. According to Ahnan, Beijing, which backed the project and was expected to purchase the electricity it generated, has yet to issue an official reaction to new announcement. The president said Burma would negotiate with the Chinese company building the dam, but he gave no further details. China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei on Friday had no immediate reaction to the decision, explaining that he needs to learn and verify the information.

Regardless of official confirmation that the project will indeed be terminated, U Ohn of the Forest Resource Environment Development and Conservation Association called the decision the best news of the year for the biodiversity hotspot.

"I'm very glad to hear that this dam is going to be stopped," he said. "We can get money from other, smaller dams in our areas instead of a big dam which is very very devastating to the environment physically, culturally, historically." The \$3.6 billion dam was the largest of seven being constructed by the China Power Investment Corporation. Activists say the decision-making process for all of the dams must be transparent, include public participation, and consider the environmental and social impact on the people.

In Burmese Ethnic Conflict, Calls for Peace Do Little to Break Standoff



In this photo taken April 17, 2010, recruits of the Kachin Independence Army, one of Burma's largest armed ethnic groups, go through battle drills at a training camp near Laiza, Burma.

Last updated on: August 17, 2011 8:00 PM VOA

Burmese President Thien Sein has called on ethnic militias currently fighting government troops in Burma to hold peace talks with respective state governments - not the central government -- in a bid to end months of conflict that has displaced as many as 50,000 people in eastern and northern states.

That demand is part of a broader set of policies that analysts say are uniting ethnic militias against the central government. Speaking to a group of businessmen and members of parliament on Wednesday, the president also accused the ethnic Kachin militia of terrorism and insisted that Burmese troops are only acting defensively in the fighting. The Kachin militia is part of a broader political alliance of ethnic groups formed in February that includes the Shan, Karen, Mon and Karenni.

Aung Zaw, editor of the Chiang Mai-based *Irrawaddy* newspaper, says the ethnic armies are more united than in the past because the government has been insisting on a policy to force them to join border patrol forces. "This is a major blunder from the side of the government: they proposed it and all the ethnic groups [said] we couldn't accept it because we are not fighting to be an ethnic border guard force or militia. [They said] we want autonomy, we want the respect for the Federal Union [of Burma]. I think this is the source of the problem," Aung Zaw says.

The ethnic militias have demanded that any peace talks must include their whole alliance and must be conducted with the central government, which senior officials have dismissed. While the impasse over peace talks continues, both the government and Kachin rights groups accuse each other of attacks and human rights abuses.

Earlier this month, a group of female U.S. senators said Burma's military is using rape as a weapon of war in the Kachin fighting as well as armed conflict in neighboring Shan state. Moon Nay Li is a spokeswoman for the [Kachin Women's Association](#), a rights group in Kachin state. "There are many kinds of abuses by the Burmese military troops, one is portering [sic], one is the gang rape to the girl, women and those who are related to the KI [Kachin Independence] Army, they did not ask questions, they arrest. That is illegal arrest. Most villages are afraid of that kind of human rights violations so they flee," she says. Some 20,000 Kachin have fled to 15 camps along the China-Burma border. The Shan rights group, the Shan Democratic Union, in a statement, said over 30,000 people had been displaced since fighting began in Shan state in March. Sally Thompson, a deputy director with the [Thailand Burma Border Consortium](#) (TBBC), which assists over 140,000 Burmese in refugee camps in Thailand, says international aid requests to remote areas have been turned down by Burma's government.

She says the breakdown of a years-long ceasefire with the ethnic groups is an indication that there is little hope for peace talks. "These areas have been in relative peace and now because they haven't agreed to the demands to transfer to border guard forces there is no dialogue," Thompson says. "It's just being met with force."

Next week, [U.N. human rights investigator Tomas Quintana is expected to visit Burma](#) to hold talks with senior officials to assess the human rights situation in the context of the new government.

It is the first time in more than a year that Burmese officials have granted him a visa.

Ethnic Militia Challenges Burma's Army, New Government



A soldier guards the Laiza Hotel, where the Kachin Independence Organization holds meetings, Laiza, Burma, August 2011.

Danielle Bernstein

Last updated on: August 09, 2011 8:00 PM VOA

Clashes in Burma between an ethnic-based army and government forces are presenting a challenge to the country's new government, the regime's relationship with its biggest ally, China, and also in its ability to maintain control of resource-rich and strategically important border areas. Although the conflict remains limited to a small region along the Chinese border, it has drawn international attention and public appeals from Burmese democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

In Laiza, a sleepy border town nestled in lush jungles and hills, children are coming home from school, soldiers with rifles on motorbikes are preparing to return to the

frontlines, and a Catholic priest is leading a service for internally displaced persons in an IDP camp.



IDPs from different villages have become new neighbors in their camp, Laiza, Burma, August 2011

The latter group kneels on the floor, surrounded by children playing, sick people sleeping and families eating in the dusty, smoky hall. The Kachin are devoutly Christian and priests in Laiza have been working overtime to minister to some 7,000 newly arrived refugees in town who have fled nearby fighting.

One refugee described being forced to act as a porter for Burmese troops before the latest violence flared.

Increasing number of displaced persons

He said that in the past, Burmese troops forced him for months to carry heavy loads and ammunition for them. He said he was beaten with a rifle butt for being slow. He said that when the recent tensions started, he just ran away.

Local aid workers say that in all, about 16,000 people have been displaced by the fighting on the Taping River, where a Chinese corporation is building two hydroelectric dams.

Many of those fleeing want to cross into China. However, Chinese officials have refused entry, saying the fighting is not close enough to the border to grant asylum. La Rip, who founded a refugee association to help people displaced by the conflict, said Burmese troops have emptied villages by threatening violence against locals if they are attacked by the ethnic militia known as the Kachin Independence Army.

"The Burmese army already came in the village and dug a bunker in front of houses, and threatened them," said Rip. "If the KIA shoots us, we'll burn down the whole village. That village is very close to Laiza."

KIA, Burmese troops clash

The Burmese government accuses the KIA of starting the conflict in June by attacking the Chinese-built dam. The KIA insists government forces started hostilities as early as May, when they fired mortars at their bases, and says its troops have responded only defensively. Kachin commanders say the fighting has meant an end to a 17-year-old ceasefire intended to prevent large-scale clashes between Burmese forces and the ethnic militia. Kachin militia commander Chyana Zaw Awn said the Burmese officials are using the construction of the dams as an excuse to go after his forces, because they refused to become border guards, working under the military.

"The source of the conflict is the refusal of the border guard force proposal," he said. "Since we reject that proposal, they have been looking for a way to ignite the conflict. So they have used the security of the Chinese investments as an excuse. We believe that they have planned from the beginning to eliminate the ethnic troops. It is the Burmese government's strategic plan to eliminate the ethnic armies."

Pleas for peace

U.S. and Chinese officials have urged all parties to settle the conflict peacefully. The conflict also has drawn in Burmese democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Last month, the Nobel laureate wrote an open letter to Burma's President Thein Sein appealing for peace talks. The KIA's vice chief of staff, General Gun Maw, has been pushing for a new ceasefire agreement to bring an end to the conflict. But he is seeking discussions covering much more than the conflict in Laiza.

"We want a nationwide ceasefire in all conflict areas, and then we'd like to move toward political dialogue," said Maw. "They seem to be happy to discuss peace, but don't mention politics. They want a ceasefire, but are not willing to engage in political dialogue. What we want is real, genuine federalism. This word scares the Burmese." It is unclear how much leverage the KIA has to force the government to

the negotiating table. Despite calls from Aung San Suu Kyi and others inside Burma for the government to discuss the standoff, officials have been unwilling to directly talk to the group. The government has appointed two envoys to talk to the militias, but they do not have the authority to negotiate. Maw warns that his forces will escalate fighting if the standoff continues. "We are ready to go back to guerilla warfare, if it comes to that, we are ready to carry on the revolution. I believe the biggest battle has not yet been fought. The main thing is, they want to eliminate the ethnic groups," he said. Kachin state is not a densely populated area. Laiza has a population of about 10,000 people. The state is slightly larger than 89,000 square kilometers, a fraction of which is KIA-controlled territory. All urban areas are controlled by the Burmese government, as well as key mining areas and rivers, which the KIA was required to hand over as part of the 1994 ceasefire.

Sixty-three year-old Burma-analyst Aung Kyaw Zaw was once a soldier and a member of the Burma Communist Party. He stresses the importance of Kachin state's location between India and China, and points up that it is where headwaters of the country's vital Irawaddy river flow south. "KIA is the very clever insurgent in the northeast," he said. "They know international politics and the Burmese politics and Chinese politics. It is not easy to face Kachin leaders."

Strategic resources in play

Resource-rich Kachin state, littered with gold and jade mines, teakwood, rubber and banana plantations, is small but potentially profitable. Htoo Trading, a conglomerate owned by one of Burma's richest business men, U Tayza, has a joint venture with a Russian mining company searching for uranium near local jade mines.

Outside analysts say they are watching to see if the militias will be able to broaden their struggle against Burma's military to involve other ethnic groups. Ahnan is a spokesperson from the environmental watchdog group, Burma Rivers Network, who said other ethnic groups feel the Burmese government is cutting them out of lucrative projects, such as the hydroelectric dams. "A lot of anger [is] happening around the country, and also some of the development projects in ethnic areas, so it's really possible civil conflict happens inside the country," said Ahnan. KIA commanders in Laiza expect the fighting to increase when the rainy season ends in September. Maw said he believes much of the fighting is still ahead.

Burma Democracy Leader Urges Talks to End Ethnic Conflicts



Pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi talks to reporters about her trip to Bagan, at her home in Yangon (File Photo - July 11, 2011)

Last updated on: July 27, 2011 8:00 PM VOA

Burmese pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi has issued what she calls an "earnest appeal" for the government and ethnic groups to begin immediate peace talks. In an open letter made available to VOA's Burmese service Thursday, Aung San Suu Kyi also says she is prepared to assist the peace process to the best of her ability. The letter is addressed to President Thein Sein and organizations representing the Kachin, Karen, Mon and Shan ethnic minorities. Government forces have been waging a military offensive against strongholds of the ethnic armies for the last several weeks. Aung San Suu Kyi says in her letter that ethnic harmony is of "utmost importance" to Burma, and that all sides will suffer if force is used to settle the conflicts. She says that only when peace is achieved on the basis of mutual understanding and respect can the country successfully strive for development.

Burma Clashes Raise Concern of Spreading Conflict

Daniel Schearf

Last updated on: June 15, 2011 8:00 PM VOA

Fighting in northeast Burma between the army and ethnic Kachin rebels has spilled over into neighboring Shan state, raising concerns about the conflict spreading. Thousands of villagers have fled to the border with China, which is urging restraint from both sides. Sporadic clashes continued Thursday between Burma's army and ethnic Kachin rebels near a mountainous border with China. The fighting in northern Kachin state, which started a week ago, has spilled into neighboring Shan state, home to the ethnic Shan. The Shan Herald, an exiled media group based in Thailand, reported that five Burma army battalions were moving in on another rebel group, the Shan State Army. The spreading fight raises concerns that the conflict could quickly get out of control. Khuensai Jaiyen, editor for the Shan Herald, says if other ethnic rebels join the fight it could become a larger war. He says ethnic leaders are hoping that Beijing will intervene to stop the fighting before it gets worse.

"They think that China has a lot of stake in the security and stability of the border," said Khuensai. "Even Beijing had said so since the Burma army attacked Kokang, another ethnic group, in 2009." The fighting two years ago between the Burmese army and Kokang rebels sent thousands of villagers fleeing into China. The instability prompted Beijing to issue a rare criticism of the government of Burma, a close ally.

The latest fighting broke out in a region where China is building hydropower plants. It is not clear what sparked the clashes. Khuensai says fighting began when Burma sent soldiers to ensure security at the plants while other reports say a prisoner exchange between the two sides went bad. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei on Thursday said Beijing is concerned about the fighting. He says they are following the situation along the border closely and urge all parties to exert calmness and restraint to avoid escalating the situation and to resolve their differences through negotiation. The clashes in Kachin state this past week also sent

thousands of villagers toward China, but reports say Chinese authorities stopped most of them at the border. Hong denies China is blocking those fleeing the fighting.

The Washington-based rights group U.S. Campaign for Burma says several soldiers were killed in the fighting. Burma's government has not issued any official comments on the clashes and it is almost impossible to confirm the details as the area is remote and journalists are not allowed to visit. The Kachin Independence Army, like several other ethnic militias, signed cease-fire agreements with Burmese authorities in the 1990s, ending years of fighting for independence. But some hostilities resumed in 2009 when the military began pressuring groups to come under their authority as a border protection force.

Bomb Blasts Hit Burma Dam Project

Last updated on: April 16, 2010 8:00 PM VOA

A series of bomb blasts at the site of a controversial dam project in a remote part of Burma has destroyed cars and buildings and wounded one man. Officials said the Saturday explosions took place in the early hours of the morning at four locations where the Myitsone Dam is under construction in the country's northernmost Kachin State. Authorities say one person sustained slight injuries in the attacks. Environmental and rights activists have campaigned against the dam. When built, the dam is expected to create a reservoir flooding an area the size of New York City, covering dozens of villages and holy sites and displacing thousands of local people.

UN Reports Rise in Opium Cultivation in Burma

Agency's latest report covering Thailand, Laos and Burma says the area poppies are cultivated on around 31,700 hectares.



Soldiers and civilians use sticks to cut the opium poppies in a jungle field in Shan State, northeast of Burma (File)

Last updated on: December 14, 2009 3:14 AM VOA

United Nations officials say opium cultivation in Burma rose for the third straight year as ethnic rebel groups sell drugs to buy arms. The increase reverses past successes in cutting opium cultivation in Southeast Asia. The U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime - UNODC - said Monday that opium poppy cultivation in Burma rose more than 10 percent in 2009 - the third successive year of growth. The agency's latest report covering Thailand, Laos and Burma says the area poppies are cultivated on around 31,700 hectares. The increase followed a dramatic decline from 1998 to 2005 from 130,000 hectares to just over 20,300 hectares in 2006.

UNODC officials say part of the reason for the increase may be political instability in

Burma, also called Myanmar. Some ethnic militia groups, such as the Wa and Kachin, are selling drugs to buy weapons to fight the government.

Burma's military has set a deadline for ethnic groups, many who have been fighting for decades for greater autonomy, to surrender their armies. News reports say some of those groups do not want to disarm and are preparing to fight.

"We had seen in preceding years dramatic declines, precipitous declines in opium poppy cultivation," said Gary Lewis, the UNODC regional representative for East Asia and the Pacific. In Myanmar, we are seeing increases in the last three to four years now totalling almost 50 percent when compared to the picture in 2006. For us, with our focus on the issue of drug control, that represents an unravelling of the process on containment and elimination." In Burma, over one million people are said to be involved in opium production. Opium is used to make heroin. But Southeast Asia - once known as the Golden Triangle because of opium production the border areas of Burma, Laos and Thailand - has been far surpassed by Afghanistan over the past decade. Leik Boonwaat, UNODC country office representative in Laos, says Afghanistan now accounts for 95 percent of the global production of illegal opium.

"The total value of opium that has been produced for Myanmar -Burma - we estimate the total value is something like \$104 million," said Leik. "For Laos it is \$15 million, while in Afghanistan I think the total value we estimated this year at \$438 million." The UNODC says the total potential opium production in Southeast Asia has fallen from 1,435 metric tons in 1998 to just 345 metric tons in 2009, down more than 75 percent. The UNODC says to cut production further the international community must help farming communities find alternative crops and livelihoods.

Minority Communities Say Burma Development Projects Lead to Abuses, Environmental Damage



Minority Communities Say Burma Development Projects Lead to Abuses,
Environmental Damage

Last updated on: November 11, 2009 7:17 AM VOA

Minority communities in Burma say the exploitation of the country's natural resources is damaging the environment and increasing the military presence in their areas. The activists say greater public participation is necessary in the development process to ensure that communities benefit. The Burma Environmental Group says the government's development policies and efforts to extract natural resources have destroyed the homes of thousands of people in border areas and is increasing hunger among ethnic minority groups. On Thursday, the group released a report saying there are more troops in minority areas and environmental damage is spreading.

The group includes representatives from the Kachin, Karen, Lahu, and Shan ethnic
Democracy and Human Rights Without Borders

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communities in Burma. Most of these communities live in Burma's border areas. Saw Paul Sein Twa is the director of the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network. He says development projects have displaced half a million people because their livelihoods are disrupted. Thousands of them have fled to Thailand.

"So the path that the military government is taking us is to environmental problems, lead us to crisis and will further marginalize our ethnic people who are in the rural areas," he said. "So you can see that many people are in refugee camps, as I said, more than 8,000 people in one area are facing starvation." The report accuses the Burmese military of human rights abuses against local communities, including beatings, killings, and sexual violence, as it protects economic projects.

The group and other rights organizations have called on the Chinese government to halt its investment in an offshore oil and gas project, and seeks a halt in several dam projects. Saw Paul Sein Twa says the groups do not oppose development in general but say public participation and is needed before projects go ahead.

"The fundamental question is development for whom? [This] needs to be addressed," he said. "The local people have to benefit from any development project and number two is people participation in this development process must be assured that people participate. Before you start an environmental impact statement must be done." The report says as long as Burma remains under military rule and communities can not take part in decision-making, increased development in the border region will accelerate environmental destruction and lead to unsustainable and inequitable development.

Burma's Ethnic Minorities Continue to Be Threatened By Military Government

Last updated on: October 30, 2009 1:36 AM VOA

Since the release of democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi in May, international attention has centered on her call for dialogue with Burma's ruling military. But ethnic minorities are also fighting for greater rights, and say they are frustrated at a diplomatic process they say ignores their interests.

A teacher holds class at the Umphiem Mai refugee camp outside Thailand's northwestern city of Mae Sot. The camp is home to 10,000 refugees from the Karen group, one of Burma's ethnic minorities.

There are more refugee camps like this along the border. After 10 years here, many resemble traditional villages. They are home not just to Karen, but to tens of thousands of people from other ethnic groups, like the Shan, the Kachin and the Karenni.

The refugees fled fighting between ethnic resistance groups and the State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC, the name of Burma's military government.

Kevin Heppner, with the Karen Human Rights Group, said abuses by the government continue. "In the areas where there is armed conflict, the current SPDC strategy is to try to force villagers into army-controlled labor camps, and then destroy all and hunt the people who are hiding in the hills and try to kill them on sight. There's a lot of torture, rape, other abuses that go on in that context and a lot of forced labor as military porters and so on," Mr. Heppner said.

The government's record of human rights abuses led the United States and other nations to impose economic sanctions on Burma.

The sanctions appear to work. Burma's desperate need for foreign investment is one reason the government agreed to talks with a United Nations special envoy. Those talks led to the release of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest, where she had spent nearly eight of the past 10 years.

Many of the exiles in Mae Sot feel there is too much diplomatic focus on Aung San Suu Kyi, as much as they respect her. Bo Kyi, once a political prisoner, fled Burma in 1999. Now he runs an assistance program in Mae Sot.

"We call Burma prison state, because there are at least 38 prisons in Burma. You can look at the location," he said.

Next to Bo Kyi's office is a museum highlighting what he said are horrendous conditions political prisoners face. Photos of some of the estimated 1,500 political prisoners in Burma are on the wall. One is of Aung San Suu Kyi. But it has no prominence over the others.

Bo Kyi is among many human rights officers and community leaders who think the release of Aung San Suu Kyi was only a public relations gesture on the part of the government.

"I believe they are buying time for their power. They want to prepare something, to arrest many political prisoners," he said.

Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, wants ethnic minorities to be included in the party's talks with the United Nations and the government.

The diplomatic process is just one part of creating peace in Burma. Leaders of the ethnic groups also have to overcome historic mistrust between the minorities and the majority ethnic group, the Burman.

One Karen refugee, who would not give his name for fear of reprisals against his family, said his concerns are typical of most ethnic Karen. She may have sympathy for the ethnic people, and she may believe in the democratic principles, and we feel that we can trust her, we like her. But still, we have suspicion, doubts, about the people who are working with her," the refugee said.

Human rights groups charge that, since the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, government forces destroyed villages in at least two districts. That is more evidence, they say, that not enough attention is focused on the people in Burma who need assistance the most.

Burmese Pro-Democracy Leader Aung San Suu Kyi Placed in 'Protective Custody' - 2003-05-31

Last updated on: October 30, 2009 4:28 AM VOA

The military government in Burma says it has placed pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and more than a dozen members of her party in "protective custody" in the northern part of the country. The government says the detentions follow clashes in which four people were reportedly killed and scores were wounded.

A spokesman for the government, Brigadier General Than Tun, says Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters are in "protective custody" in a town near Mandalay, some 600 kilometers north of Rangoon.

The official said she and other leaders of her National League for Democracy party were detained Friday night, after violent clashes between her group and unidentified opponents of her pro-democracy party.

The government spokesman blamed the clashes on what he called inflammatory speeches by the opposition leader, which he said were critical of the government.

News agencies in the Burmese capital report that the national headquarters of the NLD were sealed by security forces Saturday, and police officers were posted outside the gates of the offices.

Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi has been touring northern Burma's Kachin state for the past month, opening party offices and giving speeches. Leaders of her party have on several occasions complained of harassment and intimidation by government supporters during the trip. The government on Thursday accused NLD members of assaulting opponents and of violating traffic laws during the trip.

The state run news media Saturday criticized the Nobel Peace Laureate for the first time in several years.

The arrests come six days before the U.N. special envoy to Burma, Malaysian diplomat Razali Ismail, is to visit Burma in an effort to revive stalled reconciliation talks between the military government and the NLD.

The talks began 2.5 years ago, and led to the release a year ago of Aung San Suu Kyi, after 19 months of house arrest. Following her release, she was allowed to reopen party offices around the country and make speeches to supporters.

However, the confidence-building talks, which are aimed at starting negotiations over a transition to democracy, stalled earlier this year. Following his last visit to Burma six months ago, Mr. Razali expressed pessimism over prospects for a successful outcome to the talks.

The NLD won elections in 1990 as part of an earlier democratic transition, but was never allowed to govern. Hundreds of party loyalists, including dozens of elected parliament members, were arrested. Under the U.N.-brokered talks, several hundred party members have been released, but human rights activists say more than 1,000 political dissidents remain in prison.

UN Investigator Begins Visit to Burma - 2002-02-11

Last updated on: October 29, 2009 5:49 AM VOA

U.N. human-rights investigator Paulo Sergio Pinheiro has begun a 10 day visit to Burma to continue his assessment of civil and political rights. But there is growing frustration within Burma's pro-democracy opposition over his slow progress.

After meetings with government leaders and a visit to northern Kachin state, U.N. human-rights investigator Paulo Sergio Pinheiro is likely to meet with Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Mr. Pinheiro, a Brazilian professor, took up the U.N. post about a year ago amid efforts to start a dialogue between the military government and Ms. Suu Kyi.

Mr. Pinheiro and U.N. special envoy Razali Ismail have been part of efforts to promote reconciliation and to free political prisoners.

Aung Zaw, editor of the opposition Burmese online news service, The Irrawaddy, says there is growing disappointment and skepticism over the U.N. efforts. "I think people's expectations are a bit low at the moment in Burma," he said. "Particularly since as political dissident groups they were quite skeptical of his visit because they pointed out that he always follows the government guideline wherever he visits."

Since the reconciliation talks began, the government has released more than 207 members of Ms. Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy from prison. The party also has been able to open some offices.

But the NLD estimates that more than 800 of its members remain in jail, including some who won political office in the 1990 elections. The NLD had a landslide victory, but has never been able to take office.

Mr. Aung Zaw says the government successfully has held off international critics during the past two years. "I think it is part of a PR showcase," said Aung Zaw. "The government is trying to show they are more human, they are more soft line, more willing to take outside opinions to accommodate, to respond to international opinions."

Mr. Aung Zaw says former Burmese political prisoners now in Thailand are increasingly critical because the U.N. envoy's visits failed to show results. He does not expect Mr. Pinheiro to make significant progress during this visit.

Environmental Group Says Chinese Demand Drives Illegal Logging in Burma

Last updated on: October 28, 2009 2:20 AM VOA

A report by the British environment group, Global Witness says Chinese authorities have not halted the massive trade in illegal timber coming from Burma. There are fears over the rate of deforestation in Burma and its long-term effect on the country's people.

The Global Witness report accuses Chinese logging companies of illegally exporting millions of cubic meters of timber from northern Burma.

The report focuses on the northern regions, where the timber trade is often run by Chinese companies, using thousands of Chinese workers, operating with support from provincial governments in China.

The report accuses Burmese army commanders and ethnic groups of being involved in trade.

Sussanne Kempel is with Global Witness.

"What we found was that two-thirds of the total Burmese exports of timber are illegal," said Sussanne Kempel. "The large majority of that goes to China. When we look at the timber trade between those two countries, more than 95 percent of it is illegal according to Burmese law and according to Chinese law."

Using Chinese customs statistics, the report says that more than one million cubic meters of timber each year cross from Burma's Kachin, Wa, and Shan states into China. This is in contrast to Burma's official limit on timber exports of just 18,000 cubic meters.

Forestry product exports are the third most important source of legal foreign exchange for Burma's military government - last year totaling \$370 million.

But the report warns that excessive logging would hurt Burma's environment and potentially harm China's own forest management along the border. It also says many of the Burmese ethnic communities, who often rely on forests for food and other needs, receive little benefit from the logging.

Excessive logging can lead to soil erosion, flooding, loss of wildlife and damage to crops. On a global scale, some scientists say that over-logging of the world's oldest forests contributes to climate changes.

Ms. Kempel says the rate of deforestation in Burma is one of the fastest in Asia.

China's demand for imported timber has soared in recent years because of rapid economic growth and a ban on the felling of trees in much of China after over-logging contributed to flooding in much of the country.

Ms. Kempel says cease-fire agreements between Rangoon and some once-rebellious ethnic groups in Burma has exacerbated the problem, in part because peace means that people can concentrate on making a living and loggers can work more safely.

"Before the cease-fires there was very little logging taking place," she said. "They do not receive large amounts of aid or development from the Rangoon government, so they have been forced into a situation where their only means of generating money is selling of their forests."

But Ms. Kempel says there are indications the Chinese government is concerned about illegal logging, especially about the need to ensure sustainable timber imports for years to come. But so far, she says, China has not stood by commitments it made in 2001 on cooperating closely with Burma to protect the forests.

Global Witness is a British charity that investigates how environmentally destructive trade can be linked to human-rights abuse, poverty and other problems.

Burma's Suu Kyi urges minority rights



Aung San Suu Kyi was elected to parliament in April
25 July 2012 Last updated at 10:35 GMT BBC

Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi has called for laws to protect the rights of ethnic minority groups in her first statement in parliament. She said such laws were important for Burma to become a truly democratic nation of mutual respect.

Burma has undergone a series of political reforms initiated by the military-backed government. But some parts of Burma are still hit by conflict and unrest, most recently in Rakhine state.

"To become a truly democratic union with a spirit of the union, equal rights and mutual respect, I urge all members of parliament to discuss the enactment of the laws needed to protect equal rights of ethnicities," she said, in support of a motion by a ruling party MP.

Poverty in ethnic minority areas also needed to be addressed, she said.

Ms Suu Kyi, who was freed from house arrest in late 2010, was elected to parliament in by-elections in April. Peace deals have been reached with a number of Burma's ethnic groups, many of whom battled the military junta for years in pursuit of greater autonomy. But fighting is continuing in Kachin state.

Ms Suu Kyi's speech also comes a month after deadly clashes in parts of Burma's western Rakhine state between majority Buddhists and minority Muslims, sparked by the rape and murder of a young Buddhist woman.

Aung San Suu Kyi made no specific mention of the Muslim Rohingya people in her speech, and has to date remained relatively quiet on the issue.

Asked in June whether Rohingya should be regarded as Burmese citizens, she said: "I do not know", saying Burma should clarify its citizenship laws.

In a report last week, human rights group Amnesty International said Muslims in western Rakhine state had been subjected to attacks and arbitrary arrests in the weeks since the violence - claims the government described as "groundless and biased".

The Burmese government says they are relatively recent migrants from the Indian sub-continent. Neighbouring Bangladesh already hosts several hundred thousand refugees from Burma and says it cannot take any more.

China failing Burma refugees, rights group says

26 June 2012 Last updated at 07:55 GMT BBC

Campaign group Human Rights Watch has warned of a humanitarian crisis if China does not give aid agencies access to refugees fleeing conflict in northern Burma.

US-based HRW in a report said that as many as 10,000 Kachin refugees who had fled to China were short on supplies. Some refugees had been refused entry or forced back to Burma, it said.

China is helping mediate peace talks between Burma's government and the Kachin rebels. A ceasefire between the Burmese army and the Kachin Independence Army rebels broke down last year after a 17-year truce, and fighting is ongoing.

Estimates place the number of refugees from Kachin at 75,000, with the majority leaving for other parts of Burma and others fleeing across the border to China's Yunnan province.

Limited access

In its 68-page report, the [New York-based HRW said](#) Kachin refugees in China had limited access to food, shelter, sanitation and education for their children.

Major humanitarian organisations had also not been allowed access to the refugees, HRW said. "The refugees are staying in makeshift accommodation like abandoned warehouses and in some cases, entire villages have moved," said Phil Robertson, deputy director of HRW's Asia division, at the launch of the report in Bangkok.

"They're facing a gauntlet of harassment and extortion by local officials," he added.

"The Chinese government has generally tolerated Kachin refugees staying in Yunnan, but now needs to meet its international legal obligations to ensure refugees are not returned and that their basic needs are met," Sophie Richardson, China director at Human Rights Watch, said in a statement.

"China has no legitimate reason to push them back to Burma or to leave them without food and shelter."

HRW based their report on more than 100 interviews with refugees and relief workers, among others.

It said that while China had generally allowed Kachin refugees to stay since June 2011, it has documented cases of Chinese authorities ordering the return of Kachin refugees to Burma.

"Chinese authorities have also rejected Kachin asylum seekers at the border, forcing their return to the conflict zone," the report says.

Old tensions bubble in Burma

By Fergal Keane BBC News 11 June 2012 Last updated at 17:24 GMT



Tensions between Buddhists and Muslim Rohingyas in Burma have old roots

For decades the fear and hatred has simmered, but rigid military control has largely kept it in check. Now, as Burma enters a new era of liberalisation, decades of pent-up feelings have exploded into sectarian violence. Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine state have attacked each other, prompting the government to declare a state of emergency and impose a dusk-to-dawn curfew in several areas.

President Thein Sein has warned of an unravelling of the country's democratic transition in the face of inter-communal violence. "If this endless anarchic vengeance and deadly acts continue, there is the danger of them spreading to other parts and being overwhelmed by subversive influences," he said on Sunday.

"If that happens, it can severely affect peace and tranquillity and our nascent democratic reforms and the development of the country." Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi met Muslim leaders in Rangoon earlier this week and issued a similar appeal for tolerance.

History of hatred

Local Buddhists blame the Muslim Rohingya people for the outbreak of violence, which appears to have started when a woman was raped and killed. Three Muslim men are in custody following the attack.

In what seems to have been a revenge attack, 10 Muslims were killed in an attack on a bus. But whatever the cause of the latest clashes, the conflict between Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine state has deep roots.

During the Second World War and again in the early 1990s, sectarian violence claimed many lives. One of the most worrying trends is the appearance on placards and on the internet of demands for Rohingyas to be removed from Burma. Under the country's constitution they are denied citizenship.

There are an estimated 750,000 Rohingyas in Rakhine state, but they are frequently referred to as "Bengalis" who belong in neighbouring Bangladesh. As a former Burmese foreign minister reportedly once remarked: "Historically, there has never been a Rohingya race in Myanmar [Burma]."

But the Rohingyas are also stateless in Bangladesh, where many thousands have sought refuge from persecution in Burma. The campaign group Human Rights Watch said discriminatory government policy in Burma had helped inflame tensions.

The organisation said the government's handling of the latest crisis would be a critical test of its reform program. Elsewhere there has been progress in negotiating an end to some of the other ethnic problems that have plagued Burma since independence, although the situation in Kachin state remains hugely problematic.

Newfound freedoms

So how great a threat to the transition is the violence in Rakhine state?

If the violence was happening in isolation then the threat could be regarded as relatively small. But for a country emerging from nearly 50 years of military domination, with different groups testing the limits of freedom, the current position is potentially precarious. In recent months there has been a series of labour disputes and protests over power shortages that would have been unthinkable under the old dispensation.

The demonstrations certainly reflect a more tolerant state, but also a flexing of muscle on the part of a previously quiescent people who are frustrated with poverty and lack of development.

Set against all this is the emergence of the National League for Democracy (NLD) as a potent electoral force. It won 43 out of the 44 seats it contested in recent by-elections, a result that surprised the military backed government.

There have been signs in recent weeks that the celebrity profile of its leader Aung San Suu Kyi - and her warning against "reckless optimism" about Burma's future - has unsettled some within the leadership.

President Thein Sein cancelled his appearance at an economic forum in Bangkok apparently in response to the high profile accorded to the opposition leader. Her forthcoming tour of Europe will likely heighten official anxiety that Aung San Suu Kyi is already being treated as Burma's national leader by Western governments.

The relationship between the president and Aung San Suu Kyi is fundamental to the success of the transition. For now, Thein Sein has managed to keep the more conservative parts of the military on board, just as Aung San Suu Kyi has persuaded her more radical supporters to accept compromise with the state.

There is a fear that more conservative elements of the government might see rising ethnic unrest, expanding protests over living conditions, and the growing political threat from the NLD as a reason to put the brake on reform.

As the regime's grip loosens and long dormant forces emerge the transition is likely to be challenged in numerous and unpredictable ways.

Burma's ethnic conflicts see slow progress to resolution

26 May 2012 Last updated at 02:06 GMT BBC



Shan State Army leader Yawd Suk (left) shakes hand with General Soe Win from the Burmese Army.

The Burmese authorities are trying to reach lasting peace agreements with the country's many ethnic groups, but it is proving a long and complex process, as the BBC's Jonah Fisher reports. "Six, seven... hold on probably a few more than that," said David Mathieson, furrowing his brow as he listed Burma's armed groups.

"The Karen, the Karenni, the Shan, the Kachin, the Chin, the United Wa State Army, the Mon, the Mongla... have I forgotten anyone?"

Mr Mathieson, a researcher for Human Rights Watch, has been following developments in Burma closely for the last decade, but understanding its many ethnic wars is enough to give even the most seasoned observer a headache.

We travelled through Shan State to witness one small part of Burma's multi-pronged peace process. Started by President Thein Sein last August, its aim is to bring the country's many festering conflicts to a close.

Our invitation was to accompany the rebel Shan State Army, along with a large group of Thai and Burmese journalists and "Bob", their smartly dressed and secretive American military adviser.

For Khuen Sae, a veteran Burmese journalist, it was a first proper trip back home for almost 45 years. When he finished school in 1969, he joined the rebel Mong Tai army. Then, when its warlord leader, Khun Sa, surrendered in 1996, he went into exile in Thailand and started a news agency.

"I feel both excited and sad at the same time," he said.

Whether by accident or because there were no other accommodation options, the Burmese authorities lodged the Shan delegation at a highly sensitive location. The New Keng Tung hotel is built on the site of what the Shan see as one of the biggest acts of cultural desecration carried out by the ethnic Burmese. In 1991 a Shan royal palace was destroyed here to make way for new buildings.

"When a Burmese palace went into ruins, they rebuilt it." Khuen Sae said. "But they destroyed this one and it was still in existence. This is an example of why the non-Burmese are fighting against the Burmese."

'Trust him'

But the choice of hotel did not seem to concern the Shan State Army and their leader, Yawd Serk, too much.

With a fighting force of about 5,000 men, the rebels control small pockets of land near the Thai border and are limited to guerrilla attacks against the Burmese military. For them, President Thein Sein's offer of talks presented a way out.

"The president's announcement of reconciliation and invitation to the armed groups is why we came here," Yawd Serk said. "I trust him, that's why I'm here and why we've stopped fighting."

So in a large room at a military guesthouse overlooking Keng Tung, 11 Shan State Army representatives wearing traditional orange tunics sat opposite 11 representatives from the Burmese authorities.

In the past, ethnic groups had complained that agreements reached with the government negotiating team carried little weight with the Burmese military on the ground.

This time, there were plenty of men in military fatigues.

Alongside Aung Min, Burma's Railways Minister and chief negotiator, sat Soe Win, the deputy commander in chief of the Burmese army, and three regional commanders who operate in Shan State.

The deal they reached after a day of talks was aimed at consolidating December's ceasefire agreement. The exact boundaries of each side's territory was committed to paper and safe areas for displaced people established.

But this was, more than anything, about building trust and paving the way for future discussions. The government's current strategy is ambitious, some might say impossible.

"The president has adopted a three-stage roadmap. The first stage is the ceasefire agreements, the second stage political dialogue and then the third stage is a national meeting of all the ethnic groups," Minister Aung Min said after the talks.

"We are planning to complete the process by 2015 within the tenure of this parliament."

Communication 'breakdown'

That national meeting has been nicknamed "Panglong II" and is due to replace the first Panglong agreement.

That treaty, signed in 1947 by - among others - Aung San San Kyi's father, established the "full autonomy in internal administration" of what was then called Burma's "Frontier Areas", namely the Shan, Chin and Kachin people. For all its noble intentions, it counted for little once the military had taken over.

But while some groups have accepted the offer of talks and a ceasefire, other conflicts discovered new life. In Kachin in the far north, tens of thousands of people

have been displaced by clashes in the last few weeks between rebels and government troops.

Some see that as proof that parts of the Burmese army are not following a presidential order calling for restraint, and evidence of a schism between reformers and the military. The official word from the government delegation at the talks was that the Kachin fighting was due to a "breakdown of communication to remote areas".

Ceasefires being signed and subsequently breaking down have become a recurring part of Burma's post-independence history. In part, that is because of the fundamental incompatibility of ethnic groups wanting autonomy while the Burmese military tried to impose a strong centralised system.

But with the new civilian-lead government of President Thein Sein and the fast pace of reforms has come a degree of optimism."It's going to be incredibly difficult because a lot of the claims by different groups are really quite different," said David Mathieson of Human Rights Watch. "The size of the groups and the territories they occupy are also very different but it's not beyond the realms of possibility."

Mike Thomson on Burma's 'ethnic brethren'

Page last updated at 07:03 GMT, Monday, 9 April 2012 08:03 UK BBC

There are new hopes that Burma's ethnic wars could finally be nearing an end after decades of bloody conflict.

This weekend Burma's President, Thein Sein met with one of the country's largest ethnic groups in what's seen as one of the biggest steps towards peace yet undertaken.

According to a mediator there he told a delegation from the Karen National Union that he viewed the rebels as "brothers rather than enemies" and on Sunday the Karen leaders met with Aung San Suu Kyi.

Over the last year ceasefires have been signed with five of the country's other ethnic groups, and talks were held last month with ethnic Kachin rebels who have yet to

agree a truce.

The Today programme's Mike Thomson reports from Burma's Shan state on whether the country is finally heading towards peace as well as democracy.

Burma: The plight of Kachin state

4 April 2012 Last updated at 12:22 GMT BBC

Aung San Suu Kyi's victory in the Burmese by-elections set off celebrations and more predictions of a proper transition to democracy. But in the state of Kachin, in northern Burma, the elections didn't happen - cancelled on security grounds because of a continuing war between government forces and ethnic Kachin rebels.

Within Burma, neither aid agencies nor journalists are normally allowed into the region but reporter Sue Lloyd Roberts and cameraman Tony Joliffe managed to gain access to report for Newsnight.

Burma postpones by-elections in troubled Kachin state

23 March 2012 Last updated at 14:07 GMT BBC

Burma's authorities have postponed by-elections to be held in the northern state of Kachin, where fighting with ethnic rebels resumed last year.

They said security for the vote could not be guaranteed.

Opposition candidates have questioned the decision, saying the three constituencies are in areas not directly affected by fighting.

The opposition has also alleged that irregularities could jeopardise a free and fair vote on 1 April.

The National League for Democracy says some of its candidates have been harassed and that in some areas the electoral registers are out of date.

Human rights groups have accused Burmese troops of serious human rights abuses in an offensive against Kachin rebels that has forced tens of thousands of people to flee their homes.

Conflicts between Burma's central government and rebels from the various ethnic minority groups have flared sporadically over the decades since the country gained independence.

The government is trying to sign ceasefires with rebel groups in preparation for further political discussions. Attempts to end the fighting in Kachin state have proved difficult.

The Kachin have so far refused to sign any agreement before political issues are resolved, but are now entering into talks.

Crucial test

Following Friday's announcement, by-elections are now scheduled to take place in 45 constituencies on 1 April.

The NLD of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi is fielding candidates in most of the seats up for grabs.

But with days to go to the vote, the party says thousands of dead people remain on Burma's electoral roll.

The NLD also said households had complained that some family members had been excluded from the voter list.

It also cited what it said were instances of harassment.

In one example cited, the party said the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) had set fire to a haystack near where an NLD candidate was giving a speech in Sagaing in the north-west of the country.

In Irrawaddy, the party said a government minister had campaigned for the USDP, breaching electoral rules.

"The NLD thinks that these kind of incidents can impact on whether the elections are free and fair," a party statement said.

The 1 April vote is seen as a crucial test of reforms. Asean, the US, the EU and China are among those who have been approached to monitor voting.

Correspondents say the by-elections - in which Ms Aung Sang Suu Kyi is competing for the first time since 1990 - are hugely symbolic.

If they are seen as free and fair, it could pave the way for the lifting of foreign sanctions against Burma.

'Serious abuses' in Burma's Kachin state, says rights group

20 March 2012 Last updated at 07:17 GMT BBC

Burma has been accused of "serious abuses" against the ethnic Kachin people in a report by the US campaign group Human Rights Watch (HRW).

The government has blocked humanitarian aid to those displaced by fighting in the northern Kachin state since June 2011, the group said.

It said 75,000 civilians and refugees need food, shelter and medicine.

Burma's government, which has made steps toward reforms, has not yet commented.

The 83-page report - Untold Miseries: Wartime Abuses and Forced Displacement in Burma's Kachin State - came as Western nations consider the lifting of sanctions following recent moves towards reform in Burma.

There have been several significant developments since 30 March 2011, the date on which military leaders formally handed power to the civilian government led by President Thein Sein - which is nonetheless backed by the military.

The report also describes attacks on the ethnic group by Burmese soldiers. The army pillaged and burnt homes, tortured civilians during interrogations and raped women in villages, said the rights group.

Fighting between the Burmese army and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) broke out last June 2011, ending nearly two decades of ceasefire.

'Need to act'

HRW said it travelled to the Kachin state twice last year, and the report is based on interviews with more than 100 victims and refugees, Kachin rebels, aid workers and deserters from the Burmese army.

The group visited nine camps in the region, as well as China's Yunnan province, across the border, where many refugees have fled.

"Both the army and Kachin rebels need to act to prevent a bad situation for civilians from getting worse," said Elaine Pearson, HRW's deputy Asia director.

Conflicts between Burma's central government and rebels from the various ethnic minority groups have flared sporadically over the decades since the country gained independence.

The government is attempting to sign cease-fires with rebel groups in preparation for further political discussions.

But correspondents say that after decades of mistrust, many of the groups that have agreed a truce have done so with extreme caution.

And attempts to end the fighting in Kachin state have proved difficult. The Kachin have so far refused to sign any agreement before political issues are resolved, but are now entering into talks.

Earlier this month, the government held talks with Kachin rebels in the hope of brokering a truce in the decades-long conflict.

Burma holds peace talks with ethnic Kachin rebels

8 March 2012 Last updated at 15:34 GMT BBC

Burma's government is holding talks with ethnic Kachin armed rebels in the hope of brokering a truce in the decades-long conflict.

The government has signed provisional ceasefires with several armed ethnic groups in recent months as part of political reform in the country.

But attempts to end the fighting in Kachin state have proved difficult.

Western nations say the lifting of sanctions depends on progress being made towards national reconciliation.

Meanwhile a prominent monk, who served years in prison for anti-government activities, has been questioned in custody for the second time in recent weeks.

The family of Shin Gambira told the BBC's Burmese service he had been detained for about 24 hours and questioned about a recent visit to Kachin state.

Decades of mistrust

Conflicts between Burma's central government and rebels from the various ethnic minority groups have flared sporadically over the decades since the country gained independence.

Tens of thousands of people have been displaced by fighting and there are many reports of human rights abuses.

The civilian government, backed by the military, which came to power in 2010 is attempting to sign ceasefires with rebel groups in preparation for further political discussions.

On Wednesday, they signed a preliminary ceasefire with the ethnic Karenni rebels in the east of the country.

But the BBC's South East Asia correspondent Rachel Harvey says that after decades of mistrust, many of the groups that have agreed a truce have done so with extreme caution.

The Kachin have so far refused to sign any agreement before political issues are resolved but are now entering into talks.

Meanwhile, fighting between the rebels and the army is continuing, say reports, forcing thousands of people to remain in temporary camps on either side of the border with China.

Our correspondent says reaching a nationwide peace deal is widely recognised as key to Burma's future political and economic development.

More milestones in Burma

24 January 2012 Last updated at 03:10 GMT BBC

As the European Union suspends visa bans on leading politicians in Burma, South Asia specialist Marie Lall looks at recent dramatic changes in the country and what lies behind them.

Nowadays Burma is in the news almost daily and at the very least weekly.

There have been regular and significant milestones since 30 March 2011, the date on which military leaders formally handed power to the civilianised government led by President Thein Sein.

The eye-watering speed of change has surprised even the most optimistic country specialists and Western nations are now seriously discussing the lifting of sanctions.

The most recent and momentous event was the release of 651 prisoners on 13 January.

Those freed included almost all of the internationally known prisoners of conscience such as 88 Generation Students leaders Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi, as well as one of the leaders of the "saffron revolution" in 2007, monk Ashin Gambira.

The amnesty also included around 60 former military personnel who had been jailed in 2004 when Lt Gen Khin Nyunt, former prime minister and head of military intelligence, was convicted on charges of corruption.

The latter group were not necessarily viewed as political prisoners by western human rights organisations, however they were nevertheless jailed on political charges.

The prisoners were mostly freed unconditionally and the official statement read: "enabling them to participate in the political process [... and] nation building tasks".

There have been previous amnesties, one as recent as 4 January with 38,964 prisoners having their sentences reduced and 6,656 released.

However this time the government based itself on the National League for Democracy's (NLD) list of 604 prisoners and freed more than half of them.

Conflicts and by-elections

Another no less historic moment came with the signing of the ceasefire agreement between the government (represented by the Kayin State Level Peace-Making Group) and the Karen National Union (KNU) the day before on 12 January.

This has hopefully brought one of Asia's longest-standing conflicts to an end after 60 years of armed resistance. This agreement follows ceasefires with other ethnic groups - the Shan State Army, the Wa and Mongla in Shan State and the Chin National Front in Chin State.

While there is a long way to go between a ceasefire and a comprehensive peace agreement, this is the necessary first step to bring peace to the region and to the ravaged Burma-Thai border.

Unfortunately the conflict in Kachin state continues although the president has ordered a halt to the fighting. It can only be hoped that the recent meetings in Ruili on the Chinese side of the border will also lead to the much-awaited ceasefire.

On 29 December the Election Commission announced that by-elections would be held on 1 April to fill parliamentary seats left vacant by the appointment of ministers.

Last week, Aung San Suu Kyi announced her candidacy for the Kawhmu constituency in Rangoon.

The NLD is expected to take seats in parliament, taking part in the political process they had to date rejected.

Interviewed by the press, Speaker of the House Shwe Mann stated "If she [Suu Kyi] wins in the April by-election, we'll have to a chance to discuss and talk. I'll be waiting for her."

These are indeed momentous times for a country that even a year ago was still considered a pariah nation.

The latest developments come on the heels of increased freedom of the press, new labour laws allowing unions, a process of national reconciliation between the NLD and the government, and Burma being elected ASEAN chair for 2014.

'Third force'

Activist lobbies located in the West or on the border have increasingly been claiming that it was their isolationist policies and the sanctions regime that have brought about these changes.

But in fact it is in-country civil society organisations, both ethnic and Bamar [Burmese], which have worked tirelessly over the last five years to bring about the changes.

The New Year started with sad news as Dr Nay Win Maung, a leading civil society activist and secretary general of Myanmar Egress, died of a heart attack.

Myanmar Egress, a Rangoon-based civil society group, has been at the forefront of pushing for reforms.

Those, like him, of what has been called the "third force", realised that it would be negotiations, not confrontation or revolution, which in the end would solidify Burma's reform process and bring about the changes we are witnessing.

Over five years they and other similar organisations started to educate and create change agents amongst the younger generations.

The greatest success of some civil society groups has been to convince the new president and his men that this reform process is indeed in their interests, tapping into the acknowledgment by the military that their direct rule could not continue indefinitely.

The opposition to the former regime remains deeply divided, but over Dr Nay Win Maung's death many came together - even Aung San Suu Kyi came to pay her respects.

Top-down reform

Today the debate is about lifting sanctions.

The current Burmese government has indeed kept its side of the bargain by engendering a solid reform process and releasing the prisoners of conscience as had been demanded both inside and outside the country.

Thein Sein wants sanctions - indicative of a pariah nation status - removed as acknowledgement of what he is doing and to strengthen his position vis-a-vis the old guard, in case the reform process triggers a backlash.

And unlike the former regime his coffers are empty - he needs trade, investment and technical assistance if he and his government are to survive.

Measures to date taken by the West - sending high-level diplomats, upgrading diplomatic ties - have built confidence but this is not enough.

If this reformist government is to survive sanctions do need to be lifted - the most important thing, however, is an immediate start of technical assistance.

It is time for Western governments to support the efforts of local organisations working inside Burma and to encourage the top-down reform process which the government itself has initiated in its own interests.

Burma government in Kachin ceasefire negotiations

19 January 2012 Last updated at 15:33 GMT BBC

Burma's government has held ceasefire talks with ethnic Kachin rebels to end skirmishes near the northern border with China, officials say.

But officials say the preliminary meeting did not yield any major breakthroughs.

The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) is one of the country's most powerful and well-armed rebel groups .

Earlier this month the government signed a ceasefire with Karen rebels in the east of the country.

It has also held talks within the last two months with the Shan State Army.

Officials told the AP news agency that the latest round of talks with Kachin rebels took place over two days and involved a high-level government team.

Correspondents say that while no substantive deal was negotiated, both sides agreed to continue talks later and inform each other before deploying troops.

The talks are part of an effort by Burma's new and nominally civilian government to end long-running ethnic conflicts which have blighted the country for decades.

A ceasefire with the KIA would assist Burma's efforts to lift sanctions imposed on the country by the European Union (EU) and the United States, both of which have insisted that peace deals with ethnic militias are an essential pre-requisite if this is to happen.

Timeline: Reforms in Burma

30 April 2012 Last updated at 06:57 GMT BBC

Analysts agree that the political opening in Burma has gathered pace over recent years. Here is a timeline of key developments.

2010

November The main military-backed party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), [claims a resounding victory in the first elections for 20 years](#). Opposition groups allege widespread fraud and many Western countries condemn the vote as a sham. The junta says it marks the transition from military rule to a civilian democracy.

A week after the election, Aung San Suu Kyi - who had been prevented from taking part - [is released from house arrest](#).

2011

January [The government authorises internet connection](#) for Aung San Suu Kyi.

March Thein Sein is sworn in as president of a nominally civilian government and [the transfer of powers to the new government is complete](#).

May The new government [frees thousands of prisoners under an amnesty](#), but few political prisoners are among them and the move is dismissed by one rights group as "pathetic".

August Ms Aung San Suu Kyi is allowed to [leave Rangoon on a political visit](#); days later she [meets President Thein Sein](#) in Nay Pyi Taw.

September President Thein Sein [suspends construction of controversial Chinese-funded Myitsone hydroelectric dam](#), in move seen as showing greater openness to public opinion.

October More than 200 political prisoners are [freed as part of a general amnesty](#). New labour laws allowing unions are passed.

Democracy and Human Rights Without Borders

November The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) [agrees that Burma will chair the grouping in 2014](#). Ms Aung San Suu Kyi says she will stand for election to parliament, as her party [rejoins the political process](#).

December US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visits, meets Ms Aung San Suu Kyi and holds talks with President Thein Sein. The US [offers to improve relations if democratic reforms continue](#).

President Thein Sein [signs a law allowing peaceful demonstrations](#) for the first time. The NLD [re-registers as a political party](#) in advance of by-elections for parliament due to be held early in 2012.

Burmese authorities agree a truce deal with rebels of Shan ethnic group and [orders the military to stop operations](#) against ethnic Kachin rebels.

2012

January The government [signs a ceasefire with rebels of Karen ethnic group](#).

A day later, [hundreds of prisoners are released](#) - among them the country's most prominent political prisoners, including veterans of the 1988 student protest movement, monks involved in the 2007 demonstrations and activists from many ethnic minority groups.

April: Taking part in an election for the first time since 1990, the NLD [wins 43 out of 45 seats in landmark parliamentary by-elections](#) seen as a major test for Burma's reform drive. The polls are thought to have been generally free and fair.

The US responds by [easing sanctions on Burma](#). The EU also agrees to [suspend most sanctions in Burma](#). and opens an office in the biggest city, Rangoon.

Who are Burma's Karen rebels?

By Charles Scanlon BBC News 12 January 2012 Last updated at 13:08 GMT



A welcoming ceremony was staged by Karen men as peace talks began

The Karen National Union (KNU) has been fighting the central government since the very early days of Burma's independence from Britain six decades ago.

Largely Christian and favoured by the British during the years of colonial rule, the Karen rebelled against what they saw as repressive treatment by the Burmese nationalist military.

They later accused the army of genocide in its frequent sweeps against their villages in the impoverished and inaccessible hill country along the Thai border.

The Karen have been one of the strongest of the many ethnic groups battling for self-rule in Burma. At one time they boasted an army of 14,000 men and controlled much territory along the border.

But they steadily lost ground and have in recent years been reduced to relatively small-scale guerrilla attacks on army troops.

Large numbers of Karen villagers have fled their homes, in one of the world's least reported refugee crises, and about 100,000 still live in rudimentary camps on the Thai side of the border.

The Karen appear to have achieved little during their six decades of fighting - but some now see a chance of peaceful coexistence.

The Burmese government is under pressure from the United States and its allies to end the fighting along its borders, and that appears to give the Karen and other ethnic groups the best chance of lasting peace.

'List of demands'

KNU leaders warn, however, that there is still a long way to go.

One was quoted as saying that the Karen must not sacrifice their goal of self-rule and surrender to government pressure.

The KNU has released a list of demands to be satisfied before a formal peace agreement can be reached with the national government.

They want security guarantees, an end to the forced labour of civilians, a release of prisoners and an effective mechanism to monitor the truce. They also want the provision of basic services to their underdeveloped region and land reform.

The Karen are the last of Burma's ethnic rebels to agree a ceasefire with the authorities. But fighting continues to flare further north, along the Chinese border, between the army and ethnic Kachin rebels.

Their truce broke down in June and the fighting has continued despite an order by President Thein Sein to the army to end offensive operations.

The renewed conflict in Kachin state will help keep expectations in check. But the Karen have now taken the first tentative step towards peace after 63 years of conflict.

Burma government signs ceasefire with Karen rebels

12 January 2012 Last updated at 13:14 GMT BBC



General Mutu Saipo of the Karen National Union (C)welcomed Burmese officials as the talks opened

Burma's government has signed a ceasefire deal with Karen rebels, officials have told the BBC.

The agreement came at talks between officials and the Karen National Union (KNU) in Hpa-an, capital of eastern Karen state.

Both sides agreed to a ceasefire, to open communication offices and to allow passage through territories, a government official said.

The Karen have fought for greater autonomy for more than 60 years.

David Htaw, a KNU leader at the talks welcomed the accord, the first written ceasefire agreement in 63 years, but added: "Talks only go so far. What matters is practical steps taken on the ground".

A ceasefire is only a first step towards a durable peace, but it is a crucial sign of a new determination on both sides to try to resolve a bitter, decades-long conflict, says the BBC's South East Asia correspondent Rachel Harvey.

It is not clear what, if any, concessions have been made to reach this truce, our correspondent adds.

On Thursday, Burmese state television announced another prisoner amnesty, to begin on 13 January. Some 600 inmates have been identified as eligible for release by the Burmese president but it is not known if any political prisoners are among them.

The government has negotiated ceasefires with 17 other insurgent groups since 1989.

Last year, talks were held near the Thai-Burma border with several ethnic groups, including the Shan and Karen.

In December 2011, a deal for a ceasefire was reached between the local government and another major ethnic rebel group, the Shan State Army-South.

Sanctions condition

Efforts to end conflict are part of a larger bid by the military-backed nominally civilian government that came to power in November 2010 after Burma's first elections in 20 years.

This is one of the key demands of Western governments before sanctions that have been imposed on Burma can be lifted.

The peace talks in Hpa-an were led by Railway Minister Aung Min, who is also the leader of the State Peace Deal Commission, and by General Mutu Saipo of the KNU.

Aung Min told the BBC that one of the agreement's key points was that the talks would continue. Within 45 days the talks are due to reconvene for more substantive discussions.

"This is the first stage, in which we signed an agreement at state level. This allows both sides to open liaison offices and for them to travel freely without carrying arms. We also agreed [a] time and place for next stage peace talks at national level," he said.

Civil unrest has flared since the country's independence from Britain in 1948. The fighting has displaced thousands of ethnic minority members, many of whom have fled across the Thai border.

There are still tens of thousands of refugees living in camps in Thailand.

The ultimate goal of a long-term peace agreement between the government and all the ethnic groups could still take some time to materialise.

In the Kachin state, another ethnic rebel area, there continues to be reports of clashes, even though President Thein Sein has issued an order to cease fighting.

William Hague welcomes end of 'long darkness' in Burma

6 January 2012 Last updated at 19:51 GMT BBC



There have been small steps of reform by the new government



By Rachel Harvey BBC South East Asia Correspondent

British Foreign Secretary William Hague described his visit to Burma as a gesture of good intent on the part of the UK in the light of recent changes.

"I have come to hear directly from the country's leaders what they plan to do to continue progress and to speak to opposition figures and members of civil society about British support for their endeavours," he said.

Democracy and Human Rights Without Borders

After two days of meetings with government officials, political activists and the opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, he has clearly been convinced that the momentum of reform in Burma is real.

"We hope that the long darkness through which the Burmese people have lived may now be coming to an end," said Mr Hague.

The question is how far and how fast the process of reform will develop.

Less than a year since the civilian-led, but still military-backed, government came to power, some media restrictions have been lifted, trades unions have been legalised, some political prisoners have been released and, crucially, the government has begun talking to Aung San Suu Kyi.

The woman who has for so long embodied the hopes of a nation says she trusts the President, Thein Sein, and believes him to be an honest man.

She now feels confident enough to rejoin the official political system and run for a seat in parliament. The by-elections, scheduled for 1 April, will be a key test of Burma's embryonic democratic credentials.

But these are early days in what could be a bumpy transition.

Conflicts still rage in some ethnic minority areas, there are credible reports of abuses still being committed by the military in parts of the country and hundreds of prisoners of conscience remain behind bars.

Britain and its European allies want to see action taken towards resolving those issues before sanctions are lifted.

"These are indispensable steps for confidence in the country's development and they are achievable in the near future," said Mr Hague.

"We must not relax our efforts prematurely. That is the risk we must guard against."

But if the Burmese government continues along the path of reform, Britain will reciprocate.

"We are ready to move towards a strong, positive and open relationship as reforms take place and to respond bilaterally and through the EU," Mr Hague said.

"We will judge progress by actions and events and will respond in good faith to measures as they are taken."

To reinforce that message he announced additional aid for people displaced by conflict in Burma's border regions, support for peace efforts in Kachin state, and funding for micro finance initiatives.

That will all be welcome. But perhaps the real value of Mr Hague's trip lies in the fact that it took place at all.

After an absence of more than half a century, a British foreign secretary was back in Burma, building personal relationships and, Mr Hague will surely hope, a reservoir of trust on which to draw in future discussions.

There is a growing recognition that the next year could be crucial in determining the scope and speed of Burma's evolving process of reform.

"It is my hope," Mr Hague said, "that this year will come to be seen as a new dawn in the history of this nation."

Burma orders end to fighting against Kachin rebels

12 December 2011 Last updated at 16:59 GMT BBC

The Burmese government is reported to have ordered the military to stop operations against ethnic Kachin rebels in the north.

Officials said President Thein Sein had told the army to shoot only in self-defence against forces of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA).

Fighting has continued in the region since a truce broke down in June in a strategically important area near the Chinese border.

Thousands of refugees have fled.

The nominally civilian government has taken a number of steps towards reconciliation in recent months, including easing censorship and releasing some political prisoners.

In a highly unusual move, the chief minister of Kachin state read out a communique which he said was from President Thein Sein to the army chief of staff.

He said that all military commands in the area had been sent the president's instruction to stop offensive action.

The government recently signed a deal with another rebel group in Shan state further south.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said on a recent visit to Burma that Washington wanted an end to decades of fighting with rebel groups before it normalises relations.

Hydro-power projects

Burma accused the Kachin rebels of starting the latest round of fighting near the Chinese border following the collapse of a truce that was signed 17 years ago.

The government said the army needed to protect big hydro-power projects in the area which supply electricity to China.

The KIA opposes the China-backed power schemes, saying they cause environmental damage and social disruption, including the relocation of some communities.

It blamed government forces for the clashes.

The Burmese government has taken steps this year to improve relations with the United States and other Western countries.

The US has offered encouragement for the government's reform programme but says it must go further towards democracy and respect for human rights.

Burma dam: Why Myitsone plan is being halted

By Rachel Harvey BBC South East Asia Correspondent

30 September 2011 Last updated at 11:10 GMT BBC



The dam on the Irrawaddy would have created a reservoir slightly bigger than Singapore

In a rare concession, the Burmese government has suspended a long planned and highly controversial hydroelectric dam project in the face of growing public opposition.

The campaign against the construction of the Myitsone dam brought together conservationists, scholars, and political activists including Aung San Suu Kyi, and had become a serious test for the new civilian-led, military-backed government.

Myitsone was being developed jointly by the state Myanmar Ministry of Electric Power, the privately-owned Asia World Company of Burma and the China Power Investment Corporation.

Scheduled for completion in 2019, the dam would have created a reservoir some 766 sq km (296 square miles) - an area slightly bigger than Singapore. The vast bulk of the electricity generated - some reports say as much as 90% - was destined for export to China.

Myitsone had become something of a cause celebre for those who fear China's growing influence in Burma. Beijing, exploiting the void created by international sanctions, has moved rapidly to harvest Burma's rich natural resources.

"There's a widespread perception that China has taken advantage of Burma's situation over these past decades," according to Thant Myint-U, author of *Where China Meets India: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia*.

"Burma can benefit enormously from Chinese trade and investment, but there is almost bound to be a backlash if Chinese projects are undertaken with zero transparency and little concern for their impact on local communities."

Myitsone is, or rather was, being built at the head of the Irrawaddy - the confluence of the Mali and N'Mai rivers - in Kachin state. It's an area of rich biodiversity, less than 100km from a tectonic fault line. Or to put it another way, Myitsone was a huge construction project in an environmentally sensitive, earthquake-prone area where armed ethnic minority Kachin fighters are battling the Burmese army.

The Kachin Independence Organisation saw the dam as a direct threat to its people and their livelihoods. Thousands of local villagers have already been resettled to

make way for the dam; thousands more would have been forced to move as the project developed. But there was no public consultation.

Burma's birthplace

The potential environmental impact is harder to gauge. There is no legal obligation in Burma to conduct any assessment, though the China Power Investment Corporation (CPI) did commission a study by Chinese and Burmese experts. The report has not been made public, but parts have been leaked to activists. It is understood to have recommended two smaller dams be built instead of one, but that advice was ignored.

According to Grace Mang, from lobby group International Rivers, the CPI instead said it would study the impact of the dam during its construction. "The whole point of conducting an impact assessment is to prevent or mitigate impacts before they occur," she said. "If it's found that the environmental or social impact is unacceptable, then the project shouldn't be going ahead."

In the event, it may have been cultural and political calculations that led to the project being suspended. The Myitsone dam resonated well beyond the conservationist or Kachin communities because of its location, at the birthplace of the Irrawaddy.

"The Irrawaddy is the Burmese people's heritage, lifeline and civilisation," said Aung Zaw, editor of the Irrawaddy news website. "Everyone feels attached to it. That's the reason the campaign [against the dam] gained such support."

Outside Burma, activists from both environmental and human rights groups threw their weight behind the campaign. As Grace Mang put it: "They are flooding, quite literally, the birthplace of Burma. That's why so many are opposed."

'Bold decision'

Despite the fact that the man responsible for the project, Burma's minister of electric power, Zaw Min, only recently vowed that "we will never back down", other government figures began to waver. A diplomatic source based in Rangoon told the BBC: "There are signs of increasing unease among some ministers in Nay Pyi Taw.

Maybe some political leaders do not want their legacy to be one of irreparable damage to the Irrawaddy."

This is, after all, a government that has been trying hard to convince a sceptical public at home and abroad that it is different from its military predecessor and serious about reform. Speaking ahead of the announcement that the Myitsone project was to be put on ice, Burmese author Thant Myint-U put forward the view that the dam could be a perfect opportunity for the new administration to prove itself. "Suspending work on the dam would be the best sign so far that the new government is serious about taking popular concerns into account."

It seems Burmese President Thein Sein agrees. The government will point to this decision as concrete evidence of its willingness to listen and to work in the interests of the people. Its critics will interpret the move as a cynical piece of public relations which can easily be reversed - the Myitsone project has, after all, only been suspended, not cancelled.

Aung Zaw thinks the suspension of the Myitsone project may encourage Burma's long-suffering activists.

"It is a bold decision to stand up against China but there are several dams [due to] be built along the Irrawaddy," he said.

"What about other mega-projects with China, including the gas pipeline? I predict there will be more campaigns in the future."

Burma dam: Work halted on divisive Myitsone project

30 September 2011 Last updated at 14:16 GMT BBC

Burma's president has suspended construction of a controversial Chinese-backed hydroelectric dam.

In a letter read out in parliament on Friday, Thein Sein said the \$3.6bn (£2.3bn) Myitsone dam was contrary to the will of the people.

The project fuelled fighting between the army and ethnic Kachin rebels.

Pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who recently joined the anti-dam campaign, welcomed the move, seen as a rare victory for social activists.

The BBC's South East Asia correspondent Rachel Harvey says it appears to be further evidence of the new leadership's desire to seek legitimacy by being more open to public opinion.

The army handed over power to a civilian authority in March, although many of the new rulers are ex-military.

Our correspondent says lobby groups will still be wary because Thein Sein has said he is suspending the dam's construction only for the term of his office, which ends in 2015.

Spectrum of opposition

The Myitsone dam project was being developed jointly by Burma and China at the head of the Irrawaddy river in Burma's northern Kachin state.

Kachin rebels, who have been fighting government troops in a stop-start insurgency for years, were leading the opposition to the dam.

This year has been one of the most violent in Kachin state in more than a decade.

The dam, which was due for completion in 2019, would be one of the world's tallest at 152m (500ft) high.

The campaign against the project brought together conservationists, environmentalists, Kachin activists and the political opposition.

Their objections ranged from the lack of public consultation to the potential environmental impact of the project.

The dam would create a reservoir of some 766 sq km (300 sq miles) - about the size of Singapore - and displace thousands of ethnic Kachin villagers, our correspondent says.

"We have to respect the will of the people as our government is elected by the people," Thein Sein said.

"We have a responsibility to solve the worries of the people so we will stop construction of the Myitsone Dam during our current government."

The decision to suspend construction was unexpected.

Earlier this month, a report in the local Eleven journal said Electric Power Minister Zaw Min had declared that construction of the dam would proceed despite the objections.

Last week, police arrested a man who staged a rare solo protest against the project outside a Chinese embassy building in Rangoon, AFP news agency reported, and a rally this week against the project was also blocked.

After the decision, Aung San Suu Kyi said: "We understand the president in his memo to the national parliament has asked to suspend the Myitsone dam because of public concerns.

"Since every government should listen carefully to people's voices and tackle the concerned problems, I welcome this move."

The decision to halt construction was "a welcome surprise for everybody, inside and outside of Burma", Aung Zaw, editor of the Irrawaddy News website, based in northern Thailand, told the BBC.

"The people [are] really happy and welcome the decision made by President Thein Sein because it wasn't only [Aung San] Suu Kyi, let me remind you of that.

"It's the population, the whole Burmese who feel they belong to the culture heritage of the Irrawaddy river. They welcome the news."

Maung Maung Than, from the BBC's Burmese service, points out that the effect of damming the Irrawaddy - which flows from the north of Burma into the massive delta in the south - would have been felt throughout the country.

The vast majority of the power produced on the dam was to be exported to China, and correspondents say the dam had served to inflame growing anti-Chinese sentiment in Burma.

Beijing is investing vast sums in a series of big infrastructure projects aimed at exploiting Burma's rich natural resources and geographic position in the region.

There has as yet been no official reaction from China to the unusual step taken against it by its isolated ally.

Burma calls for peace talks with armed rebel groups

18 August 2011 Last updated at 16:53 GMT BBC

Burma's new government has called for peace talks with armed ethnic rebels groups along its borders with Thailand and China.

In a televised statement, it urged each rebel group to contact regional governments to start dialogue.

The government said it would be forming a body to deal with groups seeking peace talks.

The move is one of several recent signs that the nominally civilian government is trying to change its hardline image.

Several ethnic militias have battled the central government for decades to preserve de facto autonomy of groups like the Shan, Wa, Kachin, Karen and Mon.

Rare move

"Ethnic armed groups, which are willing to work for peace after resolving armed conflicts, are invited to contact respective state/division governments," said a statement attributed to cabinet secretary, Tin Myo Kyi.

Though some of the ethnic rebel groups have already had contact with the government, this rare public move comes three weeks after democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi wrote an open letter to Burmese leader Thein Sein offering to mediate between them.

Ms Suu Kyi, released from a seven-year period of house arrest in November last year, advocates autonomy under a federal republic for at least three of Burma's ethnic groups.

The move comes days after state-run newspapers in Burma stopped their long-held practice of publishing daily criticisms of the BBC and other international broadcasters and ahead of a visit by a United Nations human rights envoy.

Tomas Ojea Quintana is expected to visit the country next week for talks with senior government figures and possibly Ms Suu Kyi.

Burma's army has, since June, been fighting both the Kachin Independence Army and the Shan State Army.

Both Shan and Kachin states border China, Burma's biggest economic ally.

Other clashes have also taken place along the eastern border with Thailand between government troops, ethnic Mon rebels and the Karen National Union.

Burma blames ethnic Kachin rebels for deadly clashes

18 June 2011 Last updated at 14:34 GMT BBC

Burma has accused ethnic Kachin rebels of starting deadly fighting that erupted near China's border this month.

Officials told state media the army had to act after the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) ignored an order to withdraw from an area near a hydropower plant.

The fighting was the heaviest between Kachin rebels and government troops since they signed a truce 17 years ago.

The Kachin blame the government for the clashes, which have reportedly forced 10,000 people to flee their homes.

The government's accusation in the official newspaper the New Light of Myanmar is its first comment on the conflict.

It said the only objective of the army was "to protect its members and an important hydropower project of the nation".

The Tarpein dam is being built by China to help it meet its power needs.

But the KIA are opposed to the project, saying the dam will be environmentally and socially destructive.

Truce collapse

Fighting broke out in the area on 9 July - at least four rebel fighters and a number of government troops have died. The rebels say they also destroyed several bridges.

Rights groups say some 10,000 people have been fled, many of them fearing being forcibly recruited as porters by the army.

The KIA is one of several militias aligned with Burma's ethnic minority groups who for decades fought against the central government. They are demanding greater autonomy for Kachin state.

Ahead of the country's nominally democratic elections last November - the first in two decades - the authorities proposed a ceasefire deal to the militia on the condition that they disarm and join a centralised border guard force.

The KIA refused to do so, resulting in the collapse of its long-standing truce with the government.

Neighbouring China has urged both sides to "resolve their differences through peaceful negotiations".

The US state department has called on Burmese government to "cease any such hostilities and begin a dialogue with opposition and ethnic minority groups towards national reconciliation".

Burma clashes: Kachin fighters 'destroy bridges'

15 June 2011 Last updated at 17:23 GMT BBC

Burmese rebels say they have destroyed several bridges in the north of the country to prevent attacks by the army.

The rebels, from Kachin state, said they had blown up two bridges in neighbouring Shan state.

Clashes broke out last week near to the site of a hydropower project being built to provide electricity to China.

Separately, activists said two Kachin political leaders who are not linked to the current fighting have been put under house arrest.

The army is currently fighting rebels from the Kachin Independence Army.

The KIA is one of several militias aligned with Burma's ethnic minority groups, who for decades fought against the central government.

Most of the ethnic militias have accepted ceasefire deals with the government, and have agreed to be assimilated into border control forces.

But a truce between the government and the KIA broke down last year when they refused to become border guards.

The army apparently sparked the clashes when soldiers attempted to move KIA fighters away from the site of a Chinese hydroelectric power plant.

The Kachins have repeatedly warned against the building of the plant, saying it will destroy the livelihoods of many people in the area.

Reports say more than 2,000 people have fled the fighting - including several Chinese engineers working on the hydroelectric plant.

The Thailand-based Kachin News Group reported that the destroyed bridges were on a major trading route into China.

Meanwhile, Kachin activists said the government had put under house arrest Zahkung Ting Ying and Waw Lau - who belong to militant groups that have accepted a government ceasefire.

The government is reportedly trying to use their militias to attack the KIA.

Burmese troops and Kachin militia clash

14 June 2011 Last updated at 18:41 GMT BBC

Burmese troops have been involved in deadly clashes with Kachin rebels near a northern site where China is building a hydro-electric power plant.

At least four rebel fighters and a number of government troops have died.

A truce between the government and rebels from the Kachin ethnic minority broke down last year when rebels refused to become state border guards.

It is among the worst violence reported in Burma since March, when the military handed power to a civilian government.

The current fighting began on Thursday.

It appears to have started with a government offensive to force rebels belonging to the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) away from an outpost in an area where China is building two dams as part of a hydro-electric power plant.

Mediation appeal

The US Campaign for Burma, a Washington-based lobbying group, said hundreds of Burmese government troops had been deployed.

Four rebels and 16 government troops had been killed, while more than 2,000 people had fled the fighting, mostly into China, the group said. A rebel spokesman confirmed the rebel deaths.

China has said that about 30 Chinese engineers and hydro-electric power plant workers were caught up in the conflict, apparently held by government troops.

A Kachin rebel spokesman later told the BBC that the workers had been allowed to leave.

He said the conflict could be solved only through the mediation of a neighbouring country, though he did not name one.

"We don't want the war to spread country-wide," said the spokesman, La Nam.

"We don't believe the negotiation between government and us could be possible to stop the conflict. We wish a powerful neighbour country to mediate between us to relax the tension."

Will the famous Indian WWII Stilwell Road reopen?

By Subir Bhaumik BBC News, Ledo, Assam

8 February 2011 Last updated at 18:05 GMT BBC



Supporters say that reconstruction of the Stilwell Road will be a powerful economic boost for north-east India (Photos: Subhamoy Bhattacharjee)

Traders in north-east India are pressing the government to reopen its section of the famous Stilwell Road, constructed during World War II to enable trade and traffic with Burma and China.

A senior official of India's ministry of external affairs told the BBC that no decision has been taken about the future of the 61km (40 miles) Indian section of the road, which connects Assam state with China's Yunnan Province via Burma's Kachin state.

At the time of its completion by the Western allies in 1944, the 1,726km road (1,072 miles) was seen as a lifeline to China in the war against Japan, supplying Chiang Kai-Shek's Kuomintang army.

Initially called the Ledo Road, it was named after the American general Joseph Stilwell who oversaw its construction. It was built by 15,000 American soldiers (60% of whom were African-Americans) and 35,000 local workers at a cost of \$150m. It is estimated that 1,100 Americans died during the construction, as well as many more local people.

Hailed as one of the great engineering marvels of the World War II, the men who built it had to fight their way through jungle and carve a route over mountain passes.

They had to contend with malaria, monsoons that washed away the road as they built it and constant attacks from Japanese forces.

Barely passable

"We have to address many concerns from the possible dumping of Chinese products to the security of trade convoys through an area dominated by myriad insurgent groups," the foreign ministry official said.

"Without a careful weighing of pros and cons, you cannot expect Delhi to rush to a decision."

The official was unwilling to be named, on grounds that he is not authorised to talk to the media officially.

Politicians, citizens groups and businesspeople in India's north-east have welcomed recent efforts to revive the vintage road by the newly elected government in Burma.

Much of the road has been swallowed up by jungle. It is barely passable on foot and is considered too dangerous to use by many because of the presence of Burmese and Indian ethnic insurgents in the area.

Only a small part of the road lies in India - 1,033km (642 miles) is in Burma and 632km (393 miles) is in China.

For businessmen eager to export or import freight, the good news is that work on rebuilding the Great Snake (as the Stilwell Road is called) has begun.

Burma's new government, elected in a controversial poll last year, has awarded a contract to the Chinese company, Yunnan Construction Engineering Group.

It will rebuild the 312km (194 miles) stretch of the road from Myitkyina in Burma's northern Kachin state to the Pangsau Pass (nicknamed Hell's Pass by those who built it) - on the border with India's Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh state.

This section of the road is in the worst condition and the present contract is expected to fully restore it.

Production hubs

At present the road from Myitkyina to the Chinese border - along with the brief Indian section - is usable.

It is thought that a re-constructed Stilwell Road could cut 30% off the cost of transporting goods between China and India as well as playing a role in facilitating trade between both those countries and the rest of South East Asia.

"The Stilwell Road can change the economy of north-east India and north Burma by turning these less developed and insurgency-ravaged areas into major production hubs for feeding the western Chinese market," said Nazeeb Arif - a former secretary general of the Indian Chamber of Commerce and now with the Indian Tobacco Company.

"We did a study in our chamber earlier in the decade and found this is the only surface link between India and China that can take a substantial part of our growing bilateral trade."

Assam's Industry Minister Pradyut Bordoloi, from India's ruling Congress party, agrees.

"The Stilwell Road, if properly done up, will not only open huge opportunities for trade but also for manufacturing in our region. Only then will India's Look East policy make sense," he said.

Assamese students and youth groups also support the move - they have recently demonstrated in favour of opening the road to cross-regional traffic.

But in addition to unease among some in India that a renovated Stilwell Road could be a source of dumping Chinese goods into its eastern states - there is also concern that a section of the road due to be renovated now is dominated by a host of north-east Indian rebel groups and Burma's Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO).

Delhi is also perhaps not happy that a Chinese company has got the contract to rebuild this final link in the road chain.

But if the Stilwell Road is indeed reconstructed, it could be as strategically important in the 21st Century as it was in the 1940s.

Burma army in tense stand-off with Kachin militia

19 October 2010 Last updated at 05:25 GMT

A Burmese ethnic militia group, the Kachin Independence Army, is in a tense stand-off with the army following the arrest of three of its members.

It says one of its offices has been surrounded by the Burmese military.

The KIA also said that its forces have themselves surrounded an army camp near the Chinese border, the BBC Burmese service has reported.

It has had a 16-year ceasefire with the military government and seeks autonomy for the Kachin people.

The group has refused to sign a deal with the government to disarm and become an official border guard force.

Friction fear

The KIA and its civilian organisation have been allowed to control a large swathe of northern Burma as part of a ceasefire agreement with the country's ruling generals.

They provide power, roads and schools funded by taxes on the brisk trade from China as well as the jade and gold mines and teak.

But the government's deadline to disband had prompted fears of conflict with those groups, such as the KIA, who refused to do so.

The BBC's Alastair Leithead visited the KIA in Laiza, northern Burma, earlier this year, where KIA generals said they were preparing for the worst.

"I can't say if there will be war for sure, but the government wants us to become a border guard force for them by the end of the month," said the KIA's Chief of Staff, Maj Gen Gam Shawng, in February.

"We will not do that, or disarm, until they have given us a place in a federal union and ethnic rights as was agreed in 1947."

Before the latest reports, the situation appeared to have calmed.

Our correspondent says the risk of violence between the Burmese army and both the KIA and the United Wa State army, had appeared to have been reduced partly due to pressure from neighbouring China.

There are around two dozen ethnic groups in Burma, mostly scattered around its borders, and the biggest have been in various states of ceasefire or civil war over the past few decades.

The KIA is one of the biggest - their commanders say it includes 10,000 regular troops and 10,000 reservists, but it is impossible to know for sure.

The Burmese army is one of the biggest in Asia.

Burma's Kachin army prepares for civil war

Burma's Kachin army set to fight

Page last updated at 17:42 GMT, Monday, 22 February 2010

By Alastair Leithead

BBC News, Laiza, northern Burma

The sharp sound of loading and unloading weapons and the barked orders of the sergeant-major cut through the mountains of northern Burma as the young cadets are put through their morning drills.

Their discipline is good, their uniforms smart and there is little doubting their sense of purpose or patriotism towards the red and green flag with crossed machetes they proudly wear on their right shoulders.

They are the next generation of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), and say they are not afraid to be the generation that fights in a civil war many fear may soon be upon them.

"The Union of Burma was formed on the basis of equality for ethnic people, but there has been inequality throughout history and we are still being suppressed," said cadet Dashi Zau Krang.

He is 26 and has a degree in business studies, but says inequality has stopped him getting a good job and driven him to join the military.

But he is not afraid.

"The Burmese army may be the strongest in South East Asia, while we are very few, but God will help us to liberate our people to get freedom and equality. This is our responsibility," he said.

It is a war the Kachin people do not want and one they cannot win.

But their generals believe a 17-year ceasefire could soon end as a Burmese army deadline approaches, demanding the forces merge or disarm.



The Kachin people say they suffer discrimination in Burma

They have already refused, and although their leaders are still pushing for a political solution, their commanders are preparing for the worst when time runs out at the end of February.

"I can't say if there will be war for sure, but the government wants us to become a border guard force for them by the end of the month," said the KIA's Chief of Staff, Maj Gen Gam Shawng.

"We will not do that, or disarm, until they have given us a place in a federal union and ethnic rights as was agreed in 1947."

The KIA and its civilian organisation have been allowed to control a large swathe of northern Burma as part of a ceasefire agreement with the country's ruling generals.

Trade with China

They provide power, roads and schools funded by taxes on the brisk trade from China as well as the jade and gold mines and teak.

But now soldiers are being recruited, veterans are being recalled and retrained, and an ethnic army is preparing to fight perhaps the biggest military force in South East Asia.

On the car radio are freedom songs, and at one of the training camps a course in traditional dance is being run - cultural nationalism and propaganda is strong.

A BBC team travelled to an area in northern Burma controlled by the Kachin army and its civilian arm, the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO).



We were taken to training camps and outposts, but could not walk into Laiza town to talk to people on the street for fear of being seen by an extensive network of Burmese or Chinese government informers and spies.

It made forming a balanced view very difficult, but the determination and planning of the military was clear.

High on a vantage point above their headquarters, trenches are being dug and tree trunks are being hauled and hewn into gun turrets piled high with earth.

They can see the Burmese army positions from here and they know this will be just one of the front lines if fighting breaks out.

A well-oiled and highly polished large-calibre anti-aircraft gun is produced, standing on a tripod in a bunker overlooking the lush jungle valley.

Guerrilla war

The gleaming gun is a statement, a display for the visitors, but the small metal plane stencilled on the sights looks woefully optimistic.

They are organised and say they have heavy weapons, but we did not see them.

There are around two dozen ethnic groups in Burma, mostly scattered around its borders, and the biggest have been in various states of ceasefire or civil war over the past few decades.

The KIA is one of the biggest. Their commanders say it includes 10,000 regular troops and 10,000 reservists, but it is impossible to know for sure.

The Burmese army is huge. It has an air force of sorts and artillery, and the KIA knows the only way to survive will be to withdraw into the jungle and fight a guerrilla war of attrition.



Traditional Kachin dances now take on a military theme

But civil war would create tens of thousands of refugees and create regional instability.

"If we are attacked the other ethnic groups will support us, as they know the same could happen to them," Gen Gam Shawng explained.

The nearby Wa ethnic group has tens of thousands of troops and resources funded by drug smuggling, and we were told a deal with them had been agreed.

Whether civil war comes here is now up to the Burmese government.

If they use this election year to solve what they see as the "problem" of the ethnic groups they will have a fight on their hands, and the region will have to deal with the consequences.

Page last updated at 10:15 GMT, Tuesday, 16 February 2010 BBC

Amnesty warns Burma minorities face growing repression

Burma's ethnic minorities are vulnerable to increased repression ahead of elections in the country later this year, a rights group has warned.

Amnesty International said minority groups were important for the political opposition of the country.



But it said their role had not been sufficiently recognised, as international attention tended to focus on opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The Chin people are one of several ethnic groups to have fled persecution

The Burmese junta has previously denied repressing ethnic groups.

It says it will hold elections - the first in 20 years - at some point this year but no date has yet been set.

Amnesty said Burma's ethnic minorities - up to 40% of the population - had played "an important but seldom acknowledged role" in the opposition movement.

But it said they faced surveillance, harassment and discrimination when trying to carry out legitimate political activities.

Benjamin Zawacki from the group told the BBC it was "almost inevitable" that, in the run up to the elections, the world's media and organisations would look to Ms Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD).

"The ethnic minorities states are simply beyond the spotlight that's typically placed on Myanmar [Burma]," he said.

"So it's that much easier for the regime to persecute and to repress ethnic minority activists simply because they feel they can do so without a great deal of attention, much less accountability for those abuses," he said.

'Heavy-handed'

Amnesty urged the Asian regional organisation the Association of South East Asian Nations (Asean) and China to help ensure that Burma's people could participate openly in the political process.

The call comes as a UN envoy for human rights, **“Any resolution of the Tomas Ojea Quintana, is visiting Rakhine state in country's deeply troubling the north-west of the country, home to the ethnic human rights record has to take Rohingya people. into account the rights and**

aspirations of the country's large population of ethnic minorities”
Tens of thousands of Rohingya, who are mostly Muslim, have fled the country - many to neighbouring Bangladesh - claiming abuse and oppression.

Benjamin Zawacki

Amnesty International

Amnesty says the Rohingya are suffering under the junta after they led a 2007 uprising that was bloodily suppressed with the loss of at least 31 lives.

Some members of Burma's many ethnic groups are waging decades-long armed uprisings along the country's eastern border, claiming neglect and mistreatment.

Others have become political activists in opposition to the junta's rule.

Mr Zawacki said the government had responded to such activism in "a heavy-handed manner", raising fears of great repression before the elections.

"Any resolution of the country's deeply troubling human rights record has to take into account the rights and aspirations of the country's large population of ethnic minorities," he said in a statement.

Amnesty said it had conducted interviews for its report with 700 activists from the seven largest minorities, including the Rakhine, Shan, Kachin and Chin, over a two-year period from August 2007.

India not to reopen key WWII road

Page last updated at 09:07 GMT, Tuesday, 11 August 2009 10:07 UK

By

Subir

Bhaumik

BBC News, Calcutta

India has abandoned plans to reopen a World War Two road that could connect its remote north-eastern states to China's Yunnan province through Burma.

Lawmakers from India's Assam state have been informed of the Indian decision by its ministry for the development of the north-eastern region.



Opening the road could boost trade with China (*Pictures:*

This comes days after the 13th round of talks *Subhamoy Bhattacharjee*) between India and China to resolve their border dispute.

The talks failed to break the impasse and both sides agreed to keep talking.

The 1,079-mile-long Stillwell Road was built by American general Joe "Vinegar" Stillwell to supply Kuomintang forces in the war against Japan.

The road begins from Ledo in Assam and ends in China's Yunnan after traversing through Burma's Kachin state province.

Assam's Power Minister Pradyut Bordoloi, who represents a constituency around Ledo in the Assam state assembly, has been a strong advocate of reopening the road.

'Good for trade'

"This road could easily handle a substantial part of India's growing bilateral trade with China because of cost and time benefits," Mr Bordoloi, who is from India's ruling Congress party, said.

"Both sides would save much in transport costs in exporting and importing goods

meant for India's eastern and north-eastern region and China's remote southwest."

The road, built at the cost of \$137m in 1944, handled up to 65,000 tonnes of cargo during World War Two.

Many war historians say this road kept Kuomintang in the war.

"This road will be capable of handling between 15% and 20% of the Sino-Indian bilateral trade," says Nazeeb Arif, a former secretary-general of the Indian Chamber of Commerce who hails from Assam.



The road has fallen into disrepair because of a lack of

Mr Arif says he has done an extensive survey on use the potential of the Stillwell Road.

"If this road was opened, it would have encouraged Indian industry to invest in production hubs in our under-developed north-eastern states to make goods meant for export to China. Our economies would have thrived," Mr Arif said.

Nagaland's Chief Minister Neiphue Rio echoed a similar sentiment.

"That is what Delhi does not very often understand. Border trade can be very good for states like ours," he said.

India reopened the 15,000-foot-high Nathu La pass in the Himalayan state of Sikkim for border trade with China in July 2006.

But trade has been poor because the pass is under snow for a few months during the winter and cannot take heavy container traffic.

Stillwell Road does not suffer freezing because its passes are much lower than Nathu La.

Burma, however, has not been very keen on reopening the road because it passes through the Kachin state, which its army has barely controlled since Independence.

Large parts of the Kachin state were controlled by the separatist Kachin

Independence Army (KIA) since the 1960s.

Though the KIA has been maintaining a ceasefire with the Burmese army since 1994, it continues to control border trade in gems, timber and other precious stones like jade.