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THE LAW KHEE LAH CONFERENCE



From 20 to 25 January 2014, Armed Ethnic Groups met to consolidate their position in relation to a nationwide ceasefire. The meeting, held in Law Khee Lah, Karen State, was to further cement ethnic unity and produce a substantive set of requirements to ensure peace in the country.

The meeting was a result of the Laiza meeting that had been held in October 2013.

Participants had agreed that a further conference would be necessary and would originally be held in Karen State in December 2013. However, due to a number of concerns raised after a meeting in Myitkyina, on 4 and 5 November 2013, members of the armed ethnic groups decided that the next meeting should be held in early January instead so that all groups could review their position in relation to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). The principle responsibility for creating the NCA agreement rested on members of the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) that was created at the Laiza meeting. Members currently appointed to the team are:

1. Team Leader Nai Hantha, General-Secretary, New Mon State Party
2. Deputy Leader 1 - Padoh Kwe Htoo Win, Gen-Secretary, Karen National Union
3. Deputy Leader 2 - Major-General Gun Maw, Deputy Commander-in-Chief, KIO
4. Member - Dr Lian Sakhong, Presidium member, Chin National Front
5. Member - Colonel Hkun Okker, Patron, Pa-O National Liberation Organization
6. Member - Lieutenant-Colonel Kyaw Han, Arakan Army (Kachin State)
7. Member - Ms Mra Raza Lin, Central Committee, Arakan Liberation Party
8. Member - Twan Zaw, General-Secretary, Arakan National Council
9. Member - Colonel Saw Lone Long, KIO Htoo Baw Battalion
10. Member - Shwe Myo Thant, Joint Secretary, Karenni National Progress Party
11. Member - Timothy Laklem, Foreign Affairs, KNU/KNLA Peace Council

12. Member - Sai Ba Tun, Central Committee, Shan State Progress Party
13. Member - Ta Ai Nyunt, Secretary-General, Wa National Organisation
14. Member - Tar Aik Phone, Chairman, Palaung State Liberation Front
15. Member - Kya Ye Se, Lahu Democratic Union
16. Tun Lwin, Secretary-1, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army

Numerous meetings had already taken place within the NCCT in relation to formulating a new strategy after the ethnic groups were presented with a Burma Army drafted agreement in Myitkyina. The draft, which contained a number of contentious issues, including the failure to address the matter of a Union Army, forced ethnic leaders to reconsider their options. Consequently, the January conference, which was attended by over 150 participants, sought to clarify and update previous ethnic agreements that had been presented to the government. The first NCA agreement was written in November 2013 and was then updated in December and given to the Union Peacemaking Working Committee (UPWC). However, the Law Khee Lah Conference resulted in a number of changes made to the original draft and it was decided that this version would be presented to the Government in February 2014. While the conference had been intended to last two days, it was subsequently extended to four to allow further issues to be discussed. These included joint monitoring, political dialogue, and a military code of conduct.

One of the main issues included in the new agreement was that of the ethnic group's interim authority between the signing of the agreement and a future political dialogue with the government. It was felt by conference participants that the KIO's 1994 agreement had left the KIO in a weakened position in relation to control over their political future and the ethnic populations in Kachin State. As a result, NCCT members sought assurances from the Government that any ceasefire agreement would allow them to exert authority in relation to the running of their individual states during the ceasefire period and prior to political dialogue.¹

The meeting also reaffirmed the six main points necessary for ethnic groups to move towards peace in the country. These include:

1. A Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
2. A Framework for Political Dialogue
3. A National Dialogue
4. Union Conference and Signing of Accord
5. Adoption of Accord by Parliament
6. Implementation of Accord

In addition to the six points, a number of other issues were raised including the formation of a Federal Army, the new creation of ethnic based states, and the use of terminology in the NCA when referring to the armed ethnic groups themselves. While the conference was able to accept the fact that the federal army issue and the creation of new states could be solved later, a number of groups maintained that they needed to keep the Burmese term “တပ်မတော်” for revolutionary armed ethnic groups. This term, which can also mean reform, was originally dismissed by the NCCT for inclusion in earlier drafts, however, the conference participants insisted on reinstating it to the new draft.

In total the main structure of the Law Khee Lah agreement is:

- Basic Principles
- Aims and Objectives

- Political roadmap
- Military matters
- Code of Conduct
- Nationwide Ceasefire Joint Monitoring
- Trustbuilding and Waiver of Law on Unlawful Associations
- Political dialogue
- Transitional arrangements
- General
- Signing of the agreement²

The UNFC issued a statement confirming their support for the outcome of the conference noting that:

1. Conference of the ethnic armed resistance organizations (or Law Khee Lar Conference) was successfully held from January 20 to 25, for six days, at Law Khee Lar Camp, (AKA) Lay Wah, which is in the area under the control of Karen National Union(KNU).
2. The Law Khee Lar Conference was attended by a total of 160 attendees, who were representatives from 17 ethnic armed resistance organizations, especially invited representatives and observers, including those from the ABSDF.
3. At the Law Khee Lar Conference, representative leaders from the ethnic armed resistance organizations freely and frankly held discussions, on the basis of Panglong spirit and Laiza spirit. The Conference was able to materialize, in terms of principle as well as procedure, the unity gained from the Laiza Conference.
4. The outstanding achievement of Law Khee Lar Conference is the competency to adopt a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, unanimously. This Agreement, confirmed by Law Khee Lar Conference, is the result of amendment and additions, together with suggestions, made to the draft prepared, on the basis of Laiza Agreement, by the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordinating Team (NCCT), which was formed by Laiza Conference, and this Conference further gave mandate to the NCCT to undertake further coordination in respect of the Agreement.
5. This Law Khee Lar Conference, held under the aegis of KNU as the host, in addition to consolidating unity of all the ethnic nationalities, serves as an arena for preparing them, for different stages of political dialogues and negotiations that will come after achievement of nationwide ceasefire. The ethnic armed resistance organizations are to participate in the political dialogues and negotiations, with unity and coordination, and they will have to struggle on until their political goal of establishment of a “Genuine Federal Union” is achieved.
6. The ethnic armed resistance organizations are building firm unity like this, in order to be able to cooperate and participate, with correct intention, in the processes of cessation of the civil war, building internal peace and rehabilitation of the country. As Laiza Conference as well as Law Khee Lar Conference have been held with the aim of building ethnic unity, we issue this statement by urging to build collectively, ethnic unity of the entire people consisting of all the nationalities,

including organizations of the ruling government, from the ethnic unity that has been successfully achieved.³

After the meeting, a number of NCCT members met with the Government's chief negotiator U Aung Min on 29 January 2014 in Chiang Mai, Thailand. U Aung Min accepted the agreement and confirmed it would be forwarded to the National Defense and Security Council (NDSC) for further discussions. A future meeting date, to be held in March, was also confirmed.

While initial signs have been positive in relation to the agreement which is the most substantive formulated by armed ethnic groups thus far,⁴ a number of problems have recently been encountered. The timetable for further negotiations is consistently changing, there is factionalism within certain ethnic groups, and there have been recent attacks by the Burma Army against the KIO which threaten to derail the process. While the NCCT is still prepared to negotiate, one of its deputy leaders, Gun Maw of the KIO has noted that:

The NCCT will have to continue its meetings with the government. But, as for the KIO, it now needs to reconsider how much it will be involved in the peace process. I can say that this attack by the government troops is insincere because, no matter what reason they use, to purposely attack the KIA camps, while peace negotiation is underway, does not look good.⁵

Continued concerns of what control the Government has over its troops remain a major issue. Attacks on KIO bases, which are characterized by the Government as illegal logging actions, jeopardize the peace process, and unless the Government is prepared to rein in its armed forces, the possibility of a permanent peace remains elusive. The Law Khee Lah agreement has shown that armed ethnic groups are prepared to compromise in the interests of all the people of the country, the Government, and the Burma army specifically, needs to show it is prepared to make the same commitment.

Notes

¹ Personal conversation with NCCT member, 30 January 2014

² To Hopeland and Back VII: From battlefield to the negotiating table, SHAN, 27 January 2014

³ Statement, Conference of Armed Ethnic Resistance Organisations, 25 January 2014

⁴ Personal conversation with NCCT member, 20 February 2014

⁵ 'After Attacks, Kachin Rebels Must Rethink Peace Process: Gun Maw', The Irrawaddy, 17 February 2014