

A Delayed Peace

With the joint signing by the Nationwide Ceasefire Co-ordinating Team and the Burmese Government of a draft Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) text, it was hoped that genuine progress had been made in moving the peace process forward in the country.

The signing of the document was widely praised by the international community with the the UN Special Adviser for Myanmar, Vijay Nambiar, stating that it was:

a historic and significant achievement . . . The United Nations welcomes this milestone in Myanmar's history and congratulates President U Thein Sein and his negotiators as well as leaders of the Ethnic Armed Organizations and the NCCT

and that:

Today's agreement is a signal that new levels of trust, confidence and cooperation are possible between former enemies and that the seeds of change in Myanmar are beginning to sprout.

While the signing was seen as a major accomplishment by both parties, the signing of the text was only the first step in seeing the NCA draft accepted by both parties. While the Government had all but signalled their acceptance of the document, the ethnic group still required further deliberation on its contents and consequently called for a summit to discuss the matter.

It had originally been suggested that the meeting take place in Karen State, however, in a surprise move, the United Wa State Army (UWSA) offered alongside the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) to host the event at the Wa capital Panghsang.

Surprisingly, only 9 of the 16 NCCT members received invitations. The failure to include a number of groups, especially the Chin National Front, was at odds with the spirit of unity that has so often been promoted, while the inclusion of the Ta-ang, the Kokang, and the Arakan Army further irritated the Government.

Aung Myint, a spokesman reading from a statement on behalf of UWSA chairman Bao Youxiang noted that:

We invited to this meeting our brotherhood of ethnic armed groups who are in ongoing fighting [with the Burma Army]. We are like a jaw and its teeth, which cannot be divided,

The Summit, which started on 1 May and ended on 6 May was attended by a total of 65 leaders and observers from 12 Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). The attendees included the Arakan Army, Kachin Independence Organization, Karen National Union, Karenni National Progressive Party, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, National Democratic Alliance Army, New Mon State Party, Pa-Oh National Liberation Organization, Palaung State Liberation Front, Restoration Council of Shan State, Shan State Progress Party, and United Wa State Party.

At the end of the summit, another position statement was issued. The points included were:

1. Resolution of the civil war through political means

2. Inclusion of EAOs yet to conclude ceasefire with the government in the signing of the NCA
3. Cessation of government offensives in Kachin, Palaung, Kokang and Arakan areas
4. Curbs on further human rights abuses
5. Amendment of 2008 constitution to build up a federal union based on democracy, national equality and right of self-determination
6. There will be no secession from the union
7. Welcomes UN and China's efforts to bring about cessation of hostilities in northern Burma and the signing of the NCA
8. Nationwide political dialogue must include representatives from government, parliament, Tatmadaw (Burmese military), political parties, the people and the EAOs
9. Need to cultivate the spirit of peaceful co-existence among different nationalities
10. EAOs will form a representative body to hold talks with the government
11. The majority EAOs attending the summit have shown understanding and support for the Wa call for a state level status
12. More meetings hosted by the United Wa State Party will be held in order to further discuss and implement the points agreed at the summit

Point number 11 was particularly contentious as it would mean slicing off part of Shan State to create a Wa state, a move that is unlikely to be viewed favourably by the RCSS.

Yet again, there was a call for a formation of a representative body, thereby suggesting that neither the NCCT or the UNFC was capable of fulfilling the tasks necessary to negotiate with the Government.

The NCCT after its formation at the Laiza summit was not given enough powers to fulfil its role as negotiator, consequently the acceptance of the draft Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) text was in fact a gesture rather than an agreement.

Although the Panghsang Summit has been lauded as a major achievement, it did in fact do little to bring the peace process closer to its goal. Not long after the summit ended, it was announced that the NCCT would hold a meeting in Chiang Mai from the 24 to 28 May to prepare for the next summit to be held from 2 to 9 June at Law KheeLah, in Karen State.

The Law KheeLah meeting had ostensibly been arranged to discuss and finalise the ethnic version

of the Draft NCA text that had been approved on the 31 March.

Changes were expected and a number of other issues were likely to be addressed including the Code of Conduct and Security Sector reform.

Out of twenty-one armed ethnic groups invited to the summit, three did not attend, The United Wa State Army (UWSA), National Democracy Alliance Army (NDAA) and the Restoration Council of Shan State. The latter however, did issue a statement expressing 'welcome and support' for the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).

The UWSA spokesman Aung Myint noted that the NCCT meeting was an internal matter and that:

We've had a ceasefire for 26 years. We've said that we have not gotten into a fight, not even a single fight, since then and we therefore don't need to sign [a nationwide ceasefire accord]. . . We've said in meetings with government authorities that we won't sign the NCA and we will continue to say so in the future.

The meeting opened on the 2 June with a speech by General Mutu Say Po, Chairman of the Karen National Union who noted:

This meeting will be an important meeting to make a political platform for the future of our ethnic armed groups. Regarding the signing of the NCA [nationwide ceasefire accord], I want to give my thoughts: There are different armed groups in our NCCT, and we have different political interests . . . Should we abandon what we have in the current agreement from the draft NCA or take what we have got?"

The speech was considered by some participants to be over optimistic and conciliatory to the Government's position as he continued:

I want to say to you all that we will not get all the rights that we want from this draft NCA. It is not a comprehensive draft, but we need to negotiate more to get our rights via political talks. This draft is just an agreement to talk more,"

In contrast, however the next day's opening speech took a much more negative tone as N'Ban La, joint chairman of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and chairman of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), not unsurprisingly warned against such optimism:

All our ethnic people know it is easy for President Thein Sein to say he accepts what we ask for: establishing a federal system in the country . . . We all know [the government] made a similar promise when it wrote the 2008 Constitution. We have to be careful that they will not bring this Constitution to the political dialogue [as it precludes political autonomy for ethnic states]

N'Ban La was particularly clear on the stance that should be taken in relation to the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDA); the Arakan Army (AA); and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) in the fact that all must be allowed to sign.

Despite such support, however, the three groups decided that their interests were best served by resigning from the NCCT but remaining members of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC).

Abel Tweed the chairperson of the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) took a similar tone to N'Ban La noting:

This summit is very important. We will manage our own militaries and politics. We have to make the right political decision at this crucial time. If we take the wrong military approach, the result is death. If we take the wrong political path, the result might make us slaves for life. . . The Bamar government suppressed us for more than 60 years, since we did not have our own militaries or political systems. That was the great lesson for us. We need to be very careful about how to handle politics in the future.

The conference ended with the creation of a 15-member high-level special coordination team to continue dealing with the government to work for the formal signing of the draft nationwide ceasefire accord (NCA).

The creation of a higher-level branch of the NCCT had been discussed at earlier meetings, however, it was assumed the new tier of negotiators would be empowered to finalise an NCA without further recourse back to their leaders. However, this is not the case, according to Pu Lian Uk, Member of Supreme Council of the Chin National Front:

That high level negotiation team has full power of decision-making in the peace talks, but they have no authority to sign [a ceasefire].

More puzzling is the selection of members for the new team. At a time when the Government has already agreed to the draft Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement text and has dealt with the same people for the past eighteen months, the NCCT has appointed a team to move the process forward. KNU Vice-chairperson Zipporah Sein leads the new team; Dr La Ja (KIO) and Pu Zing Cung (CNF) are chosen as her deputy one and two respectively. Other members include Nai Han Tha (NMSP), Padoa Kwe Htoo Win (KNU), Maj-Gen Gun Maw (KIO), Dr. Lian H. Sakhong (CNF), Khun Okker (PNLO), Mya Raza Lin (ALP),

ShweMyo Thant (KNPP), Khun Myint Htun (PNLO), Khaing Soe Naing Aung (ALP), Mai Aik Phone (TNLA), Sao Hkun Sai (SSPP) and U Myo Win from the ABSDF.

Many of the new negotiators have not been involved with the actual process of negotiations before and as such, some analysts raise the question what do the armed ethnic groups hope to achieve by introducing a new team at such a crucial time prior to the election.

Lian Uk told the Myanmar Times, on 10 June, that that while the new members had no experience in past NCCT discussions they had a mandate to make decisions and understood the policy hammered out at the eight-day conference. He also noted that:

*Top leaders will be on stand-by
next to the negotiators when
they have to make critical
decision during the peace
talks,*

The past three months has seen numerous confusing signals as armed ethnic groups and the government signed a much lauded draft nationwide ceasefire agreement text, only to then have an ethnic summit involving the UWSA, a group that has made it quite clear they have nothing to gain by being involved in the ceasefire process. In addition, the Summit organisers failed to invite the Chin National Front, which, although a smaller group, has played an important role in the peace process.

Now that a new body of negotiating team has been created to bring the process forward, there is little doubt that there will be a signing of a nationwide ceasefire before the 2015 general election.

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