

South Asia Analysis Group

Published on *South Asia Analysis Group* (<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org>)

[Home](#) > MYANMAR: The war with the Kachins – An update

MYANMAR: The war with the Kachins – An update

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Fri, 01/11/2013 - 09:17

Paper No. 5357

Dated 11-Jan-2013

By C. S. Kuppuswamy

(This paper may please be read in conjunction with Paper No. 5132 dated 23 July 2012 – “Myanmar: The War with the Kachins-One year on” by the same author and posted on the site.

“The decision to use air power against ethnic militias, a tactic unheard of even under military rule, runs counter to reformist President Thein Sein's assurances that troops were acting only in self defence.” - Martin Petty – Reuters.

Introduction

The war between the Myanmar Army and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) which began on 09 June 2011 has escalated since December 2012 by unprecedented aerial attacks using jet fighters and helicopter gun ships. The UN, US and China have all expressed concerns but there is no respite. On the contrary latest reports indicate that the Myanmar Army is exerting a major push to dislodge the KIA from its HQ in Laiza, close to the China border.

Escalation in the War

Between the time President Thein Sein ordered the armed forces in December 2011 to cease operations except in self defence and till date no less than 1360 skirmishes or battles have been fought in northern Burma (Mizzima News – 14 December 2012).

Since the second week of December 2012, Jet fighters and MI-24 helicopter gun ships have been used to bombard the areas held by the

rebels and to provide close support to the ground forces. The Myanmar army is also reported to be using 105mm Howitzers and 120 mm mortars.

More troops (Light infantry battalions) are being concentrated in the war zone, indicative of a major offensive in the days to come.

The KIA lost control of its Point 771 outpost near Lajayang on January 3. The out post at the base of Hpun Pyan Bum Hill, (7 km west of Laiza) has also been captured in the first week of January. Altogether more than 100,000 civilians have been forced to flee to areas controlled by both the KIA and the government (The Irrawaddy, January 9, 2013).

Peace Talks

Even while the war is on, peace talks with the Government and the KIA continue. Till date 11 rounds of peace talks have taken place. The last round was held at Ruili, a border town in China, on 30 October 2012. KIA is the only major ethnic group that has not entered into a ceasefire with the Government as it is insisting on a political dialogue. The government is not prepared to make a commitment for political dialogue on the ground that it is a national issue and beyond the purview of the peace committee.

The KIA and the Kachins

The KIA is the second largest ethnic group in Myanmar. The KIA claims to have 10,000 troops with another 10,000 reservists. The troops are divided into five brigades with HQ at Laiza.

The KIA entered into a ceasefire with the military regime in 1994. This cease fire broke down after 17 years in June 2011 with the Myanmar army initiating the offensives in Momauk township in the vicinity of the area where the hydro power projects under taken by China are located.

With the past experience with the military junta there is deep mistrust and the KIA is not relenting on its political demands prior to cease fire.

"It's difficult to cease fighting while not knowing what will happen after," said KIA vice commander-in-chief, Major-General Gun Maw. "What should we do after a ceasefire? That's the answer we're looking for," he told the 7-Day News journal.

In an open letter on Wednesday (January 9) the US based Kachin alliance urged President Barack Obama to take steps to force the Burmese government to stop its assault on the Kachins (The Irrawaddy, January 10, 2013)

In an open letter to Suu Kyi on 10 January, 2013 the alliance of 23 exiled Kachin organisations criticised her for her silence on the issue of the conflict in the Kachin State and resultant humanitarian crises, and accusing her of sowing "confusion and distrust" by failing to speak out

(Mizzima News, 10 January 2013).

The Government

The Government had initially denied use of airpower in the war with the Kachins and claimed that the air forces were used to “deliver food supplies to its troops” and “to provide security for the workers who are repairing roads and bridges”.

However, subsequently the army admitted that “an assault mission, utilising airstrikes, was carried out” in the strategic Lajayang region, less than 13 kilometres from the rebels’ headquarters in Laiza.

The army insists the air strikes were necessary to reclaim a route used to deliver supplies to their outposts in Lajayang, after rebels ignored an ultimatum to pull back from the area. Rebels say they refused because they fear an attack on their headquarters (DVB News 02 January 2013).

Despite this military action the Government is inviting the KIO for the next round of peace talks.

Aung San Suu Kyi

Aung San Suu Kyi has said that she would not step in to help end the conflict between the Burmese army and the ethnic Kachin rebels without Government approval. She said she would require an official invitation to join peace negotiations (Mizzima News 07 January 2013).

“It is up to the Government” Suu Kyi told AFP.

There is seething discontentment amongst the Kachins in her not condemning the attacks and in remaining aloof from the peace process.

The UN

In the first week of January 2013 UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon expressed concerns about the situation in Myanmar following use of air attacks in the war with the Kachins. He called on the Burmese authorities to “desist from army action that could endanger the lives of civilians living in the area or further intensify the conflict in the region.

US

“We are troubled by the use of air power,” US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told reporters in Washington in the first week of January 2013, saying the United States urged both sides to cease fighting and work toward political dialogue.

The US Ambassador to Burma, Derek Mitchell had visited the Kachin State in early December 2012. In an exclusive interview to The Irrawaddy he said:

- “We have conveyed quietly our concern about any escalation of violence, I understand their position on this, including [their desire to] open up lines of communication, but you know there has to be recognition of the need for a political solution.”
- “I think both sides have to recognize that there is no military solution to this question, and that an eye for an eye will leave everyone blind, I don’t see a viable political strategy here if escalation of military hostilities leads to further alienation of the Kachin people.”

China

In the fighting with the Kachins close to the Chinese border three bombs landed in Chinese territory on 30 December 2012 according the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hua Chunying. "The Chinese side demands the Myanmar side immediately take effective measures to prevent similar incidents from happening again," she said according to China's official Xinhua news agency.

However this report denied that Myanmar aircrafts had strayed into Chinese territory while attacking the Kachins.

New Analysis

The way the war is escalating despite the president's instructions to army to cease operations except in self defence as early as in December 2011 has made him come under heavy criticism especially in his ability to rein in the army.

Myanmar seems to have taken the blessings of China for this offensive against the Kachins as the aircrafts are likely to stray over into Chinese territory to attack the border outposts held by the Kachins.

Some sceptics even indicate that the reform process can be derailed.

The Myanmar army and the government are bent upon weakening the Kachins by military action to force them to cease fire and participate in the peace process without a political dialogue.

Suu Kyi’s “hands off” attitude is surprising and is putting her in bad light.

The international community has started rethinking on opening up to Myanmar.

Tags:

Myanmar [1]

Kachin Ethnic Strife [2]

Category:

Papers [3]

Countries:

Myanmar [4]

Topics:

Political [5]

Copyright ©2012. All Rights are Reserved.

Source URL: <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/1125>

Links

[1] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/170>

[2] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/203>

[3] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers>

[4] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/myanmar>

[5] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/political>