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Myanmar: Ethnic Reconciliation and the Peace Process

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Fri, 02/22/2013 - 09:14

Paper No. 5404

Dated 22-Feb-2013

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In a landmark talks between the government and the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) held at Chiang Mai on 20 Feb 2013, the government, perhaps for the first time, officially agreed to initiate a political dialogue with the ethnics after six decades of civil war.

“This is the beginning. They (ethnic groups) see that a political dialogue must be facilitated in order to solve these problems. But we didn’t manage to make it happen under the previous governments” said Aung Min, the Chief Negotiator, at a press conference after the meeting.

Till date, the government has entered into ceasefire agreements with 10 armed groups which have only resulted in suspension of hostilities. A full-fledged war is in progress since June 2011 with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) which is the only major group that has not entered into a cease fire agreement. The last ceasefire agreement with the KIA that lasted for 17 years was broken by the government troops in June 2011.

Minor skirmishes still happen with some other groups also on some pretext or the other. The peace committee has always harped on economic development and evaded the issue of political dialogue for the reason that it was beyond the purview of the peace committee and that it is the prerogative of the parliament to initiate the political dialogue.

The government has been following a policy of entering into ceasefire agreements on a one to one basis with ethnic groups and never consented to talk with any umbrella body till date. However the government decided to have talks with the UNFC in northern Thailand on 20 February 2013. Nyo Ohn Myint, one of the peace brokers, said prior to the meeting that “Primarily they will discuss framework for starting the peace process, beginning with: addressing ways to advance political dialogue; the division of revenue and resources between the central

government and the ethnic states; and how to maintain communication channels for further talks” (Mizzima News – 19 February 2013).

The United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) was formed in February 2011. 12 of the 16 major armed groups currently active in Myanmar are members of this umbrella organisation. Six groups are full members and the other six are associate members. General Mutu Commander-in-Chief of the military wing of the Karen National Union (KNU) is the Chairman and it has two Vice Presidents one from the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and one from Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP). Since its inception the UNFC has been exerting pressure on the Government to initiate talks with the body so that the demands of the ethnic groups can be co-ordinated and decisions taken abided by the members. The UNFC has also been coaxing the government to stop the ongoing war with the KIA which is a leading member of this group.

The peace process has also gained momentum in the first ever Myanmar Development Co-operation Forum held at Naypyidaw on 20 January 2013 wherein a number of representatives of the International Community met with President Thein Sein to sign an agreement for a smooth process for international aid to flow into Myanmar for the next few years. The meeting resulted in the so-called Naypyidaw Accord which sets out the guidelines on Government – donor co-operation. President Thein Sein also told the meeting the 10 priority areas identified by the government for economic and social reforms (The Irrawaddy, 22 January 2013).

Another major development is formation of the Myanmar Peace Centre in Yangon in November 2012 as part of an agreement with the Norway Peace Support Donor Group. This is a government body headed by Aung Min (President's Office Minister) funded by the European Union to serve as a platform for dialogues between all parties involved in Myanmar's peace process. This has been established to assist Union Peace-making Central and Working Committees, with specific objectives to be achieved in two phases – phase I (November 2012 – February 2013) and phase II (March 2013-August 2014).

A major set-back in the peace process is the escalation in the war with the Kachins in December 2012 when aerial attacks using jet fighters and helicopter gunships were carried out in the Kachin rebels held areas. The rebels' headquarters Laiza is virtually surrounded by government troops. In the aerial attacks some bombs had landed in the Chinese territory and over 70,000 people have been internally displaced in this war. The Government declared a unilateral ceasefire on 19 January 2013 and had the next round of peace talks with the KIO on 04 February 2013 at Ruili – a border town in China. The talks were hosted by the Chinese authorities with some Chinese officials in attendance.

It is interesting to note that the United WA State Army (UWSA) had also offered to host the talks between the KIO and the Government at Panghsang in the territory under its control. The offer was accepted both by the government and the KIO. The UWSA had signed a ceasefire agreement with the Government in 1989 which still holds good. This is the biggest armed group in Myanmar clandestinely supported by China.

Aung San Suu Kyi who had adopted a “hands off” approach to the ongoing war with the Kachins has altered her stance. In a video address to members of her party on the Union Day (12 February) she said “I have been criticized by some people for not taking part in peace talks regarding the Kachin conflict. I have always said I am willing to take part in the process if the concerned parties wanted me to”. The KIA has rejected this offer.

China, in a significant shift from its policy of “non-interference in other country’s internal affairs”, decided to negotiate the peace process between the KIA and the Myanmar Government. It hosted the last round of talks on 04 February 2013 in Ruili-a border town in China and the Chinese representatives were in attendance. Earlier China had sent a special envoy with a high ranking Chinese military delegation to meet President Thein Sein at Yangon on 19 January 2013 to voice its concerns and this resulted in a unilateral declaration of ceasefire by the Myanmar Government. China is also resorting to some pressure tactics such as supplying sophisticated weaponry to the UWSA.

The Japanese government has named Nippon Foundation Chairman Yohei Sasakawa as its special representative to work on ethnic reconciliation. The Nippon Foundation, a Tokyo-based organisation, has long assisted Myanmar through various philanthropic causes.(Mizzima News—20 February 2013).

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank have approved fresh loans for Myanmar to aid the social and economic development of the country. The ADB granted \$ 512m, while the World Bank approved a \$440m credit. The Paris Club of creditor nations has agreed cancel almost half of its debts to member countries. It has also agreed to reschedule the payment of the remaining loan over a period of 15 years. Norway which is a member of this club has cancelled all of its claims amounting \$534m. (BBC News-28 January 2013.

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Whether under pressure from China or to ensure free flow of all the aid that has been pledged from the Western nations or realising on its own that the peace process cannot be further postponed, the Myanmar government has taken a welcome step to initiate political dialogue with the ethnic groups which has been their main demand.

The ethnic groups have also perhaps realised that they have to work on a common agenda despite the differences in their demands and views for achieving their goal.

The reaction of the Myanmar armed forces on these developments are yet to be known. The outcome of the present initiative will very much depend upon the cooperation of the armed forces.

Despite her offer to get involved in the peace process, the Myanmar government may be wary of giving Suu Kyi the chance firstly as she might steal the thunder and secondly as the ethnic groups are skeptic about her being fair to the ethnics. She has not been involved in the peace process so far.

China as well as the other international donor agencies can contribute in a big way to this peace process if they are helpful and patient.

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