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Introduction

In his address at the Chatham House, UK on 15 July 2013, President Thein Sein categorically asserted that the armed fighting in Myanmar since 1948 will end soon.

“There are issues of autonomy and self determination of power sharing and resource sharing, of cultural rights and language policy, of protection against discrimination and security sector-reform” said President Thein while enumerating the complexities of the peace process.

With President Thein Sein’s assertions at the Chatham House and the government’s announcement to hold an all-inclusive ethnic conference shortly hopefully culminating in a nation wide ceasefire, there is fervour and enthusiasm and expectation of that long elusive sustainable peace in Myanmar.

Recent Efforts of the Government

On 20 February 2013 the Government, perhaps for the first time, held talks at Chiang Mai with the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), an umbrella body of the ethnic groups, and agreed to initiate a political dialogue with the ethnics after six decades of civil war.

In the last two years the Government has entered into ceasefire agreements with all the major armed groups except with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) with whom the fighting resumed in June 2011 and escalated to the extent of China intervening early this year

(2013) to mediate to safeguard its own interests.

On 30 May 2013 the Government and ethnic Kachin rebels signed a preliminary seven-point agreement at the talks held at the state Capital Myitkyina. The agreement was “to undertake efforts to achieve de-escalation and cessation of hostilities”. Both sides declined to call it a cease-fire agreement.

In May 2013 the Union Peacemaking Team was reorganized to liaison with ethnic armed groups in ceasefire negotiations. It is divided into two parts—the Central and Working committees—with the president, vice president, government ministers, heads of divisions, members of Parliament and the chief of Burma’s armed forces, Gen Min Aung Hlaing, all included on both committees. (The Irrawaddy July 23, 2013).

In end June 2013, the Government announced that it will hold an all inclusive ethnic conference shortly without any details on the agenda or the participants.

On 12 July 2013, the Government signed a trust building (5- point) agreement with the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the biggest ethnic armed group in the country with about 30,000 soldiers. The UWSA’s ultimate aim is to have a separate autonomous WA State instead of the present arrangement of being an autonomous region in the Shan State.

The Union Peacemaking working committee met at the Myanmar Peace Centre on 21 July 2013. The significance of this meeting was that Aung San Suu Kyi had attended for the first time a meeting of the peace committee though not in an official capacity. According to a spokesperson of the peace centre she was there for a short while.

Myanmar’s first ever Peace Festival was held on 27-28 July, 2013, when thousands of people enjoyed two nights of dance and songs at Rangoon’s Thuwana National Stadium. The performers called for an end to country’s ethnic conflicts. The government’s Chief Negotiator Minister Aung Min attended the festival. A video message by President Thein Sein was also shown to the audience. The festival was organised by the government affiliated Myanmar Peace Centre and the political activist comedian Zarganar (The Irrawaddy-29, July 2013).

Efforts by the Ethnic Groups and the NGOs

A Working Group for Ethnic Coordination (WGEC) has been formed which is being financed and supported by the Euro-Burma Office. This Group comprises some minor and major ethnic groups including some members of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC). The WGEC had submitted on May 13, 2013 to the Myanmar Peace Centre, a draft comprehensive union Peace and Ceasefire Agreement containing proposals for a Panglong-type meeting and political dialogue.

The United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), a leading umbrella body of the ethnic groups, held a workshop from July 5 to 7, 2013, wherein the ethnic groups have reached a common position to push for a national convention. The proposal is to create a convention

outside the parliament so that the Government and the ethnic groups are able to exchange their views in order to move towards a constitution based on federal principles.

On July 13, 2013, a technical team of the UNFC met with a technical team of the Union Peace Making Working Committee at Chiang Mai, Thailand. The press statement of the UNFC indicates that there was an exchange of views on the peace process and that the UNFC had proposed for the next preliminary political consultative meeting in the first week of August 2013.

About 150 representatives from various ethnic armed groups, NGOs and opposition members had a meeting on 29 July 2013 in Chiang Mai Thailand to discuss a joint strategy to promote their political demands. The meeting was organised by the UNFC, which had set out a road map for a political framework for acceptance by the government (The Irrawaddy 29, July 2013).

The Norwegian led Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI) formed in 2012 has been having regular meetings with the Myanmar Government and the Peace Committee to boost international support and build confidence in the ceasefire and peace process (The Irrawaddy July 15, 2013).

Some views on the Peace Process

Tom Kramer, an analyst of the Transnational Institute feels “The present peace process is top-down, lacks civil society involvement and still has to move from making new ceasefires to a political dialogue. Concerns and criticisms from local organizations on the peace process, including on the role of international organizations, have not been properly addressed and sometimes even ignored” (AT online - 25 June, 2013).

“Peace and politics are made by doing, and whatever conspiracies, plans or strategies may be in play on the part of the government, the army, the armed groups and international actors—there is a lot of geopolitical interest in Myanmar from different regional and international powers—not any one of those players is really in a position to impose an outcome on the peace process”-Ashley South (The Irrawaddy - 15 July, 2013).

“In order for conflict-affected communities to have a sense of trust in the peace process, it would be very helpful if the Myanmar Army could withdraw from some positions which are not strategic militarily, but are perceived as threatening by communities” - Ashley South (The Irrawaddy - 15 July, 2013).

“China is showing that it can impact the situation inside the country in a way that the United States and European Union cannot. And China's role in this development is much more important than awkward and often misguided efforts by a host of Western interlocutors who have become involved in the efforts to establish peace in Myanmar” - Bertil Lintner (AT online - 25, June, 2013).

Win Tin, a founding member of National League for Democracy (NLD), said the government should move towards establishing a political dialogue instead of remaining fixated solely on achieving a nation wide ceasefire agreement. He added that he feared the Government would use Suu Kyi to win the confidence of ethnic peoples and as a ploy to pump international assistance into Burma's peace process (The Irrawaddy, July 23, 2013).

News Analysis

The much-touted conference of all ethnic groups scheduled to be held in July 2013, where it was expected that a nation wide ceasefire will be announced has not materialised till date which only shows that there are some hurdles even within the government agencies.

A nationwide ceasefire without a commitment to initiate a political dialogue has no meaning and one wonders whether the peace process is really serious.

With past experience of frequent ceasefire violations, mostly by the Myanmar armed forces, the demand for monitoring ceasefire (either locally or by international agencies) has not been addressed till date.

Even the ethnic groups have not been able to decide on a common approach or to take a united stand as there are media reports of both the umbrella groups – the Working Group for Ethnic Coordination (WGEC) and the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) falling apart on the modalities for talks with the Government.

There are also reports of clashes between some minor armed groups and the Myanmar armed forces in Shan State and in some other areas. This indicates that the armed forces are strengthening their bargaining position for an eventual settlement.

China's intervention in the Kachin conflict and its open support to the “Wa-s” indicates that it will influence the Myanmar Government to safeguard its interests in the ongoing peace process.

The 2008 Constitution in its present form is the biggest hurdle for the peace process as it stipulates that all armed forces in the union shall be under the command of the defense services, which is unacceptable to the ethnic groups. Besides it precludes a federal structure of the union which is the main demand of the ethnics.

Sustainable peace in the country continues to be elusive.

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