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Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Mon, 11/11/2013 - 09:32

Paper No. 5599

Dated 11-Nov-2013

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Introduction

A lull in the civil war that has ravaged the country for the last six decades seems to be in sight.

Following a meeting held at Myitkyina (04-05 November 2013) between the Union Peace-making Work Committee and a collection of most ethnic groups of the country, an agreement has been reached towards establishing a nationwide ceasefire to be followed by a framework for political dialogue and then the facilitation of political dialogue.

Earlier, ceasefire agreements have been entered into in 1989-90 and again in 2010-11 between most of the ethnic groups (separately) and the government. These agreements have been broken by the government troops or the rebel groups for some reason or the other. This is the first time the government has agreed to enter into a ceasefire at the national level with a coalition of most of the ethnic groups.

It was in June 2013, when the Government Chief Peace Negotiator Aung Min (a minister in the President's office) conveyed the intension of President Thein Sein to have a nationwide ceasefire agreement between the government and the ethnic groups. The President reiterated this in his address at the Chatham House, UK, on 15 July 2013. Since then the process has been set in motion culminating in the meeting held at Myitkyina on 04-05 November 2013 between the Union Peace-making Work Committee and a confederation of ethnic groups.

KIO

The Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) is the only major ethnic group which had not entered into a ceasefire agreement with the

Government following the break up in 2011 of the earlier ceasefire agreement resulting in major clashes and even use of air power by the government troops.

Calling it a nationwide ceasefire without the participation of KIO would have been a misnomer. Hence the Government persisted with the KIO in a series of peace talks. In the last round of talks held at Myitkyina from 08-10 October 2013, the Government entered into a seven point agreement with the KIO paving the way for a nationwide ceasefire. The government had also agreed at this talks for the KIO to host a conference, at Laiza (the KIO Head Quarters), of all ethnic groups for co-ordinating their demands for signing a nationwide ceasefire agreement. It will be interesting to note that besides the UN Special Advisor, the Chinese were in full strength as observers.

Laiza Talks

18 Ethnic Armed Groups, attended the KIO-sponsored four day Conference held at Laiza from 30 October to 02 November 2013. It is intriguing to note that the biggest rebel group United Wa State Army (UWSA) and its ally the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) known as the Mongla militia did not attend.

President Thein Sein in a letter dated 29 October called on the ethnic groups to work with the government for a single nationwide ceasefire agreement and adoption of a framework for political dialogue.

17 of the 18 armed groups (except for the Restoration Council of Shan State- RCSS) signed an agreement supporting the nationwide ceasefire agreement. The salient features of this agreement are:

- Ethnic leaders formed a 13 member committee called the “Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team” for negotiations with the government
- A 11 point common ground document was agreed upon. (This was presented to the government for consideration at the Myitkyina talks. The details of the 11 points were not disclosed).
- That the government form an army based on a federal system, combining all Burma’s ethnic groups, including those who have been engaged in conflict with the Burman-dominated government army for more than six decades.
- The ethnic armed groups demanded that the nationwide ceasefire accord must be signed by the Commander-in-Chief and the vice Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Forces.

Myitkyina Talks

In a landmark talks held at Myitkyina on 04-05 November 2013, between the Government and a 13 member co-ordination team of the ethnic group, it was agreed that both sides would proceed with plans to establish political dialogue and work towards a nationwide ceasefire.

The ethnic groups presented their 11 point common ground proposal arrived at the Laiza conference. The government in turn handed over its own 15-point proposal for arriving at a nationwide ceasefire.

The ethnic groups have asked for time to study the Government proposals. Both sides agreed to have the next meeting in December at Hpa-an, the Karen State Capital.

The meeting was described as “historic” by the Government Chief negotiator Aung Min.

Army and the Nationwide Ceasefire

There was a significant presence of the army brass, which included Lt. Gen Thet Naing Win the Minister of Border Affairs and Lt. Gen Myint Soe Commander of Bureau of Special Operations for Kachin, in the talks held at Myitkyina on 04-05 November 2013.

In an interview to the Democratic Voice of Burma Lt. Gen. Myint Soe said that “The Burmese Army has compromised in order to make this nationwide ceasefire happen”. He added that the Burmese army is actively involved in the peace process in an effort to bring about a nationwide ceasefire. The Federal union we (the Army) want to have – is the one that is in accordance with to-day’s Constitution.” (DVB – 06 November 2013).

In a different context he also said that the “Government could not accept the idea of breaking up the army as reports suggested that the rebel groups had proposed an army combining all ethnic communities, including those who have been fighting Burman-dominated government troops for decades” – (Radio Free Asia – 06 November, 2013).

Some views on the Nationwide Ceasefire

There are varying views on the proposed nationwide ceasefire as to, why the government is in a hurry, what will it achieve, will it bring sustainable peace, will it really culminate in a political dialogue and so on. Some of the views expressed are:

“Some observers are wary of the government’s offer of a nationwide ceasefire agreement and see it as a ceasefire just for the sake of a ceasefire, and as another of the government’s containment strategies. They see the government’s proposed step for signing a nationwide ceasefire accord as a self-imposed barrier to reach the next stage in the political dialogue and to take political advantage out of the signing ceremony.” - Brang Hkangda.

“The situation is not yet conducive for a nationwide ceasefire agreement. How can we sign a nationwide ceasefire agreement while fighting is still going on in the Kachin and northern Shan States. Refugees and IDPs are still fleeing for their lives daily in those areas. There are skirmishes in the KNU areas because there is no code-of-conduct for the troops to follow.” - Padoh Naw Zipporah Sein of Karen National Union (KNU).

“Even though a ceasefire agreement may not bring peace immediately, the Myitkyina meeting is the first step towards peace and political dialogue once a ceasefire is agreed. So the ceasefire will be the first step. If the government can accede to most points of the ethnic armed groups’ common ground, the ceasefire process will be expedited and then peace and political dialogue will follow and be realised.” - Aye Thar Aung, Chairman, Arakan League for Democracy (Mizzima – 04 November 2013.)

“After 60 years of conflict, the government held negotiations with each group individually first and now has held talks with all groups together. We have made progress and will reach a better situation if we keep going at this rate.” - Hla Maung Shwe, of Myanmar Peace Center (Radio Free Asia – 06 November, 2013).

News Analysis

The flurry of activity and the urgency in holding talks in quick succession indicates the commitment of the government to have this nationwide ceasefire before the end of the year (2013).

With past experience of frequent ceasefire violations by both parties, the discussions so far have not indicated the setting up of a monitoring mechanism (either local or international agencies) for the proposed nationwide ceasefire. A strong and effective system will have to be in place, if the ceasefire is to succeed at all. Otherwise the follow up action on frame work and political dialogue will not take place in right spirit.

The government is insistent on this nationwide ceasefire, prior to initiating political dialogue without committing on a time frame for initiating political dialogue.

It is heartening to see that the ethnic groups have arrived at a common ground and formed a committee to negotiate with the government on behalf of all the ethnic groups at the Myitkyina talks. Historically, they have been at logger heads with each other and the hope is that they will present a sustained united front in future.

Despite the presence of local and international media at the Myitkyina talks between the government and the ethnic groups, there was no press conference at the end of the talks, which indicates that there are some differences on major issues which both parties did not want to divulge. However a joint statement was issued.

The conspicuous absence of the United Wa State Army, the largest armed rebel group, in the Laiza and Myitkyina talks is intriguing. Perhaps it is hopeful of the materialisation of its demand for a separate state and does not want to be bound by this nationwide ceasefire. It is all the more perplexing when the Chinese presence in full strength in Myitkyina talks indicated its commercial interest, than any other, to keep the line from Yunnan to Indian Ocean free. One explanation is that the United Wa State Army is totally under the control of the Chinese so no separate ceasefire is required for them. Second and more important, it would continue to remain as a strategic 'lever' for China against Myanmar.

The presence of Chinese observers in the talks indicates the pressure exerted by China on the Myanmar Government for looking after its own interests. China has been wary of observers from any other nation, particularly U.S, in such talks.

The Federal Union and a Federal Army have come up for discussion in the talks. The government is most unlikely to accept the proposal of a Federal Army. As regards the Federal union the government will try and adhere to the 2008 constitution for any type of future federal administrative set-up. First and foremost, the Burman "mindset" will have to change.

According to a media report of 11 November 2013, the government's chief peace negotiator, Aung Min, is hopeful of a breakthrough in the next round of talks in the Karen capital in December 2013. This is perhaps a great expectation. This expectation seems to be more for international consumption.

Despite all the hurdles, the nationwide ceasefire, if it fructifies, is a positive development as long as it could lead to a political settlement with the ethnic groups. This is perhaps one more opportunity for sustainable peace in the country that has been ravaged by repeated ethnic disturbances since its independence.

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