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This paper may please be read in conjunction with the following papers by this author posted on this site.

- a) Paper No. 5536 "MYANMAR: Will the Peace Process Materialise?" dated 03 August, 2013 (<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/1327> [1]).
- b) Paper No. 5599 "MYANMAR: Nationwide Ceasefire" dated 11 November 2013 (<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/1400> [2]).

President Thein Sein, in his address at the Chatham House, UK on 15 July 2013, had asserted that the ongoing civil war (since Independence) in Myanmar will end soon. Swift and aggressive follow up action was witnessed resulting in two rounds of talks--one amongst the ethnic groups at Laiza (The Kachin Independence Organisation Headquarters) from 30 October to 02 November 2013 and one between the Government and the ethnic armed groups at Myitkyina on 04-05 November 2013. Since then a number of informal meetings and official meetings have taken place amongst the ethnic groups as well as between the ethnic groups and the government agencies.

Hopes of an early break through by March 2014 have been in vain and the latest is that a joint committee with nine members from the government and nine from the ethnic groups will work on a draft for a nationwide ceasefire to be signed by 01 August 2014.

There are varying views on the successful culmination of this process by this date with some considering it extremely positive and some expressing serious doubts because of the incompatible demands of the ethnic groups and the reluctance on the part of the government.

Laiza Talks

17 armed ethnic groups, met for the first time at Laiza (The KIO Headquarters) from 30 October to 02 November 2013. The major outcome was the creation of a 13 member Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) for further talks with the government and arriving at a “11 point common position of ethnic resistance organisations on Nationwide Ceasefire” which was eventually presented to the government in the Myitkyina talks.

Myitkyina Talks

In a landmark meeting the 13- member NCCT formed at the Laiza summit had talks with the government’s Union Peace-making Work Committee headed by President’s office Minister Aung Min at Myitkyina (Kachin State capital) on 04-05 November 2013.

A press release at the end of the talks indicated that the NCCT had presented its 11 point common position to the government delegation and the government in turn handed over its own 15 point proposal for arriving at a nationwide ceasefire.

Both sides agreed to have a follow-up meeting in Hpa-an (Karen state capital) in December 2013 (which has been postponed a number of times and is still to take place).

Law Khee Lah Conference

Since the government proposals given to ethnic groups for consideration (during the Myitkyina talks) had a number of contentious issues, the armed ethnic groups again met at Law Khee Lah (Karen State) from 20-25 January 2014, to consolidate their position in relation to a nationwide ceasefire.

Briefing Paper No. 20 of February 2014 of the Burma Centre for Ethnic Studies indicates that during this meeting

- A number of changes were made to the original draft and it was decided that the revised version would be presented to government in February 2014. One of the key conditions set out in the 30-page draft ceasefire is that a political dialogue will have to start within 90 days after signing the nationwide ceasefire.
- The NCCT sought assurances from the Government that any ceasefire agreement would allow them to exert authority in relation to running of their individual state during the cease fire period and prior to political dialogue.
- The meeting also reaffirmed the six main points necessary for ethnic groups to move towards peace in the country. These include:

1. A Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement

2. A Framework for Political Dialogue

3. A National Dialogue
4. Union Conference and Signing of Accord
5. Adoption of Accord by Parliament
6. Implementation of Accord

In addition to the six points, a number of other issues were raised including the formation of a Federal Army, the creation of ethnic based states, and the use of terminology in the NCA when referring to the armed ethnic groups themselves.

Conference at Myanmar Peace Centre

A two day conference (March 8-9, 2014) was held at the Myanmar Peace Centre, Yangon between the ethnic armed groups and representatives from the Government wherein it was proposed that the nationwide ceasefire would be signed by August 1, 2014 (Eleven Media Group-- 12 March 2014).

This media report also states that “Five ministers, four lieutenant-generals, one major-general, and one colonel from the military, as well as three parliamentary MPs and a deputy attorney general attended the Yangon conference from the government’s side. Eleven delegates attended from the ethnic armed groups’ side”.

Naing Han Tha from NCCT said that both sides reached many points of understanding during the two-day conference, so the signing of the nationwide ceasefire is drawing nearer. However, many challenges remain. These include- how to establish a federal state as demanded by ethnic groups, how to amend the 2008 Constitution, and what troop settlements will look like in the future.

The government

The government had talks with 14 ethnic groups individually and had signed ceasefire agreements in 2010-11. But for the first time, the government (Union Peacemaking

Work committee) had talks with most of the ethnic groups together as a group in November 2013 at Myitkyina. Since then there has been a flurry of activity by having a number of meetings with ethnic groups individually as well as with their umbrella bodies within the country and also in Chiang Mai (Thailand). President Thein Sein had also met individually some leaders of ethnic groups who had called upon him at Naypyidaw.

A budget request of 7 billion kyats (US \$ 7.1 million) for Burma's peace process and national reconciliation efforts has been submitted to parliament as a designated appropriations item for the first time (The Irrawaddy—16 January 2014).

Ethnic Armed Groups

As in the past the ethnic groups have not been able to put up a united front and rivalries between different groups have slowed down the process. The United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) and the Working Group for Ethnic Coordination (WGEC) had fallen apart due to differences of opinion as to who should take overall control of the process of negotiations with the government.

However 16 armed groups have been able to get together at the Laiza talks to form a 13-member Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team which has been recognised by the government for further negotiations at the Myitkyina talks.

It is pertinent to note that one group (Restoration Council of Shan state-RCSS) which took part in the Laiza talks did not sign the agreement at the end of the talks for supporting the nationwide ceasefire and two groups (the biggest ethnic armed group United Wa State Army-UWSA and the National Democratic Alliance Army-NDAA known as the Mongla militia) did not even participate in the talks.

As the talks with the government proceed there is apprehension that further differences may crop up amongst the ethnic groups and this weakness could be cashed by the government.

The Military

The Military was not involved in the peace process till recently. On the contrary, military offensives were being launched and continue to be launched on some pretext particularly in the Kachin and Shan states even while the peace talks are in progress.

Perhaps for the first time, Lt Gen Myint Soe of the Ministry of Defence was part of the government delegation in the Myitkyina talks with some of his aides. At the end of the talks while talking to a reporter of Radio Free Asia he said that the government could not accept the idea of a federal army as proposed by the ethnic groups in the talks.

The Commander-in-Chief Snr Gen Min Aung Hlaing had reportedly made some provocative remarks in November 2013, while defending the

offensives in Kachin State and casting the blame for violence on Kachin ethnic rebels and that the Tatmadaw would “forever follow the policy laid down by Snr Gen Than Shwe” (The Irrawaddy- 24 January 2014). This has caused some apprehensions among the ethnic groups on the military’s support for the peace process.

International Involvement

Norway is one country which has been involved in the Myanmar peace process in a big way. The Norwegian led Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI) formed in March 2012 is a multi-million dollar scheme supporting humanitarian and peace efforts in Myanmar. Norway also heads the Peace Donor Support group—a consortium of international donors which has pledged over US \$ 500 million in developmental aid to support the process.

The Government of Myanmar opened the Myanmar Peace Centre in November 2012 in Yangon as part of an agreement with the Norway-led Peace Support donor Group. It was established to assist the Union Peacemaking Central and Working Committees in the peace process.

A media report of January 2014 indicates that this initiative (MPSI) is likely to conclude consequent to an internal review as there is no added value in its work. Some complex local circumstances and influx of other actors have also been cited as reasons for this closure.

Brussels-based Euro-Burma Office (EBO) is also known to be funding the Working Group for Ethnic Coordination (WGEC) formed in June 2012-another umbrella body of ethnic groups.

An institute called the Pyidangsu Institute has been established in Chiang Mai on 27 February 2014 which will act as a study centre and secretariat that will support the various ethnic minority groups and help in developing a common approach. Norway and Sweden have promised to fund the institute. The institute is also planning to open an office in Yangon (The Irrawaddy—28 February and 20 March 2014).

Japan-based Nippon foundation is also involved in the process and has reportedly funded the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC). Japan pledged a US \$ 100 million grant in January 2014 in addition to an earlier grant of US \$ 12 million. Japan International Co-operation Agency (JICA) has submitted a report in October 2013 about proposals for development projects for Karen and Mon states with the purpose of facilitating the eventual return and resettlement of refugees and internally displaced persons. This report has come under criticism from the Karen National Union for failing to address the challenges created by decades of armed conflict.

China, despite its avowed policy of non interference in the internal affairs of its neighbours has got involved in the peace negotiations between the KIO and the government by hosting some talks at Ruili (in Yunnan close to the Myanmar border) as well as by sending observers for the talks. Perhaps this is to preclude US from taking this initiative in an area close to its borders. It is also exerting pressure on the Myanmar Government by supporting the UWSA – the largest ethnic armed group with arms.

US, as part of its revised engagement policy with Myanmar, has also started taking great interest in the ongoing peace process. US Ambassador Derek Mitchell visited the Kachin State twice during the year (2013).

Some analysts have however criticised the undue influence exerted by the western nations and China in this process without understanding the complexities of this problem which has been festering this nation for over five decades. Ashley South a consultant for the MPSI accused international donors of carelessly pumping funds through government channels without delivering capacity-building support at the local level (DVB, 12th January 2014).

Major Hurdles in the Peace Process

Federal Structure – Federalism has been equated with disintegration of the country under military rule and hence this word was not even mentioned then. However President Thein Sein has hinted at federalism for national reconsolidation in his union day address this year. There is confusion as to what sort of a federal structure the ethnic groups want in order to achieve at least limited autonomy in their states and what the government is perhaps willing to concede in this regard. Bertil Lintner writes “So are there any successful models Myanmar could follow? There seems to be only one: India. India has 28 states and seven union territories, and although the Indian constitution does not mention “federation” or “federalism,” the basic structure of the country is federal”. (The Irrawaddy, March 8, 2014)

The 2008 constitution has also to be amended if the country has to adopt a federal structure. Hence this may not happen in foreseeable future.

Federal Army—Ethnic armed groups are demanding the creation of a ‘federal army’ that will include all nationalities. In the initial stages when the Burmese army was formed prior to independence it had Karen battalions, Chin battalions as well as Shan, Arakanese and Mon units. The ethnic groups want the Tatmadaw to be reorganised on similar lines which is not acceptable for the present day commanders of the Bamar predominant armed forces.

Disarmament--The government proposals indicate that ethnic groups should submit to the government a full account of the troops, arms and ammunition under their control and disarm after signing a ceasefire. The ethnic groups have their own security concerns, apprehensions and mistrust for disarming before a political settlement is reached.

News Analysis

The formation of a joint committee in March 2014 with an equal number of members from the government agencies and the ethnic groups to draft a nationwide ceasefire agreement by August 2014 indicates that this time there is genuine interest from both sides to finalise this long pending issue.

However there are some irreconcilable differences between the government agencies (The Peacemaking Team and the Military) and amongst the ethnic groups on the modalities, time frame and even on the terminology to be used in the nationwide ceasefire agreement. Some even wonder whether the Peacemaking team and its leader Aung Min (President's Office Minister) has the mandate for taking decisions on behalf of the government.

There is an impression that the peace process is being hastened with the 2015 elections in view. Perhaps this may result in a non-representative agreement which may not be respected for long.

Despite all the meetings, talks and entreaties the non-Burman groups still do not have the trust in the government, the military and the Burman-predominant NLD and are apprehensive on getting a fair deal in this peace process.

Despite declaring a unilateral ceasefire in February 2013, the launching of military offensives in Kachin and Shan states on some pretext or other (such as illegal logging) even while the peace talks are in progress is likely to derail the process. Perhaps the military wants to have a better bargaining position in such areas in any future settlement.

As of now the China-backed United Wa State Army – the largest of the ethnic armed groups is not included in this process as their demand is for an autonomous Wa state. Presumably the government wants to postpone a decision in this regard till a settlement is reached with the other groups.

The government is seen to be laying more emphasis on economic development than on political, cultural and social demands of the ethnic groups. This is much to the dismay of especially the unarmed civilian non-Bamar ethnic population.

The signing of a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement is just the first phase and perhaps the easiest of the peace process. The hard part comes when political dialogue is initiated. There is therefore a long road ahead to achieve the elusive 'national reconciliation' with stake holders

having different and conflicting views. Peace- lasting and permanent is still elusive.

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