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Myanmar- Peace Process in Ruins- Who is Responsible?

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An editorial in Irrawaddy of 17th May, while discussing Myanmar's failing peace noted that the recent clashes with insurgents demonstrate that the ethnic groups are losing faith in the current peace process and in negotiation with the military and the government. It added, significantly that the silence of Aung San Kyi and other top leaders is "alarming and surprising"- a sign that they are admitting defeat in the quest for peace.

Is Suu Kyi to blame?

Surely, the Irrawaddy more than any other entity in Yangon knows the real problem and the helplessness of the government in dealing with the ethnic crisis. It looks that Irrawaddy is reluctant to tell the truth that may offend those really responsible for the present breakdown in the peace process.

Another noted and knowledgeable analyst from Kachin, Joe Kumbun places the blame squarely on the NLD. He said that Suu Kyi had disappointed members of ethnic communities who had cast their votes in the last election in the expectation of Suu Kyi ending the fighting, restore Panglong Agreement and bring peace to the country.

Under the 'Guest Column' in the same note of 19 May, Joe Kumbun had also said that both the President Win Myint and de facto leader Suu Kyi as well as other elected members of the Parliament should not keep silent but speak out. In the same paragraph it is admitted by the same writer that in the crackdown by the Police force on civilian demonstrators who were protesting against the escalation of fighting between the Army and the Kachins, the government can do little to rein in the Police force as it is controlled by the Army "via the Ministry of Home Affairs!"

Speaking out is fine- but to what end? Can the Government order a cease fire? Is the Army under the control of the Government? Will the Army (Tatmadaw)- obey? These are questions that need to be answered.

Everyone understands that the 2008 Constitution is a big millstone round the neck of the Government and it is the Army that calls the shots and not the Government!

Suu Kyi is in a very unenviable position. She was accused of inaction by the West when the Rohingya crisis began though nothing was under her control! The ARSA- the Jihadi outfit is quiet now as its cause has been taken over by the West and other UN agencies. But surely it will raise its head again if the international attention shifts.

Consider the Following:

* Fighting in Kachin area has intensified and the Myanmar Army is said to be using air strikes with the newly acquired JF-17s from Pakistan and artillery to pound the KIA positions. As a result of the escalation in fighting, thousands of innocent civilians have been forced to flee from the homes and many have been trapped in the jungles. In the fierce fighting between the Army and the Kachin fighters, there have been heavy casualties on both sides in the area between Myitkyina and Putao.

* Since March there has been sporadic clashes between the Army and the KNLA- the armed wing of KNU, but the clashes intensified when the Army tried to upgrade the road between two villages in Papun Township. The KNU is one of eight original signatories of the Cease fire Agreement since January 2012.

* Relationship between the Army and the RCSS-A (Restoration Council of Shan State Army (south) and the New Mon State Army has deteriorated to such an extent that the RCSS has declared that they had indefinitely postponed public consultation meetings in Shan State because of the Army's interference. RCSS is one of the original signatories of the cease-fire agreement since December 2011 and the New Mon State Army had recently left the UNFC (United Nationalities Federal Council) to sign the national cease fire agreement.

* A report in the Irrawady of May 18 indicates that there has been little improvement in relations between the Army and the Wa and Mongla groups that are based close to the border with China. The seven party alliance which goes by the name FPNCC (Federal Political

Negotiation and Consultative Committee) has not given up its demand to negotiate collectively and has also declined to sign the National Cease-fire agreement.

The China Factor:

The FPNCC is greatly influenced by China and its leadership under UWSA is said to be completely dependent on China. It would have been in the interest of China to have a cease fire in the first place before negotiations. Instead, fighting has escalated not only in the Kachin area but also in the Shan State area near Muse close to the border with China.

The Chinese, though at every meeting/function reiterate their support for the Peace process, it is yet to formulate any formal proposal relating to the ethnic conflict. It is known that the major hurdle in the peace process is the refusal of the FPNCC to go along with the National Cease-fire agreement and proposing its own narrative on the ethnic conflict. The FPNCC is the powerful entity with more than 50,000 well armed and trained fighters and has the support of China.

There has been no dearth of visits of high level delegations from China. The most recent one was the visit of a senior Chinese delegation led by State Councillor and Public Security Minister Zhao Kezhi on 9th May, when they met the President U Win Myint and Suu Kyi.

The Chinese Special Representative Sun Guoxiang as the special envoy for Asian affairs is supposed to assist in facilitating discussions between the Armed Groups and the Government, but his role appears to be more as a liaison officer and not that of making any positive inputs to make the cease fire negotiations successful.

As said earlier in other papers, the key to success in the ethnic conflict in Myanmar is surely with China and the other stake holder- the Myanmar Army. Suu Kyi on some occasions had expressed her inability to deal with the ethnic conflicts in view of the rigid and inflexible constitution.

Civilian Opposition escalating:

Meanwhile, the civilian opposition to the ethnic conflict that has displaced thousands of people is slowly emerging in Yangon, Mandalay, Myitkyina and other major cities as also outside the country too. As expected, the security agencies have dealt with the protests with a heavy hand. Protests are likely to mount once it is seen that Army would relentlessly continue the fighting in Kachin area with more and more innocent people getting displaced.

There is also concern now in some western countries of the escalation of fighting in the Kachin area, The US is said to be deeply concerned about intensified fighting that had forced thousands of people to flee their homes. It has urged all parties to cease fighting and has called

upon the government including the military to protect the civilian populations and allow humanitarian assistance.

Conclusion:

It is no wonder that the third Panglong Conference has been postponed for the fourth time to mid June. With no new group signing the agreement, with escalation of clashes between the Army and the ethnic groups as also among the ethnic groups themselves and inability of some groups to have public consultations, there is a feeling that there is no point in having another Panglong Conference now.

What is now needed is a cease-fire with all the groups. The Tatmadaw does not appear to be ready. The Chinese are still unhelpful. And the people suffer.

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