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## Myanmar: New Initiative by Ethnic Armed Organisations-Will it work?

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In what is being considered as a breakthrough, State Counselor Suu Kyi, Army Chief Ming Aung Hliang and selected leaders of Ethnic Armed Organisations are to hold talks on 15th of this month, to discuss ways of resolving deadlocks that have left the peace process stalled.

This is the first time that the three stake holders in the peace process will be sitting at one table since the peace process was launched in 2011. Actually there is a fourth stake holder but no Chinese representative is being invited though China controls and supports the seven armed ethnic organizations that are present in Myanmar-China Border.

The meeting is at the initiative of those ten armed Organisations that have signed the National Peace Agreement. The EAOs had already proposed 14 points for discussion and it is learnt that the Government had also proposed 4 points for discussion.

The ethnic armed groups had already met at Chiangmai on October 11 to decide on the representatives and the issues to be discussed.

One major issue to be discussed is - Tatmadaw's insistence that the EAOs should not seek secession from the Union.

The second issue from the EAO's point of view is- how the Myanmar Army can share power with the ethnic armed Organisations when the Army continues to insist that there could be only one Army.

The third and the most contentious issue is- how the Army and the Government can allow self determination in the respective regions. This will also include discussion on amendments to 2008 Constitution.

A Spokesperson of the EAOs (Ethnic Armed Organisations) said that they would like to engage with Suu Kyi and the Army Chief of a

future federal system for the country. The ethnic leaders also complain that the current political system is not a genuine democracy and that their people have no equal rights.

The meeting scheduled for October 15 was to be held in Mandalay Kyaukpadaung Township. It has since been shifted to the Capital at Napidaw itself.

The Armed groups after discussions in Chiangmai wanted more time to prepare themselves for the meeting, but it is understood that it has been turned down. The situation in Rakhine State is also likely to be discussed.

There is no doubt that this is a major breakthrough in getting both the Government represented by Suu Kyi and the Army represented by its Chief sitting together and discussing in the same table all the thorny issues that have stalled the peace process with Representatives of some of the Ethnic Armed Organisations.

The ten groups that signed the cease fire agreement ( we will leave the Northern alliance for the present) want to be allowed to draft their own constitution under a federal Union. They want this right as a part of State's Exercise of self determination.

On the other hand both the Army and the Government insist that the State's charter cannot supersede any of the existing laws of the present Constitution. This is the fundamental and basic difference and the Army will not accept any dilution of the 2008 Constitution while even those who have signed the National Cease fire agreement find the Constitution oppressive and discriminatory.

There are two ways to look at these developments. The initiatives of the armed groups that have signed the cease fire agreement are laudable and are genuine. But they are frustrated that no progress is being made in the peace process while the expectations of the people in their region are very high.

The second problem is that the terms like "self determination," federalism are interpreted differently by both sides. The Army and the Government, particularly the former thinks that self determination means "secession" though it need not be so. The second is the term "federalism" which the Army again thinks that it is a prelude to States breaking up. When the 2008 Constitution gives them wide ranging powers even in the politics of the nations, why should they relent?

The second view is that if the Government and the Army remain flexible and are able to accommodate the views of those who have accepted the Cease fire agreement, it will be easier to deal with the non signatories to cease fire agreement who are equal in number and who are more powerful than those who have signed it. In other words their hands will be strengthened.

From this point view, one could say that the efforts of the ten groups who have signed the agreement will not be helpful unless and until the bigger groups in the northern border particularly the UWSA and KIA are roped in for the discussions and are refrained from suggesting an

alternative narrative for the whole cease fire process. For this China should help but is not doing now for various strategic reasons. As one Obeserver said, Why should China do when they hold all the trump cards?

We have said before and we would reiterate- the cease fire process is like a four wheeled Coach where the Ethnic Armed Groups, the Army, the Government and the Chinese work in sync for the coach to move. This is not happening. The Chinese are not doing enough. The Army continues to fight an intensive war with some of the non signatories and there have been fire fights with even some of the signatories. Pre conditions like laying down the arms, declaration of non secession etc. will not help.

The way forward would be cease-fire first and talks after accepting realistic preconditions. But this is unlikely to happen in the near future.

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