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Myanmar: Army Announces Cease-fire for four months:

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On 21st December, in a surprise move ,the Army Chief Gen. Hliang announced a four-month ceasefire of operations in the northern and eastern regions bordering China and to end by April 30th 2019.

The idea, it is said, is to let the Government have some free space to negotiate with the ethnic Insurgent Groups that have not so far signed the ceasefire agreement. The Army announced that they are forming special teams of Army Officers to help the Government in the negotiations. It is also sad that this period will be utilized in settling the differences among the signatories themselves like the one between the KNU and the RCSS , though no mention was made of the conflicts between the Army and some of the ethnic groups that have signed the national cease-fire agreement.

The Northern Alliance consisting of KIO, TNLA, MNDAA and AA met on 27th and responded to the Ceasefire declaration. They said that they would halt all military activities but offered to hold talks in China and not within Myanmar. It was also mentioned that the talks should involve the Government, the Military and the ethnic groups belonging to the FPNCC.

Significantly the offer of ceasefire did not include the operations that are going on in Northern Rakhine State because of the continuing threat from the ARSA as declared by the Army. The reason could be that the operations against the Arakan Army and the ARSA do not affect the Chinese border as the present cease fire order appears to be China driven. China also suspects that ARSA is in league with Uighur terrorists of Xinjiang.

The Arakan Army has also not been quiet. On 4th January, over 300 Arakan Army Insurgents attacked four border posts in Rakhine State's

Buthidaung Township. 14 Policemen were killed and 7 injured and another 14 taken prisoners. The prisoners that had 14 Border Police Officers and 9 civilian women were returned the next day.

Earlier, there was another incident suspected to be by the ARSA when two Buddhists were killed, and their throats slit. Counter operations have been going on since then.

It is therefore no surprise that the operational areas in the northern Rakhine State have been excluded from the Army's ceasefire declaration. But it will be an embarrassment both to the Northern Alliance and the bigger group- the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC) led by United Wa State Army, backed by China, as the AA is part of the Northern Alliance and the FPNCC. Yet the northern alliance had agreed for the negotiations apparently on the advice of the Chinese as the present initiative of the Army appears to be China driven and China backed move.

The Army also insisted on four of the six points it had demanded earlier from the ethnic groups in accepting the cease-fire and these were-

1. Avoid capitalizing on the cease-fire Agreement.
2. Avoid placing a heavy burden on the local people
3. Abide by the existing laws.
4. Adhere to the promises agreed to in the peace declaration.

Reasonable enough, though no monitoring system to supervise the cease fire and an institutionalized system to resolve allegations of ceasefire violations which normally arise in case of conflicts have been made.

More significantly, the Myanmar Army chief claimed on the same day he announced the unilateral cessation of operation that the peace process will be completed by 2020. Why 2020? Was he referring to the next General elections when the NLD of Suu Kyi is not likely to get the same majority and the Army backed USDP (Union Solidarity & Development Party) is expected to have a better showing!

The Army's position on the cease fire needs a fundamental paradigm change as the 2008 Constitution is not federal in character and needs to be amended. Only then can meaningful talks take place to look for a permanent solution to the ethnic problem that has battered the country since its independence. The Army Chief has not helped the situation, when he declared following the cease-fire declaration that the ethnic armed groups need to participate in the peace process if they accept democracy and national development through national unity and solidarity!

The cease-fire has to be a long and sustaining one and nothing can be achieved within the four months stipulated by the Army.

Why then did the Army declare a temporary cease fire now when it can continue the operations against the Northern Alliance for any length

of time? The Myanmar media suggests that that the idea is to divert international attention where they are under pressure both individually and collectively for their operations and alleged atrocities against the Rohingyas. This does not appear to be the position as they will be facing flak anyway in the coming months from the International Criminal Court and the UN backed Human Rights Groups.

What is more likely is that it is at the initiative of China who seem to be in need for peace and stability in their border region with Myanmar for successful completion and operation of projects under the BRI.

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