

POLITICAL MONITOR No. 25

OFFICIAL MEDIA

GOVERNMENT AND ETHNIC ARMED ORGANISATIONS PREPARE FOR CEASEFIRE SIGNING

The government and Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) agreed to form a joint committee to prepare for the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement during a meeting held on 20 September in Yangon. Both sides also reached an agreement in principle to allow additional Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), which have not yet signed the agreement, to attend the signing ceremony.

Vice-Chairman of the Union Peace-making Work Committee Aung Min, clarified the process of holding political dialogue after the peace deal is signed to civil society organisations on 20 September and explained that a joint implementation coordination meeting will be held within 2 weeks after the NCA is signed and requires a union peace-making joint committee to be formed in the 15 days that followed. The government has urged civil society groups to participate in the peace making process and stressed the importance of signing the ceasefire in order to participate in political dialogue and that the government is committed to building a federalist system, following the agreements of the nationwide ceasefire deal.¹

JAPAN'S DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER DISCUSSES ARMY'S ROLE WITH COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF

Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing during a meeting with Japanese Deputy Prime Minister Mr Taro Aso on 22 September, said the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Defence Forces) is ready to sign the national ceasefire accord. Mr Aso who is also Japan's Finance Minister, said that the role played by the armed forces is important for national development and stability. He praised Myanmar's armed forces for being involved in rescue and rehabilitation tasks during the recent floods in Myanmar. The Commander-in-Chief said that Myanmar's armed forces pledged to ensure that the upcoming general election in Myanmar would be free and fair.²

UEC, UNDP DISCUSS MEASURES FOR FREE AND FAIR ELECTION

Chairman of the Union Election Commission Tin Aye met with representatives from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Nay Pyi Taw on 22 September and discussed strategies to ensure a free and fair election on 8 November. UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in Myanmar Renata Lok-Dessallien exchanged views on issues concerning the election, such as the scrutiny of candidates, advance voting, election observers, the issuance of voter's registration cards and arrangements for those living in internally displaced people's (IDP) camps to cast their votes.³

UEC CHAIRMAN MEETS JAPANESE ELECTION OBSERVERS

Chairman of the Union Election Commission (UEC) Tin Aye received a Japanese delegation led by the Chairman of the Nippon Foundation and Special Envoy of Japan to Myanmar Yohei Sasakawa on 21 September. The UEC Chair and the Special Envoy discussed strategies for observing the elections. The UEC chairman also explained the transparency measures already put in place and status of observers who have been invited to monitor the elections. Tin Aye also stated that international observers are

¹ Peace in Progress: Gov and ethnic armed groups prepare for ceasefire signing – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-09-21-red.pdf> (GNLM) 21 September 2015 (p. 1)

² Japan's deputy prime minister discusses army's role with Commander-in-Chief – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-09-23-red.pdf> (GNLM) 23 September 2015 (p. 1 & 3)

³ UEC, UNDP discuss measures for free and fair election – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-09-23-red.pdf> (GNLM) 23 September 2015 (p. 3)

required to submit applications to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and explained the training process for local election observers.⁴

68 CANDIDATES TO CONTEST ELECTIONS IN TACHILEK, SHAN STATE

A total of 68 candidates in Tachilek District, bordering with neighboring Thailand, in eastern Shan State will contest for the 3 Hluttaws : Amyotha (Upper), Pyithu (Lower) and Shan State Hluttaw in the upcoming November 8 General Elections, according to local election sub-commission sources. The candidates include individuals as well as members of 8 political parties including Union Solidarity and Development Party, National League for Democracy Party, the National Unity Party and several Shan, Lahu and Akha national ethnic parties. The significant feature in the district is that the representatives of the 7 ethnic groups — Intha, Akha, Lahu, Kayan, Kachin, Padaung and Lisu including Bamar — will be contesting the elections.⁵

ELECTORAL REGISTRATION DEADLINE EXTENDED IN FLOOD-HIT AREAS

The Union Election Commission announced on 23 September that it has extended the deadline for electoral registration in flood-hit regions and states. The new deadline for Matupi, Hakha and Tunzan townships in Chin State is 10 October; Monywa, Salingyi, Kani, Mawlike and Phaungpyin townships in Sagaing Region is 2 October; Sidoktaya Township in Magway Region, Myingyan Township in Mandalay Region and Hinthata, Zalun and Myanaung townships in Ayeyawady Region is 4 October and Ingapu Township in Ayeyawady Region is 30 September. The commission has set the nationwide deadline for electoral registration for 1 October and voters must check their names on the electoral registers no later than 27 September.⁶

GERMAN POLITICAL FOUNDATION LAUNCHES CONFERENCE

A Code of Ethics must be abided by everyone involved in the upcoming election, said the Chairman of Union Election Commission Tin Aye at the Election and Ethics Conference launched in Nay Pyi Taw on 25 September. The conference is being organised by the German political foundation Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and involved election candidates, officials from civil society organisations, the media and international groups. The conference aims to promote a stronger understanding of electoral ethics, international election procedures and how to overcome any problems that may arise. The conference ended on 26 September.⁷

UNOFFICIAL MEDIA

HEAVY FIGHTING BETWEEN KIO AND ARMY REPORTED IN MANSI TOWNSHIP

Heavy fighting between government troops and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) broke out on 21 September morning in Mansi Township in eastern Kachin state. The clashes took place in Laika Zup Ja village, 2 miles away from Mai Hkawng village. The latest clashes have resulted in more than 140 civilians living between Mai Hkawng and Nam Lim Pa being forced to flee over the past 24 hours. This is a particularly difficult time for villagers to flee, most of whom are small scale farmers, as late September they are busy tending to their rice and other crops.

⁴ UEC chairman meets Japanese election Observers –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-09-22-red.pdf> (GNLM) 22 September 2015 (p. 2)

⁵ 68 candidates of Tachilek District ready for upcoming election –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-09-20-red.pdf> (GNLM) 20 September 2015 (p. 4)

⁶ Electoral registration deadline extended in flood-hit areas –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-09-24-red.pdf> (GNLM) 24 September 2015 (p. 3)

⁷ German political foundation launches conference –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-09-26-red.pdf> (GNLM) 26 September 2015 (p. 3)

The latest round of fighting took place just days after senior leaders from the KIO met with President Thein Sein on 9 September in Naypyidaw for discussions relating to the ongoing peace process. Thein Sein's government is pushing for the KIO and the other groups to sign a National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) before the upcoming November elections.

The army appears to want to gain as much territory as possible in anticipation of what is expected to be at least an official end to hostilities. In addition to Mansi Township clashes have also taken place between the KIO and the army further north in Sumprabum Township and in Shan state. The army has also recently clashed with the Shan State Army South (SSA) in eastern Shan state, despite this group's leadership having already promised to sign the ceasefire.⁸

CLASHES BETWEEN GOV'T TROOPS AND TNLA CONTINUE

The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and government troops have engaged in fighting since June in northern Shan State. About 18 clashes have taken place between the TNLA troops and government troops, in the areas of Kutkai, Nangsang, and Kyaukme, according to PSLE/TNLA News and Information Department.

"Today [September 20], we also have clashed with government troops. I do not know yet whether men from our side have fallen. We cannot do anything since the government is expanding its troops. We are avoiding confrontation as much as we can. But in some places we cannot avoid it, so both sides confront and engage in fighting," said General Secretary of TNLA Colonel Tar Bone Kyaw. He said that in order to reduce fighting with the government troops, Col Tar Bone Kyaw instructed his troops to avoid confrontation as much as they can.

On 20 September, in a joint force with Kachin Independent Army troop, the battalion 527 of TNLA's Brigade 2 engaged in fighting with troops of government's Division 77 in Kyaukme Township, wherein two soldiers from the government died. Similar clashes also took place on 17 and 19 September between TNLA and government troops in Moemake and Manton Townships. Clashes between the TNLA and government troops also took place from 7 to 11 September according to PSLE/TNLA News and Information Department. According to TNLA's general secretary Colonel Tar Bone Kyaw, the reasons why the fighting is taking place in the territory of TNLA is due to the government deploying more troops and expanding its bases and with the title of "regional clearance", the government troops are launching attacks. It is reportedly said that the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC) already contacted the TNLA on 19 September, to meet and sign a bilateral agreement.⁹

LACK OF INTEREST PLAGUES VOTER LISTS

Names aren't the only thing missing from electoral rolls out for a second display. According to an election observing group, the voters themselves have been largely absent from the process. When the list of eligible voters debuted for a second correction period on September 14, the non-partisan People's Alliance for Credible Elections (PACE) sent out monitors to keep tabs on 421 display centres in both rural and urban locations across the country. Several groups have raised concerns about the accuracy of the lists, but PACE focused on the process itself. "In centers observed, PACE saw low levels of voter turnout and low levels of voters making changes or additions to the list," said a report from the election observers released recently.

Additionally, in 42 percent of the observed centres, voter education material was lacking, and 19pc of the displays PACE monitored were not even open during the officially designated hours. PACE also

⁸ Heavy fighting between KIO and army reported in Mansi Township – <http://www.kachinnews.com/news/2756-heavy-fighting-between-kio-and-army-reported-in-mansi-township.html> (Kachin News) 22 September 2015

⁹ Clashes between Gov't troops and TNLA continue – <http://monnews.org/2015/09/21/clashes-between-govt-troops-and-tnla-continue/> (IMNA) 21 September 2015

observed a low presence of political parties (not present at 87pc of observed centres) and civil society organisations (not present at 79pc of observed centres). Their methodology required that each observer stay in their assigned display location for the entire day in order to observe the process from start to finish. "Overall, PACE is encouraged by the lack of interference in the process, and the fact that most centres are equipped with necessary materials," the report stated. "However, PACE urgently recommends measures to increase voter participation, including keeping centres open during official hours and intensifying voter mobilisation campaigns."

The Union Election Commission has said it plans to keep the voter rolls out for inspection until September 27 with possible extensions in Mandalay and other areas where residents may be prevented from reaching the list in the wake of flooding. PACE said it will continue to monitor the voter lists, and also plans to deploy more than 2000 short-term observers on election day.¹⁰

40 PER CENT OF MYANMAR'S POPULATION LIVES IN WAR ZONES

According to documents presented at a meeting between the Union Peace-making Working Committee (UPWC) and civil society organisations, around 40 per cent of Myanmar citizens live in areas that regularly see armed conflict. Moreover, around 650,000 people have been forced to leave their homes due to conflict. The information was presented in a booklet titled "Peace and Ceasefire Act" at the meeting on 20 September at the Myanmar Peace Centre.

According to the booklet, there have been nine official meetings between the UPWC and the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) to discuss the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Accord, in addition to over 5,000 discussions between the 16 members of the NCCT in the 1,450 days since the government proposed the nationwide ceasefire.

The document also highlights the four gatherings of ethnic armed organisations that were officially recognised by the government. Two of these were held in Kachin State, and the other two were held in Kayin State.¹¹

PATHEIN NLD DOWNPLAYS DEFECTIONS TO RULING PARTY

The Pathein Township office of the National League for Democracy (NLD) has downplayed reports in local media outlets that more than 300 of their members have joined the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), but concedes that some former members have switched their allegiance. A number of local Burmese language dailies have reported that 365 NLD members in Pathein resigned from the party on Sept. 12 and joined the USDP, claims which were widely circulated on Facebook. Party officials conceded that some members from the party's No. 10 Region office, which is based in Pathein, had defected to the ruling party. Accounts varied as to the number of resignations.

"It is totally wrong that more than 300 party members have resigned," Kyaw Htay, a member of the NLD's Pathein Township executive committee. "We have 462 party members in our party's No. 10 Region office and only five of them have actually resigned. The report was fabricated from the voter list display in the area. They are not all party members, they are voters."

Tin Nyein, the former ward office chairman, said he resigned from the NLD in September and led 67 other members to join the USDP. He said that the other 297 locals reported as defecting from the party were not official members but erstwhile NLD supporters. "Among those who resigned from the NLD were those who already had party membership ID cards, as well as those who applied for party

¹⁰ Lack of interest plagues voter lists – <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/16586-lack-of-interest-plagues-voter-lists.html> (Myanmar Times) 22 September 2015

¹¹ 40 per cent of Myanmar's population lives in war zones – <http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/local/40-cent-myanmar%E2%80%99s-population-lives-war-zones> (Myanmar Eleven) 21 September 2015

membership—altogether, 68 of us,” he said. “We submitted the resignations through ward administration offices before joining the USDP.”

A ceremony marking the party switch was held on 12 September at the house of a local USDP member, attended by party officials and lawmakers from around the Pathein area. Dr Khin Si, a divisional USDP lawmaker for Pathein’s No. 1 constituency who is recontesting her seat in the election, reportedly issued 365 party membership ID cards at the gathering.

Though there have been periodic reports of Irrawaddy Division members resigning from the NLD since the party resumed full activities after sweeping the 2012 byelections, the mass resignation in September marks the first time members have switched their allegiance to the USDP.

Following August’s flooding disaster in lower and central Burma, Khin Si provided ward authorities in Pathein with rice, foodstuffs and cement to pave damaged roads in the area. The mass defection was a result of Khin Si’s relief donations, according to Tin Nyein. “[We resigned] mainly because the USDP gave us help while we were faced with the floods, and also provided cement to repair roads,” he said. “But the NLD didn’t support any social welfare initiatives and did not help us when our ward was faced with floods. So we joined the USDP because it carries out regional development.”

Kyaw Htay maintained that the defections had been exaggerated and the township NLD office was planning to take legal action against anyone found responsible for spreading false accounts of the resignations. “We’re discussing suing those who fabricated news of the extent of resignations from the NLD, as it hurts our reputation,” he said. Tensions have increased between NLD and USDP cadres in Irrawaddy Division as the election draws near. On the same day as the Sept. 12 resignations, a USDP member reportedly attempted to obstruct NLD campaign trucks traveling around town.¹²

ANALYSIS

The peace process has slowly but gradually made progress and indications that the signing of the NCA is imminent though questions on the number of Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) willing to sign raises concern and doubts on the sustainability of the accord. However, the signing of the NCA in itself is a means to an end – in achieving peace but more importantly contributing towards national reconciliation in the country. While all stakeholders including the government, the military and EAOs may have different views and interests, the realisation that the peace process is a concern of the entire country and that the interests of the people should not be discarded. The continued clashes in the Shan State between government forces and Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) does raise concerns and once again highlights the need by the government (the military) to control if not limit its operations during such crucial times. At a time when the olive branch is being extended it would be inappropriate to engage in unwarranted acts of aggression and at all costs be avoided if the NCA is to become the pillar for progress in Myanmar.

¹² Pathein NLD Downplays Defections to Ruling Party – <http://www.irrawaddy.org/election/news/pathein-nld-downplays-defections-to-ruling-party> (the Irrawaddy) 22 September 2015