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Defining Territory

Territorial Concerns in Karen and Mon States

The death, on 17 October, of a Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) soldier in a clash with troops from the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) further highlights territorial concerns that need to be addressed within the peace process and also at a local level. According to reports, the KNLA attacked two MNLA bases in response to what Saw Edward, a spokesman for the KNLA at the Three Pagodas Pass, because,

... the MNLA destroyed a Karen flag three days ago after his armed group [KNLA] put it up on the dividing line between Karen and Mon territory at Thee Ba Dot.¹

Major Nai Aye Mann from the MNLA said the KNLA had put its flag in front of an MNLA base, so it was destroyed, but also asked why the KNLA also attacked another base at Ma Yang Chong if the dispute was just about the flag.

The KNLA is the armed wing of the Karen National Union and the MNLA is the armed wing of the New Mon State Party. Both have signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement with the government and have had previous disputes in the past. It had been hoped that with both groups now signatories to the NCA such disputes could easily be negated, but such a belief belies the fact that the situation on the ground still remains tense.

Somewhat bizarrely, it has been suggested that the KNLA action was undertaken in response to what has been described in the media as the arrest of seven DKBA-splinter group members.² According to one report, the KNLA was unhappy that the MNLA

arrested seven members of the group and seized 11 firearms in an attack on a base, which they said was inside Mon territory, although such a proposition is unlikely to be the case.³

The Mon State government had addressed the DKBA-splinter issue and asked that all members of the group, believed to have around thirty troops, be arrested as 'insurgents' according to a statement signed by Colonel Nay Htut Oo, the border and security and affairs minister in Mon State,

The group's intention is to profit politically from creating instability and disrupting the peace process,⁴

That said, a number of smaller armed ethnic militias, many of which are under Myanmar military control, each with their own vested interests, continue to operate in ethnic areas controlled by NCA-signatory groups further complicating the peace process. But perhaps, more worryingly, regardless of the reasoning for the recent clash, the fact remains that territorial claims, the most likely cause, have yet to be addressed.

In an attempt to prevent further conflict, officers from the MNLA and KNLA met at the Three Pagodas Pass on the Thai border and verbally agreed to stop fighting.

Major Nai Aye Mann from the MNLA said low-level officers on the ground could not resolve the territorial dispute and future meetings between the groups' leaders would be needed to end the issue.

As a result, leaders from Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) Brigade 6 and the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) joined a trip to Thee Ba Dot Village, led by

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MNLA deputy chief General Nai Bayar Ma San to resolve the issue and delineate the border between the two sides.⁵

In a statement issued on the 23 October, the two ethnic armed groups announced that they had reached agreement on at least three points: that leaders from both sides would order their forces to stop fighting; that if fighting broke out again, the sides would need to hold peace talks to find a solution; and that the two sides would work to build trust so that local residents who have fled the recent fighting could return to their villages.⁶

Despite this, another minor clash occurred resulting in, according to reports, the death of another MNLA soldier.

The MNLA and KNLA agreed to let community leaders, along with military commanders, from the two villages, meet to settle the dispute over their territories. According to Lieutenant Colonel Saw Shwe Win from KNLA Brigade 6,

[Resolution] depends on how the two villages understand each other. For our ground troops, we already ordered them to stop any further fighting.⁷

Territorial tensions in ethnic areas

Fighting had broken out at least three times in October this year along the disputed dividing line between the territories, however, such clashes between the two sides are not new.

After signing the October 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, the KNU had become more active in Yebyu Township (northern Tanintharyi Region), where the NMSP's Tavoy District had assumed control following the 1995 Mon ceasefire with the government. According to the Mon, tensions were sparked when the KNU tried to transport timber through the contested area, leading the NMSP to establish more security gates.⁸

Both sides denied starting the conflict with Padoh Win Khine, who is in-charge of Tavoy District's KNU Liaison office saying,

Because they passed over the territory, we sent a moderator but could not negotiate. So, both sides started firing at each other from far away. However, it was not on purpose,⁹

According to Mon media reports, On August 24, Saw Zee Zi, secretary of the KNU's Myeik-Tavoy District, sent warning letters to village administrators in Yebyu Township stating that KNU troops would be active again in the area. The letter also stated that the KNU aimed to take back its originally controlled area.¹⁰

According to Nai Win Hla, in charge of the New Mon State Party's Home Affairs Department,

Members of the Karen National Union [KNU] came into the village . . . Two of their members came to observe our army base nearby. On their way back, two of our soldiers chased them, they fought back and a short firefight broke out,¹¹

Local media suggested that tensions in the area were exacerbated because ethnic Mon had begun growing rubber plants in an area claimed by the KNU in the past, but currently controlled by the MNLA.¹²

Nai Win Hla continued,

First, they [KNU] wanted ethnic Mon growing rubber plants in the area to get out, then they even wanted our troops to move out from these areas. We have been based in this area since before we signed the ceasefire agreement with the government [in 1995, and renewed in 2012]. But now

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the KNU are saying this area belongs to them, this is the dispute that caused the fight to break out.¹³

According to one local source, the KNU tried to remove a Mon rubber farmer from a KNU-controlled area, the rubber farmer called the MNLA, leading to the clash.¹⁴

A meeting was held on 11 September 2016 between KNU and NMSP officials in which both sides agreed to create a liaison team made up of three representatives from each side. The team would be responsible for keeping both armed groups informed of the other's troop movements and take charge of any future issues that may arise.¹⁵

As part of the peace process, a Joint-ceasefire Monitoring Committee (JMC) was set up to monitor the situation at both Union and State levels. By 2017 almost 70 per cent of the

complaints it had received were territorial disputes.¹⁶ However, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) has not yet joined the national Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee - State (JMC-S) and has instead been handling conflict at the Liaison office-level.¹⁷ In identifying four major obstacles to the NCA, Dr Shwe Kha of JMC noted that one,

. . . is to specify definitively which areas are under whose control.¹⁸

Regardless of the reasons, such likely clashes, perhaps on a small scale are likely to occur through all ethnic areas as individual groups and also local militias seek to maintain control over the local population and the area's resources. Clear delineation of territorial boundaries and stronger mechanisms at the local level could help to prevent further clashes in the future.

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Notes

¹ 'Mon Soldier Killed on Myanmar-Thai Border in Karen Attack', Lawi Weng, The Irrawaddy, 17 October 2019

² Ibid. The DKBA-splinter, or sometimes referred to as DKBA-Buddhist, is led by Col. Saw San Aung and Colonel Saw Kyaw Thet. It was originally based in the Myaing Gyi Ngu area of Karen State, but fled after a joint attack by the Myanmar Army and the Karen Border Guard Force in 2016. It is loosely allied, in name at least, to the Northern Alliance – Burma, but largely operates as an extremely small militia. It is believed to be supported by elements in the KNU's Fifth Brigade area.

³ Email correspondence with KNU official 7 November 2019

⁴ 'MNLA Attacks DKBA Splinter Group in Myanmar's Karen State', Lawi Weng, The Irrawaddy, 30 September 2019

⁵ 'Karen, Mon Leaders Visit Disputed Area on Thai-Myanmar Border' Lawi Weng, The Irrawaddy, 22 October 2019

⁶ 'Mon Soldier Killed in Fighting One Day After Peace Agreement' Lawi Weng, The Irrawaddy, 22 October 2019

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ 'Between Ceasefires and Federalism: Exploring Interim Arrangements in the Myanmar Peace Process' Covenant-Consult

⁹ 'KNU and NMSP clash after 27 years of ceasefire', Mon News Agency, 10 September 2016

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ 'Mon and Karen Forces Clash in Dawei District', Lawi Weng, The Irrawaddy, 9 September 2016

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ 'KNU and NMSP Reach Agreement', KIC, 12 September 2016

¹⁶ 'Majority of Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee Complaints are Territorial Disputes', Nyein Nyein, The Irrawaddy, 6 July 2017

¹⁷ <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/nmsp-resolving-conflict-liaison-office-level-although-not-members-joint-ceasefire-monitoring>, accessed 23 October 2019

¹⁸ <https://elevenmyanmar.com/news/jmc-face-four-challenges-in-implementing-ceasefire-process>, accessed 23 October 2019