

THE BURMA ARMY'S OFFENSIVE AGAINST THE SHAN STATE ARMY - NORTH

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On 11 November 2010, a fire fight between troops of Burma Army Light Infantry Division (LID) 33 and Battalion 24 of the Shan State Army-North (SSA-N) 1st Brigade at Kunkieng-Wanlwe near the 1st Brigade's main base, marked the beginning of the new military offensive against the ethnic armed groups in Shan and Kachin States.



Tensions between the Burma Army and the ethnic groups, which had ceasefire agreements,

started to mount after the Burma Army delivered an ultimatum in April 2009 for the groups to become Border Guard Forces. Prior to this, the Burma Army had always maintained that it did not have jurisdiction over political issues and that the groups could maintain their arms and negotiate with the new elected government for a political solution. Most of the larger ethnic groups refused to become BGFs, and in August 2009 the Burma Army attacked and seized control of Kokang (MNDA), sending shock waves through the ethnic communities and the international community. Following the outcry, the Burma Army backed down and seemed content to let matters die down as it concentrated on holding the much publicized general elections on 7 November 2010.

The attack against the SSA-N is seen as the first in a series of military offensives designed to fracture and ultimately destroy all armed ethnic opposition in the country's ethnic borderlands.¹ While the SSA-N lost its bases, this is unlikely to reduce its ability to conduct guerrilla operations against the Burma Army. The group's recent decision to combine its forces and political leadership with the RCSS/SSA-S will strengthen its ability to do so. The expansion of their areas of operation will also reduce the Burma Army's control over Shan State.

In response to the Burma Army's offensive, eleven ethnic non-ceasefire and former ceasefire groups, including the SSA-N, have formed a military alliance - the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) - in February 2011. The UNFC does not as yet seem to have a fully functioning command and control centre. But in time, this could also affect the ability of the ethnic groups to better resist the Burma Army.

Although the ability of the Shan resistance, and other ethnic groups, to conduct operations against the Burma Army will increase, so too shall the inherent human rights abuses that usually accompany Burma Army operations in ethnic areas. It is likely, therefore, that more villagers will be forced to flee to neighbouring Thailand to escape such abuses while others will remain displaced and vulnerable inside the country's borders.

For the time being, under pressure from China, it is unlikely that the Wa (UWSA) or Mongla (NDAA) will become embroiled in the conflict unless directly attacked.

There is little hope, however, for any form of compromise between the Burmese Government and the SSA-N or other ethnic groups. On 25 March 2011, a proposal was submitted to the new parliament to find a peaceful resolution with the ethnic armed groups. It was defeated by 520 votes to 106 votes thereby ensuring that only a military solution will be pursued.² This, along with the constitution's provision that *'All the armed forces in the Union shall be under the command of the Defence Services'*³ and that *'The Defence Services has [sic] the right to independently administer and adjudicate all affairs of the armed forces'* including *'... safeguarding the non-disintegration of the Union, ...'*⁴ will ensure that conflict in ethnic areas can only intensify in the future.

The Burma Army's ill-conceived plan to suddenly transform the ethnic ceasefire armies into Border Guard Forces instead of seeking a political solution does not bode well for the country. Ethnic problems have plagued the country for decades and need to be resolved in a peaceful manner if the new elected Government is to be accepted by the international community. The Army's insistence on a military solution will see the country once more drawn into a protracted civil war the likes of which have not been seen since the eighties.

THE OFFENSIVE AGAINST THE SHAN STATE ARMY – NORTH

11 November 2010 – A fire fight erupted between troops of Light Infantry Division (LID) 33 and Battalion 24 of the Shan State Army-North at Kunkieng-Wanlwe, three miles west of Wanhsaw, a village near the SSA-N's main base. In response, SSA-N 1st Brigade headquarters instructed its units stationed at Wan Et, Mong Nang sub-township, in Wan Kang Township, and Wan Tu Ya in Mong Nawng to abandon their positions.

December 2010 - In preparation for further attacks and to plan its next move, the SSA-N 1st Brigade leadership convened a month long meeting. It was announced in January 2011 that the SSA-N 1st Brigade had decided to resurrect itself as the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP), originally founded by former Shan State Army (SSA) leaders in 1971. In addition it also re-formed the Shan State Army-North into the SSA with 5 new brigades: 1st, 27th, 36th, 72nd and 74th with 3 battalions each.⁵ Heavily outnumbered, the SSPP/SSA sought support from its nearest allies, the Wa (UWSA) and Mongla (NDAA). In addition, it opened a liaison office in Mongla to better coordinate resistance to the regime should there be any attacks from the Burma Army. According to a trader in Mongla, many families of the SSPP/SSA also moved into Nam Luap, Hselur and Mong Yang townships where 2,000 homes had been built for the new arrivals.⁶

February 2011 - Increased Burma Army troop numbers opposite SSPP/SSA positions.

March 2011 – An estimated 100 Burma Army soldiers from LIB 12 in Ho Nam in Kehsi Township clashed with SSPP/SSA troops. This was followed by another skirmish involving a 100 strong force from Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) 513 based in Panglong. After the clashes the Burma Army sent reinforcements from LIBs 516, 248 and 64 based in Mong Kung, Laikha and Mong Nawng townships. LIBs 191 and 290, based near Lashio, were also sent into the area after fighting broke out.

16 March 2011 - After two days of fighting and a massive artillery bombardment, Burmese troops were able to seize the Nam Lao base, the second largest base of the SSPP/SSA and a strategic gateway to three crossings on the Salween River (Tapiang Phi, Tawoon Keng and Tawoon Nawng). These crossings connected it with territory controlled by the United Wa State Army. The fighting was reported to have caused at least 600 villagers to flee with the possibility that a number may have been killed or injured. At least one report states that four novice monks were killed when a shell hit a Nam Lao temple.⁷

According to one source, by March, more than 9 Burmese battalions had been deployed in the area of Wanhai, the location of the SSPP/SSA headquarters:

- Battalion 517 at Mong Pawn;
- Battalion 247 at Nam Zang;
- Battalion 513 at Panglong;
- Battalion 515, Battalion 516 and Battalion 64 at Laikha;
- Battalion 12 at Loilem;
- Battalion 191 at Nam Pawng; and
- Battalion 290 at Lashio.⁸

The strength of the Burma Army troops around Wanhai was estimated to be approximately 2,000 supported by 16 armoured personnel carriers.⁹

In an attempt to validate its offensive against the SSPP/SSA, the official New Light of Myanmar, on 21 March 2011, reported that the SSA (Wahming) were insurgents who were '*... constantly carrying out terrorist acts and destructions.*' In addition, it also printed the accusation that the group had:

*'... planted mines and broke a bridge on Mongshu-Mongnawng Road in Mongshu Township yesterday morning ... Likewise, SSA (Wahming) group destroyed a bridge on Mongyai-Seinkyaw-Hsaungkye Road in Hsipaw Township in mine blast yesterday morning.'*¹⁰

In a strategy to present the group as weak, the same issue also reported:

*'A 13-member group led by Sai Mon of SSA (Wahming) armed group exchanged arms for peace in the region of North-East Command with 11 units of small arms, one sub-machine gun, one BA(93), 291 assorted rounds of ammunition, 16 BA(93) grenades and its nine bullets, 15 assorted magazines, one bandolier, and three landmines yesterday.'*¹¹

6 April 2011 – With no support coming from its allies, the SSPP/SSA fighters are forced to retreat from Wanhaw, Monghsu Township. Consequently, more than 300 villagers fled to the town of Monghsu, the command post of a newly created Burma Army unit, Infantry Battalion 149.¹²

May 2011 – Fighting breaks out in Kachin State between the Burma Army and armed units of the Kachin Independence Organization.

3 June 2011 – It was reported that an attack on the SSPP/SSA base at Tangyan involved the use of chemical weapons.¹³

13 June 2011 – The SSPP/SSA is forced to retreat from its Kawng Sao Merng base, located one mile east of its former Hsengkaew HQ, Hsipaw Township, after an intense shelling campaign and an attack involving three battalions of Burma Army troops.

22 June 2011 – Mongao-based Burma Army Infantry Battalion 33 attacked SSPP/SSA 27th Brigade at the Ta Pha Hsawng crossing of the Lawng river, a tributary of the Pang, between 3 townships: Kehsi, Mongyai and Hsipaw, forcing the SSPP/SSA 27th Brigade troops to retreat a day later.

According to Shan sources the conflict has resulted in the loss of most of the SSPP/SSA's bases in an offensive that has so far involved 25 Burma Army battalions.

The Burma Army's operations in Shan State have once again resulted in a number of abuses against local citizens. The Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) has detailed a number of these abuses including the torture and killing of civilians on suspicion of supporting the Shan resistance, the gang rapes of three women, and the forced relocation of over 100 villagers.¹⁴

ARMED GROUPS IN SHAN STATE

At the moment there are four major armed groups operating in the Shan State that had ceasefire agreements and have refused to transform into a Border Guard Force.

The UNITED WA STATE ARMY (UWSA) is the most formidable force amongst the ethnic groups in Shan State. It is estimated to be able to field over 30,000 troops. From the late 1960s to the 80s, the Wa troops were under the command of the Communist Party of Burma. In 1989, the Wa mutinied against the CPB and formed the USWA. To prevent the Wa from joining the democracy movement, General Khin Nyunt, the Intelligence Chief, made a ceasefire agreement with the USWA. The agreement allowed the USWA to retain their arms, administer Wa State, engage in all types of trade (including drugs), and become an ally of the Burma Army. The UWSA today is divided into nine brigades, split between northern and southern regions, with the Burma Army controlling the territory between the two. There are four brigades (each approximately 1,500 strong), an artillery regiment and a Panghsang headquarters force in the northern Wa Hills close to the Chinese border. There are an additional five brigades stationed in the southern 171 Military Region neighbouring Thailand. In addition to numbers, the UWSA reportedly also has a vast array of weaponry including 12.7 mm and 14.5 mm heavy machine guns, 120 mm mortars, anti-aircraft canons and surface to air missiles (Soviet SAM-7s and Chinese built HN-5Ns).¹⁵

The NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC ALLIANCE ARMY (NDAA), based at Mongla, has a force of approximately 5,000 mainly Shan and Akha hill-tribe troops. NDAA troops also used to be under the command of the CPB. The NDAA also made a ceasefire deal with Khin Nyunt. The NDAA is today divided into three brigades - the 369 Brigade based at Hsaleu bordering Wa territory in the northwest; a headquarters brigade near Mongla and the 911 Brigade close to the Mekong River in the east.

The SHAN STATE ARMY – NORTH (SSA-N) was a faction of the Shan State Army (SSA) which was originally established in 1964 by the Mahadevi of Yawnghwe to protect the Shan State from the Burma Army. Its political wing the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP) was established in 1971.

However, unable to gain international recognition for its struggle, the SSA split into two factions. One faction in the north joined the Communist Party of Burma which at that time received support from China. The other faction in the south became part of drug kingpin Hkun Sa's Merng Tai Army.

When the CPB collapsed in 1989, Shan troops under its command became the Shan State Army – North and the Shan State National Army, and they also agreed to a ceasefire with the Burma Army.

On 23 January 1996, the Shan State Army (North) and the Shan State National Army (SSNA) formed the Shan State Peace Council (SSPC), which became the second largest ceasefire group in Shan State. There were 7 brigades under the command of the SSPC. Col (later Maj-Gen) Pang Fah, held the position of Deputy chief of staff of the SSPC and also commanded the 1st Brigade SSA-N. In 1996 Hkun Sa also surprised his allies and troops by negotiating a surrender to the Burma Army, his troops that refused to surrender reformed as the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA) under Colonel (now Lieut-Gen) Yawd Serk. SURA then became the Shan State Army – South (SSA-S), which was not accorded a ceasefire by the Burma Army.

The SSPC then made political overtures towards other members of the ethnic Shan opposition. A meeting was held in Manshi (Mongkhawn in Shan), Yunnan Province, from the 22 to the 25 April 2000.¹⁶ The meeting saw Maj-Gen Hsoten, and the late Col. Gunyawd, discuss political development in Shan State with Chao Tzang Yawng hwe and Sao Sengsuk both of whom had positions within the Shan Democratic Union as advisor and spokesperson respectively. They had both also held leadership positions in the original Shan State Army. However, Maj-Gen Hsoten and Hkun Htun Oo, Chair of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy that won seats in the 1990 elections, were arrested in February 2005.

In May 2005, the SSNA, under the command of Sai Yi, joined the Shan State Army - South with its remaining 3 brigades – the 6th, 9th and 16th, after two of its brigades – the 11th, under the command of Lt. Col. Kan Na (Ganna), and the 19th under Lt. Col. Koongkurh, were forced to surrender their arms to the SPDC in April and May respectively. The Shan State Army - North was composed of 3 brigades (1st, 3rd & 7th), one border force and a HQ Security Force led by Maj-Gen Loimao. The 1st Brigade was based in Wanhai, Kehsi township, southern Shan State, under the command of Maj-Gen Pangfa; Brigade No.3 was in Mongkhurh, Mongyai township, northern Shan State, also under the command of Maj-Gen Loimao and Brigade No.7 was based in Kali, Kunhing township, southern Shan State, led by Maj-Gen Gaifa. The 1st Brigade was the strongest and at its height was reported to have approximately 2,500 fully armed men.¹⁷

In late 2009, the Burma Army ordered the Shan State Army – North to agree to transform itself into a Home Guard Force. The group's top leader Maj-Gen Loimao with 12 other top members accepted the proposal to transform to a Home Guard Force at a meeting, on 22 April 2010, with Maj-Gen Aung Than Tut, Commander of the Burma Army's North-eastern Region Command at its Lashio headquarters. Consequently, the Shan State Army - North's Hsengkeow headquarters force in Hsipaw township, was officially named the Hsengkeow Home Guard Force (HGF) on Sunday 25 April 2010. It was reported that the HGF was comprised of approximately 700 troops (300 from Brigade

No.3 and the Hsengkeow HQ, and 400 from Brigade No.7).¹⁸ The SSA-N 1st Brigade refused and came under attack from the Burma Army.

The KACHIN INDEPENDENT ORGANIZATION (KIO) in Kachin State has a fighting force estimated at between 4,000 and 5,000 men. Its 4th Brigade is based in northern Shan State in Kutkai. At the beginning of the attacks on the SSPP/SSA, the KIA's 4th Brigade had been ordered to repel any Burma Army incursions into its territory after it was reported that Burma Army troops had approached Kachin territory searching for fleeing SSPP/SSA soldiers.¹⁹ Since May, however, conflict has also erupted in Kachin State. Burmese troop movements in areas around KIA territory led to the KIO issuing a demand that Burmese troops pull back from KIO areas by the 25 May 2011. After the Burma Army's failure to withdraw open warfare between the two sides erupted and is likely to continue for some time. (For information about the Burma Army attacks against the Kachin see the EBO's forthcoming Kachin Update).

REACTIONS FROM THE UWSA AND NDAA

In a statement issued on the 19 March 2011, the UWSA had made its position clear in relation to the attacks on its ally noting that:

'Existing differences and contradictions should be managed by Political Dialogue, Discussion on Equal Footing and Peaceful Resolution. We will oppose any settlements through intimidation and military means.'

In addition, both the UWSA and the NDAA (Mongla) broached the subject of the attacks on SSA-N with a Burma Army delegation which had just concluded a quarterly border committee meeting with their Chinese counterparts in Kengtung. According to one source:

*'The Burmese delegation led by Tun Tun Nyi had replied they had ordered the SSA to move all their units to their main base Wanhai, but the SSA had not complied, which had led to clashes between the two.'*²⁰

Despite such reasoning, the new constitution makes it clear that even if the SSPP/SSA had resituated all its troops to its main headquarters it would still have been in contravention of the constitution. If anything, such a move would only have made it easier for the Burma Army to contain SSPP/SSA troops and force their disarmament.

For its part, the NDAA recently complied with a Burma Army request to move out of its furthest southern base at Hsop Yawng on the Yawng River. In addition, they have also been asked to vacate their base at Hsop Lwe north of Mong Yawng. . The Burma Army ostensibly claimed that the moves were necessary to ensure security in an area that has been plagued by bandits. The UWSA, concerned that the NDAA was losing this territory has deployed between 1,500-1,500 troops from its 468th Brigade to reinforce Mongla positions. The move could further constrict the movement of both and that of the SSA-S, which operates south of Mong Yawng.

ETHNIC ALLIANCES

In January 2010, the commanders of the Kachin Independence Army (armed wing of the KIO – a ceasefire group), the Karen National Liberation Army (armed wing of the Karen National Union (KNU) – a non-ceasefire group), and the Chin National Army (armed wing of the Chin National Front (CNF) – another non-ceasefire group) met and agreed to assist each other in the event of an attack by the Burma Army.

This military alliance was followed by a series of meetings in May 2011 of the political leadership of the KIO, KNU, CNF, New Mon State Party (NMSP), Karenni National Progress Party (KNPP), USWA, and NDAA (Mongla) to discuss a political agenda. *"Vision for a Genuine Pyidaungsu"* was adopted.

In September 2010, three ceasefire groups (the KIO, the NMSP and the SSA-N 1st Brigade) and three non-ceasefire groups (the KNU, the KNPP and the CNF), announced the formation of a working committee - the Committee for the Emergence of a Federal Union (CEFU) - to map out political and military strategies.

At a conference held from the 12-16 February 2011, CEFU declared its dissolution and the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) comprised of 11 ethnic organisations was formed – KIO, KNU, CNF, NMSP, KNPP, SSPP/SSA, Lahu Democratic Front (LDF), National Unity Party of Arakan (NUPA), PaO National Liberation Organization (PNLO), Palaung State Liberation Force (PSLF), and the Wa National Organization (WNO). Its stated objective is to create a Federal Army, however, this has as yet not materialized. Although the SSPP/SSA was one of the original members, it later distanced itself from the group saying that it could only be a member on a state basis. Another problem facing the UNFC is its failure to include the Shan State Army – South (SSA-S) which is an essential member to link the alliance to groups operating in Shan State.

Despite the formation of such alliances, there appears to be little to suggest that there will be any effective coordinated front in the future. As attacks on the Kokang and the SSPP/SSA demonstrate, no member of the alliances is prepared to risk its own bargaining position with the regime to support other members. Consequently, the Burma Army will be able to gradually erode individual ethnic forces until they can either be defeated or pose no major threat.

RCSS/SSA AND THE SSPP/SSA

On the 21st of May 2011, Shan State People's Resistance Day, Lt. General Yawd Serk, leader of the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), announced that:

*'There is only one Shan State Army now. SSA 'South' and SSA 'North' [does not] exist any longer.'*²¹

He then continued:

' . . . It is clear that we have the same enemy and fighting for the same ideal. We just need to work out the details,'

Despite such a statement the details that remain to be worked out between the two groups may be problematic. Both sides have a constitution which will need to be re-written and the SSPP has a 21 member committee who will need to be accommodated in a future Shan State council. While such problems are not insurmountable it is unlikely that any changes will occur prior to the end of the year.²²

There is little doubt that the RCSS/SSA, better known as the SSA-S, has been providing military support to the SSPP/SSA in operations against the Burma Army since conflict began on 13 March 2011. As Yawd Serk notes:

*'We have been helping and supporting the SSPP since it was attacked, though we operate separately,'*²³

Despite this, the SSPP/SSA continues to face territorial losses.

Notes

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- ¹ The ongoing offensive in Karen State has intensified since November 2010 after DKBA forces seized Myawaddy. See ['EBO Analysis Paper No. 1/2011 – The Situation in Karen State after the Elections.'](#) Euro-Burma Office, April 2011
 - ² See ['Parliament snubs ethnic harmony bill'](#), DVB, 28 March 2011
 - ³ 'Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Chapter VII, Section,338', Ministry of Information, September 2008
 - ⁴ ['Analysis of the 2008-SPDC Constitution for Burma'](#), David C Williams, accessed on 26 June 2011
 - ⁵ ['Dormant Shan party reactivated'](#), SHAN, 20 January 2011, accessed 28 March 2010
 - ⁶ ['Regime troops reinforced in northern Shan State'](#), Jai Wan Mai, Mizzima, 10 March 2011
 - ⁷ ['Burmese troops overrun SSA-N base in Nam Lao'](#), Jai Wan Mai, Mizzima, 17 March 2011
 - ⁸ ['Burmese Junta and SSA-N fighting continues'](#) Jai Wan Mai, Mizzima, 15 March 2011
 - ⁹ ['Burma Army occupies SSA core base'](#), Hseng Khio Fah, SHAN, 16 March 2011
 - ¹⁰ ['SSA \(Wamhing\) group destroys bridges in Mongshu, Hsipaw townships'](#), NLM, 21 March 2011 (p. 2)
 - ¹¹ ['Armed groups return to legal fold understanding genuine goodwill of Government'](#), NLM, 21 March 2011 (p. 10)
 - ¹² ['Shan Rebels On Offensive Defense'](#), SHAN, 6 April 2011
 - ¹³ ['Being Honest about using CW'](#), SHAN, 7 June 2011
 - ¹⁴ ['Human Rights abuses reported in Shan State clashes'](#), Sai Zom Hseng, Irrawaddy, 12 April 2011
 - ¹⁵ http://adm.ebro.liucentre.ubc.ca/documents/DND_Wa_State_Army.pdf accessed on 16/5/07 and ['On Myanmar-China border, tensions escalate between SPDC, Narco militias'](#), Michael Black, World Politics watch, 13 December 2006
 - ¹⁶ <http://www.shanland.org/oldversion/index-1051.htm>
 - ¹⁷ ['Ceasefire Shan Army to split into two factions?'](#), Hseng Khio Fah, SHAN, 26 April 2010, accessed 25 March 2011
 - ¹⁸ ['Ceasefire Shan Army denies group breakup'](#) Hseng Khio Fah, SHAN, 29 April 2010, accessed 25 March 2011
 - ¹⁹ ['Tension rising between Burmese Army and KIA over Shan troops'](#), KNG, 26 April 2011
 - ²⁰ ['Wa, Mongla grill junta on Shan offensive'](#), SHAN, 23 March 2011
 - ²¹ ['SSA 'South', SSA 'North' declare 'We are one''](#), SHAN, 23 May 2011
 - ²² Personal conversation with Shan analyst, 6 June 2011
 - ²³ ['SSA 'South', SSA 'North' declare 'We are one''](#), SHAN, 23 May 2011