

## POLITICAL MONITOR NO.2

### OFFICIAL MEDIA

#### **PRESIDENT MEETS ETHNIC AFFAIRS MINISTERS, POLITICAL LEADERS AND ETHNIC GROUP REPRESENTATIVES**

President Thein Sein met Ministers for Ethnic Affairs from the Regions and States, leaders of political parties as well as ethnic group representatives on 12 January and held discussions on key domestic issues including the successful holding of the 2015 general election, the national peace process and democratization. Other participants included Speakers of the Upper and Lower Houses Thura Shwe Mann and Khin Aung Myint, Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing, Chairman of the Union Election Commission U Tin Aye, Vice Chairman of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) U Htay Oo. The meeting discussed matters related to the continued implementation of democratic transition and reform; holding political dialogues for national reconciliation based on the peace process and political issues including the development of political processes for smooth transition after the successful holding of 2015 free and fair general elections. The meeting is a follow-up of the talks that took place on October 31, 2014, involving the government, parliament, political parties, the military and the Union Election Commission, which ended without any specific outcome.<sup>1</sup>

#### **ELECTION CHAIR CALLS FOR IMPARTIAL MEDIA COVERAGE OF GENERAL ELECTIONS**

Chairman of the Union Election Commission Tin Aye held a meeting with officials from the Myanmar Journalists Association (MJA) and representatives from the London-based Article 19 media organisation on 15 January. At the meeting, the UEC Chairman called for impartial media of the upcoming general elections in 2015 and pointed out the need for political parties, social organizations, media and observers to collectively participate in holding the elections successfully. Tin Aye also gave a briefing on the organizational structure of the election commission, the voting system, the compilation of voter lists, and measures being taken to hold the elections. Officials from Article 19 raised questions regarding voter education campaigns, coordination with the media and their possible roles of cooperation with the commission. The chairman responded and stated that a free and fair election in 2015, stressing that the test of free and fair elections is whether it abides and adheres to existing laws.<sup>2</sup>

### UNOFFICIAL MEDIA

#### **CIVILIANS FLEE FRESH FIGHTING BETWEEN KIA, GOVT TROOPS**

Fighting has again flared between government troops and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) on 15 January near Aung Bar Lay and Tagaungs villages in Hpakant, Kachin State about 50 miles northwest of Myitkyina, the state capital. According to Kachin rebel sources, the KIA's Battalion 6 and Burma Army troops from Light Infantry Division 22 were the units involved in the fighting. Gunfire which began at 6 a.m., forced about more than 1,000 local residents including 200 students and 20 schoolteachers to flee, with many currently in hiding at local churches. Casualties were not immediately reported. The fighting between government forces and the KIA broke out amidst reports of the KIA's detention of Kachin State Transport Minister Kaman Du Naw along with three

<sup>1</sup> President U Thein Sein meets political leaders, ethnic affairs ministers and ethnic representative leaders – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs20/GNLM2015-01-13-red.pdf> (GNLM) 13 January 2015 (p. 1 & 3)/  
Press release on meeting of President, political leaders, ethnic affairs ministers, ethnic representative leaders – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs20/GNLM2015-01-13-red.pdf> (GNLM) 13 January 2015 (p. 1)

<sup>2</sup> UEC calls for impartial media coverage of general elections – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs20/GNLM2015-01-16-red.pdf> (GNLM) 16 January 2015 (p. 2)

Burmese police officers. They were reportedly detained on 14 Wednesday while observing construction of a road that links Moegaung, Kamaing and Hpakant. The minister was later released but the three police officers are still believed to be in KIA custody. A brief exchange of gunfire between the Burma Army and the KIA also took place on 12 January near Muse in northern Shan State. Captain Zaw La of the KIA's No. 4 Brigade said, "Clashes started on Monday [January 12], as the government military units are taking positions in the command areas of our brigade." As the Myanmar military attempts to take positions in territory held by the KIA, tensions are likely to increase, particularly as the military use heavy weapons during their offensives, he said. While both sides are positioned so closely, the KIA Brigade captain said he was concerned more fights would break out. Captain Zaw La also accused the government forces of disturbing the KIA's efforts to destroy opium fields and fight against the use and trade in illegal drugs.<sup>3</sup>

### **ETHNIC AFFAIRS MINISTERS CALL FOR 12-PARTY TALKS ON PEACE DEAL FOR MYANMAR**

Two of Myanmar's ethnic ministers have called for 12-party talks in a move towards a nationwide cease-fire agreement a day after president Thein Sein met with nearly 40 politicians and ethnic leaders to push for a deal to be signed next month. Chairman of the Kayin People's Party (KPP) and Karen ethnic affairs minister for Yangon Region Tun Aung Myint and Chin ethnic affairs minister for the Sagaing Region No Than Kap, submitted a proposal for 12-way discussions on national reconciliation Tuesday, said Speaker of the Lower House of parliament Shwe Mann. "We want peace," Shwe Mann said. "To have peace, we have to work on national reconciliation. This meeting with the ethnic affairs ministers will support to our efforts in the peace-making process." The request came during Shwe Mann's meeting with nearly 30 of the country's ethnic affairs ministers in the capital Naypyidaw to discuss an ethnic rights protection bill. The ethnic affairs ministers had an opportunity during the meeting to submit what they wanted to add to and amend in the country's constitution. Tun Aung Myint in speaking to the local media said that the talks for constitutional reform be urgently facilitated, as the general elections scheduled for late October or early November draw closer, and a nationwide cease-fire be implemented as soon as possible. He also said ethnic affairs ministers and political parties must ensure free and fair elections and be included in campaigns that promote religious harmony at all levels, according to the report. The Upper House of (Amyotha Hluttaw) has discussed the ethnic rights protection bill and sent it with suggestions to the lower house, which will review it a second time. If the entire legislature approves it, the bill will be sent to Thein Sein, the report said.<sup>4</sup>

### **PSLF/TNLA RELEASES STATEMENT ON NATIONWIDE CEASEFIRE DEAL**

Trust between the government and ethnic armed groups has diminished as the government backtracked on already-reached agreements for the nationwide ceasefire deal, according to a statement released by the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF), and its military wing, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), in honour of the 52nd Ta'ang National Revolution Day, which falls on 12 January. The PSLF/TNLA has been working with in the Nation-wide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) as a member, even though it has not reached an individual ceasefire deal with the government. The statement said the peace process has stalled at a time when the deadline to reach

<sup>3</sup> Civilians Flee Fresh Fighting between KIA, Govt Troops –  
<http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/civilians-flee-fresh-fighting-kia-govt-troops.html> (Irrawaddy) 15 January 2015/  
Myanmar's military and KIA exchange brief gunfire –  
<http://mizzima.com/mizzima-news/myanmar/item/16840-myanmar-s-military-and-kia-exchange-brief-gunfire> (Mizzima)  
14 January 2015/

Myanmar armed group ambushes official's convoy –  
<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/902091.shtml> (Global Times) 15 January 2015

<sup>4</sup> Ethnic Affairs Ministers Call for 12-Party Talks on Peace Deal for Myanmar –  
<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/ethnic-affairs-ministers-01132015162644.html> (Radio Free Asia) 13 January 2015

a ceasefire agreement is approaching because the government has rejected agreements that it previously committed to. The TNLA has deployed battalions and units in Kyaukme, Mong Mit, Namhsan, Mantong, Namtu, Hsipaw, Lashio, Hseni, Kutkai, Nanhkan and Muse and is seeking to station its forces in areas habited by Taang people. In 2014, over 200 fights broke out between the TNLA and the government army. The TNLA has been defending local people, forming a professional military force, campaign within the community and fighting the narcotics industry, the statement said. The PSLF/TNLA was able solve narcotic drug problems to a certain extent in cooperation with local people. In its effort to eliminate narcotic drugs, the PSLF/TNLA seized narcotic drug factories and adopted a plan for the eradication of narcotic drugs in its territory. Disagreement between the PSLF/TNLA and the Myanmar government over the latter's dismissal of agreements made in the 6th ceasefire talk held in Yangon on September 2014 and both sides are planning to participate in the 7th round of talks.<sup>5</sup>

### **EU CONCERNED OVER PROPOSED 'PROTECTION OF RACE AND RELIGION' BILLS**

The European Union (EU) has expressed concern over a set of religion and interfaith marriage bills set to be debated in the next session of parliament opening on 19 January. The 4 bills, which seek to impose curbs on interfaith marriage, religious conversion and birth rates, were sent to parliament by President Thein Sein in December 2014. The bills have been met with fierce criticism from human rights groups who have said that they are discriminatory and unconstitutional. The EU in a statement issued on 13 January said, "The EU calls upon the Government of Myanmar and the Hluttaw to ensure that all legislation adopted be fully in line with Myanmar's own international human rights obligations." It also urged the Myanmar government and parliament to ensure that all legislation adopted be fully in line with Myanmar's own international human rights obligations and that certain provisions included in these bills were not consistent with current transition towards national reconciliation and an open democratic society. The statement added that the laws could fall foul of international human rights treaties that Myanmar is a party to, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The bills were proposed in 2013 by a group of nationalist monks, the Committee for the Protection of Nationality and Religion, more widely known as Ma Ba Tha. Another of the proposed laws, the Myanmar Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Bill, would force a Buddhist woman under the age of 20 to get consent from their parents if marrying a non-Buddhist. Applications would also need to be made to the local authorities and a public notice of the marriage posted. In the case of a divorce, the law would guarantee that in a marriage where the male partner is non-Buddhist, a Buddhist woman would be given custody of all children that the couple may have.<sup>6</sup>

### **UPPER HOUSE SPEAKER MEETS 88 GENERATION LEADERS**

The leaders of Burma's most prominent student group, the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society, held a meeting with the Speaker of the Upper House Khin Aung Myint in Naypyitaw on 11 January. Discussions focussed on the importance of advancing national reconciliation and the peace process, as well as calling for the reduction of the military (Tatmadaw) in the country's in political affairs. The Group's leaders urged the Speaker to consider the need to amend Article 436, a controversial provision in the Constitution that requires more than 75 percent of the Union Parliament to approve

<sup>5</sup> PSLF/TNLA releases statement on nationwide ceasefire deal –

[http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=8687:pslf-tnla-releases-statement-on-nationwide-ceasefire-deal&catid=32:politics&Itemid=354](http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8687:pslf-tnla-releases-statement-on-nationwide-ceasefire-deal&catid=32:politics&Itemid=354) (Eleven News Media) 14 January 2015/

Palaung army complains of Tatmadaw intimidation –

<http://www.dvb.no/news/palaung-army-complains-of-tatmadaw-intimidation-army-ethnic-conflict-tnla-burma-myanmar/47253> (DVB) 12 January 2015

<sup>6</sup> EU concerned over proposed 'protection of race and religion' bills –

<http://mizzima.com/mizzima-news/myanmar/item/16785-eu-concerned-over-proposed-protection-of-race-and-religion-bills> (Mizzima) 13 January 2015

any constitutional amendments. With a quarter of parliamentary seats reserved for the military, Article 436 effectively gives the armed forces a veto over proposals for constitutional reform. A member of the Group Pyone Cho said, “We discussed only these topics as we think they are the most important issues at the moment and told us there are many people who should be involved in the reform process, and that the will of other stakeholders is important as well.” Mya Aye, another 88 Generation leader, said that the Group strongly expressed to the Speaker their desire for a durable peace agreement which would satisfy the desires of the country’s ethnic minorities. “We told him we want a strong peace process with no backsliding that would guarantee the federal union all ethnic people here want,” Mya Aye said.

Regarding the recent proposals for 12-party talks between representatives of the government, military and opposition—which themselves grew out of earlier agitation for a six-party dialogue - Pyone Cho said that there was broad agreement between Speaker Khin Aung Myint and the 88 Generation leaders that peace and reform discussions should focus more on outcomes than ensuring every sectional interest seeking representation had a seat at the table. “[The Speaker] said it’s more important to have a concrete agenda to discuss at the talks rather than the number of people involved,” said Pyone Cho.<sup>7</sup>

### **MON STATE GOVERNMENT MEETS CSOS, NGOS AND INGOS TO DISCUSS COOPERATION**

The Mon State government held its first meeting with civil society organisations (CSOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) on 6 January to help increase cooperation for development projects in Mon State. The Chief Minister of State Ohn Myint explained that even though such organisations are in touch with the state government they still do not have enough information to do their work properly, which shows that the government have a communication problem. To combat this, the organisations need to work and cooperate more with local authorities such as township level supporting committees, municipal committees, and land management committees. The head of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Mon State Kyaw Kyaw Soe speaking on behalf of all the development organisations working in Mon State urged the authorities to appoint a liaison officer to work with the development organisations. The Chief Minister agreed to appoint the Director of Mon State Planning and Economic Ministry to serve as liaison officer. Kyaw Kyaw Soe from the UNDP welcomed the decision on the appointment and said, “This is a positive sign, we even had some results before the meeting. The Chief Minister knew what he had to do and now he has done it [appointing a liaison officer].” He added that following the meeting with the development organisations state development projects could be smoothly implemented without any delays.<sup>8</sup>

### **ANALYSIS**

Myanmar’s democratic process is once again under the spotlight as the country prepares itself to hold general elections later this year. At such a crucial juncture in time, Myanmar is still confronted with one of its most pressing issues that of the on-going ethnic conflicts inside the country. President Thein Sein’s recent meeting with ethnic ministers, political leaders and representatives from ethnic groups once again highlights the importance of national reconciliation and that such meetings can contribute to creating a better understanding as well as promoting trust among key stakeholders. The President has also emphasized the need to implement a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) as a first step to begin a political dialogue that can shape the country’s political future. However, the

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<sup>7</sup> 88 Generation Leaders Talk Peace Process, Military Veto with Upper House Speaker – <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/88-generation-leaders-talk-peace-process-military-veto-upper-house-speaker.html> (Irrawaddy) 12 January 2015

<sup>8</sup> Mon State Government Meets CSOs, NGOs and INGOS to Discuss Cooperation – <http://monnews.org/2015/01/13/mon-state-government-meets-csos-ngos-ingos-discuss-cooperation/> (IMNA) 13 January 2015

clashes between government forces and the KIA in Kachin State raises questions as to why government and ethnic armed groups are fighting each other at this point in time and the consequences it could have for the peace process. On a more positive note, the fact that both sides are engaged in talks is in itself an achievement taking into consideration that mistrust runs deep after decades of fighting. Whatever the case maybe, peace can be reached through negotiations but will require greater resolve and genuine commitment to change. More importantly it is crucial that the current small scale skirmishes do not become outright war.