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# POLITICAL MONITOR No. 21

## OFFICIAL MEDIA

### **ELECTION COMMISSION POSTPONES BY-ELECTIONS**

Union Election Commission Chairman Tin Aye announced in a meeting with political parties on 7 September that the by-elections to be held later this year would be cancelled citing concerns over costs and charring ASEAN as reasons for the decision. Chairman Tin Aye explained that the Union Election Commission had initially told a parliamentary session on 20 May that the second by-elections would be held in late November or early December. However, now that the parliament is occupied with addressing constitutional and electoral reforms issues, holding by-elections would be burdensome on the political parties, some of whose representatives are members of the committees and commissions tasked with constitutional and electoral amendments. Tin Aye said that the government would have to spend over 2 billion kyats on two elections and, as a result, a second thought should be given to holding the elections as there is no telling whether the spending would benefit the country.<sup>1</sup>

### **PRESIDENT MAKES OFFICIAL VISIT TO SWITZERLAND**

President Thein Sein arrived in Switzerland on 4 September and held talks with Swiss President Didier Burkhalter and discussed a wide range of matters including improvement of vocational training schools, development of agriculture and livestock breeding sectors, capacity building for service personnel and local authorities, peace-making process, human rights promotion, constitutional affairs and holding of free and fair elections. They also exchanged views on peace and stability and the development of Rakhine State, as well as racial and religious conflict prevention and relations between ASEAN and regional countries. Both sides agreed to establish a deputy ministerial-level coordination mechanism between their foreign ministries to strengthen bilateral ties. The Swiss government also agreed to a contribution of US\$164 million dollars as part of a development aid package to Myanmar under a 5-year plan from 2013 to 2017. The President also visited the Swiss capital Bern and Zurich, as well as the head office of Nestle in Konolfingen. Nestle is seeking to invest US\$ 50 million in coffee, milk and dairy products, as well as the drinking water and beverages sector in Myanmar over a 6-year period starting from 2014.<sup>2</sup>

### **PRESIDENT THEIN SEIN ARRIVES IN THE NETHERLANDS**

On the last-leg of his 3-country European tour, President Thein Sein arrived in Amsterdam on 7 September and met with Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and Chief Executive Officer of Shell Ben van Beurden on 9 September.

The President was also received by King Willem-Alexander and Queen Maxima, who is the United Nations Secretary General's Special Advocate for Inclusive Finance for Development.

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<sup>1</sup> UEC decides not to hold by-elections this year –

<http://www.moi.gov.mm/npe/nlm/content/8-sept-14> (NLM) 8 September 2014 (p. 1)

<sup>2</sup> President U Thein Sein visits Albert Einstein Museum in Bern –

<http://www.moi.gov.mm/npe/nlm/content/6-sept-14> (NLM) 6 September 2014 (p. 1) /

President U Thein Sein visits Payerne solar impulse project, Nestlé Plant in Switzerland –  
<http://www.moi.gov.mm/npe/nlm/content/7-sept-14> (NLM) 7 September 2014 (p. 1) /

President U Thein Sein attends welcome ceremony of Swiss President –

<http://www.moi.gov.mm/npe/nlm/content/7-sept-14> (NLM) 7 September 2014 (p. 3) /

President U Thein Sein arrives in Switzerland –

<http://www.moi.gov.mm/npe/nlm/content/8-sept-14> (NLM) 8 September 2014 (p. 1) /

President U Thein Sein visits Berne University of Applied Sciences –

<http://www.moi.gov.mm/npe/nlm/content/8-sept-14> (NLM) 8 September 2014 (p. 3)

President Thein Sein also met Senate leader Ankie Broekers-Knol and Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation Minister Lilianne Ploumen and attended round-table talks organised by the Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers (VNO-NCW).<sup>3</sup>

## UNOFFICIAL MEDIA

### GOVERNMENT NEGOTIATORS PROPOSE DATES FOR NEXT CEASEFIRE TALKS

The Union Peace-making Work Committee (UPWC) has proposed a 3-day meeting from 22 September with the Nationwide Ceasefire Co-ordinating Team (NCCT) to discuss finalising the national ceasefire agreement.

Speaking after an NCCT meeting on 9 September to discuss its negotiating position at future talks, NCCT leader Naing Han Thar said that the group has yet to decide if it accepts the proposed dates. He said that the remaining issues to be discussed include the implementation of a ceasefire monitoring mechanism after a ceasefire takes effect. The next round of ceasefire talks would also need to agree on the groups to participate in a political dialogue after the ceasefire is signed.<sup>4</sup>

### PA-O, SHAN ETHNIC ARMED GROUPS MEET AFTER CLASH OVER TERRITORY

Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) Vice Chairman Gen. Sai Yee and Pa-O National Liberation Organization (PNLO) Chairman Khun Myint Htun met on 11 September to discuss the latest clashes in Maukmae Township, southern Shan State, according to RCSS peace team secretary Lt-Col. Sai Ngin. "They agreed to settle the territorial dispute in a peaceful manner," he said, adding that they met at Loi Tai Leng, the RCSS headquarters located on the Burma-Thai border. "We focused on controlling our ground forces so we will not exchange gunfire again," Sai Ngin said, adding that the territorial dispute would be discussed in detail at a further meeting.

The meeting comes a week after the two sides exchanged fire in a long-disputed area where both intend to build bases and homes for their ethnic villagers. Sai Ngin said the fire-fight had been settled and no casualties had been reported.

The RCSS alleged that the PNLO came to build houses in the area and ignored repeated warnings by the RCSS to leave. RCSS troops are still deployed in the disputed area, where it has been providing health and educational supports for Shan villagers.

The PNLO claimed that 3 of its fighters were captured and are being held against their will, but Sai Ngin denied these accusations. "These 3 soldiers came and joined the RCSS forces, we did not arrest them. If they want to go back home or have a desire to go back to their organization, we are ready to let them go," he said.

Representatives of other ethnic armed organizations including the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the Wa also attended the meeting in order to help mediate a solution. KNPP Chairman Abel Tweed said that Burma's different ethnic groups should unite in order to negotiate a peace agreement with the government. He said the groups should live in harmony in areas where

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<sup>3</sup> President U Thein Sein arrives in Netherlands –  
<http://www.moi.gov.mm/npe/nlm/content/9-sept-14> (NLM) 9 September 2014 (p. 1) /  
President explains Myanmar reforms in talks with Dutch dignitaries –  
<http://www.moi.gov.mm/npe/nlm/content/10-sept-14> (NLM) 10 September 2014 (p. 1 & 3) /  
President U Thein Sein meets Prime Minister of the Netherlands, CEO of Shell Co., -  
<http://www.moi.gov.mm/npe/nlm/content/11-sept-14> (NLM) 11 September 2014 (p. 1)

<sup>4</sup> Government negotiators propose dates for next ceasefire talks –  
<http://www.mizzima.com/mizzima-news/myanmar/item/12639-government-negotiators-propose-dates-for-next-ceasefire-talks> (Mizzima) 10 September 2014

they are neighbors, adding that “the dispute could be settled. We cannot push away or reject to the settlement of the ethnics - either Pa-O, Palaung, Shan or Wa - in Shan State.”<sup>5</sup>

### **MAJOR RESHUFFLES IN MILITARY LEADERSHIP**

Military sources have confirmed that Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing ordered a reshuffle of senior officers on 8 September, with a number of important positions changing hands.

According to these sources, as a result of the reshuffle, which was not publicly announced, Lieutenant General Mya Tun Oo has been promoted to full general and given the posts of Chief of Military Security and Chief of Bureau of Special Operations-6.

Lieutenant General Kyaw Swe, who previously held those positions, took over Mya Tun Oo’s former post of Chief of Staff (Army) and was also appointed Head of Bureau of Special Operations-5.

General Mya Tun Oo, who is from the 25<sup>th</sup> intake of the Defence Services Academy (DSA), is widely tipped to take over the position of Commander-in-Chief when Senior General Min Aung Hlaing retires.

Meanwhile, Yangon Region Command Commander Major General Sann Oo was promoted to Adjutant-General, while the former Adjutant-General, Lieutenant General Khin Zaw Oo, was shifted to the Head of Bureau of Special Operations-4.

Northern Region Command leader Major General Tun Tun Naung was appointed as Commander of the Yangon Command.<sup>6</sup>

### **KAREN WOMEN GROUP URGE KNU TO REJOIN UNFC**

The Karen Women Organization (KWO), a Karen women’s group based inside Burma, has issued a statement urging the Karen National Union (KNU) to rejoin the ethnic alliance the UNFC, as its recent action to suspend its membership risks dividing support within the Karen political community and derailing unity in the ethnic nationalities.

The KNU suspended its UNFC membership during the 1<sup>st</sup> Congress of the ethnic alliance organized on 25 August in Chiang Mai, Thailand. KNU delegates who attended the Congress had submitted a 9 point proposal on 30 August recommending the UNFC change its structure and policies. After the KNU’s proposal was not discussed and rejected by the majority of the alliance members, the KNU submitted a letter of suspension as an alliance member. The KNU is planning to hold a central executive committee meeting to make the decision for its further involvement with the UNFC.

KWO spokeswoman Naw Ohn Hla said “We see that it [the suspension] is in contradiction to KNU policies. The decision also seems to be influenced by individuals, groups and personal attitudes. Therefore, we put out our position statement to voice our concern to KNU over this action.”

The KWO statement highlights 5 key points that the KNU ignored and by doing so defied its own policies laid down at its 15<sup>th</sup> Congress. The KNU – by suspending its membership with UNFC, an ethnic alliance formed to establish a federal union – has effectively divided the strength of the ethnic push for national equality and its call for rights to self-determination.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Pa-O, Shan Rebels Meet after Clash over Territory – <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/pa-o-shan-rebels-meet-clash-territory.html> (Irrawaddy) 11 September 2014

<sup>6</sup> Major reshuffles in Tatmadaw ranks – <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/11605-major-reshuffles-in-tatmadaw-ranks.html> (Myanmar Times) 9 September 2014

<sup>7</sup> Karen Women Urge KNU To Rejoin UNFC – <http://karennews.org/2014/09/karen-women-urge-knu-to-rejoin-unfc.html/> (Karen News) 10 September 2014

## USDP DENIES ROLE IN CANCELLING BY-ELECTIONS

A spokesman for the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) has rejected reports that the party was involved in axing this year's by-elections, but said that he believes the decision to cancel polling was "sensible".

"The reasons Union Election Commission [UEC] Chairman Tin Aye gave for cancelling the by-elections were sensible," said USDP central committee member Thar Win. "Nonetheless, we wanted to contest the polls and had been preparing for the campaign. We believe the by-elections would have been beneficial for us. We wanted to use this year's polls as a learning curve for the 2015 general election."

According to Thar Win, the USDP conceded that the term of any elected candidates in the by-election would only last a year, and therefore the time spent campaigning would be uneconomical. However he rejected claims that the polls, which were to be slated for November or December, had been cancelled due to pressure from the USDP. "We had prepared vigorously for these by-elections," he said. "But our preparations will not be wasted as we have national elections coming soon."

Thirty-five vacant seats remain in the upper and lower houses of parliament, as well as state and divisional assemblies. The opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi won 43 seats of 46 seats at the last by-elections in April 2012. It, too, said it accepted the decision of the UEC to cancel this year's polls.<sup>8</sup>

## KARENNI LANGUAGE, ALPHABET TO BE TAUGHT IN SCHOOLS

The Karenni language and writing are to be taught in schools in the ethnic state, following a decision by the state assembly in Loikaw on 8 September. According to State Social and Health Minister Poe Reh, the teaching of Karenni children in their mother tongue was supported by 80 percent of local people in a recent field survey.

Karenni National Youth Union Central Executive Committee Member Kyaw Htin Aung said it "would not be a problem" to introduce a new curriculum in Karenni language to the children of the region, and that the Union plans to host a conference in the near future including representatives of all the various sub-groups of the Karenni.

The Kayah, or Red Karen (i.e, Karen Ni), is the majority ethnic group in Karenni State, however a sizeable population of Padaung (Kayan) also exists. The teaching of Padaung in schools was passed by state lawmakers in 2013.

Primary and secondary schools in Burma's ethnic areas have traditionally taught only in Burmese, but many have ethnic language classes once a day. Both Mon and Karen authorities have approved the adoption of mother tongue languages in their respective regions after Thein Sein's government gave the green light in 2013 to minority languages being introduced in ethnic state schools.

In July, more than 200 ethnic representatives met at a forum in Yangon to brainstorm an ethnic language curriculum, based on a modern communicative approach rather than traditional teaching methods.

According to the 2014 census, Karenni State is the least populated region in the country with 286,738 people. It also has the fewest number of schools. According to 2002-03 data there are 338 primary schools in Karenni State, with 33 middle schools and just 12 high schools. The state has 3 universities, all located in the state capital, Loikaw.

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<sup>8</sup> USDP denies role in cancelling by-elections –

<http://english.dvb.no/news/usdp-denies-role-in-cancelling-by-elections-burma-myanmar/43986> (DVB) 9 September 2014

The Karenni is a Sino-Tibetan ethnic group closely related to the Karen, and its Kayah language is spoken by an estimated 590,000 people, many of whom live in Karen State. The Karenni alphabet – kyal poe gyi or kayah li – was created in 1962, and has only ever been widely taught at refugee camps in Thailand. It appears to be modelled, linguists say, on Thai and Burmese scripts. Kayah li has 24 consonants and nine vowels, each of which is controlled by one of three tones: high, mid and low.<sup>9</sup>

## ANALYSIS

Burma's election commission has postponed the by-elections scheduled for later this year, citing the financial burden it would pose for political parties as one of its concerns. The postponement represents yet another step backwards in the on-going democratic reform process, although it has been welcomed by prominent parties including the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and the National League for Democracy (NLD). However, for some, the by-elections could have provided an important test for assessing the commitment of Naypyitaw to democratic reforms, but it will be seen by others as another broken pledge. On a more positive note, the cancellation means parties will have more time to prepare for the general elections to be held next year in 2015. If the government is genuinely committed to reforms, it will need to work with the election commission to ensure that the 2015 general elections are conducted in a free and fair manner.

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<sup>9</sup> Karenni language, alphabet to be taught in schools – <http://english.dvb.no/news/karenni-language-alphabet-to-be-taught-in-schools-burma-myanmar/44083> (DVB) 12 September 2014