



THE ARAKAN ARMY'S INVOLVEMENT IN RAKHINE STATE

On 29 March 2015, fighting broke out between the Arakan Army's (AA) Tactical Unit No. 5 and Myanmar Army Infantry Battalion No. 289 in one of the first major attacks for the AA outside of Kachin State where they are largely based. The attack, on the ethnic Chin village of Pyin So, Paletwa Township, Chin State, forced hundreds of villagers to flee. According to one villager, speaking to the Chin Human Rights Organisation, the fighting had occurred because Government soldiers stationed in the village had captured an Arakan Army soldier, three days before the clash.¹

Lieutenant Colonel Dr. Nyo Tun Aung, AA deputy commander-in-chief, said in a Narinjara interview that two bodies - a captain and a private, both from the Burma Army - were recovered, and that they arrested two Myanmar Army soldiers. In addition, the AA seized a 45mm pistol, two MA-1 machine

guns, one MA-3 machine gun, several bullets, and military equipment.² He also noted that because the government has been increasing the number of Burma Army soldiers in the area there is likely to be further fighting.

Prior to the fighting the Arakan Army has largely confined its military operations to Kachin State and the presence of the Arakan Army in Rakhine State close to the border with Chin State should be seen as a major concern not only for the Myanmar Army, but also for the Chin National Front. Additionally, it may also further complicate the peace process. Both the Arakan Army and the Chin National Front are members of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) and the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordinating Team (NCCT). Although the AA was one of three groups that were set to resign from the NCCT they withdrew their resignation.³

PALETWA

One of the main concerns is a territorial dispute over Paletwa, claimed by both the Chin and the Rakhine. The majority of the population are Khumi Chin and there was a major demonstration when the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP) announced it was going to open a Liaison Office in the town as part of

a ceasefire agreement with the Government. Both ALP and Rakhine state government delegations made an agreement to set up a liaison office for the ALP in Paletwa, in Chin State during the first week of April 2012 in a move that was criticised by the local community.



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According to one government employee:

*"We could accept it if they were a Chin political party. It is not acceptable for us to allow them to set up their office in Paletwa. It is not their territory. The authorities should have consulted the Chin State government before making a decision on this issue"*⁴

A local village head also stated that:

"The central authorities ought to have consulted local people about this issue. We are not Arakanese. We cannot accept any other national armed group in our area. The Burmese government should have consulted local Khumi people before signing an agreement".

EXPANDING OPERATIONS

As noted earlier, the Arakan Army has largely been involved in fighting alongside the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and, most recently, with the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) in Kachin and Northern Shan State. At a time when the Government is involved in ceasefire negotiations of which they and other ethnic leaders demand they become a part, it must be questioned whether now is the right time to expand its military operations into Rakhine

Salai Ceu Bik Thawng, General Secretary of the Chin National Party (CNP) echoed such concerns:

*"I am worried that there will be clashes between Chin and Rakhine people over this issue because it is very sensitive. This problem will not be solved by democratic means and a federal system but will lead to racial problems"*⁵

Because of such protests, the office remains unopened.

A number of Chin leaders have suggested that the Chin National Front has made it clear to the Arakan Army that should Chin civilians suffer due to Arakan Army operations then the CNF's armed wing the Chin National Army, may have little recourse other than to engage them.⁶

and Chin States. Although clashes between the Myanmar Army and the AA occurred in late March, the heaviest fighting was reported on April 17, 18 and 23 April. Not long after, on 29 April, it was reported that the Myanmar Army had detained U Zaw Win Maung, an executive committee member of the Rakhine National Party for Kyauktaw Township. The Rakhine politician was arrested in Ywarthit village, while two days later on 1 May, it was reported that more than 30 civilians had been arrested in Rakhine State by the Myanmar Army



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for alleged links to the Arakan Army. Lieutenant Colonel Nyo Tun Aung, the deputy commander-in-chief of the AA, said they were being arrested because they were depicted in images on phones found on AA soldiers captured by the Tatmadaw.⁷

There have been numerous reports of Myanmar army seizures of weapons in Rakhine State,⁸ in one

FORMATION AND FUTURE

The Arakan Army (AA) was founded on 10 April 2009 in what it describes as its temporary headquarters in Kachin State. It is estimated to have approximately 2,500 troops and claims to have 10,000 supporters.¹¹ It is led by Commander-in-chief General Twan Mrat Naing and Second-in-Command Col. Dr. Nyo Twan Awng, its Chief of Staff is Brigadier Tun Myat Naing. Its main aims are:

1. Self-determination for the people of Arakan.
2. Safeguard national identity and cultural heritage.
3. Promote national dignity and Arakanese national interests.¹²

The group, after training, had originally planned to return to Arakan State and fight for self-determination; however, with the outbreak of fighting in Kachin State in June 2011, they were unable to return. As a result, they took up arms

incident, on 7 May 2015, the military recovered around 40 firearms from Cil Hali in Maungdaw North believed to be used by the Arakan Army.⁹ It has been suggested that Rakhine sympathisers of the Arakan Army are considering smuggling operations into Bangladesh to help finance the group's operations in Rakhine State¹⁰.

against the Myanmar Army in support of the KIA.

The Arakan Army in Kachin State is not affiliated with the Arakan Liberation Party/Arakan Army actually in Rakhine State and along the Thai-Myanmar Border. The Kachin based AA is much stronger and more battle conditioned. It currently has no political leadership as Dr. Nyo Twan Aung notes:

*"Arakan Army is only an armed group, not a political party, fighting against the government for freedom of Arakanese people."*¹³

Consequently, the Arakan Liberation Party, in what appeared to be an attempt to have the Arakan Army join it and thus strengthen its bargaining position with the Government had, in a 4 June 2013 statement, said:

"...the Arakanese people today need a strong modern Army to protect the indigenous people, the



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land and our natural resources. Without a stronger force we cannot achieve our goal.”¹⁴

Such a force is needed due to the fact that:

“The land of Arakan is today witnessing the conflict of interest under the deadlock of Myanmarization and Islamization which has finally threatened the existence of the Arakanese people.”¹⁵

The statement was made despite the fact that the ALP signed a State-level agreement with the Government in April 2012, which also includes a non-cessation clause.

The Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) was also courting the Arakan Army. In a 5 May 2013 meeting with President U Thein Sein, Arakan Army (AA) leaders welcomed a request made by the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) to have the AA permanently reside in Rakhine State., according to the Chief of Staff, Brigadier, Tun Myat Naing:

“This is a demand made by the Rakhine people and the RNDP is merely trying to follow through; it needs for the AA to settle down. This is part of the agreement the RNDP made with the government after discussing the political issue. The AA is ready to protect the Rakhine people.”¹⁶

He continued:

“We are receptive to the RNDP’s demand and will have to live in Kachin State according to the

stipulations. With permission from the government, the AA will settle down in Rakhine State only, said Brigadier Tun Myat Naing.”¹⁷

In January 2014, the two main Rakhine parties, the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) and the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) formed the Arakan National Party (ANP) and the Arakan Army has suggested that it supports the ANP despite a number of conflicts within the Party. Chief of Staff Brigadier Tun Myat Naing has stated that:

“We support our Arakan National Party, but I see it is not doing well. I don’t want to criticize the internal affairs of the party, but, it would be better if the organizational structure were stronger. No matter who would [enter the race] from [elsewhere in] Burma, Arakanese people will win the election in our Arakan State.”¹⁸

However, he has also made it clear that the Arakan Army is preparing to reorganise its administrative function:

“We have not formed a central executive committee yet. We have more than ten thousand members. We did not form a [political] party because there were a number of parties already. At first, we thought of unifying the parties in Arakan State instead of forming a separate party. But then we came to realize that it is not convenient because there would be too many leaders and it would hamper their



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functionality. We now have a blueprint for a central executive committee. We plan to eventually form an Arakan National League [as an administrative wing of the AA] and we are already working on it.

We have a consultative council, and senior experts advise them. With their help, we are now trying to get contacts in neighbouring countries. We are almost ready to work on a wide scale. We have already planned for a meeting where we will publicly announce our organizational structure.”¹⁹

As part of the UNFC’s plan for a Federal Union Army, it is necessary for each individual State to have its own armed forces. While the Arakan Liberation Party’s military wing, also known as the Arakan Army, may be seen to be the obvious choice it is too small and inexperienced. Consequently, therefore, it is more than likely that the Kachin based Arakan Army, once it has appointed a sufficiently effective administrative structure, would like to see itself in the role of defender of Rakhine State.

That said however, the Myanmar Government would need to reassess its position in allowing the group to participate in the Nationwide Ceasefire negotiations. The NCCT has made it quite clear that it is not prepared to enter into an agreement with the Government unless those groups currently excluded –the AA, The TNLA, and the MNDAA– are included.

The fact that the Arakan Army has now widened its operations to Arakan State suggests that this may be a serious issue in how far Government negotiators are able to find compromise, this combined with tensions with the Chin further suggest that the Arakan Army may need to rethink its future strategy.



Notes

- ¹ 'Villagers flee clash between Arakan and Burma armies in Chin State', Chinland Guardian, 1 April 2015
 - ² 'Arakan Army and Burma Army clash in Arakan State', Narinjara, 29 April 2015
 - ³ 'Rebel Armies Reconsider NCCT Resignation after Summit Olive Branch', Kyaw Kha, The Irrawaddy, 8 June 2015
 - ⁴ 'Chin leaders oppose ALP's liaison office in Paletwa' Khonumthung, 12 April, 2012
 - ⁵ Ibid.
 - ⁶ Personal conversation with Chin leaders in May and June 2015.
 - ⁷ 'Rakhine chief minister hits out at army over fighting', Myanmar Times, 1 May 2015
 - ⁸ <http://www.rathedaung.net/2015/05/weapons-seized-in-series-of-raids-in-rakhine-villages-and-monasteries.html>
 - ⁹ <http://burmatimes.net/arrests-made-in-connection-with-arakan-army/>
 - ¹⁰ Ibid.
 - ¹¹ 'I Want to Stress That We Are Not the Enemy', Nan Lwin Hnin Pwint ,The Irrawaddy, 12 June 2015
 - ¹² See <http://thearakanarmy.com/>
 - ¹³ 'Arakan Army Basic Military Training Concludes in KIO Controlled Area', Narinjara, 8 April, 2013
 - ¹⁴ 'ALP urges for a stronger National Army for Arakanese', Narinjara, 7 June, 2013
 - ¹⁵ Ibid
 - ¹⁶ <https://democracyforburma.wordpress.com/2013/06/03/the-arakan-army-is-ready-to-stand-in-the-motherland/>
 - ¹⁷ Ibid.
 - ¹⁸ 'I Want to Stress That We Are Not the Enemy', Nan Lwin Hnin Pwint ,The Irrawaddy, 12 June 2015
 - ¹⁹ Ibid.
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