
POLITICAL MONITOR NO.32

OFFICIAL MEDIA

PRESIDENT THEIN SEIN RECEIVES THE ELDERS

An Elders Group delegation consisting of three former heads of state led by US President Jimmy Carter, Finnish President Marti Ahtisaari and Norwegian Prime Minister Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland paid a three-day official visit to Myanmar from 24 to 26 September. The Elders held talks with President Thein Sein and discussed the peace-making process, constitutional amendments, efforts for peaceful coexistence between Buddhists and Muslim communities in areas of conflict and the release all prisoners of conscience. President Thein Sein expressed thanks to the Elders for their humanitarian efforts and said that his government was making efforts to achieve a nation-wide peace accord, but that it still needed to hold political dialogue to achieve peace. The Elders encouraged all parties in Myanmar to continue to work on the political reform and peace process. They also held meetings with high-ranking government officials, leaders, religious leaders and civil society groups including women's organisations and exchanged views on the role of defence services personnel in the democratization process, preparations for the 2015 elections and participation of ethnic minorities and women in parliamentary affairs and State issues.¹

UNESCO INITIATES PEACE EDUCATION PROJECT IN RAKHINE STATE

The Ministry of Education has approved UNESCO's peace education project in Northern Rakhine State. The project will be jointly implemented by the Ministry of Education and UNESCO through funding from the Belgium government. Following the recent communal violence in Rakhine State, resulting in an ongoing humanitarian situation which has affected hundreds of schools and thousands of students, the government of Myanmar and the international community have identified peace education as one of the priorities to address the underlying causes of the communal tension. The overall aim of the peace education project is to enhance the capacity of teachers, students and their parents to facilitate inclusive problem solving processes and consensus-building around community priorities and to strengthen the commitment to an inclusive civic national identity. Through a conflict-sensitive approach to education, the project will support local leaders, teachers, students, parents and civil society to facilitate constructive civic dialogue that promotes inter-cultural awareness and peaceful coexistence. The project will promote the long term goal to overcome discrimination and exclusion through human rights-based, quality education and will be implemented in Northern Maungtaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung Townships, in northern Rakhine State. Under the programme, 350 teachers from 40 conflict-affected schools will be trained in peace education and it also aims to establish 40 parent teacher associations and set-up 3 community

¹ President U Thein Sein receives the Elders –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM-2013-09-26-red.pdf> (NLM) 26 September 2013 (p. 1)/

UEC Chairman meets former US President and party –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM-2013-09-26-red.pdf> (NLM) 26 September 2013 (p. 9)/

Deputy Speaker of Pyithu Hluttaw receives The Elders based in London of Britain –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM-2013-09-26-red.pdf> (NLM) 26 September 2013 (p. 9)/

The Elders support peaceful political transition, peace accords –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM-2013-09-27-red.pdf> (NLM) 27 September 2013 (p. 1)/

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing receives former US President Mr. Jimmy Carter, British Ambassador –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM-2013-09-27-red.pdf> (NLM) 27 September 2013 (p. 1)

learning centres. The Ministry of Education has indicated its interest in implementing similar projects in other cease-fire areas in Myanmar.²

PRESIDENT RECEIVES DELEGATION FROM JAPANESE HOUSE OF COUNCILLORS

President Thein Sein received a delegation led by MP Eriko Yamatani of the House of Councillors of Japan on 23 September. The visit focussed reviewing the existing Japanese ODA loans to Myanmar and future prospects and support development. Japan has already granted a US\$ 5 billion new ODA loan to Myanmar. The President welcomed the steps taken by many countries including Japan to invest in Myanmar; including the implementation of Thilawa Special Economic Zone, the Yangon water supply and power project; as well as upgrading the Yangon-Nay Pyi Taw-Mandalay railroad, the Tada-U Airport and the Dawei Special Economic Zone Projects.³

EU TO PROVIDE ASSISTANCE FOR 2015 ELECTIONS

The Chairman of Union Election Commission Tin Aye received the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Sir Robert Cooper on 24 September. They discussed EU assistance to hold successful free and fair elections in 2015 as well as EU experts sharing knowledge on electoral experience and technical assistance.⁴

UNOFFICIAL MEDIA

ETHNIC GROUPS CALL FOR FEDERAL UNION AT ‘TRUST-BUILDING’ CONFERENCE

Hundreds of representatives from Myanmar’s ethnic groups and government officials wrapped up a landmark conference on “trust-building” held in Taunggyi from 21 to 23 September. The conference had more than 300 attendees from 50 different political parties and armed ethnic groups that have signed cease-fire agreements with the Myanmar government in Shan, Mon, and Kayah states. The meeting aimed to promote trust-building between the many different ethnic groups, all of which are in various stages of talks with President Thein Sein’s administration about greater political representation.

The joint statement elaborated on the 5 goals agreed upon at the conclusion of the conference including 1) pursuing a nationwide cease-fire, 2) abolishing all “non-democratic laws,” 3) creating a federal union with equal rights, 4) a new Panglong Conference, referring to an all-inclusive 1947 accord aimed at uniting ethnic groups and forging national reconciliation, and 5) rewriting the former military junta’s 2008 constitution, which has received criticism for not giving the country’s ethnic groups sufficient representation in the government.⁵

² UNESCO Initiates Peace Education Project in Northern Rakhine State of Myanmar with support from the Belgium Government – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM-2013-09-21-ocr-red.pdf> (NLM) 21 September 2013 (p. 16)

³ Myanmar, Japan to cooperate in Yangon-Nay Pyi Taw-Mandalay railroad upgrading project, TadaU Airport and Dawei SEZ Project. President U Thein Sein receives MP of the House of Councillors of Japan and party – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM-2013-09-24-ocr-red.pdf> (NLM) 24 September 2013 (p. 1)

⁴ EU to provide assistance to 2015 election – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM-2013-09-25-red.pdf> (NLM) 25 September 2013 (p. 1)

⁵ Myanmar ethnic groups call for Federal Union – <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/conference-09232013182926.html> (RFA) 23 September 2013

SHAN STATE CONSTITUTIONAL REVIEW COMMITTEE FORMED

According to sources in Taunggy, a 5-member Shan State Constitutional Review Committee has been formed and held its first meeting on 25 September, while the details of the discussion have not been disclosed. The members include:

- Sai Kham Mart - Chairman, Deputy Speaker of Shan State Assembly
- U Thaug Shwe - Member, MP for Kalaw township
- Daw Cherry Kyi - Member, State Chief Justice
- U Win Shwe - Member, Chief Law Officer (Retired)
- Sai Kyaw Zam - Member, Director Law Department (Retired)

According to reports, other Regions and States have also formed their own Constitutional Review Committees. Common demands from the people so far include: the election of the state/region chief minister by the state/region legislature (and not by the President as stipulated in the constitution), less control of the Union Home Ministry over Shan State government and more say in financial matters.⁶

NATIONAL UNITY PARTY CALLS FOR CONSTITUTION TO BE AMENDED, NOT RE-WRITTEN

The National Unity Party (NUP), which was formed by the military junta in 1988, has insisted that Myanmar does not need to draft a new constitution, though certain provisions could be amended to satisfy the ethnic populations.

The announcement follows months of heated debate over whether Myanmar should re-write or amend its controversial 2008 constitution, which grants the military 25 per cent of seats in parliament and excludes opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi from the presidency.

NUP Central Executive Committee member Thein Htun defended the legislation and dismissed suggestions that it should be scrapped. "We aim to work for the development of our nation within a political framework based on the 2008 constitution," he said. "We don't see that it is necessary to completely rewrite the constitution to improve it but should only amend certain points prioritising the interests of the ethnic nationalities and the public."

At the event held at NUP headquarters in Yangon on 24 September, the party also released a statement calling for Myanmar to become a "peaceful and developed" democratic nation based on the 2008 constitution.

Thein Htun also stated that although the NUP objects to drafting a new constitution, they support plans to make changes that allow greater self-determination for ethnic peoples, which make up roughly 40 per cent of the population.⁷

HISTORIC WOMEN'S FORUM HELD IN YANGON, CALLS FOR NEW CONSTITUTION

The Women's League of Burma (WLB) and the Women's Organization Network (WON) jointly organized the landmark Myanmar Women's Forum in Yangon for the first time from 20 to 23 September, to deliberate upon gender equality, uplifting of the lives of women, role of women in peace building and federal union building in Myanmar. The forum was attended by over 400 participants and called for the 2008 Constitution to be completely re-written.

⁶ State level charter review committee formed – http://www.english.panglong.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5604:state-level-charter-review-committee-formed&catid=85:politics&Itemid=266 (S.H.A.N) 26 September 2013

⁷ National Unity Party calls for constitution to be amended, not re-written – <http://english.dvb.no/news/nup-calls-for-constitution-to-be-amended-not-re-written/32802> (DVB) 25 September 2013

Susanna Hla Hla Soe from WON said the participants discussed ways of getting women to take up leading roles in on-going peace process, as well as to promote women's rights in the country. "Besides discussing the topic 'Women and Peace', we also discussed subjects titled 'Women and the Law', 'Women and Gender' and 'Women and Decision Making'," she said.

WLB General-Secretary Tin Tin Nyo said the participants also discussed the controversial National Race Protection Law which they expanded to include a "Law for the Protection of Women". "As women, we believe that we are capable of decision-making and are able to shape our own lives. We know what is right for us and what is wrong. "We are looking to carry out campaigns that support women's development against the backdrop of a conservative, backward-thinking mind-set." She added that representatives may also seek meetings with senior Buddhist monks. Tin Tin Nyo said that simply amending the constitution was not enough—the women's groups were calling for a complete rewrite of the 2008 document. She said the groups at the forum will also sign a petition urging President Thein Sein to release women activists Naw Ohn Hla, Myint Myint Aye, Bauk Ja and Mi Mi Khin who are serving jail terms.⁸

MILITARY SENDS MORE TROOPS AND SUPPLIES TO NORTHERN KACHIN STATE

Myanmar military planes were recently observed unloading troops and supplies at the Putao airport in northern Kachin state according to local residents. The arrival of reinforcements in Putao comes just weeks before government negotiators and representatives of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) are to meet in early October for peace talks.

At least two large Chinese-built Shaanxi Y-8 transport planes were seen landing and unloading at Putao airport on 21 September. Large helicopters have also been seen off-loading troops and supplies at the same airport according to local residents.

Most of the troop reinforcements and military supplies were sent south of Putao to Nhka Ga village in Machyangbaw Township, according to a well-informed local resident. The village was previously controlled by troops from the 7th Battalion of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) 1st Brigade until late August when government troops captured the area.

Nhka Ga village fell on 29 August after two days of heavy fighting. The fighting began when troops from the army's Infantry Battalion No. 137, supported by a local pro-government militia led by Ahdang Tang (or Danggu Tang), attacked KIA positions near the village. Two Burmese officers were reported killed during the battle according to KIA sources, though only the loss of one of the men was confirmed by the state-run media.⁹

ANALYSIS

The visit by the Elders and their meetings with Myanmar leaders, opposition parties, civil society organizations and ethnic groups will have provided the international community further insights and a better understanding on the reform process. Similarly, the EU's offer to provide expert and technical assistance augurs well that the elections in 2015 will be free and fair. Despite these preparations, the calls to review and even rewrite the controversial 2008 constitution will become a major challenge in the run-up to the elections. However, it is crucial to note that discussions on such sensitive issues will take time and may not be able to accommodate the wishes and desires of all

⁸ Charter of Women's Development to be released - <http://www.mizzima.com/mizzima-news/development/item/10208-charter-of-women-s-development-to-be-released> (Mizzima) 28 September 2013 /

Women's groups call for new constitution – <http://www.dvb.no/dvb-video/womens-groups-call-for-new-constitution/32748> (DVB) 23 September 2013

⁹ Military sends more troops and supplies to northern Kachin State – <http://www.kachinnews.com/news/2571-military-sends-more-troops-and-supplies-to-northern-kachin-state.html> (KNG) 27 September 2013

interested parties and groups. Furthermore, consideration also needs to be taken with regards to the response of the military (Tatmadaw) as such debate will bring into question its role. Another key factor is the on-going peace process, through which several cease-fire agreements have been signed, but has yet to achieve peace. President Thein Sein will need to skilfully manage to accommodate both the Tatmadaw and ethnic groups to join the democratic reform process. Other leaders from political groups and ethnic groups must also be ready to make such sacrifices in the interest of the nation.