

A DISTURBING PORTENT: INTER-ETHNIC TENSIONS AND THE PEACE PROCESS

As the Union Peace Conference was taking place in Nay Pyi Taw from 12 - 16 January 2016 tensions between the armed forces of the Restoration Council Shan State/Shan State Army - South (RCSS/SSA-S) and the Palaung State Liberation Front/Ta'ang National Liberation Army in northern Shan State continued.

Conflict between the two sides first occurred on 27 November 2015, little more than a month after the RCSS signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) on 15 October 2015. The fact that conflict occurred between the two sides, one signatory and one non-signatory to the NCA, should be of serious concern. At a time when the peace process is set to be handed over to the newly elected NLD, the clashes have highlighted tensions that exist with ethnic *groups*, not just organisations, at a much more micro level.

The PSLF and Ta'ang National Liberation Army

The TNLA was created by remnants of the PSLF after its ceasefire agreement with the Government in 1991.

Despite the original ceasefire, remnants of the Palaung State Liberation Army (PSLA) had remained at Manerplaw the KNU's headquarters near the Thai-Burma border. These units continued to fight with the Karen and other ethnic forces. The Nationalities Democratic Front (NDF) supported the PSLA's remaining units to form the PSLF on 12 January 1992 and they continued to mount joint operations against Government forces with the Wa National Organisation (WNO) on the Thai-Burma border.

In October 2009, the reformed PSLF held its 3rd congress and formed the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). The TNLA was formed under the political wing of the PSLF. It started military activity in the Palaung area in 2011 with the training and support of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which it now supports in their conflict with the Myanmar Army. The PSLF Chairman is Tar Aik Bong and the TNLA's Commander-in-Chief is Tar Hul Plang.

According to the PSLF its aims and Objectives are:

1. To obtain freedom for all Ta'ang Nationals from oppression.
2. To form Ta'ang full autonomy that has a guarantee for Democracy and human rights.
3. To oppose and fight against dictatorship and any form of racial discrimination
4. To attain national equality and self-determination
5. To establish a genuine federal union that guarantees autonomy.

It is currently active in northern Shan State and claims to be able to field more than 4,000 troops. There were originally five battalions but this has been expanded to twenty-one operating in Brigade areas 1, 2, and 3 and it also has two tactical operation commands.¹

According to its founder and Chairman, Tar Aik Bong, the group originally wanted a nationwide ceasefire, political dialogue, and self-rule of Ta-ang areas as part of a greater Shan State. He also has noted that:

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The main aims of PSLF/TNLA are to attain national equality and self-autonomy, but, due to the current increase in opium plantations and drugs smuggling and drug addiction issues in the region, the TNLA has to operate these two objectives jointly: a war on drug eradication and, at the same time, national liberation.

The PSLF/TNLA is a member of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) a coalition of ethnic armed organizations that refuses to sign the NCA unless all its members are included.

The RCSS/SSA-S

The original Shan State Army (SSA) was formed in 1964 in response to General Ne Win's coup and his Revolutionary Council which abolished the 1947 Union Constitution. But by the 1970's it had split into SSA-North, SSA-South and SSA-East. The larger SSA-N and SSA-E joined the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). However, they received a major setback in 1989 with the collapse of the CPB, which removed their main source of arms and ammunition. Although the SSA-N and SSA-E (now the NDAA-ESS) finally made peace agreements with the government, a small number of SSA cadres led by Sao Sai Lek - the SSA-S's commander since 1983 - remained active and joined the rival Mong Tai Army (MTA) led by notorious drug warlord Khun Sa. The MTA became a powerful alliance of Shan nationalist groups, including the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA) led by Moh Heng and Khun Sa's Shanland United Army (SUA).

Sao Sai Lek died in January 1995 and in January 1996, Khun Sa surrendered to the State Law and Order Restoration Council and disbanded the MTA. A faction of former SURA fighters led by Yawd Serk refused to surrender and resurrected the SURA, before merging with other scattered Shan forces under the Shan State Army (SSA) banner. Active on the southern border with Thailand, the 'new' SSA became known as the Shan State Army - South (SSA-South) to distinguish it from the original SSA, which was still at peace with the government, and which became known as the Shan State Army - North (SSA-North).

The Shan State Army - South, under the command of Lt. General Yawd Serk, is believed to be one of the strongest of the ethnic resistance groups with more than seven thousand troops.

In total it has 5 fixed bases, the Loi Taileng H.Q. (opposite Pang Mapha District, Mae Hong Son), Loi Moong Merng (opposite Muang District, Mae Hong Son), Loi Lam (Wiang Haeng District, Chiang Mai), Loi Hsarm Hsip (opposite Fang district, Chiang Mai) and Loi Gawwan (opposite Mae Fa Luang District, Chiang Rai) and also an anti-narcotics unit, Task Force 701 in Namkham Township on the Chinese Border.

The SSA-South was the first group to formally agree to a ceasefire with the government on 3 December 2011.

The outbreak of hostilities

Conflict between the RCSS/SSA-S and PSLF/TNLA erupted in Shan State on 27 November in Namkham and Manton townships, near the China border. Reports from the Ta'ang claim that members of the SSA-S had crossed into their areas, which they designate as Kyaukme, Namhsan, Manton and Namkham Townships, without seeking 'permission'.²

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According to the TNLA, the RCSS was supported the next day by the Myanmar Army. Captain Mai Aie Kyaw, a spokesman for the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) speaking to RFA stated,

We've been fighting against the RCSS (Restoration Council of Shan State) since 27 November . . . During the last three days, government forces have joined the RCSS in fighting us.³

In another interview, Captain Mai Aie Kyaw said the blame actually laid with the Myanmar Army and the fact that the RCSS had signed the NCA,

We are not sure about their intentions, but the fighting broke out after the RCSS signed the nationwide ceasefire agreement . . . They [the Myanmar Army] are creating the fighting. They fought alongside the RCSS on the frontline.

According to local media reports the, RCSS/SSA-S troops had been passing through a contested area in the Shweli River valley after returning from a workshop on the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) held at the group's base on the Thai-Burma border.⁴

To address the issue the PSLF issued a statement on 10 December blaming the RCSS for the incident,

1. We, the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF/TNLA), strongly condemn the RCSS/SSA's act of military aggression, with the help of Myanmar Tatmadaw, by entering into Ta'ang Region, where battles have been raging between Tatmadaw and Ta'ang national army troops, as it is a setup that could lead to serious conflict between fellow ethnic nationalities.
2. After signing the NCA, the Southern Shan State Army, the RCSS/SSA, with the help of Myanmar government troops, has been expanding its troop presence constantly, in our Ta'ang Region. As the combining of forces with the Myanmar troops and engaging in area control operations, regardless of our repeated warnings, is an undertaking, which should not be done against a fellow nationality, we, the Ta'ang Army PSLF/TNLA, inevitably have to respond militarily.
3. The Southern Shan State Army, the RCSS/SSA, with a force of over 500 troops and by acquiring aid from Myanmar government army, has been launching expansion drive successively into PSLF/TNLA Brigade-2 Area in Mogok, Kyaukme and Namtsan Townships, Brigade-1 Area in Kutkai and Nam kham Townships, and Brigade-3 Area in Mantong and Momeik Townships. Clashes between the two sides have been happening constantly.
4. Our PSLF/TNLA has been endeavouring to reduce armed clashes, as much as possible, during the political transition period, between the time of 2015 election and the emergence new election-winning NLD government. However military clashes have become ferocious, because the RCSS/SSA, together with Myanmar Tatmadaw, has been performing to the gratification of Myanmar military leaders.
5. For that reason, we, the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF/TNLA), declare our position that we strongly protest and condemn the act of current Myanmar Tatmadaw and Southern Shan State Army, RCSS/SSA, which have been working with concrete intention and primarily for prolonging more than ever the fire of Burma's civil war, by launching aggressive military expansion.⁵

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As a result of the clashes the RCSS decided to meet with the UNFC on the 15 December in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The meeting was attended by three representatives from the UNFC including military chief General Bee Htu from the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), Twan Zaw the from Arakan National Council (ANC), Naing Shwe Thein from the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and three representatives from the RCSS/SSA-S including Lt. Gen. Yawd Serk, Lt. Col. Sai Nguen and Lt. Col. Sai Muang. However, no TNLA representatives were present during the discussion.

According to Lt. Col. Sai Nguen, three issues were discussed.

Firstly, we discussed how we could work together in the political arena in the future, Secondly, we discussed long lasting ethnic unity. And finally, we discussed the recent fighting between the RCSS/SSA-A and the TNLA/PSLF.⁶

He further added, in relation to the conflict with the TNLA,

We agreed that we will solve the problem by peaceful means . . . The UNFC will report what we have discussed with them. In the near future, both sides will hold a meeting again in order to find a solution . . . For RCSS, we always think of TNLA as an ally. We never had a problem and fought each other in the past. We never think of the TNLA as our enemy.⁷

Despite such sentiments clashes continued to be reported throughout December and into February 2016.⁸ On January 18, the TNLA/PSLF Information Department posted on their Facebook page that fighting had broken out between TNLA Battalion No. 256 and RCSS/SSA-S troops, but claimed that it was due to the RCSS/SSA-S troops trespassing into territory under TNLA control.

Mai Aik Kyaw, a spokesperson for the TNLA, told local media that the RCSS/SSA-S was not previously operating in the disputed area, but had arrived in the middle of November and was now fighting alongside Myanmar Army troops. According to him

We fought with RCSS troops first before 8 o'clock and then the government troops advanced to our positions. They fired both small arms and heavy weapons.⁹

He said the government's Light Infantry Division No. 77 came in as a reinforcement unit and a combined force of RCSS and LID 77 clashed with the TNLA near Lwepaik village, Mai Ngau sub-township, at about 1 p.m. he reiterated

The RCSS invaded our territory to loot us . . . They fought us with government troops. It means a NCA signatory force fought a NCA non-signatory force by taking assistance from government troops,¹⁰

However, the RCSS/SSA-S deny they had encroached onto TNLA territory, Sai Hseng Mung, the organisation spokesperson claimed that TNLA troops had attacked them and had been advancing further into areas controlled by RCSS/SSA-S every day. He also noted that the RCSS/SSA-S had sent letters to TNLA several times requesting a meeting to discuss the conflict, and that,

We [ethnic groups] don't want to have a problem among each other.¹¹

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On the 24 January, Myanmar media reported that the TNLA had asked the UNFC and the Shan State Progressive Party (SSPP) to intervene to help end the fighting with the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS). The report quoted Colonel Tar Phone Kyaw, general secretary of the TNLA as saying,

We are seeking to end the ongoing clashes. We have already informed the UNFC and the SSPP about the clashes. We requested both organisations to intervene to stop the clashes with the RCSS.¹²

The RCSS spokesperson Colonel Sai La also struck a similar conciliatory tone,

We don't want clashes. We want to be on good terms with all ethnic groups. We will be glad if the TNLA gives the green light.¹³

Twan Zaw, joint secretary-general of the UNFC, responded to the TNLA request saying,

We are trying to make the leaders of both groups meet to end the clashes.

However, he was also quick to apportion blame on the Government peace process, or more correctly, groups that had signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, for the inter-ethnic conflict,

The disputes are over territory. Now we have two groups of ceasefire signatories and non-signatories, the clashes are a result of the signing, to some degree.¹⁴

Most recently, fighting again erupted on 7 February in Namhkam Township, in northern Shan State with the village headman of Lotnaw village recounting that,

At about 8:30 a.m. on Feb. 7, about 300 troops from the rival RCSS/SSA-South came into the village where about 100 TNLA troops were based . . . Then a big battle began, and the villagers fled amid heavy shelling.¹⁵

Nearly all of the 1,500 villagers were forced to flee.

There is little doubting the fact that some groups, by putting the needs of their own people first rather than imagined ethnic unity, had caused further tensions by signing the NCA. That said however, there is little to suggest conflict would not have happened anyway. Shan State, is a particularly volatile region. Ethnic groups vie for territorial and political representation and the recent Union Peace Conference attests to a particularly worrying future for ethnic states.

The Union Peace Conference and the ethnic aftermath

The whole purpose of the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and subsequent political dialogue was to bring ethnic organisations and the people they represent into an ethnic union. The first necessity to achieving this was to bring peace to the ethnic states. Ironically, since the conference at least two new armed ethnic groups have appeared in Kachin State and another, a remnant of an earlier group, has once more started fighting in Karen State while there remains tension in Chin State.

Not unsurprisingly, the first political dialogue stage, which saw over seven hundred delegates representing the Government, Political Parties, Armed Ethnic Groups, and the Military, attend resulted in new calls for greater recognition of some ethnic groups. These groups, which considered themselves misrepresented often by more dominant ethnic groups in their states, demanded equal

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recognition. As a consequence, ethnic Pa-O, Shan-ni, Ta'ang and Wa representatives demanded state-level recognition at the Conference.

The requests particularly concerned the ethnic Shan especially the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) as it would see large parts of Shan State carved out to allow the Wa, Pa-O and Ta'ang much larger representation. Both the Wa, Ta'ang and the Pa-O have self-administered zones, however, recognition of them at state level could see heightened tensions in the area. Khun Htun Oo, chairman of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) said on hearing about the demands that,

If we give states to [these] ethnic groups, our country will face problems like Yugoslavia . . . The Union of Myanmar will disappear.¹⁶

As a response to the Shan Ni demands the “Red Shan” of northern Myanmar fuelled such concerns by announcing the formation of their own armed group, the Shanni Nationalities Army (SNA). Described as an independent organization “not under any other group,” the SNA claims to represent the Shan peoples of northern Myanmar. With a population estimated at 300,000, the Red Shan largely live in southern Kachin State, particularly near Mohnyin and Bhamo, and in Sagaing Division.¹⁷

One retired Shan Ni soldier from Kachin State said he believes that the establishment of an armed group will give the Red Shan a more prominent role in Myanmar's political dialogue amid a belief that armed groups will have greater bargaining power.

One of the SNA's promises is to “protect local people bullied by other armed groups.” Since the 1960s, Red Shan communities have been situated between two powerful militaries—the Kachin Independence Army/Organization (KIA/O) and the Myanmar Army. They report having suffered abuses from both sides in the conflict, which has reportedly contributed to the organization of informal Shan-ni militias over the years.

The SNA reported one clash with the government already in an outbreak of fighting on January 11 on the Myanmar-India border. They claimed that Myanmar troops in Sagaing's Homelin Township surrounded them on all sides, including from within Indian territory. Three SNA soldiers were allegedly arrested by the Myanmar Army and one SNA sergeant was killed.

To complicate matters further, a Kachin Republic Party (KRP) has been formed which also claims to be setting up an armed wing. Acting General Secretary Lashi Yawna said that they were preparing to form the KRP in an attempt to create an independent Kachin Republic, or in other terms secede from the Union.

In an official statement issued on 12 January, the KRP said it will be formed with religious leaders from Kachin Baptist Churches, some leaders from the KIO and leaders from Kachin People's Militias (MHH) and, quite bizarrely, would be under the command of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA).

Lashi Yawna added that the KRP would be formed in 2016-17 and it would have an armed wing called the Kachin Republic Army (KRA) and would have positions of Chairman and Vice-Chairman in their organizational structure but these names would not be disclosed at the moment for security reasons. According to Lashi Yawna,

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KIO had talks with the government for the right to self-determination. We have never had talks with the government. This is the difference between us. But the people should not misunderstand us. We don't have any policy in our party which will divide our people and cause distrust among them. We will not be split from the KIO. We are just assisting them in what they can't do. We will retake our positions and outposts from where KIO troops were withdrawn by forming our own army the KRA is to fight against the government in the name of an independent Kachinland seceded from the Union.

While it is difficult to take the KRP seriously, the fact that such sentiment exists, and considering the easy availability of weapons in Kachin and Shan states, such groups should not be dismissed out of hand. Bearing in mind the fact that numerous militias already exist throughout north-eastern Myanmar, a militia which harbours nationalist, and not financial, ideals should be a concern.

Addressing this issue, the KIO released a statement which said they are fighting a revolutionary war with the objective of freedom from oppression under the sole command of one government, one leader, and one army in a unified position.

A KIO central committee member was quoted in Myanmar media as saying,

I think this should not be done. Our KIO has released an announcement. Some of this party [KRP] are irresponsible and act insensibly. The people who think seriously and sensibly will not do such things.¹⁸

Meanwhile in Karen State, yet another armed group declared that it was now active. Led by General Kyaw Thet and Colonel San Aung the group has co-opted the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) name.¹⁹ Both Kyaw Thet and San Aung were expelled from the previously re-named Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (KKO/Klo Htoo Baw) Battalion because the leaders had admitted that the two officers and their followers were beyond their control (see EBO Background Paper No.3 - Conflict over Highway Taxation in Kayin State).²⁰ The group in a statement said

The members of the DKBA are ... sacked members of Democratic Karen Benevolent Army and those members of the old DKBA who refused the order by the former State Peace and Development Council to form the BGF in 2010.²¹

According to at least one media report, Colonel Saw San Aung had told domestic media that some members of the KNU/Peace Council had also joined the newly reactivated DKBA.

The group is unlikely to pose a serious threat to the peace process but will however further add to the burden facing villagers in its areas of operation. While critics of the peace process will no doubt try to suggest that DKBA members are true Karen patriots standing up for Karen people, there is nothing to suggest this is true.

Another concern is that of the Kachin based Arakan Army (AA) which, as well as in Rakine State, is operating in Paletwa, Chin State. A number of clashes have been reported and the local population forced to flee as clashes regularly occur between the Myanmar army and AA. On 7 January, the Myanmar Army vowed to "eliminate" the AA "for the security of people's life and property"²² after reporting that they had clashed with the AA 15 times from 28 December 2015 to 4 January 2016 in Rakhine State.

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There has been a long running territorial dispute over Paletwa, which is 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 the 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. 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,²³

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,

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 problems²⁴

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.²⁵ If this happens, and the current situation suggests post-ceasefire that the CNA may have no other choice it could see the CNA launch operations against the AA with the support of the Myanmar Army, as has been alleged in RCSS/SSA-S attacks against the TNLA.

The Balkanization theory

The Balkanization argument, alluded to by Khun Htun Oo, is not new and has often been touted as a major concern primarily by the Myanmar military establishment. In reaction to this, Teddy Buri, an exiled ethnic politician, speaking at a symposium in Japan in 2001, addressed these concerns,

. . . Another point Mr. Suto mentioned was about the ethnic nationalities. He seems to fear the Balkanization of Burma. As a matter of fact, the military regime has always said that if it weren't for the military regime in Burma, Burma would have disintegrated, and that Burma would not be what it is today. But this is pure propaganda which the military regime has been able to sell. It is falsehood. It is all falsehood. The ethnic nationalities, as a matter of fact, joined the Union voluntarily in the first place when they signed the Panglong Agreement. And we are still committed to being a part of Burma. We are still willing to be a part of the Union of Burma, and this is why we are preparing ourselves to join the Federal Union of Burma. So

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I would like Mr. Suto not to be concerned about the Balkanization of Burma because of the ethnic issue.

That said, such hypothesis ignores what the likelihood of continued calls for more power for smaller groups and inter-ethnic fighting is likely to engender. As a consequence of such calls, and the arming of smaller groups, it is likely that the Myanmar Army will be given a reason to once more take control of the country. As Martin Smith points out,

Tatmadaw leaders argue that the military has earned three historic responsibilities, known as 'Our Three Main Causes', as its exclusive prerogative, which allow it the right to interfere in the political process whenever it feels these duties are threatened: 'non-disintegration of the Union', 'non-disintegration of national solidarity' and the 'perpetuation of national sovereignty'. Underpinning this arbitrary right is a perception of Burma as the 'Yugoslavia of South-East Asia', and officials argue that any relaxation of security, or accession to demands that they perceive as 'separatist', will have drastic implications beyond the country's borders. 'A return to the post-independent situation could become analogous to a "Balkanization of South-East Asia"', claimed an SPDC press release in 2001.

Min Aung Hlaing in numerous interviews has stated that the military will not leave politics as long as there is a serious security situation. And while there may be a new NLD government, it is powerless against the Army regardless of its façade of control.

While there is little doubt that a number of smaller groups need much better representation in the political process, resorting to arms is unlikely to attain this. In fact, it is likely to have the opposite effect. If the NLD Government cannot contain ethnic groups through political means, it is likely that the Myanmar army will act against those groups that seek to further strengthen their position through armed conflict.

It is therefore also necessary for larger armed ethnic group to negotiate with smaller groups that are in their states. The continued presence of these new groups is not only a burden on the people but further threatens an already fragile peace process.

Notes

¹ Email correspondence with Tar Aik Bong, 23 April 2015

² 'SNDP demands release of detainees amidst Shan and Ta'ang clashes' SHAN, 7 December

³ 'Myanmar Military, Shan Army Launch Offensive Against Ta'ang Rebels', RFA, 1 December 2015

⁴ 'SNDP demands release of detainees amidst Shan and Ta'ang clashes' SHAN, 7 December

⁵ 'PSLF/TNLA Condemns RCSS/SSA's Act of Military Aggression Conjointly with Tatmadaw', 10 December, 2015

⁶ 'RCSS/SSA-S: "We never think of the TNLA as our enemy"', SHAN, 16 December 2015

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ 'Clash Between Rebel Groups in Myanmar's Shan State Forces Villagers From Homes', 10 February 2016

⁹ 'Ta'ang soldier killed in clash with government troops', Phanida, Mizzima, 19 January 2016

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ 'RCSS/SSA-S and TNLA trade trespassing accusations as clashes continue in northern Shan State', SHAN, 19 January 2015

¹² 'Warring rebels call for negotiations', Eleven Myanmar, 24 January 2016

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ 'Clash Between Rebel Groups in Myanmar's Shan State Forces Villagers From Homes', 10 February 2016

¹⁶ '“Red Shan” form army in northern Burma after demand for new state.', SHAN, 25 January 2016

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ 'Kachin Republic Party to be formed to seek an independent Kachinland', Phanida, Mizzima, 15 January 2016

¹⁹ Most of the original Democratic Karen Buddhist Army turned into a Tatmadaw-controlled BGF in 2010 while the remainder restyled themselves as the Klo Htoo Baw Battalion/Democratic Karen Benevolent Army.

²⁰ 'DKBA fires officers who led recent clashes', Lun Min Mang, Myanmar Times, 24 July 2015

²¹ 'Security heightened along Asian Highway as factions reactivate DKBA', Lun Min Mang, Myanmar Times, 20 January 2016

²² 'Tatmadaw rejects Arakan Army offer of talks', Wa Lone and Thu Thu Aung, Myanmar Times, 11 January 2016

²³ 'Chin leaders oppose ALP's liaison office in Paletwa' Khonumthung, 12 April, 2012

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Personal conversation with Chin leaders in May and June 2015.