

POLITICAL MONITOR NO.7

OFFICIAL MEDIA

BURMESE LEADERS RECEIVE U.S. AND BRITISH GUESTS, DISCUSS MILITARY TIES

Speaker of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw and Pyithu Hluttaw Thura Shwe Mann received United States Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy R. Sherman on 7 March and discussed strengthening of bilateral ties and development of democracy between the two countries. Secretary Sherman also met the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and discussed promoting ties between the two armed forces, the defence services' role in the democratization process in Burma and measures to be taken by the Burmese defence services in ending ethnic armed conflicts in the country. General Min Aung Hlaing also received the British Military Attaché Colonel Antony Stern on 7 March and had cordial discussions on strengthening relations between the two armed forces and sending excursion groups and trainees.¹

SNR GENERAL MIN AUNG HLAING DISCUSSES PEACE PROCESS WITH KNU LEADERS

Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing met a delegation led by Chairman of Karen National Union Saw Mutu Sae Po at Bayintnaung Yeiktha in Nay Pyi Taw on 7 March and discussed issues related to the ongoing peace process. The Commander-in-Chief elaborated on a confidential six-point “wish list” by the Defence Services and the agreement by both sides to adhere to three main “national causes”—non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity, perpetuation of sovereignty. Min Aung Hlaing stressed the need for moving towards lasting peace, and upholding the “genuine Union spirit.”²

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS INVITED TO HELP WITH 2015 ELECTIONS

The Union Election Commission (UEC) has invited civil society organizations to support the commission for the successful holding of the 2015 general elections. UEC Chairman Tin Aye addressed a gathering of civil society organisations on 13 March and stressed the importance of the role of CSOs in the election and carrying out democratic reforms. He added that the Election Commission had drafted a “12-chapter strategy” for holding free and fair elections, including a chapter on cooperation with CSOs and urged them to cooperate with the UEC in counting ballots and preventing malpractices, among other things. He said the CSOs needed to learn the rules and regulations and directives for an election in order to serve as election observers.³

¹ Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Speaker Thura U Shwe Mann receives US guests –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs17/NLM2014-03-08.pdf> (NLM) 8 March 2014 (p. 16) /
Senior General Min Aung Hlaing receives Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs of US, British Military Attaché –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs17/NLM2014-03-08.pdf> (NLM) 8 March 2014 (p. 7)

² Senior General Min Aung Hlaing discusses peace process with KNU leader –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs17/NLM2014-03-08.pdf> (NLM) 8 March 2014 (p. 16 & 7)

³ Civil Society Organizations invited to help with 2015 Elections –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs17/NLM2014-03-14.pdf> (NLM) 14 March 2014 (p. 16)

HLUTTAW SESSIONS – Highlights

Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) sessions

The 9th Regular Session of the First Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) held its 23rd day meeting on 7 March. The following issues and questions were raised and discussed:

- MP U Htay Aung of Yesagyo Constituency raised the **question on the 2012 Farmland Law and urged the government to implement measures to support for farmers.**
- Deputy Minister for Agriculture and Irrigation U Ohn Than, stated that **the law was effective and provided several benefits to farmers. “Since January, 2013, certificates of farmland use have been issued to more than five million farmers,”** he said, adding that the certificate issuance process is ongoing. **The certificate needs to be obtained in order to gain permission to cultivate farmland. With the certificate, farmers have a wide range of rights, including the right to form joint ventures and to sell or lease land.**⁴

The 9th Regular Session of the First Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) held its 24th day meeting on 12 March. The following issues and questions were raised and discussed:

- U Kyi Thar of Gwa Constituency asked if the government had response plans to tackle oil spills in Burma’s territorial waters. Deputy Minister for Energy U Aung Htoo replied that oil spill prevention and response measures which are compliance are stated in the agreements between the ministry and oil exploration and production contractors to ensure full compliance with international practices for oil drilling. He assured that there are preventive measures against environmental damage including oil spill, saying that oilrig, pipeline and centers in Kyaukpyu of Rakhine State have been designed to withstand the seismic intensity of 8 degree and seismic acceleration of 0.3 gram. He stressed the need to present preventive measures and cleanup plans to the government before serving as an oil port for 300,000-ton oil tankers and that vessels with marine insurance will be allowed to dock at Madaykyun deep-sea port.
- A report of the Bill Committee on the Bill amending the Political Parties Registration Law (State Law and Order Restoration Council Law No.2/2010) was submitted at the session.
- MP Khin Maung Latt from Rakhine State Constituency No (6) highlighted the importance of the Burma’s 1982 Citizenship Law, calling for strict rules and regulations regarding the Political Parties Registration law. U Paw Hlyan Lwin of Chin State Constituency No (9) stressed the need not to allow those with no citizenship scrutiny cards to be included in the list of founders of a party.⁵

Amyotha Hluttaw (Upper House) sessions

The 9th Regular Session of the First Amyotha Hluttaw (Upper House) held its 24th day meeting on 13 March. The following issues and questions were raised and discussed:

- The session discussed the registration of the Association Bill and Anti-terrorism Bill. Regarding the registration of the Association Bill, two MPs suggested an amendment to allow associations to form without having to pay a fee. The Speaker called on the Bill Committee to take the proposed amendments into consideration. As Pyithu Hluttaw, the

⁴ Farmland Law, infrastructure, mobile communication top parliamentary agenda – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs17/NLM2014-03-08.pdf> (NLM) 8 March 2014 (p. 7)

⁵ Deputy Energy Minister briefs about oil spill response plan in parliament – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs17/NLM2014-03-13.pdf> (NLM) 13 March 2014 (p. 10)

People's Parliament, had made amendments to the Anti-terrorism Bill and that the approval of the bill will be decided by the Union Parliament.⁶

Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Parliament) sessions

The 9th Regular Session of the First Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Parliament) held its 21st day meeting on 10 March. The following issues and questions were raised and discussed:

- The Speaker of the House informed the session that a law on religious conversion and a law on balancing the increasing population will be drafted with the support of a new commission.
- According to a message by the president, **a commission with officials from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Ministry of Immigration and Population as well as other experts has been formed to do extensive research and take the advice from monks into consideration before drafting the bills.**
- Regarding the Interfaith Marriage Law and the Law on Monogamy, **the president's message urged Pyidaungsu Hluttaw to directly work with the Supreme Court of the Union.**
- The Speaker also urged **all representatives to complete their tasks as soon as possible to get the Union Taxation Bill as well as the bills amending the Income Tax Law and Commercial Tax Law approved.**
- **Reports on the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission Bill, Consumer Protection Bill and Anti-Money Laundering Bill were also presented** and discussion on **the 2014 Union Taxation Bill** was held during the session.⁷

The 9th Regular Session of the First Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Parliament) held its 23rd day meeting on 13 March. The following issues and questions were raised and discussed:

- **The provision of special funds for construction and electrification in Rakhine State, Bago, Mandalay and Ayeyawady Regions were approved by the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw.**
- The Ministry of Border Affairs will spend **K 803.35 million on improving the socio-economic status in Rakhine State, as well as repairing canals, dams and dykes in Toungoo district of Bago Region. In the Zagyan-Kanmye area in Mandalay Region, the construction of deep wells will be carried out.**
- **The money will be allocated in accordance with the 2013 Union Budget Law which states the provision of special funds for rural development undertakings and used for the construction of infrastructure to supply drinking water in Kyauktaw of Rakhine State, preventative measures against bank erosion in Kalay district of Sagaing Region and Kangyidaunk and Labutta townships of Ayeyawady Region, and installation of two transformers for electrification in the Zagyan-Kanmye area in Mandalay Region.**
- The Ministry of Livestock, Fishery and Rural Development, the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of Electric Power and the Ministry of Construction will **implement their priority projects using K 16,732.219 million from the Union special funds.**
- The session also approved **the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission Bill, the Consumer Protection Bill and the Anti-money Laundering Bill.**⁸

⁶ Pyidaungsu Hluttaw approves special funds for construction, rural electrification – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs17/NLM2014-03-14.pdf> (NLM) 14 March 2014 (p. 16 & 8)

⁷ Commission formed to draft Laws on religious conversion and balancing population: President – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs17/NLM2014-03-11.pdf> (NLM) 11 March 2014 (p. 16)

UNOFFICIAL MEDIA

MILITARY CALLS FOR CEASEFIRE DEAL TO BE SIGNED BY 1 AUGUST

The Tatmadaw (armed forces) has proposed for the nationwide ceasefire to be signed by 1 August, according to representatives from the government and ethnic armed organizations.

During a 2-day conference held at Myanmar Peace Centre from 9-10 March, the two sides released a joint announcement with 5 points, including a commitment to draft the nationwide ceasefire agreement together. This agreement will have 7 chapters.

“We have told them to sign the agreement. We told them that we wanted to sign the ceasefire by 1 August 2014. They said they would try to sign it before that date,” Lieutenant-General Kyaw Swe said after the conference. Hlan Hmone from the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) said that an 1 August deadline seems realistic. “The military said they wanted to do this before August. We want to do it earlier. As we now have the committee, there’s no need to compose a new draft. We only need to combine the two drafts submitted by them and us, so I don’t think the work will be that difficult. I think it will be finished quickly,” he said.

Lieutenant-General Myint Soe said he was “very satisfied” with the results of the 2-day conference and expects the ceasefire agreement to be signed without any special persuasion. Hlan Hmone from the NCCT agreed, “I really want to thank the military side for this 2-day conference. The commander-in-chief himself has made it the priority of [senior military officials] to obtain peace without failure. As he has made this his duty, we have seen the true desire of the military to obtain peace. This is a very good development for the country.” Delegates from both sides will meet in Yangon during the first week of April to negotiate military affairs in detail.

Lieutenant-General Myint Soe said “Everything will be included there. We will be able to talk about it at that time. The date for holding the Hpa-an conference will depend on this conference. The Hpa-an conference will be the last stage, where we sign the agreement. As for the military side, we really wanted peace so all of us have come to attend this conference.” According to Naing Han Tha from NCCT both sides reached many points of understanding during the conference, so the signing of the nationwide ceasefire is drawing nearer. However, many challenges remain, including how to establish a federal state as demanded by the ethnic organizations, how to amend the 2008 Constitution, and what troop settlements will look like in the future.⁹

PRESIDENT MEETS AUNG SAN SUU KYI

President Thein Sein met opposition leader and NLD chairperson Aung San Suu Kyi in Nay Pyi Taw on 9 March, according to the National League for Democracy (NLD) and sources close to the executive. A senior officer from the President’s Office also confirmed that the two met for about 50 minutes at the Farm House, a venue the president uses to meet with civil society and opposition groups in the capital. This is the 5th meeting between the President and Suu Kyi since August 2011, a few months after she was released from house arrest. She was only elected to parliament in a by election in April 2012.

⁸ Pyidaungsu Hluttaw approves specials funds for construction, rural electrification – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs17/NLM2014-03-14.pdf> (NLM) 14 March 2014 (p. 16 & 8)

⁹ Military calls for ceasefire deal to be signed by August 1 – http://elevenmyanmar.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5347:military-calls-for-ceasefire-deal-to-be-signed-by-august-1&catid=44:national&Itemid=384 (Eleven News Media) 11 March 2014 / Joint committee to draft nationwide ceasefire agreement – www.mizzima.com/mizzima-news/ethnic-issues/item/10985-joint-committee-to-draft-nationwide-ceasefire-agreement (Mizzima) 11 March 2014

Both have enjoyed a confidential relationship during these meetings which, according to experts, has been essential to bringing legitimacy and opposition support to the government's reform process. The NLD sent a letter requesting a 4-part meeting in November last year involving President Thein Sein, Union Assembly Speaker Thura Shwe Mann, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and Suu Kyi to discuss amending the military-drafted 2008 Constitution.

While the speaker has said he was ready to oblige, the President has been quoted as saying that the meeting should only take place when a parliamentary committee charged with looking into constitutional reforms reports on its findings. Political observers have said that the one-to-one meeting was very significant and thought that Suu Kyi may push for the proposal to have the four-part meeting.¹⁰

UK TO SPEND US\$25 MILLION ON BURMA'S PEACE PROCESS

The United Kingdom will maintain its annual aid package to Burma, at about US\$100 million, over the next 2 years, according to Gavin McFillivray, head of the UK Department for International Development (DFID) office in Burma. He said a quarter of the aid in 2014-15 fiscal year will be spent on the peace process including assistance for internally displaced people in conflict areas, while other funds would be allocated for health, education and microcredit loans.

Speaking to local news media during a visit to the Irrawaddy Division, McFillivray said "We want to work for a Myanmar [Burma] in which every child can go to school and have a good education, in which all people have good health care, and in which everybody can get a good job." British Ambassador to Burma Andrew Patrick, also said that the United Kingdom had already provided \$5 million to the Myanmar Education Consortium, a multi-million dollar program—unveiled last year with the Australian government aid body—that aims to support education for Burma's poorest children. Through the consortium, the United Kingdom helps support early childhood development centres (ECCD) in five states and divisions around the country. "So far we have established 86 ECCD centres, trained 2,800 caregivers and provided early childhood care and development for 3,000 children," Ambassador Patrick told reporters. "Over the coming year, we intend to expand so that 1,300 children have access to ECCD." The early childhood development centres offer care for children between the ages of 3 and 5 who have not yet entered the formal school system. In some cases, parents say the centres have allowed them to improve their livelihoods.

The United Kingdom has also supported local microfinance operator Pact to offer basic training on financial management, as well as access to credit and loans, to 78,000 people. Women have received 95% of this support. The UK aid agency DFID doubled its aid package to Burma in the 2013-14 fiscal year, to \$100 million, compared to about \$50 million in the 2012-13 fiscal year.¹¹

VICE-PRESIDENT NYAN HTUN CALLS FOR A PUSH TO RETURN SEIZED LANDS

Vice President Nyan Htun at a formal meeting on 7 March in Nay Pyi Taw and announced that over 150,000 acres of military-seized lands will be returned soon to the original owners. The Ministry of Defense has already returned more than 50,000 acres of seized lands, he said, and relevant government organizations should make a thorough explanation about the seized lands which are still not returned, known to the public. He added that they should explain fully about the lands whether they're utilized constructively or not.

¹⁰ President has confidential meeting with Suu Kyi – http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5337:president-has-confidential-meeting-with-suu-kyi&catid=32:politics&Itemid=354 (Eleven News Media) 11 March 2014 /
Burmese President holds talks with Suu Kyi – <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/burmas-suu-kyi-holds-talks-president-thein-sein.html> (Irrawaddy) 10 March 2014

¹¹ UK to spend \$25 Million on Burma's Peace Process – <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/uk-spend-25-million-burmas-peace-process.html> (Irrawaddy) 10 March 2014

The Parliamentary Land Investigation Commission released a report at the end of February 2014 uncovering 745 cases of land seizure and that more than 500,000 acres of land has been grabbed by the army, local government authorities and private companies.

Similarly, Chief Minister for Shan State Sao Aung Myat said to the media on 5 March that all seized lands in his region would be returned to farmers before the end of the year. The Shan chief minister's timeline for the return of confiscated lands – many of which were seized by the military during the era of the previous junta – comes after Parliament had motioned that all seized lands are returned before September. He also acknowledged that many people are dissatisfied with the delays in administrative work at all levels since the Land Usage Administrative Committee was formed.¹²

FIRST MON WOMEN'S CONFERENCE HELD

The 1st ever Mon Women's Conference (MWC) was held from 8 to 12 March at the Sarsana Monastery in Moulmein, the Mon State Capital. About 150 people attended, including Mon women's groups, youth and civil society groups as well as representatives from the New Mon State Party, the All Mon Regions Democracy Party, the Mon Democracy Party and the Shin Saw Pu Association. According to the Chairwoman of the MWC organizing Committee Mi Cherry Soe said that topics discussed included health, education, society, protection, women's rights, children's rights and cultural heritage. She said "Due to the oppression and discrimination faced by women now is the time for women to speak out. I hope this will encourage change."

The aim of the conference was to raise women's voice and encourage them to become more involved in and more responsible for decision-making in government, justice, lawmaking, business, society and media. The coordinator of Gender Equality Network May Sabae Phyu, said "because our country has just started the movement for women rights, we have to work a lot to get equality and it will take a long time." Until the government acknowledges the women's rights movement women will not achieve equality and will face obstacles. According to the Mon State Minister for Planning and Economics Dr. Min Nwe Soe "There is still discrimination in many places. It happens at the level of the home, the family, the village, the township, the nation and at the global level. But we have to move forward and gradually that discrimination and inequality will disappear". May Sabae Phyu added that women should be brave and be encouraged to take up their rights, roles, and responsibilities. She said that women need to think wisely and implement as much as they can to help them achieve equality, safety and rights for women.¹³

DEPUTY INFORMATION MINISTER: BURMESE MEDIA STILL IN INFANCY

According to Deputy Information Minister and presidential spokesperson Ye Htut, a free press is essential to democratic discourse in Myanmar, but the media generally is still in its infancy and lacks basic journalism skills. The Minister delivered the opening address at a 3-day international media conference with the theme 'Challenges to a free press in emerging democracies' organised by the US-based East-West Centre in Yangon on March. The Minister Ye Htut said to the more than 400 participants that for the first time in 50 years, the government was committed to developing a free and independent press. "This is a responsibility that we take seriously because it is the media that helps citizens to make informed decisions."

¹² Vice-President Nyan Htun calls for a push in returning seized lands – http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5316:vice-president-nyan-htun-calls-for-a-push-in-returning-seized-lands&catid=32:politics&Itemid=354 (Eleven News Media) 8 March 2014 / Shan Chief Minister assures farmers on land issues – <http://www.dvb.no/news/shan-chief-minister-assures-farmers-on-land-issues38235-burma-myanmar/38235> (DVB) 8 March 2014

¹³ Mon Women's Conference Held for the First Time – <http://monnews.org/2014/03/12/mon-womens-conference-held-first-time-110414/> (IMNA) 12 March 2014

He added that challenges remain in building relationships between government ministries and the media because some ministries were reluctant to share information or were distrustful of the media. The Minister said a new media law could help to establish higher standards of conduct in journalism, and that training courses by international groups such as UNESCO and the Norwegian-based International Media Support would help to develop skills in the media sector. He also said there was a need for greater diversity in the media, saying that the concentration of the industry in Yangon had resulted in some ethnic minority groups and those in outlying areas not being able to participate in the debate on media reform.¹⁴

KNU TO ALLOW LIMITED CENSUS TAKING IN CONTROLLED AREAS

The Karen National Union (KNU) will allow limited census-taking activities in its controlled areas, Phado Saw Thaw Thi Bwe, KNU's Joint Secretary-1 told reporters near the Thailand-Myanmar border on 11 March. As the government will conduct a nationwide census from 30 March to 10 April, the KNU leader said, "With respect to the policy, we have not refused to take part in the census collection. But permission must be granted with limitations because ethnic people are now living in IDP camps under the KNU-controlled areas, and in refugee camps. Moreover, the people are also living illegally in the far-flung areas. That's why we can't reach them [refugees, IDPs] as part of the peace process. But we are going to cooperate with the government—only to a limited degree". The KNU Secretary said that the census would not be taken in the IDP and refugee camps, adding that the process must be in harmony with the peace process. He said it is very early to be conducting a nationwide census because the political process in Myanmar is unstable.

During the commencement ceremony for the Nationwide Census Collection held at the Myanmar Convention Centre in Nay Pyi Taw, President Thein Sein said that information collected from the census will be the nation's development data for both the incumbent government and the next government following the 2015 election. Burma last took part in a nationwide census in 1983.¹⁵

SEVERAL GROUPS IN SHAN STATE PLAN THEIR OWN CENSUS

Several minority ethnic groups in Shan State say they plan to conduct a population count on their own terms and separate from the government-sanctioned nationwide census scheduled to begin at end of March. Shan State Minister for Intha Affairs Win Myint said the "Committee to Verify the Accurate Number of Ethnic Nationalities in Shan State" was formed last year and includes members of parliament and civil society representatives from various ethnic groups in the eastern Burmese state including Shan, Palaung, Pa-O, Kokang, Intha and Danu. "We aim to determine the exact populations of different ethnic groups under our own terms – but there is no plan to submit the findings to the government," he said, adding the committee hopes the figures will be useful when the country transforms into a federal union. "For the most part, we intend to use the count as a means of assessing the needs of local populations – ID cards, householder lists, and for social and education assistance." He said the process is set to begin after completion of the government census in April and that a three-month timeframe would be set, which could be extended to up to nine months if necessary. Sai Than Maung, a committee member and MP in the Shan State Regional Parliament, said the programme will also include local people who do not have national identification cards. "We are looking to help those thousands of people who have been forced to flee the country over the past 15 years – some of whom who don't have ID cards – by reissuing their personal documents and householder lists. We are talking with civil society organisations in Chiang

¹⁴ Myanmar media still in infancy, says Deputy Information Minister – <http://www.mizzima.com/mizzima-news/media/item/10982-myanmar-media-still-in-infancy-says-deputy-information-minister> (Mizzima) 10 March 2014

¹⁵ KNU to allow limited census taking in controlled areas – http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5359:knu-to-allow-limited-census-taking-in-controlled-areas&catid=44:national&Itemid=384 (Eleven News Media) 12 March 2014

Mai and Bangkok, as well as the regional government in Shan State to work out a plan for them,” said Sai Than Maung.

The budget for the project is estimated at 200 million Kyat (US\$200,000). The committee said it has now raised around 120 million Kyat from local businessmen, civil society groups and individual donors. The Committee to Verify the Accurate Number of Ethnic Nationalities in Shan State was formed on 22 August 2013 with members of parliament, literary experts and influential figures from 84 Shan State townships with 10 representatives from each township. The confirmation that the Shan groups plan to work independently of the central government and other ethnic groups on the census comes just a day after the Shan State Army- South announced that it will not fully adhere to any nationwide ceasefire agreement, but will instead work towards a separate peace deal with the Burmese government.¹⁶

ANALYSIS

The possibility of a smooth transition to democracy and achieving national reconciliation are the aspirations of the majority of those in Burma. However, such desires cannot be fulfilled without the approval or support of the armed forces or Tatmadaw. The recent meeting between the government and ethnic groups’ peace teams was noteworthy due to the participation of high-ranking military officials. The statement by Lieutenant-General Kyaw Swe from the Ministry of Defence stating the national ceasefire accord to be signed by 1 August 2014 is indeed significant.

Similarly, the recent meeting between President Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi can be regarded as yet another positive step in promoting understanding and cooperation between the two leaders. While few details of the talks have been revealed, the meeting can be best characterized as more trust-building exercise than negotiations. Whatever the circumstances may be, a meeting between the President and leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) is indeed encouraging for the national reconciliation process. Whether this or other meetings will move Burma forward depends on how all parties choose to work with each other. Burma’s democratic transition remains fragile and has a long way to go and thus under such circumstances, all stakeholders alike should seize all possible opportunities and accept any form of conciliatory gestures in achieving peace and unity. And if this meeting is able to serve and promote these issues than it can be seen as meaningful.

¹⁶ Shans plan their own census – <http://english.dvb.no/news/shans-plan-their-own-census-burma-myanmar/38370> (DVB) 13 March 2014