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Developing Peace in Karenni State

The Role of the KNPP in the Union Peace Process

Despite the fact that thus far ten groups have signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement¹ the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) still maintains a number of reservations in relation to the signing of the agreement. While a number of other groups, primarily situated in Shan State and along the border with China have also held out,² the fact that the KNPP, one of the remaining members of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) has not yet signed is somewhat surprising.³

Given its geographical location between Karen State and Shan State, it had been expected given the signing of the NCA by KNPP allies and UNFC members the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and Lahu Democratic Union (LDU) that the KNPP would also sign. However, the KNPP is still concerned about signing the agreement and attending the Union Peace Conferences that the government initiated to further the peace process.

Although a number of doubts remained, the KNPP met with the Government's Peace Commission for two days on April 26-27, 2018 in Loikaw and agreed on the implementation of bilateral terms through regular discussions at the state level.⁴ According to a joint statement issued after the meeting,

The Karenni National Progressive Party-KNPP has committed to sign the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement-NCA and has agreed to follow the following points in the short term before signing the NCA.

(a) Issues concerning holding negotiations at the state level for Local Monitoring Team & JMC issue, movement of troops of both sides and communications to hold regular negotiations between Kayah State Government and the KNPP as agreed by both sides

(b) To reassign liaison officers at the state level and Union level to carry it out through the agreed communication channels agreed by both sides at the state level and Union level

(c) Progress was achieved in the military sector, and both sides are to proceed with the work as agreed.

3. As the above points were agreed at the Peace Talks, the Karenni National Progressive Party-KNPP hereby announced that it had agreed at the talks to keep on its efforts for signing the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement-NCA.⁵

The KNPPs Gen Bee Htoo said that while the two sides have not yet been able to reach an understanding on signing the NCA, "It is important to keep peace in Karenni State."⁶

One of the main issues of concern for the KNPP was the killing of three of its soldiers and one civilian who was allegedly murdered by Tatmadaw troops at the regional operation command based in Loikaw in December 2017. Although, the Tatmadaw has said it is conducting an inquiry into the incident no further progress has been made. The incident has further weakened trust in relation to the Myanmar military and its presence in Karenni State.

Shwe Myo Thant, Secretary of KNPP Central Committee, was quoted as saying

The KNPP maintained the bilateral agreement with the government since 2012 but we need to watch the condition of the relationship between us and Tatmadaw,⁷

To further negotiations, a meeting between the Peace Commission had been planned in May but the Commission cancelled the meeting after the KNPP had asked for further clarification in relation to the subjects to be discussed.⁸

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Nal Nae Palo, the spokesperson of the KNPP's Peace Dialogue Committee, stated that,

. . . the KNPP will only sign the NCA after the contents of the union-level and state-level ceasefire agreements with the government have been implemented and trust has been built.

And that,

There are challenges in the implementation [process] after the signing of the NCA. We see that there are many challenges in monitoring, prevention against another outbreak of skirmishes, political dialogues and public meetings. If we can have guarantees for building more trust on these issues and implementing them without a hitch, we believe there may be some form of relaxations in these challenges.⁹

The serious trust deficit on behalf of the KNPP is further compounded by the overall lack of progress in the NCA and concomitant peace process overall. Armed ethnic organisations continue to meet with the Government but it is the Myanmar military that seems unwilling to further the process and build trust between the two sides.

The situation in Karenni state recently saw the first fighting in six years since the signing of the bilateral agreement. On 20 October, fighting broke out in Hpasauing township between the Karenni Army and units of the Myanmar military based in Hpruso Township under the Tatmadaw Regional Operations Command. A statement issued on Oct. 20 by the state government said that seven KNPP members attacked a Tatmadaw unit earlier that day between Nan Kit and Ba Han Lot villages. The KNPP, however, has denied this saying that Tatmadaw troops had arrested two local men and forced them to serve as guides for a clearance operation and the Myanmar military had travelled through KNPP-controlled territory to do so - but did not use a regular, designated route agreed to in 2013.¹⁰

Not unsurprisingly both sides have accused the other of breaking the bilateral agreement further adding to increasing tension between the two sides.

The fact is that the KNPP remains reticent to sign the NCA especially in view of the recent violations.

Prior to the clash, there were reports that in order to get the KNPP to sign the NCA, a deal was put forward by the government's National Reconciliation and Peace Centre (NRPC) allowing the KNPP to sell 5,000 tons of logged timber that had been felled in 2013 and 2014 after signing a bilateral ceasefire agreement with the government of Thein Sein. Officials from the NRPC have refuted such reports but U Aung Soe of the NRPC did say,

. . . that when the NRPC met with the group in May it did say that if it signed the NCA it could enter separate negotiations with the government for a deal to move the logs and that permission was possible.¹¹

At this moment in time, it remains unclear as to what would be necessary on a practical level for the KNPP to sign the NCA. The release of findings in relation to the military's investigation of the killings of the KNPPs troops and a civilian and subsequent prosecutions would increase trust on behalf of the KNPP. Regrettably, such an event is unlikely to occur.

BACKGROUND

Under colonial administration Burma was divided into two very distinct entities: Burma proper or ministerial Burma, consisting only of what are now the majority divisions of the country, and the excluded areas which were comprised of what is now Karen State (then known as the Karen Salween Hill tracts), Chin State (Chin Hills), Arakan State (Naga Hills) and Shan and Kachin States (Federated Shan States). During the 18th and 19th centuries, Karenni State was split into five substrates, each ruled by a King called a Saophya and therefore did not come under the direct rule of either the Burman Kingdom or Britain.

In 1875, the Burmese monarchy and the British government made an agreement that formally recognised the independence of the four western Karenni substates (the fifth Karenni sub State was included in the Union of Burma in 1888 following

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fighting between the British and the local Saophya). The four Karenni Saophyas were left to continue ruling their sub-states. The Karenni, like many of the other ethnic groups, allied themselves to the British during the Second World War and, like the other groups, believed that the British would allow them to continue with their independence after the Japanese defeat.

In February 1946, Shan Sawbwas invited the Karenni Saophyas to attend an ethnic conference to be held at Panglong. The Karenni Saophyas refused to attend the meeting stating that as a separate independent state outside British-Burma there was no reason for their attendance. That year, on the 11th of September 1946, the Karenni leader, U Bee Tu Ree, the Myosa of northern Bawlake, announced the formation of a United Karenni State Independent Council (UKSIC) comprising all four Karenni states. Less than a year later, in November 1947, Saw Maw Reh and members of the UKSIC formed the Karenni National Organisation (KNO) and it was these organisations that would seek to represent Karenni interests.¹²

As far as it was concerned, the British government had already made allowances for the former frontier areas to be given special dispensation for self-rule in any future independent Burma. Aung San and a number of AFPFL representatives, minus any ethnic members, were invited to London for discussions with then Prime Minister Clement Attlee. Despite the fact that Attlee had received a cable from the Shan Sawbwas stating that '*Aung San and his delegation did not represent the Shan and the frontier areas*' talks continued.¹³ The result was that the Aung San – Attlee agreement, originally designed to give the country full self-government within the commonwealth, stated that ethnic states, including Karenni, could decide for themselves if they wished to join with the Union of Burma. It also stated that a conference to discuss ethnic representation must be arranged by the AFPFL.¹⁴

The subsequent conference, held at Panglong in Shan State on the 12th of February 1947, resulted in

the signing of what became known as the Panglong agreement.¹⁵ This agreement provided for autonomy for both the Shan and Chin states and the future demarcation for a Kachin state.¹⁶ The ethnic issue was also later addressed in the 1947 constitution which included a provision that ethnic states could secede from the Union but not within 10 years of the constitution coming into law.¹⁷

The situation for the Karenni, however, was more complex. After the Panglong agreement, the British Government ordered the Frontier Areas Commission of Enquiry (FACE) to gauge reaction to the Panglong agreement. While the FACE report recognized the independence of Karenni it also believed that a future Karen state could be designated to include both. It was noted that:

Whether the Karenni State should merge with the Karen State or not is a matter left entirely to the people residing within Karenni State to decide. If the Karenni State is willing to merge with the Karen State, the matter can be regulated under section 180 of the Constitution.¹⁸

After a number of consultations with the people, Karenni representatives made it clear that it sought an independent Karenni state outside of the Union of Burma. Regardless, Karenni state was included as a special area of Karen State under section (180) of the 1947 constitution.¹⁹ In an attempt to change the constitution a four-man Karenni delegation, led by Saw Wunna, was sent to Rangoon on the 14th September 1947 to meet with the AFPFL. After apparently accepting bribes, Saw Wunna and another member of the delegation, U Sein, joined the AFPFL as Karenni State representatives and attended the constituent assembly on the 19 September 1947.²⁰

On 9 August 1948 at 04:00 am, AFPFL military police attacked the headquarters of the Karenni National Organization in Mya leh Daw. Karenni villagers took up arms and numerous attacks were made against the central government to protect Karenni interests. In response, the United Karenni States



EBO Background Paper - No .5 | 2018

November 2018

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Independence Army was formed, on 17 August 1948, to fight against the Burmese government.

Notes

¹ The Chin National Front (CNF), the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (Peace Council) (KNU/KNLAPC), the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), the Pa-O National Liberation Organisation (PNLO), the New Mon State Party (NMSP), and the Lahu Democratic Union (LDU).

² These groups continue to negotiate with the Government under the designation of the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC) and are led by the United Wa State Army (UWSA).

³ The UNFC currently consists of four member the KNPP, the Arakan National Council, an alliance of Arakan Group, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Lahu Democratic Union (LDU), the latter two have also signed the NCA.

⁴ 'KNPP, Gov't Agree to Further Peace Negotiations', Nyein Nyein, The Irrawaddy, 27 April 2018

⁵ <http://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=issues/peace/id-8719>, accessed 4 August 2018

⁶ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/knpp-govt-agree-to-further-peace-negotiations.html>

⁷ <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/knpps-signing-nca-depends-outcome-killings-probe.html>

⁸ <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/govt-cancels-informal-talk-knpp> accessed 17 August 2018

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/tatmadaw-knpp-troops-clash-hpa-saung-township.html>,

accessed 25 October 2018

¹¹ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/ethnic-armed-group-claims-govt-offered-timber-deal-sign-nca.html> accessed 16 October 2018

¹² 'The 50th Anniversary of the Karenni National Resistance Day', KNPP Information Committee, 1998, p14 and personal correspondence with Khu Oo Reh, 25 July 2012

¹³ 'The Shan of Burma', C.T. Yawnghwe, ISEAS, 1987 p. 99

¹⁴ See the Aung San-Attlee agreement clause 8 reproduced in Rhododendron, Vol. 4 No 1, 2003, CHRO, p. 8

¹⁵ A The first Panglong Conference occurred in March 1946

¹⁶ It must be noted that the 1947 constitution did not allow the Kachins to secede. See Union of Burma, Constitution, 1947, Chapter IX, 178

¹⁷ Union of Burma, Constitution, 1947, Chapter X, 202

¹⁸ Regional Autonomy Enquiry Commission, GUB, 19 February 1949

¹⁹ 'The 50th Anniversary of the Karenni National Resistance Day', KNPP Information Committee, 1998, p19

²⁰ Ibid. p20