
POLITICAL MONITOR NO.40

OFFICIAL MEDIA

PRESIDENT HOLDS TALKS WITH THAI DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

President Thein Sein received Thai Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Surapong Tovichakchaikul in Naypyitaw on 22 November. The two leaders discussed the prompt settlement of disputes between the two countries through regular meetings of the Thai-Myanmar Joint Commission, the designation of Chiang Mai and Kengtung (*Kyaington*) as sister cities, the development of the border areas including the bilateral implementation of the Dawei Deep Sea Port, as well as follow-up plans for the emerging Mesauk-Myawady-Kawkareik road. The talks also included the implementation of economic zones in the border areas and upgrading of Dawei Airport. The 7th Thai-Myanmar Joint Commission meeting was also held on 22 November and a wide range of issues, including capacity building, economic cooperation and social and cultural development between the two countries were discussed.¹

COMMITTEE FOR SCRUTINIZING REMAINING POLITICAL PRISONERS MEETS

The Government's Committee for Scrutinizing Remaining Political Prisoners held its 10th meeting on 23 November and discussed the release of remaining political prisoners before the end of December 2013. Ko Ye Aung, a former political prisoner who attended the meeting, said that a list containing 82 remaining political prisoners and more than 200 who were charged under Section 18 will be submitted to the government. Ye Aung added by that focus is being placed not only on political prisoners but also on those charged under Section 18 and at present there are about 265 prisoners who have charged under Section 18 and ways and means are being sought to drop the charges against them. Bo Kyi from the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners group said those who were sent to prison in accord with Section 18 will be included in the list which is to be submitted to the government in the near future.²

UNOFFICIAL MEDIA

ETHNIC LEADERS WANT ARMY CHIEF INVOLVED IN PEACE TALKS

Leaders of the ethnic alliance United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) have said that they want the Commander-in-Chief of the Burmese Army Min Aung Hlaing to be involved in peace process leading up to the signing of a nationwide ceasefire agreement.

Vice-Chair of the New Mon State Party Nai Han Thar said the current negotiations between the government and ethnic armed groups (EAGs) were flawed by the absence of senior military representation. "The peace process will be more meaningful if the commander-in-chief would join the conversation," said Nai Han Thar. "The recent fighting in Kachin State, amid the peace talks, is threatening the trust building for peace." While the government's negotiating team, is pushing for a ceasefire deal involving all armed groups, the Burmese Army has been accused of mounting continued operations in areas of Kachin State controlled by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in recent weeks. "We are having conversations only with the government," said Nai Han Thar. "The

¹ President U Thein Sein holds talks with Thai Deputy Prime Minister – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM-2013-11-23-red.pdf> (NLM) 23 November 2013 (p. 9) / Seventh Myanmar-Thailand joint commission meeting held – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM-2013-11-23-red.pdf> (NLM) 23 November 2013 (p. 16)

² Committee for scrutinizing remaining political prisoners meets – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM-2013-11-24-red.pdf> (NLM) 24 November 2013 (p. 16)

fighting is continuing despite the discussions, and we have no idea whether there is agreement between the government and the military regarding the recent fighting.”

Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) Chairman Abel Twet emphasised the need to rebuild trust between the government and ethnic armed groups and work together to promote development of the country.

Vice President David Thakapaw said the high budget used for military expenses is unnecessary and that the government should stop the civil wars to achieve eternal peace in the country.

The UNFC delegation also met the government’s chief negotiator on 24 November and stressed the importance of trust building in the on-going peace process.³

GOVT REJECTS NLD PROPOSAL FOR QUADRIPARTITE MEETING

Presidential spokesman Ye Htut said a proposal by the National League for Democracy (NLD) calling for a quadripartite meeting to discuss constitutional reform between the president, the military, the parliament and the NLD as Burma’s main opposition party should wait until the parliamentary Joint-Committee for Reviewing the Constitution releases its report.

“Amending the constitution is a matter that concerns all the citizens of Burma and all 58 official political parties, not only the NLD,” said Ye Htut. “Discussion of the matter should be all-inclusive. The Union Parliament’s Joint-Committee for Reviewing the Constitution is set to present its report in December and debating the matter ahead of time through alternative means could lead to discord with the report’s findings,” he said. “I believe that the president and the commander-in-chief should wait until the report comes out before considering a meeting, not only with the NLD but with other parties.”

NLD spokesman Nyan Win hit back at Ye Htut’s statement, claiming there were not sufficient grounds to reject the proposal, and saying that the party is yet to receive an official letter of response from the government. “We sent the proposal because we think the meeting can and should take place,” said Nyan Win. “We don’t think [Ye Htut’s] answer was sufficient. We are aware of the existence of the Committee but amending the constitution is a political requirement but not a legal requirement. We all know what the legal requirements are – but just citing that alone is not a good enough reason.”⁴

ETHNIC ARMED GROUPS DISCUSS NATIONWIDE CEASEFIRE IN CHIANGMAI

The Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT), made up of representatives from 14 ethnic armed groups, met in Chiang Mai from 26 to 28 November to discuss proposals for a ceasefire after decades of conflict with Burmese government forces. The three-day summit in northern Thailand comes ahead of talks between the NCCT and the Burmese government scheduled for December in Karen state capital Hpa-an.

Karen National Union (KNU) General-Secretary Pado Saw Kwe Htoo Win said that the NCCT discussed a draft of the nationwide ceasefire plan proposed by Naypyidaw and added amendments according to the policies of individual armed groups. “We discussed the nationwide ceasefire agreement as proposed by the government and we make amendments as necessary based on our basic principles,” said the KNU general-secretary. Pado Saw Kwe Htoo Win added that the NCCT

³ Burma’s Rebels Leaders want Army Chief involved in Peace Talks – <http://www.irrawaddy.org/min-aung-hlaing/burmas-rebel-leaders-want-army-chief-involved-peace-talks.html> Irrawaddy) 25 November 2013

⁴ Govt rejects NLD proposal for quadripartite meeting – <http://english.dvb.no/news/govt-rejects-nld-proposal-for-quadripartite-meeting-burma-myanmar/34787> (DVB) 29 November 2013

aimed to reach an agreement between the armed groups regarding a framework for the nationwide ceasefire, as well as an itinerary for future procedures and political dialogue with the government.

The meeting included more than 20 participants, including Gen. Gun Maw Sumlat of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), and Khun Okkar, David Takapaw, Abel Tweet and Nai Hongsa of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC). The NCCT was formed by a loose alliance of ethnic armed groups who appointed their representatives at a meeting in KIO headquarters Laiza on 2 November.⁵

ETHNIC PARTY TO SCRUTINIZE KAMAN POPULATION IN BURMA

The Kaman National Development Party (KNDP) announced in a statement issued on 23 November that it has decided to count the population of Kaman nationals in Burma. According to estimates, the total number of Kaman in country is expected to be around 50,000 but over 100,000 are understood to be holding Burmese national identity cards with the identity of Kaman ethnicity.

KNDP General Secretary Tin Naing Win said "we have come to know that the population of Kaman people is increasing, hence we want to have the population list for verifying the numbers." He also added that during the nearly 60 year military they had no option to carry out such mission. As the country is now adopting democracy, the KNDP has taken the initiative. It would also help the authorities to identify other nationals of Burma, if any, are using Kaman ethnic names, disclosed U Tin Naing Win. "We suspect that many Bengali people in Arakan have received the Burmese ID cards with Kaman ethnic names" said the KNDP leader.⁶

CONSTITUTION MUST BE AMENDED SAYS USDP OFFICIAL

Executive member of the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), Lower House MP for Kantpetlet Constituency and former general Thura Aung Ko has said that the 2008 Constitution must be amended in accord with the people's desire.

"Myanmar will start assuming duties of alternate ASEAN chairmanship as of 1 January 2014. ASEAN countries are also expecting that Myanmar would hold free and fair elections in 2015. In this situation, it is required to amend the 2008 Constitution in accord with the will of the people so that Myanmar will accomplish ASEAN chairmanship," said Thura Aung Ko.

Amending the military drafted 2008 Constitution requires the approval of 75 percent of parliament, making it what analysts have called one of the most difficult constitutions to change. Burma's military currently hold a 25 percent unelected stake in the Union Assembly and the ruling USDP currently holds an overwhelming majority in both lower and upper houses of parliament.

"It is a kind of difficult constitution for amendment. To be appropriate with democratic values, we must first relax section 436 (A) and (B)," said Thura Aung Ko. Furthermore, if 75 percent of parliament agrees to amend the constitution the amendments have to go to national referendum and approved by over half of all eligible voters. "I do not regard military members will object to the amendments that can't harm three national causes," added Thura Aung Ko.⁷

⁵ Ethnic rebels discuss nationwide ceasefire in Chiang Mai – <http://english.dvb.no/news/ethnic-rebels-discuss-nationwide-ceasefire-in-chiang-mai-burma-myanmar/34711> (DVB) 27 November 2013

⁶ Ethnic party to scrutinize Kaman population in Burma – <http://www.narinjara.com/main/index.php/ethnic-party-to-scrutinize-kaman-population-in-burma/> (Narinjara) 29 November 2013

⁷ Constitution must be amended says USDP official – <http://elevenmyanmar.com/politics/4246-constitution-must-be-amended-says-thura-aung-ko> (Eleven News Media) 28 November 2013

ANALYSIS

The continuing ethnic conflicts and demands to amend the 2008 Constitution are currently the major challenges and obstacles to the democratisation and reform process underway in Burma. Despite the numerous cease-fire agreements being signed fighting continues in some ethnic regions thus raising doubts on the way forward in achieving sustainable peace.

The government will therefore need to ensure that the current peace agreements are followed up by political and social reforms, but, more importantly, they must ensure that all relevant conflict parties are involved in the process.

The recent calls for the involvement of the military in the peace process once again highlights the importance of the issue and that any deals or agreements done without the approval and backing of the Tatmadaw will be difficult and unsustainable. To date, the government has not been able to reassure the ethnic armed groups that both the government and the military are on the same wave length.

The military has traditionally portrayed itself as the sole guarantor of national unity and national sovereignty but to date has opted not to interfere with the democratic reforms but has remained tight-lipped with regards to the calls to amend the Constitution. Therefore, steps or measures taken to erode or diminish the role of the military will no doubt be met with resistance within the military leadership.

The path towards genuine peace and self-determination for all the peoples of Burma will not be easy and if it is to achieve its goals will require not only commitment but the participation of all stakeholders including the military.