

POLITICAL MONITOR NO. 25

OFFICIAL MEDIA

3,000 PRISONERS RELEASED UNDER AMNESTY

President Thein Sein granted amnesty to 3,073 prisoners under Section 204 (a) of the Constitution on 7 October. 58 foreign nationals were included in the amnesty according to state-run media which stated that for the sake of “peace and stability,” the “rule of law” the “reconsolidation of the national people”, and on “humanitarian grounds” prisoners were released from prisons across the country.¹

PRESIDENT THEIN SEIN WELCOMES THAI PRIME MINISTER

President Thein Sein received Thai Premier Prayuth Chan-o-cha in Nay Pyi Taw on 9 October and discussed the promotion of bilateral relations and trade, development of the Dawei special economic zone, human resources development in energy, education, health and agriculture sectors. They also exchanged views on the construction of communication links between Myanmar, India and Thailand and the protection of rights of Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand. President Thein Sein and Prime Minister Prayuth also attended the signing of MoUs on the establishment of sister cities between Kyaing Tong in Myanmar and Chiang Mai Province in Thailand, between Myeik in Myanmar and Prachuap Kirikhan Province in Thailand and between Kawthoung in Myanmar and Ranong Province in Thailand. The Thai Premier also met Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and discussed cooperation in the fight against illegal drug trafficking, border issues to exchange information to prevent the threats of extremists in the region.²

UNION ELECTION COMMISSION PROMISES ELECTIONS IN LATE 2015

The Union Election Commission (UEC) met with its sub-commissions, political parties and civil society organizations in Dawei, Taninthayi Region, on 7 October. UEC Chairman Tin Aye promised free and fair general elections in late 2015, pledging campaigns for voter education and voter training and calling for public cooperation in the processes. A pilot project has been carried out, aimed at collecting the correct number of eligible voters to ensure the successfully conducting of free and fair elections across the nation, according to Tin Aye. Lessons have been drawn from the weaknesses of the previous general elections, which took place in 2010, he said, adding that books on election rules and regulations will get into print and be circulated. The UEC Chairman urged political parties, social society organizations and media to point out any deviation from the law.³

¹ Over 3,000 prisoners released under amnesty by President –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs19/GNLM2014-10-08-red.pdf> (GNLM) 8 October 2014 (p. 1 & 3)

² President U Thein Sein warmly welcomes Thai Prime Minister –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs19/GNLM2014-10-10-red.pdf> (GNLM) 10 October 2014 (p. 1 & 3) /
Thai Prime Minister and wife arrive in Nay Pyi Taw –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs19/GNLM2014-10-10-red.pdf> (GNLM) 10 October 2014 (p. 2) /
Commander-in-Chief receives Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs19/GNLM2014-10-10-red.pdf> (GNLM) 10 October 2014 (p. 2)

³ Union Election Commission promises elections in late 2015 –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs19/GNLM2014-10-08-red.pdf> (GNLM) 8 October 2014 (p. 3)

HLUTTAW SESSIONS – Highlights

Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) sessions

The 11th Regular Session of the First Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) held its 15th day meeting on 13 October and the following issues were raised and discussed:

- Deputy Minister for Home Affairs Brig-Gen Kyaw Kyaw Tun said that **the Correctional Department has transformed labour camps into agricultural and vocational training centres and there are now over 10,000 prisoners in 46 agricultural and vocational training centres.** The Deputy Minister also added **that a health worker is appointed to each training centre and prisoners are allowed to receive medical treatment at hospitals and from local and international health organizations.**
- **Although the prisoners have to work at the centres, they offer themselves to go to the centres of their own volition, as they have the opportunities to enjoy the environs, holidays and full remission, to spend 3 days with their families every month and to learn agriculture, livestock breeding and manufacturing methods, according to the deputy minister. In addition, a prisoner at the centre earns K 200 per day and they can take out the money when they are released.**
- Deputy Minister Kyaw Kyaw Tun said that **the Correctional Department has been taking measures to enable prisoners to enjoy their rights by adopting the Standard Minimum Rule of the United Nations.**⁴

The 11th Regular Session of the First Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) held its 16th day meeting on 14 October and issues on compensation of workers publications of laws in state-owned media were discussed.

- MP Thein Tun Oo, from Amarapura Township Constituency, asked **if the amount of compensation for those workers after losing in legal battle with employers.** Deputy Minister for Labour, Employment and Social Security Daw Win Maw Tun said **that under the Labour Compensation Act, the family of deceased labour will receive from K 150,000 to K 450,000 as reimbursement. Moreover, an ailing labour or injured one who turned to suffer severe disability will be compensated from K200,000 to K600,000. If those who are suffering no-serious injuries and are registered for social welfare programme, they can enjoy one-third of their salaries and plans are underway to modernize the Labour Act.**
- MP Myint Soe, from Pyawbwe Township Constituency, asked **whether the public-related laws would be printed in state-owned media.** Deputy Minister for Information Pike Htway answered that **the state-owned newspapers have presented 77 bills and 104 laws since the first parliamentary session, covering all the laws passed by the parliament during the term of present government.**⁵

Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Parliament) sessions

The 11th Regular Session of the First Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Parliament) held its 13th day meeting on 13 October and the issues discussed included the human rights and legal protections for the two Myanmar nationals accused of murdering two British tourists in Thailand as well as the developments on the peace process.

⁴ Labour camps have been transformed into vocational training centres: Deputy Minister – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs19/GNLM2014-10-14-red.pdf> (GNLM) 14 October 2014 (p. 2)

⁵ Pyithu Hluttaw convenes 16th day meeting – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs19/GNLM2014-10-15-red.pdf> (GNLM) 15 October 2014 (p. 2)

- MP Khin Maung Yi submitted the motion calling on the Speaker of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw to send a message to the speaker of the National Assembly of Thailand to provide human rights and legal protection for two Myanmar nationals accused of murdering two tourists on Koh Tao Island in Thailand;
- Regarding the peace process, Union Minister at the President Office and leader of the government's peace team Aung Min said **that it is difficult to predict whether success will be achieved or not as the peace process is delicate. The government formed the international donors' organization with Norway, Britain, Australia, the European Union, the United Nations and the World Bank on 12 June 2012 in order to get international assistance for the peace process. In addition, he added that the member countries has a policy to contribute financial assistance fully only when the nationwide ceasefire has been reached. The office building of the MPC worth US\$ 1.2 million was offered by Japan while the EU has intended to spend €5 million on the peace process. The UN Peace Building Fund provided 7 vehicles, 2 generators and communication equipment worth US\$ 404,600 for the MPC.**
- Similarly, **the Nippon Foundation has provided 57,399 bags of rice and medicines for 14 ethnic groups and the local people so far, and negotiations are underway to donate basic food items worth US\$ 6.3 million to about 100,000 local people. Arrangements are being made to donate a medicated mosquito net and a solar lamp per household to 17,552 households.**
- Minister Aung Min also stated that **all the funds for the MPC came from aid and grant programs and no loan has been taken for the MPC. He said that challenges and difficulties of the peace process are a reality as the government has to negotiate with large armed groups and small armed groups at the same time adding that political and economic reforms being carried out simultaneously with the peace process will give strength to overcome the challenges and difficulties.**⁶

JAPANESE GOVT GRANTS US\$ 584,493 FOR 5 GRASSROOTS PROJECTS IN EDUCATION SECTOR

Japanese Ambassador to Myanmar Tateshi Higuchi and Chairpersons from the States and Regions Committees responsible for Education signed 5 grant contracts totalling US\$ 584,493 on 2 October. The Grant Assistance for Grass-roots Human Security Projects (GGP) Scheme will be used to implement the construction of 4 schools in Thanatpin and Kyaukkyi Townships in Bago, Einme and Kangyidaunt Townships in Ayeyawady Region and Kanbawza Theingi No. 1 Nunnery School in Muse Township, Shan State. The projects will benefit over 4,100 students as well as indirectly benefitting local people in Kayin, Shan, Bago and Ayeyawady Regions. The fund will be spent to construct a new R.C building with sufficient classrooms and full school furniture. The Government of Japan has assisted 694 various grass-roots projects in Myanmar under this GGP scheme since 1993 including 317 projects in education sector.⁷

⁶ Pyidaungsu Hluttaw discusses legal protection for two Myanmar nationals accused of murder in Thailand and peace process –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs19/GNLM2014-10-14-red.pdf> (GNLM) 14 October 2014 (p. 2)

⁷ Japanese Govt grants US\$ 584,493 for five grassroots projects in education sector –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs19/GNLM2014-10-06-red.pdf> (GNLM) 6 October 2014 (p. 8)

UNOFFICIAL MEDIA

SSA-NORTH DEFIES ORDER TO WITHDRAW

The Shan State Progress Party (SSPP), the political wing of the Shan State Army-North, has informed the Union Peacemaking Work Committee (UPWC) that it declines to withdraw its troops from a strategic location in northern Shan State.

A request to withdraw SSPP/SSA-North troops from Loilan Namseekyein region, where the group's No 36 brigade is based was made by Minister for Border Affairs and Security for Shan State Colonel Aung Thu on 9 October. In his letter, the Minister also criticised the SSPP/SSA-North for carrying weapons in the area, claiming local residents were afraid.

However, a spokesman for the group, Sao Khun Sai, said the withdrawal location designated by the Tatmadaw was deep in the forest, far from residential areas. The request came after fighting between the Tatmadaw and SSA-North in Kye-thi township left hundreds displaced and several soldiers on each side dead.

The SSPP/SSA-North and the government signed a ceasefire agreement in 2012, but have clashed since.⁸

KAREN REBEL GROUPS PLAN MILITARY COOPERATION

The commanders of 4 different Karen armed groups announced on 7 October that they would begin military cooperation under the name of the Kawthoolei Armed Force (KAF).

Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA) Head Gen. Saw Lah Pwe and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) Deputy Commander-in-chief Gen. Baw Kyaw are joined by two smaller groups, the Karen National Defence Organization (KNDO) led by Col. Nerdah Mya and Colonel Tiger from the KNU/KNLA Peace Council.

The new KAF would include 1,500 fighters from the DKBA; KNLA Brigades 2 and 5 and have an estimated 3,000 fighters while the two smaller groups KNDO and KNU/KNLA Peace Council have several hundred soldiers each.

Under the agreement, the armed groups will keep their current uniforms, insignias and flags, but they have promise to cooperate and help each other in operations against the Burma Army. The groups said they will work together with an alliance of other ethnic armed groups to negotiate with the government for the establishment of a democratic federal union of Burma, in which ethnic minorities have the right to full self-determination.

The agreement marks a significant step towards unifying some of the Karen armed groups, who have splintered into different groups during the past decades of rebellion. The DKBA split from the KNLA in 1994 after members of the Buddhist Karen community fell out with the predominantly Christian KNU leadership. The DKBA fought alongside the Burma Army from 1994 until 2009. The KNU/KNLA Peace Council split from the KNLA to become a pro-government Border Guard Force in 2007, until a recent outburst of fighting near Myawaddy also affected Col. Tiger and his men. The newly formed alliance of the Karen rebel groups could pose a further complication for the nationwide ceasefire process.⁹

⁸ SSA-North defies order to withdraw – <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/11977-ssa-north-defies-order-to-withdraw.html> (Myanmar Times) 16 October 2014

⁹ Karen Rebel Groups Plan Military Cooperation – <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/karen-rebel-groups-plan-military-cooperation.html> (Irrawaddy) 14 October 2014

MILITARY APPOINTS 3 OFFICERS TO SPEAK TO THE MEDIA

In a ground-breaking first meeting, Defence Services Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has met with 7 members of the (Interim) Myanmar Press Council to discuss army-media relations.

At the same time, Min Aung Hlaing announced the appointment of three spokespersons for the Tatmadaw. Deputy Defence Minister Brigadier General Aung Thaw, Armed Forces Training Vice Chief Brigadier General Soe Naing Oo and Director of Public Relations and Psychological Warfare Major General Aung Ye Win were named as spokespersons.

“We discussed building an open relationship between the Tatmadaw and the media. The press council has to move forward by meeting with the three military officers,” said press council member U Thiha Saw, who is also editorial director of the Myanmar Times. He said the senior general responded to a request from reporters to visit the scene of clashes with ethnic armed groups by saying that the government feared it would be accused of pushing propaganda.

Press council member Zaw Thet Htwe said the senior general also thought the battlefields were not secure enough to grant journalists access. However, the senior general agreed to let military officials participate in discussions in events hosted by the press council.

Myanmar Journalist Network (MJN) General Secretary Myint Kyaw said he was pleased that a “new channel” of engagement between the military and media had begun. “It’s high time we had the chance to build an open relationship with the Tatmadaw,” he said, adding that this could help to avoid legal action being taken by the military against journalists.¹⁰

MON WOMEN PARTY FORMED

A group of politically minded women in Mon State have formed a party to contest the general elections in 2015, with the express goal of securing more seats for women in both houses of Burma’s Parliament. The Women’s Party was founded on the principle of gender equality and aims to increase female representation in politics by creating an inclusive and welcoming space for women of all ethnicities to participate in governance.

Party Chair Mi Layaung Mon, also known as Than Shin, said that she and a few other party leaders met with the Union Election Commission in Naypyidaw on 14 October to discuss the measures necessary for official party registration. Layaung Mon said that their primary intention is to give voice to women’s concerns and promote equal rights by ensuring that women hold more parliamentary seats. “There are many women in this country, with many different interests. Some want to work in civil society, some want to be business women. Others want to join politics—they can join our party.”

Mon State is an ethnic state in eastern Burma with two dominant political parties: the All Mon Region Democracy Party and the Mon Democracy Party. The state has a population of about two million, but estimates on the total ethnic Mon population in Burma vary widely, with the discrepancy not likely to be resolved until the full results of this year’s census are released.

Mi Layaung Mon added that she rejects the suggestion that creating a new party for women will divert support from ethnic parties. Even though most ethnic people want less fractured politics, she explained, there is a need for diverse female leadership, which a new party could address. “Some people treat women as equals, but some people do not want to give us our rights. We want to send a clear message to the women of this country that if we want our rights, we need to fight for them

¹⁰ Military appoints three officers to speak to media –
<http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/11983-military-appoints-three-officers-to-speak-to-media.html>
(Myanmar Times) 17 October 2014

ourselves,” said Layaung Mon. Currently the Women’s Party has 9 executive and 15 central committee members.¹¹

ARAKAN POLICE RECEIVE UNICEF TRAINING

A 2-day orientation programme organized by UNICEF and Rakhine State government was held from 6 to 7 October for 40 police officers from the Arakan Police Force, where the participants were given training on issues concerning children and minors.

Various norms and standard rules of Myanmar relating to child victims and witnesses were discussed in comparison to international laws during the training programme. The sessions also dealt with Burma’s 1993 child laws, child-trafficking issues and also capacity building for the affected children.

According to an UNICEF statement, it is working with the Burma government to improve the relevant laws for children and young people. Improvement in police actions and also judicial interventions in this regard are also being addressed in the training courses.

UNICEF also conducted similar police training programmes in Rangoon in June and another programme is scheduled for Kachin State in October.¹²

MINORITY LANGUAGE CLASSES GET BOOST WITH BURMA GOVT STIPEND

The Union government will provide a stipend to schoolteachers who teach ethnic minority languages in Burma, according to ethnic leaders. In what they say would be a major win for ethnic minorities’ cultures and rights, ethnic leaders said that the Ministry of Education had asked them to put forward lists of schoolteachers who teach ethnic languages at state schools, with the government in Naypyidaw to pay the instructors 30,000 kyats (US\$30) per month. If true, it would be the first time the Union government has offered to compensate teachers for dedicating a portion of their instruction to ethnic language study. In Mon State, a pioneering curriculum that included Mon language instruction has been taught since July 2014, making Mon schools the first to teach an ethnic minority language in government schools in more than 50 years.

An ethnic Mon parliamentarian told local news media that the monthly stipend would be paid retroactively from July. “We asked for 40,000 [kyats], but they agreed to provide 30,000 for one person,” said Aung Naing Oo, a lawmaker from Moulmein. “We got our right to let our children study their mother tongue. We need to say thanks to the government. But we want to say to our Mon people, we have not achieved our political goals yet. It is just the beginning, just a little progress,” he said. In Mon State, literature is highly valued, and Buddhist teachings are taught from a young age from Mon-language texts. “It is important for our Mon children to be able to read their language,” said Aung Naing Oo. “Our children will understand the value of their literature when they can read in their mother language.”

The Kachin Literature and Culture (KLC) organization said that it had also been informed that government schools in Kachin State would receive money from Naypyidaw for instructors who teach the Kachin language in schools. Currently, there is no ethnic Kachin language component to government schools’ curricula in Kachin State. KLC joint secretary Lum Nyo said her group is helping to prepare government schools to teach the Kachin language. “They [the Union government] told us to teach [the Kachin language] at schools. We have ongoing talks about the amount of teaching time,” she said.

¹¹ New Political Party Aims to Put Burma’s Women in Power – <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/new-political-party-aims-put-burmas-women-power.html> (Irrawaddy) 16 October 2014

¹² Arakan police receive UNICEF training – <http://narinjara.com/index.php/arakan-police-receive-unicef-training/> (Narinjara) 9 October 2014

Sai Maung Tin, a Union-level parliamentarian, said that ethnic Shan schools would also be allowed to incorporate the minority group's language into the curriculum. "Our schoolteachers may be provided money in the coming year's budget," he said. "We provide our own money to our schoolteachers at the moment." The Shan language is not currently taught during the school year, and children are most often given linguistic instruction over the summer months when class is not in session. Asked about the importance of preserving the Shan language and literature, Sai Maung Tin said the matter was existential. "Without Shan literature, the Shan people would disappear. Shan people will exist as long as their literature survives." Since 2012, teaching ethnic languages has been permitted, but only outside of school hours, and without any state funding.¹³

ANALYSIS

The statement issued by 4 Karen military factions to establish the Kawthoolei Armed Force (KAF) claims that it is a step taken to implement the decision reached at the 15th KNU Congress in 2012. At the Congress, the KNU laid out an objective on reuniting the various Karen factions and agreed in principle to formation of a "reunification committee". However, The decision taken by the Head of the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA) Gen. Saw Lah Pwe, Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) Gen. Baw Kyaw, the Karen National Defence Organization (KNDO) led by Col. Nerdah Mya and Colonel Tiger from the KNU/KNLA Peace Council to form the KAF was done without the prior consent and approval of the KNU leadership. Such actions could not only affect the unity of the KNU and but its cooperation with other ethnic armed organisations (EAOs). Furthermore, the announcement to form the KAF comes at a time when clashes have occurred between the government troops and both DKBA and KNU/KNLA Peace Council forces and the stated objectives of the KAF is to unite the Karen people and prevent further incursions into Karen territory by government troops. That was not the specific aim of the 15th Congress. The fallout within KNU ranks will be monitored closely by the government and other ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) and that a fragmented KNU could create a bigger threat not only to the on-going peace process but also towards the democratic reforms in Burma.

¹³ Minority Language Classes Get Boost With Burma Govt Stipend – <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/minority-language-classes-get-boost-burma-govt-stipend.html> (Irrawaddy) 14 October 2014