
POLITICAL MONITOR No. 4

OFFICIAL MEDIA

GOVERNMENT, STUDENT PROTESTERS AGREE TO HOLD 4-PARTY TALKS

The government, Hluttaw representatives and student representatives of Democracy Education Movement met in Nay Pyi Taw on 28 January and issued a 4-point declaration. Meeting participants included President's Office Union Minister U Aung Min, Deputy Minister U Thant Shin and representatives of the Leading Committee for Democracy Education led by Zeya Lwin and Nanda Sit Aung of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions. According to the declaration, the participants agreed to hold 4-party talks among the government, the parliament, students and the National Network for Education Reform on 1 February in Yangon, to discuss the 11 demands of the students and to seek solutions through dialogue, to discuss positively to reach agreements and to stop further student protests.

Min Ko Naing of 88 Generation Peace and Open Society hailed the agreement between the government and the students, saying that it was a good step forward and both the government and the students were required to keep their promise.

Ko Zeyar Lwin of Yangon Institute of Economics agreed that the meeting was important and it was a rare meeting in the history of the student movement. He believed that the 4-party talks of the strike committee, the leading committee for democracy education movement, the national network for education reform and the government will solve the national education law crisis. Zeyar Lwin also state that other demands of the students will be discussed at the talks. The talks will begin on 1 February and the protests will also be suspended as soon as the talks begin, according to Ko Nanda Sit Aung of All Burma Federation of Student Unions (Central Working Committee).¹

EDUCATION MINISTRY TO SUBMIT BILL AMENDING NATIONAL EDUCATION LAW TO PYIDAUNGSU HLUTTAW

A coordination meeting to amend provisions demanded by the students regarding the National Education Law was held in 27 January. Deputy Speaker of Pyidaungsu Hluttaw and Pyithu Hluttaw U Nanda Kyaw Swa explained the issues related to the amendment of the National Education Law while the Union Minister for Education Dr Daw Khin San Yi stated that some points in the law will be amended and will later be submitted to the Hluttaw for discussion. Deputy Minister Dr Daw Min Aung, chairmen and members of Pyithu and Amyotha Hluttaw also participated in the discussions. The Ministry of Education will submit a bill amending the National Education Law to the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw.²

ELECTION COMMISSION CHAIR BRIEFS ELECTION OFFICIALS

The Union Election Commission U Tin Aye addressed a work coordination meeting on 23 January with ministries that are involved with election activities. The UEC Chair said training will be provided to local election commissions, related ministries, political parties, civil society organizations and the media, with the chairman calling for them all to familiarize themselves with and adhere to the rules and regulations so as to ensure a greater electoral transparency. As part of voter education, he emphasized the use of mass media, which include Q&A sessions, radio and television broadcasts, pamphlets, billboards and cartoons. "They should also be made available in ethnic languages," he

¹ Government, Hluttaw representatives, students issue joint declaration on amendment of national education law – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs20/GNLM2015-01-29-red.pdf> (GNLM) 29 January 2015 (p. 3)/ Government, student protesters agree to hold four-party talks –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs20/GNLM2015-01-29-red.pdf> (GNLM) 29 January 2015 (p. 9)

² Education Ministry to submit bill amending National Education Law to Pyidaungsu Hluttaw – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs20/GNLM2015-01-28-red.pdf> (GNLM) 28 January 2015 (p. 2)

said. Tin Aye urged the Ministry of Immigration and Population to speed up the submission of the list of ethnic groups eligible for parliamentary candidacy. International observers will be invited to prove that the elections are free, fair and transparent. The chairman said that ministries should coordinate to design a code of conduct for foreign eyewitnesses that meets international norms and does not harm the country's foreign policy. He called for bold action against electoral fraud, vote rigging and prejudice, stressing that these dishonest behaviours will tarnish the image of both candidates-elect and the government they form, thereby opening the country to criticism from the international community. The UEC Chair also held two separate meetings with election commission officials from Shan State North (Lashio) on 27 January and the Kokang Self-Administered Zone on 28 January.³

Amyotha Hluttaw (Upper House) sessions

The 12th Regular Session of the First Amyotha Hluttaw (Upper House) held its 6th day meeting on 26 January and the controversial Religious Conversion Bill was discussed at the session.

- MP Khin Maung Latt of Rakhine State Constituency (6) stated **that enacting the bill will contribute to reduction of conflicts, stability and national interests** while MP Aung Kyi Nyunt of Magway Region Constituency (4) was of the view that **special care and enough time should be taken for enactment of an unbiased and meaningful law as the bill will force people to convert religion as its side effects and stoke the worry of national races instead of protecting the freedom of worship.**
- MP Dr Banya Aung Moe of Mon State Constituency (7) said that **the bill will not affect the freedom of worship and will encourage people of different religions to live in unity.** Similarly, Defence Services Personnel Representative Lt-Col Thein Lwin stated **that the bill is in accordance with the state constitution and meets the international legal standards without preventing freedom of religious conversion and that the bill systematizes the conversion of religion.**
- MPs U Nyan Lin of Ayeyawady Region Constituency (3) and U Phone Myint Aung of Yangon Region Constituency (3) called for **the proposed bill to be redrafted** while MP U Zonhle Htan of Chin State Constituency (2) while U J Yaw Wu of Kachin State Constituency (12) **objected to the motion.**⁴

UNOFFICIAL MEDIA

UNFC CHAIR: CALL FOR SIGNING ON FEDERALISM MADE

The Chairman of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) General N. Ban La 25 January said that a proposal had been presented to President Thein Sein to host a ceremony for the signing of an agreement on federalism. "If it is agreed then I'm ready to sign it as the chairman of the UNFC," he said.

He explained that his proposition was made in reference to the President's monthly radio address on 2 December when he reported: "A firm political agreement on forming a federal union, which is vital to the peace process, has been reached."

³ UEC urges local commissions and ministries to exert more efforts on greater electoral transparency – <http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs20/GNLM2015-01-24-red.pdf> (GNLM) 24 January 2015 (p. 3)/ UEC Chairman Meets election sub-commissions, political parties, departmental officials, CSOs – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs20/GNLM2015-01-29-red.pdf> (GNLM) 29 January 2015 (p. 3)/ UEC Chairman Meets election sub-commissions, political parties, CSOs in Kokang Self-Administered Zone – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs20/GNLM2015-01-30-red.pdf> (GNLM) 30 January 2015 (p. 3)

⁴ Amyotha Hluttaw divided on religious conversion bill – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs20/GNLM2015-01-27-red.pdf> (GNLM) 27 January 2015 (p. 2)

The proposal followed media reports saying the Nationwide Ceasefire Accord (NCA) that has been negotiated since 2013 between the government's Union Peacemaking Work Committee (UPWC) and the armed organizations' Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT), would not be signed on 12 February, the 68th anniversary of the historic Panglong Agreement as expected earlier.

"The UNFC represents not only the 12 member organizations that are members in the NCCT but also the other 4 that are its confederates," he added. "The RCSS/SSA (Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army) is the only non-confederate."

He warned that failure to achieve progress could place the peace process at risk. "I fear we may be forced to reconsider the role of the NCCT if our proposal fails to receive consideration from the government," he said. Details of the proposal were not disclosed.

The UNFC leader made a visit to RCSS/SSA headquarters on 19 January when he made the proposal to hold a summit of all leaders in the near future. The RCSS/SSA leader Sao Yawdserk welcomed the proposal, said N Ban La.⁵

NCCT NOT POSTPONING THE SIGNING OF A CEASEFIRE, SAYS NCCT LEADER NAI HONGSAR

Concerned with the recent protest in Kamarwet Town, Mon State in which locals called for the signing of a nationwide ceasefire on Union Day, leader of the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) Nai Hongsar said that the NCCT was not making any delay in signing a ceasefire agreement. "In fact, it is not that we do not want to sign a ceasefire. In the past, we experienced that after signing a ceasefire agreement, the agreement was just in name. We do not want to do that [again] if it is not certain," Nai Hongsar stated at the Civil Societies' Forum for Peace, held on 28 January in Moulmein the capital of Mon State.

On 27 January, nearly 500 protesters joined together to call for a nationwide ceasefire to be signed immediately, in order to bring democracy and peace to Burma. "We want to have the peace process implemented immediately. The only way to do business in peace from one place in the country to another is if there is peace [in the country]," said U Min Tun Taung, who submitted for permission to protest in Kamarwet Town.

However, Nai Hongsar maintains that although the government has offered to hold a 7th round of peace talks, these talks will only be held if the Tatmadaw (Burmese Army) side agrees to the appropriate points to discuss. "Now, we [the NCCT] are working on getting along well with the government. Talks can be resumed if the Tatmadaw side has appropriate points to discuss with [us]. We will not sign a ceasefire agreement if we do not reach any agreement on the points discussed during the talk," said Nai Hongsar, who also sits as vice-chairman of the New Mon State Party (NMSP).

According to the chairman of the Mon National Party (MNP) Nai Banyar Chan, holding a protest such as the one in Kamarwet, while the ethnic armed organizations and government have yet to reach an agreement and the NMSP is engaged in ceasefire talks with the government, it is as if Mon people are pressuring the NMSP to sign a ceasefire.

"The people [who] participated in the protest are not the ones who understand the peace talk process," said Nai Banyar Chan, "The people staged the protest without understanding that the group which Nai Hongsar leads is having talks with the government, wherein [discussions are being held regarding] the difficulties ethnic armed groups face, and how the government did not agree with the points that the ethnic armed groups demanded." The Union Peace-Making Working

⁵ UNFC leader: Call for signing on federalism made – <http://english.panglong.org/unfc-leader-call-for-signing-on-federalism-made/> (Shan Herald News Agency) 28 January 2015

Committee (UPWC) and the NCCT held 6th round peace talks in September 2014. The Myanmar Peace Center is currently negotiating for both sides to hold a 7th round of talks.⁶

GOVT, KNU SET UP NEW TOWN PROJECT FOR REFUGEES

The government and the Karen National Union (KNU) have jointly set up a new town project to create job opportunities and resettlement in Myanmar for refugees currently living in Thailand. The new town is built on 750 acres of land located near Malwakhee Village. The project is named Laykaykaw Town and contains industries for job creation. Also, the new town project contains governmental offices, schools, hospital, playground, market, swimming pool, and electricity. The Border Affairs and Security Minister of Kayin State Col Aung Lwin visited the new town on January 22 and observed the project. He instructed the project to be systematic in water distribution, road, health, education and relaxation zones.

Many people fled to Thailand due to the ongoing civil war in Myanmar. In order for them to return to Myanmar, the authorities and the KNU funded the project. Refugees from Myanmar of mostly Kayin and Kayah origin fled armed conflict and have sought refuge in Thailand for more than three decades in temporary shelters administered by the host country. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are 72,900 Myanmar refugees in Thailand as of this month. On top of that are some 51,500 people who are in refugee-like situations.⁷

KS 43.8 BN BUDGETED FOR 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The Union Election Commission (UEC) has requested a budget of Ks 43.8 billion for the upcoming 2015 general elections, according to the UEC's budget request at the Union parliament on 27 January. UEC member Win Ko said: "We requested a budget of Ks 43.8 billion for all electoral processes. So all expenditures, including revenue expenditures, amount to Ks 50.1 billion." "With regard to the UEC's summary of revenues and expenditures approved by the Financial Commission, the UEC has budgeted Ks 24.29 million in revenues. This is the estimated calculation of registration fees for political parties, remonstrations fees and fees from candidates who will obtain less than one-eighth of the votes," Win Ko added.

"The budgeted revenue expenditures amount is Ks 50.1 billion, of which Ks 6.2 billion is earmarked for expenditures of the UEC headquarters and sub-commissions. As a distinct point, the budget for the general election is Ks 43.8 billion. Largely, allowances are among the biggest expenditures, accounting for Ks 16.3 billion. These expenditures are for polling station staff," he said. "The UEC has asked for capital expenditures of Ks 2.24 billion but was allotted capital expenditures of Ks 1.73 billion, as the financial commission cut expenditures for copiers and furniture," Win Ko added.⁸

ANALYSIS

The recent protests by students in Yangon, Mandalay, Myingyan, Kyaukse, Taungtha and Magwe against the National Education Law came after the government failed to meet the demands by students for talks to amend the proposed legislation. And as protests were gaining momentum and likelihood of spreading to other parts of the country, the government finally agreed to meet with student representatives in resolving the issue. However, whether these talks and meetings will be

⁶ NCCT not postponing the signing of a ceasefire, says NCCT leader Nai Hongsar – <http://monnews.org/2015/01/29/ncct-postponing-signing-ceasefire-says-ncct-leader-nai-hongsar/> (IMNA) 29 January 2015

⁷ Govt, KNU set up new town project for refugees – <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/aec/Govt-KNU-set-up-new-town-project-for-refugees-30252754.html> (the Nation) 27 January 2015

⁸ Ks 43.8 bn budgeted for 2015 general elections – http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8825:ks-43-8-bn-budgeted-for-2015-general-elections&catid=44:national&Itemid=384 (Eleven News Media) 28 January 2015

enough to end the protests remains to be seen. The draft legislation which was rushed through Parliament without adequate consultation with relevant stakeholders has been slated as not representing the interests of the people and the students. Thus, it is crucial that any future discussions to resolve the issue will need to include students and teachers as well as other key stakeholders. Myanmar is currently going through a political transition to democracy and the formulating of a new education policy should be based on democratic principles. Students have played a leading role in political movements in the past and the recent protests are clear indications that their demands for a good education system can only serve to promote interests of the country and creating an engine of a more vibrant and confident society in Myanmar. The road ahead in 2015 is long and challenging and at such a crucial juncture in time, the government should avoid the creation of adding another crisis to its already exhaustive lists of conflicts and issues.