

POLITICAL MONITOR NO.20

OFFICIAL MEDIA

WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM ON EAST ASIA (2013) OPENS IN MYANMAR

The 22nd World Economic Forum on East Asia themed “Courageous Transformation for Inclusion and Integration” was officially opened by President Thein Sein and leaders from Vietnam, Laos and the forum’s founder Klaus Schwab. Thein Sein in his speech stated that the country’s current period of reforms as a “pivotal moment” in its history and urged the international community to render support and assistance to Burma. Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and Lao Prime Minister Thongsing Thammavong stressed strengthening of building ASEAN integration, vowing to make joint efforts to build up ASEAN Community in 2015 to realize ASEAN development goals. During the first day participants discussed the Global Agenda Council Series, Travel and Tourism Growth and Jobs, Accelerating ASEAN’s Integration, Exclusive Dialogue with Burmese/Myanmar Businesses and Laying the Basic for Travel and Tourism Guiding Principles. In other sessions on the first day, opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, Union Minister Soe Thein and former political prisoner Zin Mar Aung took part in a debate organized by the BBC, and discussed the possibility for constitutional amendment, lack of independence of the judiciary, and reconciliation with activists and ethnic minorities. Suu Kyi also affirmed her wish to become president of Burma/Myanmar in 2015 and acknowledged that there were many aspects of the controversial 2008 constitution— which still need to be amended. Issues on the agenda of the three-day is set to include the challenges and opportunities currently facing Burma/Myanmar as well regional development and audience of over 900 delegates including 500 business executives from 55 countries worldwide is expected to attend the three-day event.¹

PRESIDENT THEIN SEIN RECEIVES CHIEF OF BRITISH ARMED FORCES

A British delegation led by Chief of the Defence Staff General Sir David Richards arrived in Burma to begin his official visit from 2-4 June. His visit is the first of a head of British Armed Forces over 50 years and is considered as a milestone in relations between the two armed forces after 1988. In his meeting with President Thein Sein, the two exchanged views on promotion of bilateral relations and cooperation between the two countries, sharing experience on peace-making process and human resources development. The British delegation also met Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and discussed strengthening of ties between the two Armed Forces with the possibility of training cooperation and the appointment of military attachés in both capitals in the near future. Also during the visit General Richards met Speaker of the Upper House Khin Aung Myint, Speaker of the Lower House Thura Shwe Mann, Minister for the President’s Office Aung Min, and opposition leader NLD Chairman Aung San Suu Kyi and representatives of ethnic minority groups.²

¹ World Economic Forum kicks off in Myanmar –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/NLM-2013-06-06-red.pdf> (NLM) 6 June 2013 (p. 16)/
World Economic Forum on East Asia (2013) opens –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/NLM-2013-06-07-red.pdf> (NLM) 7 June 2013 (p.1)

² President U Thein Sein receives Chief of the Defence Staff of British Armed Forces –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/NLM-2013-06-06-red.pdf> (NLM) 6 June 2013 (p. 1)/

Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services welcomes British Chief of the Defence Staff –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/NLM-2013-06-06-red.pdf> (NLM) 6 June 2013 (p. 6)/

Tatmadaw cooperating friendly with armed forces of neighbours, regional countries, ASEAN and other countries in the world –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/NLM-2013-06-06-red.pdf> (NLM) 6 June 2013 (p. 16 & 9)/

Pyithu Hluttaw Speaker holds talks with US delegation, Chief of British Armed Forces and party –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/NLM-2013-06-06-red.pdf> (NLM) 6 June 2013 (p. 8)/

PRESIDENT U THEIN SEIN RECEIVES EMERITUS SENIOR MINISTER OF SINGAPORE

President Thein Sein received Singapore's Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong on 5 June in Naypyitaw and discussed matters related to further strengthening of ties between the two countries and development of health and communication sectors in Burma/Myanmar as well as development of human resources, investment of Singapore's entrepreneurs in Burma. In a separate meeting Minister Goh also called on Speaker of Pyithu Hluttaw Thura U Shwe Mann and exchanged views on parliamentary affairs, bilateral friendship and cooperation, and reforms in Burma.³

FORMER US CHIEF DIPLOMAT MADELEINE ALBRIGHT MEETS BURMESE LEADERS

Vice-President Nyan Tun received a US delegation led by former US Secretary of State and Chairperson of National Democratic Institute (NDI) Madeleine Albright in Naypyitaw on 5 June. They discussed the promotion of US-Burma/Myanmar-US ties, and NDI's potential assistance in terms of advice and experience towards the democratization process in Burma. Similarly, the former US diplomat also met the Speakers of both the Upper and Lower Houses and the Chairman of the Union Election Commission and held comprehensive discussions on parliamentary affairs, strengthening bilateral friendship and amity and further cooperation between Burma/Myanmar and the United States, the on-going process for ensuring national unity, national reconsolidation, the rule of law and internal peace and work progress to hold a free and fair elections in 2015.⁴

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SHAN LEADER TAKES COUNSEL BEFORE MEETING PRESIDENT

The leader of the Restoration Council of Shan State / Shan State Army (RCSS/SSA) Lt-Gen Yawdserk, held a two-day consultation meeting on 1-2 June, with individuals and groups from both inside and outside Shan State. During the meeting the participants raised their concerns on cooperation against drugs; releasing of RCSS/SSA members; peace and cease-fire monitoring; Moratorium on 1908 Unlawful Association Act and issuance of citizenship cards to RCSS/SSA members and dependents which were included in the 12-point agreement signed between the government and RCSS in Kengtung on 19 May 2012. The meeting also urged the RCSS leader to raise the following issues in his meeting with President Thein Sein.

- the issues of federal democracy for the Shans;
- the 2014 census to take into account millions of migrants in neighboring countries and to issue them with household registers and citizenship cards;

Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Speaker U Khin Aung Myint receives British, US guests –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/NLM-2013-06-06-red.pdf> (NLM) 6 June 2013 (p. 8)/

Head of the UK armed forces visits Burma –
<https://www.gov.uk/government/world-location-news/head-of-the-uk-armed-forces-visits-burma> (British Embassy Official website – Rangoon) 5 June 2013

³ President U Thein Sein receives Emeritus Senior Minister of Singapore –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/NLM-2013-06-06-red.pdf> (NLM) 6 June 2013 (p. 9)/
Pyithu Hluttaw Speaker receives S'pore's Emeritus Senior Minister –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/NLM-2013-06-06-red.pdf> (NLM) 6 June 2013 (p. 9)

⁴ Vice-President U Nyan Tun receives NDI Chairperson –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/NLM-2013-06-06-red.pdf> (NLM) 6 June 2013 (p. 1)/
Pyithu Hluttaw Speaker holds talks with US delegation, Chief of British Armed Forces and party –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/NLM-2013-06-06-red.pdf> (NLM) 6 June 2013 (p. 8)/
Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Speaker U Khin Aung Myint receives British, US guests –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/NLM-2013-06-06-red.pdf> (NLM) 6 June 2013 (p. 8)/
UEC Chairman receives NDI Chairperson –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/NLM-2013-06-06-red.pdf> (NLM) 6 June 2013 (p. 8)

- to end land confiscations;
- to embrace the people's Free, Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) principle when it comes to mega-projects in non-Burman states.;
- To support non-state media in ethnic languages;
- A bona-fide ceasefire⁵

ETHNIC RAKHINE PARTIES TO DISCUSS MERGER

The Arakan (Rakhine) League for Democracy (ALD) and the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) will meet on 15 June in Yangon to discuss merging into a single political party. The move was announced after the RNDP annual meeting held at the end of May. "The plan of joining the two major parties into one is a first step in building trust and laying down the basic principles for future works," said Dr. Aye Maung, the chairman of the RNDP. "Dignitaries from Rakhine Thahaya Association, Rakhine Literature and Culture Association and other Rakhine networks as well as Buddhist monks will be attending the meeting," said Dr. Maung. The five-member delegation led by Dr. Aye Maung from the RNDP and five top leaders of the RLD will hold a meeting at Rakhine Thahaya Association in Yangon on 15th June. Regarding the merging of the two parties, Aye Thau Aung, chairman of the RLD said that they would have to select suitable persons after their meeting and that a merger was of great importance to both parties.⁶

KAREN COMMUNITY LEADERS CALL FOR TRANSPARENCY ON BUSINESS DEALS AMID PEACE TALKS

More than 150 representatives from 40 Karen community organizations in Burma and overseas have called for transparency and accountability in economic, development projects that have been signed amid on-going peace talks between the government and Karen rebels. The representatives, including community leaders from civil society groups, made the call after they concluded a five-day seminar on 31 May was organized by the Karen National Unity Seminar Organizing Committee. In a statement issued on 31 May, the organizers of the meeting called for "transparency and accountability in matters related to economic, development and investment activities as it is imperative that local communities benefit from those projects."

Naw Susanna Hla Hla Soe, a spokesperson for the Karen National Unity Seminar Organizing Committee, said: "The KNU told us about their business policy. It is quite positive. It included businesses that don't harm local communities, but benefit the communities and ideas emerging from the middle-class business people." "We urged them to publicly explain their position to Karen civilians before making a final decision. We ask both the KNU and the Burmese government." She added that the Karen representatives also called on the KNU to consult the public before signing business deals, such as power plants and dams, which might damage the livelihoods of local civilians. "We only find out about the projects after they're already having a negative impact on civilians. We don't want such incidents to happen in the future," she added.

The seminar participants pushed for a political participation, encouraging both the government and the KNU to establish a timeframe for the peace process, which they say should include economic and land issues. The participants also raised concerns over the significant drop in cross-border humanitarian assistance provided to Karen communities and called on the international community to continue its cross-border aid until real peace is achieved. The representatives also called on the

⁵ Shan leader takes counsel before meeting President – http://www.english.panglong.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5443:shan-leader-takes-counsel-before-meeting-president&catid=85:politics&Itemid=266 (S.H.A.N.) 3 June 2013

⁶ Major ethnic Rakhine parties to discuss merger – <http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/politics/3813-major-ethnic-rakhine-parties-to-discuss-merger> (Eleven News Media) 5 June 2013

Burmese government, the KNU and Karen community-based organizations to collaboratively work on eliminating widespread drug addiction and gambling problems in Karen state.⁷

KAYIN FORMS UNITY COMMITTEE FOR ETHNIC KAYIN ARMED GROUPS

A Unity Committee for ethnic Kayin armed groups has been formed with the purpose of avoiding skirmishes among them and seeking a peaceful solution in case of conflicts. The decision was taken at the meeting of ethnic Kayin (Karen) armed groups held at the Karen National Union (KNU) headquarters on 28 May. The ethnic Kayin armed groups which participated in the meeting included the KNU, the Border Guard Force (BGF), the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), the Karen Peace Force (KPF) and the Phayagyigone peace organization.

The Unity Committee was formed with 17 members—3 from the KNU, 3 from the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army - Peace Council, 3 from the Border Guard Force led by Colonel Saw Chit, 3 from the DKBA, 3 from the Karen Peace Force (KPF), and 2 from the Phayagyigone peace organization by Phado Saw Myint Than. The committee will also take up issues on combating the spread of narcotic drugs in the Kayin State.⁸

ANALYSIS

The holding of the 22nd World Economic Forum has once again brought Burma under the spotlight of the international community while at the same time the country continues its path to democratic transition. The Forum will provide Burma an opportunity to showcase to the outside world its economic credentials but will also to attract would-be investors to venture into a country which for decades has been in secluded. And at such an important juncture in time, the 3-day forum will not only be an opportune moment for the government to promote its image economically but more importantly its commitment in implementing democratic reforms in Burma.

The calls made by 40 Karen community organisations for the public to be more involved in the decision making-process are signs that the armed groups are taking the opinion of their communities seriously. This bodes well for democratization and getting a political solution that is acceptable to the people.

Similarly, the recent visit of Chief of the Defense Staff of British Armed Forces General Sir David Richards to Burma is indeed a significant step in broadening bilateral relations between Burma and the United Kingdom. General Richard's visit to Burma is a reflection of the importance attached by the UK in building relations with the Burmese military, which remains not only powerful but integral to the country's leadership and the on-going reform process. The visit will also provide Britain to monitor and better understand the dynamics of the country's political environment but help in promoting engagement with the Tatmadaw (Burmese Army), which in the past had been non-existent. Britain's offer of assistance on security sector reform and the possibility of training cooperation between the two armed forces as well as the appointment of a full-time military attaché in Yangon will enhance its ties with Burma. And in doing so, Britain and other international community should monitor closely the democratic transition in Burma and more importantly to ensure the reforms become irreversible.

⁷ Karen Community Leaders Call for Transparency on Business Deals Amid Peace Talks – <http://www.irrawaddy.org/archives/36467> (Irrawaddy) 4 June 2013

⁸ Kayin forms Unity Committee for ethnic Kayin armed groups – <http://elevenmyanmar.com/politics/3763-kayin-forms-unity-committee-for-ethnic-kayin-armed-groups> (Eleven News Media) 2 June 2013