

POLITICAL MONITOR NO.41

OFFICIAL MEDIA

PRESIDENT THEIN SEIN VISITS THE PHILIPPINES

At the invitation of Philippines President Benigno Aquino III, a delegation led by President Thein Sein visited the Philippines from 4 to 7 December. The two leaders discussed a broad range of issues on ASEAN and regional cooperation including trade and investment, education, human rights, agriculture and forestry, hotels and tourism, bilateral air services, banking, rural development and poverty reduction, security and peace-making experiences. The Philippine President reaffirmed his support for Burma's reform process. He also expressed thanks for Myanmar's aid assistance to storm and earthquake victims of the Philippines. President Thein Sein also expressed thanks to the government and people of the Philippines for their support towards the reforms taking place in Burma and reiterated that his government would continue the process. He voiced Burma's support for the peaceful settlement of disputes between fellow ASEAN members and the People's Republic of China and made a pledge to actively participate in the works for full implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea while taking ASEAN's Chair. Following their talks, Aquino and Thein Sein witnessed the signing of agreements on trade and investment, agricultural cooperation, renewable energy, information cooperation and visa exemption for Filipino holders of ordinary passports. An MOU to establish a business forum was also signed between the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and the Myanmar Chamber of Commerce during the visit.¹

LANDS TO BE HANDED OVER TO OWNERS AFTER COMPLETION OF LETPADAUNG TAUNG PROJECT

During the coordination meeting of the Implementation Committee of the Report of the Investigation Commission for Letpadaungtaung Copper Mining Project in Sagaing on 3 December, Committee Chairman Hla Tun called for deeper transparency and close contact with local people and emphasized the need for transparency in the facts and figures pertaining to the environmental conservation of the project. Chairman Hla Tun explained that the government and the company must spend money before earning profit from the project and that after its completion the lands will be systematically handed over to original land owners. He also touched upon long-term and short-term measures, meeting of international standards, the rule of law, peace and stability and cooperation between the officials concerned. Vice-Chairman Sagaing Region Chief Minister Tha Aye explained the follow-up measures and the implementation of an electric power pumping project and Union Minister Win Tun discussed environmental conservation in the project area.²

UNOFFICIAL MEDIA

FEDERAL ARMY 'ALREADY EXISTS, SAYS MILITARY CHIEF

Amid calls from Burma's ethnic armed groups for the establishment of a "federal army," the country's commander-in-chief has claimed that the current military is already a federally constituted

¹ President U Thein Sein leaves for the Philippines –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM-2013-12-05-red.pdf> (NLM) 5 December 2013 (p.1)/
President U Thein Sein arrives in Manila –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM-2013-12-05-red.pdf> (NLM) 5 December 2013 (p. 8)/
Myanmar affirms support for peaceful resolution between ASEAN members concerned and China through series of negotiations: President U Thein Sein Philippines reaffirms its support for Myanmar's reform process: President Mr. Benigno S. Aquino III –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM-2013-12-06-red.pdf> (NLM) 6 December 2013 (p.1 & 8)

² Lands to be handed over to owners after completion of Letpadaungtaung Project –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM-2013-12-04-red.pdf> (NLM) 4 December 2013 (p.16 & 9)

institution, owing to its inclusion of ethnic minority members within the ranks. In remarks made to troops in Thandwe Township, Rakhine State on 4 December, Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing appeared to reject some ethnic armed group leaders' proposal for a military that would decentralize the command structure and see the battalions in certain regions comprised largely of soldiers from the dominant resident ethnic group. "Different ethnic groups are enlisted in our army and our army is the Union Army. This is why our army needs to build up union spirit. It is the duty of everyone in our army to avoid misunderstandings between either individuals or battalions," said Min Aung Hlaing. During a visit on the same day to Sittwe, Min Aung Hlaing told the public that he wanted Burma to practice "disciplined democracy," adding that the military would participate in the realization of this goal. "We want to have real, disciplined democracy. This is the first time I've told the public," Min Aung Hlaing was quoted as saying. "We really want to become a democratic country. We want to have similar [system of governance] as other countries that have enjoyed peaceful and stable development. We are working to attain it. We need to have peace, rule of law and unity." The government has not yet indicated whether it will consider the ethnic armed groups' pitch for a future army that is federal in nature.³

MILITARY MPS TO SUBMIT SUGGESTIONS FOR CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

One of Parliament's military-appointed MPs, Major General Wai Lin, on 1 December said that he and other military MPs will submit their suggestions for constitutional amendments to Parliament's Constitution Review Joint Committee by 15 December. "After submitting our report to the Committee, we will explain our suggestions for change." He added that he could not comment on if they had proposed modifications to article 59(f) of the constitution, which details qualifications for Presidential, Vice-Presidential, and Defense Services candidacy. The Committee was formed earlier this year to seek solutions to issues within the constitution in preparation for the 2015 general election. It has requested assessment and advice from Myanmar's political parties, organizations, and citizens.⁴

CONSTITUTION TO BE DISCUSSED FOLLOWING CEASEFIRE – AUNG MIN

Political dialogue, including amending the 2008 Constitution, must come after a nation-wide ceasefire is in place, according to Union Minister Aung Min. The minister for President's Office was speaking at a forum about the role of public organisations in national peace-building, held on 30 November 30 at Yangon University. "The coming political dialogue will include amending the 2008 Constitution. For now, I think the nation-wide ceasefire accord may be reached in this month or January next year. After that, establishment of frameworks will follow," said Aung Min. He also added that representatives from the government, parliament, the military, ethnic armed groups, political parties and civil organisations will take part in the dialogue.⁵

88 GENERATION STUDENT'S GROUP BACKS TALKS ON CONSTITUTION REFORM

The 88 Generation Students civil society group on 4 December gave its support to opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's proposal calling for a four-way dialogue with President Thein Sein, the parliamentary speaker, and the military chief to lay the groundwork for constitutional reforms. The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and at least one ethnic-based party, however, said

³ Federal Army 'Already Exists, Says Military Chief – <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/federal-army-already-exists-says-military-chief.html> (Irrawaddy) 5 December 2013

⁴ Military MPs to submit suggestions for constitutional reform – <http://mizzima.com/mizzima-news/politics/item/10690-military-mps-to-submit-suggestions-for-constitutional-reform> (Mizzima) 2 December 2013

⁵ Constitution to be discussed following ceasefire – Aung Min – <http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/politics/4301-constitution-to-be-discussed-following-ceasefire-aung-min> (Eleven News Media) 3 December 2013

any talks among top leaders should not wait until after a parliamentary committee tasked with reviewing public proposals for revising the charter completes its work in January. Min Ko Naing, leader of the 88 Generation Students' Group, said the four-way meeting should be held without delay. "My opinion is that this is an important thing to do as soon as possible, though it should be systematic," he told RFA's Myanmar Service. "People who can make decisions for the country must meet at anytime as needed. We also need to have talks in which ethnic [leaders] can propose what they need," he said. Myanmar's ruling officials have mostly expressed support for constitutional amendments, but with elections two years away, some observers say the process so far has been slow. In response to Aung San Suu Kyi's request, Presidential spokesman Ye Htut said that any talks about constitutional amendments should include all Myanmar political parties and ethnic groups and be held after the parliamentary committee's review.⁶

SECOND ROUND OF MYANMAR GOVT-ETHNIC ARMED GROUPS CEASEFIRE TALKS PUT OFF

The second round of nationwide ceasefire talks between the government and 17 ethnic armed groups scheduled to take place in Hpa-an, the Karen State capital from 19 to 20 December has now been put off until January, according to KNU sources. As the armed groups are not well ready for the talks and the Christmas is fast approaching, it is impossible to hold the talks on schedule and therefore the talks have been moved to January 2014, a KNU central committee member said. The talks were expected to reach a final nationwide ceasefire accord so that parties involved would enter into political dialogue. During their first round of talks held in Myitkyina, the capital of northernmost Kachin state, in November, ethnic leaders presented to the government their 11-point framework for a ceasefire deal, while the government side also put forward its draft nationwide ceasefire accord. Neither side has given immediate response to each other's proposals in the talks then.⁷

WOMEN'S FORUM IN RANGOON

A women's forum held in Rangoon from 6-7 December brought together hundreds of leading women politicians, activists, businesswomen and journalists from Burma and across the world to discuss the role of women in Burma's rapidly changing society. In speaking to the forum, Aung San Suu Kyi said women had an important role to play in peace-building and socio-economic development of Burmese society, which is quickly opening up due to political reforms and emerging from decades of ethnic conflict. "Women, I believe, have a great role to play in building a culture," said Suu Kyi, adding that women should help foster new attitudes in Burmese society. "It takes time to change a culture, a mindset," the Nobel Laureate said. "Our women have to understand that their role is to build a new culture and to me one of the most important things that the women of this country can do, and our friends and supporters can help change, is our own attitude." She added that it was equally important that traditional attitudes change and become more progressive towards women and girls. Other discussions and workshops during the event included women's roles in driving growth in emerging markets and promoting responsible international investment, freedom of expression and women's health. The event was organized with support of the French Embassy and the Paris-based Women's Forum for the Economy and Society, the event included speeches, panel discussions and workshops on women's roles in Burma's "fast-opening society." Prominent French speakers at the forum also included International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing

⁶ Myanmar's 88 Generation Group Backs Talks on Constitution Reform – <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/constitutional-reform-12042013172856.html> (RFA) 4 December 2013

⁷ Second round of Myanmar govt-ethnic armed groups ceasefire talks put off: report – <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/xinhua-news-agency/131202/2nd-round-myanmar-govt-ethnic-armed-groups-ceasefire-talks-p> (Xinhua/Global Times) 2 December 2013

Director Christine Lagarde, Minister of Culture and Communication Aurélie Filippetti, and Christophe de Margerie, the CEO of French energy giant Total.⁸

ANALYSIS

Burma's reform process has not been easy and calls to amend the 2008 Constitution and resolving the long-standing ethnic conflicts have now become more pertinent than ever before. While President Thein Sein, his government including both houses of parliament have been implementing measures to achieve peace and reconciliation, the question on the involvement of the military in the both processes still remains unclear. The recent comments by Burma's Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing that " *the current military is already a federally constituted institution*, appears to be a rejection on the formation of a '*federal union army*'. However, if the military is fully committed towards national reconciliation, its leaders should consider the demilitarization and redeployment of troops in key areas, as well as institutional solutions that seek to afford ethnic minority rights.

On a similar note, demands for constitutional amendments are increasing day by day. Whether the Parliamentary Committee is able to provide a satisfactory outcome on amending the certain provisions of the 2008 Constitution remains to be seen.

⁸ First Women's Forum Kicks Off in Rangoon – <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/first-womens-forum-kicks-rangoon.html> (Irrawaddy) 6 December 2013