

## ENGAGING ARMED GROUPS IN PEACE PROCESSES

### Burma Primer

*This document is intended as a simple overview produced for the Accord Programme workshop on 'Engaging armed groups in peace processes', London, July 2004. As such, it does not seek to represent the full complexity or the contested nature of the situation described.*

#### Basics



Population: circa 43 million

Borders: China, India, Bangladesh, Laos, Thailand.

Ethnic groups: Burman 68%, Shan 9%, Karen 7%, Rakhine (or Arakan) 4%, Chinese 3%, Indian 2%, Mon 2%, other 5%

Religion: Buddhist 89%, Christian 4% (Baptist 3%, Roman Catholic 1%), Muslim 4%, animist 1%, other 2%

Government: military regime.

Economy: GDP per capita \$1,900 (ppp 2003). Main exports: Clothing, gas, wood products, pulses, beans, fish, rice.

The present government prefers to use the name 'Myanmar' to 'Burma'. Both words have long histories of use in the country. Many countries have not recognized the new names because of the nature of the regime. Others include: Yalong/Rangoon; Arakan State/Rakhine State; Karenni State/Kayah State.

#### Historical background

Burma was a British colony from the 19<sup>th</sup> century until 1947. The British regime reinforced existing cleavages between ethnic groups, mainly recruiting for the colonial army from the Kachin, Karen or Chin, excluding the Burmese. Many from these minority groups converted to Christianity, while the majority remained Buddhist. Britain removed the WWII Japanese occupation with help from the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), led by Aung San. But he and six members of his interim government were assassinated by political opponents in 1947. Burma became independent from Britain with U Nu as Prime Minister in 1948.

Following a split in the ruling AFPFL party, a caretaker government led by army Chief of Staff General Ne Win ruled 1958-60. U Nu's party faction won a decisive victory in the 1960 elections, but his promotion of Buddhism as the state religion and his tolerance of separatism angered the military. U Nu was ousted in 1962 in a military coup led by Ne Win, who abolished the federal system and inaugurated "the Burmese Way to Socialism" (nationalizing the economy, forming a single-party state with the Socialist Programme Party as the sole political party, and banning independent newspapers). In 1974 a new constitution came into effect, transferring power from the armed forces to a People's Assembly

headed by Ne Win and other former military leaders. In 1982 a law designating people of non-indigenous background as "associate citizens" in effect barred such people from public office.

In the bloody period around Ne Win's retirement in July 1988, thousands of people were killed in anti-government riots. In September, the Defence Minister Saw Maung organized a coup that led to the creation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (Slorc) as a provisional ruling junta. It declared martial law in 1989, arresting thousands of people, including National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who was put under house arrest. A coalition party of Burman and non-Burman parties under the banner of the NLD won a landslide victory in the 1990 general election, but the result was ignored by the military (who had anticipated gaining an outright victory). The Slorc remained in power, and the Burmese army increased from around 180,000 troops in 1988 to around 400,000 in 2002.

Following several years of international isolation through the imposition of economic and political sanctions, the Slorc created an institution for constitutional debate, the National Convention, opened in 1993. It was discontinued in 1996 with the NLD refusing to give in to pressure to give the military a major role in future government. Since 2000, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) (the new name for Slorc since 1997) has been involved in conciliatory talks (under international pressure) with the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi, releasing her in 2002 and returning her to "protective custody" a year later.

Khin Nyunt became prime minister in August 2003. He had been central in forging locally organized ceasefire arrangements with nearly 20 ethnic insurgent groups in the last 15 years. He proposed to reconvene the National Convention in 2004 on drafting a new constitution as part of 7-point 'road map' to reconciliation and democracy. In May 2004 the body was revived despite serious reservations amongst leading military factions as well as a boycott by the NLD. Some ethnic minority armed groups (i.e. with ceasefire status) also boycotted the talks, and the talks were indefinitely adjourned in late June with the government seemingly unable to respond to the attending armed groups demand to share power.

### **Armed conflict and ceasefires**

While international attention focuses on the NLD, the ethnic conflict that has persisted since independence remains the most fundamental obstacle to peace. In recent years, the government has achieved control of much of the country, and the main opposition armed groups with significant force are the Karen National Union (KNU) and Shan State Army–South (SSA-South).

A diverse range of ethnic opposition groups came together in umbrella groups, like the National Democratic Front (NDF), formed in 1975. But these became severely divided as the Slorc/SPDC negotiated ceasefires (or "surrenders") with many of the armed groups between 1989 and the mid 1990s. The Slorc/SPDC's divide-and-rule tactics overwhelmed many groups that could no longer rely on internal or international support, and were increasingly coerced or channelled towards illegal narcotics business activities. Many of these 'ceasefire groups' retain arms and control of territory and fight other groups on behalf of the government. The ceasefires are all essentially military accords accompanied by economic incentives – the government has consistently maintained it is a transitional administration and therefore unable to discuss political issues. 'Ceasefire groups' generally maintain their quest for self-determination and equal rights, pursued through engagement with the government. In many cases initial contact between the government and armed groups was made through go-betweens from local communities, in many cases Christian church leaders, or other religious institutions like the Mon Buddhist Sangha.

Several key armed groups did not join the 'ceasefire groups'. The KNU and the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) from Kayah State had significant talks with the government, and the KNPP signed an accord that broke down in 1995. More military campaigns followed. As part of its campaign to deny the guerrillas local support, the military forces forcibly relocated hundreds of villages and tens of

thousands of Karenni civilians. In central and southern Shan state, the military forces continued to engage the SSA-South, and began a campaign of relocation against the villagers in the region. Many thousands were forcibly removed from their villages.

Thailand has long supported ethnic insurgent groups against the Burmese government, but their 'buffer zone' policy has been abandoned and a politically pragmatic spirit of border cooperation introduced. Unresolved issues – notably demarcating the border – remain.

### **The KNU and its recent ceasefire**

The KNU has long been considered the backbone of ethnic and democratic movements. The Karen struggle began in 1949. The Shan, Chin and Kachin had agreed in 1947 to be part of the Union of Burma in exchange for autonomy, but the Karen held out for full independence. At its peak in the 1970s and 80s, the KNU and its armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), had over 10,000 men under arms and controlled large areas. Government military campaigns in the 1990s wrested control of much of this land away from the KNLA who had to reorganize as a much smaller guerrilla force.

Various attempts at ceasefire talks with the Slorc/SPDC in the 1990s foundered when the junta refused to discuss human rights or political issues. The KNU engaged the government in talks in 1995-96,<sup>1</sup> but these talks collapsed in January 1997 when Slorc began a major offensive against KNU strongholds.

In January 2004, the Government and the KNU agreed to end hostilities. The KNU had made a verbal ceasefire agreement with the military government in early December 2003.<sup>2</sup> This peace effort is the first time the KNU's military leader, General Bo Mya, has headed the KNU delegation. Peace talks from 15 January made good progress, and a provisional ceasefire was agreed on 22 January between Khin Nyunt and Bo Mya – but no formal agreement signed. Bo Mya's visit to Rangoon was extremely significant: once labelled as a terrorist, his birthday party in January was hosted by Khin Nyunt, and they referred to each other as 'uncle' and 'nephew'.

The talks can be explained in terms of the pressure on both sides. Rangoon was keen to reach agreement because the KNU is the most significant ethnic rebel group still engaged in armed struggle. A peace deal with the KNU and other ethnic rebel groups is crucial to the current Khin Nyunt's plans for national reconciliation – the regime's way of describing its proposed political reform. He wanted to have the KNU at the National Convention for the sake of the road map. For the KNU – having lost territory and income over last decade, harassed by the Democratic Buddhist Karen Army (a former breakaway from the KNU that signed a ceasefire with the junta in 1994) and finding it harder to acquire arms – there were many reasons to engage. Officially the Thai Government says it is not official policy to harass the KNU or Karen refugees, but privately local Thai authorities have told KNU leaders that they had no option but to negotiate a ceasefire agreement. Further, Bo Mya was in very bad health and was reportedly keen to see some kind of solution to the Karen's battle for self-determination and autonomy.

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<sup>1</sup> The first meeting between KNU and Burma government representatives was December 14-19 1995. The second meeting 15-16 February 1996; third 6-7 June; fourth 22-23 November (all in Moulmein, Mon State). KNU delegates also met Lt\_Gen Khin Nyunt at the Second Peace Conference, Rangoon, 22 February 1996 and Third Peace Conference 4 July 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Deputy intelligence chief announced junta was ready to reconcile with the KNU in October 2003. On 22 November 2003, KNU leaders met with Col San Pwint, a spokesman for the Ministry of Defence, in Mae Sot, Thailand, near the Burmese border. Col San Pwint said the government was open to dialogue with the KNU without conditions. On 3-8 December a five member KNU delegation, led by Lt-Col Soe Soe, a KNU liaison officer, met PM Gen Khin Nyunt and Karen community leaders in Rangoon. Upon their return, Gen Bo Mya said that the KNU had verbally agreed a ceasefire. Bo Mya led a KNU delegation of 20 officials to Rangoon in January.

The possibility of a ceasefire has caused division and resentment within the KNU, especially inside its political wing as some followers reportedly felt things were moving too fast. Nevertheless, the two sides met again 22-25 February, when a 12-member delegation led by joint secretary Lt-Col Htoo Htoo Lay and foreign affairs chief David Taw, attended another round of talks in Moulmein. Another 3-day meeting was held in Moulmein in late March. The sides discussed demarcation of territory, troop positions, and the resettlement of displaced Karen.

But clashes have continued. The Karen Information Center reported that Karen and Burmese soldiers skirmished more than 200 times between formal peace negotiations and the end of May. The government invited the KNU to participate in the National Convention, but the KNU has boycotted it, and the government's suspension of it in late June may be partly to try and convince the KNU other boycotting groups to join.

The KNPP and the CNF have also discussed a ceasefire through intermediaries. The KNPP postponed talks for the beginning of April over disagreement with the junta about whether they were a 'party' or the Karenni Government. The SSA-South and CNF said in February they were open to political dialogue.

### **Further reading**

International Crisis Group. 'Myanmar backgrounder: ethnic minority politics'. Bangkok/Brussels: ICG Asia Report No. 52, 7 May 2003.

Various articles in *The Irrawaddy*. <http://www.irrawaddy.org/>