

Finding an Endgame in Kachin State

The KIO's strategies for finding a resolution to the conflict

Since 9 June 2011, Kachin State has seen open conflict between the Kachin Independence Army and the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military). The Kachin Independence Organisation had signed a ceasefire agreement with the regime in 1994 and since then had lived in relative peace until the ceasefire was broken by the Tatmadaw in June 2011.

The increased territorial infractions by the Tatmadaw combined with economic exploitation by China in Kachin territory, especially the construction of the Myitsone Hydropower Dam, left the Kachin Independence Organisation with very little alternative but to return to armed resistance to prevent further abuses of its people and their territory's natural resources. Despite this, however, the political situation since the beginning of hostilities has changed significantly.

Although a number of groups agreed to a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in October 2015, with the continuing conflict in Kachin State, the KIO has sought a number of different methodologies to realise their political aims and secure its people's legacy.

Strategy One – The UNFC Alliance

The origins of the UNFC began in May 2010 when three 1990s ceasefire groups, the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), the New Mon State Party (NMSP), the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP) and three non-ceasefire groups, the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the Chin National Front (CNF), formally announced the creation of the Committee for the Emergence of a Federal Union

(CEFU). The Committee's purpose was to consolidate a political front at a time when the ceasefire groups faced perceived imminent attacks by the Tatmadaw. However, in November 2010 shortly after the Myanmar elections, the political grouping was transformed into a military united front. At a conference held from the 12-16 February 2011, CEFU declared its dissolution and the formation of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC). The UNFC, which was at that time comprised of 12 ethnic organisations¹, stated that:

The goal of the UNFC is to establish the future Federal Union (of Myanmar) and the Federal Union Army is formed for giving protection to the people of the country.²

Shortly after, wide-scale conflict occurred throughout areas controlled by the SSPP and a number of their bases were lost to the Tatmadaw. Then, in June 2011, the KIO ceasefire broke down, resulting in the current conflict in Kachin State. The formation of the UNFC had occurred at a time of increasing uncertainty in relation to how the new Myanmar Government would settle the 1990s ceasefire groups issue. It could be argued that the Tatmadaw's insistence that the ceasefire groups become Border Guard Forces precipitated the fighting, or that the creation of a military alliance consisting of both ceasefire and non-ceasefire groups precipitated the fighting.

The political leadership of the alliance originally fell on the KNU with KNLA Commander-in-Chief General Mutu announced as Chairman and KIA commander, Lt. Gen. Gauri Zau Seng as Vice Chairman No.1. The KNPP's Khun Abel Tweed took the position of Vice Chairman No.2 and the NMSP's

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Nai Han Tha, General Secretary. The creation of the UNFC occurred while a number of other ethnic alliances still remained. The National Democratic Front, formed in 1976, still contained members of armed ethnic groups, the National Council Union of Burma (NCUB) was still active, as was a five-party military alliance, and the existence of the latter was the reason given by the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S/RCSS) for not joining the UNFC.

Despite the fact that Gen. Mutu was ostensibly Chairman, the UNFC's policies were mainly driven by the KIO and the NMSP. The Central Executive Committee was reformed and it was announced that Lt. Gen. N'Ban La of the KIA would take over as Chairman and Gen. Mutu would be Commander of the Federal Union Army (FUA). Leadership changes were made once more at a meeting in November 2011, Gen. Mutu was replaced by Maj. Gen. Bee Htoo of the KNPP as Commander-in-Chief and Brig Gen Gun Maw of the KIO was appointed as Deputy#1.

In its manifesto the UNFC set forward two main points that needed to be considered prior to Union level talks:

(a) The Union government is to carry out the cessation of military offensives by its troops in areas of the UNFC member organizations immediately, to announce officially such cessation of the offensives and, at the same time, announce officially a ceasefire covering all the areas where armed conflict is happening. At the same time, the UNFC is to issue such an announcement;

(b) After the Union government has announced a ceasefire officially, the two sides are to consult and speedily undertake for resolving the political problems peacefully through political dialogue. If political dialogue cannot be held or [there is a] failure to hold political dialogue [it] shall be taken as an

abrogation of the ceasefire;³

For the UNFC, there was a clear distinction between the priorities put forward by the Government through the 2008 Constitution and what UNFC members envisioned as representing the Panglong spirit. The Constitution makes clear its priority of development over the political rights of ethnic states. This, in itself, negates what ethnic organisations see as their own priorities and this was a stated reason as to why the KIO was not prepared to stop fighting until the issue was addressed. The KIO claimed that political dialogue must be held first, prior to the cessation of hostilities.

In addition, one of the main demands that the KIO made was that such a negotiation take place outside of a parliamentary framework. The KIO position was that a new ethnic conference or dialogue should be convened along Panglong lines.⁴ President Thein Sein in a speech before Parliament had already stated that:

We have no trick on the path in the direction of peace . . . we conduct peace talks on [the] spirit of the Panglong agreement.⁵

However, it was unlikely at that time that such an agreement could be created outside of the parliamentary process; consequently, one of the main demands of the KIO was already unachievable (although this was exactly what was agreed through the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement which the KIO did not sign). It must be noted that the KIO, and its leadership of the UNFC, was extremely important in deciding UNFC policy and it has been suggested that without the KIO's involvement, the UNFC, and ethnic unity as a whole, would have collapsed.⁶

The KIO's desire to control the UNFC and thus the ethnic agenda based on their own needs became apparent in April 2013 and became more pronounced in 2014.

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In April 2013, at the meeting of the Working Group for Ethnic Coordination (WGEC) to finalize the ethnic proposal to the Myanmar Government for a Nationwide Ceasefire and a political dialogue, Lt. Gen. N'Ban La announced that the WGEC could now be disbanded since the UNFC would be taking the proposal to the Myanmar Government. The KNU, a UNFC member and the RCSS objected, thus paving the way for a separate peace initiative.

From 25 August to 3 September 2014, the UNFC held its first congress. The 2014 conference was the first the UNFC had had since its inception and the Karen National Union had hoped to restructure the alliance so it best reflected all of its member components, rather than just the KIO and NMSP. Consequently, the KNU submitted a 10-page proposal at the beginning of the meeting for discussion. This proposal suggested a rolling leadership position similar to ASEAN in which the chair of the group would be shared by the major members of the UNFC and there should be a review of its policies. According to reports, N'Ban La through the UNFC had restricted members from signing bi-lateral ceasefire agreements and had sought to control financial support and humanitarian aid to individual members.⁷

KNU sources said that the UNFC chair, N'Ban La, had originally ignored the KNU proposal and when it was finally discussed a number of days later it was dismissed out of hand.⁸ In addition, it was reported that N'Ban La had suggested that the KNU were acting as agent provocateurs on behalf of the Myanmar government. As a result, General Mutu and the KNU delegation walked out of the conference.

Strategy Two - Proxy Armies

In an attempt to further widen its strategy, the KIO/KIA became involved in training and supporting a number of other ethnic military organisations. This was done often with little regard for the larger political objectives of the Kachin themselves or geographical boundaries recognised by former and

remaining allies. The issue of the KIO's smaller allies, specifically the Ta-ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar National Democratic Army (MNDA), needs to be further addressed. These three groups have helped support the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in fighting but have largely affected the ability of the KIO to define its own endgame without sacrificing those groups that have supported it.

The Ta-ang National Liberation Army

The Ta-ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), which was a member of the UNFC, was created by remnants of the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF) in 2009.

Originally, the Palaung National Force was formed on 12th of January 1963. In 1976, the PNF was reformed as the Palaung State Liberation Army (PSLA) under the leadership of Chairperson Tar Khon Taung. The PSLA signed a ceasefire with the Tatmadaw on the 21 April 1991 and was disarmed on 29 April 2005.

After the cease-fire agreement was signed between the PSLA and SPDC, remnants of the PSLA remained at Manerplaw, the Karen National Union's Headquarters. These units continued to fight alongside the Karen and other ethnic forces. The National Democratic Front supported the PSLA's remaining units to form the PSLF on 12 January 1992 and they continued to mount joint operations against Government forces with the Wa National Organisation (WNO) on the Thai-Myanmar border.

In October 2009, the PSLF held its 3rd Congress and formed the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). The TNLA was formed under the political wing of the PSLF. It started military activity in the Palaung area in 2011 with the training and support of the Kachin Independence Army. The PSLF Chairman is Tar Aik Phone and the TNLA's Commander-in-Chief is Tar Hul Plang.

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According to its founder and Chairman, Tar Aik Phone, the group wants a nationwide ceasefire, political dialogue, and self-rule of Ta-ang areas as part of a greater Shan State.⁹

The Arakan Army

The Arakan Army in Kachin State was created by a number of Arakanese who left Arakan State to be trained by the Kachin Independence Army in 2008. Led by its Commander-in-Chief Tun Mra Naing and his deputy Dr Nyo Twan Aung the group has about two thousand troops.¹⁰

The group, after training, had originally planned to return to Arakan State and fight for self-determination, however, with the outbreak of fighting in Kachin State in June 2011, they were at the time unable to return. As a result, they took up arms against the Tatmadaw in support of the KIA.

Should there be a Kachin ceasefire the role of the Arakan Army in Kachin State, which originally lacked political objectives and appears to be grounded in overt nationalism and the desire for self-determination, will be questionable. As Dr. Nyo Twan Aung originally noted:

Arakan Army is only an armed group, not a political party, fighting against the government for freedom of Arakanese people.¹¹

That said, however, it has since been able to send a number of troops back to Rakhine State. The AA now has an HQ in Paletwa a contested area on the Chin/Rakhine State border. Their current involvement with the KIO now remains unclear, as does that of former proxy armies that have increasingly moved towards the sphere of the UWSA.

The Myanmar National Democratic Army (MNDAA)

In December 2014, clashes were reported between ethnic troops and Tatmadaw soldiers stationed ten

miles away from Kunlong, Shan State. According to Myanmar media sources, the Tatmadaw was attacked by Kokang rebels using heavy weapons.

The incident was particularly alarming to the Government as the MNDAA had all but been destroyed in a military offensive in 2009.

In February 2015, the MNDAA launched a full-scale attack on Laogai. The attack resulted in thousands of refugees fleeing to China as Tatmadaw troops fought an offensive against the combined troops of the MNDAA, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and purported troops from the Kachin Independence Army and the Shan State Progressive Party (SSPP), both of which denied their involvement.

The attack on Laogai was a particularly devastating move as it not only heralded the re-emergence of the MNDAA but also further highlighted the roles played on Myanmar's eastern border by not only the KIO and the UNFC but also the role of China's foreign policy towards its neighbour.

MNDAA leader Pheung Kya Shin had remained off the radar until 2012 when he resurfaced at the Kachin Independence Organisation Headquarters at Laiza. According to Pheung Kya-Shin,

They immediately gave me 100 rifles, marking the beginning of the rejuvenation of the Kokang army.

Shortly after, the first batch of 5 recruits arrived at the KIA's Laiza H.Q., followed by another 10 and several veterans who were long-time drug addicts. The MNDAA formed itself into 14 Battalions and soon claimed it could field a thousand troops, according to Pheung Deran, the MNDAA Operational Commander, almost no one under the level of brigade commander within the MNDAA had combat experience. Most soldiers had just reached the age of 20.

The MNDAA is unlikely to be ever recognised by the Myanmar military which sees the group as a previously vanquished force and their connection

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to the KIO, and the latter's loyalty to it could seriously impede future peace negotiations for the KIO.

Strategy Three – The FUA

From 28-29 November 2014, the first meeting of the Federal Union Army (FUA), the purported armed wing of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), was held on the Thai-Myanmar Border.

The meeting was attended by 15 people including eleven officers from various ethnic armed groups which were members of the UNFC.¹²

As noted earlier, the formation of the Federal Union Army had been a major objective of the UNFC since its transformation from the Committee for the Emergence of a Federal Union (CEFU). However, actual planning for the FUA was sporadic and while numerous statements of its proposed founding had appeared since 2011, the most recent announcement, which came during continuing ceasefire negotiations and not long after the shelling of a training academy in Laiza that killed 23 cadets, further posed an obstacle to the peace process.

It was originally announced that the Federal Union Army was formed at a meeting held on the 16-17 December 2011. According to its Circular #1 / 2011, the Federal Union Army's aims and objectives are:

- To defend the Union
- To achieve peace
- To restore democratic rights and fundamental rights of the people
- To struggle for Equality and Right of self Determination
- To oppose human rights violations and war crimes committed by some elements of the Tatmadaw
- To serve as a rally point for Tatmadaw members who wish to stand by the people

- To become a part of the armed forces of the future federal union¹³

The circular also designated the following as allies: the Arakan Liberation Army (ALA), the All Myanmar Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) and the Shan State Army (SSA) 'South'.

A number of armed ethnic groups remained outside of the Federal Union Army plan, specifically the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the largest armed ethnic group in the country, the National Democratic Alliance Army – Eastern Shan State (NDAA-ESS) and the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS).¹⁴

While UNFC leaders made numerous overtures to the UWSA, with both then KNU 5th Brigade Commander Baw Kyaw Heh (representing the UNFC and *not* the KNU)¹⁵ and Bee Htoo travelling to meet the UWSA, there was little interest shown in the UNFC's Federal Union Army proposal by Wa leaders.

The establishment of a Federal Union Army as part of the UNFC mandate is at odds with the text of the Government's Nationwide Ceasefire agreement and the position of the ethnic group's negotiators, the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT). The NCCT's ceasefire agreement calls for substantial Security Sector Reform to be agreed during the political dialogue phase and implemented after the signing of a Union Peace Accord. However, ethnic leaders have sent mixed messages in relation to reforming the armed forces. Therefore, the formation of the FUA further added to the confusion within the peace process. The KIO's reliance on realising such a strategy did in fact further ensure that a solution to the conflict was positioned further away.

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Strategy Four – The Northern Alliance – Burma (NA-B) and FPNCC

In November 2016, a number of attacks near the trading hub of Muse killed at least 10 and injured 29 people, according to government figures.

Led by the Kachin Independence Organisation/ Kachin Independence Army (KIO/KIA), the Northern Alliance – Burma (NA-B), which at the time also comprised the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) said they launched the attacks in response to continuing military offensives against its members in August 2016 by the Myanmar military. In a statement released on 21 November 2016, the alliance said,

The Burmese armed forces have been launching offensive attacks in the ethnic territories of Kachin, Kokang, Ta'ang, Arakan and Shan and military pressures are increasingly mounted. The Burmese armed forces have also intensified not only shelling 105 – 120 mm heavy artilleries targeted at innocent civilians but also arresting, torturing and killing indigenous peoples.

Although there [sic] are holding discussions between Ethnic Armed Organizations and the Burmese government for a nationwide peace, the Burma army has continued launching more offensive attacks that can break Myanmar's internal peace. The Burma armed forces have been assaulting to destroy all political and military struggles of the ethnic peoples because they have no will to solve Myanmar's political problem with politically peaceful negotiation methods.¹⁶

Although largely in response to the continued offensives, there also appeared to be, on behalf of those groups, TNLA, AA, and MNDAA, that had been excluded from the peace process, an attempt to finally force Suu Kyi and the military into accepting them. With little capitulation on behalf of the military, which had used its offensives against the KIO to try to force it to sign the nationwide ceasefire agreement, the KIO and the other groups thought they had little alternative. TNLA spokesperson Tar Bong Kyaw told the Irrawaddy,

The main objective is to [make the government] solve political problems through political means. We hate that the [military] urges ethnic groups to sign the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement [NCA] on one hand and attacks the Kachin [Kachin Independence Army-KIA] on the other hand. We launched the joint offensive to [pressure the military] to cease fire and to solve the root cause of the problem through political means.

He added,

We had to make hard choices in the face of Burma Army attacks and we think [the offensive] is the best option. The so-called democratically elected civilian government led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been silent about the Burma Army's massive offensives [in ethnic regions]. We don't think forcing us to join the NCA through military offensives will solve political problems. Inevitably, we had to launch joint military operations.¹⁷

According to KIA General Gun Maw, the attacks were in response to continued offensives against the KIO, in relation to the fall of the KIA's strategic Gideon outpost on 17 December 2016,

Gideon, for example, had been under Tatmadaw attack for almost three months, and so we conducted a counter-offensive in one place, which lasted only 15 days,

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and which started on Nov. 20. If you criticize this particular KIA counter-attack, then you also must be aware of how the government army has been initiating offensives in the region for many months and with much greater military strength.¹⁸

Although the attacks, were said to be in response to efforts by the military to get the armed ethnic groups to sign the NCA it is also possible that the NA-B was looking to bring China further into the equation. The attacks which disrupted Chinese trade led to Chinese authorities having to provide shelter to more than 3,000 displaced in Wanding, a border town in China's Yunnan Province. Additionally, the Dehong Dai Border Defense Base, a unit of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), delivered a letter detailing 13 explosions in the area of Wanding and Manghai towns on Nov. 20. According to the PLA letter, all 13 explosions were caused by heavy weapons fired from inside Myanmar. One Chinese civilian was injured by the shelling.¹⁹

As noted earlier, The KIO has consistently sought to strengthen its bargaining power with the Government by supporting other groups in its area to fight against the Tatmadaw.

In an interview with the Irrawaddy, General Gun Maw of the KIO stated there were two distinct entities in relation to the NA-B,

We call the groups that are included in northern region operations the Northern Alliance. But also there is another collaboration known as the "Northern Alliance Army" in which three groups—the TNLA, AA, and Kokang [Ta'ang]—are members. The whole KIA has not joined them; only KIA Brigade 4 and Brigade 6 are in the alliance because we [Brigades 4 and 6] are their allies, and also our regions are connected. Most importantly, if we did not join this operation, it could affect the trust between groups and could lead to an unnecessary political mess.²⁰

The KIO which had attended the 21 Century Panglong Summit remained concerned about the lack of inclusiveness and therefore saw the failure of the Government not to insist on the Military accepting the TNLA, MNDAA, and AA as negotiating partners as a serious affront. While it was unlikely that the Military would be swayed by the NLD-led government it would appear that the KIO banked on China to increase its bargaining power.

Representatives of the Northern Alliance and officials from Myanmar's National Reconciliation and Peace Centre (NRPC) met on 1 December 2016 in Kunming, China, to try and resolve the conflict. However, the dialogue collapsed after the NRPC insisted that discussions be held separately with the TNLA, MNDAA, and AA, a request that was refused and ended with Col Tar Phone Kyaw saying,

Now let's go back to our territory and launch this war again.²¹

On 4 December, the Northern Alliance released a statement,

Until now the intensive fights continue since our Northern Alliance (Burma) has launched unavoidable joint operations against the Burma Army's offensive attacks that have ever been intensified in the ethnic territories of Kachin, Kokang, Ta'ang and Arakan.

Notwithstanding the State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been attempting to install peace, the Burma Army has been launching their offensive attacks by non-stop shelling artilleries targeted at innocent civilians whilst the Burma Army helicopters and Fighter Jets have been bombing every day in the ethnic territories.

In order to end the flame of the civil war of Myanmar genuine political dialogues must be conducted after the nationwide ceasefire. Thus, political problem solved

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by the means of political dialogues must be implemented to end the current flame of the civil war of Myanmar forever. For the ending of the current civil war of Myanmar, We, Northern Alliance (Burma), therefore, call for the following demands:

1. To announce a nationwide ceasefire by the Government of Myanmar
2. To retreat their troops from the ethnic territories after stopping the Burma Army's offensive attacks
3. To immediately start the means of political dialogue to terminate armed conflicts
4. To urgently negotiate and mediate by the Republic of China since most of the current fights are breaking out along the Myanmar-China border
5. We, Northern Alliance (Burma), are ready for a genuine and equal political dialogue to end these fights²²

Dr Tin Myo Win, leader of the NRPC delegation, also met with the Chinese foreign minister while he was in Kunming to discuss the Shan State conflict. How far China is prepared to endure such a situation is unclear. The state-run Global Times stated in an editorial,

Conflicts will jeopardize the China-Myanmar relationship as well. Border trade is frequently suspended by clashes. This upsets the economic development of both countries and is to blame for the slowed development of the border area. In addition, as government forces and ethnic armed groups have their respective spheres of influence, it is difficult for China to have large-scale cross-border economic cooperation with Myanmar.

Clashes will impede China's programs in Myanmar and pose security threats to the

China-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines and a number of other cross-border projects. The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor which goes through northern Myanmar will be affected as well.

Conflicts may arouse public dissatisfaction and harm people-to-people friendship. On the one hand, some observers and media outlets from Myanmar accuse certain Chinese of supporting the ethnic armed groups to counter their government. Conflicts in northern Myanmar bring no good to China. The Chinese side supports Myanmar's national peace and reconciliation, and there is no reason for it to support Myanmar's ethnic armed groups. Peace is the only solution beneficial to both sides.²³

There is a strong belief that local authorities in Yunnan have supported armed ethnic groups in Myanmar often at a local, rather than national, level, however, the disruption caused to China this time may see that policy change. It was reported that on 11 January 2017, Chinese Police refused to allow refugees fleeing fighting in Kachin State's Waingmaw to cross the border leaving them stranded in the war zone.²⁴ This claim was later refuted by the Chinese Embassy in Myanmar.²⁵

The cost of the conflict not only to local people but also the KIO as an organisation is huge. The offensive has resulted in the Tatmadaw being able to capture a number of strategic KIA outposts.

Offensives following the 20 November 2016 attacks, have resulted in KIO territory further decreasing and resulted in the Tatmadaw moving closer to the KIO HQ at Laiza. If anything, the 20 November attacks have further legitimised the Tatmadaw's offensive against the KIO with politicians on 2 December 2016 calling for the Lower House to label the northern ethnic alliance as a coalition of "terrorist organizations." A move that was rejected by the Union parliament but

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passed by Myanmar's Shan State parliament. The reason given for the move was the fact that, by 7 December, more than 10 civilians had been killed and 40 injured during the conflict.²⁶

The decision to launch the attacks on 20 November 2016 with the hope of either stopping the Tatmadaw or bringing further Chinese influence into peace negotiations regrettably backfired.

In an attempt to further strengthen their position, the NA-B joined hands with the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and formed what is now the Federal Political Negotiation Consultative Committee (FPNCC) to conduct negotiations with the government. Consisting of the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA), Kachin Independence Organization/Kachin Independence Army (KIO/KIA), Myanmar National Truth and Justice Party/Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNTJP/MNDAA), Palaung State Liberation Front /Ta'ang National Liberation Army (PSLF/TNLA), Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army (SSPP/SSA), Peace and Solidarity Committee/Shan State East National Democratic Alliance Association (PSC/NDAA) and United Wa State Party/Army (UWSP/UWSA).

The Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee were established by the decisions of the leaders of ethnic armed revolutionary organizations at the 4th Phangkhram summit, which was successfully held at the headquarters of the "Wa" state government in the special region from 15 to 19 April 2017.

While the FPNCC says it was formed to,

. . . negotiate and consult with the government of Myanmar in order to resolve the world's longest ethnic conflict and civil war through a peaceful political means.²⁷

This doesn't necessarily seem to reflect the view of all member organisations.

On the 12 May, the TNLA killed 19 people, including four members of the security forces, and injured 29 others in a major attack near the main border gate with China of Muse.

TNLA spokesman Mai Aik Kyaw said the attack was a "small" offensive targeting positions held by the Tatmadaw and the allied Panhsay militia and the latter's casino in the area.

He also said the attacks were

. . . because the Myanmar Tatmadaw has been attacking our temporary camps in the jungle. Also, there are military tensions in areas controlled by our allies, the Kachin Independence Army. Therefore, we launched this minor offensive.²⁸

He also noted,

There have been so many reports from locals about their lives being damaged by thefts, robberies, gambling and drugs. So, we attacked them. Also, the casualties were armed militia members and their families,²⁹

The fact that the casino was targeted should be of major concern to both the FPNCC and the KIO. While there is little doubting that the Myanmar military and any allied militias are valid targets, the fact that a casino where it is likely civilians will be employed and there are also civilian patrons should be a major concern.

The TNLA in a statement provided a somewhat dubious assertion, noting that the attack was necessary because,

That large central casino is particularly protected by heavily armed Myanmar police, the Myanmar Army and paramilitary. Inside the casino, they conducted all sorts of fraudulent gambling trades, and vast amounts of various illicit drugs were openly traded and used by its patrons. Whenever a visitor won a large

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price in any of the gambling games, the casino's security forces would extort their winnings (finances), kill them and dispose of their bodies so that they would never be found. There have been many visitors, to that casino, who had vanished.³⁰

Although what evidence there is to support this claim has not been provided. It continues,

The Chinese authorities in Ruili city are having difficulties implementing Chinese law to prevent Chinese citizens from gambling in the Myanmar military owned Pangsay casino due to the lack of cooperation from the Myanmar government. Within the period of 2016, 2017 and 2018, hundreds of Main Land-Chinese citizens have been kidnapped, they became victims to fraudulent gambling, they lost their lives as they were unable to pay the Myanmar authorities' demands for money.

Inside that casino, nearly a hundred Chinese visitors were killed by the management team and the whereabouts of the bodies of the deceased are still unknown to their loved ones back in China.

The fact that the Chinese authorities have been quick to react when Chinese citizens have been killed or injured in the past but have not when hundreds of their citizens have been 'disappeared' seems highly dubious and is unlikely to provide substantial support for the TNLA's reasoning.

Once again KIO support for such a group is more than likely to further decrease its opportunity for negotiation. While the KIO remains a major figure in finding peace in the country their current status continues to be eroded by the lack of a clear objective.

The Future

The KIO faces a number of serious realisations that

need to be accepted. Previous strategies and the belief that some form of ethnic unity will strengthen their position have proven to suggest otherwise.

Meanwhile, the local Kachin population suffers daily due to the inaction of the KIO to recognise that a solution must be found which benefits them and their people. Revolutionary ethnic unity has consistently proven to be a myth, and while a number of previous alliances have yielded minor results they have not brought about an end to the conflict or a change of government.

There has been a consistent problem in Myanmar where armed ethnic organisations believe their objectives are the same. This is not the case, each ethnic armed organisation has to realise that their people and what they want is separate in nature and they rely on their leaders to recognise this.

It is true a large part of the continuing failure to end the conflict can be attributable to the Kachin leadership's concerns of losing popularity among its support base, this was especially true in 2011 and even more so now.³¹

Regardless, Kachin leaders must recognise the fact that their previous strategies have failed to achieve substantive results and have in fact weakened their position in the negotiation.

Evidently finding a compromise and moving forward the peace process is not going to be easy, but current strategies have failed and continue to make progress less likely. While no one is suggesting that the KIO surrender their arms and overall objectives, it must be realised that something else must be done to bring an end to the conflict.

Notes

¹ Chin National Front, Kachin Independence Organisation, Kachin National Organisation, Karen National Union, Karenni National Progressive Party, Lahu Democratic Union, National Unity Party of Arakan, New Mon State Party, Palaung State Liberation Front, Pa-O National Liberation Organisation, Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army, Wa National Organisation. There are currently 11 members due to the fact that the KNO was absorbed into the KIO.

² 'Statement of Expanded Meeting of the Political Leading Board and Central Executive Committee of UNFC', 14 May 2011

³ The Draft Manifesto of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC)

⁴ Personal Interview with Dr La Ja , 22 March 2012

⁵ 'Ethnic Peace is my priority', Saw Yan Naing, The Irrawaddy, 1 March 2012

⁶ Personal Interview Dr Khin Maung, 21 March 2012

⁷ 'Why Did the KNU Withdraw From the UNFC?' Saw Yan Naing, The Irrawaddy, 3 September 2014, and personal conversation with KNU leaders 1 September 2014

⁸ Personal conversation with KNU leaders 1 September 2014

⁹ Personal Conversation with Tar Aik Phone 24 June 2013

¹⁰ 'Far From Home', Simon Roughneen, The Irrawaddy, December 28, 2012

¹¹ 'Arakan Army Basic Military Training Concludes in KIO Controlled Area', Narinjara, 8 April, 2013

¹² First UNFC Congress, Federal Union Army, Statement by First Council of Chiefs of Staff

¹³ 'UNFC: Federal Army formed, better late than never', SHAN, 23 December 2011

¹⁴ Formerly Shan State Army – South and sometimes referred to as the Rehabilitation Council of Shan State.

¹⁵ Personal conversation with KNU leader

¹⁶ Statement by Northern Alliance, Arakan Army (AA), Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Myanmar

National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) | November 21, 2016

¹⁷ <http://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/tnla-spokesman-the-joint-offensive-is-necessary.html> accessed 20 December 2016

¹⁸ 'KIA General Gun Maw: 'To Talk and Live as Equals, That is Genuine Peace'', The Irrawaddy, 17 January 2017

¹⁹ <http://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/burmes-e-and-chinese-officials-hold-talks-over-shan-state-conflict.html> accessed 20 December 2016

²⁰ 'KIA General Gun Maw: 'To Talk and Live as Equals, That is Genuine Peace'', The Irrawaddy, 17 January 2017

²¹ 'Shan State Peace Talks Fall Apart', Lawi Weng, The Irrawaddy, 2 December 2016

²² The released statement of Northern Alliance (Burma) in order to end civil war in Myanmar, 4 December 2016

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