

POLITICAL MONITOR NO. 34

OFFICIAL MEDIA

AMNESTY GRANTED, NO POLITICAL PRISONER RELEASED

The President's Office announced on 14 November the release of 452 prisoners including foreigners from various prisons in accord with Section 204 (a) of the constitution and Section 401 (i) of Code of Criminal Procedure as of 15 November, 2012, for establishing stability of the State and eternal peace, on humanitarian grounds, and to allow them to participate in nation building tasks. 31 prisoners were released from Insein Central Jail and the foreigners released were extradited.¹

Unofficial media: According to rights groups there were no political prisoners among the 452 prisoners released. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), a Thailand-based campaign group, described the pardon as "the worst amnesty to date". Campaigners including Human Rights Watch cast doubt on the motivation for the latest amnesty though some see the release as a symbolic gesture prior to the visit of US President Obama to Burma on 19 November.²

PRESIDENT THEIN SEIN RECEIVES SWEDISH PM AND PARTY

The Prime Minister of Sweden Frederik Reinfeldt arrived in Naypyitaw on 12 November and became the first Swedish PM to visit the country. He held talks with Burmese President Thein Sein, Speaker of the Union and Upper House Khin Aung Myint, and Lower House Speaker Thura Shwe Mann. In their official meetings, the two sides cooperation and Swedish assistance for democracy, human rights and the rule of law, inter-governmental cooperation for improvement of human rights in Burma as well as investment by Swedish companies in oil, natural gas, rubber, wood, fishery and livestock breeding sectors. Prime Minister Reinfeldt attended the Forum on Responsible Business and CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) organized by the International Council of Swedish Industry (NIR) on 13 November and said Swedish in his address that companies could have a positive influence in Burma and help contribute towards expanding existing trade relations between the two countries. During the forum, papers entitled 'the Global Compact in Myanmar', 'the Role of Telecom in Economic and Societal Development', 'CSR in Myanmar & the Role of the CSR Center' and 'Responsible Business and Financing' were presented by officials and academics from both Sweden and Burma.³

¹ Amnesty granted –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs14/NLM2012-11-15.pdf> (NLM) 15 November 2012 (p. 16) /

Amnesty granted to 31 prisoners –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs14/NLM2012-11-16.pdf> (NLM) 16 November 2012 (p. 9)

² Activists slam Burma amnesty ahead of Obama visit –

<http://www.dvb.no/news/activists-slam-burma-amnesty-ahead-of-obama-visit/24818> (DVB) 16 November 2012

³ Swedish delegation led by Prime Minister of Sweden arrives in Yangon –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs14/NLM2012-11-13.pdf> (NLM) 13 November 2012 (p. 8) /

President U Thein Sein receives Swedish PM –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs14/NLM2012-11-13.pdf> (NLM) 13 November 2012 (p. 1) /

Swedish Prime Minister attends NIR Forum on Responsible Business and CSR –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs14/NLM2012-11-14.pdf> (NLM) 14 November 2012 (p. 10) /

Pyidaungsu Hluttaw and Amyotha Hluttaw Speaker receives Swedish Prime Minister and party –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs14/NLM2012-11-13.pdf> (NLM) 13 November 2012 (p. 10) /

Pyithu Hluttaw Speaker Thura U Shwe Mann meets Swedish Prime Minister and party –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs14/NLM2012-11-13.pdf> (NLM) 13 November 2012 (p. 10)

HLUTTAW SESSIONS – Highlights

Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) sessions

The 5th regular session of the First Pyithu Hluttaw was held for the 12th day at Pyithu Hluttaw Complex in Naypyitaw and attended by Pyithu Hluttaw Speaker Thura U Shwe Mann and 376 MPs.

During the session, 8 questions were raised and answered, 4 proposals submitted 2 laws discussed and approved.

- The key proposal submitted during the session was by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi of Kawhmu Constituency **urging the Union government to form a supervisory committee constituted with personnel of Health Ministry, members of Hluttaw committees/commission, academicians, intellectuals and intelligentsia, and local and foreign donors in order to upgrade Yangon People’s Hospital.** The Union Minister Dr Pe Thet Khin expressed the support for the proposal and the proposal was approved by the session.
- A proposal calling for **the creation of an academic environment in which undergraduates can think freely apart from decentralization of educational institutions** was submitted by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi of Kawhmu Constituency. She also called for **academic independence stressing that ongoing efforts of Education Ministry alone are simply not enough for promotion of education, the bedrock of national development.** In responding, the Deputy Minister for Education Dr Ba Shwe said that, the focal ministry is focusing on promotion of education standard and asked for the proposal to be put on record. He also suggested better plans should be implemented when the University Law emerges in the next term of Pyidaungsu Hluttaw. However, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi insisted on seeking approval from the Hluttaw and the proposal was put to the vote. As the majority voted in favour of the proposal, the Hluttaw approved it.⁴

Amyotha Hluttaw (Upper House) sessions

The 5th regular session of the first Amyotha Hluttaw held its 12th day at Amyotha Hluttaw Hall of Hluttaw Complex, here, at 10 am today, attended by Amyotha Hluttaw Speaker U Khin Aung Myint and 186 MPs.

During the session, 2 questions were raised and answered, 1 bill report discussed and 1 proposal submitted.

- Dr Aye Maung of Rakhine State Constituency No.1 raised the question on **“the situation on compensating those who had suffered damages due to the Myanmar-China Natural Gas Pipe Line in the respective States and Regions.”** The Minister for Energy U Than Htay replied that **Myanmar will receive 13.81 million USD per year for the right of way under the 30-year contract** and that Rakhine State with 879.75 acres, Magway Region with 1,121.47 acres, Mandalay Region 1,707.93 acres and Shan State with 1929.44 acres totaling 5,638.596 acres will be rented for the construction of pipe line. **Compensations amounting to Kyats 27,662,588,119.65** has been paid for land and crops. For the losses of land and crops, Ministry of Energy has formed the compensation organizations including respective general administration departments and local agents. For permanent handing over of lands, five-year compensations of land value, seasonal crops and perennial crops are paid.
- Member of Amyotha Hluttaw Bill Committee Dr Myat Nyana Soe **submitted the Bill Committee’s report on amended Myanmar Citizens Investment Bill** sent back by Pyithu Hluttaw to be discussed by Amyotha Hluttaw and the proposal.⁵

⁴ Public participation required for elimination of discrimination against HIV/ AIDS patients: Union Health Minister – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs14/NLM2012-11-10.pdf> (NLM) 10 November 2012 (p. 1) / Academic independence, sine qua non for promotion of education standard – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs14/NLM2012-11-10.pdf> (NLM) 11 November 2012 (p. 1 & 9)

⁵ Myanmar receives more than 13 million USD per year for the right of way under the 30-year contract – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs14/NLM2012-11-10.pdf> (NLM) 10 November 2012 (p. 16)

Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union) session

The 5th regular session of the first Pyidaungsu (Union) Hluttaw held its 5th day at Amyotha Hluttaw Hall of Hluttaw Complex attended by Amyotha Hluttaw Speaker U Khin Aung Mint, Pyithu Hluttaw Speaker Thura U Shwe Mann and 579 Pyidaungsu Hluttaw representatives.

During the session, the Union Auditor-General of the Union U Thein Htaik **reported the findings from auditing the Union government's budget for 2011-12 fiscal year** and Vice-Chairman of Joint Public Accounts Committee U Thein Win on findings and comments of the committee. MP U Maung Toe of Minhla Constituency discussed the message sent by the President on loan of K 430.395 billion for state-owned businesses for 2012-13 fiscal year, and Union Minister for Finance and Revenue U Win Shein made clarifications. The Hluttaw session then approved the loan. Regarding the supplementary budget of the Union Government for 2012-13 fiscal years, Bill Secretary U Saw Hla Tun read out the findings and comments of the Joint Bill Committee, and Union Minister U Win Shein submitted a proposal to discuss the bill at the Hluttaw. Ten MPs held discussions on principle of the Bill and basic principles, and the Union minister made the necessary clarifications.⁶

UNOFFICIAL MEDIA

GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF PEACE NEGOTIATOR MEETS EXILED GROUPS

The government's peace negotiators led by the President's Office Minister Aung Min held separate meetings with members of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the Democratic Party for New Society (DPNS) on 9-10 November. During talks with the KNPP, the minister and his team discussed issues that will be addressed during the upcoming union-level talks with the group which is tipped to commence in early 2013. In his meetings with the DPNS, the discussions focused on the group's return to Burma and taking part in the country's political arena.⁷

Minister U Aung Min also informally met with representatives of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) in Chiang Mai, where the alliance urged the government to declare a nationwide ceasefire, to settle political issues using political channels, to finalize ceasefire agreements with all resistance groups, and to work together toward resolving the ongoing war in Kachin State. The alliance also presented its 6-point ethnic peace roadmap, but said this issue would be addressed again in future talks.⁸

ETHNIC PARTY ALLIANCE (NBF) DEMANDS FEDERAL SYSTEM FOR BURMA

The Nationalities Brotherhood Forum (NBF), an ethnic alliance issued a 6-point-statement expressing their willingness for the emergence of federal system in Burma. The statement was issued after a two-day meeting held from 10-11 November called for 'federalism and not separatism'.

The Vice-Chairman of the Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party Mahn Aung Pyi Sone said, "People are now talking about what federalism means. Some people see it as separatism. We want people to know that the ethnic nationalities want a federalism that will unite us, as a whole." The NBF statement also noted that the proportional electoral system may not be suitable for voters in the 2015 national election, that it now was unacceptable to change State names, the government needs to deal carefully with the conflict in Arakan (Rakhine) and welcomed the visit of US President Barack Obama to Burma. The meeting was attended by 40 representatives from the Tailaing National Development Party (TNDP), Danu Nationalities Democracy Party (DNDP), Asho Chin National Party

⁶ Pyidaungsu Hluttaw holds its fifth day session –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs14/NLM2012-11-15.pdf> (NLM) 15 November 2012 (p. 16)

⁷ Aung Min meets with exiled groups in Chiang Mai –

<http://www.dvb.no/news/aung-min-meets-with-exiled-groups-in-chiang-mai/24716> (DVB) 13 November 2012

⁸ UNFC restates call for nationwide ceasefire –

<http://monnews.org/?p=4097> (IMNA) 14 November 2012

(ASNP), Inn National Development Party (INDP), Pa-O National League Party (PNLP), Taaung (Palaung) National Party (TNP) and the Wa Democratic Party (WDP).

The NBF was formed in January 2011 and members include the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party, the Chin National Party, the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party, the All Mon Region Democracy Party, the Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party and the Kayan National Party. At the conclusion of the two-day meeting the Nationalities Brotherhood Forum renamed the alliance to the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation.⁹

7 BURMESE SOLDIERS DIE IN CLASHES WITH THE KIA

Seven soldiers from Burma's military are believed to have died during recent clashes with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in two separate places in northern Kachin state, according to KIA sources. The first of the lethal clashes took place Monday 12 November close to Kamaing in the jade rich Hpakant district located in the west of the war torn state. Three government soldiers were killed and several more injured during the short battle which saw troops from the KIA's Battalion 6 face off against the army. Similarly, in the second incident which occurred between Tayang Zup and Sup Hka four more government soldiers died after their vehicle came under attack from Kachin resistance forces. The vehicle was part of a military convoy consisting of more than 30 trucks which was heading north along the Myitkyina-Putao road.

According to sources on the ground, most of the fresh troops have been sent to reinforce government positions that face KIA strongholds in the east, west and north of Kachin state. Officers at the KIA's Laiza headquarters told local news media that an estimated 1,000 new combat troops have arrived over the past few days near Laiza, the de facto Kachin rebel capital where an estimated 30,000 refugees are taking shelter. And as the military is now readying to launch a large scale assault on the de facto Kachin rebel capital.

Army reinforcements were sent shortly after the latest round of peace talks held in Shweli between the government and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) ended without agreement. And it appears that the Burmese army is now readying to launch a large scale assault on the Laiza, the KIA's de facto capital.¹⁰

PEACE BUILDING AWARENESS TRAINING PROVIDED IN CHIN STATE

Local residents in Matupi town of southern Chin State were given a 5-day training on peace building process from 5-9 November 2012. About 30 participants, including both men and women from civil society and religious organizations, attended the event organized by Kachin-based Shalom Foundation. A wide range of topics ranging from peace, conflict, communication, community, civil society and politics was included in the 5-day training. During the 5-day event, participants also discussed drug-related issues, environmental destruction and commodity prices and the need for a gradual improvement of communication between towns located in the Chin State. The Chin participants also welcomed the preliminary peace talk between the Chin National Front (CNF) and Chin State government in January this year as one of the positive signs toward building peace in the country. One of the 'worrying' points highlighted during the discussions is an ongoing migration of the Chin from Chin State to other parts of Burma and abroad. "We find the training very informative and helpful. We need more trainings like this," one Matupi woman participant was quoted as saying. Salai Van Chan Ceu said that a similar training is scheduled to take place in Hakha town from 13-17 November 2012 in collaboration with the Hakha Baptist Association (HBA).¹¹

⁹ Ethnic alliance wants federal system for Burma –

<http://karennews.org/2012/11/ethnic-alliance-wants-federal-system-for-burma.html/> (Karen News) 15 November 2012

¹⁰ 7 Burma army soldiers die in two separate clashes with KIA –

<http://www.kachinnews.com/news/2433-7-burma-army-soldiers-die-in-two-separate-clashes-with-kia.html> (KNG) 13 November 2012

¹¹ Peace Building Awareness Training Provided in Matupi –

<http://chinlandguardian.com/news-2009/1901-peace-building-awareness-training-provided-in-matupi.html> (Chinland Guardian) 12 November 2012

FOREIGN EMBASSIES ISSUE JOINT STATEMENT ON RAKHIN CONFLICT

Nine foreign embassies in Burma issued a joint statement calling on all parties involved to work together to bring an immediate end to the violence in western Rakhine state. The joint statement was issued on 9 November by the embassies of Australia, Egypt, France, Germany, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Britain and the US.

The statement said that the Rakhine conflict was highly regrettable and urged all parties concerned to put an immediate end to the violence in which tens of thousands of people were displaced and many were killed. It also recognized and expressed its full support to the Burmese government's efforts in restoring law and order and stressed the need to adopt transparency and the rule of law in accordance with international standards. In the statement, the embassies said they appealed for a full, transparent and independent investigation into the Rakhine conflict and urged the government to ensure full and unhindered humanitarian access across Rakhine state to all persons in need.

International organizations on their part are willing to work together with government to ensure long-term development of Rakhine state and provide humanitarian aid. And finally, the statement stated that they (the embassies) would encourage the Burmese people to move forward with their goal of living peacefully within the framework of law and democracy and prosperity. And furthermore, continue to support the cause of not only Rakhine state but also the whole nation.¹²

ANALYSIS

The unexpected amnesty announced on 14 November which saw the release of 452 prisoners has been welcomed by some while criticized by others. Many saw the release of prisoners as a plot to promote Burma's image prior to the visit of US President Obama to the country. Whatever, the reasoning may have been behind the release; the non-inclusion of political prisoners has left many asking the government's true sincerity towards national reconciliation and reforms. And under such circumstances, the issue of political prisoners will no doubt remain high on the agenda for political activists but also for those closely monitoring the political developments in Burma. And thus, any measures or initiatives taken to address the issue will no doubt be seen as a positive step in the right direction and implemented.

On a more positive note, the recent meetings between the government and some ethnic and exiled political groups will have provided a basis on which to promote trust and understanding between the two sides. While the talks did not provide any substantive progress, the fact that the government is prepared and willing to engage with all stakeholders involved in the national reconciliation process is a welcome sign. Whether future talks and meetings provide the desired objectives remains to be seen. As President Thein Sein strives to promote peace and prosperity to the country, fighting in Kachin State and the communal unrests in Rakhine State remain far from being resolved. Both conflicts have claimed many lives as well as displaced thousands from their homes. The government in a bid to resolve these issues, held talks with the KIO and entrusted a 27-member commission to investigate unrests in Rakhine State. While little or no headway has been achieved resolving the two issues, tensions remain high between the two communities in Rakhine and fighting on-going in the Kachin State.

To date, the government has yet to clearly define specific measures or plans in resolving the two conflicts and questions are now being asked as to why the government has not been able to do so. The President on his part has stated his intent and shown his goodwill in promoting peace with the ethnic groups while at the same time working hand in hand with opposition parties. The ethnic groups have also taken to the negotiating table for talks but have not achieved the desired goals. The Burmese transition to democracy and national reconciliation is now being put to the test in all different sizes, shapes and forms. How the Burmese leadership and its people respond to these challenges will be pivotal in determining the country's future.

¹² Foreign embassies issue joint statement on Rakhine conflict – <http://elevenmyanmar.com/politics/1277-foreign-embassies-issue-joint-statement-on-rakhine-conflict> (Eleven Myanmar)