

ETHNIC COORDINATION & UNITY



Clockwise - Chief Government Negotiator, Minister Aung Min, arriving in Three Pagoda Pass by helicopter for talks with the Karen National Union in May 2012. Kachin Independence Organization and Government delegations, and observers after informal talks on 1 June 2012 in Mai-jayang, Kachin State. KIO traffic police escort for Government delegation. KNU delegation preparing for Three Pagoda Pass talks.

KACHIN TALKS

There is a certain amount of confusion and concern over how well the various ethnic nationalities forces are coordinating their peace efforts.

The recent meeting between the Kachin Independence Organization and the Government of Myanmar (GoM) in Shweli (Ruili) on 4 February 2013 is a good example. Internationally, it is seen as an event orchestrated by China. Others see it as a GoM manipulated event to force the KIO to the table. The Karen National Union (KNU) Chair General Mutu Sae Poe, the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) representative, and the EBO were seen, at best as pawns, and at worst, as complicit in the 'conspiracy'. Nothing could be further from the truth.

When General Mutu was invited to meet President Thein Sein in Nay-pyi-taw in early January, he first met with KIO and RCSS leaders to consult with them and put forward his plan to raise the Kachin issue. He did exactly that with both the President and the Commander-in-Chief of the Tatmadaw, Vice-Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. On his return from Nay-pyi-taw, General Mutu met again with the KIO and RCSS to report back.

In the meantime, the United Wa State Army (UWSA) had offered to mediate and host GoM-KIO talks in Pang Sang, Wa State. China had also sent its Vice Foreign Minister Madam Fu

Ying to inform the President and VSG Min Aung Hlaing about China's concern and desire to see the conflict ended. US Ambassador Derek Mitchell is reported to have also offered to mediate or at least sit-in during GoM-KIO talks. None of these offers was accepted by the GoM and the story going around at that time was that the KIO did not want to negotiate.

When the KIO, KNU and RCSS leaders met, the KIO clarified that its policy has always been to find a political solution through a political dialogue. But given its past experience with the GoM and the media manipulation, it is reluctant to meet again with the GoM without witnesses. The KNU and RCSS then offered to be witnesses if that is what the KIO wanted.

This possibility was conveyed to both the GoM and the KIO Central Committee. Given that senior KIO leaders would have difficulty to travel far afield, it was further proposed that the GoM-KIO meeting with the KNU and the RCSS present, take place in China.

The GoM accepted the KNU and RCSS presence, and given Chinese pressure, requested China to facilitate travel arrangements if such talks were to take place. The idea was to wait for a response from the KIO. China, however, thought differently and took over the meeting.

China decided on the date and venue. Having already offered to be witnesses for the KIO, the KNU, RCSS and EBO decided to follow through and be present in spite of the fact that China was now pushing the agenda. China, then, wanted to mediate the meeting. This was resisted by all participants and it was finally agreed that China would only observe.

China objected to the presence of the EBO claiming it was an international organization. This claim was rejected by both the KIO and the GoM. China also objected to the KIO and the GoM agreeing to the need for ceasefire monitors and the need to provide humanitarian assistance to internally displaced populations. Both these points were dropped from the official record of the meeting. No reason was given for the objections but it is possible that China does not want an international presence on its border.

WORKING GROUP FOR ETHNIC COORDINATION

What this incident shows is that there is practical coordination taking place between the various ethnic armed groups. It does not mean that coordination does not exist because it is not reported in the media. Since February 2011, up to 19 ethnic armed groups are invited and participate in the monthly Working Group for Ethnic Coordination (WGEC) meetings to coordinate their ceasefire negotiations and plan together on how to transform their individual ceasefire talks into a collective political dialogue in an inclusive peace process.

What is often forgotten is that the ethnic nationalities forces are a diverse grouping with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, religious affiliations, political aspirations, different revolutionary histories, and that they are geographically dispersed. Expecting them to be united and well-coordinated is akin to expecting the Irish in Northern Ireland, the Scots and the Welsh to present a united front in negotiations with the British Government.

In spite of their differences, the ethnic nationalities have actually shown a remarkable desire and ability to work together beginning with the first Panglong Conference in 1946. This was followed by the second Panglong Conference in 1947, made famous by the attendance of Burman nationalist leader General Aung San, the subsequent Panglong Agreement, and the emergence of the independent Republic of the Union of Burma in 1948.

In the democratic period from 1948 to 1962, the ethnic nationalities were once again able to work together to convince the then Prime Minister U Nu to agree to amend the constitution. They did not succeed only because General Ne Win who disagreed, seized power and imposed a dictatorship that set out to crush the aspirations of the ethnic nationalities.

Even after they were driven underground, the ethnic nationalities armed forces founded the National Democratic Front in 1978 to pursue their goals collectively. This was followed by the Ethnic Nationalities Solidarity and Cooperation Committee (2000), the Ethnic Nationalities Council (2004), the Committee for the Emergence of a Federal Union (September 2010), and in November 2010, the United Nationalities Federal Council which at that time focused on resisting the Tatmadaw through military rather than political action.

UNITED NATIONALITIES FEDERAL COUNCIL

Part of the confusion about ethnic coordination stems from the fact that each group is negotiating separately with the government, while the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), an alliance of eleven ethnic groups, has announced that it is the sole representative of the ethnic groups and that it is the sole body authorized to negotiate with the government.

The question that arises is whether the government is deliberately trying to undermine the unity of the ethnic nationalities by negotiating with each group separately, or whether the UNFC is truly representative of all the ethnic armed groups.

Other concerns have been raised by ethnic civil society groups and ethnic political parties regarding the representativeness of the ethnic armed groups.

Viewed from the narrow perspective of preventing armed conflict, the government may technically be correct in negotiating separate ceasefire agreements with each of the groups. However, if the broader aim is to build peace, it will not be enough to just negotiate with the ethnic armed groups separately or collectively. It may not even be enough to negotiate with all the ethnic groups – armed groups, civil society, and political parties.

Since the ethnic conflict is based on a constitutional issue, a much broader political dialogue, including the Tatmadaw, democratic parties and civil society as a whole, will be needed.

DEVELOPMENT OF CURRENT ETHNIC COORDINATION

27-28 January 2010 – Meeting in Laiza, Kachin State, at the Headquarters of the Kachin Independence Army, to discuss cooperation and coordination in the event of hostilities breaking out between the KIA and the Tatmadaw. Participants:

- KIA Chief of Staff, General Gam Shawng, and Deputy CoS, Brig-Gen Gun Maw;
- Karen National Liberation Army General Officer Commanding, General Mutu Sae Poe, and KNLA Quartermaster-General, Maj-Gen Isaac;
- Chin National Army Deputy Commander-in-Chief, Colonel Solomon;
- A representative of the Karenni National Progress Party; and
- Ethnic Nationalities Council Gen-Sec David Taw and Foreign Affairs Dr Suikhar.

7 May 2010 – Meeting in Kunming, China, to discuss forming an alliance in the case of an attack by the Tatmadaw. The need to prevent a return to armed conflict by launching a political campaign was discussed. Participants:

- KIO delegation led by Vice-Chair Gen N Ban La and BG Gun Maw;
- Karen National Union delegation led by Vice-Chair David Thackerbaw;
- Karenni National Progress Party delegation led by Vice-Chair Abel Tweed;
- Chin National Front delegation led by Chairman Zing Cung;
- New Mon State Party delegation led by Chairman Nai Htaw Mon;
- Delegation from the United Wa State Army;
- Delegation from the Myanmar National Democratic Army; and
- Delegation from the National Democratic Alliance Army.

22-23 May 2010 – Ethnic Consultation in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The leaders present signed the *Nationalities Agreement: To Build A Genuine Pyidaungsu*. Participants:

- KIO delegation led by Vice-Chair Gen N Ban La and BG Gun Maw;
- KNU delegation led by Vice-Chair David Thackerbaw;
- KNPP delegation led by Vice-Chair Abel Tweed;
- CNF delegation led by Chairman Zing Cung;
- NMSP delegation led by Chairman Nai Htaw Mon;
- Delegation from the Shan State Progress Party;
- Delegation from the United Wa State Army;
- Delegation from the Myanmar National Democratic Army;
- Delegation from the National Democratic Alliance Army; and
- ENC General-Secretary David Taw and Foreign Affairs Dr Suikhar.

9 June 2010 – Meeting in Beijing, China, to gauge Chinese response to the formation of an ethnic political alliance. Participants:

- KIO delegation led by Vice-Chair Gen N Ban La;
- ENC Foreign Affairs Dr Suikhar.

29 June 2010 – Meeting in New Delhi, India, to gauge Indian response to the formation of an ethnic political alliance. Participants:

- KIO delegation led by Vice-Chair Gen N Ban La;
- CNF delegation led by Chairman Zing Cung; and
- ENC Foreign Affairs Dr Suikhar.

24-26 Sep 2010 – Ethnic Consultation in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Formation of the Committee for the Emergence of a Federal Union (CEFU) to implement the *Nationalities Agreement: To Build A Genuine Pyidaungsu*, and seek a political solution to the impending war.

21 October 2010 – Meeting in Washington DC at the US State Department and US Congress to explain why the CEFU was formed. Participants:

- KIO delegation led by Vice-Chair Gen N Ban La;
- NMSP delegation led by Chairman Nai Htaw Mon;
- CNF delegation led by Chairman Zing Cung;
- Shan State Progress Party representative Sao Methi; and
- ENC delegation led by General-Secretary David Taw.

22 October 2010 – Meeting in New York at the UN to explain why the CEFU was formed. Participants:

- NMSP delegation led by Chairman Nai Htaw Mon;
- SSPP representative Sao Methi; and
- ENC delegation led by General-Secretary David Taw.