

KAREN NATIONAL UNION & the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC)

“The peace process and the Nationwide Ceasefire negotiations will not be adversely affected by the KNU’s decision to leave the UNFC.”

Saw Tah Doh Moo, KNU Executive Committee member



KNU Chairman Saw Mutu Sae Poe addressing the Karen Unity and Peace event in Yangon

Following the KNU decision to temporarily suspend its membership in the UNFC on 31 August 2014, the KNU on 22 September 2014 launched its first campaign to reassure the Karen people and clarify its position. Addressing an audience of several hundred at an event in Yangon organized by the Karen Unity and Peace Committee (KUPC), KNU chairman Saw Mutu Sae Poe reiterated his organization’s commitment to ethnic unity and to finding a peaceful political solution. The KNU General Secretary Padoh Kwe Htoo Win is currently leading the ethnic armed organizations’ Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) negotiations with the government’s Union Peacemaking Work Committee (UPWC).

The event was opened by Karen Affairs Minister of the Yangon Regional Government Padoh Saw Tun Aung Myint, who welcomed the opportunity for the public to be informed of developments in the peace process. In response to questions, Padoh Kwe Htoo Win explained how the KNU had systematically tried to work with the UNFC to make it a more effective forum for member organizations to work together to identify and resolve common problems. He said that the KNU Standing Committee had already previously decided that it would leave the UNFC if it could not be reformed. The KNU delegation to the 1st UNFC Congress in August 2014, spent three days trying to convince the assembled delegates of the need for reforms. Having failed to do so, the delegation led by Chairman Saw Mutu Sae Poe decided to implement the next step in the KNU’s strategy – temporary suspension – and report back to the Standing Committee to re-affirm the decision to leave the UNFC. The key issue for the KNU with regard to the UNFC which resonated with the audience was the need for the Karen people to decide their own destiny. This has been the guiding principle in Karen politics since Karen martyr Saw Ba U Gyi’s presidency of the KNU from 1945-50. Most of the audience were reassured that the KNU had not acted hastily or on the whim of the Chairman, who has been accused by dissidents of putting his personal interests before that of the Karen people. Some Karen Women’s Union members present remained loyal to KNU Vice-Chair Naw Zipporah Sein and protested the ‘washing of KNU laundry’ in public. At the meeting, the EBO Executive Director was asked to present an analysis of the UNFC to enable

participants to better understand the KNU's dilemma and decision. Some key points:

Genesis of the UNFC

In January 2010, the then General Officer Commanding (Commander-in-Chief) of the Karen National Liberation Army (armed wing of the KNU) – General Mutu Sae Poe – traveled overland to KIO headquarters in Laiza, to offer assistance and support to KIA. At that time the KIA was under pressure from the SPDC government to become a Border Guard Force. Prior to that, democracy forces on the Thai border considered KIO to be an enemy since it signed a ceasefire with General Khin Nyunt in contravention of NDF policy. Following the breakthrough, the Committee for the Emergence of Federal Union (CEFU) was formed to unite ceasefire and non-ceasefire groups, and call for a political dialogue. Instead, the alliance opted for a military solution and formed the UNFC to be backed by a 'Federal Army'. In spite of the set-back, ethnic unity was fostered through the formation in 2012 of the Working Group for Ethnic Coordination (WGEC) in which the UNFC participated. Things came to a head in May 2013, when the UNFC rejected the proposal to form a joint team to negotiate with the government. The NCCT was finally formed 6 months later in Laiza in October 2013 as a compromise after the UNFC would not agree to forming a joint-decision-making body. The issue of a political steering committee to guide the NCCT was raised again in July 2013. This was again rejected by the UNFC. In its latest communique, the UNFC has stated that the NCCT must abide by UNFC policy since it was formed by UNFC. This is disputed by participants at the 1st Ethnic Armed Organizations' Conference in Oct 2013.

Representation

Does the UNFC represent all ethnic armed organizations? This question was answered by comparing the relative strength of troops under the command of non-UNFC organizations (45,100 men) and UNFC organizations (15,910 men).

Mandate

Does the UNFC executive have the mandate to decide on behalf of member organizations? This question was answered by a chart showing that UNFC executives are not the top-ranking leaders in their own organizations. Therefore, it is problematic for the top leaders to unquestioningly obey UNFC directives especially if they have not been consulted. The new 12-member executive also represents only 8 of the 12 member organizations. The KIO has 3 representatives and the KNPP has 2 on the EC. The Lahu, Ta-ang and Wa are missing.

View on Current Negotiations

Some UNFC leaders have said that - *Signing NCA and starting a political dialogue with the current government is like voting for the USDP. We should only have a political dialogue with the NLD after the 2015 elections.* This argument is flawed. 1) There is no guarantee who will win the elections, 2) Even if NLD wins there is no guarantee that DASSK will be President, 3) Even if DASSK becomes President, there is no guarantee she will continue with the political dialogue, 4) Even if she continues with the dialogue, there is no guarantee she will offer something better, and finally, 5) Even if DASSK offers a better deal for the ethnic armed organizations, there is no guarantee that she can control the Army and actually deliver.

Given the above, many analysts agree that the KNU leaving the UNFC will not adversely affect the ceasefire negotiation. It will likely speed up the process and ensure a dialogue.