
ELECTION MONITOR NO. 1

MEASURES ON CEASEFIRE GROUPS

According to the local populace, the Burmese Army, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), is drawing up plans to establish a new army headquarters in Chi-bway, in the Kachin State. The new base will be situated close to Pan-Wa, the headquarters of the National Defence Army-Kachin (NDA-K). Another significant military operation has been the increased number of Burmese forces being deployed to the southern Karen State, close to areas occupied by the New Mon State Party (NMSP). These recent activities of the SPDC in the Kachin State and the Karen State are being regarded as measures to monitor the activities and movements of the two cease-fire groups, namely the KIO and the NMSP.

MEETING WITH RELATIONS MINISTER U AUNG KYI AND DAW AUNG SAN SUU KYI

Minister for Relations U Aung Kyi and Opposition Leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi held two meetings on the 3rd of October and 7th of October 2009 respectively at the Government State Guest House. Details of the meetings have not been disclosed, however, speculations are focused on a letter dated 25th September, sent to Senior-General Than Shwe by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi relating to the lifting of sanctions on Myanmar/Burma. Unconfirmed rumours have surfaced for the possibility of a meeting the SPDC Chairman and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Neither side have made comments with regards to this matter or the two meetings.

DEMOCRACY ACTIVISTS ARRESTED BY GOVERNMENT

Four democracy activists, Daw Naw Ohn Hla, Ma San San Myint, Ma Cho and Ma Cho Cho Lwin were arrested by the authorities on Saturday the 3rd of October. The four female activists are members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and prominent members of a group which organizes the weekly well-wishing ceremony held on the Shwedagon Pagoda every Tuesday for the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Other activists arrested in Yangon include Ko Nyein Chan who has been charged under Article 33 - the Electronics Act - for inciting unrest by composing songs. Another youth activist arrested is Ko Aung Ko Min who together with Ko Nyein Chan face many other criminal charges and are awaiting their sentences.

TENSIONS RISE OVER JUNTAS' CRONY CAR IMPORTS

Tensions between the Burmese junta crony Tay Za and the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings, Ltd (UMEHL), a military-owned conglomerate, are rising over the recent import of 1000 Toyota Corolla Mark-II cars, of which 900 cars had been allocated to Tay Za and only 100 cars going to UMEHL. Tay Za is regarded as a major player in the Burmese economy and has close ties with the leading generals. His privileged position is highlighted by the fact that the regime normally allows only a few thousand cars to be imported each year and the only two people who can issue import licenses for cars are Senior-General Than Shwe and Vice Senior-

General Maung Aye—the two highest-ranking members of the ruling junta. Furthermore, the recent ban imposed on cooking oil imported by Tay Za’s Htoo Trading sanctioned by the state-run Food and Drug Administration with the heavy handed UMEHL approach has made matters worse. The UMEHL is a military-controlled enterprise designed to maintain an advantage over privately owned companies and it is involved in a wide range of businesses, including the import of staple foods, automobiles and electronic equipment. Under these circumstances, Tay Za and the UMEHL have now become rivals in the running of the Burmese economy with both having strong military backing.

ANALYSIS

The activities undertaken by the SPDC forces in the Kachin and Karen State are clear signals to the cease-fire groups that their daily activities will be closely monitored and that they will not be granted self-autonomy with a free-hand. The army has located itself in strategic positions to the cease-fire groups in order for them to be more easily and effectively controlled. What is still unclear and remains to be seen are the plans laid down for the other remaining cease-fire groups and the actual transformation of the cease-fire groups into Border Guard Forces by the SPDC prior to the 2010 elections. The two meetings between Relations Minister U Aung Kyi and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi can be regarded as positive steps in the right direction. However, these meetings must be reinforced by meaningful and concrete actions rather than just goodwill gestures. Leading upto the 2010 elections, detention and arrests of prominent opposition members will continue since it is the major strategy of the government to totally demolish any organizations or individuals who will pose a threat to their implementation of their Seven Step Road Map. The rising tensions between Tay Za and the UMEHL should not be discarded lightly since vast sums of money and financial interests are at stake. Under the circumstances and due to the military backing on both sides, if left unattended this rivalry or bitter tensions could become the driving wedge leading to disagreement and divisions within the ruling SPDC elite and the military as a whole.