
ELECTION MONITOR NO. 3

KACHIN GROUP SENDS TROOPS FOR BORDER GUARD TRAINING

The National Democratic Army-Kachin (NDAK), a ceasefire group in northern Burma has sent a number of cadets to the Burmese Army Regional Command Base in Myitkyina in accordance with the terms set out by the regime – the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) for becoming a Border Guard Force. In June, the NDAK accepted a government proposal to transform its group into a Border Guard Force unit, and is one of the first ceasefire groups to do so. Three battalions from the present NDAK forces will be transformed into Border Guard Forces, with the No.1001 Battalion Base in Chi-bway, No.1002 Battalion Base in Lu-Pi Village, and No.1003 Battalion Base in Sin-Kyaik Village respectively. Locations and plans are being finalized between the authorities and the NDAK for the construction of the battalion bases according to NDAK officials.

DKBA AND KNU GROUPS HOLD TALKS.

Two major armed Karen groups who were engaged in fierce fighting earlier this year have held talks for the first time since 1994, according to sources close to the groups. In a recent communication sent by an influential monk, Sayadaw U Thuzana, to both the opposition Karen National Union (KNU) and the pro-junta Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), the Sayadaw urged both sides to learn lessons from the past and bring an end to the conflict in the region. The talks ended on the 16th October 2009 without an agreement due to differences on both sides. The DKBA was represented by Saw Maw Tho, Deputy Tactical Commander, Kalo-Htoo-Baw Region and Bo Ngwe Tin, while the KNU was led by General Mu-Tu Say-Phoe, Command-in-Chief of the Karen National Liberation Army, Brigadier-General Johnny, Commander, No.7 Battalion of the KNLA, Pado Aung Maw Aye, Chairman of KNU Paan District, Mann Nyein Maung, Secretary for DKBA Affairs KNU Headquarters.

KNPLF (KARENNI NATIONAL PEOPLE'S LIBERATION FRONT) TO SPLIT

A minority faction of the Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF) led by Major Tun Kyaw has decided to split from the main KNPLF ethnic army to join the Burmese Regional Command and transform his troops into Border Guard Forces in accordance with the terms set by the SPDC regime, according to sources close to the KNPLF. The KNPLF signed a cease-fire agreement with the Burmese military regime in May 1994 and has since operated as a militia for the government. Members of the KNPLF have received economic concessions from the junta, and unconfirmed reports suggest the KNPLF has an estimated 4,000 armed men. During a recent gathering in Hpasawng Township, 95 kilometres south of the state capital Loikaw, Major Tun Kyaw explained his stance on why he believes the Karenni should accept the junta's Border Guard plan and that the process would bring benefits to the group.

RESTRICTIVE TRAVEL MEASURES IMPOSED ON MEMBERS OF THE SANGHA

In an attempt to control and prevent any future unrest similar to the 2007 'Saffron Revolution' the Burmese authorities have imposed new restrictive travel measures on members of the Sangha (Buddhist Monks). Previously, monks were requested to provide letters of invitation, passports, 'Religious Activity Records', recommendation letters from the District and Divisional Sangha Nayaka Organisations and police certificates to the Department of Promotion and Propagation of the Sasana, Ministry of Religious Affairs to obtain approval for travelling abroad. Under the new measures, a complete and detailed Curriculum Vita has now been added to the list of documents required for submission to the relevant authorities. The new measures allow the authorities to closely monitor movements of monks on their travels and also upon their return to Myanmar. Since the 2007 Saffron Sangha Movement, the authorities have detained and questioned 30 members of the Sangha.

EU PLEDGES €35 MILLION IN AID TO BURMA

The European Union is set to channel € 35 million to non-governmental organizations in Burma after a recent visit of an EU delegation led by the Swedish Ambassador to Thailand, Lennart Linner. The five-day was linked to the aid pledge and deemed as a fact-finding mission. During the visit, the EU delegation held meetings with various stakeholders and discussed future EU policies towards Burma including dialogue between the EU and Burmese officials. In what appears to be shift towards greater engagement with the SPDC, the EU pledge will be channeled through to the new Livelihood and Food Security Trust (LIFT) Fund for assisting and aiding local NGOs.

SENIOR US OFFICIAL TO VISIT BURMA

The United States has said that it will send a senior-level government delegation to Burma in the next few weeks with plans to meet with both the Burmese military junta and Aung San Suu Kyi. The visit will be the second high profile visit by senior US politicians to Burma in recent months and comes shortly after the Obama Administration announced it would begin direct engagement with the military regime. The last senior politician to visit Burma was Senator Jim Webb who arrived in the country in August and secured the release of imprisoned US citizen John Yettaw. During the visit, the US delegation plans to meet with representatives of Burma's Ethnic Nationalities and members of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) party, according to US officials.

ANALYSIS

The acceptance of several cease-fire groups to transform themselves into Border Guard Forces, shows once again the vulnerability and differences of interests which exist among all cease-fire groups. And thus, the rifts and differences of opinions amongst the cease-fire groups has allowed the SPDC to easily manipulate the smaller and weaker groups for its own benefit. The bigger and stronger cease fire groups will be faced with a make or break situation in the near future as the 2010 Elections draws closer. New travel measures imposed on the members of the Sangha can be regarded as part of the strategic plan to cripple all opposition forces, with the aim of preventing future unrest and demonstrations as well as providing the regime the tools to maintain and control the activities of the monks. On the international front, the EU's pledge to provide funds for local NGOs within Burma can be regarded as a positive signal, showing their desire to open up a dialogue with the regime. At the same time, the decision by the Obama Administration to send a senior-level US delegation in the coming weeks could pave the way for more detailed discussions between the regime and the US. However, radical change cannot be expected, especially from the SPDC, since it has always been its tactic and strategy to avoid and ease all international criticism and pressure in preparing for the elections. The upcoming visits and meetings will test the true sincerity of the regime as well as the international community in bringing about change in Burma.