
POLITICAL MONITOR No. 19

OFFICIAL MEDIA

UEC ANNOUNCES GENERAL ELECTION DATE - 8 NOVEMBER

The Union Election Commission (UEC) has announced that the 2015 general election will take place on 8 November. The announcement said all seats in parliament will be contested in line with Article 34 (C) and bylaw 16 (a) of the electoral law for the respective Hluttaws.¹ The UEC also announced that cabinet members and deputy ministers could begin campaigning² and called on political parties to submit their lists of parliamentary candidates, which are to be submitted from 20 July to 8 August, and can be withdrawn until 11 August. It will scrutinize the lists from 12 to 21 August.³

PRESIDENT HIGHLIGHTS ACHIEVEMENTS OF PEACE PROCESS, PLEDGES TO ENSURE GENERAL ELECTIONS ARE CLEAN, FREE, AND FAIR

In his monthly radio address, President U Thein Sein emphasized that the country's greatest political needs are internal peace and national reconciliation and spoke about the current achievements of the peace process and his government's efforts to ensure the democratic credibility of the General Election in November. He noted that the peace process has achieved two unprecedented significant successes: 1) all sides have recognized that armed conflict is a political issue that must be settled through political means, and 2) a Union based on federal principles must be built to ensure equality for all ethnic groups. These achievements have been the result of numerous and time consuming negotiations between representatives of the government and ethnic armed groups. As a result, the latest draft of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) has gained more significance and will contribute that those achievements are more sustainable. He added that as the government respects the goodwill of all the leaders that have made these positive developments possible, and they will continue their efforts to sign the agreement and that he firmly believes conditions exist to bring about a positive outcome for the peace process. He also noted that constitutional amendments are a feature of a democratic system, and that he believes they will not affect the country's stability and that a credible electoral process and political leaders' vision will promote stability. As the first civilian government to hold office in many years, his government pledges to do its very best to ensure the 2015 general elections are clean, free, and fair.⁴

GOV'T & ETHNIC ARMED GROUPS RAISE HOPES CEASEFIRE DEAL WILL BE SIGNED

Peace negotiators from the government and ethnic armed groups met in Chiang Mai from 3-4 July for talks, which were the first meeting between the government's peace negotiating team and a new 15-member senior negotiating team appointed by the ethnic groups at the Law Khee Lar summit in early June. 14 of 15 senior delegates including 5 former members of the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) met in Chiang Mai with the government's peace negotiators, including Union Ministers U Aung Min and U Khin Yi. Both sides outlined their respective positions on the draft deal before exchanging views on how to end the impasse. Prospects to sign the NCA looked good as it was confirmed that formal talks would take place in Yangon. The new Senior Delegation representing the ethnic groups said they are not dogmatic in holding to a set of points they made at their recent Law Khee Lar summit and are willing to further negotiate the draft text to ensure it is

¹ UEC Announces Nov. 8 General Election Date

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-09-red.pdf> (GNLM) 9 July 2015 (p.1)

² UEC Allows Election Candidates to Begin Campaigning -

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-09-red.pdf> (GNLM) 9 July 2015 (p.1)

³ UEC Instructs Parties to Submit Election Candidate Lists -

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-09-red.pdf> (GNLM) 9 July 2015 (p.1)

⁴ Government pledges to do its very best to ensure 2015 general elections are clean, free, and fair -

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-14-red.pdf> (GNLM) 14 July 2015 (p. 1)

acceptable to both sides. The MPC said both sides have been clearing roadblocks in the peace process and setting a principle of moving towards further talks for the truce deal.

On 16 July, the MPC announced that both sides would meet formally in Yangon on 22-23 July. The meeting will focus on finalizing the deal and addressing the ethnic side's demand that the signing process be inclusive of all armed groups, including those currently not officially engaged in the negotiations. The talks will also discuss who should be the NCA signatories, as well as international witnesses.⁵

TATMADAW AND ARMED GROUPS ENGAGE OVER NEW ASIA HIGHWAY

The Myawady-Kawkareik section of the new Asia Highway was scheduled to commission in July, but Tatmadaw columns have to clear the areas of armed forces members who forcefully collected money from the people. The Myawady-Kawkareik New Asia Highway was built with the aim to encourage trade in and the development of border areas and promotion of links between regional countries and tourism by the union government. As small armed groups led by Kyaw Thet and Saw San Aung, which are breakaway factions of DKBA/KKO, built tax collection centres on the road and collected money from people, regional authorities confronted them and to leave the road many times. Fighting broke out on 2 July as they refused to withdraw and started fighting at Tatmadaw members who were clearing the area. The Tatmadaw, together with border guards, fought engaged them 29 times until 9 July and successfully cleared the former Myawady-Kawkareik road and the new Asia Highway on 10 July.⁶

See also: *EBO Background Paper No. 3 / 2015 - [Conflict Over Highway Taxation in Kayin State](#)*

UN OFFICIAL WELCOMES CHILD SOLDIER PROGRESS, SAYS MORE MUST BE DONE

Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict Leila Zerrougui has welcomed progress made by the Tatmadaw to stop its recruitment of child soldiers, but said stronger measures were needed to completely stamp out the practice. Ms. Zerrougui said it was "very positive" that the 2012 Joint Action Plan to end the Myanmar army's recruitment and use of children was making an impact, however, there remained "gaps" in the implementation of the plan. She said robust age assessment must be applied within the centralized military recruitment process - "A professional army does not need children". The army must also make measures to prevent violations against children a standard part of its curriculum and take action against military personnel or civilian brokers involved in underage recruitment. She also expressed concern about the detention of children alleged to have "deserted" the army; they should never be recruited in the first place, rather the recruiters should be detained. She also noted that since 2012, 646 former child soldiers had been released by the Tatmadaw, and expressed her hope that the UN and the government would finalize the Joint Action Plan soon.⁷

PRESIDENT VISITS JAPAN, ATTENDS JAPAN-MYANMAR & MEKONG-JAPAN SUMMITS

President U Thein Sein wrapped up a 3-day official visit to Japan on 5 July. He attended the 7th Mekong-Japan Summit, which was held in Nay Pyi Taw in 2014 and aims to promote development of countries in the Mekong region, including the east west economic corridor and southern economic

⁵ Gov't team, ethnic armed groups extend Chiang Mai meeting to second day – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-04-red.pdf> (GNLM) 4 July 2015 (p. 1+9)

Chiang Mai talks raise hopes ceasefire deal will be signed soon – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-05-red.pdf> (GNLM) 5 July 2015 (p. 1)

Gov't, ethnic armed groups set to resume negotiations toward ceasefire accord <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-17-red.pdf> (GNLM) 17 July 2015 (p. 1)

⁶ Tatmadaw Combs Areas of Asia Highway - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-10-red.pdf> (GNLM) 10 July 2015 (p. 2)

⁷ UN official welcomes child soldier progress, says more must be done - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-17-red.pdf> (GNLM) 17 July 2015 (p. 1+2)

corridor through the Japan- ASEAN Integration Fund. With a population of 240 million and total GDP of US \$664 billion, the region is an increasingly important market. He also attended the Japan-Myanmar Summit, where he discussed development of the Dawei Special Economic Zone, construction of a coal-fired power station, upgrading of railway lines, and measures to combat traffic congestion in Yangon with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The Japanese government also approved assistance loans of 100 billion yen for the Yangon Circular Rail Line, National Power Supply Phase-2 and development of the East-West Economic Corridor, and signed a memorandum of intent related to the Dawei Special Economic Zone. The president studied the public transportation of Japan by taking public trains between Tokyo, Nagoya and Kyoto, and generation of electricity at the largest coal-fired power station in Japan. He also invited Japanese companies to create environmentally friendly coal-fired power stations in Myanmar. The trip was the third by the president to Japan, since his inaugural visit in April 2012.⁸

Meanwhile, Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing met the Japanese Government's Special Envoy for National Reconciliation in Myanmar Yohei Sasakawa on 6 July in Nay Pyi Taw to discuss promoting relations between their joint armed forces, as well as sending Myanmar cadets to the National Defence Academy of Japan, development of sports such as judo by exchanging coaches, and cooperation between the United States and Myanmar.⁹

MYANMAR, THAILAND DISCUSS ANTI-DRUG COOPERATION, BOAT PEOPLE ISSUE

Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing received a delegation led by Director of Joint Operations of the Royal Thai Armed Forces Lt-Gen Wanlop Rugsanaoh on 9 July as part of the 4th Myanmar-Thailand Senior Staff Talk in Nay Pyi Taw. They discussed sustaining good results from the Senior Staff Talk, regional peace cooperation, as well as further coordination between the armed forces of the two countries in combating drug trafficking and responding to the boat people situation. Also present at the meeting were Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Commander-in-Chief (Army) Vice-Senior General Soe Win, senior military officers of the Commander-in-Chief Office and the Thai Military Attaché (Army) to Myanmar.¹⁰

GOV'T PLEDGES K3.2 BILLION ASSISTANCE FOR FLOOD-HIT RAKHINE STATE

The Government announced on 9 July a K3.216 billion package to resettle displaced people and rebuild damaged infrastructure in Rakhine State following severe flooding in late June. Six people died during three days of torrential rain that struck 14 townships in the state from 24 June. The flooding also killed 25,055 animals, according to the Rakhine State government. The natural disaster destroyed 2,564 acres of rice fields, 592 houses, seven schools, two monasteries, 54 bridges and 42 road sites. Around half of the assistance package, or some K1.6 billion, is allocated to reconstruction of roads and bridges. Another K891.1 million is to be spent on reconstruction of houses. The education, health and livestock sectors will also receive funding under the plan. The damage bill was highest in An Township, which incurred nearly K1.4 billion worth of losses.¹¹

LACK OF FUNDING HAMPERS IDP CAMPS IN KACHIN STATE

IDP (internally displaced people) camps in Kachin State are facing difficult times during the rainy season due to a lack of funding from local NGOs and stricter budgetary controls for UN agencies, according to the Kachin Baptist Convention. There are more than 40,000 IDPs at 70 camps managed

⁸ President U Thein Sein Concludes Japan Tour -

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-07-red.pdf> (GNLM) 7 July 2015 (p. 1+3)

⁹ Senior General Min Aung Hlaing Meets Japan Special Envoy -

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-08-red.pdf> (GNLM) 8 July 2015 (p. 3)

¹⁰ Myanmar, Thailand Discuss Anti-Drug Cooperation, Boat People Issue -

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-10-red.pdf> (GNLM) 10 July 2015 (p. 3)

¹¹ Gov't pledges K3.2 billion assistance for flood-hit Rakhine State -

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-10-red.pdf> (GNLM) 10 July 2015 (p. 1)

by the Myitkyina-based aid organization and other charitable organizations. The camps are ill-equipped to handle any increase in numbers and many school-age camp residents lack basic access to education.¹²

Hluttaw Sessions (Highlights)

Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Parliament) sessions

The 12th regular session of the First Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Parliament) met on the below dates. Highlights of the issues raised and discussed include:

3 July¹³

- The Deputy Minister for Agriculture and Irrigation U Khin Zaw reported on **the ministry's work to ensure adequate water for farmland**.
- The Session **approved the Border Areas and Ethnic National Races Development Law**.

6 July¹⁴

- Deputy Minister for Health Dr. Win Myint noted a **plan to double the patient capacity of the 50-bed hospital in Gyobingauk** would be submitted to the Union Government.
- The session heard findings of the bill committee on a **motor vehicle bill**, a **bill repealing the pension act** and a **bill amending the penal code**.

7 July¹⁵

- The **Joint Bill Committee** submitted reports and findings on several bills, including: a **boiler bill**, an **amendment bill on the law of the Union Election Commission** and a **bill on the reservoir law**.
- MP Daw Khin Waing Kyi (Yangon region constituency 1) said the **interfaith marriage bill** would be able to pass into law soon despite international criticism, adding the law would be beneficial for Myanmar women.
- MPs from Shwepyitha, Yangon Region, and Mahlaing, Mandalay Region supported a government **plan to operate the Yangon City Development Committee and the Mandalay City Development Committee as state-owned enterprises** without using the union budget.

8 July¹⁶

- The Pyidaungsu Hluttaw held a secret ballot in connection with the **constitution amendment bill of Section 436(b)** - amendment to chapters, sections and sub-sections did not win support over 75% of the vote, but Schedules 2 and 5 were approved with over 75%.
- U Khin Maung Nyo (Loikaw constituency) urged **to continue to use the existing retirement system, which allows civil servants to retire on the day they turn 60**. He added that changes to the retirement system are against the will of the people and that the plan to extend the retirement age will involve taking into consideration the population growth, the life expectancy of the people, literacy rate, the population of able workers, unemployment

¹² Lack of funding hampers IDP camps in Kachin State -

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-11-red.pdf>

¹³ Pyithu Hluttaw discusses irrigation facilities and allowance for far-flung areas -

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-04-red.pdf> (GNLM) 4 July 2015 (p. 2)

¹⁴ Deputy Minister for Health fields queries at Pyithu Hluttaw -

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-07-red.pdf> (GNLM) 7 July 2015 (p. 2)

¹⁵ Joint committee submit bills to Pyidaungsu Hluttaw -

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-08-red.pdf> (GNLM) 8 July 2015 (p. 2)

¹⁶ Parliament approves amendment to Schedules 2 and 5 of Section 436(b) -

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-09-red.pdf> (GNLM) 9 July 2015 (p. 2)

rate, economic aspects, GDP rate and healthcare. According to him, 8 out of 10 ASEAN countries have 60 as the retirement age. He noted that in Myanmar the average life expectancy is 66 years, with 64 years for men and 68 for women.

9 July¹⁷

- The Hluttaw heard **vigorous debate** by MPs arguing for and against **extending the retirement age for civil servants** from the current 60 years. Fourteen representatives discussed two separate proposals on the issue — one seeking to keep the retirement age at 60 and the other pushing to raise it to 63. U Khin Maung Nyo (Loikaw constituency) supported maintaining the status quo, while L t - C o I Hlaing Win (representative of defence services) spoke in favour of raising the age, arguing civil servants aged 60 and above with rich experience would contribute a lot to the country, provided they were healthy enough to continue working. U Htan Lain (Mintut constituency) was against the proposed extension, saying it could become a barrier to promotion for subordinates. In a similar vein, U Sai Than Naing (Phapun constituency) said extension of the retirement age would fuel the unemployment problem. Chairman of the Union Civil Services Board U Kyaw Thu said the issue had undeniable pros and cons, but hinted that the board would extend the retirement age if it was deemed to be in the interests of the country and civil workforce.
- The **parliament approved three bills** — a **boiler bill**, the **election commission amendment bill** and a **dams bill**.
- The parliament also **put on record four bills concerning television and radio broadcasting, preservation and maintenance of ancient artefacts and buildings, and the development of border areas and national races**.

10 July¹⁸

- U Kyi Tha (Gwa constituency) asked about **the government's tender policies and procedures**. Deputy Minister for National Planning and Economic Development Daw Lei Lei Thein responded that there are directives on tender procedures for procurement, construction, services, and rental, adding that government departments invite tenders for procurement of lower monetary value, but open tenders are required when higher costs are involved and tender systems differ from ministry to ministry.
- Dr. Win Myint (Hlaing constituency) asked about **the number of SIM cards sold, annual earnings and taxes from foreign mobile operators**. Deputy Minister for Communications and Information Technology U Win Than responded that licences have been issued to Myanma Posts and Telecommunications, Ooredoo Myanmar Ltd and Telenor Myanmar Ltd., and that MPT, in partnership with KSGM Co Ltd, has sold over 8.66 million SIM cards from September 2014 to June 2015, earning K9.154 billion with commissions deducted and K574.967 billion from calls, mobile data and recharges. Ooredoo is required to pay U S\$1.010 billion in tax in three installments for its 15-year mobile services in the country. It has paid K741.653 billion (US \$757.5 million), which is 75 percent of the total sum. It will pay the remaining \$252.5 million this fiscal year. Telenor has paid K363.155 billion (US \$375 million), 75 per cent of US \$500 it owes to the ministry, with the remaining payment of \$125 million to be made this fiscal year. MPT does not have to pay the tax, he noted. MPT is licensed for 15 years from 24 March 2014 to 23 March 2030, while Ooredoo and Telenor are licensed from 5 February 2014 to 4 February 2029, with the ministry hinting at possible extension in accordance with the communications laws, rules and regulations.

¹⁷ Pyidaungsu Hluttaw debates extension of retirement age - (GNLM) 9 July 2015 (p. 2)
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-10-red.pdf> (GNLM) 10 July 2015 (p. 2)

¹⁸ Government tender policies questioned at Pyithu Hluttaw -
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-11-red.pdf> (GNLM) 11 July 2015 (p. 2)

- The Pyithu Hluttaw **approved the following bills: the Red Cross society bill, the Evidence Act Amendment bill and the Oil Well bill.**

14 July¹⁹

- Speaker of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Thura U Shwe Mann explained **the legislative process for schedules 2 and 5 of the Constitution**, which have been approved for amendment by 75% of representatives in the bicameral assembly. The bill for amendment of these schedules was submitted to the President on 10 July to become law, Thura U Shwe Mann said.
- The speaker read out **the cases on human trafficking and boat people including a reply from UN Secretary General Ban Ki moon**, and the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw recorded the issue.
- Union Minister for Finance U Win Shein discussed **tax collection procedures** introduced this fiscal year. The Public Accounts Joint Committee presented its report on audit findings for budget expenditures in the second half of fiscal 2013-2014 and the first half of 2014- 2015.

15 July²⁰

- U Tha Sein (Kyauktaw Constituency) asked about **plans for the extension of Main Strand Road linking northern Rakhine State with Chin State**. Deputy Minister at President Office U Kyaw Kyaw Win responded that the extension of the road was not covered in the local budget allowance for 2015-2016 fiscal year and that local development committees are carrying out development tasks in order of importance.
- Deputy Minister U Kyaw Kyaw Win discussed the request of U Enn Phon San (Machanbaw Constituency) for **the dissolution of fishing tenders along the Malikha River and to create common fishing areas**.

16 July²¹

- The Pyidaungsu Hluttaw **approved the 3rd amendment bill of the Union Judiciary Law, the 3rd amendment bill of the Constitutional Tribunal Law of the Union and the amendment bill of the Union Civil Services Board Law.**
- The parliament also **approved the reformation of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw's Joint Bill Committee.**
- Union Minister for Finance U Win Shein read out **the 2nd half-year Union Budgets Report 2014/2015** submitted by the central government. The budget estimate for the second half of the financial year amounts to 96.91% of total earnings, with 97.91% as the total budget estimate of the whole financial year.

Amyotha Hluttaw (Upper House) sessions

The Amyotha Hluttaw (Upper House) met on the below dates. Highlights of the issues raised and discussed include:

3 July²²

- The Amyotha Hluttaw **approved the TV and Radio Broadcasting Bill** sent back by the Pyithu Hluttaw with amendments.

¹⁹ Speaker of Pyidaungsu Hluttaw clarifies Bill Amending Constitution - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-15-red.pdf> (GNLM) 15 July 2015 (p. 2)

²⁰ Pyithu Hluttaw discusses regional development and endangered fish species - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-16-red.pdf> (GNLM) 16 July 2015 (p. 2)

²¹ Pyidaungsu Hluttaw approves 3 amendment bills -

²² Upper House approves TV and Radio Broadcasting Bill - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-04-red.pdf> (GNLM) 4 July 2015 (p. 2)

6 July²³

- **Entrance criteria for the Bachelor of Education at the University for Development of National Races will be amended** said Deputy Minister for Border Affairs Major-General Tin Aung Chit, in response to a query from MP U Salai Kwe Yan (Chin State constituency 12).
- Attorney-General of the Union Dr. Tun Shin explained that **debtors of fish farms able to settle bad loans or renegotiate payments would be exempt from lawsuits**.
- Deputy Minister for Education U Thant Shin said the ministry is scrutinizing budget allocations for **the appointment of permanent teachers at early child development schools**.

15 July²⁴

- The speaker of Amyotha Hluttaw informed the Hluttaw of sending back **Myanmar Red Cross Society bill** by Pyithu Hluttaw. Amyotha Hluttaw will discuss the **Jails Bill** submitted by Deputy Minister Brig-Gen Kyaw Zan Myint and the Bill Committee read out the paper on the bill. While U Nyunt Tin (Yangon Constituency No 2) tabled a proposal calling for the **formation of National Transportation Safety Board**, three MPs seconded it. The Hluttaw decided not to approve the proposal.

Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) sessions

16 July²⁵

- **Citizenship scrutiny cards** have been issued to 6.4 million citizens, Deputy Minister for Immigration and Population U Win Myint reported, in response to a question on a plan to easily deliver citizenship scrutiny cards to citizens who were born of two citizen parents without delay by U Soe Win (Kyauktada Constituency). The deputy minister said that as citizenship is an important role in the security of the nation, allowing citizenship to a disqualified person would be harmful to the nation in the long run. According to the law, it will take a certain length of the time for foreign mixed races to get through the citizenship process.
- U Than Myint (Salingyi Constituency) asked about plans to take **deterrent action against drug traffickers and crime brokers to prevent abuse of narcotic drugs among the youths**. Deputy Minister for Home Affairs Brig-Gen Kyaw Kyaw Tun said that Yinmar Plan was implemented as anti-drug campaign with various work groups including Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control. Action has been taken against drug traffickers and those related to the narcotic drug cases, and drugs and related equipment were confiscated.
- Deputy Minister for Finance Dr. Maung Maung Thein submitted the **bill amendment of foreign exchange management law**.
- The Hluttaw **approved bills amending the insurance law and saving bank law**.

UNOFFICIAL MEDIA

GOVERNMENT AND ETHNIC DELEGATION AGREE TO FINALIZE NCA BEFORE ELECTIONS

The government and ethnic groups' representatives reached an agreement in principle to work towards getting the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) signed and starting the process of drafting a political dialogue framework with President U Thein Sein's administration. The Union

²³ Univ. for Development of Nat'l Races set for entrance criteria change - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-07-red.pdf> (GNLM) 7 July 2015 (p. 2)

²⁴ No plan to upgrade Panglong to township - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-16-red.pdf> (GNLM) 16 July 2015 (p. 2)

²⁵ Pyithu Hluttaw approves bills amending insurance law and saving bank law - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-07-17-red.pdf> (GNLM) 17 July 2015 (p. 2)

Peacemaking Working Committee led by Minister U Aung Min and the Ethnic Senior Delegation led by Padoh Naw Zipporah Sein met on 3-4 July in Chiang Mai, Thailand for the first time, since the senior ethnic delegation was formed. The preliminary meeting was to exchange views before an official round of talks take place in Rangoon, which according to U Aung Min, will be held around the 3rd week of July. Padoh Naw Zipporah Sein, vice chairperson of the Karen National Union and who is to lead the Ethnic Senior Delegation said in an interview that the government's negotiators are pressing to have a NCA agreed to before the national elections. The agreement [in principle] was released in the four-point-statement released by the ethnic Senior Delegation on 5 July, which described the agreement as a "good result" that allows them to meet officially and continue talks for a "genuine peace."

The draft nationwide ceasefire agreement that was earlier agreed to by the ethnic armed groups Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) and the government's UPWC was not approved at the last ethnic armed organization summit held at Law Khee Lar in Karen State in early June 2015. Ethnic leaders at Law Khee Lar summit raised 15 points from the draft NCA that they said needed further negotiation. According to Padoh Naw Zipporah Sein, "We discussed the 15 points. From their [UPWC] side, their position is that they don't want to make changes to these points. From our side, we discuss with them to find ways, instead of holding on to the position of 'making no changes at all'. We have to look at each point and try to see which point can be reworded or kept as notes or brought back for further discussion. They agreed with what has been discussed and they need to report it back."²⁶

PALAUNG ARMY TALKS PEACE

The Ta-ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) has vowed to avoid armed clashes and reduce tensions with Burmese government forces, as it bids to join other ethnic armed groups in signing a nationwide ceasefire agreement (NCA). A statement released by the ethnic Palaung militia on 6 July said it welcomed negotiations last weekend in Chiang Mai between the government's Union Peacemaking Work Committee and a senior delegation representing ethnic armed groups. The TNLA stressed that an NCA followed by genuine political dialogue are "the necessary steps to enable the country's political reforms". The group expressed concerns for Palaung (also known as Ta-ang) villagers in northern Shan State who have been caught up in hostilities amid a recent upsurge in Burmese military offensives against TNLA positions in the region. It pledged to avoid clashes in the future, except in cases of self-defence, and said it would sign an NCA with the government if its partner ethnic groups do the same.²⁷

WARNING FOR PEACE PROCESS AS AMENDMENTS REJECTED; WITHOUT GENUINE UNITY AND EQUALITY, CIVIL WAR WILL CONTINUE, SAYS ETHNIC MP

Two years of debate and discussion on constitutional change have come to virtually nought, with all proposed amendments to the main text of the constitution voted down in parliament on 8 July. The proposed changes would broadly have given more power to states and regions, and also strengthened the role of parliament, but were vetoed by military MPs. Their rejection prompted warnings from ethnic MPs that the result could jeopardise the peace process, as too much power would be retained by Nay Pyi Taw. However, some changes to the schedules at the end of the constitution, which demarcate the powers of the Union government and parliament, and state and region governments and parliaments, were approved with 90% support, above the 75% threshold.

²⁶ Burma Government and Ethnic Delegation Agree to Finalize NCA Before Next Government - <http://karennews.org/2015/07/burma-government-and-ethnic-delegation-agreed-to-finalize-nca-before-next-government.html/> (Karen News) 9 July 2015

²⁷ Palaung Army Talks Peace - <http://www.dvb.no/news/palaung-army-talks-peace-burma-myanmar/53716> (Democratic Voice of Burma) 7 July 2015

The closest MPs came to amending the constitution was on two proposed changes that would have made parliamentary committees "Union-level" bodies, and of the same status as government ministries. This received 426 votes from the 605 MPs present, well below the 475 votes required to pass the change. The number of votes needed was calculated based on the total number of MPs, 633, rather than the number present for the vote. The rejection of a proposal to give state and region parliaments, rather than the president, the power to choose chief ministers prompted anger from ethnic MPs. Altogether 63 MPs had debated proposed changes to dozens of sections of the constitution contained in the bill, which was submitted to parliament on 10 June by senior Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) official U Thein Zaw. However, the result was a whitewash, with all of the changes rejected, including a number of provisions seen as crucial for the peace process and reconciliation. The results of the voting were also seen as reflecting a battle between Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Speaker Thura U Shwe Mann and President U Thein Sein for control of the USDP and its potential nominee for the presidency after this year's election. Over the past four years, the military has generally voted in favour of the government's position, and that trend continued yesterday. However, the high degree of consensus among civilian MPs on the need for constitutional change left many disappointed by the result.²⁸

Shan Nationalities League for Democracy Lower House MP Sai Thein Aung said he is concerned Myanmar will remain in a vicious circle of civil war unless a genuine Union with equality is established. He spoke during a discussion on the amendment bill for Section 436(a) of the constitution during a session of the Union parliament. "Without the Panglong conference, the Union of Myanmar may not have emerged. Myanmar has existed for nearly 70 years following the ethnic minority groups' signing of the Panglong agreement on 12 February 1947, which is designated as Union Day," he said. "The country's political problems were compounded by the military's seizure of power out of fear of the breakup of the Union ten years after the country's establishment. Consequently, civil war started after the pledges enshrined in the Panglong agreement, such as equality and self rule, were ignored, and disunity and distrust continue to reign among the ethnic groups. The ethnic groups argued and fought with each other instead of working together to develop the country. Lots of lives were lost. The civil war has been as long as the lifetime of our country". He also blamed the current constitution for causing difficulties and delays in the government's efforts to achieve national peace, development and national reconciliation. "Constitutional amendments to ensure equality will facilitate the ceasefire and lasting peace, as well as national unity and trust. Aside from equality and self administration, the constitution even restricts the rights and powers of regional governments. Therefore, all the people, including the ethnic armed groups, political parties and civic organisations, demand charter change," he said.²⁹

CONSTITUTIONAL PUSH FOR DECENTRALISATION, STRONGER PARLIAMENT FALTERS

A second draft of proposed constitutional amendments largely met the same fate as a first set of changes put to Parliament last month, with unelected military lawmakers again exercising their effective veto power on 8 July to block efforts to reform the controversial constitution. Amendments to 21 articles of the Constitution failed to meet the 75% threshold required for enactment, while a series of additions to two sections of the charter passed muster and will ostensibly empower regional legislatures in the realms of lawmaking and taxation. The amendments that failed to pass would have given Parliament enhanced prerogatives in helping shape the composition of Burma's executive branch and judiciary, as well as elevate the status of parliamentary committees. Several of the proposed changes would have weakened the power of the

²⁸ Warning for Peace Process as Amendments Rejected -

<http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/15418-warnings-for-peace-process-as-amendments-rejected.html>
(The Myanmar Times) 9 July 2015

²⁹ Without Genuine Unity and Equality, Civil War Will Continue, Says Ethnic MP -

<http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/politics/without-genuine-unity-and-equality-civil-war-will-continue-says-ethnic-mp>
(Eleven News Media) 7 July 2015

presidency, including one failed amendment that had been pushed by ethnic minority lawmakers in particular: allowing state and divisional legislatures to elect their own chief minister, rather than granting the president the power to appoint an individual to the post as is currently the case. That provision, under Article 261, garnered 66% of votes in favor. A total of 34 addendums to Schedule Two of the Constitution and 20 addendums to Schedule Five were approved by lawmakers, broadening the scope of matters on which regional legislatures can enact laws and levy taxes.

The provisions subject to the vote fell under Article 436(b) of the Constitution, which requires more than 75% of votes for amendments to all provisions of the charter not enumerated in Article 436(a). The military's guaranteed allotment of 25% of seats in Parliament ensures that it holds an effective veto on constitutional reform.

On June 25, lawmakers failed to meet that threshold on five of six articles under Article 436(a), which specifies that a set of provisions must also be put to a national referendum if they first meet the 75 percent parliamentary threshold. The vote last month included an effort by opposition parties and the ruling USDP to lower the threshold for Article 436 to 70 percent.

The June vote's lone successfully amended article—a change of negligible practical significance—will require a national referendum, which Union Parliament Speaker Shwe Mann has said will be held concurrently with Burma's general election on Nov. 8. That provision, Article 59(d), was changed from the current requirement that candidates for president and vice president be familiar with "military" affairs, to instead requiring that said candidates be well-versed in "defense" affairs.³⁰

PARLIAMENT APPROVES CONTROVERSIAL INTERFAITH MARRIAGE LAW

Lawmakers have passed contentious legislation that imposes restrictions on interfaith marriages in the predominantly Buddhist country, despite opposition from rights advocates who say it discriminates against women and Muslims in the conservative, predominantly Buddhist country. The law requires Buddhist women and men of other faiths to register their intent to marry with local authorities, who will display a public notice of the engagements. Couples can marry only if there are no objections; but if they violate the law, they could face imprisonment. Critics have argued that the legislation does not apply the law equally to all people and flies in the face of domestic and international human rights standards. Proponents, however, say the law will protect Buddhist women who marry outside their faith. The law is part of a series of four laws on marriage, religion, polygamy, and family planning proposed by a Buddhist organization called the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, which is affiliated with a nationalist Buddhist monk group. Although the law does not mention any specific religion, it has prompted speculation that it could be aimed at preventing Muslims from trying to coerce Buddhist women into abandoning their faith for marriage or otherwise.³¹

NLD CONFIRMS MYANMAR POLL BID

Aung San Suu Kyi has confirmed that the National League for Democracy would participate in a historic general election in Myanmar set for Nov 8, the first to be contested by the party in a quarter of a century, vowing the party would "amend the constitution" that bars her from the presidency if it wins the polls. "We will contest the election to continue implementing the democratic transition that has yet to be achieved," she said. "If the NLD wins the election, national reconciliation will be the first priority. To make a country develop, stability in politics, the economy and in various sectors are very important. If the NLD runs the government, we will prioritise this." The NLD is tipped to

³⁰ Charter Push for Decentralisation, Stronger Parliament Falters - <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/charter-push-for-decentralization-stronger-parliament-falters.html> (The Irrawaddy) 9 July 2015

³¹ Myanmar's Parliament Approves Controversial Interfaith Marriage Law - <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/parliament-approves-controversial-interfaith-marriage-law-07072015152051.html> (Radio Free Asia) 7 July 2015

make huge gains at the ballot box if the vote is free and fair. The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which is dominated by military officers and civil servants who retired to become candidates, will be the NLD's biggest opponent. The opposition party has been urging citizens in recent days to check official voters' lists, raising concerns that the lists displayed across the country are riddled with inaccuracies.³²

102 ABANDONED MIGRANTS RESCUED IN TENASSERIM, UN URGES MORE SUPPORT FOR ROHINGYAS, BUT STATE MEDIA SUGGESTS THEY ARE OVERFED

The Burmese navy has recovered 102 men, thought to be asylum seekers from Bangladesh, who were abandoned on the island of Saunggauk in the southernmost region of Tenasserim Division. Naval personnel detained the men after searching from 30 June to 12 July. According to state media, the detainees are of "Bengali" origin, a word commonly used to describe the Muslim Rohingya minority, implying that they belong to neighbouring Bangladesh. The Myawaddy News reported that the men were lured onto a people-smuggling boat bound for Malaysia by the promise of jobs abroad, and were subsequently abandoned on the island. The navy has declared it will continue to search all islands in the area, and that they will be handing the detained men over to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for repatriation. This case is the latest event following the migrant crisis earlier in the year, which saw thousands of people stranded in the Bay of Bengal.

UN Assistant High Commissioner for Protection Volker Türk has called for more support for the 140,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Arakan State, the majority of whom are Rohingya Muslims. However, on the same day – 16 July – Burmese state media released a report suggesting that IDPs have an excess of UN-supplied rations. He called for "more concerted support to resolve the plight of displaced people in Myanmar [Burma] and those with undetermined citizenship" during his 5-day mission to Burma, during which time he visited IDPs camps, as well as the mostly Buddhist city of Sittwe and predominantly Muslim town of Maungdaw. Türk heard directly from the affected populations in Rakhine [Arakan] State, where 140,000 people are still internally displaced after the outbreak of inter-communal violence three years ago, said the UN, noting that Arakan is one of the least developed states in the country and home to an estimated one million people of undetermined citizenship — predominantly Rohingya. Meanwhile, Burmese state-media cited sources who allege that "excess relief supplies provided to refugee camps in Rakhine State are being sold at roadside stalls. International organizations, UN agencies and the Rakhine State Government have been supplying Bengali [Rohingya] refugee camps in Sittwe Township with food, kitchenware, clothes, plastic sheets and items for women and children on a monthly basis," according to the Global New Light of Myanmar. It also noted that despite reports of shortages in the camps, cited sources said that "relief supplies were abundant", and that such items were being resold at roadside shops in a Rohingya village.³³

PROTESTING WORKERS DEMAND K4000 WAGE

Over 200 workers from 15 different factories at the Hlaing Tharyar industrial zone demonstrated in favour of a K4000 (US\$3.50) minimum wage, up K400 from the government-backed amount already rejected by factory owners as too expensive. The National Committee on the Minimum Wage – which includes ministries, employers and labour organisations – proposed last month to set the daily standard at K3600 (US\$3.20), a figure which provoked the predictable string of criticism from both factory workers and bosses. Union leaders pressed for a higher amount, while employers

³² NLD confirms Myanmar poll bid -

<http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/general/620028/nld-joins-myanmar-election> (Bangkok Post) 11 July 2015

³³ 102 abandoned migrants rescued in Tenasserim -

<http://www.dvb.no/news/102-abandoned-migrants-rescued-in-tenasserim/54754> (DVB) 14 July 2015

UN urges more support for Rohingyas, but state media suggests they are overfed -

<http://www.dvb.no/news/un-urges-more-support-for-rohingyas-but-state-media-suggests-they-are-overfed/54872> (DVB) 17 July 2015

complained the figure would shutter their business and undermine the industry. On 12 July, the deadline to lodge objections to the proposed minimum wage, factory workers queued into lines at 7am for a government-approved march against the proposed minimum wage. Some held signs and shouted slogans in favour of the K4000 (US\$3.50) minimum.³⁴

ANALYSIS

There had been great concern that the peace process had stalled and that campaigning for the elections would take over and interrupt the momentum that had brought hope that a peace agreement would finally be signed after so many years of conflict. Talks between the new Senior Delegation representing the ethnic armed organizations and the government were more positive. Both sides made it clear that they are serious about peace and that they intend to sign a national ceasefire agreement (NCA) as soon as possible. But whether or not they are able to, remains to be seen.

At the same time, following the announcement of the Union Election Commission (UEC) of the 8 November General Election date, not only have several parties (including the NLD) already started to throw their hats into the ring, but the President reiterated his government's commitment to the democratic process, including free and open debate. This could be seen in Parliament where amendments to the constitution were fiercely debated and in the end largely rejected, however while some may be disappointed by the outcome, democracy as a process is definitely starting to take hold in the country. 2015 long promised to be a pivotal year for Myanmar and the following months will perhaps finally bring a few circles to a close.

³⁴ Protesting workers demand K4000 wage - <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/15465-protesting-workers-demand-k4000-wage.html> (Myanmar Times) 13 July