

POLITICAL MONITOR No. 27

OFFICIAL MEDIA

PRESIDENT CONDUCTS HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL MEETING

President Thein Sein held a high-level political meeting with the 2 Vice-Presidents, military leaders, the 2 Speakers from both houses of parliament and representatives from 6 prominent political parties on 31 October in Naypyitaw. In his address, President Thein Sein stated the 3 main agendas of the meeting – continuation of democratic transition and political process, ways to strengthen peace process for national reconciliation as well as to successfully hold the 2015 elections. The President emphasized that the talks was to establish a common vision and called on all political forces to refrain from resorting to confrontational approaches and that the success of the political reforms hinges on the ways in which the peace process evolves. He also emphasized it was important for the government, the Hluttaws, the ethnic armed organisations and the Tatmadaw to work together to conclude the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) and urged all those present to openly express their opinions in achieving the best means to solve Myanmar's challenges.

Present at the high level dialogue were Vice Presidents Dr Sai Mauk Kham and Nyan Tun, Speakers of both the Upper and Lower House Khin Aung Myint and Thura Shwe Mann, Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the Union Election Commission Chairman Tin Aye, Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Commander-in-Chief (Army) Vice-Senior General Soe Win, Vice Chairman of the Union Solidarity and Development Party Htay Oo, Chairperson of the National League for Democracy Aung San Suu Kyi, representative of the National Unity Party Thein Tun, representative of United Nationalities Alliance Khun Tun Oo, representative of Nationalities Brotherhood Federation Sai Aik Paung and representative of Federal Democratic Alliance Khin Maung Swe.¹

RESETTLEMENT OF REFUGEES BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND UNHCR

Minister for Defence Lt-Gen Wai Lwin received representatives from the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees in Naypyitaw on 28 October. The two sides exchanged views on resettling of Myanmar refugees, the need to ensure secure stability; sustainable livelihoods for returnees and clearance of landmines. Both the UN and UNHCR are keen to sign the memorandum of understanding or an agreement on the resettlement of refugees between Myanmar and Thailand adding that the UNHCR has a road map for resettlement. UNHCR officials said despite the need for cooperation between Myanmar and Thailand, Myanmar must play a leading role in managing the issue. The Defence Minister said that his ministry would cooperate with other ministries concerned in carrying out resettlement of refugees with the guidance of the government and that the Myanmar-Thailand border committees had been formed to assist the process.²

HLUTTAW SESSIONS – Highlights

Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) sessions

The 11th Regular Session of the First Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) held its 23rd day meeting on 27 October and questions on safety of gas pipelines, levy of taxes on wood products and debate the report on electoral system were discussed.

¹ For this transition to succeed we have no alternative but to talk to one another Political stability is the basis to make elections a success - http://www.moi.gov.mm/npe/sites/default/files/newspaper-journal/1_Nov_14_gnlm.pdf (GNLM) 1 November 2014 (p. 1, 2 & 3)

² Union defence minister holds talks with UNHCR representatives on resettlement of refugees – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs19/GNLM2014-10-29-red.pdf> (GNLM) 29 October 2014 (p. 9)

- **In the debate for the electoral system, MP Khin Maung Win of Lanmadaw Constituency said that it is necessary to amend the state constitution and to hold a national referendum to change from one electoral system to another and the current FPTP system should not be substituted with others. MP Lei Lei Win Swe from Tamway Constituency said that **electoral system that combines FPTP and PR systems is the most appropriate for Myanmar.**³**

The 11th Regular Session of the First Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) held its 24th day meeting on 28 October and questions on safety measures of electricity power lines and report of the electoral reforms commissions.

- Regarding **the report of electoral reform's commission, MP Phyo Zeya Thaw from Pobbathiri constituency, pointed out the Mixed-member proportional (MMP) electoral system which is mixed with the First-past-the post (FPTP) and the Proportional Representation (PR), was the basic rights of people and had weaknesses. He also suggested that the electoral system should be amended to fulfil the wishes of the people. MP Win Oo from Yebyu constituency supported the FPTP system in which the representative who wins the largest supporting votes should come first followed by the second and third winners who can substitute for the first representative when he or she is assigned for executive role or any other reason.**
- **Regarding peace-making process, MP Ye Htut Tin from Pasawng constituency, urged for national unity and peace as the country is located between India and China. MP Phyo Min Thein also suggested the change of electoral system should be carried out not by the parliament alone, but also by holding a referendum across the country. Zone Teint from Chipwe constituency said the votes of unelected representatives should be combined to favour all the ethnic people, political parties and voters to ensure national reconciliation.**⁴

Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Parliament) sessions

The 11th Regular Session of the First Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Parliament) held its 18th day meeting on 27 October and Ministers and Deputy Ministers concerned briefed the session on matters related to the additional budget for 2014-2015 fiscal year.

- Minister for Finance Win Shein explained **the nature of original budget estimates, amended budget estimates, additional budgets, the duty and rights of the financial commission, management of public finance, financial policy, economic growth, government spending and requirements to include loans than have not been approved by the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw. Deputy Minister for Home Affairs Brig-Gen Kyaw Zan Myint said the financial management of the ministry and measures taken for transforming the Myanmar Police Force into a modern people's police force and the Minister for Defence Lt-Gen Wai Lwin stated that spending by his ministry was used for defence activities and the peace process.**⁵

UNOFFICIAL MEDIA

NO SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS AT SHAN CEASEFIRE TALKS

A team from the Myanmar Peace Center held informal talks with the Shan State Army- South (RCSS/SSA) in Chiang Mai on 2 November. The talks followed a meeting in Naypyidaw on 31 October between the government team and the Shan State Army- North (SSPP/SSA).

RCSS Spokesman Col. Sai La said, "The government delegation explained the current situation in Burma, especially the recent high-level talks involving President Thein Sein, the Commander-in-

³ Pyithu Hluttaw raised questions on safety of gas pipelines – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs19/GNLM2014-10-28-red.pdf> (GNLM) 28 October 2014 (p. 2)

⁴ Pyithu Hluttaw discuss electricity, electoral systems – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs19/GNLM2014-10-29-red.pdf> (GNLM) 29 October 2014 (p. 2)

⁵ Union ministers explain budgets and tasks of ministries at Pyidaungsu Hluttaw – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs19/GNLM2014-10-28-red.pdf> (GNLM) 28 October 2014 (p. 2)

Chief, parliamentary representatives and political party leaders, as well as issues surrounding the signing of a nationwide ceasefire, and subsequent political dialogue.” He also added that “ the Shan State Army-South intends to sign a ceasefire agreement, but is still in discussions on whether it will sign together with other groups or insist on a separate accord.”

Nyo Ohn Myint from MPC said no significant progress was made at the talks this week. “The RCSS side said it will sign a ceasefire and then participate in political dialogue,” he said. “Then, they will be able to concentrate on regional development issues. That’s what they told us. We responded that we would pass the message on to Minister Aung Min.”

A similar meeting was held in Naypyitaw on 31 October between the Shan State Army-North, or RCSS/ SSA and the government’s Union Peace-making Work Committee led by Vice-chairman Thein Zaw. RCSS representative Capt. Sai Phone Han said that talks focused on forming a committee to monitor regional stability and development cooperation. He said the Burmese army has proposed a committee with five representatives from both sides, while the RCSS/ SSA wish to see Shan political parties and civil society groups in attendance.⁶

US AMBASSADOR VISITS KACHIN STATE

The US Ambassador to Burma Derek Mitchell paid a 3-day visit to the conflict-torn Kachin State from 25 to 27 October and met advisors from the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), religious leaders and peace negotiators in Myitkyina. Ambassador Mitchell also visited several camps for internally displaced persons (IDP’s) during his visit and was briefed on the on-going peace process by the KIO’s Technical Advisory Team (TAT).

“The ambassador assured us that [the United States] would push [the Burmese government] and continue to support the transition to democracy,” said TAT spokesperson Dau Khar, adding that the Ambassador explained the position of the US government towards the peace process and that it was keen to see it moving forward.”⁷

FRAMEWORK FOR PEACE DIALOGUE DEVELOPED BY 56 POLITICAL PARTIES

Federal Union Party member Saw Than Myint told local news media on 4 November that the alliance of 56 political parties formed under the Peace and Politics Implementation Committee (PPIC) has now agreed on 20 points they wish to be discussed as part of the political dialogue following the signing of a nationwide ceasefire agreement. Saw Than Myint said, “The main draft agreement has been approved with some amendments in addition to the points that were approved in the previous four meetings.” He also added that the focus of the points was split evenly across three key spheres; political, economic and social dialogue and that all 56 members of the PPIC had planned to meet on 8 November to begin discussion on the political dialogue. Secretary 2 of the National Democratic Front Nay Min Kyaw, said he expected this process to be complete by the end of the year. The parties hope this process will find them a seat at the table in the discussions between government,

⁶ No significant progress at Shan ceasefire talks – <http://english.dvb.no/news/no-significant-progress-at-shan-ceasefire-talks-burma-myanmar/45680> (DVB) 6 November 2014/

Shan delegation departs for Naypyitaw – http://www.english.panglong.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5958:shan-delegation-departs-for-naypyitaw&catid=85:politics&Itemid=266 (SHAN) 29 October 2014

⁷ US Ambassador Visits Kachin State – <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/us-ambassador-visits-kachin-state.html> (Irrawaddy) 27 October 2014

parliament, the defence services, armed ethnic groups and political parties that will follow the signing of a ceasefire agreement, said Saw Than Myint.⁸

SNLD CALLS FOR EARLY POLITICAL DIALOGUE

In a statement released on 26 October to mark the party's 26th Anniversary, the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) has urged the government and armed ethnic organisations (EAOs) to start political dialogue as soon as possible in order to end armed conflict in Burma.

“At the moment, the armed ethnic groups’ Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team [NCCT] and the government’s Union Peacemaking Work Committee [UPWC] are negotiating a nationwide ceasefire, but they haven’t been able to make progress,” said SNLD General Secretary Sai Nyunt Lwin. “It’s unlikely the two parties will meet again in October, but we urge them to resume their dialogue as soon as possible because military operations are currently rampant in Shan State, and we think these issues are better resolved at the negotiation table.”

The SNLD also called for a review or complete redraft of the 2008 Constitution on grounds that it is not an effective way of solving the country’s ethnic problems and that it is willing to facilitate an inclusive political dialogue.

Sai Nyunt Lwin said that the conflicts between the ethnic armed organisations and the government have become more complicated due to lack of trust and respect between the 2 sides. He also added that the SNLD had not fully prepared for the 2015 elections and activities such as voter education needed to be carried out in order to ensure a free and fair election.

The SNLD won the second largest number of seats in the 1990 election after the National League for Democracy but was later disbanded after its leaders including Khun Htun Oo—were detained and given lengthy jail sentences in 2005. After a presidential amnesty in 2012 the party re-registered and has an estimated 35,000 to 40,000 party members.⁹

KAF INAUGURAL MEETING KICKS OFF

The Kawthoolei Armed Forces (KAF) held its inaugural conference at the Klo Htoo Baw Headquarters in Sonese Myaing Village, Myawaddy Township, Karen State from 29 to 30 October to establish the group’s formation.

Second General Staff of Klo Htoo Baw Headquarters Major Tun Tun said, “We have founded [the] Kawthoolei Armed Forces, but some organizations are not ready [for that] yet. At first, [this] meeting [was to be] held for 3 days, but it can be finished within 2 days,”

He added by saying that the core objective in founding the Kawthoolei Armed Forces is to advance the unification of all Karen nationals under the name of Kawthoolei and its objective is to create a system to unite all Karen armed groups.

Concerned with uniting all Karen armed groups under Kawthoolei, Major Tun Tun stated that the KAF will, “Begin to form with the groups we already have. For example, [the] Karen National Union (KNU) accepts this [idea of founding the] Kawthoolei, according to its policy, but it will not join in the formation yet; it’s that [the KNU] is not ready to join yet.”

At the KNU’s Central Permanent Emergency Meeting held on 13 October, the group discussed the establishment of the KAF and according to its policies; the KNU accepted the idea of founding

⁸ Framework for peace dialogue developed by 56 of Myanmar’s smaller political parties – <http://mizzima.com/mizzima-news/politics/item/14463-framework-for-peace-dialogue-developed-by-56-of-myanmar-s-smaller-political-parties> (Mizzima) 5 November 2014

⁹ Shan party calls for early political dialogue – <http://english.dvb.no/news/shan-party-calls-for-early-political-dialogue-burma-myanmar/45436> (DVB) 28 October 2014

Kawthoolei. However, the KNU would only make the decision as to whether or not it would join the KAF at the group's upcoming congress meeting.

About 250 representatives attended the KAF founding conference, including the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), the KNU and KNLA/KNU-PC, the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO), the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF), as well as various Karen Women's groups, Karen youth networks, and township representatives.¹⁰

UEC BEGINS REVAMPING VOTER LISTS

The Union Election Commission (UEC) has begun compiling new voter lists for the 2015 general election, after the recent census conducted in March earlier uncovered a gaping discrepancy in the actual versus the predicted number of people in the country. The census tallied 51.4 million people within Burma, as opposed to 60 million, an officially held figure that had been cobbled together by projected birth rates and disparate demographic studies. On 3 November, the UEC set out to calculate the number of eligible voters and the Commission believes the process will take 8 months to construct a new list.

"Household lists will be collected from all villages and quarters, and population lists will be gathered from local administration offices, said UEC spokesman Thaug Hlaing. "We will then use this information to compile a list of all people over the age of 18. Thereafter, we will remove voters who are not eligible to vote under election laws."

Legal expert Ko Ni believes that the 2010 election was irreconcilably flawed by spurious voter listings. "In the last election there were many errors; for instance, the voter lists included some dead people," he said. Ko Ni believes that 2010's listing problems were repeated in the 2012 by-election and that the poll saw the NLD elevated into both houses of parliament. "The 2010 election lists were very ugly. The same lists were used again in the 2012 bi-elections and we discovered that they contained many errors. There were many weaknesses in the commission's methodology of compiling voter lists at the local level, but nobody took responsibility," said Ko Ni.¹¹

ELECTION COMMISSION REJECTS KAREN PARTY'S REQUEST TO LIFT DECREE ON 147 POLLING AREAS IN KAREN STATE

The Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party (PSDP), a Karen State based political party said that their request to lift a voting decree in 147 polling areas of Karen State for the 2015 national election had been refused by Union Election Commission (UEC). As many as 147 polling areas out of a total of 304 distributed in all seven townships in Karen State are affected by the voting decree and deemed 'unsafe' by the UEC as they were in areas affected by armed conflict.

In an effort to remove the ban, the PSDP party raised the issue and made its request at a meeting on 21 October in Rangoon with UEC Chair Tin Aye. Vice Chair of the PSDP Mahn Aung Pyi Soe said that UEC said that they cannot make it happen at this time.

"We have suffered as there are many [polling] areas banned by government [UEC] since 2010. When our party asked whether UEC would lift the ban for the 2015 election, they said that there is something still need to be done with those places and they could not run the election unless conditions were secure."

¹⁰ KAF Inaugural Meeting Kicks Off – <http://monnews.org/2014/10/30/kaf-inaugural-meeting-kicks/> (IMNA) 30 October 2014

¹¹ UEC begins revamping voter lists – <http://english.dvb.no/elections/uec-starts-compiling-voter-lists-for-2015-%E2%80%A8%E2%80%A8%E2%80%A8burma-myanmar/45647> (DVB) 5 November 2014

During the 2010 election, the government claimed that due to security reasons, polls could not be held in the banned 147 polling areas in Karen State. The banned polling areas included 11 areas in Hpa-an township, 25 areas in Papun township, 11 areas in Kawkaik township, 46 areas in Kyainseikyi township, 1 area in Myawaddy, 36 areas in Thandaung township and 17 areas in Hlaingbwe township.

Karen State NLD Central Executive Committee Nan Khin Htwe Myint said, "No matter whatever excuses they [UEC] gave, the banned polling areas should be lifted by now because of the peace building process. We see that this is not acceptable for the civilians. The election commission is not talking straight regarding this issue."¹²

CHIN STATE BANS TWO MORE NEWSPAPERS

The Chin State government issued an order on 16 October ordering 2 newspapers - the Tedim Post and Zo Lengthe to cease publishing. Tedim Post's executive chief Htan Van Hlan said that both the Tedim Post and Zo Lengthe were not officially registered and filing for registration. Since the last week of September, the Chin State authorities have banned 4 newspapers from publishing for not being registered. The Hakha Post and the Falam Post were also issued orders from publication on 29 September and the 15 October respectively.¹³

RAKHINE STATE CHIEF MINISTER CALLS ON LOCALS TO COOPERATE WITH INGOs

Rakhine State Chief Minister Maung Maung Ohn has told local Rakhine people that they will lose out if they act against international aid agencies. Speaking at a ceremony on 14 October, the Chief Minister said that the international community is ready to assist and to implement the Rakhine Action Plan that seeks to help develop the largely poverty-stricken region. "Rakhine people need to be shrewd in their international relations in implementing the framework. If not, locals will lose opportunities due to the tarnishing of the image of Rakhine State," he said. Chief Minister Maung Maung Ohn was referring to incidents in which international aid organizations, primarily Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders), were attacked or threatened over what was perceived as bias in supporting the Muslim Rohingya or Bengali community at the expense of the Buddhist Rakhine community. Maung Maung Ohn pointed out that the attacks against international aid agencies in Sittwe caused a blemish on the image of Rakhine State in the international community.

Chairperson of the Rakhine Women's Network Daw Nyo Aye who led the protest to oust Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) said, "We are not aggressive against MSF. If the providers do their work in a transparent and equal manner, there will not be any problem." A state of emergency was declared in Sittwe in March 2014 after an incident involving an American staff member of Malteser International who was seen to put a Buddhist flag in the back pocket of her pants, a behaviour regarded by some locals insulting. As a result, riots ensued and 14 offices of international aid organizations were destroyed in Rakhine State.¹⁴

ANALYSIS

At the recent high-level meeting held in Naypyitaw, President Thein Sein urged military leaders, Speakers of Parliament and representatives of prominent political parties to continue the

¹² Burma's Election Commission Turns Down Karen Party's Request To Lift Decree on 147 Polling Areas In Karen State – <http://karennews.org/2014/11/burmas-election-commission-turns-karen-partys-request-lift-decree-147-polling-areas-karen-state.html/> (Karen News) 6 November 2014

¹³ Chin state bans two more newspapers – <http://khonumthung.org/2014/10/25/chin-state-bans-two-more-newspapers/> (Khonumthung) 25 October 2014

¹⁴ Locals will lose out if not open to international NGOs: Rakhine State Chief Minister – <http://mizzima.com/mizzima-news/myanmar/item/14101-locals-will-lose-out-if-not-open-to-international-ngos-rakhine-state-chief-minister> (Mizzima) 25 October 2014

democratic transition, strengthen the peace process as well as to successfully holding the 2015 elections. In doing so, he emphasized the need for all stakeholders to refrain from resorting to confrontational approaches and strive for a better future through realistic political means. The meeting is a significant development and the President's initiative to engage with prominent political players involved in Myanmar's reform process should be welcomed. It is a lack of understanding and trust between the government, the military and ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) which has stalled the on-going peace process. Therefore, the President's initiative to consult and begin to build trust amongst the key political players is crucial.

While the main responsibility for dealing with these challenges may lie with the government, military and ethnic armed organisations it is important for political parties, civil society and public at large to engage actively in the peace process. Major obstacles and challenges that could derail current reforms remain and all concerned stakeholders will need to find common ground if genuine peace and national reconciliation is to be achieved in Myanmar.