

# PEACEWORKS



## Why Burma's Peace Efforts Have Failed to End Its Internal Wars

By Bertil Lintner



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## ABOUT THE REPORT

Supported by the Asia Center's Burma program at the United States Institute of Peace to provide policymakers and the general public with a better understanding of Burma's ethnic conflicts, this report examines the country's experiences of peace efforts and why they have failed to end its wars, and suggests ways forward to break the present stalemate.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bertil Lintner has covered Burma's civil wars and related issues, such as Burmese politics and the Golden Triangle drug trade, for nearly forty years. Burma correspondent for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* from 1982 to 2004, he now writes for *Asia Times* and is the author of several books about Burma's civil war and ethnic strife.

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**Cover photo:** A soldier from the Myanmar army provides security as ethnic Karens attend a ceremony to mark Karen State Day in Hpa-an, Karen State, on November 7, 2014. (Photo by Khin Maung Win/AP)

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# Summary



Burma's ethnic conflicts constitute the world's longest civil war, having begun shortly after its independence from Britain in 1948. Following the 2010 general election, the new government launched what it called a peace process. Ten ethnic groups signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. More than 80 percent of Burma's ethnic combatants, however, have not. Further, since the agreement, Burma has seen in the far north the heaviest fighting in decades, described in a 2015 issue of *Jane's Defense Weekly* as "the largest war in Myanmar [Burma] since independence."

More important, this is scarcely the first time the central government has tried to bring the conflicts to an end. The main difference this time is that foreign organizations have become involved in the process, and ethnic leaders and government and military officials have been sent to Northern Ireland, South Africa, Colombia, and Guatemala to study how those countries have achieved a semblance of peace.

The way forward, however, is in Burma's own history of failed attempts to establish peace. The government and military now need to encourage serious discussions about what constitutional changes would satisfy the aspirations of the country's many ethnic groups. They also need to end the divisive policy of separating ethnic armed groups into signatories and nonsignatories of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. Last, all armed stakeholders need to work together at building an inclusive national identity. For international actors, priority should be given to leveraging the many lessons to be learned from the five previous attempts at peacebuilding in Burma. International players also need to look deeply into China's history and interests in Burma, which have always been a barrier to the realization of peace.



Then president of Myanmar Thein Sein, center, walks on the historic U Bein bridge while assessing environmental changes at Taungthaman Lake in Amarapura, near Mandalay, Myanmar, on September 27, 2015. (Photo by Hkun Lat/AP)

## Overview

**On January 4, 1948, Burma became an independent, federal republic, the Union of Burma. Three months later, in the first week of April, the first shots in its long-lived civil war were fired.**

On January 4, 1948, Burma became an independent, federal republic, the Union of Burma. Three months later, in the first week of April, the first shots in its long-lived civil war were fired as government forces and communist rebels clashed in a village near Pegu in the central dry zone. The Communist Party of Burma (CPB) had operated openly until March 28, when it was raided by the police and the cadres went underground. The communist rebellion encompassed central Burma, units of the regular army mutinied, and the People's Volunteer Organization—a militia formed by independence hero Aung San before his 1947 assassination—resorted to armed struggle as well. All three of these predominantly Burman groups, believing that the country was not truly independent but instead ruled by foreign capitalists, wanted to establish a socialist people's republic.

In January 1949, the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO), which had no desire to join the new Union of Burma, took over Insein, immediately north of Rangoon. From there, the insurrection spread to Karen-inhabited areas of the Irrawaddy delta region and the eastern hills. At about the same time, smaller groups of Mon and Karenni joined the uprising, as did a band of Kachin mutineers from the regular army. Led by Naw Seng, a World War II hero, they took over much of northern Burma.

## ABBREVIATIONS

|       |  |       |   |
|-------|--|-------|---|
| AA    | Arakan Army  | MNDAA | Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army |
| BSPP  | Burma Socialist Program Party                            | MPC   | Myanmar Peace Center                      |
| CPB   | Communist Party of Burma                                 | NCA   | Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement            |
| DKBA  | Democratic Karen Buddhist Army                           | NDF   | National Democratic Front                 |
| FPNCC | Federal Political Negotiating and Consultative Committee | NLD   | National League for Democracy             |
| KIA   | Kachin Independence Army                                 | PNA   | Pa-O National Army                        |
| KIO   | Kachin Independence Organization                         | RCSS  | Restoration Council of Shan State         |
| KKY   | Ka Kwe Ye (government-recognized home guards)            | SLORC | State Law and Order Restoration Council   |
| KMT   | Kuomintang   | SSA   | Shan State Army                           |
| KNDO  | Karen National Defense Organization                      | SSPP  | Shan State Progress Party                 |
| KNLA  | Karen National Liberation Army                           | TNLA  | Ta'ang National Liberation Army           |
| KNU   | Karen National Union                                     | UWSA  | United Wa State Army                      |

The place names in this report reflect the names used at the time of the events being discussed.

Moreover, thousands of renegade nationalist Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) soldiers had retreated into Burma's northeastern Shan State after their defeat in the Chinese civil war.

The government's control of the country was so limited that diplomats widely referred to the government led by Prime Minister U Nu as "the Rangoon Government."<sup>1</sup> Only one unit of the army, the 4th Burma Rifles, commanded by General Ne Win, remained intact. The government, led by the prime minister and his Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, would most probably have collapsed had it not been for arms shipped to the country by U Nu's close friend and Indian counterpart Jawaharlal Nehru.

By the early 1950s, much of the fighting had subsided. Naw Seng and a few hundred of his men had escaped to China, the KNDO had lost Insein and other urban areas, and the CPB was holding out in the Pegu Yoma mountains north of Rangoon and some other areas in the Irrawaddy delta and upper Burma. Following a UN resolution in April 1953, Taiwan was forced to repatriate

its KMT soldiers in Burma, many of whom were still in remote areas near the Chinese border.<sup>2</sup>

In 1955, the CPB's central committee held a meeting to reevaluate its experiences of seven years of fighting. The party, it concluded, had become divorced from the people of Burma and therefore should abandon its armed struggle and become instead a legal opposition party like the Communist Party of India. A peace movement emerged led by Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, one of the founders of nationalist group the Dobama Asiayone and considered the grand old man of Burmese nationalism. He served as chairman of the World Peace Congress (Burma) and set up an eight-person Internal Peace Committee. The outcome was the growth of a legal organization, the Burma Workers' and Peasants' Party, which had been set up in 1950 and was seen as an aboveground front for the CPB.

These moves, however, led only to a split between moderates and hard-liners within the CPB—and a hardened stance by the military, now united under General Ne Win, which saw a communist conspiracy behind the

**More than twenty ethnic armed organizations made deals similar to the UWSA's, but only one, the KIA, insisted on a written accord . . . All ceasefire armies were allowed to engage in any kind of business to sustain themselves, but no political concessions were offered.**

peace movement. Allegations that the Burma Workers' and Peasants' Party received clandestine support from the Soviet and the Chinese embassies in Rangoon were frequent.<sup>3</sup> No peace was achieved, but, if government figures are to be believed, 2,304 communist and ethnic rebels surrendered in the late 1950s.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the government claimed a total count of no more than 6,365 insurgents in the country, a figure that seems to be grossly inaccurate given the extent of fighting even in the late 1950s.<sup>5</sup>

This period and each of the following phases of Burma's seven-decade civil war offer valuable lessons for future attempts at forging a lasting peace.

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**Lessons learned no. 1: No real effort was made to address the grievances of the rebels, only to rehabilitate them.**

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On March 2, 1962, the military—led by General Ne Win—seized power in Rangoon, abolished the 1947 federal constitution, and banned all political parties. In 1963, it summoned representatives of all major rebel armies to Rangoon, probably hoping that the country's many communist and ethnic insurgents would give up when faced with the massive force of the new military government. Thakin Kodaw Hmaing became involved this time as well, and received support from Kyaw Zaw, a well-respected former military officer who, accused of having links with the CPB, had been expelled from the army in 1956. Even this attempt to end the civil war failed, however, because the government offered rehabilitation only if the insurgents surrendered. The rebels had their own agendas, including political demands on the part of the communists, and the ethnic rebels advocating a new, more elaborate form of federal

system than the one that had existed before the 1962 coup. Moreover, China played an important behind-the-scenes role in 1963: its intention was to lay the groundwork for a revitalized communist insurgency, not to help establish peace.

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**Lessons learned no. 2: Manipulations by external powers had a significant impact on Burma's internal affairs; key armed organizations failed to build internal unity; the government failed to respond to aspirations of the Federal Movement that ethnic leaders launched in the late 1950s and kept active until the 1962 coup.**

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In 1972, as the CPB—with massive support from China, which included the supply of automatic assault rifles with ammunition and other military equipment such as anti-aircraft machine guns—was establishing large base areas in the north and northeast, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) held talks with the northern command of the Burmese army. The CPB was fighting fierce battles against not only the Burmese army but also the KIA. Meanwhile, the government wanted the Kachins to join forces with the army in its campaign against the communists. In return, the KIA asked the army for arms and ammunition. According to Kachin sources, the request was turned down and the ceasefire lasted only three and a half months.<sup>6</sup> In 1976, the KIA decided to join forces with the CPB against the government rather than the opposite.

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**Lessons learned no. 3: No real attempt was made to work out the nature of a peace deal with the Kachins. Likely because of this, the KIA joined forces with the CPB rather than the Burmese army.**

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On May 24, 1980, the government announced a ninety-day amnesty for insurgents and political opponents in exile. Official figures cite 2,257 rebels as surrendering, including nearly all the noncommunist Burman forces based on the Thai border, which belonged to a resistance movement set up by former prime minister U Nu (who had been ousted in the 1962 coup).<sup>7</sup> Both the CPB and the KIA entered into peace talks with the government. The Kachins were offered rehabilitation only. No political concessions were made and the talks eventually broke down. Talks with the CPB also broke down because the communists wanted to be recognized as a legal political party and to maintain their base area and army.

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**Lessons learned no. 4:** Political concessions were not offered or made, only rehabilitation and later business opportunities.

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The next major peace process began after the 1989 mutiny within the CPB, and again China, which by then had changed its Burma policy and was no longer interested in exporting revolution, played an important behind-the-scenes role in brokering peace agreements between the mutineers and Burma's military authorities.

The Wa, who had come to make up the bulk of the communist fighting force, got what had been denied the CPB in 1980: they could have their own army, the United Wa State Army (UWSA), and a base area along the Chinese border. Three other, smaller former CPB forces soon joined in and received the same concessions in exchange for ceasefire agreements. After that, a number of ethnic armies that had depended on arms supplies from the CPB also entered into ceasefire agreements with the

government. More than twenty ethnic armed organizations made deals similar to the UWSA's, but only one, the KIA, insisted on a written accord, which was signed on February 24, 1994. All ceasefire armies were allowed to engage in any kind of business to sustain themselves, but no political concessions were offered.

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**Lessons learned no. 5:** The military government did not engage in any political talks with the former rebels; only ceasefires and nearly unlimited business opportunities were offered.

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Thus the peace process that began in 2012 and is still continuing is the sixth time that efforts have been made to end the conflict. Not much has changed, though, since the 1950s: the government is still offering little more than rehabilitation in return for what amounts to surrender. Then and now, *surrender* means giving up the armed struggle—or retaining their guns and becoming some kind of government-recognized militia force. Burma's military leaders have made it clear that it is their duty to uphold the 2008 constitution, which is not federal in character and which gives them extraordinary powers over the country's seven regions (Rangoon/Yangon, Irrawaddy/Ayeyarwady, Tenasserim/Tanintharyi, Pegu/Bago, Magwe, Mandalay, and Sagaing) and seven ethnic states (Shan, Kachin, Karen, Karenni/Kayah, Chin, Arakan/Rakhine, and Mon). Unless those attitudes change, the prospect for a lasting peace this time is no greater than during previous efforts. At the same time, the ethnic organizations, armed as well as unarmed, need to make it clear what kind of federal system they envisage, not simply present only vague notions of "a genuine federal union."



# Past Peace Efforts

## 1950s: PEACE MOVEMENTS

The peace movement that Thakin Kodaw Hmaing initiated in the mid-1950s exposed differences between Burma's military and the elected government in perceptions of the ethnic conflicts. U Nu had tried to find a political solution to the war by initiating a move to create a separate Karen State within the union. The Karen had refused to attend the conferences that were held before independence in the small Shan market town of Panglong and resulted in representatives of the Shan, the Kachin, the Chin, and Aung San (representing the Burmans) signing an agreement on February 12, 1947, to form a federal union. The Panglong Agreement promised "full autonomy in internal administration for the Frontier Areas," and the date it was signed is still celebrated in Burma as Union Day.<sup>8</sup> Burma's first constitution, in 1947, recognized separate states for the Shan and the Karenni. The Panglong Agreement stipulated that a Kachin State should be set up as well, which happened immediately after Burma's independence in January 1948. In September 1952, a Karen State was also set up. However, the state was limited to areas in the eastern hills where the Karen do make up a majority, but it did not include the areas in the Irrawaddy Delta region where the vast majority of Burma's Karen population reside. Those two new states—Kachin and Karen—did not have the right, which the Shan and Karenni States did, to secede from the union after ten years (that is, in 1958).<sup>9</sup>

The creation of a Karen State within the union, though, did not lead to a peace agreement with the KNDO and its parent organization, the Karen National Union (KNU). Because of the civil war, the Karen State government did not assume full responsibility of the areas under its jurisdiction until 1955.<sup>10</sup> Further, Thakin Kodaw Hmaing's efforts were, in the eyes of the military and even the government, from the very beginning tainted by his affiliation with the

Eastern bloc. He attended the 1952 Asia and Pacific Rim Peace Conference, which took place in Beijing in October 1952 against the backdrop of the Korean War. He traveled to China, Mongolia, Hungary, and the Soviet Union in 1953 and, in 1954, was awarded the Stalin Peace Prize by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet in Moscow.

That Thakin Kodaw Hmaing had strong, leftist sympathies is not in doubt, but his motives were political: he wanted a negotiated end to the wars. The military leaders, however, were convinced that they could win the wars militarily and that the insurgents would eventually surrender. According to a 1959 document, the rebels were "constantly on the run. Their morale is almost completely shattered and with few villages to harass and live on, it is quite assured that they will not be capable of holding out much longer in the inhospitable jungles."<sup>11</sup>

## 1962: FEDERAL MOVEMENT AND COUP

U Nu's government was forced to resign in September 1958, and General Ne Win formed a caretaker government that ruled the country until elections were held in April 1960. The old Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League had split and U Nu had formed the Pyidaungsu Party, which won the 1960 election. Once again, he became prime minister. The main issue he faced was national unity. The ten-year trial period for the Shans had expired in 1958, and, when it became clear that their constitutional right to hold a referendum on secession from the union was not going to be honored, a rebellion broke out in the Shan Hills. Although the Shan princes, or *sawbwas* (*saohpa* in Shan), did not support the rebellion, they were concerned with military atrocities and the exercise of extra-constitutional power by the commanders, first in their campaigns against the KMT and later against the Shan rebels.<sup>12</sup> According to Jackie Yang Rettie, a native

## Map of Burma/Myanmar

Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

of Kokang, there was also “a feeling that the Mother government took more from the constituent states (via revenue from mining, forest, import/export business, for example) than it gave back (in grants to the states). . . . All leaders and all state governments shared the view that the Union . . . was a colonial-like structure.”<sup>13</sup>

Leaders of what was termed the 1961–62 Federal Movement included the head of Shan State, Sao Hkun Hkio, and Sao Shwe Thaik, *sawbwa* of Yawnghwe State, who had served as the first president of Burma (1948–52), and was now speaker of the Chamber of Nationalities, the upper house of the Union Parliament. They wanted to loosen the federal structure of the union, not to dissolve it but to make it more equitable. According to Sao Shwe Thaik’s son Chao Tzang Yawnghwe:

The federal movement [1960–62] must . . . be seen as an act within the legal and constitutional framework undertaken by the responsible and moderate elements in Shan society and politics aimed at circumventing a civil war situation and defusing the armed rebellion. It had nothing to do with alleged secession plots or the discontent of the *chaofa* [sawbwa] over the loss of power.<sup>14</sup>

In April 1959, the thirty-four Shan princes had handed over power to the Shan State government in Taunggyi, but that was done on their accord to adjust to changing times.

In response to the demands of the ethnic leaders, U Nu convened a federal seminar in early 1962, and a political solution to the ethnic crisis seemed to be in sight. The armed forces, however, had other plans. On the morning of March 2, 1962, troops moved into Rangoon to take over strategic positions in the capital. U Nu was arrested along with five other ministers, the chief justice, and more than thirty Shan and Karenni leaders. Among them was Sao Shwe Thaik, and in a shoot-out at his house, his seventeen-year-old son Sai Myee was



killed. Sao Shwe Thaik died in prison later that year. Sao Kya Hseng, the popular *sawbwa* of Hsipaw, was apprehended in Shan State and never seen again.

Having abolished the 1947 constitution and ordered all political parties dissolved, Ne Win replaced the old federal order with a centrally controlled system where the military, and later its Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP), became the only institution of any relevance. As a consequence, the rebellion in Shan State flared anew, and a Kachin uprising, which had begun in Kachin-inhabited areas in northern Shan State in 1961, spread to Kachin State.

Major grievances of the Kachins included not only the military coup and what it meant for the ethnic minorities but also two unpopular steps taken by the previous U Nu government: a decision in 1960 to make Buddhism the state religion—the Kachins are predominantly Christian—and a border agreement with China the same year. That agreement was not unfair by any international standards: China gave up its claims to northern Kachin State—until then Chinese maps had marked the border in a west-to-east line a few miles north of Myitkyina and south of Sumprabum—and relinquished sovereignty over an area called the Namwan Assigned Tract, which the British had leased from the Chinese in 1898, in exchange for some remote villages at Hpimaw in Kachin State and Panhung-Panglao in the Wa Hills of Shan State.

The Hpimaw area measured 152 square kilometers, Panhung-Panglao 189 square kilometers, and the Namwan Assigned Tract 220 square kilometers, not including the vast tracts of northern Kachin State, which China until then had claimed (and which are still included in official maps in Taiwan). But the government never explained the deal properly, which led to misunderstandings that linger even today. On the Chinese side, many people believe that their government gave up large tracts of territory to Burma, because they saw a new border with Kachin State, which had been the de

facto border for decades. Ne Win's military government honored the 1960 border agreement with China, but Buddhism never became Burma's state religion.

Ne Win's new government was surprisingly tolerant toward religion—"the Burmese Way to Socialism," not Buddhism, was its ideology—but cracked down hard on any political opposition. On July 7, 1962, troops opened fire on students at Rangoon University demonstrating against the military takeover. Officially, fifteen were killed and twenty-seven wounded. Independent observers put the number of casualties in the hundreds.<sup>15</sup> That night, the army dynamited the historic student union building in Rangoon, an act that caused widespread resentment because it was there Aung San and his comrades had begun their fight for independence in the 1930s. In the wake of the massacre, many students took to the hills to join the CPB or, if they belonged to minority communities, their respective ethnic armies.

### **1963: PEACE PARLEY**

The renewed civil war prompted the new military government (or Revolutionary Council, as the ruling authority was called) to announce a general amnesty to all insurgents on April 3, 1963. The offer, though, did not extend to people detained during or after the March 1962 coup, notably members of U Nu's government and the leaders of the ethnic minorities.<sup>16</sup> In June, the Revolutionary Council made a second gesture of conciliation by inviting all groups, ethnic as well as political, to Rangoon for talks: "No preconditions for the talks were laid down; the insurgents did not have to surrender and they could hold their weapons; further, they were promised safe passage to and from the meetings, regardless of the outcome."<sup>17</sup>

The rebels arrived in batches: Karens, Shans, Kachins, Karennis, and communists of various stripes. The colorful Red Flag communist leader Thakin Soe probably attracted the most attention when he arrived accompanied by a team of attractive young women in khaki uniforms. He placed a portrait of Joseph Stalin in front

of him on the negotiating table and then began attacking the “revisionism” of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and the opportunism of Mao Zedong’s China. Not surprisingly, Thakin Soe was soon excluded from the talks.

Negotiations with the other groups continued for months, and both Thakin Kodaw Hmaing and Kyaw Zaw were active this time as well, but to no avail. The talks broke down in mid-November because no agreement was reached on the definition of a ceasefire as a first step toward lasting peace. Nothing had to be written in that regard, but the government was urged to make clear what it meant when it said that the wars should end. Martin Smith also observed that “continuing Rangoon’s ingrained habit of playing down ethnic minority questions, the nationalist delegations received little analysis in the state media at the time.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite the generous offers the government had made before the talks, the military’s negotiators turned out to be much less flexible than the participants had expected. The Kachins claimed that the government had “put forward unacceptable conditions such as: all armed troops must be concentrated in designated areas, troops must not leave these areas without permission, all organizational work must stop, all fund-raising must stop, and the location of armed camps must be disclosed to RC [the Revolutionary Council].”<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, the rebels had widely varying demands. The Shan delegates demanded a return with modifications to the pre-1962 federal system, the Kachins argued for an independent country, and separatist tendencies were strong among the Karens and the Mons as well. The Communist Party of Arakan wanted to set up a people’s republic in Arakan with the right to secede from the union.

At the same time, schemes were being hatched in China, which had long been wary of the ambitious and sometimes unpredictable Ne Win. Six important steps were taken after the coup in Rangoon:

- CPB exiles in China, who had been there since the early 1950s and were not allowed to engage in political activities as long as U Nu was in power in Rangoon, were for the first time allowed to print propaganda leaflets and hold meetings with state and party leaders in Beijing.
- Following the split in the international communist movement, the CPB had sided with China, and CPB exiles in Moscow were forced to leave for Beijing, where a “leading group of five” was set up to coordinate what was to become all-out Chinese support for the communist insurrection in Burma. It was led by Thakin Ba Thein Tin, the party’s vice chairman, who had left for China in 1953.
- Nearly all the CPB cadres in China were well-read Marxist intellectuals who had little or no military experience. But Naw Seng and his battle-hardened Kachins had been living in a people’s commune in Guizhou since they had retreated to China in 1950. In early 1963, Naw Seng was brought to see the CPB exiles and told that the time had come to go back to Burma and fight. They were given military training in Yunnan.
- In late 1963, San Thu, one of the Moscow returnees, was put in charge of a team that began surveying possible infiltration routes from Yunnan into north-eastern Burma. Naw Seng and his Kachins would lead the first attack accompanied by political commissars from the CPB.
- Since the 1920s, small communist cells of ethnic Chinese had been working underground in Rangoon and other towns. The Chinese embassy in the capital now arranged for them to go to a base area that the CPB had along the Shweli River in northern Shan State and wait for help that was going to come from China.
- Most important of all, China and the CPB took the opportunity offered by the 1963 peace parley in Rangoon to establish a link between the exiles in China and those holding out inside Burma, primarily in the Pegu Yoma. That linkup paved the way for a new era in the history of Burma’s civil war. China was becoming a factor to be reckoned with.<sup>20</sup>



Than Htay, chairman of Union Solidarity and Development Party, left, and Mutu Say Po, chairman of Karen National Union, right, speak during a ceremony for the Karen New Year Day in Payathonzu on December 26, 2019. (Photo by Aung Shine Oo/AP)

In 1963, twenty-nine CPB members arrived by air from China, ostensibly to participate in the peace talks. Among the Beijing returnees, as they came to be known, were prominent members such as *Yebaw* (Comrade) Aung Gyi, Thakin Pu, Bo Zeya (one of the legendary Thirty Comrades who had gone with Aung San to Japan during World War II), a woman cadre named Sein Win, and Thakin Ba Thein Tin, who did not actually participate in the talks but seized the opportunity to sneak out of Rangoon and visit the CPB's headquarters in the Pegu Yoma. He had brought with him radio transmitters from China, and the communist fighters in the Pegu Yoma were shown how to use them so they could communicate with the exiles in Sichuan. They were also told to be patient. Big plans were being hatched in China, and help would soon be forthcoming.<sup>21</sup>

According to CPB documents, the government demanded that the communists should concentrate all their troops and party members in an area stipulated by the authorities, inform the government if any guerrillas or cadres remained elsewhere, stop all organizational activities of the party, and cease fundraising.<sup>22</sup> The intransigence of the military regime was a blessing in disguise for the CPB. The talks broke down on November 14 and the various insurgents returned to their respective jungle camps. Thakin Ba Thein Tin and another CPB cadre flew back to China, and the remaining twenty-seven Beijing returnees went to the Pegu Yoma where they assumed de facto leadership of the party at home.

Most historians have assumed that riots in Rangoon's Chinatown in June 1967—when ethnic Chinese stores and homes were ransacked by mobs without any interference by the police—were the reason China was

**It has never been proven but is plausible to assume—and some independent Kachin sources have suggested—that China’s security authorities played a role in persuading the KIA to join forces with the CPB.**

behind the first push into Burma on New Year’s Day 1968. Although it is true that China, for the first time, stepped up its rhetoric against Ne Win’s government after the riots, calling him a “fascist and a reactionary” in broadcasts over Radio Beijing, those events were only a pretext for what, in fact, had been planned since 1962.

The 1963 peace parley had another undesirable outcome as well. The introduction of the Burmese Way to Socialism—which meant that everything in sight was nationalized and handed over to a number of military-run state corporations as part of a new economic policy—led to economic collapse and the emergence of a huge black market. Further, not enough funds were available from central coffers to pay for the counterinsurgency operations that the government wanted to launch. The solution was to set up local militias or home guards, known as Ka Kwe Ye (KKY, “defense”), which were allowed to trade in any kind of goods as long as they assisted the government’s army in its fight against the insurgents. Today, the same government policy is repeated in a program that enables former rebel forces to become *pyithusit* militias, or border guard forces.

Some rebels who had surrendered during the 1963 amnesty took this opportunity, as did several local bands of freebooters and brigands. The two most powerful KKY commanders to emerge from this scheme were Luo Xinghan (Lo Hsing-Han), whose Kokang KKY became a major drug trafficking organization in the early 1970s, and Khun Sa, an alias of Chang Shifu (Zhang Qifu), of Loi Maw KKY, another prominent drug trafficker. It was only when they began to negotiate passage for their drug caravans with the Shan rebels, who controlled the countryside, that they were arrested by the authorities. Khun Sa spent the years 1969 to 1974 in prison; Luo Xinghan was incarcerated from 1973 to 1980.

Among those who were leaders of ethnic armies in their own right (rather than militias established by Ne Win), only Saw Hunter Thamwe, alias Musso Kawkasa, surrendered to the government after the 1963 peace talks. He had in the early years of the insurrection led the Karen forces in the Irrawaddy delta and served as chairman of the KNU and its administrative body, the Karen Revolutionary Council, from 1956 to 1963. But, as Martin Smith points out, his surrender was “so loudly trumpeted out at the time that it obscured just how few Karen rebels actually came in.”<sup>23</sup> Saw Hunter died in Rangoon in 1980.

### **1970s: PEACE TALKS**

The time between 1968 and 1973 saw a rapid expansion of the areas under control of the CPB. Having entered Mong Ko on January 1, 1968, the communist juggernaut rolled on into large tracts of northern Shan State, Kokang, the Wa Hills, and the mountains north of Kengtung as well as an area along the Chinese border in Kachin State. By 1974, the CPB had taken control of more than twenty thousand square kilometers of territory in the north and the northeast. In the beginning, a large number of the CPB’s soldiers were actually Red Guard volunteers from China. It was not until they captured the Wa Hills in 1972 and 1973 that ethnic Wa came to make up the bulk of the communist fighting force. The Chinese aid to the CPB came at the same time as the Cultural Revolution raged in China, which meant chaos at home and massive support for Maoist-oriented parties all over the world.

The KIA found itself squeezed between two superior forces and decided to reach out to what it then perceived as the lesser evil: the Burmese army. In 1972, peace talks were held in Lashio between Lieutenant Colonel Zau Dan, commander of the KIA’s forces in northern Shan State, and Colonel Sein Mya, commander of the 99th Light Infantry Division of the Burmese army. Although the talks—and the ceasefire—lasted for three and a half months, no agreement was reached

and the Kachins had to continue their fight against the CPB on their own. The military tried to pressure the KIA into becoming a kind of local militia force. Meanwhile, the KIA negotiators wanted the government to provide them with arms and ammunition to fight the CPB, but with the KIA remaining an independent organization with its own high command.

Zau Dan was killed in action with the CPB on March 1, 1975. His brothers Zau Seng—the overall commander of the KIA—and operations commander Zau Tu, along with Pungshwi Zau Seng, a Kachin intellectual, were assassinated on the Thai border on August 6 of that year.

Those former leaders had been staunchly anti-communist. Their demise paved the way for an unlikely alliance forged in July 1976: the Christian Kachins led by Brang Seng, a former headmaster of the Baptist High School in Myitkyina, entered into a defense pact with the CPB. The KIA, which the government had denied weapons, now began to receive Chinese arms through the CPB. Within less than a year, the KIA had taken over most of Kachin State outside major towns, including a large stretch of the main road from Myitkyina and Bhamo. The KIA's headquarters moved from the Triangle area between the Mali Hka and N'mai Hka Rivers in the north to new locations near the Chinese border southeast of Myitkyina: Na Hpaw for the KIA and Pajau for its political wing, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO).

It has never been proven but is plausible to assume—and some independent Kachin sources have suggested—that China's security authorities played a role in persuading the KIA to join forces with the CPB, so remarkable was the change. The KIA leaders at the Thai border had even been active participants in an anti-China organization called the Asian People's Anti-Communist League, a branch of the World Anti-Communist League founded by Chinese nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek in 1966. The US chapter was led by General John K. Singlaub, a former US chief of staff of both UN and US forces in Korea.

## 1980: AMNESTY AND PEACE TALKS

The base area that the CPB built up in Kokang, the Wa Hills, and other ethnic minority areas adjacent to China was meant to be a springboard from which it would push down to the Pegu Yoma and central Burma, where its future, if any, would have been—and maybe even farther than that. During the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s, the United States talked about what it called the domino theory: if communism was not stopped in Vietnam, it would spread to the rest of Southeast Asia and perhaps even beyond. That theory may have been a good one. For Mao's chief strategist, Kang Sheng, who was in charge of China's connections with overseas communist parties, however, the North Vietnamese leadership and the National Liberation Front in the south were too close to the Soviet Union to be trusted. Kang's plan was to spread revolution to the region: through the CPB and then down to Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, where Maoist-leaning communist parties were active. The plan, absurd as it may seem now, also included the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist), a tiny group of pro-Beijing Australian radicals. One of Thakin Ba Thein Tin's closest foreign associates was its chairman, a Melbourne barrister named Edward Fowler Hill. Thakin Ba Thein Tin told this researcher, "Ted Hill and I were together in Beijing. We wrote appeals against the Soviet Union and for world revolution. He was a fine, cultured kind of man."<sup>24</sup>

Burma's military leaders realized that they would not be able to defeat the CPB in the northeast, but that the Party could be flushed out of its much weaker areas in central parts of the country, which had not benefited from the supply of Chinese munitions. In that way, the grand plan to link up the "new" forces with the "old" would be thwarted. When the CPB was isolated in the northeastern border mountains, central Burma would be secure. The first target was the Pegu Yoma, where the Beijing returnees had carried out bloody purges to rid the party of moderate elements. Yebaw Htay, who had headed the CPB's delegation to the 1963 peace talks, was branded "Burma's Deng Xiaoping" after Mao's main "rightist" rival in the Communist Party of China, and executed. The veteran Hamendranath

Ghoshal, an ethnic Indian who had organized labor strikes in Rangoon before he went to the Pegu Yoma in 1948, was denounced as “Burma’s Liu Shaoqi” after China’s disgraced president and also killed.<sup>25</sup>

In early 1975, a major offensive was launched in the Pegu Yoma. All remaining CPB camps there were overrun. On March 15, the Burmese army even managed to kill party chairman Thakin Zin and his secretary Thakin Chit (Thakin Zin’s predecessor Thakin Than Tun had been assassinated by a government infiltrator on September 24, 1968, less than a year after the thrust into Mong Ko). Those who survived the government’s operation in the Pegu Yoma either surrendered or fled to the Pokaung range in Magwe Division, where a handful of CPB soldiers managed to hold out until 1979. Very few, probably not more than ten or twenty, CPB cadres from the old base areas ever made it to the new base area in the northeast.<sup>26</sup> One of the few was Kyaw Mya, the leader of the CPB forces in Arakan. He left his area after the Burmese army mounted a major offensive there in 1979. But he crossed the border into Bangladesh and went to Dhaka, where the Chinese embassy put him on a plane to Beijing. From there, he went down to the base area in northeastern Shan State.<sup>27</sup>

Changes in Beijing after the death of Mao Zedong on September 9, 1976, also had far-reaching repercussions for the CPB and Chinese foreign policy in general. Kang Sheng was purged—and Deng Xiaoping rose to become the main leader of China. The Chinese did not curtail their aid to the CPB, but it was scaled down. As China began to open up its economy and abandon old-fashioned socialism in favor of private enterprise and foreign trade, exporting revolution was no longer a priority. The first post-Cultural Revolution reforms were introduced by Deng in December 1978 in a scheme that was called *baluan fanzheng* (eliminating chaos and returning to normal).

The government in Rangoon realized that it could use this entirely new regional security paradigm to its advantage and try to neutralize as many of the

insurgencies as possible, whether China-supported or not. On May 24, 1980, the government announced a ninety-day amnesty for all insurgents. It was the first move of its kind since the 1963 peace talks, yet the insurgents were not particularly enthusiastic. Officially, 450 rebels from the CPB surrendered, along with 400 KIA soldiers, 260 from the Karen rebel army, 160 from Kokang, and more than 450 expatriates returned from the Thai border and abroad. These numbers total 1,720 but the government claimed 2,257.<sup>28</sup>

Cross-checking those contradictory figures is impossible, but the Kokang number refers to followers of the opium warlord Luo Xinghan, who had gone underground in 1973 and then stayed in camps near the Thai border. The expatriates—the noncommunist Burmese opposition led by former prime minister U Nu, who had also been encamped on the Thai border—surrendered as well, and so did the ragtag remnants of the CPB in the Pokaung range and Arakan State. No insurgents surrendered in Kachin State and certainly none from the CPB in the northeast. To whom would any Wa have surrendered? Most of them could not even speak Burmese.

Nonetheless, both the CPB and the KIA were invited to take part in peace talks with the government. Talks with the CPB began in May 1981, after the end of the amnesty period, deliberately chosen to show that the party did not recognize the government’s amnesty offer. The CPB sent a three-man delegation to Lashio comprising vice chairman Thakin Pe Tint; Ye Tun, an older, former peasant organizer from Pyinmana who had made it to Panghsang for earlier talks (discussed below); and Hpalang Gam Di, a Kachin from Naw Seng’s group of war veterans. (Naw Seng had died under mysterious circumstances in the Wa Hills on March 9, 1972. Many Kachins believe that he was killed by the CPB because he did not want to take part in the fighting that the communists were then engaged in with the KIA.) Kyaw Zwa, a medical doctor who was with the CPB, also accompanied the party’s delegation to the talks. The Burmese army was represented by Major General Aye Ko, a





Buddhist and Roman Catholic nuns at the Interreligious Gathering of Prayers for Peace in Yangon on October 10, 2017. (Photo by Adam Dean/ New York Times)

high-ranking officer who had served as commander of the 88th Light Infantry Division, which had fought many battles against the CPB. Two other officers—Than Hlaing and Myint Lwin—also took part on the military’s side in the talks.

Although the CPB delegation spent a week in Lashio, actual talks lasted for only one day. The CPB delegates demanded recognition of their party as a legal political organization with the right to maintain its army and control of its “liberated area” along the Chinese border. Aye Ko and his team rejected those demands and suggested instead that the CPB become a local militia similar to the old KKY home guards, and that communist cadres were welcome to work within the BSPP’s People’s Councils and other administrative organs.<sup>29</sup> The CPB delegates considered that tantamount to surrender. The talks broke down.

In contrast, the preceding talks with the KIO began in August 1980 and lasted until May 1981. At first, five ethnic Kachin government officials and church leaders from Myitkyina met a four-man KIO delegation led by Malizup Zau Mai, the KIA’s chief of staff and vice chairman of the KIO. The meeting took place at Dabak Yang, a major village south of Myitkyina then under rebel control, and the mediators read out a message to the KIO saying that the people were suffering because of ongoing fighting between the KIA and government forces. Although the KIA was getting Chinese weapons from the CPB, that assistance was limited; the communists would never allow the KIA to surpass them in strength, and an independent Kachin State was not possible. Without armed force or independence as viable options, the Kachins turned to seeking a peaceful solution. The KIO responded favorably and trusted in the team of mediators, mainly because it included well-known Kachin community leaders such

as former Burmese army captain Hkun Seng, Father Lawhkum Lawt Naw of the Roman Catholic Church, and the Reverend Lahtaw Saboi Jum representing the Kachin Baptist Convention. More talks were held in Myitkyina, and KIA soldiers came out of the jungle to the towns to be with their families and friends—and to play soccer with Rangoon’s troops.

In October 1980, KIO Chairman Brang Seng, KIO General Secretary Zawng Hra, KIO central committee member Gauri Zau Seng, and Manam Tu Ja, Brang Seng’s doctor, flew to Rangoon for talks with General Ne Win himself. The government was also represented by General Tin Oo, head of Burma’s military intelligence, and San Yu, a high-ranking BSPP official who was to succeed Ne Win as president of Burma in November 1981 (Ne Win remained BSPP chairman until July 1988). While in the capital, Brang Seng and his colleagues appeared one Sunday at Judson Baptist Church. Startled Kachin friends from the capital who were attending the service asked what they were doing in Rangoon. Brang Seng revealed to the entire congregation that he and other KIO officers had come to Rangoon to negotiate peace and that the KIA was willing to lay down arms if the government granted genuine autonomy to Kachin State.<sup>30</sup> The government had intended to keep the talks secret, but now military intelligence officers who had escorted Brang Seng and his colleagues to the church could only watch as the service turned into a prayer meeting for peace.

According to Brang Seng, the Chinese, eager to open the border for trade, put pressure on the government in Rangoon to accept the KIO’s demands for autonomy. San Yu, however, responded that “in our country, we recognize only one party” (that is, the BSPP). In the end, the government did not offer anything more than “rehabilitation” for rebels who surrendered; no political concessions were even considered. The talks ended in failure to reach an agreement, but the KIO had scored a significant political victory. The Kachin public became aware of its demands for autonomy—and not, as in

the past, independence—and many were appalled at the government’s intransigence. Brang Seng had also won the respect and admiration of the new leaders in Beijing. Unlike the CPB negotiators, he showed considerable flexibility. After the talks, the Chinese praised Brang Seng for his efforts even as they seemed to weary of the orthodoxy of the CPB’s leaders.<sup>31</sup>

### **1989–95: CEASEFIRE AGREEMENTS**

Following the failure of the 1980–81 peace talks, the KIO decided to deploy another tactic. Brang Seng believed that the talks had gone nowhere because the KIO had negotiated from a position of weakness. The answer, he argued, should be a broader front so the rebels could meet the government on more equal terms. In 1983, a group of Kachin soldiers led by Gauri Zau Seng trekked down to the Thai border, their mission to rejoin the National Democratic Front (NDF), a grouping of about half a dozen ethnic rebel armies the KIO had withdrawn from when it forged an alliance with the CPB in 1976. The next step was to invite the NDF to the KIO’s Pajau headquarters for talks. On November 19, 1985, a twenty-six-man NDF delegation reached its destination after an arduous, eight-month journey from the Thai border. At Pajau, it decided to coordinate political and military activities—and to seek an even broader alliance with the CPB.

From Pajau, the NDF delegates trekked down to Panghsang, where an agreement was signed between the NDF and the CPB to cooperate militarily and politically. That decision, however, caused a serious rift within the NDF. General Bo Mya and other staunchly anti-communist leaders of the KNU and its armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), refused to honor the accord reached at Panghsang. One of the two KNU delegates who had taken part in the meetings in Pajau and Panghsang was even imprisoned for a while.

Meanwhile, Brang Seng and KIO General Secretary Zawng Hra had made it to Thailand and, using passports acquired through Thai contacts, traveled to West Germany and Great Britain in an attempt to

**Burma was engulfed in political turmoil in 1988. Student-led demonstrations in March and June were met by gunfire from the military, which only hardened the resolve of the populace. Decades of economic misrule and political oppression resulted in massive, nationwide demonstrations in August.**

internationalize the issue. They did meet with some sympathy from individual politicians and even some government officials. The aim was to solicit international support for peace talks, but those efforts were overtaken by events as Burma was engulfed in political turmoil in 1988. Student-led demonstrations in March and June were met by gunfire from the military, which only hardened the resolve of the populace. Decades of economic misrule and political oppression resulted in massive, nationwide demonstrations in August.

Again, the military was called out and thousands of demonstrators were gunned down. That led to a general strike, and for more than a month, daily demonstrations shook Rangoon, Mandalay, and every major city and town across the country. Eventually, on September 18, 1988, the military intervened again. Another massacre unfolded, and a junta called the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) took over. The BSPP government was dissolved and the SLORC abrogated the 1974 constitution, which had been enacted after a staged referendum in 1973. As David Steinberg observed, “The action in Burma was not to overthrow a failing government but to shore up a regime overwhelmed by popular protests.”<sup>32</sup>

The ethnic rebels—and the CPB—had remained conspicuously quiet during the upheavals in central Burma. As hundreds of thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of Rangoon and other cities and towns, the Karen and Mon rebel armies even clashed over who should be in charge of a position on the Thai border where “tax” was collected on the contraband trade between the two countries. The orthodox CPB had some underground activists who took part in the protests in urban areas, but the party leadership paid only scant interest in the pro-democracy uprising, which seemed to go against the Maoist doctrine of “capturing the countryside first, then surrounding the cities and moving into urban areas later.”<sup>33</sup>

On September 23, 1988—five days after the SLORC’s takeover—the CPB began to organize its response, and on December 13, the CPB and the KIA launched an unusually savage ambush on a government column at Kongsá in the hills near Kutkai in northern Shan State. More than a hundred government soldiers were killed and fifteen captured, along with a large quantity of arms and ammunition. That battle, though, turned out to be the last that the CPB would fight.

The role China might have played behind the scenes in the events that were to follow is still a matter of conjecture. By the time a mutiny broke out in April 1989, the Chinese had signed several trade agreements with the Burmese authorities, and Chinese pressure on the CPB to reconsider its old policies had become more persistent. Already in 1981, as Deng Xiaoping was beginning to put his first pro-market reforms into practice, the Chinese had offered asylum to party leaders and high-ranking cadres. This offer included a modest government pension—¥250 a month for a Politburo member, ¥200 for a member of the Central Committee, ¥180 for any other leading cadre, and ¥100 (plus a house with a plot of land) for ordinary Party members. That, though, was on condition that the retired CPB cadres refrained from political activity of any kind in China. The old guard, especially those who had lived in China during the Cultural Revolution and been close to Mao, saw the offer as treachery, but at first did not criticize China’s new policies openly. The offer was repeated in 1985 and again in 1988. Some of the younger, low-ranking CPB cadres accepted the offer to give up and retire in China. The senior members simply ignored it.

Then, in early 1989, the Chinese once again approached the CPB and tried to persuade the leadership to give up. A crisis meeting was convened at Panghsang on February 20, and, for the first time, Thakin Ba Thein Tin lashed out against the Chinese. In

an address to the secret meeting, he referred to “mis-understandings in our relations with a sister party. Even if there are differences between us, we have to coexist and adhere to the principles of non-interference in each other’s affairs. This is the same as in 1981, 1985, and 1988. We have no desire to become revisionists.”<sup>34</sup>

The minutes of the secret meeting were leaked, which may have encouraged disgruntled local commanders to rise up against the old leadership. A major reason it had not happened earlier was that the ordinary soldiers, and their officers, were uncertain of China’s reaction to such a move. After all, the CPB leaders still went to China every now and then—and they were always picked up at the border by Chinese officials in limousines.<sup>35</sup>

But other rumblings within the party and its army were audible, including simmering discontent among the hill tribe, mostly Wa, rank-and-file of the CPB’s army, leading to a mutiny against the party’s aging, mostly Burman leadership. As early as December 20, 1988, Zhao Yilai and Bao Youxiang, two Wa leaders in the CPB’s army, met for the first time to conspire against the leadership. Plans were drawn up to form a political organization that would be exclusively Wa, and not communist.<sup>36</sup> But before they could make a move against the CPB leadership, the unit in Kokang led by Peng Jiasheng rebelled. On March 12, 1989, Peng announced that he and his troops had broken away from the CPB. Two days later, they took over the party’s northern bureau headquarters at Mong Ko.<sup>37</sup>

On April 13, Zhao and Bao met again and decided that they could not wait any longer. On the night of April 16–17, seven hundred Wa troops marched into Panghsang and surrounded the headquarters area where the top leaders were staying. The mutineers went on to seize the well-stocked armory, the broadcasting station, and other central buildings. As Wa soldiers were smashing portraits of communist icons Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao and burning party literature in an outburst of anti-party feelings, the Burman Maoist leaders and their

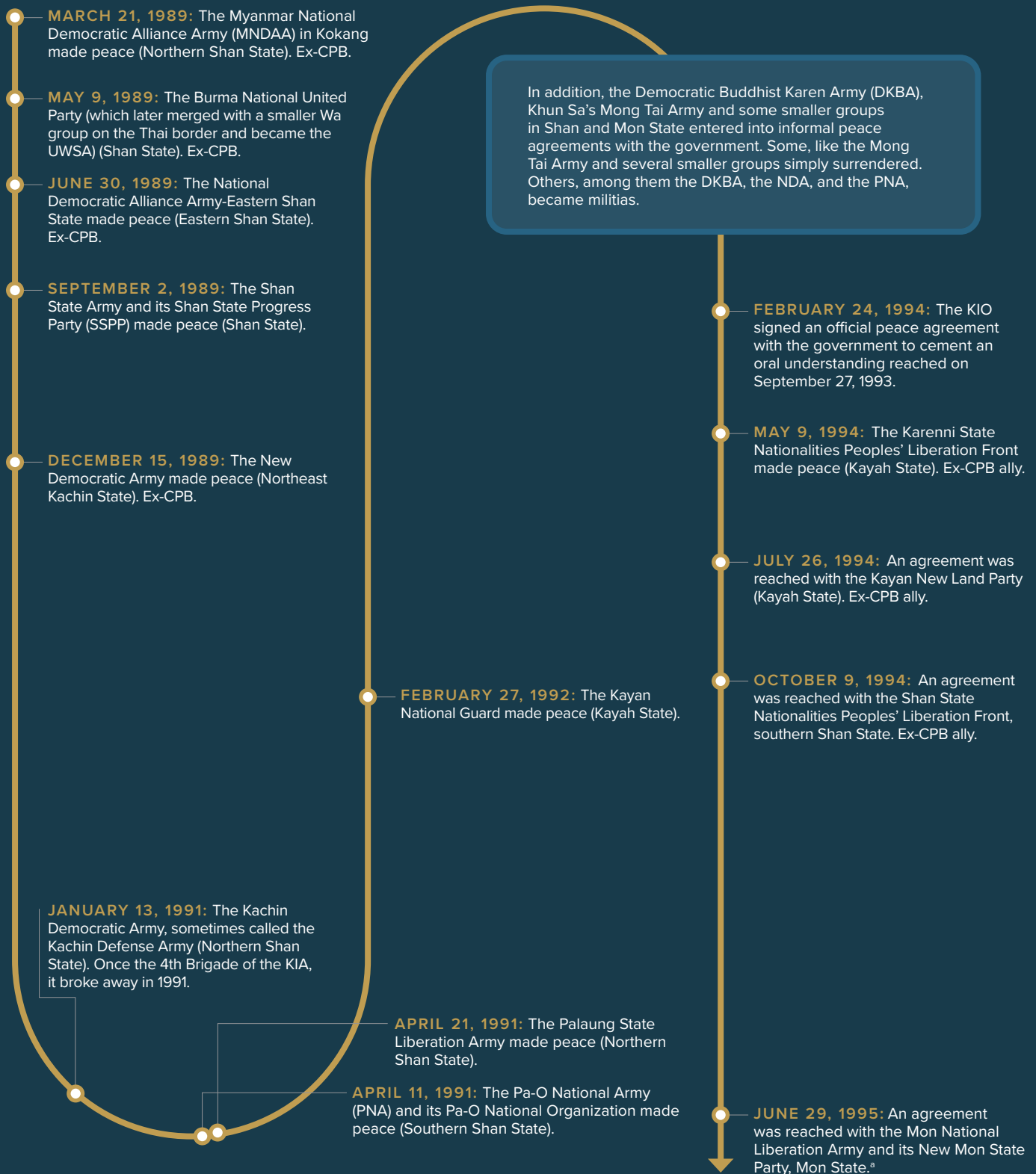
families escaped across the Nam Hka River into China. Burma’s forty-one-year communist insurrection was over.

Because there were no more communist rebels in the country, the NDF tried to exploit the situation and sent a delegation to Panghsang to negotiate with the mutineers. Apart from the ethnic armies, these also included, for the first time since the surrender of the U Nu–led rebels in 1980, a Burman component in the resistance against the authorities in Rangoon. In the wake of the 1988 massacres, more than ten thousand urban dissidents had fled to the Thai and Chinese border areas and formed a group called the All-Burma Students’ Democratic Front, which received some arms from the KIA and the KNLA.

The problem was that none of these ethnic groups had any significant stockpiles of weapons they could share with the urban dissidents. The CPB mutineers, on the other hand, had more than ten warehouses full of Chinese arms and ammunition, which had been supplied mainly during the decade from 1968 to 1978. Few urban dissidents had made it to the CPB-controlled area, which was hardly surprising given the anti-authoritarian nature of their movement. After the 1989 mutiny, however, the only rebels in the country were ethnic and the possibility of a link-up between the urban dissidents and the ethnic groups (and the well-armed mutineers) along the Thai and Chinese borders worried the SLORC.

The NDF delegation to Panghsang was led by Mahasang, an ethnic Wa, but the first surprise came within days of the mutiny—and even before Mahasang had arrived in Panghsang. (On his arrival there, he was arrested by his Wa brethren but managed to escape and make it back to Thailand.) What had happened in the meantime was that General Khin Nyunt, the powerful chief of Burma’s military intelligence service, had called in the old warlord Luo Xinghan to act as an intermediary with the mutineers in his old home district of Kokang. Luo had been sentenced to death 1976 for “rebellion against the state”—a reference to a brief alliance he had forged with the Shan State Army (SSA) in 1973—but had not been executed.

## Groups Entering into Ceasefire Agreements with the Government, 1989–95



### Note

Many of these groups formed following the fall of the CPB in 1989; some had been allies of the CPB. Timeline data drawn in part from *The Irrawaddy*, "List of Cease-fire Agreements with the Junta," January 1, 2004, [https://web.archive.org/web/20111218073438/http://irrawaddy.org/research\\_show.php?art\\_id=444](https://web.archive.org/web/20111218073438/http://irrawaddy.org/research_show.php?art_id=444). However, that list gives an incorrect date of the 1993 agreement between the KIO and the SLORC (October 1, 1993, instead of September 27, 1993). See also Zaw Oo and Win Min, *Assessing Burma's Ceasefire Accords* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), 86.

Instead, Luo had been released during the 1980 amnesty, when most of his men also returned from the Thai border. He had also been given K2 million (Burmese kyats) by the government to build a military camp southeast of Lashio. Called the Salween Village, it became the base for a new home guard unit, this time under the government's new *pyi thu sit* (people's militia) program, which had been launched after the disbandment of the old KKY seven years earlier. The new agreement was effectively the same as the former accord between the Rangoon and the local militias: fight the rebels and gain, in return, access to government-controlled roads and towns for smuggling.

Luo's meeting with the mutineers in Kokang was followed by a trip to the north by Aung Gyi, a Sino-Burmese former brigadier general in the Burmese army who became a politician during the 1988 uprising, and Olive Yang, a colorful and well-known Kokang Chinese warlord.<sup>38</sup> She belonged to the old ruling family of Kokang and had become famous when, in the 1950s and early 1960s, she linked up with the KMT and became the first drug trafficker to send opium in truck convoys down to the Thai border.<sup>39</sup> Aung Gyi and Olive Yang met with Peng Jiasheng and Peng Jiafu, two brothers who had led the first mutiny in Kokang in March 1989, under the watchful eye of Burma's military intelligence in the garrison town of Lashio.

In late April 1989, shortly after the Wa had taken over Panghsang and Luo, Aung Gyi, and Olive Yang had visited the north, Khin Nyunt himself and Colonel Maung Tint, the chief of the Burmese army's Lashio-based northeastern command, helicoptered to Kunlong on the Salween River opposite Kokang. They met Peng Jiafu and agreed on a temporary ceasefire. After this initial meeting, Khin Nyunt paid several visits to Kokang, which received wide coverage in Burma's government-controlled media.<sup>40</sup>

The time was ripe to invite the main Wa leader, Zhao Yilai, and his men, who controlled nearly 80 percent of the CPB's old army. A helicopter was sent to the Wa Hills to pick them up, and meetings were held in Lashio between them and Khin Nyunt, Maung Tint, and other officers from

Burma's regular army, as well as its military intelligence services. The junta in Rangoon pledged to spend K70 million on a "border development program" under which roads, bridges, schools, and hospitals were going to be built in the Wa Hills. Diesel, gasoline, kerosene, and rice would also be distributed in former CPB areas.<sup>41</sup>

The fall of the CPB had a severe impact on several ethnic armies that had depended on the communists for arms supplies. They entered into a similar agreement with central authorities. Even the powerful KIO gave in to pressure and made peace with the SLORC, as did some smaller groups that had not been allied with the CPB but saw advantages in striking deals with the military authorities in Rangoon. In return for ceasefires, they could operate openly and engage in any kind of business, including—unofficially—drugs.

These agreements came at a time when the government in Rangoon wanted, at any price, to prevent a coalition between the urban dissidents and the ethnic rebels, so the latter had to be neutralized. Ironically, just when almost the entire population of Burma had turned against the regime, thousands of former insurgents rallied behind the ruling military. The threat from the border areas was thwarted. The SLORC could not only survive but also consolidate its grip on power.

Of all these groups, however, only the KIO had a signed peace treaty at that time; other agreements were oral understandings.<sup>42</sup> The UWSA signed basic agreements in 2011 and 2012, really stressing only that war should stop and that the border areas needed development.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, the Wa built up an army that was stronger and better equipped than the CPB had ever been. In the initial stages, funds came from the drug trade; weaponry was obtained mostly in China.<sup>44</sup>

Given the nature of the 1989–95 ceasefires, it was hardly surprising that they did not involve any substantial peace talks. Meetings between leaders of the ethnic armed organizations and the military tended to

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focus on business arrangements and where the various groups could have camps and collect taxes. Again, the only exception was the KIO. The Kachin rebels had learned from their experiences of peace talks in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980 that they had to be well prepared if the talks were going to lead anywhere. They also did not trust the military and were suspicious of its intentions. A four-man KIO delegation met with four military officers (one of them was Lieutenant-Colonel Kyaw Thein, a high-ranking military intelligence officer) at Panghsai on the Burma-China border on October 18, 1990, to explore the possibility of a ceasefire.

That meeting was arranged by Hpauyam La Wawm, an ethnic Kachin who had served as Burma's ambassador to Israel, Lahtaw Saboi Jum from the Kachin Baptist Convention, and his brother Lahtaw Hkun Myat, a Kachin businessman. The talks were held in secret so as not to have any adverse impact on the Thai-border based antigovernment alliance of which the KIO was also a member. More talks were held in Thailand, this time involving Brang Seng and Michael Baumann, a peacemaker from Germany. Baumann was the first European to become actively involved in peace talks in Burma, working closely with the Thai peace activist Sulak Sivaraksa. The outcome was an informal agreement on September 27, 1993, and then the official signing of a treaty on February 24, 1994. Only the KNU/KNLA and some smaller allies remained in armed opposition to the government.

The bilateral agreement between the SLORC and the KIO stipulated where the KIA's troops should be stationed, where liaison posts would be established and other technical issues, and that the KIO would be involved in drafting a new constitution for Burma.<sup>45</sup> In May 1990, five months prior to the beginning of the secret KIO peace talks, the SLORC had, to the surprise of many, agreed to hold a general election. Leaders probably

assumed that no party would win a majority, or that the military's own National Unity Party—the successor to the BSPP, which was dissolved in 1988—was popular in the countryside. Whatever the case, the SLORC had grossly misinterpreted the situation. The National League for Democracy (NLD), which was formed by uniting a variety of smaller parties under the iconic leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, scored a landslide victory, winning 392 of the 485 seats up for grabs in the 492-seat *pyithu hluttaw* (national assembly). The National Unity Party won only ten seats. The rest, apart from seven seats left vacant because of ongoing insurgencies, went to local pro-democracy parties in ethnic regions.<sup>46</sup>

Having recovered from the shock, the SLORC moved the goalposts and, on July 27, 1990, issued Announcement 1/90, declaring that only the junta “has the right to legislative power” and that “the representatives elected by the people” would merely be “responsible for drafting a new constitution for a future democratic state.”<sup>47</sup> Even that pledge was not honored. When the National Convention, as it was eventually called, met on January 9, 1993, it consisted of 702 delegates, of whom only 99 had been elected in 1990; the remaining 603 were all appointed by the SLORC.<sup>48</sup> Even so, it was suspended several times following dissension from ethnic delegates. The NLD representatives withdrew from the convention altogether in 2006.

In 2007—fourteen years after that first meeting—the constitution was eventually completed. A referendum was held in May 2008. According to official figures, 93.48 percent were in favor of it, 6.18 percent against, and 0.34 percent (the remainder of the votes) either invalid or blank.<sup>49</sup> But few neutral observers believed those figures, Human Rights Watch labeled the results “an insult to the people of Burma.” The NLD said the vote was “full of cheating and fraud.”<sup>50</sup> The armed

forces were guaranteed a quarter of all seats in the upper as well as the lower house—and in regional assemblies—and the right to appoint the ministers of defense, home affairs, and border affairs. No important clause in the constitution could be changed unless more than three-quarters of all members of both houses voted in favor—which gave the military the right to block any attempt to change the basic power structure of the state that has itself at the apex. Little power was given to the country's seven regions and seven ethnic states.

Burma remains a centrally governed country with what, at best, can be described as a hybrid system in which the military remains its most powerful institution and elected members of parliament and the civilian part of the government run day-to-day affairs.

### **2015: NATIONWIDE CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT**

Shortly after assuming office in March 2011, the new president, former general Thein Sein, began talking about what he called a peace process. In June, however, the Burmese army broke the ceasefire agreement with the KIO and launched an all-out offensive in Kachin State. The KIO had participated in the National Convention and submitted a nineteen-point proposal that included suggestions on how to preserve and promote the cultures and rights of the country's ethnic minorities.<sup>51</sup> It is unclear why the military decided to attack the KIA, but it is most probably because the KIA had refused to become a government-supervised border guard force, an option given to them and other groups but accepted by only a few (among them the New Democratic Army, the ex-CPB force in Kachin State, and some Karen factions).

The Thein Sein government, led by the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party, appointed a body called the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC) to initiate and oversee talks with the ethnic armed organizations. More than \$100 million was poured into the peace process by foreign governments and institutions.<sup>52</sup> Vast amounts were spent on various training programs, among them study tours to countries such as Northern

Ireland, South Africa, Colombia, and Guatemala, which had little relevance to the situation in Burma.

In the end, the MPC had little to show for its efforts given that most ethnic armed organizations in the country did not participate, or did so reluctantly. As a face-saving gesture in the lead-up to the November 2015 election—which the Union Solidarity and Development Party was not sure to win—the Thein Sein government announced on October 15 that the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) had been signed by eight armed groups. A close look at the list, however, reveals that only two of them actually had any armed forces to be reckoned with:

- The KNU/KNLA is a viable force with its own army and civil administration.
- The Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) is a formidable force with an army called the Shan State Army—not to be confused with the original Shan State Army set up in 1964 whose political wing is the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP). The RCSS grew out of Khun Sa's Mong Tai Army (the warlord surrendering to the government in January 1996). To differentiate the two SSAs, the RCSS army is often referred to as SSA-South and the SSA/SSPP as SSA-North.
- The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) is a militia that fought with the Burmese army against the KNU/KNLA and later split into several factions, one called the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army and another accepting the government's offer to become a border guard force.
- The All-Burma Students' Democratic Front gave up its armed struggle in the early 2000s to focus on political work.
- The KNU/KNLA Peace Council is a tiny group with only a few armed members.
- The Chin National Front is another small group with little relevance until the peace process began; the MPC chief, Aung Min, even gave it a few villages in Chin State so it would have a "base area" and some credibility when the talks began.
- The Arakan Liberation Party and Army is a handful of soldiers based on KNU/KNLA areas on the Thai



border. It never had any presence in Rakhine State and should not be confused with the Arakan Army (AA), which is active in Rakhine State and has a formidable fighting force.

- The Pa-O National Liberation Organization was formed by a handful of Thai-border based Pa-Os who broke away from the Pa-O National Organization (PNO) when it entered into a ceasefire agreement with the government in 1991. Like the Chin National Front, it was of no relevance until it signed the NCA—which enabled it to get fresh recruits from the Pa-O area near Taunggyi. Sources in Taunggyi also claim that it has borrowed some troops from the PNO’s military wing, the Pa-O National Army.

On February 18, 2018, two more groups signed the NCA: the Lahu Democratic Union, which could best be described as a nongovernmental organization based in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, and the New Mon State Party/Mon National Liberation Army, which was quite strong in the 1980s and 1990s, but then fell apart and dwindled into a small armed band with no military clout or influence.

It is evident that this entire peace process is a sham. The old ceasefire agreements from the late 1980s and early 1990s were forgotten as soon as this new process began, and the KIA was not the only group that came under attack. The SSA/SSPP base at Wan Hai came under fierce attack in October 2015. Prior to that, in 2009, fighting had broken out between the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the government’s army in Kokang. Some members of the former CPB forces in Kokang were open to the idea of transforming their local troops into a border guard. Others were opposed to that idea and wanted to maintain a semblance of independence from the Burmese military leadership. In February 2015, however, MNDAA forces went on the offensive, provoking a fierce response from the Burmese army. Aircraft and heavy artillery were used in what *Jane’s Defense Weekly* called “the largest war since Myanmar’s [Burma’s] independence.”<sup>53</sup>

In the Palaung area in northern Shan State, the April 1991 ceasefire agreement between the Palaung State Liberation Army and the government had led to discontent as government forces began suppressing the local population. The outcome was the formation of the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), a rebel army first trained by the KIA that later became more closely allied with the MNDAA. Another new rebel army, the AA, grew out of similar circumstances. Its first recruits came from Rakhine workers in Kachin State—especially those in the Hpakant jade mines, on banana plantations, and on road construction crews—and were then trained by the KIA. Like the TNLA, it became a close ally of the MNDAA and got its first real combat experience in the 2015 war in Kokang. The KIA had trained the TNLA and the AA to carry out attacks in their respective home areas—the Palaung-inhabited hills of northern Shan State and Rakhine State respectively—to relieve the pressure on KIA strongholds in the north of Myanmar. Later, though, they developed into formidable fighting forces in their own right, each numbering several thousand well-equipped soldiers.

The TNLA and the AA are allied with the nonsignatory SSA-N, KIA, MNDAA, UWSA, and National Democratic Alliance Army-Eastern Shan State in an umbrella organization called the Federal Political Negotiating and Consultative Committee (FPNCC), set up on April 19, 2017. Those seven groups account for more than 80 percent of the personnel in Burma’s ethnic armed organizations and remain outside the peace process. The rise of the TNLA and the AA—which have benefited from arms supplies from the UWSA and MNDAA—and the formation of the FPNCC should be seen as the inevitable outcome of a series of failed attempts to establish peace in Burma.

That also applies to another, smaller armed force, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, which launched several attacks in the Muslim-majority areas of northern Rakhine State in 2016 and 2017, prompting the Burmese army to launch a massive “clearing operation” that drove more than seven hundred thousand Rohingya into refugee camps in neighboring Bangladesh.

# Conclusions and Recommendations



The Thein Sein administration's peace process was inherited by the NLD and its main actor, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, when it assumed power in March 2016. The NLD had boycotted the 2010 election, but participated in the polls in November 2015 and scored a landslide victory. The new administration has held a series of talks with the ethnic armed organizations; these conferences are called Panglong after the town in Shan State where Aung San Suu Kyi's father, Aung San, signed the Panglong Agreement in 1947. Apart from giving the process a new label, however, little has changed. The military has also stated time and again that its duty is to defend and uphold the 2008 constitution and that it is prepared to alter only a few minor clauses. The NLD's attempts to amend that constitution in February 2020 to curb the powers of the military failed because of the military's de facto veto power.<sup>54</sup>

The NLD's peace efforts have been hampered by ongoing warfare in Kachin, Shan, and Rakhine States, the political power of the military, the Rohingya crisis in Rakhine State, and now the spread of the coronavirus. Some venues, though, could be explored in order to break the current stalemate.

Burma's misguided peace process needs a fresh start, and only a holistic approach to the problem can bring it forward. It should also be based on Burma's past and present realities, which in many ways are unique. More Panglong conferences should be held, but the approach of the government and military should not be to collect more signatures on the NCA, but instead to encourage serious discussions about what constitutional

changes would be required to satisfy the aspirations of the country's many ethnic groups. That should be done now, not later. It makes little sense to push for more groups to sign the NCA before a political dialogue about the country's future has been held.

The designation of the ethnic armed groups as signatories or nonsignatories is a divisive policy that needs to be abandoned, especially given that 80 percent of all combatants are designated as nonsignatories. Just as in 1963, the government should announce an unconditional ceasefire and then hold talks. This time, however, both sides need to show more flexibility. The military especially needs to stop clinging to the undemocratic and unfederal 2008 constitution, a stance that will only prolong the civil war.

Almost seventy years of "peacemaking" in Burma point to repeated failures because the military and other central authorities have always demanded that the rebels surrender but never offered them more than rehabilitation and business opportunities. Sadly, military attitudes have changed little since the 1950s. To avoid repeating past mistakes, all stakeholders, internal as well as foreign, need to study all five previous failed attempts. Archival research is essential to establish an accurate historical record, as are interviews with survivors of those efforts. Documentation is available in the National Archives in Yangon, at Cornell University in the United States, and in private collections. It may be hard to find any survivors of the efforts in the 1950s and the 1963 peace parley, but many of those who participated in the talks in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s



Officers with the Ta'ang National Liberation Army gather in Mar Wong, a village in northern Shan State, on January 12, 2015, marking the fifty-second anniversary of the Ta'ang (Palaung) organizing against the rule of General Ne Win. (Photo by Gemunu Amarasinghe/AP)

are still alive and should be consulted. In this regard, foreign peace activists should listen and learn, and not be—as, unfortunately, the case often is—patronizing. Because one approach to a conflict somewhere else in the world was successful, it does not mean that it is applicable to the situation in Burma. The attitudes of foreign peacemakers should be modesty, humility, and willingness to learn, not to lecture. Only then can domestic and foreign parties work together constructively and share ideas.

It is vital for peace that the ethnic and religious diversity of Burma is recognized. It is not enough to talk about 135 national races and claim that all of them are “Myanmar.” First, that official list is highly questionable in that it divides ethnic groups such as the Kachin, the Shan, and the Karen into several smaller subgroups

that could not by any stretch of the imagination be considered separate ethnic entities. Second, not all those identified would agree that they are Myanmar given that that term is basically the same as Burmese: how could Myanmar encompass 135 ethnic groups if the language once known as Burmese is now referred to as the Myanmar language? Tackling this issue would be one of the most important talks for any government, present or future, that wants to build peace in Burma. Educational reform for the nation’s schools is badly needed as well.

The peace process must also involve unarmed ethnic groups such as ethnic political parties, religious institutions, women’s groups, youth groups and other civil society organizations. It is important that representatives of the people in the areas that have been most

affected by the war should take part in the peace talks. It is, after all, for them and their well-being that peace has to be established.

The China factor is a significant one. China played an important, some would argue devious, role behind the scenes in 1963—and it is doing so again. China no longer exports revolution, but the so-called China-Myanmar Economic Corridor remains strategically important for trade and commerce because it provides China with direct access to the Indian Ocean. Therefore, China has become directly involved in the peace process and, in recent years, managed to outmaneuver all the Western peacemakers. China's role, intentions, and *modus operandi*—taking part in the peace talks and arming groups such as the UWSA as well as, indirectly, the UWSA's allies in the FPNCC—should be studied carefully. Countering China's growing influence in Burma is in the interest not only of the international community but also of the Burmese military, which sees protecting the sovereignty of the nation as its duty. Foreigners involved in the peace process should study China's past and present involvement in Burma's peace processes and draw their own conclusions as to what they could do to balance China's influence and make the talks more inclusive.

During the entire peace process, the role of the militias has been overlooked. Apart from the ethnic armed organizations, hundreds of major, medium-sized, and minor *pyi thu sit* forces are present in the country. An excellent report on the *pyi thu sit* by John Buchanan should be studied carefully.<sup>55</sup> It outlines the Burmese military's past and present policies of turning rebels into militias, and the consequences for Burmese

society of such moves: increased drug trafficking, illegal "taxation" of local residents, and general instability in the frontier areas. These approaches have certainly not led to peace in conflict areas. Some of those militia forces, which are recognized by the military but act independently, are stronger and better armed than many of the ethnic armed organizations.

After decades of civil war and five failed peace efforts, Burma is no closer to reaching an agreement that would bring an end to its many conflicts. As this study's analysis of these previous attempts at peace demonstrates, every one of the peace negotiations foundered on immutable attitudes on both sides. The military side refused to discuss fundamental political issues underlying the conflict, insisting instead on a limited security role for the ethnic armed groups under central military control, but with unlimited business opportunities. The armed factions who accepted these terms became military-controlled militias with access to land and resources to participate in whatever business they chose, no matter how illicit. Those who did not were designated illegal. This only further confounded the possibility for the remaining ethnic armed groups to coordinate a united position among themselves, thereby forcing peace negotiations into bilateral channels and keeping them focused on ceasefires that did not resolve the underlying political differences. Most of the ethnic armed groups eventually went back to war with the military. Until the military is willing to allow peace talks that address solutions to underlying political disparities with the ethnic minorities, and until all parties to the process are willing to place community interests and sustainable development ahead of short-sighted illicit economic activities benefiting only armed actors, peace will remain elusive.

# Notes

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The world's longest civil war is now more than seventy years old, having begun in 1948 with Burma's independence from Britain. On one side have been various ethnic groups, Muslim rebels, and communist insurgents. On the other, the central government. Since the latest peace process was launched in 2011, however, the fighting has only intensified. This report looks at Burma's previous failed attempts at peacebuilding and draws valuable lessons from those efforts in order to break the current stalemate, including potential changes to the constitution, ending the divisive policy of separating ethnic armed groups into signatories and nonsignatories of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, building an inclusive national identity, and balancing China's growing involvement in Burma's peace process.

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