

THE FALLACY OF BURMA'S NATIONWIDE CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT

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<http://www.dictatorwatch.org/articles/BurmaNCAfallacy.pdf>

There is a complex negotiation underway in Burma, which has now entered its second year (counting from last August, when the ethnic nationality organization, the United Nationalities Federal Council - UNFC, released its list of positions). The negotiation's stated goal is to create a "Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement" (NCA), which presumably would bring peace to the country that is experiencing the world's longest running civil war.

The war is being fought between Burma's military dictatorship, under the control of individuals from the largest ethnic group, the Burmans, and a wide collection of ethnic nationality pro-democracy armies. The war has further been instigated solely by the dictatorship, whose Burma Army (aka Tatmadaw or Sit-tut) has invaded the ethnic homelands, in the process committing widespread and ongoing crimes against humanity against the ethnic peoples.

The fundamental problem with the negotiation is that the dictatorship does not want peace, much less democracy. As such, the entire process is fallacious. It is impossible that it will lead to its formal objective, an end to the war. Indeed, this fact is well understood by the rebels. They are participating in the negotiation mainly to demonstrate to the world that they are sincere in their desire for national peace, and further that such peace could easily - if not instantly - be achieved if the dictatorship would simply end its aggression.

That the dictatorship does not want peace is proven by the fact that it is the party launching attacks, and on a number of the ethnic groups, including groups with which it currently has individual ceasefires. Since it is already breaking these agreements, there is no reason to trust any NCA that might be achieved. Further, the NCA can in no way be termed nationwide, since many groups - including those that are currently under attack - are unlikely to sign.

A ceasefire agreement?

It is also a fallacy to even call the prospective agreement a ceasefire. As C.S. Kuppuswamy noted in the article, "*Myanmar: Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement - Analysis*," in *Eurasia Review*: "*It is more of a political document than a ceasefire agreement, which explains why it has taken such a long time.*"

A ceasefire is simple, at least in concept. It is a cessation of combat. A normal ceasefire deal therefore has a limited set of provisions. These include an end to the fighting; demarcation of territory to help prevent future clashes; the relocation of troops and bases to achieve this demarcation; and - in some cases - the introduction of a peacekeeping force to keep the two sides apart.

The Burma agreement, on the other hand, is incredibly complex. It includes a preamble and seven chapters. As the current text of the document has not been released, it is impossible to know if the above provisions related to a true ceasefire are even present.

Much of the text, though, apparently concerns the groundwork for additional political negotiation, over the ethnic nationality demands for self-determination and the establishment of a federal democracy. In the last negotiation session, a supposed breakthrough was achieved with the regime seemingly agreeing to implement a federal system. But, as Sai Wansai has noted, in an article in the *Shan Herald*, “*Burma Peace Process: Rejoicing prematurely or back to the square one?*,” this “promise” is in no way assured. Indeed, it looks like “bait” to get the ethnic groups to fall into a trap.

It is essential to understand that the regime negotiation team has two components, and which in turn are following a Good Cop/Bad Cop strategy. The good cop is the “government,” meaning the Union Peacemaking Work Committee (UPWC), as well as the regime’s propaganda arm the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC). The bad cop comprises the Burma Army generals, starting with “retired” Senior General Than Shwe, who are hidden in the background and who have no formal - at least public - negotiation unit or even spokesperson, but who nonetheless have veto authority over any deal. When the good cop - the government - said that self-determination and federalism are acceptable, what they really meant is that these subjects may be discussed in post NCA negotiations. However, the bad cop - the dictatorship itself - has shown no willingness, none whatsoever, to agree to these demands. Indeed, the generals are even unwilling to agree to a structure and timetable for the negotiations on these and other issues once the NCA is signed.

A good question is why the NCA draft is so complex, and full of provisions well beyond that of an actual ceasefire. Probably the best reason for this is the influence of international “experts,” mainly representing the United States and Europe, which countries have invested so much in the idea that the reform in Burma is sincere, and who also fund MPC. In effect, peace in Burma is being sabotaged by the actions of a collection of foreign, well-intentioned fools, starting with Barack Obama and John Kerry, although a deeper reading is that Obama and Kerry actually realize only too well that the NCA will never yield peace, but simply don’t care.

An NCA between whom?

Another way to gain clarity on the situation with the NCA (and in Burma overall), is to consider the desires and motivations of the parties that are involved. However, this does not only include the ethnic nationality and regime leaders. Even more important are the interests of the ethnic peoples, and for that matter the Burma Army soldiers.

For the ethnic peoples, they want an end to the attacks and abuse, including the destruction of their villages and crops, and the thefts, rapes and murders, all perpetrated by Burma Army soldiers. Moreover, they want this to be enduring. They want the aggressor Burma Army to

withdraw, and with some type of guarantee that it will never return. It is only with the satisfaction of these objectives that the local peoples have any time for or interest in the broader issues of democracy and federalism.

Interestingly, a similar set of objectives is likely held by the rank and file Burma Army soldiers (including the regime's large population of press-ganged child soldiers), who are Burmans, and who have been used as cannon fodder by their generals in what are effectively campaigns of conquest in foreign lands. They have suffered enormous casualties in recent years. Certainly many if not most dream of returning home, to Burma Proper.

For the ethnic leaders in the negotiation, most want exactly what their people want: peace, freedom, and democracy. However, this does not hold for all such leaders. For example, it is apparent that some of the leaders from the KNU would be willing to sign just about any deal.

The KNU was corrupted through the fraudulent election at its last Congress, and some of the new leaders have already surrendered. At this point, they appear preoccupied by opportunities to engage in corruption.

Irrawaddy reported that the major ethnic participants in the NCA negotiation received 120 permits to import cars, and that these permits were being sold, at up to \$50,000 per permit, to bring luxury vehicles into Burma. Many ultra-luxury vehicles, including Rolls Royces, have passed through the Myawaddy checkpoint. Doing the math, the KNU leaders may have stolen up to \$6 million, to provide cars to senior Tatmadaw generals and cronies. However, it appears that even this is not enough. The KNU wants the other ethnic groups to surrender as well, for which treachery it will no doubt receive an even greater payback (including from the International Community).

For the regime, the only side that counts is that of the generals, meaning Than Shwe. His interests are unchanged. He wants to stay in power. He doesn't want to lose his, or his family's, stolen national wealth. He wants to defeat the ethnic rebels, and maintain his ability to terrorize their peoples. He also wants to keep Aung San Suu Kyi and other Burman dissidents under control, and prevent a popular uprising. And lastly, he wants to give the United States and Europe even more reasons to ignore what is really happening inside the country, and ultimately for them to supply the Tatmadaw with the weapons that it uses to commit war crimes. After all, American weapons are already being used against the people by dictators and terrorists in Iraq and Syria; why not in Burma as well?

Than Shwe will never compromise on his core demands - his six preconditions - including that the rebels disarm and accept Burman officer control; and that they accept the 2008 Constitution with no or minimal amendment. Moreover, the national census results will be rigged, as will the 2015 election - if it is even held. Burma's disciplined democracy - its new form of dictatorship - will proceed, with no real internal opposition, and - as with China - with full international support.

Approval of the NCA

A key issue with the NCA that has received scant attention is how it will be approved, meaning by the different ethnic groups. Everyone is too preoccupied with forecasting when the formal signing ceremony will take place, and who will participate.

As an aside, it is worth noting that the date guessing contest, the month that a deal will finally be signed, is - for the ethnic nationalities - a loser's game. The regime is attempting to out-negotiate them by getting them to accept the idea that a deal is inevitable, no matter the terms. The real starting point, on which they should never compromise, is that if their basic positions are not accepted, beginning with an end to the attacks and abuse nationwide, there will never be a deal.

Indeed, by not responding collectively when the regime breaks the individual ceasefires, the revolutionaries appear weak. They have already surrendered to a degree.

As for who signs, meaning Suu Kyi, or Ban Ki-moon, or even hypothetically Barack Obama himself, it's irrelevant. Having political celebrities sign will not in any way stop Than Shwe from breaking the deal.

By talking about and even arguing over the signatories, the regime is simply trying to distract the ethnic groups from the real issues at hand. These of course cover the NCA terms, but also its approval process. What should happen is that any single text document that is finalized and accepted by the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT), should receive close and widespread scrutiny. At a minimum, the final text should be publicized the day it is agreed. The ethnic peoples should then be given an opportunity to comment. Finally, for formal approval, the document should be approved by the UNFC, and by the executive committees of all the participating organizations. It is essential to realize that there will be great momentum to accept anything that the NCCT approves. This momentum must be blocked, so the agreement can be given a careful and public appraisal.

Conclusion

The dictatorship has been engaged in a multi-pronged propaganda war, and which includes international allies and participants (notably Harn Yawnghe's EuroBurma Office, and the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative). Domestically, the propaganda has ranged from the points described above; to the ongoing articles by MPC's Aung Naing Oo that the ethnics should trust the Burmans - that's rich!; to the anonymously attributed MPC threats that if the ethnics don't sign now, while "soft-liner" Min Aung Hlaing is Commander in Chief, that they will have to wait until after the election and deal with "hard-liner" General Soe Win. Internationally, the ethnic nationality leaders are being strong-armed in closed door meetings, and offered development incentives as bribes.

What the ethnic leaders should do, though, is clear. They must represent their people, and through this all of Burma. While we can't expect this from the corrupt participants, there is a risk with the sincere leaders as well. The negotiation has gone on for so long, and involved so much work. They have a lot invested personally in reaching a deal. They therefore need to guard against the tendency to just give up and to accept a bad deal. Even though the dictatorship is not sincere, the NCA is historic. They cannot make a mistake and sign a document that betrays their people. They need to wait - for years if need be - until they can get a fair and honest agreement.

Finally, if the ethnic nationality leaders relent and an NCA is signed, it is certain that the regime will break it, if not the very next day. The ethnic groups should prepare their response to this eventuality, now. Normally, when a ceasefire is broken widespread fighting quickly resumes. But, groups in Burma with individual ceasefires, notably the KNU and the SSA-S, have already tolerated such aggression with minimal response.

As UNFC Eastern Australia representative Philip van Gaalen-Prentice has noted,

"The failure of the KNU leadership to hold the USDP-Tatmadaw regime to account in the fulfillment of these demands [withdraw troops near villages; reduce overall troop levels; release Karen political prisoners; cease military operations in all active war zones] has led to the present disastrous political position of the organization and its revolutionary allies. Had the KNU ended its ceasefire and cited the failure of the USDP-Tatmadaw regime to fully implement these conditions the pressure from Western governments could have been expected to fall most heavily on Naypyidaw - not the KNU and other revolutionaries - as the whole so-called 'peace process' provides them with justification of their political and economic engagement with Burma."

When will the KNU and its allies in the UNFC hold the USDP-Tatmadaw regime to account for its constant ceasefire violations and open attempts to bribe their leadership?"

With Mutu Say Poe in charge, I don't think we can expect anything positive from the KNU leadership anytime soon. When the dictatorship breaks the NCA, though, those groups now fighting, including the KIA, TNLA, SSA-N, MNDAA, and also the UWSA, NDAA and Naga, should form a Northern Federal Military Alliance, to reinvigorate the revolutionary opposition. If this is done, it is likely that other groups, including the KNPP and NMSP, and even the SSA-S and units of the KNLA, will join as well, to establish a southern flank. In fact, the entire NCA charade can be used in a positive way as a staging ground and prompt to create a unified ethnic resistance, which will defeat the dictatorship once and for all. The goals of the ethnic people, of everyone in Burma who is not allied with the regime, can finally be fulfilled.