Resolving Ethnic Conflicts in Burma—Ceasefires to Sustainable Peace

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The transition currently underway in Burma presents the best opportunity in over two decades to address conflicts between the government and ethnic communities. However, to achieve lasting peace, ceasefires agreed between the government and armed ethnic groups must be extended to include participation from a range of stakeholders, and substantial discussion of issues which have structured half-a-century of armed conflict. Without a political settlement, the current round of ceasefires are unlikely to be sustainable.

National Political Context—How Resilient is Reform Process?

Since the Thein Sein government assumed power in late March last year, there have been many positive developments—for example, the functioning of parliaments; release of most (but not all) political prisoners; understandings reached with opposition groups; government responses to social action (e.g. suspension of the Myitsone dam); relaxations on censorship and freedom of expression and association. However, the question remains whether the pace and scope of reform is sustainable.

So far, centrally directed reforms have not had much impact on ordinary people's lives, especially in the conflict-affected countryside. Expectations of real change in Burma could quickly become frustrated, once it becomes apparent that many of the changes required will take years, or decades, to achieve.

It is when authoritarian regimes seek to reform that they are most vulnerable. Many individuals and communities in Burma are damaged and traumatized by decades of military rule and abuses. The relaxation of political restrictions is like taking the lid off the pressure cooker—ethnic and other grievances (e.g. land rights) could explode.

Perhaps the biggest constraint on rapid and sustainable change is limited government capacities. There is a need for policy reform in many areas. However, state officials have limited skills, and authoritarian political cultures make change difficult. Also, elements of the previous regime are unhappy with the pace and scope of recent reforms. Powerful actors are biding their time, waiting to move against the reform process.

The Ethnic Dimension

These concerns are particularly relevant in relation to ethnic issues. For more than half-a-century, various armed ethnic groups have been fighting for greater autonomy from a militarized government dominated by the Burman majority. After decades of "low intensity" armed conflict, most armed ethnic groups are greatly weakened. Nevertheless, they still enjoy varying degrees of credibility among the communities they seek to represent.

Burma's ethnic communities constitute over 30 percent of the population. Until their grievances and aspirations are addressed, national-level political reforms cannot be consolidated. Although complex and seemingly difficult to resolve, addressing the "ethnic question" is essential to sustained social and political reform.

Peace must be understood as a national issue affecting all sectors society—not just something concerning ethnic political and military elites and the government and Burmese Army. Reconciliation must include trust building. But peace is about more than ceasefires.

Peace-Making and Peace-Building

Resolving conflicts between armed ethnic groups and the government is necessary, but not sufficient, to achieve peace. Lasting peace must also address the underlying social-economic and political grievances and aspirations of ethnic communities. These are potentially divisive issues, which require working with individuals and communities on identities and interests. Such long-term work must be owned and driven by Burmese citizens.

Armed ethnic groups are key stakeholders, whose members are motivated by genuine grievances, and long-held aspirations for self-determination; some individuals are also motivated by private economic agendas ("greed factors").

Particularly along the Thailand border, some armed ethnic groups have been supported through aid agencies working in refugee camps and cross-border in the conflict zones. This has had the effect of legitimizing some actors, while marginalizing others.

Other key ethnic actors include political parties, several of which did well in the 2010 elections. Ethnic nationality political parties are key stakeholders, which should be brought into peace processes. Another important sector is civil society actors. This includes NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) working cross-border from China and Thailand, and those operating "inside" the country—both traditional and modern associations, faith-based and secular groups.

The most important set of stakeholders are communities. Civilian populations in conflict areas have the most to gain, or loose, in peace processes. It is essential that communities and their representatives are included in peace initiatives, as well as ethnic diaspora in neighboring countries and beyond.

Comprehensive and sustainable peace-building in Burma requires engagement with a broad range of stakeholders. This is particularly important for those communities who do not feel themselves well-represented by armed opposition groups and affiliated organizations. For example, many Karen communities (particularly Buddhists and Pwo-speakers) feel unrepresented by armed groups dominated by Sgaw-speaking Christians.

Government Initiative

In his speech to the joint *Hlutaw* Union Parliament on March 2, the president called for an "an all-inclusive political process for all stakeholders," stating that "there must be mutual assurances and pledges to end all hostilities." This historical opportunity for peace should be

seized. However, there is a danger that hastily agreed ceasefire agreements could unravel later.

At present, the government's approach to ceasefires is implemented by two sets of rival actors: Aung Thaung and Thein Zaw, and the Railways Minister Aung Min (the president's personal envoy). This dual-track approach has created some confusion among ethnic groups. There are also questions regarding the extent to which the Burmese Army buys into recent ceasefire agreements. Burmese military field commanders have proved adept at manipulating conflicts. Will they acquiesce in civilian government-led peace initiatives?

Recent Ceasefires

Over the past few months, preliminary ceasefires have been agreed between the government and armed non-state groups representing the Chin (Chin National Front or CNF), Wa (United Wa State Army or UWSA), Mongla (National Democratic Alliance Army or NDAA), Shan (Shan State Army-North and South or SSA-North and SSA-South), Karen (Karen National Union or KNU, Democratic Karen Buddhist Army or DKBA, and KNU/Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council) and Mon (New Mon State Party or NMSP). Talks have just taken place with Karenni/Kayah (Kareni National Progressive Party or KNPP), and are on-going with the Kachin (Kachin Independence Organization or KIO).

For many of these communities, there is a profound lack of trust in the government, and particularly the Burmese Army. Also, in the case of several groups, there are internal differences of opinion and strategy. For example, some KNU leaders are seeking to move forward with an exploratory peace process, following an historic January 12 meeting with government representatives in the Karen State capital of Pa'an, where a preliminary ceasefire was agreed. Others in the KNU leadership have proposed introducing new conditions, before engaging in further talks with the government. Questions remain whether the KNU will be able to maintain a coherent and consistent position.

The situation in Kachin State is particularly dangerous. The resumption of armed conflict after a 17-year ceasefire must be understood in the context of the perceived failures of the 1994 KIO truce, and pressures on ceasefire groups to become Burmese Army-controlled Border Guard Forces—plus the government's refusal to allow a Kachin political party to contest the 2010 elections (after promising to do so). Fighting in Kachin areas has forced some 60,000 civilians to flee. Although the KIO and government have had several rounds of talks, these have yet to result in a peace deal.

What Next?

There is a need for consistency of approach and representatives on the government side. It is important to build on political momentum, but at the same time, undue haste may lead to ceasefire agreements which cannot be sustained.

Without a clear "roadmap" leading to political negotiations, the current round of ceasefires may stall. The president's initiative calls for the completion of initial ceasefire agreements, followed by Union level political talks, and discussion of key issues in Parliament.

The third stage of his plan envisions a grand *Hlutaw*, along the lines of a "New Panglong Agreement" which many ethnic nationality politicians have been calling for. It is important

that participation in national level political talks includes civil society and political stakeholders, as well as armed groups.

Re-negotiating the relationship between state and society in Burma risks provoking a backlash from Burmese military hardliners. A pretext for the 1962 coup was that (then Prime Minister) U Nu was on the point of selling-out to secessionists. Might "hardliners" use the prospect of a new Panglong-type conference to precipitate a crackdown?

Another historical precedent is the ceasefires of the 1990s, when some two dozen armed ethnic groups agreed truces with the military government. It is important to avoid the missed opportunities of this period. Ceasefires between the government and armed ethnic groups in the 1990s "froze," rather than resolved, conflicts—i.e. did not move from peace-making towards genuine peace-building. Nevertheless, these truces did allow for the (re-)emergence of civil society networks within and between ethnic groups. Also, the earlier ceasefires saw a marked decrease in war-related deaths and injuries and other acute human rights abuses associated with counter-insurgency.

Another lesson from history—international agencies failed to support the 1990s ceasefires. This was largely due to political conditions, and the reluctance of governments and donors to engage with a military regime which was an international pariah. It is important that such mistakes are avoided this time round. Donors should explore ways to get behind the ceasefires, and where possible provide early peace dividends.

From Armed Truces to Sustainable Ceasefires

With the important exception of the KIO, Burma's major armed ethnic groups have agreed preliminary ceasefires with the government. The question now is how to consolidate these ceasefires and produce benefits for communities affected by fighting and human rights abuses. One way forward could be to reach agreement regarding "ground rules" for (ex-) combatants, specifying how soldiers should behave towards civilian populations. This will require agreeing codes of conduct for armed personnel—both government forces and non-state armed groups.

A key issue is how compliance with such codes of conduct—and thus ceasefires—can be monitored. One solution may be a tripartite monitoring mechanism, with roles for the government and Myanmar Army, armed ethnic groups, and community representatives. This mechanism could resolve some issues locally, while others would be passed up the chain of command, for resolution at the State/Region level and if necessary Union level.

Other issues still to be resolved include:
- The rehabilitation (and return, where appropriate) of refugees and internally displaced persons, and other communities affected by conflicts;
- Supporting livelihoods, including providing alternatives for young people to engaging in criminality and armed conflict;
- Land rights, including issues of return and/or restitution for displaced people;
- Landmines (Burma is one of the most landmine-infested countries in the world);
- Release of ethnic and other political prisoners.

Foreign Aid and Economic Agendas

In the context of political transition in Burma, foreign donors are preparing to increase their assistance. More foreign aid is welcome, given the scale of needs. Assistance to conflict-affected areas should focus on confidence-building measures, delivering concrete and symbolic peace dividends.

However, international organizations currently lack access to many armed conflict-affected areas, while local communities and CBOs are already active on the ground. An influx of foreign aid risks distorting local priorities, overwhelming limited local capacities, and marginalizing local agencies.

It is therefore important that foreign donors and aid agencies engage with communities and CBOs in ways which support and empower local agencies, and build capacities. Multi-donor trust funds and other mechanisms should be flexible and creative enough to engage constructively with local agencies.

Notwithstanding the importance of humanitarian and development assistance, it is important to recognise that current levels of foreign aid to Burma are less than one percent of foreign investment. In or nearby many armed conflict-affected areas, huge infrastructure and industrial development projects are in the planning or implementation stages.

These include hydropower projects (e.g. on the Salween); the Shwe Gas and associated projects (in Arakan State); Special Economic Zones (e.g. on the outskirts of Pa'an); and the Dawei (Tavoy) deep-sea port project (with an initial budget of US $8 billion, and total projected spend of some $100 billion).

Such projects were planned and agreed by the previous military government, without implementing social or environmental impact assessments, and could cause enormous environmental and social damage. However, since many of these projects are still in the planning or early implementation stages, there are opportunities to engage with economic and political power-holders, in order to mitigate the worst impacts, and advocate for the best results for affected communities.

Entry points for engagement include the promotion of environmental regulation, and best practice in the field of corporate social responsibility. Like the peace issues discussed above, it is essential that communities participate in decisions about projects which will affect their lives.