

Inside the peace process

by Ashley South

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The lives of civilians affected by decades of armed conflict in Myanmar are undergoing profound transformations for the better, thanks to the ceasefires agreed between the government and more than a dozen ethnic armed groups. However, the emerging peace process is unlikely to be sustainable unless negotiations begin soon regarding the underlying political, social and economic causes of conflict.



The government and the Karen National Union (KNU) have forged preliminary ceasefire agreements, but lasting peace will require a deeper engagement with issues underlying long-standing conflicts. Photo: Staff

Part of the problem is that different actors, from the military to donors to conflict-affected communities, have different understandings of what “peace” is and act accordingly. Because key stakeholders often fail to define what they mean by peace, dominant positions and actors tend to prevail.

For most ethnic stakeholders, the primary need is for structural changes to the state and real autonomy for ethnic communities (usually expressed as an aspiration for constitutional federalism). However, historically in Myanmar the army has opposed such changes as threatening national unity. The government has sought to escape this thorny issue by focusing primarily on the humanitarian and development needs of ethnic communities.

Unfortunately, international support to the peace process has largely supported the government’s view of what peace-building means, proceeding in accordance with donors’ assumptions and agendas rather than an understanding of political concerns, and local needs and realities.

There is a risk of missing opportunities for long-term peace, if donors continue to support activities which mostly suit aid agency agendas and are perceived by ethnic communities as playing into the government's hands.

Conflict-affected communities: hopes and fears

The Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI) has recently completed the first phase of a "listening project" with conflict-affected communities in remote parts of Myanmar. The aim is to listen to Karen (Kayin), Mon and Karenni (Kayah) communities – particularly women – to better understand their experiences before and after the ceasefires.

Initial findings indicate that many people have benefited greatly from preliminary ceasefires between the government and the Karen National Union, the New Mon State Party and the Karenni National Progressive Party. For example, before the KNU ceasefire, villagers often had to flee from fighting, and to avoid forced conscription and portering.

Today people report greatly decreased levels of fear. Many of those who spoke with the MPSI said that for the first time in decades they did not have to worry about fleeing into the jungle, to avoid being subjected to serious human rights abuses.

In some cases, displaced people are beginning to return to previous settlements and attempting to rebuild their lives. Many villagers mentioned that before the ceasefire they were unable to travel or visit their farms – or could only do so by paying bribes.

Even then, villagers were severely restricted in terms of the amount of food or other supplies they could carry while travelling, as they risked being accused of supporting the KNU. Villagers told terrible stories of abuse at the hands of the Tatmadaw, including beatings and killings – even the beheading of suspected insurgents.

After the ceasefire, however, villagers have been able to travel much more freely and to tend their rice fields. Levels of taxation, paid to either the Tatmadaw or ethnic armed groups, have decreased significantly over the past two years in both Karen and Mon areas. In many communities, livelihoods have improved as a result of villagers' better access to their farms and a reduction in predatory taxation. Villagers greatly appreciate these changes, although they worry whether the ceasefire and emerging peace process can be maintained.

"Since the ceasefire, I can go to my rice fields and weed regularly, so I get more rice for my family," one villager said. "Now I can also travel freely and, unlike before, sleep out in the rice fields in a hut without having to fear for my life. Now the Tatmadaw still move around but we don't have to fear meeting them."

Another man told the MPSI that "our villagers are like ducklings that have been in a cage for so long, and now they are released. They are so pleased to leave their cage! Our villagers are free to travel day and night, and are more busy and productive than before."

Despite such positive views, there is widespread anxiety that the government and ethnic armed groups may fail to reach a political settlement and the peace process may yet break down. One man said, "If the ceasefire breaks down, it's not worth living for me."

Supporting the peace process: missed opportunities?

The agreement of ceasefires is a historically important achievement of peace-making. In order to sustain the peace process and move toward a genuine peace-building phase, it will be necessary to start a multi-stakeholder political dialogue and consolidate the existing ceasefire agreements.

The government and most ethnic armed groups have agreed to continue negotiations toward a nationwide ceasefire to address these issues.

However, many ethnic stakeholders remain sceptical about whether the government is willing or able to deliver. The government can maintain the present truces more or less indefinitely without reaching a political settlement; for ethnic communities, the status quo is a losing game. Political dialogue is essential.

There are substantial differences between the nationwide ceasefire agreement drafted by the government and that prepared by the ethnic armed groups' Nationwide Ceasefire Coordinating Team (NCCT). Nevertheless, one positive outcome from recent negotiations is the emergence of clarity from both sides. A fairly cohesive position has emerged on the part of the groups in the NCCT. Likewise, on the government side, the military is now more engaged. The National Defence and Security Council has produced a draft ceasefire agreement that, while problematic from the ethnic perspective, has the merit of better reflecting the Tatmadaw's position. This is extremely important given previous concerns that the army was not involved enough in the peace process.

The peace process in Myanmar is unique in many ways, not least because of the limited role of the international community: Negotiations are undertaken between the government and ethnic armed groups, with no significant external mediation and only limited international facilitation. Outsiders can, however, help communities to recover from conflict while supporting initiatives that build trust and confidence in the peace process and test the sincerity of the government, the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups.

A number of international donors have pledged financial support to the peace process. Already some funds have been distributed, including to MPSI-supported projects in a number of conflict-affected areas that are implemented by local communities, civil society actors and ethnic armed groups. Several key donors are keen to expand their assistance on the understanding that supporting the peace process can help to consolidate the wider government-led reform process. Of course, there are very substantial needs among conflict-affected communities.

Unfortunately, international support to the peace process has been mostly characterised by a lack of direction and by strategic drift. Donors seem largely content to provide funding channelled through traditional –and generally government-controlled – structures. This is an easier approach than seeking out appropriate local partners on the ground.

This situation is not unique to Myanmar. Around the world, aid donors tend to frame the concerns of vulnerable communities as technical problems to be fixed by professional aid regimes, rather than sites of contestation requiring political solutions.

The exceptions are in contexts where a state's legitimacy is very clearly and persistently challenged, such as Myanmar before 2011, or when regional or global powers' interests are directly involved. As a result, it is not uncommon for peace-support initiatives to fail to

engage with the real issues affecting communities and other stakeholders, instead falling in behind government-led development and rehabilitation projects.

However, the problem in Myanmar is not primarily a failing or weak state that needs to be strengthened or fixed, but rather an urgent need to re-imagine and negotiate state-society relations – and in particular mend relationships between the Burman majority and ethnic nationality communities.

The commitments made by international donors under the Busan New Deal in 2011 are meant to guide the international community toward addressing the causes of conflict. Donor support to the Myanmar peace process demonstrates the difficulties of implementing this approach.

For example, most Asian governments' support to the peace process is channelled almost exclusively through Myanmar state structures, demonstrating very limited consultation with conflict-affected communities or ethnic armed groups. This approach to peace-building frames armed conflicts as problems to be resolved through foreign aid rather than expressions of deep-rooted social and political grievances.

Aid agencies working in conflict-affected areas need to better understand local political cultures and perceptions, and the dynamics of peace and conflict. Illustrating how peace means different things to different people, ethnic communities are concerned that the government has an “economic development first” agenda and wants to use aid as an alternative to political dialogue.

Ethnic communities worry that aid activities constitute efforts by the government to intensify its presence in, and control over, ethnic communities. This is deeply problematic for many ethnic stakeholders, who still regard the government as largely illegitimate and whose experience of the Tatmadaw is as a violent and predatory force.

As the leader of a major ethnic armed group recently told me, “We are worried that the government and donors are pushing ahead with their own plans without consulting us – and that the aid agenda is getting ahead of the political agenda.”

Meanwhile, a number of needs articulated by key stakeholders in the peace process are going unmet. For example, there is a need to provide funding and training to more than two dozen liaison offices established by ethnic armed groups under agreement with the government. The liaison offices play important roles in sustaining the peace process, but apart from some start-up funding donors have mostly failed to support this key component of the peace process.

Another example of unmet needs is the failure to properly support education activities in conflict-affected ethnic minority areas. Despite requests to donors dating back more than a year, ethnic nationality schools in Mon areas, for example, are still unable to pay their teachers. This is leading to a local perception that international donors are happy to support the government – in this case through the state education system – but are unwilling to engage constructively with ethnic nationality systems of service provision.

The Mon National Schools are administered by the NMSP and provide an ethnic language introduction to schooling for minority children – most of whom do not speak Myanmar – allowing them the best possible start in education. At the same time, the Mon National

Schools teach the Myanmar language and mostly follow the government curriculum, ensuring that graduates can sit state matriculation exams and enter the higher education system.

The Mon National Schools represent the best of both worlds: A locally owned and delivered education regime which is closely linked to the state system, producing students who are proud of their ethnic cultures, but also equipped to be citizens of the union. Despite widespread recognition that the Mon National Schools represent a model of best practice, donors have so far proved unable to provide substantial funding.

International donors and diplomats need to better demonstrate their understanding of the complexities in Myanmar, and play a more strategic role in supporting the peace process. Failure to cultivate the glimmers of hope experienced by conflict-affected communities would constitute a terrible lost opportunity to support lasting peace in Myanmar.

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