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What lies ahead for Burma's cease-fires

by Ashley South

Between 1989 and 1995, 20-plus armed ethnic groups agreed cease-fires with the Burmese military government. This year, these agreements are likely to come under renewed pressure.

Since the fall of ex-prime minister Khin Nyunt in October 2004, the situation for most cease-fire groups has deteriorated, as they no longer have access to the centre of power in Burma. The situation is particularly difficult for groups such as the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), which have publicly challenged the government - including by endorsing Burma's inclusion on the UN Security Council agenda.

Since it reconvened in 2004, 28 cease-fire groups have sent over one hundred delegates to the National Convention - although most realise that this process is designed to perpetuate and institutionalise military rule. The NMSP, KIO and several other cease-fire groups have issued demands regarding the type of (broadly federal) constitution they would like to see emerging from the convention. In doing so they have sketched the outlines of what a future political settlement to "the ethnic question" in Burma might look like. Although most of their demands have been rejected by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), in expressing their aspirations the cease-fire groups have raised the political profile of Burma's ethnic nationalities.

With the National Convention drawing to a close, it seems likely that the military government will turn its attention to the cease-fire groups. With arrangements for a new constitution in place, the government will likely seek to "regularise" their situation, either by incorporating the cease-fire groups into state command-and-control structures, as local militias, or by forcing them to disarm - as occurred with two groups in Shan State in 2004. Some organisations may be willing to settle for a degree of autonomy and restricted political participation under the new constitution, which designates six sub-provincial administrations. According to this view, any constitution is better than continued direct rule by the military: although the space available to ethnic nationality and other parties under the new constitution will be very limited, it will at least allow them to participate in above-ground politics, from "within the legal fold". However, other cease-fire groups (including the NMSP) have indicated that they will refuse to hand over their weapons until a comprehensive political settlement is reached.

Probably, Tatmadaw Regional Commanders will be given scope to pick-off non-compliant cease-fire groups, as the opportunity arises. Although the regime may hope to gain some international credit by taking on organisations associated with the drugs trade, the most powerful ethnic armies, such as the 20,000-strong United Wa State Army (UWSA), will probably be left until last. Such considerations leave militarily weaker cease-fire groups, such as the NMSP, looking vulnerable.

The cease-fires have resulted in a mixed picture of positive and negative developments. Problems associated with the cease-fires are well documented, and include the Tatmadaw expansion into previously contested zones, accompanied by widespread land confiscation to build new army bases. Also, land has been confiscated in the context of "development projects", and under the Tatmadaw's self-support policy. Another problem associated with the cease-fires is the continuing incidence of forced labour and other rights abuses in areas adjacent to cease-fire zones. Most assessments of the cease-fires are produced by opposition groups and supporters. These generally underestimate positive developments, focusing instead on the many ongoing problems in these troubled

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regions. The positive aspects of the cease-fire are less widely discussed, and tend to focus as much on process, as on the substance of short-middle term results. Positive developments include a relative decrease in the most serious forms of human rights abuse, in those areas where cease-fires have held.

Efforts to rehabilitate and resettle displaced populations and reconstruct communities have also been a result of the cease-fires. The post-cease-fire re-emergence of civil society networks is among the most significant, but underappreciated, aspects of the social and political situation in Burma over the past decade. For example, local communities have supported programmes such as the Mon language and culture courses, conducted over the school summer holidays in over one hundred monasteries across lower Burma.

In response to criticism from the ethnic communities they seek to represent, a few cease-fire groups have grappled with internal reform. The NMSP and KIO in particular have demonstrated a degree of democratic political culture, reflecting their 20 years of participation in pro-democracy alliances, such as the National Democratic Front and Democratic Alliance of Burma.

Policy-making within NMSP and KIO leadership circles usually involves a fair degree of debate and disagreement - which has sometimes resulted in damaging schisms and splits. Both the NMSP and KIO deserve credit for eliciting public participation in decision-making, by consulting with villagers, religious and civil society leaders from their communities, regarding whether and how to engage with the military government.

The NMSP is in a particularly difficult position. The three small blocks of territory granted to the party under the June 1995 cease-fire agreement are vulnerable to Tatmadaw incursion. Neighbouring Thailand, whose security establishment helped to push the NMSP into the cease-fire, is unlikely to be sympathetic to any resumption of armed conflict in Mon areas. The NMSP has been the most outspoken of the cease-fire groups. Indeed, since December 2005, the party has refused to endorse the National Convention, sending only a small team of "observers" to the forum. Although some activists might like the party to go further in its defiance of the government, the NMSP probably can do little more without definitively breaking the cease-fire - and bringing humanitarian disaster to Mon State.

The cease-fire groups will soon have to decide whether or not to participate in the restricted political space outlined in SPDC's new constitution. In part, such decisions will depend on the position of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. The NMSP's attempt to "sit on the fence" will not be tenable for much longer. The party has been dealt a weak hand of cards - but has so far played them pretty well (sometimes as much by luck as judgement). While retaining relations with the government, the NMSP is the only cease-fire group that still enjoys credibility within opposition circles (including most exile groups), and remains in contact with its old insurgent allies.

In 2007 the cease-fire groups are likely to come under renewed pressure from the SPDC. However it responds, the NMSP deserves credit for having got this far, while still preserving its basic integrity.