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Burma/ Myanmar: Challenges of a Ceasefire Accord in Karen State

Paul Core

Abstract: Burma (Myanmar) has seen some of the longest-running insurgencies in the world, which have had a devastating effect on local populations and the country as a whole. While the Karen National Union (KNU), which has fought successive Burmese governments since 1949, is in a critical phase of its life, the KNU/KNLA Peace Council (KPC) is experiencing life under a ceasefire accord with the Burmese government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Major challenges have occurred since the ceasefire and future developments are uncertain. Like all ceasefire groups in the country, the KPC has come under immense pressure to follow the government's "seven-step road map" to democracy, compete in the 2010 elections, and transform its troops into a border guard force under the control of the Burmese military or face disarmament. This article seeks to provide some insights into a ceasefire group, to analyse the failures and successes of the ceasefire accord, and to outline future challenges to the country.

Keywords: Burma/ Myanmar, Karen, ceasefire groups, ethnic politics

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1 Introduction

Since its independence in 1948, Burma (Myanmar) has seen some of the longest-running insurgencies in the world. In 1988 the Burmese military government started making ceasefire offers to different ethnic armed groups, trying to end the armed conflict without having to agree to a political solution. These ceasefire agreements have now lasted more than twenty years. Over seventeen official ethnic ceasefire groups currently exist, while others such as the Shan State Army South, the Karenni National Progressive Party, and the Karen National Union (KNU) have not reached an agreement as yet. Ceasefire groups have come under immense pressure to follow the government's "seven-step road map" to democracy, which the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) claims will lead to a modern, developed, and democratic nation. They have been asked to disarm their troops or transform them into a Border Guard Force (BGF) under the control of the Burmese military and form new political parties, which have to be formally separated from their organizations if they wish to compete in the 2010 elections. While some of the smaller ceasefire groups would accept the proposal of a BGF, stronger groups are likely to reject it (TNI 2009: 35-36). Recent clashes and tensions between ceasefire groups in Northern Shan State and the Burmese military (Tatmadaw), with negative impacts on local populations and the temporary closure of humanitarian aid projects in the region, raise serious questions about the future of ceasefire accords in Burma.

After six decades of conflict between the KNU, its armed wing the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and successive Burmese governments, the KNU has lost control of almost all its remaining territorial bases in Karen State. Weakened by ongoing Burmese military offensives, failed ceasefire negotiations, internal splits, and the resettlement of future elites, the organization is now experiencing a critical phase of its life. The recent joint offensive by the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and the Tatmadaw against the KNLA's 7th Brigade in June 2009 has led to another refugee flow into Thailand, and more offensives against remaining bases at the Thai-Burma border are likely. While this presents the situation for the KNU, the KNU/KNLA Peace Council (KPC) is experiencing life under a ceasefire accord with the SPDC. Having achieved a ceasefire of its own with the SPDC in January 2007, Brig. Gen. Htein Maung, commander of the KNLA's 7th Brigade, was dismissed by the KNU Executive Committee shortly after this. The group, composed of about 500 soldiers and their family members, was granted a new headquarter at Htokawko village, site of the death of the legendary Karen Revolution leader Saw Ba U Gyi. This new base is located in the foothills of the Dawna Range about twenty kilometres north of Kawkareik, in Karen State. The government has supported the

group with the provision of food, housing, infrastructure, and other grant aid for the first three years of the agreement.

The ceasefire agreement met with harsh criticism and condemnation from exile opposition groups as well as international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) at the Thai-Burma border. Many of them feared that the KPC would develop into a group similar to the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), which has attacked refugee camps on Thai soil in the past and often acts as a proxy for the Tatmadaw. Even though the defection cannot be considered to be as serious as the DKBA's in 1994, it further weakened the KNU's position. The 7th Brigade, located in Pa'an District, had been the KNLA's strongest and most strategically important brigade for decades. It was here that lucrative KNU trading bases existed and major battles were fought against the Burmese Army in the 1980s. This defection showed the continuation of processes whereby armed resistance groups were fragmented, drawn away from the opposition and changed into clients of the Burmese government (South 2008a: 66-68). While the ceasefire accord – an oral gentlemen's agreement – has currently interrupted the violence between the SPDC and the KPC, the accord has still been challenging. The example of the KPC's ceasefire reveals both the success and failure of reaching a ceasefire accord with the Burmese government.

2 The KNU/KNLA Peace Council (KPC)

The KPC is headed by Maj. Gen. Htein Maung, who joined the Karen Revolution in 1949 and was commander of the KNLA's 7th Brigade and a KNU Central Committee Member for nearly forty years. Together with General Bo Mya and other comrades, he re-built the KNU in the eastern borderlands during the 1970s with the help of right-wing Thai governments. He is closely advised by Pastor Timothy Laklem, an old friend of the Bo Mya family, and a group of Karen leaders from Yangon. This group includes Christian pastors as well as prominent Karen leaders from the civil-society sector. Initially, the KPC included Colonel Ner Dah Mya, son of the late long-time KNU strongman Gen. Bo Mya, and his mother, Naw La Poe. Both turned down their positions as first secretary and vice-chairperson just after the formation of the new group due to mounting pressure from their KNU mother organization (South 2008a: 39-68).

Htein Maung's son-in-law, Colonel Ler Moo, who received his higher education in India, and liaison officer Maj. Maung Kyaw, a Burman by birth and a German citizen who joined the KNLA after 1988, also played major roles in the ceasefire accord initially. After having escaped two assassination attempts in 2007, Col. Ler Moo was killed by a bomb in the 7th Brigade's

headquarters opposite Mae La Refugee Camp in February 2008. He had just returned to the Thai-Burma border after having stayed in Yangon for several months, contacting INGOs and foreign embassies for humanitarian assistance in the KPC area as well as leaders from the Karen community. The death of Col. Ler Moo was never investigated, but the KPC blamed the KNU for his assassination. Shortly after, Padoh Mahn Sha, General Secretary of the KNU, was killed by two unidentified gunmen at his Mae Sot home. Again, the classic divide-and-rule strategy of the military government had succeeded in dividing members of the KNU/KNLA, who had been fighting for the same cause for decades.

With his close friend assassinated and due to disagreements with the KPC leadership, Major Maung Kyaw announced his resignation from the KPC in July 2008, after which he returned to Germany. Like all ceasefire groups, the KPC's decision-making processes are top-down and the group is run in a military fashion with an ethnic nationalist agenda. Surprisingly, all the members of the immediate leadership hold military ranks, even though some of them were civilians before the ceasefire. The group has drafted its own constitution and claims to encourage and guarantee the future political participation of its local population as well as civil-society activities. Many of the KPC's advisers and policy-makers obtained their education abroad and possess an international network of contacts. The main SPDC contacts for the KPC are the Southeast Commander in Moulmein, the Chairman of Karen State and Military Affairs Security (MAS), which is headed by Maj. Gen. Ye Myint.

3 The KPC's Ceasefire Accord: Successes and Failures

Even though military pressure has been the main reason for ceasefire accords, attractive offers such as keeping arms, a controlled territory, lucrative business deals as well as development promises were given to armed resistance groups (Oo and Min 2007). This is also true in the case of the KPC ceasefire. According to the leadership of the KPC, the burden of the conflict for the local population had become unbearable and political change could only happen through dialogue. The negative consequences of rejecting the ceasefire offer were clearly presented to Brig. Gen. Htein Maung and his group by MAS officers. These consequences became apparent during the joint offensive by DKBA and SPDC forces in June 2009, which led to the displacement of thousands of Karen villagers and the loss of all the remaining KNU bases in the 7th Brigade's area.

However, personal political and economic motives also existed that caused ceasefire agreements to be made. Pastor Timothy had not been able to secure a position on the KNU Central Committee at the 13th Congress in 2005 and saw his influence declining. With the failure of the “gentlemen’s agreement”, the cessation of fighting in 2004/2005 and Bo Mya’s health declining, he and a group of Karen leaders from Yangon turned to Htein Maung to secure their political ambitions. The leadership of the KPC would also benefit economically from the ceasefire, receiving business opportunities from the government and controlling a vast territory with natural resources. The Thai security establishment and local businesses at the border also had special interests in the success of the ceasefire, which would bring about long-term stability for their future endeavours. In addition, the SPDC promised government aid to soldiers, their families, and civilians in the KPC-controlled territory under its border development scheme Na Ta La and access for local and international aid agencies.

3.1 Keeping Arms: Enhancement of the KPC’s Troop Strength

The KPC did not have to disarm its forces after achieving the ceasefire in 2007. In fact, like other ceasefire groups, it has actually used the ceasefire to strengthen its troops. Young men from surrounding villages and even from government-controlled areas such as Pa’an, the capital of Karen State, have voluntarily joined the military wing of the organization. Like the KNU, the group claims to uphold the Four Principles of Saw Ba U Gyi: “surrender is out of question; we shall retain our arms; the recognition of Karen State must be completed; and we shall decide our own political destiny”. Karen celebrations such as Karen Revolution Day and Martyr Day, commemorating Saw Ba U Gyi, the KNU president, are conducted in the KPC’s territory and tolerated by the SPDC.

3.2 Human Security: Improvements for the Local Population in KPC-controlled Territory

Human security has steadily improved since the ceasefire and a degree of normality has returned to local villagers’ lives. Initial tensions between the KPC and its former comrades-in-arms, the KNLA’s 7th Brigade, which resulted in casualties on both sides, have decreased, if not vanished. Armed conflict-related human-rights abuses such as extrajudicial killings, the destruction of villages, forced relocation, forced portering and rape have declined. The KPC claims that it is protecting villagers in its controlled area

and that villagers are not required to pay taxes or participate in forced labour. Villagers are free to move and engage in trade opportunities. In 2007, the group was accused of recruiting child soldiers by the Karen Human Rights Group, but there is no proof that this took place in a systematic way; in its constitution, the organization states that recruits must be at least twenty years old to be enlisted into the armed forces.

3.3 Business Opportunities for the KPC: Lack of Capacity and Low Benefits to Local Communities

Business opportunities were also given to the KPC, but these are far less lucrative than those of earlier ceasefire groups. The opportunities include mining concessions, agriculture investments, import and export licences as well as investments in the tourist and hotel sector. Although critics have accused the KPC leadership of profiting financially from the ceasefire accord, the funds of the group have been depleted. Most of the government-provided opportunities have not been realized due to the lack of management skills, capable personnel, and restrictions by the government. Instead, the group is relying on taxation, illegal cross-border trade, and logging. Land has been bought from local villagers around the new headquarters for planting crops to support troops and families. Nevertheless, low-profile visits to the area by Asian businessmen and talks with Thai investors and authorities indicate that future business opportunities lie in store once the security situation has improved. While access to many areas in Karen State has been denied to INGOs and NGOs by the government, Asian investors have freely travelled to restricted areas to evaluate future business opportunities. Such projects would mostly benefit Thai companies, local government authorities and ceasefire leaders, with little benefit to local communities and their development. Local Thai businesses have especially profited from the long-term conflict, dealing with all the parties involved. Natural resources have been extracted at low price levels for years and villagers are working in contract farming projects for Thai merchants.

3.4 Development Assistance: Government Failures and NGO Activities

The government has offered food and living assistance for the first three years of the ceasefire accord and has built a whole village for the group in Htokawko. Most of the people who live in Htokawko are family members of KPC soldiers and relatives. However, the assistance provided by the government has never been sufficient and additional food rations have been

provided by INGOs and church-based organizations. Living conditions for IDPs and returnees at the Thai-Burma border were especially critical in the initial ceasefire period. Detached from cross-border assistance by Thailand-based INGOs and Karen civil-society groups, people struggled to survive.

Having separated from the KNU, the KPC had to set up new departments to administer its territory. This has been and still is a major challenge due to weak administrative and management skills as well as the lack of young educated personnel. To date, the KPC has established an education, health and women's department. There are about fifteen primary schools, two secondary schools and one college in the region. Schools are mainly built from locally available materials such as bamboo and wood. Most of the teachers have worked in this region for years and are supported by local communities. The education department is struggling to provide proper incentives for teachers and school supplies for schoolchildren and students.

To support educational development, the government built a primary school near the KPC's headquarters approximately two miles from Hto-kawko and provided teachers from the Ministry of Education, who were ethnic Burmese unable to speak Karen; the language of instruction was to be Burmese. Parents refused to send their children to this government school for two reasons: first of all, they didn't feel happy about sending their children to a school located outside their village, and second, their children's tuition was not in their mother tongue. The KPC therefore hired additional teachers for their primary and secondary school and the college in Hto-kawko. These teachers were recruited from urban areas such as Yangon and speak both Karen and Burmese. A house functioned as a school building in the initial phase, but with the help of NGOs, proper school buildings and a nursery have now been constructed. A health clinic has also been set up, but proper equipment and supplies are absent. The villagers suffer from malaria and other preventable diseases.

With the positive examples of the Shalom Foundation and Metta Development Foundation, two well-known local NGOs which were established after the ceasefire with the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in 2001 and 1998 (South 2008b: 24-25), members of the extended circle of the KPC, including civil-society actors from Yangon, decided in 2007 to establish a local NGO whose mission was not only to implement projects in the KPC's area, but in Karen State as a whole and even beyond the region. With a charter drawn up and a board established, the undertaking was presented to the government, but didn't earn much appreciation. The organization still has not been established. INGOs and local NGOs active in the KPC's area work on a very low-profile level to avoid any confrontation with the government, which still has not given any official permission for

humanitarian agencies to enter the area yet, despite official visits by UNHCR staff, representatives of foreign governments, and international aid agencies. It seems that the SPDC favours infrastructure projects such as road and bridge construction, but is rather reluctant to support development projects in the fields of education, health, and capacity-building. A deep mistrust is apparent towards INGOs/ NGOs and their activities. Meanwhile, small groups of refugees continue to cross the River Moi from Thailand and resettle in the KPC's territory.

4 Political Challenges for the KNU/KNLA Peace Council

Even though ceasefire accords have resulted in many improvements, especially for the local populations, the main problems of the ceasefires are the absence of a peace process and political development as a follow-up to the accords; twenty years have brought no political solutions, and ethnic needs and demands have not been met. Ceasefire groups are now under pressure to follow the government's "seven-step road map", participate in the forthcoming 2010 elections and become a Border Guard Force under the control of the Burmese military (TNI 2009: 23).

It is unlikely that political issues were discussed during the KPC's ceasefire negotiations, but the group calls for a federal state based on democratic principles, in which the rights of ethnic minorities are protected. Activities such as visits to Cyclone Nargis-affected communities and the distribution of relief items in the Irrawaddy Delta indicate a more substantial political strategy beyond the administration of the KPC's territory. Ceasefire groups (including the KPC) and community-based organizations have advocated a process of "peace through development", while parties such as the KNU and the National League of Democracy have advocated a principle of "political solutions" first (Smith 2007: 49-50). In contrast to other Karen State ceasefire groups, such as the DKBA or Padoh Aung San's Peace Force, the KPC did not attend the National Convention, and demands by Tatmadaw officers to turn its troops into a border-protection force were recently rejected by Maj. Gen. Htein Maung. The group has shown no intention of forming a political party, as requested by the government, so that it can compete in the 2010 elections. Members of the KPC would have to leave their organization to form a new political party, which would further weaken the existing organization and not guarantee any political participation. Currently, the KPC is not prepared to risk testing its electoral popularity.

So far, the KPC has not used the opportunity to approach other Karen groups in the country and work on topics such as unity, political solutions, reconciliation or community development. However, the group needs to realize that only co-operation or accommodation with other Karen groups, including the KNU and DKBA, will strengthen the position of the Karen in the country; indeed, it might even have an impact on constitutional issues. Many S'ghaw, Pwo and other such ethnic populations identify themselves with the ethnonym "Karen" and would like to see a Karen solution to their struggles such as the lack of development and human insecurity. A number of community-development initiatives and civil-society projects already exist in the country, and if a higher degree of co-operation and goodwill could be achieved between all the groups, then "unity in diversity" might be achieved (South 2008a: 213-215). A dialogue (i.e. ceasefire negotiations) between the KNU and the SPDC might be re-initiated if the KPC and the KNU managed to repair their damaged relationship.

5 Conclusion

Ceasefires have been a first step in the process of peace-building in Burma, although twenty years of ceasefire accords have failed to result in any political solutions for ethnic armed groups in the country. Conflict-related human-rights abuses have lessened and improvements in the sectors of education, health, infrastructure, and trade can be observed in many ceasefire areas. However, the example of the KPC ceasefire accord shows the immense challenges which ceasefire groups face after reaching an agreement with the Burmese government. Many promises which were made during ceasefire negotiations have not been fulfilled and many restrictions have been enacted. Slow progress or the absence of social and economic development, the militarization of ethnic minority areas and the extraction of natural resources by the military government have led to more grievances among ceasefire groups. As a consequence, trust in the military government remains low and most of the ethnic armed groups have strengthened their armed forces. The ceasefire groups have also been disappointed by the outcome of the National Convention and the government's persistent call for a unitary-style constitution; none of the rational proposals made by ethnic groups – especially those made by thirteen ethnic groups in 2004 – have been considered.

Future developments concerning the ceasefire accords remain uncertain, and if the government persists in demanding the transformation of ethnic ceasefire groups into a BGF or even their disarmament, the re-emergence of violence is quite likely, with devastating impacts on local populations.

Clashes between the Burmese Army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army in Northern Shan State (Shan State Special Region-1), the first group to sign a ceasefire agreement, may only mark the beginning of more violence and the failure of other existing ceasefire accords. This would not only have an effect on Burma, but also on neighbouring countries, as recent refugee flows to Thailand and China show. In addition, ceasefire groups have been frustrated because most international aid has failed to reach their organizations and populations, even after making peace (Smith 2007: 54).

The international community has ignored the relevance of ethnic politics and ceasefire accords in Burma for too long. These issues are of utmost importance for local populations and can create a space in which local and international organizations can address the needs of these groups. International agencies should recognize the often contested legitimacy of ceasefire groups and engage with them to reform local government structures and political cultures (South 2008b: 45-47). Only if a conflict-responsive peace-building infrastructure is established by Burma's leaders that addresses the root causes of the conflict, restores relationships and fosters reconciliation will it be possible to achieve a sustainable peace.

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Burma/ Myanmar: Herausforderungen eines Waffenstillstandsabkommens im Karen-Staat

Zusammenfassung: Myanmar (Burma) ist bis heute Schauplatz von anhaltenden ethnischen Konflikten, welche einen erheblichen Einfluss auf lokale Bevölkerungen und das ganze Land haben. Während die Karen National Union, die seit dem Jahr 1949 gegen die burmesische Regierung kämpft, sich in einer kritischen Phase befindet, hat das KNU/KNLA Peace Council seinen eigenen Frieden mit der Militärregierung geschlossen. Seit dem Waffenstillstand haben sich erhebliche Herausforderungen aufgetan und zukünftige Entwicklungen sind ungewiss. Wie alle Waffenstillstandsgruppen im Land steht die Gruppe unter dem Druck der Regierung, dem „Sieben-Punkte-Fahrplan zur disziplinierten Demokratie“ zu folgen und damit eine politische Partei zu gründen sowie seine Truppen in eine Grenztruppe unter Kontrolle des burmesischen Militärs zu transformieren. Dieser Artikel gibt einen Einblick in eine Waffenstillstandsgruppe, analysiert die Erfolge sowie Misserfolge des Waffenstillstandsabkommens und präsentiert zukünftige Herausforderungen.

Schlüsselwörter: Burma/ Myanmar, Karen, Waffenstillstandsgruppen, ethnische Konflikte