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Charity Registration Number: 208223

**Asia Programme Paper: ASP PP 2009/04**

# Ethnic Conflict and the 2010 Elections in Burma

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23 November 2009

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## SUMMARY

- Ethnic conflict in Burma pre-dates independence. With preparations for the 2010 elections underway, there is a need for a renewed focus on the complex political and ethnic divisions within the country. Whilst many do not believe that the election will be a true reflection of the people's wishes, there are areas in which the junta have made political and peaceful gains. Critics of the regime, however, believe that the election will only further the government's hardline stance towards dissenting groups.
- Despite on-going conflicts, 18 armed ceasefires have been agreed. The ceasefires have allowed for improvements but have created new problems in Burma's border areas. However, these agreements serve as potential models for wider peace agreements and reconciliation.
- In the autumn of 2009 some of the ceasefires broke down and there was renewed instability on the Burma China border as clashes broke out between the Kokang and the Tatmadaw (Burmese armed forces) resulting in refugees fleeing to China.
- The Tatmadaw (the Burmese military) is trying to force ethnic minority militias to become a border guard force prior to the 2010 elections. This is being resisted by a number of ethnic militia groups such as the Kachin and the Wa. However any further break down of these ceasefire agreements will bring renewed instability to Burma.
- Involvement and pressure from Burma's allies and critics have had little noticeable effect on conflict resolution as the drivers of the ethnic conflict are ultimately internal.

## INTRODUCTION

Conflict in Burma dominated media headlines during the protests in the autumn of 2007. It was not the first time that the world took note of the division between state and society in that country. This conflict between society and the regime has been an issue of international concern since the 1990 election following which the military prevented the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, from taking power.<sup>1</sup> Since then various international powers and organisations, headed by the US and the UK, have called for different forms of international intervention, primarily in the form of sanctions.

Since independence, Burma has also suffered ethnic conflicts between the majority Bamar group and a range of other ethnic groups. While few would claim that the military government is legitimate, the argument that the country would implode without strong leadership has some purchase. While the conflict between state and society is vital, it is also the case that the very nature of the state is unclear because of the relationships between the ethnic groups.

‘In the international community, few people are familiar with the longstanding conflicts between the successive central governments dominated by the majority ethnic group called the Bamars and the country’s other minority ethnic groups. Even if they are aware of the conflicts, they tend to think that the only political solution is that the ruling military junta must relinquish power and hand it over to the political party that won the national election in 1990.’<sup>2</sup>

As Taylor (2009) argues the Western Governments need to re-examine their stance towards Burma, especially in light of the 2010 elections, intended to create a civilian administration and parliamentary system, while perpetuating military control. An understanding of the ethnic conflicts, the political significance of the ceasefires and the economic and political seesawing between ethnic minority groups and the army is essential to understand Burma’s political future.

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<sup>1</sup> See Tonkin: 2007 - The 1990 elections were won by the NLD, however the mandate of the elections was changed by the SPDC from forming a government to writing a new constitution, which would serve as the basis for the election of a new government later. Following the election, the NLD did not accept the new interpretation.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Saw U in Ganesan, N. and Kyaw Yin Hlaing (eds.) (2007) *Myanmar – State, Society and Ethnicity*, ISEAS, Singapore and Hiroshima Peace Institute, Hiroshima. Alan Saw U is an ethnic nationality civil society leader from inside the country, and as such his views are important.

Unsurprisingly, the size of the ethnic population is contested. Of a total population of around 53m, minorities would claim to comprise around 40%. Burmese sources claim they account for one-quarter, at best. According to Network Myanmar, they comprise around one-third of the population.<sup>3</sup> Ethnic minority groups are mainly based in Burma's border regions. Since independence these different groups, and different elite groupings within these ethnic communities, have had distinct conceptions of what kind of nation Burma was to become – especially in relation to the division of power between centre and periphery. The British colonial legacy of divide and rule entrenched differences between the Bamar majority and other minority ethnic groups. The minority groups have challenged the state since its inception, some asking for greater autonomy and some for outright independence.<sup>4</sup> The army justifies its position in power by arguing that it is the only institution which can guarantee the unity of the country.<sup>5</sup> Consequently there has been an increased militarisation of the state in the past 60 years.<sup>6</sup>

Different groups have been at war with the army for different lengths of time, but this has not meant that the state is at risk of national breakup.<sup>7</sup> In fact Smith argues that the conflicts do not fall into the classic modern war caused by 'greed and grievance'. These are largely characteristic of weak states and based on struggles over natural resources.<sup>8</sup> While Smith agrees that the struggle over control over natural resources has increased since the late 1980s, he identifies four factors which more accurately explain the duration and the intensity of the Burma's civil wars. First the conflicts date back to independence and are not simply rooted in modern grievances. Second the national movements are diverse and each has its own identity; there is no unified ethnic movement. Third, many of the conflicts have international linkages, with foreign powers sustaining the armed struggles at different points in time. For instance China has funded the Burma Communist Party on the Chinese border. Fourth, the length and complexity of the conflicts meant that neither government nor opposition have been able to find a solution as no single issue can be singled out. Some ethnic demands, such as those of the Karen, were the direct result of colonial rule. In other cases – as with the

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<sup>3</sup> [www.networkmyanmar.org](http://www.networkmyanmar.org)

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed history of the ethnic conflicts see Martin Smith (1999) and Ashley South (2003) 'Golden Sheldrake: Mon Nationalism and Civil war in Burma.' Routledge Curzon. See also Ashley South (2008) 'Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict' Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> This is the same argument the Pakistani army has used to justify its role in politics for the last 60 odd years. However in the case of Pakistan the western powers see nothing wrong with this logic and have supported the successive military regimes in power in Islamabad.

<sup>6</sup> Callahan, M. 2003. *Making Enemies: War and State building in Burma*, Cornell University Press, Ithaka.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, M. 2007. *State of Strife: The Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict in Burma*, Policy Studies 36, p 2. East West Centre, Washington.

Mon and the Arakanese, the need to reformulate the state at the time of independence allowed the explosion of long-standing ethnic grievances, in areas that had scarcely developed during colonial rule.

In the late 1980s the Burmese Communist Party collapsed as a result of internal ethnic tensions. China pressured several ethnic groups to cut deals with the government. This largely reflected changing policy in China, as it focussed more on building up its own economy. In the 1990s around 18 armed ceasefires were agreed with various groups arranged by the then Military Intelligence Chief, General Khin Nyunt. By 2006, 25 different ethnic groups had agreed cease fires with the State Peace and Development Council.<sup>9</sup> The basic deal was that the cease fire groups would be allowed to keep their arms and territories until a new constitution had been put together. This would allow ceasefire leaders to re-enter politics. Beyond the opportunity offered on the political spectrum, the economic angle was also important as ethnic minority groups were now able to exploit the natural resources in their areas not only to finance conflict, but for development. Smith describes 'new economic complexes' which included government departments, ceasefire organisations, as well as non-ceasefire groups which became involved in logging and gem mining.

Today only a few conflicts remain active. The most well-known is between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the army. Despite the large number of armed conflicts and the complexities of the ceasefires, the international community has attached little importance to them, focusing instead on the illegitimacy of the military regime. During the 1990s the UN and other international actors called for a tripartite resolution of the problems in Burma, comprising the army, the opposition in the form of the NLD and the ethnic groups.<sup>10</sup> However, there has been little analysis of the dynamics between the ethnic groups and the army, specifically with regard to the ceasefires. The complexity of Burma's ethnic conflicts and their resolution is central to the development of a stable society in light of the 2008 referendum and the 2010 elections.

The importance of these ethnic conflicts was highlighted in the autumn of 2009 some of the ceasefires broke down. There was renewed instability on the Burma China border as clashes broke out between the Kokang and the Tatmadaw. The Kokang had been one of the first groups to agree a cease fire

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Smith in Kyaw Yin Hlaing et al (eds.) 2005. *Myanmar, Beyond Politics to Societal Imperatives*, p. 61. ISEAS, Singapore.

deal with the regime in 1989. The Tatmadaw is trying to force ethnic minority militias to become guards under the control of the Burmese army prior to the 2010 elections. The Kokang and other ethnic groups in the region, amongst them the Kachin and the Wa, are resisting such pressures<sup>11</sup>.

The Kokang incident received some international coverage as it seemed to mar usually close Burma China relations, given not only over 30,000 Kokang or ethnic Chinese refugees fleeing into China, but also the looting and destruction of Chinese owned property. China clearly told the Burmese government to deal with the conflict and the Tatmadaw defeated the Kokang militia in September 2009. Whilst this particular clash seems to have died down, the fact that some of the ethnic groups which have agreed cease fires could threaten not to take part in the elections, and are possibly preparing for renewed military confrontation<sup>12</sup>, could in turn exacerbate instability in Burma's border region.

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11 Officially the issue in the Kokang region was started when the Myanmar police was tipped off about an illegal arms factory operating in the region. [http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/world-news/myanmar-claims-chinese-intelligence-led-to-kokang-conflict\\_100245029.html](http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/world-news/myanmar-claims-chinese-intelligence-led-to-kokang-conflict_100245029.html)

12 Lorch, J. And Will, G. Burma's forgotten Conflicts – A risk for the Region's security, SWP Comments 10, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, July 2009.

## BACKGROUND

### The colonial era

The basis of Burma's ethnic conflicts lies in the colonial system of government, which led many tribal groups in hill regions to believe that they were not part of Burma.<sup>13</sup> The British helped define Burma's ethnic diversity by mapping the various ethnic groups. In 1992 the military government catalogued 135 'national races' (*lu myo*, in Burmese). This classification derives from colonial era when the British took advantage of ethnic power struggles to establish their authority. During the last Anglo-Burmese war, the British destroyed Burma's monarchy along with the administrative structure of pre-colonial Burma.<sup>14</sup> The favouring of ethnic minorities and the advent of American Baptist missionaries who worked, first with the Karen and later with the Kachin and Chin tribes, led to a 'divide and rule' system which underlay colonial rule.<sup>15</sup> Taylor also argues that the British were responsible for the politicisation of ethnicity in Burma.

'The Administrative and military distinctions which the British used in their administration of Myanmar – lowlands and highlands, Burma Proper and the Frontier areas – were only the beginning of the complexities which were soon conceptualised into an ahistorical 'model' of the characteristics of Myanmar social formations. This has persisted inside and outside the country to the present day and bedevils clear thinking about the society's issues.'<sup>16</sup>

The British developed a separate administration for the Kachin and the Chin through the Kachin Hill Tribes Regulation and the Chin Hills regulation (both 1895).<sup>17</sup> At independence, the colonial state's reification of ethnicity had to be transformed into an ideology that would support the state.<sup>18</sup> This was particularly difficult as the various groups felt they had had a special status under British rule and that only Aung San had succeeded in bringing some of the minorities together at the Panglong Conference in 1947 to form a union. At the time the Karen attended the meeting as observers and went

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13 Sai Kham Mong in Ganesan, N. and Kyaw Yin Hlaing (eds.) 2007. *Myanmar – State, Society and Ethnicity*, p. 261. ISEAS, Singapore and Hiroshima Peace Institute, Hiroshima.

14 Thant Myint-U. 2008. *The River of Lost Footsteps*, Faber, London.

15 Taylor, R.H. 2009. Myanmar: Reconciliation or Reconsolidation? Isolation or Resolution? *Asian Affairs*, Vol XL, number II, p. 274.

16 Taylor in Ganesan, N. and Kyaw Yin Hlaing (eds.) 2007. *Myanmar – State, Society and Ethnicity*, p. 75-6. ISEAS, Singapore and Hiroshima Peace Institute, Hiroshima.

17 Sai Kham Mong in Ganesan, N. and Kyaw Yin Hlaing (eds.) 2007. *Myanmar – State, Society and Ethnicity*, p. 259. ISEAS, Singapore and Hiroshima Peace Institute, Hiroshima.

18 Taylor, R.H. 2005. Do States Make Nations? The Politics of Identity in Myanmar Revisited, *South East Asia Research*, Vol.13, Number 3, p. 267.

underground two years later. The constitution which emerged was 'tenuous' as 'the Shan and the Kayah States were theoretically able to secede from the union after a ten year trial period and referendum.'<sup>19</sup>

### **1988-89 ethnic conflict and the Burmese Communist party**

Taylor and others have argued that it was the post-colonial rulers' championing of Buddhism as a state religion which was interpreted as an attack on minority identity.<sup>20</sup> Alan Saw U argues that in addition to this, the central government discriminated against all non-Bamar groups politically, economically and through specific suppression of their culture, language and religions.<sup>21</sup>

Ethnic conflicts preceded independence; hundreds of Karen were massacred by Burmese troops loyal to the puppet government during the Japanese occupation. And the conflict resumed almost immediately after independence, with Karen armed rebels fighting just outside Rangoon. Taylor recalls that civilians and troops on both sides used to pay to shoot at each other across the no-mans land which divided Insein (now a suburb of Yangon) and Rangoon.<sup>22</sup> Western concern at the time was largely directed towards the ethnic groups with a sizable Christian population. They gained foreign support because of their status as the Christian 'underdog'<sup>23</sup> though they also occupied land rich in mineral resources and forest products.

But many of these groups, including the Karen, Kayin, Chin and Kachin, had also shown solidarity with the British in the conflict against the Japanese.<sup>24</sup> Some ethnic groups supported the Union government in 1949 and wanted rebellions suppressed.<sup>25</sup> Though many representatives of ethnic groups comprised feudal lords who were happy to compromise with the Burmese elite provided, they were able to maintain their own status.

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<sup>19</sup> Steinberg, D.I. 2001. *Burma – the State of Myanmar*, p. 184. Georgetown University Press, Washington DC.

<sup>20</sup> The official state promotion of Buddhism started in the early 1960s. Taylor and Sai Kham Mong in Ganesan, N. and Kyaw Yin Hlaing (eds.) 2007. *Myanmar – State, Society and Ethnicity*, p. 265, 280. ISEAS, Singapore and Hiroshima Peace Institute, Hiroshima

<sup>21</sup> Alan Saw U in Ganesan, N. and Kyaw Yin Hlaing (eds.) (2007) *Myanmar – State, Society and Ethnicity*, p. 220. ISEAS, Singapore and Hiroshima Peace Institute, Hiroshima

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, R.H. 2005. Do States Make Nations? The Politics of Identity in Myanmar Revisited, *South East Asia Research*, Vol.13, Number 3, p. 284.

<sup>23</sup> Steinberg, D.I. 2001. *Burma – the State of Myanmar*, p. 185. Georgetown University Press, Washington DC.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor in Ganesan, N. and Kyaw Yin Hlaing (eds.) 2007. *Myanmar – State, Society and Ethnicity*, p. 85. ISEAS, Singapore and Hiroshima Peace Institute, Hiroshima.

<sup>25</sup> Sai Kham Mong in Ganesan, N. and Kyaw Yin Hlaing (eds.) 2007. *Myanmar – State, Society and Ethnicity*, p. 256. ISEAS, Singapore and Hiroshima Peace Institute, Hiroshima.



The late 1950s and 60s saw a new wave of ethnic nationalist movements emerge, exacerbated by clauses in the constitution granting nominal rights of secession to some groups.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the Tatmadaw saw itself increasingly as nation-builders rather than soldiers<sup>27</sup> as the failure of the parliamentarians in the years after independence created a vacuum in the nation-building project.

Ne Win, who came to power in 1962 in the second military coup, introduced the 'Burmese Way to Socialism'. This brought economic isolation, failed to resolve ethnic issues, and rebellions flared up across the country. The cold war also encouraged separatism, insurgency and smuggling. China in particular was deeply involved in funding groups who supported the Burmese Communist Party (BCP). While this was largely run by Burmans, the foot-soldiers were predominantly Wa – former headhunters considered wild by first the British, then the Chinese. Chinese funding prolonged this conflict, although the BCP received funding from a range of other countries for their own logic.

'Until 1989, the Myanmar Army had been fighting two inter-connected civil wars – one against the ethnic nationalist insurgents and another against the Communist party of Burma'.<sup>28</sup> According to Martin Smith the BCP collapsed due to ethnic mutinies. China had become Burma's most important trading partner, 'a dynamic which was greatly enhanced by the ethnic ceasefires that spread in the Shan and Kachin states during the 1990s'.<sup>29</sup>

## The ceasefires

Once funding from China dried up, various ethnic minorities became open to negotiating with the regime. Prior to this the military junta's objective had been the defeat of all opposition through the military.<sup>30</sup> General Khin Nyunt was the driving force behind the ceasefires and with each deal, more troops were freed up to fight in the areas where no agreement had been reached. The simple principles which had to be followed were that once rebels stopped fighting the army, the people in the region could pursue their traditional

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<sup>26</sup> This issue goes back to the Panglong agreement, where only a few ethnic groups were represented and not all were granted rights to secede. See Walton 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Smith in Kyaw Yin Hlaing et al (eds.) 2005. *Myanmar, Beyond Politics to Societal Imperatives*, p 67. ISEAS, Singapore.

<sup>28</sup> South, A. 2004. Political Transition in Myanmar: A new Model for Democratization, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 26, number 2, pp. 238.

<sup>29</sup> Smith in Kyaw Yin Hlaing et al (eds.) 2005. *Myanmar, Beyond Politics to Societal Imperatives*, p 221. ISEAS, Singapore.

<sup>30</sup> Alan Saw U in Ganesan, N. and Kyaw Yin Hlaing (eds.) 2007. *Myanmar – State, Society and Ethnicity*, p. 220. ISEAS, Singapore and Hiroshima Peace Institute, Hiroshima.

agricultural livelihoods. In turn the army would support improved health and education services as well as infrastructure. The rebel forces have often been allowed to become a kind of local militia, retaining arms.<sup>31</sup> To date around 18 armed ceasefires have been agreed between the army and armed groups of the following ethnicities: Kachin, Kayah (Karenni), Shan, Rakhine, Mon, Wa, Pao and Palaung.<sup>32</sup>

As a part of the ceasefire movement a Border Area Development Programme was initiated in 1989. From 1992 this became the Ministry for the Progress of Border Areas and National Races. The Ministry has built hospitals, health centres, bridges, dams and more than 430 schools as well as thousands of miles of roads in the border townships including ceasefire areas.<sup>33</sup> The ceasefires are presented as part of the policy of 'national reconsolidation' and, according to Senior General Than Shwe, are 'the most defining characteristic of his government's rule'.<sup>34</sup>

The ceasefires have improved physical security for the inhabitants of the border regions and allowed basic economic development to take place in what, less than a decade ago, were war zones. There has also been a re-emergence of civil society networks and indigenous language schools. Civil society organisations and NGOs usually operate around the health and education sector. Opium eradication has also been successful in ceasefire areas. Due to Chinese and UN pressure, the ex-CPB National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDA) announced a ban on growing and processing Opium in 1997 (although the ban was not effective until 2002).<sup>35</sup> Drug-trafficking on the Shan-China border had greatly reduced.<sup>36</sup>

Conversely, the ban led to increased internal displacement in the Wa and Kokang areas as livelihoods have been forced to change. At the same time, the ceasefires have allowed the military to militarise areas previously affected by conflict. There continue to be instances of forced labour in areas close to ceasefire zones; and welfare services remain painfully under-resourced.

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<sup>31</sup> Steinberg, D.I. 2001. *Burma – the State of Myanmar*, p 187. Georgetown University Press, Washington DC.

<sup>32</sup> The main Cease fire groups represented at the National Convention are: Communist Party of Burma (Arakan); New Democratic Army (Kachin); Kachin Independence Organisation; Kayan National Guard; Karenni Nationalities Peoples Liberation Front; Kayan New Land Party; New Mon State Party; Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (Kokang), United Wa State Party; Shan State Army; National Democratic Alliance Army (Eastern Shan State); Kachin Defence Army; Pao national Organisation; Palaung State Liberation Party; Shan State National Army; Shan State Nationalities Liberation Organisation. Seven of these were former allies or break away groups of the BCP. Copied from Martin Smith in Kyaw, p.78

<sup>33</sup> South, A. 2007c. Burma, COHRE Country Report, p. 133. November 2007, Geneva.

<sup>34</sup> Smith in Kyaw Yin Hlaing et al (eds.) 2005. *Myanmar, Beyond Politics to Societal Imperatives*, p 70. ISEAS, Singapore.

<sup>35</sup> I am grateful to Ashley South for pointing this out.

Extraction of natural resources (mainly timber, but also gold and jade) is increasing. Mining is poorly regulated and has damaging environmental consequences. Profits are unevenly distributed and help consolidate local power holders. This perpetuates a top-down political culture with little or no accountability. Most importantly, other than the controlled national convention, the ceasefires have not led to a more sustained dialogue. Ceasefires should not be an aim in themselves but lead to a longer political process for inclusion which has yet to take place.<sup>37</sup>

All ceasefire groups are part of the National Convention, which re-opened on May 14 2004. Most of the 1,000 plus delegates were handpicked by the government. Over one hundred delegates represented the 28 ceasefire groups, 'These were a mixed bunch, enjoying various degrees of legitimacy, and representing only one sector of the ethnic nationalist constituency. Nevertheless, the cease fire groups developed coherent positions on several key issues'.<sup>38</sup> Their main demands included increased legislative and administrative power for local governments, the formation of local ethnic security forces and a federal union of Burma. These proposals would not be included in the draft constitution, which led to threats by certain groups to take up arms again.

#### *Example – the Kachin case*

According to Ja Nan Lahtaw whose father, the Rev Saboi Jum, was instrumental in brokering the ceasefire in Kachin state, the central issue within any ceasefire is to work towards a 'just peace'. She acknowledges that most of the ethnic conflicts have been dealt with peacefully after over 40 years of conflict, but that these conflicts have left Burma a deeply divided society with divisions at every level.<sup>39</sup>

In the Kachin case, up until 2005, there were three separate armed groups<sup>40</sup>:

- the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), in existence since the 1960s and the lead organisation;

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<sup>36</sup> South, A. 2007b. 'Burma: the Changing Nature of Displacement Crises', p. 24. RSC Working Paper No 39, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, Oxford.

<sup>37</sup> On the advantages and disadvantages of the ceasefires see South, 2007b: 18-19

<sup>38</sup> South, A. 2007c. Burma, COHRE Country Report, p. 42. November 2007, Geneva.

<sup>39</sup> Jan Nan Lahtaw in Ganesan, N. and Kyaw Yin Hlaing (eds.) 2007. *Myanmar – State, Society and Ethnicity*, p. 236. ISEAS, Singapore and Hiroshima Peace Institute, Hiroshima.

- the New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDA-K), part of the ex-Communist party of Burma which became the local militia after an agreement with the government forces in 1998;
- the Kachin Defence Army (KDA), which signed an agreement with the army in 1991;

The various armed groups who have signed separate agreements with the military government, shows that even within an ethnic minority group there are issues regarding unity of aims and means. The KIO signed a ceasefire agreement in 1994. Subsequently, 10,000 refugees returned from China and 60,000 internally displaced people had to be resettled.<sup>41</sup> Whilst the ceasefire marked the first step in political dialogue it took another eleven years for the dialogue to move to the National Convention in 2004.

'Due to the lengthy armed conflicts, social-economic reconstruction and a reform of the system of governance have been ongoing. Since the beginning of the 1990s, religious organisations and a few NGOs have started community development programmes for the people at the grassroots level in some ethnic states.'<sup>42</sup>

The Metta Development foundation was established in 1998 and now has projects in Shan, Karenni, Karen and Mon states. Metta Director Daw Seng Raw states that 'Many ethnic groups feel extremely disappointed that in general foreign governments are not responding to the process of these ceasefires or indeed even understand their significance'.<sup>43</sup> Lahtaw argues that it is essential that border areas are developed equitably, that people have access to education and increased infrastructure is not only used for either the army or the Chinese to encroach on more land and natural resources.<sup>44</sup> Despite the ceasefire agreement problems persist in Kachin state.

'Over the past ten years, local communities have lost large amounts of land (and associated livelihoods), confiscated by the Tatmadaw, often in the context of its self support policy, and by local authorities

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<sup>40</sup> Ganesan, N. and Kyaw Yin Hlaing (eds.) 2007. *Myanmar – State, Society and Ethnicity*, p. 242. ISEAS, Singapore and Hiroshima Peace Institute, Hiroshima. The KIA break away group only came into existence in 2005.

<sup>41</sup> South, A. 2007b. 'Burma: the Changing Nature of Displacement Crises', p.20. RSC Working Paper No 39, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, Oxford.

<sup>42</sup> Jan Nan Lahtaw in Ganesan, N. and Kyaw Yin Hlaing (eds.) 2007. *Myanmar – State, Society and Ethnicity*, p. 236-7. ISEAS, Singapore and Hiroshima Peace Institute, Hiroshima.

<sup>43</sup> South, A. 2004. Political Transition in Myanmar: A new Model for Democratization, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 26, number 2, p. 248.

<sup>44</sup> Personal conversation, Yangon July 2007.

and business groups, including in the context of 'development projects', and due to unsustainable natural resource extraction.<sup>145</sup>

These developments could become problematic as ceasefires have to lead to a *just peace* with ethnic groups having their rights protected. The inclusion of the KIO at the National convention is positive but not sufficient to secure this.

### The ongoing conflict

Despite the numerous ceasefires there remain some ethnic groups are still fighting the regime. These are in the Kayin (Karen), Shan, Kayah (Karenni), Chin, Rakhine and Naga areas.<sup>46</sup> The main three groups are the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the Shan State Army (SSA-South). These conflicts have resulted in large refugee flows, primarily to Thailand but also to India, Bangladesh, Malaysia and China. Between 1991 and 1992 over 250,000 Muslims crossed over to Bangladesh due to a brutal Tatmadaw campaign. Most have since returned<sup>47</sup>, but some 28,000 remain in refugee camps.<sup>48</sup> Some of these movements are motivated by the armed conflict, but in certain cases, especially along the Chinese border, migration is for economic reasons. In his report on the changing nature of displacement crisis, Ashley South estimates that around 2 million people of Burmese origin are displaced outside the country. In Thailand alone there are more than 150,000 refugees. Internally the conflict has led to over half a million displaced.<sup>49</sup>

#### *Example – the Karen case*

The Karen claim self-determination on the basis of being a separate nation: 'the Karen are much more than a national minority. We are a nation.'<sup>50</sup> The

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<sup>45</sup> South, A. 2007b. '*Burma: the Changing Nature of Displacement Crises*', p.16. RSC Working Paper No 39, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, Oxford.

<sup>46</sup> Smith in Kyaw Yin Hlaing et al (eds.) 2005. *Myanmar, Beyond Politics to Societal Imperatives*, p 58. ISEAS, Singapore The main non ceasefire groups are: Arakan Liberation Party; Arakan Rohingya National Organisation; China national Front; Hongsawatoi Restoration Party; Karen national Union; Karenni National Progressive party; Lahu Democratic Front; Mergui-Tavoy United Front; Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland; National United Party of Arakan; Rohingya Solidarity Organisation; Shan State Army (South); Wa National Organisation. Copied from Martin Smith in Kyaw, p.80

<sup>47</sup> Smith in Kyaw Yin Hlaing et al (eds.) 2005. *Myanmar, Beyond Politics to Societal Imperatives*, p 58. ISEAS, Singapore.

<sup>48</sup> South, A. 2007b. '*Burma: the Changing Nature of Displacement Crises*', RSC Working Paper No 39 p. 5), Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, Oxford.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.3.

<sup>50</sup> KNU publication cited by Smith in Kyaw Yin Hlaing et al (eds.) 2005. *Myanmar, Beyond Politics to Societal Imperatives*, p 60. ISEAS, Singapore.

Karen community are a diverse collection of ethno-linguistic groups with common characteristics. Around two-thirds of Karen inside Myanmar are Buddhists.<sup>51</sup> It was the Christian Karen who first started to develop the idea of a Karen nation and it was the Karen Christian elites who led the insurgency in the name of all Karen.<sup>52</sup> 'A recent account of Karen history views the nationalist movement from an almost exclusively Christian perspective'<sup>53</sup>, perpetuating the image that the Christian dominated KNU are the only legitimate Karen representation.

The Karen were seen by both Thailand and the US as Christian and anti-communist and consequently a valuable asset for US policy in the region.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, Thailand was happy to deal with the KNU, for instance selling it arms. The KNU was also able to tax trade across the border with Thailand, and received donations from abroad. The conflict led to a refugee crisis. Today there are only between 5,000 and 7,000 soldiers left, but the KNU's symbolic importance cannot be denied.<sup>55</sup>

According to Saw U, many Karen have become wary of the long conflict. Since the beginning of the 1990s various Karen groups have been projecting the idea of "transferring the "armed struggle in the battlefield" to the "political struggle around the table".<sup>56</sup> Yet early negotiations failed. The KNU's suggestion of assistance from an international mediator or observer was unequivocally rejected by the junta.<sup>57</sup> And the KNU itself did not want international mediation at times when if it felt it could hold its own positions. However, in November 2003 the military regime extended an invitation through the Karen Peace Mediator Group to establish dialogue. The KNU accepted but ceasefire negotiations were cut short after the arrest and removal of General Khin Nyunt in October 2004. According to South, 'developments since mid 2005 indicate that the government lacks the political will to make peace...between February 2006 and January 2007, approximately 25,000 people were displaced by Tatmadaw attacks on villages in North-western Karen State'.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> South, A. 2007b. '*Burma: the Changing Nature of Displacement Crises*', RSC Working Paper No 39, p.9. Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, Oxford.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p.10.

<sup>53</sup> South, A. 2007a. Karen Nationalist Communities: The 'problem' of Diversity, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 29, number 1, p. 62.

<sup>54</sup> South, A. 2007b. '*Burma: the Changing Nature of Displacement Crises*', RSC Working Paper No 39, p.10. Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, Oxford.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.11.

<sup>56</sup> Alan Saw U in Ganesan, N. and Kyaw Yin Hlaing (eds.) 2007. *Myanmar – State, Society and Ethnicity*, p. 221. ISEAS, Singapore and Hiroshima Peace Institute, Hiroshima.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 222.

<sup>58</sup> South, A. 2007b. '*Burma: the Changing Nature of Displacement Crises*', RSC Working Paper No 39, p.13. Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, Oxford.

## A National Identity Beyond Conflict?

At the heart of the issue is the debate on national identity and belonging. While many ethnic groups argue for a separate identity, both within and without the state, it is the armed forces who have insisted on a national identity and a united country based on the Burman majority, historical tradition and language.<sup>59</sup> Yet it is still unclear who is, and who is not, a part of Burma and this is partly why there has been 60 years of ethnic conflict. Identity has become more crucial for the modern state, as 'map based territorial definitions' have detracted from more fluid pre-modern relations between groups.<sup>60</sup> Burma, like many post colonial states, suffered from the dilemma of how to turn what had been an anti-state nationalism, into a pro-state nationalism. The issues of defined territory, ethnicity and religion divided the Bamar majority from the various ethnic minorities. The discourse on national ethnicities helped perpetuate divisions. However, Taylor argues that the various ceasefires might point to increasing national cohesion.<sup>61</sup> Martin Smith when discussing the 2004 roadmap to democracy, describes how Shan, Chin and Kachin representatives from the Frontier Areas Administration agreed with ethnic Bamar leaders to recall the Panglong spirit on the basis of Aung San's 'unity in diversity'. He quotes Zau Seng, Vice-Chairman of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO):

'The Kachin, Shan and Chin states, as they stand today, are not dominion states mandated by the government of the Union of Burma. Rather, it was primarily through the consent of the ethnic nationalities to integrate that the Union came into existence.'<sup>62</sup>

A stable future for Burma lies in domestic and international recognition both of the conflicts and exploring mechanisms that could secure a lasting peace beyond the ceasefires. This implies the need to find some compromise between the military, which wants a unitary state, and the ethnic minorities, which demand a federal arrangement. And there is a need to recognise the political nature of the ethnic elites; that ethnicity is used as a means of gaining political power, not as some primordial given.

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<sup>59</sup> Ceasefire groups were represented at the National Convention which wrote the basic principles on which the new constitution was based. A number of them complained that they were able to have a meaningful input and a number of groups including the KIO threatened to take up arms again. It is not clear how the situation will evolve in light of the forthcoming elections in 2010.

<sup>60</sup> Argued by for instance, Taylor, R.H. 2005. *Do States Make Nations? The Politics of Identity in Myanmar Revisited*, *South East Asia Research*, Vol.13, Number 3, p. 266.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, p. 283.

## Conclusion

'We [minorities] must first survive as a people, then we can talk about democracy'.<sup>63</sup>

Since the arrest of General Khin Nyunt in October 2004, the government has taken an increasingly hard line with the ceasefire groups. The groups came under pressure, not least in light of the constitutional referendum. South believes that some elements of the groups will comply and others will resume armed conflict.<sup>64</sup> The future of Burma looks inherently unstable, something neither its close neighbours nor the wider international community wants.

As mentioned above, recognising the political significance of the ceasefires requires an acceptance that the army is a stakeholder in Burma's future. The development of these ceasefires into lasting peace agreements would create a new playing field allowing wider discussion of the country's future.

'...It seems that certain sectors of the international community have the fixed idea that none of the country's' deep problems, including ethnic minority issues, can be addressed until there is an overarching political solution based upon developments in Rangoon. In contrast, the ceasefire groups believe ... that simply concentrating on the political stalemate in Rangoon and waiting for political settlements to come about ... is simply not sufficient to bring about the scale of changes that are needed'.<sup>65</sup>

Whilst it is essential for conflict resolution to go beyond the ceasefire negotiations, recognising the importance of the ceasefire process is essential in order to find a way forward to re-establish a dialogue between the regime and the international community. Thant Myint-U is not alone in arguing that the current government, which sees itself as the guarantor of national security and stability, has developed in isolation from the international community and is consequently not concerned with the outside world.<sup>66</sup> The problems facing the country are in essence domestic and this limits the influence of external actors. However, a greater understanding of the fault-lines inside Burma might go a long way in helping resolve the various conflicts between state and

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<sup>62</sup> Smith in Kyaw Yin Hlaing et al (eds.) 2005. *Myanmar, Beyond Politics to Societal Imperatives*, p 62. ISEAS, Singapore.

<sup>63</sup> Steinberg, D.I. 2001. *Burma – the State of Myanmar*, p. 181. Georgetown University Press, Washington DC.

<sup>64</sup> South, A. 2007b. 'Burma: the Changing Nature of Displacement Crises', RSC Working Paper No 39, p. 21. Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, Oxford.

<sup>65</sup> Daw Seng Raw, Metta Director, in South, A. 2004. Political Transition in Myanmar: A new Model for Democratization, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 26: 2, p. 248.

<sup>66</sup> Thant Myint-U. 2008. In an interview entitled: U-Thant's grandson speaks, See also his book 'The River of Lost Footsteps'.



society in a context within which the parameters of the state are as yet unresolved.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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In eastern Burma, the regime's conflict with ethnic Karen involved what Amnesty argued were "widespread and systematic violations of international human rights and humanitarian law". Violations included torture, forced labour, forced displacement and enforced disappearances. At the end of 2008, Amnesty stated, there were over 500 000 internally displaced people in Burma.<sup>14</sup> The 2008 Constitution and the proposed 2010 elections. Much attention is now being focused on the prospect of the elections which the government has announced will be held in 2010. The Constitution adopted in 2008 appears in many ways to be designed to maintain the dominant position of Burma's military rulers. 39. "N Korea, Burma in league: Clinton", *The Australian*, 21 July 2009. Elections now have become the main conduit to accessing power. Despite the maintenance of authoritarian rule (and the unclear motivations promoting such system change) the opening of the political realm and civil society creates avenues for new actors, identities, interests, and relationships to be constructed. However, attempts to impose Karen unity from above have often proved divisive in practice, and have helped to fuel 60 years of ethnic conflict in Burma. This article also narrates the re-emergence of civil society networks within and between Karen communities over the past decade, and concludes by sketching the outlines of a consociational approach to the problem of Karen "unity in diversity". The internal conflict in Burma is a term that is employed to refer to the current violence in Burma that has existed since approximately April 1948 between the Burmese government and the various ethnic groups in the country. More recently, the conflict has been against the military regime that has ruled the country since 1962. The conflict is the oldest ongoing war in the world, and has received international attention as a result of the 8888 Uprising in 1988, the work of activist Aung San Suu Kyi, the anti-government protests in late 2007, and the tragic devastation of Cyclone Nargis that left... Ethnic Conflict and the 2010 Elections in Burma.