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EVALUATING THE CURRENT STATE OF CEASE-FIRE

From the Bangkok Post/Sunday Post report of 17 March 1996, the five proposals rejected by SLORC at the second round of cease-fire talks on February 1996 are:

1. SLORC declare a nation-wide ceasefire;
2. Villagers forcefully relocated be allowed to return to their place of abode and to allow NGOs to help settle these villagers;
3. To permit open and free discussions, and hold conferences when necessary with Karens in the country;
4. To allow the UN to supervise and monitor troops of both sides when the ceasefire is in effect; and
5. To discuss basic issues plaguing the country such as politics, the civil war and national peace and reconciliation within 30 days after reaching a ceasefire agreement.

A far more serious obstacle is the SLORC's demand that the Karen National Union should lay down arms once KNU returned to the "legal fold" (that is, as soon as KNU signed the cease-fire, see the report below).

UN-REASONABLE ATTITUDES

1. Most of the problems in the cease-fire negotiation with SLORC appears to be the "attitude problem". For example, while SLORC itself has been claiming to have achieved ceasefire with almost all other groups around the country, one still wonders why it cannot declare a nation-wide ceasefire. This fact shows a particularly small-mindedness of SLORC leaders: the SLORC leaders do not want to give the Karen National Union a political leadership on this issue.

Present policy of making separate cease-fire with the ethnic groups is the continuation of "divide and conquer" tactics that has been employed against the Democratic Alliance of Burma since 1993. One could understand the SLORC refusing to declare a nation-wide ceasefire only in this context.

From my personal view, the primary objective - whether SLORC declare a nationwide ceasefire or not - is to get the unhindered access for the international humanitarian organization to all the cease-fire affected areas. Places like Kachin State in the north to Mon State in the south and also to Shan and Karenni States, there should be some cease-fire monitors.

2. & 4. If the ICRC is allowed to monitor the cease-fire, the UNHCR/NGOs can be requested to supervise resettlement and repatriation of the returnees/internally displaced people. Programs for rehabilitation and developments can start only after the cease-fire conditions hold.

The UNHCR can be also of assistance to the retraining/rehabilitation of former soldiers. For example, the UNHCR program can be sought to deal with politically sensitive tasks, such as demobilization and demilitarization. Such initiatives for rehabilitation will be necessary for the former rebels as well as for the government soldiers. The pro-democracy forces should take a long view to the time beyond the cease-fire; and eventually looking towards the goals of transforming themselves to political parties that are suitable to operate in a federal state. Transforming the armed forces/rebel forces into normal workforce is important for Burma's long term stability.

Once again, these steps - demobilization and demilitarization - can only take place when the political problems are settled and at a time enough confidence-building has been done. These measures must be taken step-by-step. The SLORC demanding Karen National Union to 'lay-down-arms-first' is totally un-reasonable: it's like asking one to make "a chicken before an egg".

3. & 5. One way or the other, to solve the cease-fire problem cannot be separated from the problems of writing the constitution. Unless SLORC made progress on the talk with National League for Democracy about national convention, there may still be difficulties on the cease-fire front. There has to be a guarantee about the participation of ethnic leaders in drafting the constitution. From recent posting of BurmaNet's interview with U Tin Oo (NLD) suggest, the people within National League for Democracy welcomed the participation of ethnic leaders in drafting constitution. The main problem, then, rests on the decision of SLORC's leaders.

The reason the National League for Democracy walked out of Convention on November-1995 is because of the SLORC imposition of its guideline: namely to "Enshrine the leading role for military in future Burmese politics". Although power-sharing of the military and civilian opposition - the National League for Democracy - may be

considered for immediate future, to put the military a permanent-leading role in the constitution is impossible. A much fair-minded attitude is still needed in the part of the military leaders.

To have observers in National Convention is also important. The presence of observers in such Convention by itself do not amount to interference to the national politics. The role of observers is to create an atmosphere of trust and confidence for the civilians and ethnic minorities alike. The SLORC's reluctance to admit outside observers' presence in National Convention is a simple lack of vision and imagination by its leaders.

MIS-CONCEPTION ABOUT THE POLITICS

Often neglected factor by most analysts in dealing with SLORC is the intellectual mediocrity of SLORC leaders. As U Tin Oo (NLD) has pointed out in his interview, the SLORC leaders do not have the capacity to understand issues like human rights, democracy and politics. Only some member of SLORC seems to have vague idea of what are the issues in discussion. While nobody was to be blamed, this mediocrity happened because most elder-SLORC leaders have grown up in war time and went through the period of a dictatorship. Therefore, they simply do not have an idea of how an alternative system - a civil society (non-government, social and political organizations), the free press or, even, an independent judiciary - will function. The other factor attributing to this mediocrity is, for few decades under General Ne Win, the Burmese army has effectively eliminated first-class & bright officers who could pose a leadership threat to General Ne Win. In this context, one can understand the SLORC's bewilderment about the politics in general.

Some intelligent responses made by the SLORC media do not exactly reflect the thinking of its leaders. These responses are usually made by some civilian-underdogs who in no position have access to SLORC inner circle. It is even doubtful that SLORC's foreign minister - who is a civilian - has a proper channel to its leadership. A common practice (i.e. the authoritarian trait) in Burma - especially in the military establishment - is the boss "know everything" and the rank-and-file must be subservient: the staff-members must not complain or question about any decision made by Generals. Therefore, the chances for intellectual input into decision-making process of SLORC leadership from its own staff-members are also much reduced.

While the SLORC leaders discredit Aung San Suu Kyi and democracy advocates as the foreign "lackeys" and "puppets" that are acting on alien's advice, the reality is SLORC themselves have many times - so many times in fact - failed to listen to the voices of their own countrymen. The mediation by foreigners, especially from the West, has also been refused because of xenophobic tradition (and rhetoric).

Political negotiation (or) discussion need broad-minded people who also know the issues. In this sense, one can understand why people are complaining about SLORC do not listen to anything and making little progress towards political negotiations. The quiet diplomacy, which ASEAN countries advocated, usually fail to produce result because of this simple reason. Although the Government of Japan has reasonable influence on the present military leaders, it still much doubt that such influence would be enough for SLORC to make genuine concession for a federal democracy. Recent developments of renewed arrest of NLD workers and the army's movement within the Karen State clearly indicate that SLORC is not in the spirit of reconciliation.

WE NEED PEACE-BROKER

Whenever there are those who refusing to listen to reasons, there also have to be the "arm twistings". SLORC actually isn't immune to the international pressure. Previous experience with SLORC suggest that the pressure from U.N. and international community is vital in bringing the military leaders to negotiation. The first meeting of SLORC and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in September 1994 is to be taken as an example. We must continue to advocate the U.N. and international community to broker peace in Burma.

With best regards, U Ne Oo.

KNU will continue talks with Slorc
4.8.96/Bangkok Post/Perspective

INTERVIEW: The Karen National Union leadership give their views of the recently concluded third round of ceasefire negotiations with the State Law and Order Restoration Council, the ruling Burmese military regime in Rangoon. The council, the ruling Burmese military regime in Rangoon. The eleven-member delegation held talks for three times with Slorc in late June in Moulmein, the Mon State capital in late June in Moulmein, the Mon State capital.

Could you explain the latest ceasefire talks with Slorc, What is your view? How would you assess the whole situation?
Gen Bo Mya: We have still to reach a ceasefire agreement. Slorc is still insisting that we lay down arms once we return to the "legal fold". This, of course, is out of the question as far as the KNU is concerned. We understand a ceasefire pact is to help resolve the problems that exist between the KNU and Slorc. And the main issue here is a political settlement. This is the crux of what the Karen revolution is all about. For us to agree to a ceasefire, Slorc must first agree to concede to

whatever political concessions are necessary. Only then we would be able to come to terms with them.

What are the terms, this time, agreed upon? What does Slorc want and what are KNU terms or proposals?

Gen Tamalabaw: We have submitted 12 proposals. First, for a complete ceasefire. This is our basic principle. We tried to propose without any preconditions that we discuss the related principles in achieving such an agreement. Clauses like returning to the "legal fold" and laying down arms should not be included in the agreement. Also we believe the ceasefire should be a nationwide affair. After this is agreed upon we are willing to sit down at the table. This should be a step-by-step process in which all parties and groups in the country should participate.

On the other hand, what they are demanding is a complete ceasefire followed by regional development, after which a promise of disarmament from the KNU. This, of course, is not acceptable to us. These are the points of contention between the Slorc and the KNU. Slorc has assured us that our proposal would be taken into consideration and will be further discussed when both sides meet again in the near future.

Do you have any plans to lead the next delegation to the talks?

Gen Bo Mya: NO, not at the moment. However, should they in one way or another indicate that they truly want genuine dialogue which would lead to a permanent ceasefire, then I might consider leading the team. Is there any possibility of reaching an agreement with Slorc in the near future? We cannot say right now. We will continue to negotiate not once, twice or three times, but until they come to fully understand our position. If they can't then they only have themselves to blame.

What did Gen Khin Nyunt have to say during your brief encounter?

Gen Tamalabaw: What he said was Slorc has been striving to achieve nationwide peace. And because of these peace efforts many of the armed ethnic forces have come to an understanding with Slorc. He said the KNU should seriously consider the peace initiatives.

And what did you have to say to that?

We have' been working toward achieving peace since a long time ago. [Gen Tamalabaw was present at the very first peace talks in 1963 during the era of the Revolutionary Council headed by Gen Ne Win]. I have now come again to attempt to establish a genuine and lasting peace. I told him that it was impossible to come to terms all at once, and also that it would be impossible just for Slorc and the KNU alone to achieve peace. Genuine peace would only be possible if all parties concerned are involved in the talks.

The KNU already have principles laid down in finding lasting peace a long time ago. But our approaches [peace process] differ. However, we could gradually work toward coming to an understanding to reach our objectives.

Where do the talks stand now compared to the second meeting in February?

Padoe Mahn Sha: We carried on where we left off during our last meeting based on the important points of the 12-point proposal such as a nationwide ceasefire and finding a political settlement. However, to abandon the armed struggle and return to the "legal fold" are two issues that are unnecessary to talk about at this stage. We have never even considered them for discussion. The topics discussed during the second and third meetings are basically the same. But one significant development was the meeting this time round was more cordial and open.

Do you take this as an indication of a thaw in the relationship between Slorc and the KNU?

Yes could call it as such.

Who were your Slorc counterparts during talks in Moulmein?

Team leader Deputy Director-General of the Military Intelligence Col Kyaw Win, Col Kyaw Thein, Lt Col San Pwint, Lt Col Myo Myint (G1), Maj Myo Myint (MI5), Col Khin Maung Kyi (MI25), Capt Kyaw Thura who was accompanied by Col Kyaw Thein from Rangoon, and Deputy Divisional Commander (Southeast Command) Major Gen Aung Thein.

Did the delegation make an attempt to meet Daw Aung San Suu Kyi during your visit to Rangoon?

Gen Tamalabaw: We would love to meet her. However, as soon as we arrived we were told to stay away from Daw Suu, and all embassies even before we could put in for such a request.

As one of the participants of the first peace talks in 1963 and now a member of the latest, what differences do you see in the approach and style?

The negotiation process is different. But the principle remains the same. We [then] returned because we failed to reach an agreement. They [then] said that if we wanted to continue with the negotiations we would have to be restricted to a designated grid line [area]. Nothing has changed since then. Their terms are still the same.

When are the next round of talks scheduled?

We have agreed to continue with the negotiations. However no specific date has been set.

What message do you have for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi?

Gen Bo Mya: We believe what Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, one way or another, is working toward restoring democracy to the country. I must say what she is doing is in the best interests of the people. So it is imperative that she continue with her work until democracy is returned.
