

**Seminar:****Ethnic Conflict in Burma/Myanmar:  
From Aspirations to Solutions<sup>1</sup>****Bangkok, 14-15 November 2013**

In November, TNI/BCN hosted a two-day seminar, involving ethnic groups from different regions of Burma, on the theme of “Ethnic Conflict in Burma/Myanmar: From Aspirations to Solutions”.<sup>2</sup> Those participating included 20 representatives from Burmese civil society, political and armed opposition groups.<sup>3</sup>

The meeting occurred during an important time in the country’s political transition. International recognition for the reform agenda of the government of President Thein Sein is increasing. Asian governments are maintaining their economic priorities for Burma’s political future, while Western leaders are promoting a combination of political and economic engagement. Ex-US president Bill Clinton, ex-UK prime minister Tony Blair and EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton all visited the country in mid-November. As a result, a major escalation in Western aid appears imminent. The European Union alone is reportedly proposing an increase in annual aid from 19 million to 90 million Euros a year.

The view from Burma’s peoples on the ground remains very cautious. As the doors to the country open, there is undoubtedly greater freedom of speech, modernity and social mobility. Such changes are welcome. However, after over 30 months of the Thein Sein government, political transition continues to be military-dominated and top-

down, with essentially the same ruling elite in political and economic authority as under the former State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) regime. Hopes remain that, through political negotiation, democratic reforms will be achieved which lead to just and inclusive solutions. But as the countdown to the 2015 general election begins, concerns are growing that essential reforms will not be delivered.

In particular, a critical stage has been reached in discussions over constitutional reform and ethnic ceasefires. For the moment, there are no indications as to how such key national issues will be resolved. In the meantime, many citizens say that they have seen no improvement in the quality of their lives; land-grabbing and economic grievance are increasing; and the number of persons internally-displaced by violence have grown by around 240,000 since the 2011 change of government to an estimated 649,000, exacerbated by conflict in the Kachin region and anti-Muslim violence in several parts of the country.<sup>4</sup>

The seminar focused on four main areas: political reform; moving from ceasefires to political dialogue; land rights and natural resource extraction; and ethnic identity and citizenship.

On both political reform and the ethnic ceasefires, the perception is widespread that the international community has been

premature in apparently accepting the 2008 constitution and new system of government as the solution to the country's needs and challenges. This could inhibit flexibility and momentum towards fundamental reforms that are still needed. On a positive note, some politicians have been able to use the new legislative system to raise popular topics and lobby for essential reform. But on the key national issues, there remain different centres of government authority, with the armed forces (Tatmadaw) still a leading influence in the legislatures as well as deciding all military operations in the field.

Meanwhile, whether by government accident or design, pro-democracy and ethnic nationality parties remain marginalised from representative impact – a situation that will pertain until the 2015 general election at least. A parliamentary committee has been formed to review the process of amending the constitution, reform of which is a key demand of the National League for Democracy and other opposition groups. But time is slipping away and, at present, there is no indication as to what kind of constitutional amendments will be possible. Similarly, under the Thein Sein government, there has probably never been a greater diversity of ethnic-based parties. But they are essentially separated into three categories – electoral parties, ethnic armed groups (with or without ceasefires), and Border Guard Forces or local militia, some of which are headed by MPs.

Opinion is widespread that, if a common roadmap were agreed to constitutional reform and political progress, many of these differences would recede. After decades of conflict, all sides want to participate in what is recognised as Burma's most critical time of political transition since the early days of independence. But, to the frustration of many parties, there remains a lack of answers to crucial socio-economic and political questions that could well come to define the legacy of the Thein Sein government.

As political veterans point out, ignoring these challenges will only underpin a new generation of grievances.

The primacy of the need for political solutions has also emerged as the leading focal point for the ethnic ceasefire talks. Given the speed of events, judgements on progress are difficult. But in recent months, a growing clarity about the positions of the different stakeholders has appeared. In particular, at the recent Laiza conference representatives of 17 armed ethnic groups agreed a common 11-point framework in the pursuit of federal goals<sup>5</sup> – an aspiration that is generally shared with ethnic parties in the legislatures. Subsequently, hopes for rapid agreement towards a nationwide ceasefire were knocked back at the next peace meeting in Myitkyina when government representatives unexpectedly put forward a tough new ceasefire draft, reflecting Tatmadaw input and limiting the ability of ceasefire groups to independently move and organise. Tatmadaw leaders were thought to be especially unhappy that, in the Laiza agreement, ethnic parties promoted the idea of a national “federal army” to ensure ethnic inclusion and representation.

In general, however, the main challenge is one of a political agreement and sequencing the next ceasefire steps. The government is keen to persuade all forces to sign a nationwide ceasefire first, while ethnic groups remain reluctant to do this before there is political dialogue, agreement and real guarantees of reform. Looking at successful experiences of conflict transformation elsewhere in the world, four other elements are also regarded essential in Burma's peace process: a written accord, independent monitoring and verification, an agreed timetable so that political and ceasefire issues move forward together, and the inclusion of civil society.

In Burma's case, the role of civil society is becoming ever more important. This reflects the response to community needs and the

changing political landscape. From the Tanintharyi Region to Kachin State, local community-based and non-governmental organisations have been increasing rapidly during the past two years, whether addressing such issues as environment, land-grabbing or the needs of the estimated 100,000 internally-displaced persons (IDPs) in the Kachin, Shan and Ta-ang (Palaung) conflict areas in the country's northeast.

Importantly, too, while international humanitarian aid is welcomed, the perception is growing that international donors and governments frequently fail to understand the nature of Burma's ethnic crises and the need for political solutions. For while the internationally-funded Myanmar Peace Centre has performed a successful role in presenting the government (and Burman-majority) position, there has been no similar support or profile for the cause of ethnic minority groups. Instead, Western donors appear to believe that ethnic peace and political reform can be supported by aid and development programmes. These they organise according to their own priorities and terms. However, for Burma's peoples, such interventions can appear highly political, often treated as technical issues that can be dealt with by bringing in outside experts and consultants. In the meantime, the risk remains that a new incarnation of military-backed government will become entrenched without political reforms and ethnic rights being guaranteed for Burma's peoples.

The same worries about domestic trends and international neglect are growing over land rights and natural resource extraction. Across the country, reports of land-grabbing are a common source of grievance in the ethnic states and regions. Some of the confiscations are attributed to the Tatmadaw for either security or business reasons, while other land losses are due to economic projects, such as the oil and gas pipelines to China, hydro-electric dams, mining ventures, agro-businesses, and the Dawei Development

Project. Chinese, Thai and, increasingly, Japanese interests are driving many of the largest initiatives. But not only do local communities complain that they will not benefit from such projects but, as Burma moves to formal laws that do not recognise customary ethnic land rights, they fear that land loss will only increase under current legislation.<sup>6</sup>

The scale of the problem is immense, with many citizens owning no formal titles to their land, land confiscations dating back decades, and an estimated three million IDPs, refugees or citizens living in neighbouring countries to escape conflict. Moreover, as ceasefire talks continue, there are worries that local ethnic leaders could be bought off to collude with both government and international projects. Already, there are reports of business groups connected to the government accumulating land where they know future economic plans. In consequence, at a time when there had been hopes of social and political progress, many communities feel disempowered and marginalised. The rights of local participation, consultation and democracy in economic planning and development have not been established.

Finally, many of the same worries about ethnic marginalisation and lost opportunities for inclusive reform are felt over citizenship and identity trends. Concern is widespread over the communal and anti-Muslim violence that began in the Rakhine state and subsequently spread to other parts of the country. In many places, community leaders are keen to resolve ethnic or religious tensions by working together. But although there is a perception that outside provocateurs are involved in instigating violence, local communities and organisations, such as in the Shan state, say that they often do not know who these people might be.

At root is the very issue of citizenship and ethnic identity in Burma, and ethnic concerns

are being increased by UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon's prioritization of support to the Ministry of Immigration and Population in attempting the country's first national census since 1983. The UN Population Fund, with financial support from Western donors, is guiding all aspects of census planning. Ethnic statistics have always been contentious in the country's divided political landscape, and the outcome could have negative impact on the political map and national understanding at a time when there remains instability and displacement in many ethnic borderlands. Many ethnic organisations refute claims that they have been consulted over its planning and conduct, which was piloted in March-April 2013, and this is only raising ethnic worries further. In particular, the apparent decision to go ahead with the census on the flawed delineation of 135 "national races" – an unhelpful legacy from the SPDC regime – is regarded evidence of a lack of research or the continuation of a confusing promulgation from the SPDC era designed to distort and water down the ethnic minority cause.

With consultation, forethought and appropriate timing (for example, after the 2015 general election), many of the most controversial issues could be corrected by inclusive discussion, thus contributing to improving national understanding during a time of critical change. But the speed and manner by which international donors have pressed ahead with the census have compounded perceptions that, during the past two years, the donor focus has changed from the political rights and empowerment of the Burmese peoples to satisfying other aid agendas, such as the UN Millennium Development Goals. Humanitarian, social and educational needs are great, and there have long been calls to scale up international support. But, after decades of conflict, aid and development assistance are not simply technical exercises in Burma's contested political environment, and there is a risk that socio-political and economic realities are being overlooked. The country is only at the

beginning of an uncertain period of political change – not at an end.

In summary, there remain many challenges ahead if genuine peace and justice are to be established. Many of the difficulties of ethnic minority peoples are also experienced by the Burman-majority, and there needs to be greater collaboration and understanding in working together to ensure democratic rights and political representation are achieved for all. In the new political environment, the dynamic of hopes for progressive change is reflected in towns and districts across the country, and ethnic nationality peoples are also finding greater voice in expressing their goals, whether in political, armed or community-based groups.

At present, however, there is a sense of drift over constitutional reform and ethnic ceasefire progress, and this is fuelling worries about government and Tatmadaw intentions. Conflict is still continuing in several areas, land-grabbing and displacement have been increasing, and many ethnic communities feel that the growing international presence – whether business or donor agency – has increased the daily pressures on their lives at a time when they are still prioritising political rights and justice. There are undoubtedly positives in the broader national landscape of change. But unless the rights of Burma's ethnic minority peoples are addressed, national instability and state failure will continue. For real national progress to take root, it is vital that the issues of political and economic reform, equal opportunity, and a just and inclusive peace are resolved.

## Notes

1. In 1989 the then military government changed the official name from Burma to Myanmar. They are alternative forms in the Burmese language, but their use has become a politicised issue. Although this is changing, Myanmar is not yet commonly used in the English language. For consistency, Burma will be used in this report. This is not intended as a political statement.

2. A recent TNI briefing raised some of these issues. See, "Burma's Ethnic Challenge: From Aspirations to Solutions", TNI-BCN Burma Policy Briefing Nr 12, October 2013.

3. The seminar followed the Chatham House Rule: "When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed." See: <http://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chathamhouserule>

4. UN OCHA, "Myanmar: Countrywide Displacement Snapshot", November 2013.

5. Laiza is the headquarters of the Kachin Independence Organisation on the China border. Eleven are members of the United Nationalities Federal Council (marked with asterisk). Agreement signatories were: Arakan Liberation Party, Arakan National Council\*, Arakan Army, Chin National Front\*, Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, Kachin Independence Organisation\*, Karenni National Progressive Party\*, Karen National Union\*, KNU/KNLA Peace Council, Lahu Democratic Union\*, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (Kokang), New Mon State Party\*, Pao National Liberation Organisation\*, Palaung (Ta-ang) State Liberation Front\*, Shan State Army-North/Progress Party\*, Wa National Organisation\*, United Nationalities Federal Council. A further participant, the Shan State Army-South/Restoration Council for Shan State, agreed with the statement but refrained from signing until internal party consultation.

6. These issues were the subject of a TNI/BCN workshop this year. See, "Access Denied: Land Rights and Ethnic Conflict in Burma", TNI-BCN Burma Policy Briefing Nr 11, May 2013.

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## **TNI - BCN Project on Ethnic Conflict in Burma**

Burma has been afflicted by ethnic conflict and civil war since independence in 1948, exposing it to some of the longest running armed conflicts in the world. Ethnic nationality peoples have long felt marginalised and discriminated against. The situation worsened after the military coup in 1962, when minority rights were further curtailed. The main grievances of ethnic nationality groups in Burma are the lack of influence in the political decision-making processes; the absence of economic and social development in their areas; and what they see as Burmanisation policies by governments since independence that have translated into repression of their cultural rights and religious freedom.

This joint TNI-BCN project aims to stimulate strategic thinking on addressing ethnic conflict in Burma and to give a voice to ethnic nationality groups who have until now been ignored and isolated in the international debate on the country. In order to respond to the challenges of political changes since 2010 and for the future, TNI and BCN believe it is crucial to formulate practical and concrete policy options and define concrete benchmarks on progress that national and international actors can support. The project will aim to achieve greater support for a different Burma policy, which is pragmatic, engaged and grounded in reality.

The Transnational Institute (TNI) was founded in 1974 as an independent, international research and policy advocacy institute, with strong connections to transnational social movements, and intellectuals concerned to steer the world in a democratic, equitable, environmentally sustainable and peaceful direction. Its point of departure is a belief that solutions to global problems require global co-operation.

BCN was founded in 1993. It works towards democratization, respect for human rights and a solution to the ethnic crises in Burma. BCN does this through facilitating public and informal debates on Burma, information dissemination, advocacy work, and the strengthening of the role of Burmese civil society organisations.

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