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NO RESPITE IN MYANMAR'S ETHNIC CONFLICTS

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The elusive peace is unlikely to return soon in Myanmar as the latest Myanmar government report of 19 April 2015, says that it has lost 126 soldiers, with 359 wounded in the ongoing battle with Kokang rebels. The fight against the rebels also known as Kokang's Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), erupted on 9th February 2015, in north eastern Myanmar Shan state, bordering with China.ⁱ This is first major offensive by Myanmar army against the Kokang rebels after 2009, where massive displacement of people took place. More than 30000 refugees took shelter in neighbouring Yunnan province of China, leading to its asking Myanmar to restore peace in the border region.

Root Issues

There are more than 16 ethnic groups in Myanmar, mostly in border regions, who have battled for more autonomy in their areas, since the country gained independence from British in 1948. At the time of independence, these ethnic groups entered into an agreement with Myanmar government - Panglong agreement - which would guarantee ethnic rights, self determination and inclusion of minorities in the democratic process.ⁱⁱ However all these agreements were kept on the backburner, as successive military governments ruled out any kind of negotiations with ethnic groups and actually focused on defeating the rebels under the guise of consolidating Myanmar as a nation. It led to most of these ethnic groups resorting to armed struggle to protect their states from majority Bamar rule, demanding autonomy, ethnic rights and inclusive democracy. Thus, these conflicts specially, with Kachin Independence Organisation, Karen National Union and Kokang Army constitute some of the longest ongoing civil war in the region.



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Present Status

The Myanmar government and 16 ethnic rebel groups signed a draft cease – fire agreement in March 2015, raising hopes of ending decades of clashes with ethnic rebel groups. However, some major ones – most notably Kokang rebels (MNDAA) and United Wa State Army (UWSA) did not join the negotiations and preliminary deal. Myanmar army continues to fight the Kokang rebels in Shan state, as recent as third week of April 2015. Although this is not the first instance of the cease-fire agreement being signed between the two sides, but this attempt from the present government is worth taking note of as it comes months before the forthcoming general elections in the country in November 2015. There are no specifics about the contents of the agreement available - but representatives of the groups said that the most contentious issues were removed from the document to speed up the process.ⁱⁱⁱ An effective ceasefire across the country involving all the stakeholders will be seen as a landmark achievement for the government in its efforts to bring reforms and development in the country. It may also help the ruling party to win crucial votes in the scheduled elections later in the year.

However, Myanmar government has not been consistent in its policy in resolving the ethnic issue. While it says that it has prioritised ending hostilities between various ethnic rebel groups, yet at the same time it has resorted to fresh offensives against the groups who have not joined the cease-fire agreement. There are reports of flaring of fresh fights with Arakan army in Rakhine state on 17 -18 April 2015 and exchanged fire with Kachin Independence Army, at Hpakant township of Kachin state ^{iv} amidst the process of ongoing peace negotiations. But one of the encouraging aspect is the emergence of peace negotiators, who are working on getting Kokang rebels, United Wa State Army and other groups to the negotiating table. Infact, on 01 April 2015, the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) claimed a breakthrough in negotiations aimed at achieving a nationwide ceasefire accord.^v However, the latest offensives will only delay further if not curtail the entire cease-fire negotiations process.



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Challenges

There are many conflicting issues, which are yet to be addressed by Myanmar government. Some of these are –

- (a) NCCT considers Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and Arakan Army to be part of the Ceasefire Alliance Group but Myanmar government has refused to recognise these groups.
- (b) United Wa State Army has never been part of any ceasefire agreements with Myanmar government unlike any other group. It also happens to be a group, which has support in terms of infrastructure and military resources from China. ^{vi}
- (c) The biggest challenge is the Myanmar government's continuous refusal to accept the conflict as a political issue. The erstwhile military rulers saw the ethnic issue as a military issue and resorted to using its army to crush the rebels. However, there has been persistent violence for decades and intermittent ceasefires have provided temporary truce only.

Future

The Myanmar government has urged the NCCT not to invite MNDAA, Arakan Army and Tang National Liberation Army as part of Nationwide Ceasefire agreement. The ceasefire is only a step towards the building of long lasting peace. But an agreement, leaving out some of the major ethnic groups, may not achieve the ultimate aim of peace, development and inclusive democracy. There are many hopes riding on these draft ceasefire agreements, as ensuing peace will allow locals, including minority groups, to tap into Myanmar's huge resources and improve the overall living standard of the people. However the ground reality is that fighting with Kokang and some other ethnic rebels continue in the northern regions of the country. There is genuine apprehension that if the process falters at this critical juncture, then the glimmer of hope of lasting peace that it has



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kindled will be lost. There may not be any respite from clashes with ethnic rebel groups in the near future as well.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

i Thingyan brings no respite in Burma's ethnic conflicts by Nyein Nyein , the Irrawaddy accessed <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/thingyan-brings-no-respite-in-burmas-ethnic-conflicts>

ii Briefing Myanmar's ethnic problems at IRIN Asia accessed at <http://www.irinnews.org/report/95195/briefing-myanmar-s-ethnic-problems>

iii Myanmar signs draft peace deal with armed ethnic groups by Shibani Mahtani and Myo Myo accessed at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/myanmar-rebel-groups-sign-draft-cease-fire-deal>

iv Refugees return to Laukkai from Lashio by Lun Min Mang at Myanmar Times accessed at <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/14057-refugees-return-to-laukkai-from-lashio>

v Thingyan brings no respite in Burma's ethnic conflicts by Nyein Nyein , the Irrawaddy accessed <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/thingyan-brings-no-respite-in-burmas-ethnic-conflicts>

vi Briefing Myanmar's ethnic problems at IRIN Asia accessed at <http://www.irinnews.org/report/95195/briefing-myanmar-s-ethnic-problems>