
Overview of Developments on Border and Political Initiatives in Eastern Burma

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Burma is a country with a complex society. There are 8 major ethnic nationalities with the Burman forming the largest majority. The non-Burman are referred to as minorities, or ethnic nationalities. The ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities are generally regarded as foreigners.

After independence in 1948, all of the ethnic nationalities, one after another, rose in resistance against the central government, after their peaceful attempts to redress their grievances failed.

Five of the 7 ethnic nationalities live in the eastern part of the country, bordering on China, Laos and Thailand. The Karen, under the leadership of the Karen National Union (KNU), had managed to maintain a sizable liberated area, on the Thai-Burma border. In 1976, a number ethnic organizations formed a loose alliance known as the National Democratic Front (NDF), in the liberated area of the KNU. By 1986, the alliance came to include all of the 7 major ethnic groups and 4 smaller ones. In 1988, as an aftermath of the pro-democracy uprising, the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), comprising of the ethnic and pro-democracy forces, came into being, in the liberated area.

The country-wide pro-democracy uprising in 1988, against the BSPP government, the then military dictatorship, was peaceful and orderly. The dictatorship used its undercover agents to create violence and disorder. Then the military forces swooped in and brutally crushed the movement. State power was changed over from the BSPP to another military group, which assumed the name of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

The NDF did not make any armed intervention, at the time of the uprising, so as not to give the BSPP dictatorship an excuse for crushing the movement. On the other hand, it had hoped that the dictatorship would give in to such an overwhelmingly popular demand and resolve the politi-

cal problems of the country, peacefully.

When it was soundly repudiated in the 1990 general election, the SLORC quickly reneged on its promise to hand over power to the winning party. About the same time, it laid down a plan to increase the strength of its armed forces by 5 folds.

Cease-fire Talks

In May 1993, the SLORC made an overture for cease-fire talks with the armed resistance groups. The NDF and the DAB made an offer for talks, so as to obtain a comprehensive solution to problems besetting the country, instead of the SLORC's attempt to get a deal separately with each individual organization. The SLORC rejected the offers of both the NDF and the DAB.

In early 1994, the Kachin Independence Organization, reportedly under Chinese pressure, reached a cease-fire agreement with the SLORC, in spite of strong protests by other NDF member organizations.

In March 1995, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) reached a cease-fire agreement, which broke down barely after 3 months, when the SLORC started to violate the cease-fire terms. In May 1995, the New Mon State Party (NMSP), under the pressure of some Thai business groups, had to accept a cease-fire agreement.

In Shan State, where there is a melange of smaller ethnic groups, armies of drug lords and groups based on different political ideologies, it is hard to make out where each group stood, but, generally speaking, the groups in drug business reached cease-fire agreement with the SLORC, well before 1990, and continued their drug business unhindered.

The Karen National Union (KNU) was in the last stages of preparation for talks, when the SLORC launched attacks on its headquarters in early 1995. As a result, talks between the KNU and the SLORC