

Burmese military escalates war in Kachin state

John Roberts
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Fighting has intensified in Burma (Myanmar) between the Burmese army and the separatist Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in the north of the country close to the Chinese border.

The Burmese military acknowledged on Wednesday that it has used air strikes against KIA positions, supposedly to relieve beleaguered troops needing supplies. The fighting is taking place just 13 kilometres from the town of Laiza, the KIA's headquarters.

Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) official James Lum Dau told the media on Thursday that the air strikes had killed more than 300 people over the past week. A *Financial Times* article pointed to reports by human rights organisations that many people had been injured by aerial bombing and gunfire. The KIA is the KIO's armed wing.

The military signalled its intention to step up operations against the KIA with an ultimatum to leave the Lajayang area by December 25, which was rejected. KIO spokesman La Nan told the *Irrawaddy* on December 25 that KIA bases in the area were "very important for us and our headquarters. There's no way we'll pull our troops out of there."

The Obama administration reacted with alarm to the escalating conflict in Kachin State. US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told a news conference on Wednesday that the US was "deeply troubled" by the attacks and called the two sides to engage in dialogue to end the conflict.

US concern is not for the victims of the fighting, but its potential to undermine the Obama administration's carefully cultivated rapprochement with the Burmese military. Ending the protracted wars with various ethnic minorities in northern Burma was one of Washington's provisos for resuming diplomatic relations, lifting sanctions, and forging closer economic and strategic

ties.

All other northern separatist groups have reached peace deals with Burma's military-dominated regime. But fighting, which erupted in Kachin state in mid-2011 after the breakdown of a 17-year ceasefire, has continued and intensified. About 70,000 people have been displaced over the past 18 months. The Kachin minority is predominantly Christian in overwhelmingly Buddhist Burma and number about one million, making it one of the largest of the country's many ethnic groups.

A number of reports indicated that the Burmese military has been using heavy weapons against the Kachin rebels, including Russian-made helicopters, 105mm howitzers, 120 mm mortars and modern Swedish manufactured rocket launchers. An *Asia Times* web site article suggested that the use of heavy weapons was aimed at intimidating the KIA which has mounted effective ambushes in the mountainous terrain. In a recent engagement, the KIO claimed that 50 government soldiers were killed.

Both sides are seeking to strengthen their position amid pressure from Washington for a peace deal. The *Democratic Voice of Burma* reported that a US diplomatic delegation led ambassador Derek Mitchell last month met with Kachin state officials and peace mediators. Several unofficial rounds of negotiations between the government and KIO officials had taken place.

The generals and their business cronies are insisting on the lion's share of economic resources in Kachin for themselves. The government calls for any peace deal to be based on the 2008 constitution imposed by the military. The minimum goal for the KIA/KIO is a greater degree of political autonomy, which is incompatible with the 2008 charter.

Significant interests are at stake. The area is rich in jade and other minerals as well as timber. There is the enormous potential of hydroelectric projects on Kachin's rivers. The area also sits astride key trade routes between northern Burma and southern China. Last year fighting was centred around Hpakant township where 100 jade mining companies operate. In August 6,000 miners and residents were forced to flee the area.

The KIO has financed the KIA's military campaigns through its control of the lucrative timber trade into the Chinese province of Yunnan, which is illegal both in Burma and China. According to the Kachin New Group, from October 2010 to April 2011 alone 40,000 tonnes of hardwood and teak were shipped to southern China.

Human Rights Watch analyst Matthew Smith told Radio Free Asia last August: "The economic impact of the war has been tremendous. Both parties to the war stand to gain economically, depending on the outcome. Multibillion dollar projects are being put on hold or are at risk of becoming military targets, to say nothing of the lost livelihoods of miners and traders."

The war in Kachin has been largely ignored in the US and international media which has been hailing the Burmese government of President Thein Sein for its "democratic reforms". This is in line with the Obama administration's efforts to resume economic and strategic ties with the military-backed regime as part of its broader "pivot" to Asia.

As in the rest of Asia, Washington's chief concern in Burma is to undermine the position of China, which, under conditions of Western sanctions and isolation, developed close connections with the Burmese military. Despite the Obama administration's claims that Burma is moving towards the democracy, the military remain firmly in political control of the government and parliament. The continuing abuse of basic democratic rights was graphically shown last year in the crackdown on the persecuted Muslim minority in the western state of Rahkine.

Within Burma, the US has relied on opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) to provide a threadbare veneer of "democracy" to the regime. Suu Kyi has become a virtual spokeswoman for the government's policies, while at the same time calling for further "democratic

reforms"—in effect, a greater say for the NLD.

Speaking to ethnic leaders on December 21, Suu Kyi piously called for removing "imbalances" and promoting "mutual respect" among the country's ethnic communities. The way to do this, she said, was for representatives of the ethnic minorities to enter parliament. This is exactly the stance of the generals, who are attempting to bomb the KIA/KIO into submission.



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