

# Burmese regime signs draft ceasefire with ethnic separatists

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16 April 2015

The military-backed government in Burma (Myanmar) signed a draft peace accord with 16 ethnic minority separatist groups and militias in Rangoon (Yangon) on March 31, then declared the ceasefire to be “historic.”

The inflated description of the agreement reflects the government’s political needs and manoeuvres in the lead-up to national elections in November, and its anxiety to advance its economic and political engagement with the Western powers.

The accord does not include separatist militias in the Kokang region of Shan state, where the Burmese army is fighting the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and its allies. Battles erupted there last month, near the border with China. Fighting also continues with the Kachin Independence Army.

The government’s Union Peace-making Work Committee (UPWC) signed the draft ceasefire with the National Ceasefire Coordinating Team (NCCT), representing the 16 groups involved in seven rounds of negotiations over 16 months.

The Burmese regime has concluded at least 34 bilateral ceasefire agreements with dozens of minority ethnic factions since 1989. Many of these subsequently broke down, including a 1989 deal with the MNDAA. This draft proposal, however, is the first to cover such a large number of organisations.

The agreement’s signatories do not include some of the best-organised and equipped militias, including the United Wa State Army and the Shan State Army-South, as well as the MNDAA. Of the 16 groups that signed the ceasefire, all but two already have bilateral peace deals in place and have co-operated closely with the regime.

The agreement is yet to be endorsed by a summit of the 16 groups. All have their own vested interests and

are likely to press for greater autonomy within their political fiefdoms, a demand the military is never likely to grant. The generals want nothing less than total disarmament by the groups. Armed forces chief Senior General Min Aung declared on March 27: “In the implementation of the ceasefire and peace processes, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration for security reconciliation are essential.”

The draft agreement would probably not have been signed at all if Burmese President Thein Sein had not held out two concessions. The first was a promise of greater devolution of political power and resource management, supposedly to establish a peace process leading “to a union on democratic and federal principles.” The second was a softening of the demand that rebel groups disarm before a ceasefire.

The draft calls for committees to monitor the ceasefire, and establishes rules for the conduct of the army and the ethnic militias during the truce. It also bans further recruitment by the signatories, confirms their territory and status, and outlines the nature of future political discussion. Despite many remaining problems, the government says it expects to finalise a full agreement within months.

The draft agreement was welcomed by the UN special adviser on Burma, Vijay Nambiar, who declared it to be “a historic and significant achievement,” as well as by US and Chinese diplomats in Burma. China’s ambassador Wang Yifang expressed the hope that a final agreement would “restore peace and stability to the China-Myanmar borders.”

It is the MNDAA, however, which is at the centre of the latest military conflict on China’s border. Moreover, in commenting on the accord, Burmese government spokesmen pointedly declared that dealing with this ethnic Chinese-based militia was a matter of

“national sovereignty” and not an internal issue—a not-so veiled accusation of Chinese involvement.

While posturing as a supporter of the peace agreement, Washington has not criticised the Burmese army’s offensive against the MNDAA, nor its imposition of martial law in Kokang. The Pentagon is developing closer relations with the Burmese military under the pretext of schooling it in “human rights.” The US clearly regards the Kokang conflict as a means of undermining Chinese influence in Burma and in particular for thwarting Beijing’s plans for a strategic transport corridor through Burma.

The fighting in Kokang underscores how rapidly Burma is being drawn into the sharpening geo-political tensions fuelled by the US diplomatic offensive and military build-up against China, known as the “pivot to Asia.”

In 2011, Burma’s nominally civilian government, set up by the military under its 2008 Constitution, reacted to the “pivot” by seeking closer relations with Washington in order to lessen its economic and political dependence on Beijing. The pro-US opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi fully supported the move and has worked closely with the regime.

In 2012, Suu Kyi and 43 other NLD members entered the military-dominated parliament through by-elections, lending credibility to the regime’s claims to be carrying out political reforms. The US and European Union responded by suspending most sanctions imposed on the former junta following its crackdown on the NLD after it won the 1990 elections.

Burma’s reorientation to the West has, however, reached a critical state. Both the US and EU have impressed on the Burmese government that a further improvement of relations is contingent on “credible” national elections this year and a ceasefire agreement with ethnic militias in the northern resource-rich regions of the country.

Last month’s peace accord went hand-in-hand with the government’s efforts to provide a democratic facade for national elections. Last week, President Thein Sein convened two meetings with political party representatives, including Suu Kyi, to discuss the poll. While the government media hailed the gatherings as a success, no agreement was reached over constitutional reforms and the conduct of the election.

Suu Kyi hinted that her party could boycott the elections. Thein Sein brushed this aside, however, confident the NDL has little room for manoeuvre, given its support for the turn to the West and participation in the 2012 by-election. Even if the NDL does well in the election, the military will retain effective control of key security posts covering defence, home, home affairs and border security.

The regime is clearly hoping for a further easing of sanctions to encourage investment. Foreign direct investment more than doubled to \$US8 billion in the 2014-2015 fiscal year compared to the previous year. However, most of the money went into the oil and gas sector and transport and communications. Only \$1.5 billion was invested in manufacturing, which the government desperately wants to expand to increase employment and ease social tensions.

The draft peace accord, despite its limited and fragile character, is part of the government’s bid to consolidate closer relations with the US and its allies.



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