

Regime on charm offensive as Aung San Suu Kyi meets Thein Sein

August saw a series of initiatives by the regime which have gained positive publicity for the dictatorship, including talks with Aung San Suu Kyi, allowing the UN Special Rapporteur back into Burma and offers of ceasefire talks with ethnic groups.

One of the events perceived as most significant was the meeting between Aung San Suu Kyi and President Thein Sein in the capital Naypyidaw on 19 August. No details of what was discussed during their one-hour meeting were released.



Aung San Suu Kyi also had a meeting with Aung Mye Thaw, the minister appointed to liaise with her after the 2007 uprising, on 12 August. It is their eleventh meeting over the past few years. Again, no details of their discussions have been released.

In August Aung San Suu Kyi made her first political trip outside Rangoon since her release from house arrest in November 2010, spending a day in Pegu. Her visit drew large crowds and she told supporters that it was too early to comment on signs of political progress with the regime.

Despite being widely reported as positive developments in the international media, and hailed as signs of political reform, it is important to recognise that such events are not new and are not necessarily signs of political progress. Although this month's meeting with President Thein Sein was their first, Aung San Suu Kyi also met Burma's previous dictator Than Shwe. In November 2002 Than Shwe boasted to the Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi that Aung San Suu Kyi had met with government ministers on 13 occasions and had met with a liaison officer 107 times. However, these meetings didn't lead to political reforms. To date, no substantive reforms have taken place, no political prisoners have been released and the human rights situation is deteriorating.

Regime continues military offensive - over 50,000 displaced by Burmese Army attacks in Shan and Kachin States

Tens of thousands of civilians have been forced to flee on-going attacks by the Burmese Army. In Shan State, over 30,000 villagers have fled Burmese Army attacks during recent intensified attacks against the Shan State Army.

Over 4,000 Burmese troops from 42 battalions were deployed during July to seize the Shan State Army – North (SSA-N) headquarters of Wan Hai in Ke See township, backed up by jet fighter planes. Advancing through surrounding villages, troops have been committing human rights abuses against civilians, including killing, rape and mutilation. One dead villager was found with his leg and hand cut off.

An estimated 31,700 villagers have fled since the Burmese Army began its offensive on March 13, breaking its 22-year-long ceasefire with the SSA-N. Some have fled to towns, to Wa-controlled areas along the China border, or to the Thai border, but most are hiding in the jungle near their villages.

Those in hiding are facing chronic shortages of food, clean drinking water, shelter and medicine, with heavy rains exacerbating the situation. No international aid has reached these displaced communities so far. Aid agencies working officially inside Burma are being denied access to the conflict areas, according to reports by the Shan Women's Action Network and the Shan Human Rights Foundation.

“With the regime keeping tight control on all aid in Burma, cross-border aid is the only way to reach war-affected populations,” said Nang Hseng Moon, coordinator of the Shan Women’s Action Network. “We urge international donors to respond to this humanitarian crisis before further lives are lost.”

In Kachin State, aid restrictions by Burma’s regime are also causing hardship for displaced communities.

Numbers of displaced villagers along the China-Burma border have risen from 16,000 in July to an estimated 20,000, sheltering in 15 makeshift camps.

Human rights abuses have also increased with the military attacks. On 9th August, a 39-year-old woman and her 17-year-old daughter were gang-raped and killed by troops from Burma Army Light Infantry Battalion 37 near Waimaw. On 31st July, a 15-year-old boy was shot and killed when he fled from a Burmese Army patrol near Kamaing, west of Myitkyina.

According to the Kachin Women’s Association Thailand, those displaced in camps along the China-Burma border are surviving on donations of rice and occasional other food supplies from local communities. Lack of proper food is starting to cause malnutrition among the children.

“We urge international donors to push for access to the war-affected in Kachin State,” said Shirley Seng, spokesperson of the Kachin Women’s Association Thailand. “They must not stand by while the regime blocks aid to those who desperately need it.”

Ethnic groups urge national peace talks

Having broken ceasefire agreements with Karen, Shan and Kachin ethnic groups since the ‘elections’ last year, on 18 August the regime invited ethnic armed groups to approach their regional administrations for peace talks.

However, the groups all rejected this proposal. The United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), a coalition of 12 ethnic armed groups, said that they do not want separate local negotiations with each ethnic group as the situation demands national level negotiations.

They called for direct talks between Thein Sein’s government and the UNFC to ensure that any peace agreement or ceasefire is a sustainable one that will apply to all ethnic groups. The UNFC have written to President Thein Sein calling for a nationwide ceasefire and to begin a political dialogue.

Zipporah Sein, General Secretary of the Karen National Union (KNU), said in an interview with the Democratic Voice of Burma, that they would be prepared to open dialogue with the regime in Naypyidaw if all ethnic groups were represented; “The political problems should be solved by all the ethnic peoples, as well as the democracy movement. It is not only an ethnic issue; it is a lack of democracy.”

Parliament reconvenes

On 22 August, the Parliament reconvened for its second session.

The first session of Parliament from January to March was characterised by severe restrictions, with no opportunity for serious debate, and ministers refusing to answer some questions posed by MPs, and some questions not even being allowed to be asked. Parliamentary rules also require MPs to submit proposals to the house speaker at least 15 days in advance of the session.

The second session has seen slightly more debate, but proposals to repeal or reform oppressive laws, including the Emergency Act and the Contempt of Court Act, were rejected. However, because the Parliament is constitutionally powerless, even if Parliament passed progressive motions, the government is not obliged to act on decisions made in Parliament.

UN Human Rights Envoy visits Burma



United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Tomás Ojea Quintana, made a five-day visit to Burma from 21-25 August.

Quintana met with several regime officials in the capital, Naypyitaw, including the Foreign Minister, Chief Justice, and Defense Minister. He also attended a session of the new parliament.

After meeting some political prisoners at Rangoon’s Insein Prison, he also had meetings with Aung San Suu Kyi and senior officials of the National League for Democracy.

In a statement at the end of his visit, Quintana noted that “the Government has taken a number of steps that have the potential to bring about an improvement in the human rights situation of Myanmar” but highlighted the continuing reports of serious human rights abuses; the continuing allegations of torture and ill-treatment of political prisoners, serious human rights violations in ethnic border areas, “including attacks against civilian populations, extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, arbitrary arrest and detention, internal displacement, land confiscations, the recruitment of child soldiers, as well as forced labour and portering.”

He said that the release of political prisoners remained “a central and necessary step”.

This was Quintana’s fourth visit to Burma but the regime had denied Quintana a visa to Burma for over a year after he expressed support for a United Nations commission of inquiry into crimes against humanity.

Arrest of activists continues

In August, The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners reported that four activists were arrested, including two youths who were arrested and allegedly tortured for having three posters under their motorbike seat calling for the release of political prisoners.

Nay Myo Zin, a former army captain and charity worker, was charged under the Electronics Act and given a 10 year sentence for possession of an e-mail critical of the military.

Sithu Zeya, a journalist already serving an 8 year sentence, now faces an additional sentence of 7 to 15 years in prison on a charge of circulating material online “that can damage tranquility and unity in the government” under the Electronics Act.

There are a total of 1,998 political prisoners in Burma. In a statement following his visit, UN Special Rapporteur Quintana said, “In Insein prison, I heard disturbing testimonies of prolonged sleep and food deprivation during interrogation, beatings, and the burning of bodily parts, including genital organs. I also heard accounts of prisoners being confined in cells normally used for prison dogs as means of punishment.”

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