

### Attacks against the Kachin continue

Since late December, the Burmese Army has intensified its attacks against the Kachin people, employing helicopters and fighter jets to launch a series of air strikes around Laiza, the town near the China-Burma border where the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) headquarters is located. On 14 January, three civilians including a child were killed and four others injured when, for the first time, the Burmese Army directly bombarded the town of Laiza with rocket shells. Laiza is home to 6,000 civilians and in addition, 14,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) are sheltering in camps in and around Laiza.

Intense attacks against the Kachin have continued despite the government announcing an end to attacks on 18 January. The Burmese Army has now taken several key Kachin military posts. It is expected that once the military have taken this area using military force, and have met their military objectives, they will end this latest offensive.

Burma's Ministry of Defense issued a rare press release condemning international criticism of its actions and accusing international organisations, embassies and media of "fabricating news" about the government and military. It claimed the army "had to react for self-defense".

The Burmese Army has been launching military offensives in Kachin State since June 2011, when it ended the 17-year long ceasefire agreement with the KIO. Since then, attacks on the Kachin people have been relentless, resulting in about 100,000 internally displaced persons, including around 75,000 in KIO-controlled areas.

Burma campaign groups in Europe called on the European Union to take the following measures:

1. That no further sanctions should be relaxed;
2. In relation to the upcoming review of the EU Common Decision, that a visa ban be re-introduced which includes all senior members of the Burmese military, all government ministers who are serving members of the military, and all MPs who are serving members of the military;
3. That the other measures in the EU Common Position which are currently suspended continue to be suspended for a further year;
4. That EU members withdraw invitations to President Thein Sein to visit their countries;
5. That funding and other forms of support for government capacity building be suspended;
6. That mechanisms for monitoring implementation of the arms embargo be reviewed, with penalties for member states involved in violations of the arms embargo;
7. That the European Union and member states should provide financial assistance to locally based community NGOs in KIO-controlled areas in order to reach the tens of thousands of IDPs denied aid because free access to provide international aid is being blocked by President Thein Sein.



On 10 January, the Kachin community from China came to the China-Burma border to show their solidarity. They were stopped by the Chinese authorities. IDPs and the Kachin community from Laiza in Kachin State waited on the other side of the border bridge.

## **Over 2,000 people flee violence in Rakhine state by boat**

According to the UN refugee agency, in the first week of January more than 2,000 Rohingyas fled Rakhine state and Bangladesh in boats. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) fears that more people will undertake the dangerous journey from the Bay of Bengal if there is no imminent end to the violence.

At least 485 people are believed to have died or remain missing in four reported boat accidents last year. However, the real death toll could be much higher.

A spokesperson for the Office of the UNHCR, Adrian Edwards, said, “It is unclear how many actually make it to their final destinations, where they often risk arrest, detention and possible refoulement through deportation to Myanmar.” (Under international law the principle of ‘non-refoulement’ guards against the return of people to countries where, for example, they might be subjected to torture).

In January, Thai authorities arrested and detained almost 1,000 Rohingya who had landed in boats.

The violence has left 115,000 people displaced, as well as more than 100 dead, according to UN estimates.

An estimated 13,000 Rohingyas left from the Bay of Bengal in boats in 2012.

## **Campaigners criticise ‘premature’ Burma debt cancellation**

Western countries, in a body called the Paris Club, have agreed to cancel 50% of the debt owed to them by Burma. The World Bank and Asian Development Bank have also agreed to start lending to the Burmese government again.

Burma’s external debt is \$15.3 billion, much of it from lending in the 1980s and 1990s. The government began defaulting on the debt in 1997, since when few payments to western countries have been made.

Campaigners raised concerns that Burma is receiving billions of dollars of debt relief when its biggest spending is on the military, which is committing crimes against humanity in its war against ethnic minorities.

Tim Jones, policy officer at Jubilee Debt Campaign, said, “These agreements allow large amounts of new lending, before any investigation has been

made into how past loans did and did not benefit the people of Burma. None of these deals save Burma any money now, but they commit future governments to making payments on debt they inherit. This support for a military dictatorship could bind the hands of a hoped-for future democratic government.”

Under the debt cancellation deal, 50 per cent of the debt owed to western countries will be cancelled in two stages. The remaining 50 per cent will be paid between 2020 and 2028. In addition, Norway has agreed to cancel 100% of the debt owed to it, whilst Japan has agreed cancellation of over 60%. In total \$5.9 billion of debt will be cancelled.

The UK is owed £85 million, so will cancel over £40 million. The debt comes from loans for Burmese companies to buy British exports in the 1970s and 1980s, primarily gas turbine generators and textile equipment.

## **Political prisoners released following conviction**

Four political prisoners, Aung Hmine San, Than Htike, Min Naing Lwin and Thein Aung Myint, were released on 18 January.

They were arrested for protesting without permission and were sentenced to one month in prison but were able to walk free after the court hearing since they had already been detained for 33 days in prison.

Burma Campaign UK urged the military-backed government in Burma to repeal the current protest law, which doesn’t give genuine rights and freedom to protest. Article 18(b) of the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law in Burma allows the military-backed government to still control who can have permission to protest and who can’t depending on whether it is critical of the government or not.

## **Thein Sein meets new KNU leaders**

President Thein Sein met the newly elected leaders of the Karen National Union (KNU) in Naypyitaw from 5-6 January. The KNU delegation was led by the KNU’s new chairman, Gen. Mutu Say Poe. The initial ceasefire agreement signed a year ago was discussed, as well as the violence in Kachin state and the need for a nationwide ceasefire. The talks did not result in any new agreement.

## **Obsolete laws repealed**

In January, President Thein Sein repealed two repressive laws that had been enacted by the military dictatorship.

On 15 January Law 5/96 was repealed. The law outlawed criticism of the National Convention and the 2008 constitution, both of which are now completed. NLD spokesman Nyan Win said, “That law is actually irrelevant now because it was enacted during the drawing of the constitution guidelines. The constitution was adopted and already in force.”

On 28 January Order 2/88 was abolished, which banned public gatherings of more than four people. The law was issued in 1988 during the crackdown of the nationwide pro-democracy protests.

The law was obsolete as it has now been replaced by the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law. The new law still gives the government sole power over who can have permission to protest and who can't, depending on whether the protest is critical of the government or not. The military-backed government continues to harass, arrest and imprison activists.

### Censorship board disbanded but media repression continues

The Press Scrutiny and Registration Division (PSRD), Burma's censorship board, was officially dissolved on 24 January. It follows a decision in August last year, when Burma announced it would stop prior censorship of publications. A new media law is currently being drafted, but its publication has been delayed several times.

In its latest report on Burma, Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) acknowledges that “the release of imprisoned journalists and the end of prior censorship represent the start of a new era for Burma's journalists.” However, it warned that “in the absence of a law providing the media with effective protection, there is a real danger of journalists censoring themselves after decades of government censorship. Officials have not shed their repressive tendencies, as witnessed by the many legal proceedings against privately-owned weeklies in 2012.”

In its ‘Press Freedom Index 2013’ RSF ranked Burma 151 out of the 179 countries surveyed.

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