

Burmese Army increases military attacks in Northern Burma

The Burmese Army stepped up its military offensive against the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in September, in the heaviest fighting since the government broke the ceasefire with the KIA in June. Over 1,000 Burmese Army troops launched attacks with heavy artillery against Kachin bases in northern Shan State.

The army has also deliberately targeted civilians in the offensive, with reports of killings, torture and sexual violence being committed by Burmese troops. Over 25,000 people have been displaced in the past four months. Many are sheltering in makeshift camps along the Kachin-China border and are facing severe shortages of food and medicine.

The Kachin Women's Association of Thailand reports that women and children have suffered some of the worst crimes. They have documented horrific cases of rape and sexual violence against women and children and warn that the use of rape as a 'weapon of war' in Kachin areas is escalating.

In a letter to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, the Kachin Independence Organisation called for the UN and the international community to help find a solution to stop the civil war and achieve national reconciliation.

"The KIO does not accept that the way to solve civil conflict is through military means. We believe that the only option to solve these civil conflicts is by addressing the political problems through peaceful means and setting up a mechanism to resolve our differences through on-going dialogue ...

"If the political dialogue is conditioned solely by the 2008 constitution framework, then, how can it ever end our civil conflicts? Our nation's ethnic groups desire a platform for political dialogue that acknowledges the root causes of the civil conflict in our country," the letter said.

Thein Sein suspends Myitsone Dam project

In a surprise and welcome development, President Thein Sein has suspended work on the controversial Myitsone dam project. In a letter to the Parliament on 30 September, Thein Sein said "Our government is elected by the people so we must pay attention to the will of the people ... Thus the Myitsone Dam project will be suspended during the term of our government."

The campaign to stop the dam on the Irrawaddy river had been gaining momentum in recent weeks. A petition to 'Save the Irrawaddy' signed by nearly 1,600 Burmese people, including politicians, writers and artists, was sent to President Thein Sein on 1 September. Aung San Suu Kyi wrote an open letter calling for the project to be reassessed and attended an art exhibition in Rangoon to promote the campaign.



Construction of Myitsone Dam project in Kachin State.
(Photo: Irrawaddy)

With the campaign starting to draw widespread support, Thein Sein seems to have become increasingly worried that the issue could spark wider popular dissent and protest.

In addition, the dam is located in Kachin State, northern Burma - a conflict area where the Burmese Army has been increasing attacks against the ethnic Kachin. The Kachin Independence Organisation had also been blocking the supply of construction materials from China for the Myitsone dam, forcing a halt to the dam construction work.

Burma's dictatorship signed an agreement with China Power Investment Corporation in May 2007 for seven large dams along the Irrawaddy. The Myitsone dam is the largest of the seven dams. It is estimated to cost \$3.6 billion and 90% of the electricity generated by the project would be exported to China.

The dam would have a disastrous impact on local communities, flood an area about the size of Singapore and impact millions of people who depend on the Irrawaddy for agriculture, fishing, and transportation. The project has already displaced around 12,000 people. The dam would also destroy one of the most significant cultural heritage sites for the Kachin people and Burma.

The Myitsone dam is just one of many dam projects in Burma. Environmental group Burma Rivers Network called for continued pressure on the Burmese government and CPI to immediately cancel the six other dams planned on the Irrawaddy source rivers.

News websites unblocked

In September a number of previously banned foreign news websites were unblocked, including Youtube, BBC, Reuters, The Bangkok Post, Straits Times, Radio Free Asia, Irrawaddy and Democratic Voice of Burma.

Reporters Without Borders welcomed the news but noted that the unblocking of websites happened "just a few months after Internet café regulations were tightened." It urged the government to "allow the media to express themselves with complete independence and to stop persecuting bloggers and journalists."

Despite the small relaxation of some media censorship, journalists continue to be persecuted.

Sithu Zeya, a journalist for the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), was sentenced to an additional 10 years in prison on 14 September after being found guilty of breaching Burma's notorious Electronics Act.

Sithu Zeya was already serving an eight-year prison term for his work for DVB. He was arrested in April

last year, after he was caught photographing the aftermath of a bomb explosion in Rangoon.

There are 17 journalists among the hundreds of political prisoners still held in Burma's prisons.

Ban Ki-moon holds 'Group of Friends' meeting

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon convened a ministerial level meeting of the UN Group of Friends on Myanmar on 27 September.

Ban Ki-moon said after the meeting "Real opportunities for progress exist, but the Government must step up its efforts for reform if it is to bring about an inclusive - and irreversible - transition.

"In particular, the authorities must cultivate improved dialogue with all political actors and release all remaining political prisoners. The Foreign Minister of Myanmar has referred in his statement at the General Assembly that an early amnesty is being considered.

"Pledges on this have been made and must be fulfilled in a qualitatively significant manner. On its part, the international community has a responsibility to support Myanmar's change.

"I am committed to working with all parties to ensure that the United Nations continues to do its part to help the people of Myanmar to address the political and developmental challenges facing their country."

New US envoy visits Burma

The new US Special Representative for Burma, Derek Mitchell, made a six-day visit to Burma in September.

He met a range of officials in the capital Naypyitaw, but did not meet President Thein Sein. He also met Aung San Suu Kyi and leaders of the National League for Democracy.

Mitchell said the government should "demonstrate its sincerity and genuine commitment to reform and national reconciliation, including by releasing all political prisoners unconditionally, engaging in meaningful outreach to the political opposition, including Aung San Suu Kyi, and engaging in dialogue rather than armed conflict with ethnic minority groups."

"Progress on these issues will be essential to progress in the bilateral relationship," he said. "If the government takes genuine and concrete action, the United States will respond in kind."

Global Day of Action in protest at Government's racist policies

Rohingya communities in 8 countries around the world held an international day of action on 15 September to condemn the racist policies of Thein Sein's government.

The Rohingya are a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority and are one of the most oppressed ethnic groups in Burma. The government's continued persecution of the Rohingya was highlighted during recent answers to parliamentary questions.

On 29 August an Arakan MP asked in parliament why "indigenous Rakhine Muslims" still had their freedom of movement curtailed by having to apply to the authorities to travel between towns.

In response, Union Minister for Immigration and Population Khin Yi said that "those who are labeled "Myanmar Muslims" were assumed to be Bengalis in Maungtaw of Rakhine State ... Bengalis in Maungtaw have common religion, culture, appearance and language with their counterparts in the other country."

In July, a Muslim member of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in Mandalay's Tatkon township was recently sentenced to one and half years in prison for trying to travel to a nearby town without permission. In September nine Rohingyas were sentenced to two and a half years in prison for traveling from Arakan State to Rangoon without requesting permission from the authorities.

In reply to another parliamentary question in September regarding the denial of identity cards for Rohingya in Arakan State, Immigration Minister Khin Yi called Muslims in Arakan State "Bengalis residing in the region" who had no right to claim Burmese citizenship.

On 13 September, the US State Department released its latest report on 'International Religious Freedom'. The report listed Burma, along with seven other countries, as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) regarding religious freedom. The report found that "The government continued to refuse to recognize the Muslim Rohingya ethnic minority as citizens and imposed restrictions on their movement and marriage."

Burma's 'new' Human Rights Commission

On 6 September, Burma's state-run media announced the creation of the 'Myanmar National Human Rights Commission'. The 15-member organisation includes former State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) ambassadors and retired civil servants.

The Chairman and Vice-chairman of the commission are retired ambassadors Win Mra and Kyaw Tint Swe. As former representatives of the dictatorship at the UN, Win Mra and Kyaw Tint Swe routinely denied reports of human rights violations in Burma.

In an address to the United Nations General Assembly in 2003, Kyaw Tint Swe blamed Aung San Suu Kyi for the Depayin massacre, saying the "incident would have been avoided had she [Aung San Suu Kyi] heeded the advice of local authorities not to travel to remote areas, particularly at night. This clash should be seen in the background of the strong feelings that she had created among some of the population because she was advocating sanctions."

Previously, in 2000, Burma's dictatorship formed the 'Myanmar Human Rights Committee', which was led by Home Affairs Minister Col Tin Hlaing, and later by Maj-Gen Maung Oo.

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