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## **The Significance of Union Peace Conference, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Panglong What is next?**

In line with its primary objective of officially introducing a series of political dialogue through the peace process under the NLD-led government, State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has held the Union Peace Conference (21<sup>st</sup> Century Panglong) for four days in the state capital, Nay Pyi Taw, from August 31 to September 3, 2016. The conference was conducted in a very transparent manner, broadcasting its proceedings live, allowing several thousands of people watching it from around the world. The conference was significant in many ways.

First, the conference was able to bring together the legitimate representatives of almost all eligible key stakeholders and institutions in the Myanmar peace process – Myanmar military, the government, the parliament, ethnic armed organizations including leaders of the non-signatories, registered political parties, and other relevant groupings. Within this short period of time, not many believed that she would be able to involve as big a number of diverse parties that were in attendance. It is a testament to not only her shrewd analytical competence of the real situation, but also a demonstration of trust, inspiration, hope, and belief in her commitment and leadership by all.

Second, the legitimate representatives of each organization in attendance have presented their respective political views outlining their analysis of the root causes as well as proposed solutions of Myanmar political conflict, what they want, need, and expect politically. To ensure that there was a level playing field, all speakers were given 10 minutes each. As the conference was a formal event, all speakers have expressed their genuine beliefs and political standpoints for their respective parties, institutions, organizations, and ethnic groups. It was very good because the conference opened an opportunity for all parties, especially the long oppressed and marginalized groups, to express their political grievances, sincere political aspirations and desires. Moreover, regardless of how competing and conflicting their views might be, it is very good that there is a renewed sense of a clearer mutual understanding among all parties in terms of each party's perspective and position, which will be very helpful for future political dialogue. The conference turned out to be more than a symbolic event; substantive instead.

Third, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Ban Ki-moon came to deliver his arousing speech endorsing the ongoing peace process, re-affirming the unequivocal support of the United Nations for the ongoing reform process in Myanmar, “The United Nations has been a steady partner in support of Myanmar’s reform, particularly the national reconciliation, and we will continue our efforts to smooth differences, lower tensions and move parties towards better understanding and dialogue. I have worked to mobilize a full support of the United Nations and international partners for Myanmar... Let us work together for peace of this great nation of Myanmar”. It was politically significant because the attendance of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Panglong

Conference by the Chief diplomat of the largest formal international institution showcased how highly important the historic Myanmar peace process is on the agenda of the United Nations in the midst of other competing global crises and processes going on around the world.

Fourth, the conference conveys a very strong message that there is no absolute military solution to the long-standing armed conflict of Myanmar. Everyone, including the military delegates, acknowledges and accepts the importance of embracing a new culture of peaceful political dialogue against the attempts to resolve differences, including the political crises, through military force. In fact, many speakers openly denounced the military violence and its consequences, the use and reliance of military force against each other, and pointed out the destructions that armed conflicts have caused to the nation and its peoples for so long. While Myanmar military, the most powerful institution of Myanmar, made its case passionately in defense of the 2008 constitution and their doctrine of the three national causes, the military Chief and his delegation were also proven to be tolerant of diverse and different viewpoints expressed, including critical comments against the role and responsibilities of the military in Myanmar national politics. In addition to the political will of all, this mutual toleration of diverse views and respect among dialogue partners is and will be very crucial in order for the ensuing series of political dialogue to be sustainable, meaningful, and successful.

One has to recognize, indeed, that the conference sets a strong momentum for the peace process. It exceeds the expectation of many in a positive sense, and proves many critics wrong. Seizing this positive momentum as an opportunity to consolidate the peace process, it is crucial that the government resumes its intensive negotiation efforts with the leaders of the ethnic armed organizations, both members and non-members of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), who are searching for a way to sign the nationwide ceasefire agreement (NCA), and join the process as full and equal participants. This aspect of negotiation is critical, because a peace process and political dialogue between the government and only the eight EAO signatories would not produce the meaningful outcome and lasting solution that the country of Myanmar needs.

Negotiations with the non-signatories, through the Delegation of Political Negotiation (DPN) representing the UNFC members, should not be seen as an uphill battle. They – the leaders of the non-signatories – do not try to amend the NCA text nor do they intend to write a new nationwide ceasefire agreement. As they were part of the process of the NCA negotiations, none of them has raised any objections to the NCA text. DPN has submitted a proposal though, which would be signed simultaneously along with the NCA. This is not to harm the process in any way, but to make the process stronger. The very promising thing is that DPN has indicated its readiness to find a negotiated solution to their proposed additional measures, only to achieve an agreement that both sides can accept. Since it is a proposal, every point in it is up for negotiation. What is important is that both parties need to resume their negotiation with a particular focus on this new proposal. In terms of essence and the current political environment, everyone needs to understand that it is very difficult, if not impossible, for members of the UNFC to sign NCA per se, without any additional measures.

All the members of UNFC have cooperated with the government for the actual organizing of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Panglong. In fact, their active participation and cooperation in the planning, preparation and final attendance of the conference definitely made the historic conference a

genuine success. The government needs to acknowledge the indispensable key role that the members of the UNFC have played. Without the members of the UNFC joining, the conference would not have been a success. They rightly feel that they made concessions for the sake of the peace process to make a strong start anew. It should be clear by now, that the non-signatories are displaying their sincere desire to join the peace process.

Since August 12, the seven members of UNFC plus NDAA have also taken active part in the ongoing review of the Framework for Political Dialogue. In this way, together with the eight signatory EAOs, the government and the political parties, these non-signatories sincerely strive for making the national peace dialogue to begin as soon as ever possible. Therefore, it is time for the government to put its full attention to negotiate with the non-signatories. Constant and unwavering efforts need to be made by the government to secure a middle ground, and mutually acceptable solution, which would allow all the non-signatories to be part of the peace process, including the three groups, Arakan Army (AA), Ta-ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA).