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AWAITING PEACE IN MON STATE

The New Mon State Party (NMSP) has represented Mon national interests since its founding in 1958, however, the organisation found itself manoeuvred into a ceasefire agreement in 1995 with the SPDC (see background). As with other ceasefire groups, it refused to join the SPDC's BGF program and consequently faced a renewal of war. Nonetheless, with the emergence of the Thein Sein government's peace process, the NMSP, like other groups decided to conclude an initial peace agreement.

The NMSP has been a strong proponent of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) and has called for the alliance to be included in any negotiation process. Therefore, prior to a meeting on 22 December 2011¹ with U Aung Min in Sangkhalaburi, Thailand, NMSP President Nai Htaw Mon stated:

NMSP must make its stance according to the policies of the UNFC. These policies are that the State Government will make a preliminary dialogue with UNFC, and then declare a nationwide ceasefire. After that, a political dialogue will be discussed.²

The conflict in Kachin State and a number of clashes in Shan State have driven UNFC policy in relation to its member organisations dealings with the Government. Addressing the issue, Nai Htaw Mon continued:

It is not appropriate to battle in one territory after having a ceasefire in another territory. Therefore, as members of UNFC, each single member will not make any agreement with the government. However, there is a policy that each member can separately meet with the government's representatives. It is already known that the discussion will also be according to UNFC policies when the KNU meets with the government.

The NMSP's General Secretary Nai Hong Sar reiterated that:

We have no plans to meet Aung Min because they [the Burmese government] have ignored our demand to stop fighting in Kachin State . . . Our policy is based on the decision of the UNFC. We will not enter into a ceasefire alone. Instead of having an advantage, we are worried that we will have a disadvantage if we take the ceasefire individually.³

As with the Kachin Independence Army, the NMSP has had direct knowledge of working with the government and has been the most sceptical about peace overtures. Nai Htaw Mon, speaking at the Sixth Mon National Conference held at the Thai-Burmese border from 18-20 January 2012, reportedly told participants that:

We maintained a ceasefire for 15 years, but there was never any political dialogue. . . The only thing the ceasefire did was convince many members to leave our party. . . Many of our soldiers quit. They blamed us for cooperating with the Burmese military.⁴

In addition, the NMSP had openly opposed the 2008 constitution, and as with the UNFC and KIO, sees its un-amended existence as a major obstacle to any peace process being signed.

We believe that confrontation with government forces is inevitable unless the 2008 Constitution is revised . . . We consider the main issue to be the need for a review of the 2008 constitution, because it allowed the military to take all the main positions within the government. . . The Burmese government presented their political road map—but they will only let us walk this road if we sign a ceasefire. . . However, we said we would only walk this road if they changed the Constitution.⁵

With some reservations, the NMSP signed a preliminary agreement with the Government on 1 February 2012. The four point agreement, similar to other initial agreements, included the following:

1. to re-open a liaison office.
2. to get agreement in advance if weapons were to be carried outside limited areas.
3. to continue a negotiation with the central government for local development.
4. to hold political dialogue with state level negotiators.

After the agreement the NMSP opened eight liaison offices: Moulmein, Mudon, Thanbyuzayat, Ye, Phaya Thongsu, Yebyu, Kyaikmaraw, and Zingyaik.

Although the agreement has been signed, the NMSP remains wary especially in relation to the amendment of the constitution. As noted earlier the NMSP supports the UNFC in its calls for the Constitution to be amended outside of Parliament. The reason for this, according to NMSP General Secretary, Nai Hong Sar, is that necessary amendments would not be passed in parliament due to the military's overwhelming control of the system.⁶ Therefore amendments should be made at a joint ethnic conference outside of parliament similar to that held at Panglong.

The issue regarding the constitution echoes calls of the UNFC. The alliances' most recent statement sets out a numbers of demands for a future peace process:

1. To hold the negotiation in a venue where either side cannot impose its influence;
2. To have an impartial international body to observe the proceedings during the entire period of negotiation;
3. In negotiation, representatives of the Union Government are to meet with representatives from all the armed organizations, including those from the UNFC;

4. A convention participated by representatives from all the armed ethnic organizations, the ethnic political parties, ethnic social organizations and the ethnic intelligentsia is to be held; (If other groups of forces want to hold such a convention, they must have the permission to do so within their own groups)
5. A broad-based national convention with a structure acceptable to all the forces (stake holders) and participated by equal number of delegates from the ethnic forces, democratic forces and the government is to be held.
6. The decisions made by the convention are to be recognized as the agreements of the entire Nation, and the organizations concerned are to accept them for the implementation;
7. These processes are to be the finished, before the general elections in 2015.⁷

While the agreement continues to be upheld there remain major concerns that if there is no end to conflict in Kachin State then a number of those already made with other groups will collapse. The New Mon State Party (NMSP) along with the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP),⁸ all UNFC members, threatened in a UNFC statement:

. . . if the Bamah Tatmadaw does not stop its transgression and military offensives in Kachin State by June 10, 2012. Also, our UNFC members, who have agreed ceasefire with U Thein Sein government, have decided to review the peace process and future programs, including the preliminary ceasefire agreements reached.⁹

While such incendiary language in relation to the Burma Army was unlikely to win the UNFC support, its failure to affect the agreements after the deadline passed further identified weaknesses in its policies. Both the NMSP and the KIO largely dictate UNFC policy and it is interesting to note that both had had prior agreements with the military leadership and saw the regime gradually renege on them.

One of the biggest problems throughout the ceasefire period for both groups was the lack of political space given to them. This is largely the reason why both the NMSP and KIO want to see a substantive political solution before committing any further to the peace process. While the KIO insists it will not have a ceasefire until conditions for dialogue are met first, the NMSP has agreed to ceasefire but wants to see political dialogue soon. Failure to accommodate this may result in the collapse of agreements already made, as Nai Hong Sar, NMSP General Secretary, notes:

We requested in December that the government hold political talks with each and every ethnic armed group . . . but we don't see any signs that they will do it. If they do not hold negotiations, we will renounce the ceasefire.¹⁰

Although most major armed ethnic groups have made agreements with the Government there still remains the need for an all-inclusive ethnic consultation. Until this request is met then all ethnic ceasefire agreements will be tenuous.

BACKGROUND

Founded by Nai Shwe Kyin on 20 July 1958 after the Mon People's Front, its predecessor, surrendered to the then U Nu government. The NMSP originally claimed five districts namely, Pegu, Thaton, Moulmein, Tavoy and Mergui to be incorporated into an independent Mon State. The NMSP fought alongside the KNU and was an active member of a number of ethnic alliance fronts including the National Democratic Front (NDF), the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) and the National Council Union of Burma (NCUB) with the latter two including Burman pro-democracy groups.

Throughout the nineties Mon State saw an increase in Burma Army activities and the inherent human right abuses. First, due to the 160 km Ye-Tavoy railway link and then to the construction of the Yadana and Yetagun Gas pipelines. Both pipelines would cut through Mon State, Karen State, and then into Thailand's Kanchanaburi district. In an attempt to clear the pipeline area the Burma Army began, in 1991, the construction of three new permanent bases and started counter-insurgency activities against both the NMSP and the KNU. Thousands of civilians were forced to work for the Burma Army in the bases construction and maintenance, while others were forced to flee to refugee camps on the Thai border.

Faced with the forced repatriation of Mon refugees from Thailand and large scale human rights abuses due to the Ye-Tavoy railway link and pipeline projects, five representatives of the NMSP, responding to pressure from the National Security Council of Thailand, met with representatives of the regime at Moulmein, capital of Mon State, Burma, for the first time from 29th December 1993 to 3rd January 1994 but without a satisfactory conclusion. Talks started again on the 25th March 1994. This meeting also ended in a deadlock. After two days of recess the meeting resumed again on the 28th March 1994 however a ceasefire was not finally agreed to until June 1995.

According to NMSP chairman Nai Shwe Kyin, in an interview with the Democratic Voice of Burma, the reasons for the NMSP engaging with the regime were many:

. . . because we need internal peace. The other reasons included the urging of the Thai National Security Council, and officers of the No. 9 Thai Local Regional Command; and the recent incident at the Halockkhani Mon refugee camp [where Mon refugees were forcibly repatriated to Burma by Thai officials]. We went because there was an opportunity to hold a meeting with the SLORC based on a real need for internal peace. The other reason we had was that we do not want the people to see us as a weapons-wielding bloodthirsty group, which engages itself in illegal activities and does not want internal peace. We are always willing to hold talks if there is an opportunity for internal peace.¹¹

After agreeing to the ceasefire, Burma's ruling junta originally granted the group nominal control of an area of Mon state spread out over 12 cantonments largely along the Ye River and two areas to the north in Thaton and Moulmein Districts.¹² In addition they were also given 17 industrial concessions in areas such as logging, fishing, inland transportation and gold mining and were also allowed to make trade agreements with companies in Malaysia and Singapore.¹³ The SPDC also

recognized the creation of three refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. These camps, based at Halochanee, Bee Ree, and Tavoy in Mon State, were supported by the Mon Relief and Development Committee (MRDC) with cross-border assistance from the Thai-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC).

The SPDC originally agreed to supply the NMSP with four million kyat (nearly US \$3,500) in economic aid each month for the political body to function, however, this ended in 2005 after the NMSP boycotted the National Convention. A number of other concessions were also later withdrawn, most notably lucrative logging rights that were revoked in 1997 purportedly over the group's signing of the Mae Tha Raw Hta agreement which had a provision supporting the NLD.¹⁴

Seen as one of the more politically adept and democratic of all ceasefire organisations, the NMSP's unwavering political stance immediately caused an increase in tensions between the group and the military regime. Although the NMSP attended resumed sessions of the National Convention in 2004, it only sent observers after December 2005 due to the SPDC's refusal to address ethnic issues put forward in a joint proposal with 12 other ceasefire groups.

The federal proposal, which was presented at the National Convention session held between the 17th May and 9th July 2004, contained a number of requests including:

1. Concurrent legislative powers for the states
2. Residuary powers to the states
3. The states to draft their own constitutions
4. Separate school curricula for states
5. Separate defense force for states
6. The states to conduct own foreign affairs in specific subjects
7. Independent finance and taxation.¹⁵

Due to the NMSP stance, the SPDC cancelled its aid agreement with the group.¹⁶ Also In 2005, it was reported that the SPDC's military Intelligence apparatus began scrutinizing the group's activities in and around Moulmein where the organization was based. In addition to closely monitoring the NMSP itself, Mon NGOs and women's organization also found their activities curtailed.¹⁷

Causing further problems for the group was the fact that, despite the ceasefire, there were still displaced people in the NMSP's area many of whom were unable to receive assistance due to the SPDC's restrictions. The TBBC's 2005 programme report notes the existence of 48,700 internally displaced people in 2004, an increase from the reported 31,100 the year earlier. The report also noted that:

The Mon ceasefire agreement became more tenuous due to the New Mon State Party deciding to only send observers to the National Convention. Village leaders were ordered to increase surveillance of NMSP members' activities and the Burmese Army deployed 5 more battalions into NMSP areas during 2005. In ceasefire areas, the tension has primarily manifested itself through restrictions on travel to markets and fields.¹⁸

The group was also placed under intense pressure to surrender its weapons and, in refusing to do so, found its movement and authority further reduced. Its refusal to openly condemn the Burmese government being brought in front of the United Nation's Security Council in 2006, its support for the Havel/Tutu report, and its close ties to anti-Rangoon opposition movements in Thailand also placed the organisation under acute scrutiny.¹⁹ The group also issued a number of statements in opposition to regime policy and ignored demands from the SPDC to condemn Aung San Suu Kyi's call for tripartite dialogue. In stressing its position on the latter, the group's statement noted:

We believe that Burma's political problems can only be solved through political dialogue. Therefore, we established a ceasefire-agreement with the Burmese military government.

We have submitted our proposals on ethnic nationalities' rights in past sessions of National Convention, but our proposals have been rejected and ignored by the Convention. Thus, we reduced our participating in the National Convention from sending full representatives to observers.

We support Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's statement called for political dialogue in Burma. We will closely observe what would happen in reality. We strongly also believed that political dialogue could only be meaningful if all ethnic nationalities are included.²⁰

The NMSP also issued two statements denouncing the regime's 2008 referendum and calling on voters to say 'No'. Despite its obvious relationship problems with regime it was told that it, like all other ceasefire groups, would need to transform its military wing into a Border Guard Force.

On 5th of August 2009, Mon Revolution Day, it was announced that it would not transform its armed wing, the Mon National Liberation Army, into a Burma Army controlled Border Guard Force (BGF). With war looming in Nai Hong Sar, the General Secretary of the NMSP, stated in a May 2010 interview.

We will not be able to keep doing political work and representing the party if we deny their offer. They [SPDC] will provoke us, the cease-fire will end, and peace will end in Mon State. This will happen not only with the Mon but other ethnic groups as well. This is a big change and there will be massive conflict if the SPDC keeps doing what they want and the ethnic political parties are unable to accept their desires. To be clear, civil war will restart again. This change is important.²¹

When asked by the interviewer if this meant that the NMSP would need to prepare for a return to war, Nai Hong Sar replied that it did and preparation had already begun.

Regardless, a number of meetings took place between the NMSP and Lt. Gen. Ye Myint, of the Southeast Command. A meeting held on 7 April 2010 resulted in the NMSP being given a deadline of 28 April 2010 to acknowledge their transformation to a BGF or People's Militia. According to Mon sources, Lt. Gen. Ye Myint informed the NMSP representatives that failure to accept the SPDC's people's militia offer could result in a return to the 'pre-ceasefire relationship' between the two parties.²²

In response, on 23 April 2010, the NMSP reiterated their official decision stating that they could not become a local militia. According to an NMSP spokesperson, Nai Chay Mon, a special meeting had been held and twenty-seven CC members, including nine Central Executive Committee (CEC) members and five associated CC members, had decided not to accept the transformation of the MNLA into either a Burmese government-run militia, or a Border-Guard Force (BGF). Nai Chay Mon was also reported as saying that,

We will try our best to maintain the ceasefire, but if the government forces us to accept their demands, or if the government attacks, we will have to defend ourselves.²³

Shortly after the meeting a number of leaders were reported to have moved to safer locations in the event of a Burma army attack.²⁴

The Burmese government response was surprisingly muted. Two Light Infantry battalions had been moved closer to the NMSP's northern border in Tavoy district prior to the NMSP's decision being announced. While no military action was reported, the news immediately prompted local residents to flee to safer areas and there was an increase in the population of IDP camps near the Thai border. But, with the onset of the rainy season, it was unlikely an attack would take place before November 2010. It was been reported that local Town Peace and Development Council (TPDC) authorities and Police units throughout Mon villages had begun taking a census to establish the number of current NMSP members. It must be noted, however, that such actions were regular occurrences, especially when the relationship between the NMSP and SPDC became precarious.

Notes

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- ¹ The NMSP first met with Government negotiators in Ye on 6 October 2011
- ² 'New Mon State Party will enter peace dialogue only according to UNFC policies', Min Thu-Ta, IMNA, 1 December 2011
- ³ <http://www.warsintheworld.com/index.php/2012/01/15/burma-myanmar-new-mon-state-party-nmsp-will-not-discuss-ceasefire-until-fighting-ends-in-kachin-state/> accessed 3 August 2012
- ⁴ 'Mon Chairman Says 'No' to Ceasefire', Lawi Weng, The Irrawaddy, 23 January 2012
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Personal Conversation with Nai Hong Sar, General Secretary, NMSP, 3 August 2012
- ⁷ 'Statement of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) Regular Meeting', UNFC, 22 July 2012
- ⁸ 'UNFC gives deadline to halt military offensives', Phanida, Mizzima, 14 May 2012
- ⁹ 'Statement of Extraordinary Meeting of the UNFC', UNFC, 10 May 2012
- ¹⁰ 'Ceasefire is Breakable: NMSP', Lawi Weng, The Irrawaddy, 19 June 2012
- ¹¹ 'Mon leader views failure of cease-fire talks with junta', DVB, 8 January 1994, the BurmaNet News: Monday, January 23, 1995 Issue #99
- ¹² 'Ethnic Politics in Burma', Ashley South, Routledge, 2008, p160
- ¹³ 'Waiting Game', Louis Reh, The Irrawaddy, Vol. 13, No.11, November 2005
- ¹⁴ Ethnic Minority Politics, ICG Asia Report No 52, May 2003
- ¹⁵ See 'Trading Legitimacy', ENC Working Paper No 1, Appendix 2, 2008
- ¹⁶ 'Ceasefire group says it can't trust National Convention' - Shah Paung, Irrawaddy, 7 December 2006 and 'Burmese junta cuts support for NMSP', Louis Reh, Irrawaddy, 9 September 2005
- ¹⁷ 'Mon NGO's put under close watch', Kaowao, 15 October 2002
- ¹⁸ 'Programme Report - July to December 2005', TBBC, 2006
- ¹⁹ 'Investigation of New Mon State Party could threaten ceasefire', Louis Reh, The Irrawaddy, 4 October 2005
- ²⁰ 'Statement on Burmese military government asking ceasefire groups and political organizations to against political dialogue called by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and to support the regime's National Convention.' NMSP, 16 November 2007 <http://www.nmsp.info/press.php> accessed on 11 May 2010
- ²¹ 'The relation between NMSP and SPDC on the 51st anniversary of the party foundation; Interview with secretary of New Mon State Party, Nai Hong Sar', IMNA, 12 March 2010
- ²² 'Unofficial NMSP member censuses gathered across Mon State', IMNA, 27 April 2010
- ²³ 'New Mon State Party announces final "government militia" decision', IMNA, 24 April 2010
- ²⁴ Ibid.