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SEEKING PEACE IN ARAKAN STATE

THE ARAKAN LIBERATION PARTY AND THE NEGOTIATION PROCESS



On 5 April 2012, representatives of the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), led by its Vice President Khaing Soe Naing Aung, inked a preliminary peace agreement with the Burmese regime. The move was yet another substantive effort by the country's ethnic armed groups to find an accommodation with the Thein Sein Government. The move comes despite pressure from hardliners within the various ethnic armed groups and an on-going conflict in Kachin State.

The Arakan Liberation Party, supported by the Karen National Union, was originally formed in 1968 by Khaing Pray Thein. However the Burmese regime moved quickly to quash the movement and arrested many of its leaders jailing them for two to three years. After being granted an amnesty in the early 1970s, ALP President Khaing Moe Linn and Vice Chairman Khaing Ba Kyaw, re-formed the ALP with support from the Karen National Union (KNU). The KNU trained and armed as many as 300 ALA soldiers and it soon became a leading member of the National Democratic Front (NDF) after it was created in 1976. The ALP/ALA was reorganised in 1981 under the leadership of Khai Ray Khai, with the goal of establishing a sovereign state in Rakhine State.

The armed wing of the ALP, the Arakan Liberation Army (ALA) operates as a mobile force in the southern Chin Hills or northern Arakan Hills and has been known to be active in the interior of Arakan State including Kyauktaw and Mrauk-U townships.¹ In addition, the ALP still has cadres along the Thai-Burma border and was most recently reported to have been involved in a joint ambush with Klo Htoo Baw Battalion and All Burma Student Democratic Front troops in Karen State on 15 October 2011.² Currently, the Arakan Liberation Army has between 60-100 troops and is equipped with light weapons.³

Bangladeshi authorities recognized the ALP as a terrorist group after the kidnapping of a Danida Director in 2008 and the killing of a local Thansi headman in 2009. In addition, there have also been allegations of growing opium and smuggling it within Bangladeshi territory with the BIPSS Security and Peace Review noting that:

The ALP some-times coerces Bangladeshi tribesmen into growing poppy in the interior of Chittagong Hill Tracts.⁴

That said, however, there have been no recent reports of such activities and these were most likely local unit actions rather than a policy of the ALP leadership. The US Embassy in Rangoon noted, in a September 2006 cable, that it:

. . . has no information that the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP) has engaged in any activities that are considered acts of terrorism . . . [and that there is] no information that the ALP, or its armed wing the Arakan Liberation Army (ALA), has engaged in hijacking or sabotage of civilian conveyances.⁵

In 2004, the Arakan Liberation Party was a founding member of the Arakan National Council (ANC) an Arakan alliance composed of the Arakan League for Democracy, the Democratic Party of Arakan, the National United Party of Arakan (NUPA), the All Arakan Students Youth Congress, the Arakan Women Welfare Association, and the Rakhaine Women Union (RWU). The stated aims of the ANC are:

1. Solidarity of the entire people of Arakan
2. Elimination of military dictatorship
3. Establishment of political equality and self-determination on true federal principles among the different states
4. Peaceful co-existence
5. Establishment of a strong and indivisible Arakan

The Arakan Liberation Party also continues to play a leading role in the National Democratic Front (NDF) with its Vice President Khaing Soe Naing Aung also acting as the NDF's Vice Chairman. Although the ALP is not a member of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), the Arakan National Council is, although it is unclear whether the ALP peace process would be affected by any future UNFC decisions.

The April peace talks were the first negotiations that the organisation has had with the Government since its formation. The ALP talks, along with agreements made with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-K), are a further sign that the Government is serious about inviting all armed opposition to the negotiating table. The signed agreement, similar to those with groups at the first stages of negotiation, focused on five main points:

- a) Any offensive military operations between Burma's Tatmadaw and the Arakan Liberation Party will cease beginning April 6th 2012.
- b) To facilitate further bilateral talks, consultations, and discussions, the Arakan Liberation Party will set up its consulates as per agreement in the following locations:
 - (i) Paletwa
 - (ii) Kyauktaw
- c) During the cease-fire period, any armed-personnel manoeuvres beyond the territories which are bilaterally approved for such exercise will be undertaken only after bilateral negotiations.
- d) During the cease-fire period, the Government of Myanmar will facilitate movement in its territory to unarmed personnel of the ALP for travel purposes across the border
- e) The peace-building teams designated respectively by the government of Rakhine State and the Arakan Liberation Party will further negotiate on issues regarding peace and development in Rakhine State at an approved location and time.⁶

A major issue that may cause some concern is the opening of the ALP office in Paletwa in Chin State. While the ALP General Secretary Khaing Soe Naing Aung has stated that he believes as long as there is mutual respect between the Chin National Front (CNF) and the ALP there should be no problems,⁷ there have been some concerns from the Chin community with a least one government employee in Paletwa quoted in media as saying:

We could accept it if they were a Chin political party. It is not acceptable for us to allow them to set up their office in Paletwa. It is not their territory. The authorities should have consulted the Chin State government before making a decision on this issue⁸

A village elder from the Khumi ethnicity is quoted in the same article also noting that:

The central authorities ought to have consulted local people about this issue. We are not Arakanese. We cannot accept any other national armed group in our area. The Burmese government should have consulted local Khumi people before signing an agreement.

While such concerns seem to be somewhat premature there does appear to be a strong movement within the exiled Chin community and a number of local politicians to block the move. Salai Ceu Bik Thawng, General Secretary of the Chin National Party (CNP), which won 9 seats in the 2010 election, as stated that

I am worried that there will be clashes between Chin and Rakhine people over this issue because it is very sensitive. This problem will not be solved by democratic means and a federal system but will lead to racial problems.⁹

Such a view is also shared by Dr. No Than Kap, Chairman of the Chin Progressive Party (CPP) and Chin Affairs Minister of Sagaing Division, who noted that if the ALP office is opened in Paletwa then Chin people would not accept it.¹⁰

While the ALP has agreed to further talks they still have some concerns regarding the sincerity of the Government especially in relation to the 2008 constitution which continues to ensure military dominance of Parliament. Another issue they would also like to see addressed is the Shwe Gas Project off the Arakan coast. The 'Shwe' offshore fields will be connected by a 2,800 kilometre pipeline that will pump 12 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually to China. The project is likely to severely damage the Arakan fishing industry, cause environmental damage and will also result in land confiscation. Despite these however, the ALP still remains optimistic that future talks will provide further opportunities for peace.

Notes

¹ Personal correspondence with Arakan leader, 11 December 2009

² 'Arakanese join Karen rebel ambush', Naw Noreen, DVB, 17 October 2011

³ Personal correspondence with Arakan leader, 11 December 2009

⁴ Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS), Peace and Security Review, Vol.4, No.8, Second Quarter, 2011 p20

⁵ <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2006/09/06RANGOON1288.html>

⁶ Personal correspondence with ALP vice-president Khaing Soe Naing Aung received 16 May 2012

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ 'Chin leaders oppose ALP's liaison office in Paletwa' Khonumthung, 12 April 2012

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.