



BRIEFING PAPER NO.8

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ENDURING PEACE IN SHAN STATE

THE RESTORATION COUNCIL OF SHAN STATE /SHAN STATE ARMY AND THE CONTINUING PEACE PROCESS¹

On the 19 May 2012, the Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army (RCSS/SSA) met in Kengtung to further consolidate the current peace process. The meeting was held to build on other meetings that have taken place since the 19 November 2011 (for further information see BCES BP No.1). Despite 17 clashes occurring throughout this initial period,² the RCSS/SSA has remained committed to securing peace in the country and thus signed a new 12-point agreement with the Government's Union Peace Working Committee (UPWC). The points agreed to were:

1. The RCSS/SSA plan to cooperate in the eradication of illicit drugs is heartily received by the UPWC to be forwarded to the President for consideration
2. The two sides will conduct a joint field survey for the resettlement of displaced people
3. The government will assist families of the RCSS/SSA members to earn adequate means of livelihood
4. The government will assist the RCSS/SSA in the preservation and promotion of Shan literature and culture
5. The RCSS/SSA is permitted to request assistance from and coordinate with NGOs and INGOs
6. The RCSS/SSA will be allowed to register its Tai Freedom news agency after the new media law comes into effect
7. Members and supporters of RCSS/SSA who are in prison will be released except for those who have been imprisoned on criminal charges
8. A peace monitoring group will be formed before the end of July 2012 after nomination by the two sides of suitable persons
9. The two sides will continue to build up mutual trust to enable the RCSS/SSA to be totally withdrawn from the list of unlawful associations
10. A special industrial zone will be set up in the area controlled by the RCSS/SSA

11. The RCSS/SSA is free to hold political consultations with individuals, groups and communities throughout the country
12. National ID cards will be issued to members, family members and people residing with the RCSS/SSA³

This was the first meeting for the reorganised UWPC led by Minister of Railways, Aung Min, to also include high-level military officials including Gen. Soe Win, Deputy Commander-in-Chief and commanders from the Triangle, Central and Eastern commands. The inclusion of the Army commanders allowed the two sides to directly address the confusion over military issues.

Despite the agreement there still remain a number of concerns. The Burmese Army is insistent that the Shan State Army – South move all of its units north of the Salween and in Eastern Shan State down to the Thai border. The RCSS has made it clear that it is not prepared to relocate its troops until a substantive political settlement has been reached.

The taxation of villagers is also a worry that needs to be addressed. The RCSS has agreed that it would gradually reduce and finally cut village taxation when an alternative can be found. U Aung Min has offered to assist the RCSS in this endeavour by providing money and rice not only to SSA-South troops but also to IDPs that fall under RCSS jurisdiction. At present there are an estimated 8,000 IDPs (primarily Lahu, Akha and Pa-O) in the Mongta area.

To further support itself in the future the RCSS set up a company ‘Shan Taungdan Cherry’ in April 2012 and a business liaison office was set up in Muse. In addition the RCSS has set up liaison offices in Kangtung, Tachilek, Mongsat, Khotang and Taungyi. It is not yet clear whether the Norwegian Peace Initiative, which supports KNU liaison offices in Karen State, will also provide funding for those in Shan State.

A more recent issue that has caused some concern is conflict with the UWSA. The UWSA are under the misapprehension that the Government has allowed SSA-South troops to set up bases near its own troop positions. The RCSS, anticipating such concerns in relation to its ceasefire, had already sent a letter, dated 17 February 2012, to UWSA Chairman Bao Youxiang stating that:

The government led by U Thein Sein have included an agreement on Monghta and Homong sub-townships where your forces have also maintained a presence, and we would like to discuss with you on how we can continue to live and let live together.

The Burmese military has explained to us that the reason it is not withdrawing from the area is because it is worried we might take to fighting against each other if it is not there. As for us, we think it will be better for both of us if the Burmese military withdraws. We therefore would like to consult with you how you would propose to do in the event that you were asked to withdraw (from the Homong-Monghta area) by the Burmese military.⁴

The UWSA did not respond to the request and as the peace process continued a number of Shan IDPs began farming rice and maize in areas close to UWSA positions. As a result, believing that the RCSS had violated their territorial integrity, UWSA brigades 772 and 778, based at these locations respectively, laid siege to the SSA’s Loi Gawaan base, opposite Chiang Rai’s Mae Fa Luang district, on the 16 June 2012. The siege lasted until the 19 June 2012 when a 4-point agreement was made between the two sides. The agreement noted that:

- The SSA agrees not to establish new bases closer to those of the UWSA

- Non-encroachment on each other's territory
- Notification of one's movements to the other in common territory
- Agreement for Shan IDPs to resume their farming projects⁵

Although an agreement has been made, the siege does raise serious concerns in relation to how the Burmese Government is responding to, or are aware of, the needs of other ethnic groups living in overlapping areas. As noted in other briefing papers the possibility of conflict between different ethnic groups can occur in Chin State due to the granting of an office to the Arakan Liberation Party and also in Karen State between the Karen National Union and New Mon State Party. This issue along with the failure of the Burmese Government to rein in its armed forces continues to be a major obstacle in the trust building process.

Since the 19 May 2012 meeting, there have been seven clashes (bringing the total since starting the process to 24) between the Burma Army and the Shan State Army – South. These clashes, which are usually described as 'area clearing operations' by the Burma Army which also claims that the SSA-South forces 'were in the way', are hardly likely to build trust in the continuing process and further calls in to question the ability of the UPWC, even with military inclusion, to fully implement the peace process. Despite such problems, however, optimism still remains high.

Notes

¹ The author would like to thank Sai Kheunsai Jaiyen, interviewed on 7 and 19 June 2012, for his help in preparing this briefing.

² 'RCSS/SSA and Naypyitaw have agreed on 11 points on peace talks' SHAN, 20 May 2012

³ Unofficial translation, 'The 12 point agreement', SHAN, 23 May 2012

⁴ 'Shan, Wa reach agreement', SHAN, 19 June 2012

⁵ Ibid.