

A 'Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement'—for What?

Is Myanmar's military laying the groundwork for peace, or setting the stage for an assault on its most formidable enemy?

By BERTIL LINTNER

If blogs that normally reflect the strategic thinking of Myanmar's military leadership are to be believed, the hitherto peaceful Wa Hills may become a battlefield when this year's rainy season is over.

Military action against the United Wa State Army (UWSA) would no doubt be popular among the Myanmar public at large, which sees the group as a stooge of China. Even the international community would most likely be sympathetic to a campaign to clip the wings of the UWSA. Unlike other armed groups in Myanmar, the UWSA is perceived internationally as a drug-trafficking organization, not a group fighting for ethnic rights or some political ideal. Several of its top leaders have been indicted on drug trafficking charges by a US court.

But the plan to attack the UWSA could also explain why the government wants to see a nationwide ceasefire agreement signed with all other ethnic groups no later than August. Political talks can be held later, the government says.

If the blogs are correct, what they are saying actually casts doubt on the government's overall policy towards the ethnics: Is it meant to find a lasting

solution to Myanmar's decades-long ethnic strife, or is it just a clever divide-and-rule strategy to defeat the other groups by a variety of means, including wearing them down at the negotiating table?

For there is nothing to indicate that the military is prepared to give in to the demands of, for instance, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and other more genuine ethnic groups that seek a return to the federal system of government that Myanmar had before the 1962 military takeover.

In his speech to mark this year's Armed Forces Day on March 27, Commander-in-Chief Snr.-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing held the ethnic groups responsible for the violence in the country's ethnic areas and said: "We made peace agreements, but that doesn't mean we are afraid to fight. We are afraid of no one. There is no insurgent group we cannot fight or dare not to fight."

Exactly two years earlier, on Armed Forces Day 2012, Snr.-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing also made it clear that there was little room for negotiation on fundamental political issues, saying, "The military has an obligation to defend the Constitution and will

continue to take part in politics as it has done in the past."

In February of this year, the Tatmadaw, or Myanmar armed forces, conducted a massive military exercise in a central part of the country codenamed "Anawrahta" after the founder of the first Myanmar Empire, who reigned from Bagan from 1044 to 1077 and is one of Myanmar's celebrated warrior kings.

According to Hla Oo's Blog, a pro-military website, the war game consisted of "a combined Infantry-Airforce-Tanks-Missiles-Artillery assault on an enemy's fixed position" like the UWSA's headquarters at Panghsang on the Chinese border. The blog pointed out that a similar war game took place in March 2012 and was "then followed by a large-scale ground and aerial assault on KIA's Laiza Headquarters in December 2012."

This time, "the large-scale assault will be short but brutally decisive" as the Tatmadaw now has "massive firepower" including "short-range tactical missiles and heavy artillery." The aim would be to "smash" the UWSA and drive "the Chinese Wa," as they are referred to, "back into China." If successful, Myanmar's military would emerge stronger and perhaps also more popular than before—which could increase the chances of the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party doing well in the 2015 general election.

Military observers note that the government signed a ceasefire agreement with the KIA in February 1994—and then attacked the Karen National Union (KNU), capturing its Manerplaw headquarters in January 1995. In January 2012, the government signed a ceasefire agreement with the KNU—and later that year launched a massive attack against Laiza. Even if there may be little sympathy for the UWSA among other ethnic armies in Myanmar, agreeing to a ceasefire in August would nevertheless neutralize them and make it easier to attack Panghsang before the end of the year.

If it did decide to mount a decisive assault on the UWSA, however, the Tatmadaw would have to be prepared to face the armed group's Man-Portable

Air Defense Systems, or MANPADS, and other sophisticated military equipment it has obtained from China over the past few decades. No other rebel army in Myanmar is as heavily armed and militarily as strong as the UWSA.

So far, little or no attention has been paid to the Myanmar military's strategic thinking in regards to the so-called "peace process." Discussions have centered on "a nationwide ceasefire," after which a "political dialogue" may be held. The government's own outfit, the Myanmar Peace Center, has received massive funding from the European Union and other international donors, while a cabal of foreign "peacemakers" and "reconciliation experts" are flocking to the country to get their share of the pie.

The problem is that few if any of those "foreign experts" have a very deep understanding of the complexities of Myanmar's ethnic problems. And, as critics are also eager to point out, these "experts" are paid more in one month than an ordinary Myanmar worker can earn in five years or more. "Peacemaking" has become a very lucrative industry in Myanmar—at least for the foreign experts and their organizations. And so far, no one has discovered that it is, in fact, a very shrewd strategy designed to outmaneuver and neutralize the non-Bamar ethnic groups without giving in to any of their demands.

While the leaders of the ethnic armies are being bribed with car-import licenses and other economic incentives, many of their followers are unhappy with those arrangements. The result is discord and even splits within those groups and between the various



Armed Forces Commander-in-Chief Snr.-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing salutes the national flag during a parade in Naypyitaw in March.

PHOTO: REUTERS

government. Today, 17 years later, no less than 80 rounds of talks have been held in what clearly amounts to delaying tactics on the part of the Indian government. Meanwhile, the NSCN's fighters are getting used to a comfortable life in so-called "peace camps"—and the Naga public is turning against them. They continue to demand "taxes" from the public while the leaders are becoming corrupt, spending the money they have collected on new houses and cars.

A similar development could be seen in Kachin State between the KIA's signing of a ceasefire agreement in 1994 and when the government decided to break it in 2011. During those 17 years, the KIA lost much of the popular support it had preciously enjoyed—while the government's attacks over the past two and a half years have galvanized the Kachin nation and made the rebels heroes in the eyes of most Kachins.

The KIA is not likely to repeat the mistake it made in 1994—nor would the "Naga model" work in Myanmar. The NSCN is only one group and it wants to separate Nagaland from India. Myanmar has more than a dozen ethnic armies, and they want federalism, a far more reasonable and realistic demand.

So will killing Myanmar's ethnic groups with sugar-coated bullets and military action against the UWSA work? One has to consider why the ethnic rebels took up arms in the first place. A nationwide ceasefire agreement will only freeze the problem, not solve it.

And if the offensive against the heavily armed UWSA fails, the Myanmar military is in serious trouble. Whatever the outcome, the foreign peacemakers can always carry on to another conflict zone on the globe—and leave a mess behind in Myanmar. ■

ethnic armies, making this an effective divide-and-conquer game to defeat the ethnic resistance.

In most other peace processes, talks are held first and agreements are signed when a consensus has been reached. No signatures are required for the preceding ceasefire that could be agreed upon verbally. But in Myanmar, the government and the foreign peacemakers are putting the cart before the horse, asking for an agreement to be signed first and then vague promises of talks later.

The model for that kind of strategy would be a somewhat similar peace process in the Indian state of Nagaland. In 1997, the insurgent National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN; the Isaac and Muivah faction) signed a ceasefire agreement with the Indian