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## Myanmar's National Reconciliation An Audit of Insurgencies and Ceasefires

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## Abstract

Myanmar's positive transformation in the past year in the political, administrative as well as legal realm has made the country a sought after destination. Even then, the country is miles away from durable peace. A number of ceasefire agreements with the ethnic armed insurgencies notwithstanding, peace remains tenuous. Unless both the government and the ethnic groups demonstrate continued commitment towards peace, the country's new found tranquillity may return to a state of hostility.

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# Myanmar's National Reconciliation

## An Audit of Insurgencies and Ceasefires



**Bibhu Prasad Routray**  
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Myanmar has undergone positive transformation; even the handful of scholars, disputing the real intentions of the military backed civilian regime, agree that the a wind of change has swept across the country, bringing about changes thought to be highly improbable few years ago. Since March 2011, changes continue to occur in the political, administrative as well as legal realm. Sanctions have been lifted and diplomatic relations between the erstwhile pariah country and the western nations have resumed.

However, even a transformed Myanmar is still miles away from durable peace. Notwithstanding numerous ceasefire agreements the government has signed with the ethnic armed insurgencies, peace remains tenuous. Encounters, albeit at a low scale, continue between the Kachins and the Myanmar army, underlining the distrust of the periphery with the centre. Hurriedly signed ceasefire agreements continue to show occasional signs of fragility. Unless both the government and the ethnic groups demonstrate continued commitment towards peace, the country's new found tranquility may return to a state of hostility.

### I ETHNIC INSURGENCIES

At least 16 armed groups claim to represent the interests of Myanmar's plethora of ethnic groups. The history of ethnic armed rebellions, centred around issues of cessation and greater rights over natural resources, has been marked by unending upheavals in the forms of splits, opportunistic alliances and intense conflicts with the central forces. In recent times, twelve of these sixteen ethnic groups have come together under an umbrella organization - the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), formed in February 2011 with the purported objective of establishing a 'Genuine Federal Union, which guarantees full rights of National Equality and Self-determination within the States'.

The UNFC has two levels of membership depending on the strength of the political and armed wings, control area and the number of supporters. While six groups have been given full membership, the other six are associate member groups. Full members include Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), Karen National Union (KNU), New Mon State Party (NMSP), Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), Chin National Front (CNF) and the Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army (SSA). The associate members are the Kachin National Organization (KNO), Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF), Lahu Democratic Union (LDU), National United Party of Arakan (NUPA), Pa-O National Liberation Organization (PNLO) and Wa National Organization (WNO)

#### Major Insurgent Groups: A Brief Profile

*The United Wa State Army (UWSA)*, with a cadre strength of 20,000 is Myanmar's largest ethnic insurgent group. It was formed in May 1989 after the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) disintegrated, leading to the creation of several armed ethnic groups in the far north. The group

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seeks the establishment of an autonomous Wa State within Myanmar's national borders. Following its split from the CPB, UWSA signed a ceasefire agreement with the central government, which recognised the group's territory in northern Shan state and its headquarters in Panghsang and Mongpawk. This tactical arrangement with the military regime allowed "UWSA commanders to profit from involvement in the narcotics trade while running an essentially autonomous state in its area of control with little interference from the junta. In return, the UWSA acts as a proxy force against other ethnic rebel groups who remain militarily opposed to the junta, such as the Shan State Army - South."

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*The Kachin Independence Army (KIA)*, with 10,000 regular troops and 10,000 reserves, is the armed wing of the KIO operating in Myanmar's north, along the border with China. It was formed in 1961 asking for independence following a military coup by General Ne Win. Ne KIA fought a guerrilla war against the government forces till 1994, when a ceasefire agreement was signed by both sides. The KIA has since renounced its goal of independence and seeks 'autonomy within a federal union of Burma'. The ceasefire with the government troops allowed the organisation to control a large swathe in northern Myanmar, making them the defacto rulers. The KIO "provide power, roads and schools funded by taxes on the brisk trade from China as well as the jade and gold mines and teak." KIA's headquarters is outside the town of Laiza, near the Chinese border.

*The Karen National Union (KNU)* is the oldest of the armed groups in Myanmar. It describes itself as "a democratic organisation representing the Karen people of Burma" and its goal as "peace and prosperity in a democratic federal Burma". This predominantly Christian insurgency has been fighting the central government since the very early days of the country's independence from Britain six decades ago. The KNU have been one of the strongest of the ethnic insurgencies in Myanmar. At one time they boasted an army of 14,000 men and controlled much territory along the eastern border. However, in recent years their operations have been reduced to relatively small-scale guerrilla attacks on army troops. Large numbers of Karen villagers have fled their homes, in one of the world's least reported refugee crises, and about 100,000 still live in rudimentary camps on the Thai side of the border.

*The New Mon State Party (NMSP)* was formed in July 1958 under the leadership of Nai Shwe Kyin alias Nai Ba Lwin, after the Mon People's Front (MPF) surrendered to the central government. The MPF had launched an armed rebellion since 1948 and surrendered after the government promised an autonomous Mon state. Few MPF dissidents were not convinced and went on to form the NMSP. The Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA), NMSP's military wing, formally founded as its armed wing on 29 August 1971, is one of the smaller armed ethnic minority groups in the country with about 1000 cadres based in the hills of Southeast Myanmar.

The objective of the NMSP/MNLA is to establish autonomy for the Mon-inhabited areas of southeastern Myanmar. The group claims that it is fighting to "establish an independent sovereign state unless the Burmese government is willing to permit a confederation of free nationalities exercising full right of self-determination inclusive of the right of secession". (Janes Intelligence, 2012)

*The Shan State Army (SSA)* was formed in 1964 but split immediately into two factions- SSA-North and SSA-South. The SSA-North aligned itself with the central government till 2011, when fighting broke out with the Myanmar troops, following the former's refusal to become a BGF. However, in late January 2012, the outfit agreed for a truce with the government. The SSA-South too signed a ceasefire agreement with the government in December 2011. The SSA-South is a member of a parallel ethnic alliance called National Democratic Front which was formed in 1976. That was cited as the reason when the SSA-South did not opt to join the UNFC. SSA-South has a strength of 10000 cadres and has a wide repository of arms.

*The Chin National Front (CNF)* was formed on 20 March 1988. Its military wing, the Chin National Army (CNA) was constituted on 14 November 1988. It seeks autonomy for Chin State within Myanmar. According to a CNF statement, the group was "founded out of a desire to

defend the rights of the Chin people from the Burmese military dictatorship that seeks to annihilate the Chin cultural, religious and ethnic identities, and to build a federated Union of Burma based on respect for human rights, democracy and equality for all ethnic nationalities." In recent years, the group has broken up into several factions, leaving the mainstream CNF with about 200 cadres.

*Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)* pursues an autonomy demand in the Myanmar-Thailand border area. The DKBA had split from its mother organization, the KNLA's political wing, the KNU, in 1995. In 2010, the DKBA itself split into two factions after its Brigade 5, with an estimated 1500 troops walked away from the mother group of 6000 cadres and restarted armed conflict with government troops. The move followed after DKBA was forced by the government to join the BGF and observe a ceasefire agreement with the government since 1995. On 7 November 2010, DKBA Brigade 5 temporarily took control of several government buildings in the town of Myawaddy on the Thai border and the fighting that followed forced over 20,000 people to flee to Thailand. (Saw Yan Naing, 2012)

*The Arakan Liberation Army (ALA)* is the military wing of the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), which was established in 1967 demanding the independence of the western Rakhine state from the then Burma. The ALA was formed in the early 1970s with assistance from the KNU through an 'agreement of assistance'. The ALA had a long history of skirmishes with the troops till the first week of April 2012, when it signed a ceasefire agreement with the government. The ALA's cadres strength, however, has been estimated at only 100 fighting men.

## II

### NATIONAL RECONCILIATION: AN AUDIT

Control over lucrative border trade sustained Myanmar's insurgencies for decades. Similarly, the prospect of international investment and trade, linked to stability in the ethnic minority inhabited areas, undeniably plays an important role in pushing the peace agreements. Resource-rich ethnic minority regions are crucial for Myanmar to link up with neighbouring countries via large infrastructure projects. As Myanmar embarked on a journey to open itself up, it was expedient that its restive periphery is stabilised, in order to take fully exploit the untapped resources.

#### Ceasefire Agreements

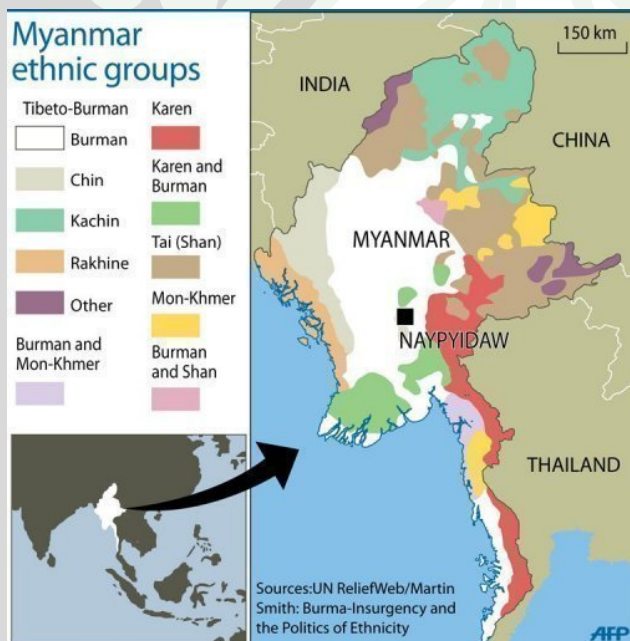
Attempts to establish peace with the ethnic insurgents have had an infamous past in Myanmar. The Kachin, Shan, and Chin ethnic groups have bitter memories of the 1947 Panglong Agreement. Promise by the Aung San regime that these ethnic groups would have 'full autonomy in internal administration' was never implemented. On the contrary, the nationalisation campaign involved suppression of local languages and cultures, a range of discrimination against non-Buddhists in jobs and education, and destroying non-Buddhist places of worship. Not surprisingly, fighting with the troops, rather than trusting the peaceful intentions of the ruling regime was the principle that marked the attitude of the periphery towards the centre. Following the 1988 military coup, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in the 1990s reached ceasefire agreements with various ethnic armed groups. Barring the agreement with the Kachins, however, none of the deals involved signed documents promising political dialogues. Over the years, these informal "gentlemen's agreements' with the intelligence service that were sealed with a handshake" (EBO, 2013), gradually lost much of their meaning and collapsed as the military tried to incorporate ethnic armies as Border Guard Forces (BGFs).

A renewed attempt at peace was launched in April 2009, with the Tatmadaw delivering an ultimatum to the ethnic groups to become BGFs under the national army command. Before the BGF formula was brought in, the Army had maintained that the insurgent groups could keep their arms and negotiate with the new elected government for a political solution. Most of the larger ethnic groups refused to become BGFs, leading to the start of a military offensive against

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them towards mid-2009. However, this phase of armed offensive remained rather brief in view of the 7 November 2010 general elections, which necessitated the full commitment of the army.

After taking office in March 2011, President Thein Sein declared that the ethnic conflicts are rooted in “dogmatism, sectarian strife, and racism,” and that the country cannot move forward without lasting peace. The new government started implementing a four stage-step plan for peace with the insurgent groups that involved a preliminary and then durable ceasefire stage; initial political dialogue; resolution of underlying political problems with national reconciliation; and finally political participation. The government offered more flexible terms, including dropping the demand for the groups to become BGFs. This appeared to have convinced some of the major ethnic groups to sign peace agreements and others to agree to verbal ceasefires and subsequently ink written agreements. By December 2012, 13 rebel groups had signed some form of agreements with the government. The current round of ceasefires do contain certain differences with past rounds – notably that ceasefires are now treated as part of a process towards inclusive political dialogue, rather than solutions to a security problem. In May 2012, Aung Min said that his government is planning to hold an all-inclusive ethnic conference to discuss national reconciliation and the future of ethnic minorities in the union. “We will try to fulfil the demand of our national brethren in line with the constitution through the future conference,” he said. (The Nation, 24 May 2012) Although the conference still remains a distant affair, each of these widely reported written agreements does demonstrate some degree of official sincerity conspicuous by its absence on previous occasions.



### Fragility & Red Herring

Invariably, fast tracking of the peace negotiations leading to signing of ceasefire agreements was spurred by the desire of the government to abide by the conditionalities imposed by United States and the European Union for lifting of economic sanctions. As a result, some of the ceasefire agreements between the government and the insurgents broke down with the swiftness with which they had been inked. The other agreements came under strain with the ethnic armies threatening to walk out of the deals unless the government brings in constitutional reforms transforming Myanmar from a unitary to a federal state. The details of the ceasefires remains murky and appear to be a mix of misunderstanding and back-peddalling by the rebel group's

leadership.

The SSA-North, for example, entered into a ceasefire agreement with the government in January 2012. However, within weeks both sides fought each other after the troops attacked a SSA-North outpost. Issues such as allowing each other's soldiers to pass through the territories each side controls has remained a contentious issue in the absence of a final agreement on demarcating the zones of control.

Similarly, media reports in February 2012 indicated that the ceasefire signed between the DKBA's 5 Brigade and the government had broken down following hostilities between the two sides in Pa-an district of southern Karen State. The 5 Brigade alleged that the joint force of army and BGF troops carried out a raid on a military base of the outfit on 19 February 2012 and seized a cache of weapons including AK-47s, AR-15 rifles and RPGs. The Brigade 5 unit subsequently carried out an attack on the joint force in Myaing Gyi Nyu township killing three and injuring two soldiers.

Similarly, almost 20 days after it signed a preliminary ceasefire, the KNU insisted that there is no ceasefire between the two sides. Till late February 2012, the KNU kept complaining that the government troops are still holding on to their areas within the ethnic areas. It asked the government to reduce troop numbers and stop sending re-enforcements and supplies to ethnic

areas. Karens were worried that government troops will launch attacks against the KNLA bases once they stock up on rations, supplies and manpower. In August 2012, several months into the ceasefire agreement, the Karens warned of renewed conflict unless the government begins to pursue politically meaningful negotiations with ethnic groups. (Hanna Hindstrom, 2012)

Three months after the ceasefire agreement was signed between the SSA-South, skirmishes continued between both sides. Under the ceasefire agreement, the two sides are required to give advance notice before they enter each other's territories. However, the SSA-South alleged on 4 January 2013 that since the ceasefire agreement, both sides have fought each other at least 50 times, primarily due to the 'invasion' of the Myanmar army of the outfit's territory. Such aberrations notwithstanding, all the ceasefire agreements have remained in place.

### The Kachin Tangle

Amidst such successes of establishing peace in the strife-ridden border regions, at least one group appeared determined to stick to a fighting mode. The Kachin state in Myanmar's north remained untouched by the wave of reforms sweeping across the country. While the rest of the country took part in the historic by-elections in the country that returned a record number of candidates belonging to the National League for Democracy (NLD) including Aung San Suu Kyi to the parliament in April 2012, polls in Kachin never took place.

Following the breakdown of a 17-year old ceasefire, fighting erupted in June 2011 between the KIA and the Tatmadaw. The breakdown happened after the government pressed the KIA to accept a process that either merges the KIA with the army or disarms its fighters. In fact, anticipating a resumption to fighting, the KIA since late 2009 had started recalling its veteran cadres and retrained them. Immediate reasons cited for the continuation of the offensives is the struggle for resources; Kachin state's mountain jungles and river valleys contain massive untapped wealth of timber, minerals and – most critically – Chinese-financed energy projects contracted by the former military junta. It is no coincidence that some of the fiercest clashes have taken place near a pair of major pipelines, in nearby Shan state, which is scheduled to pump oil and gas to Yunnan province starting 2013. (Economist, September 2012)

Attempting to force the KIA into negotiations, the Tatmadaw appeared to be pursuing a policy of applying maximum force, mobilising at least 10 combat divisions in the rebel strongholds. From a strategic point of view, tactical offensive against a recalcitrant rebel group was deemed expedient for a strategy that aimed to establish tranquility in a hurry. Given that such tactics had previously worked in case of other outfits, Naypidaw's preferences were clear. The SSA-North, a decade long ally of the government had fallen out with the government after it refused to be a BGF. A ceasefire agreement was signed with the group in January 2012 after Tatmadaw used a light infantry division led offensive targeting the group's assets starting November 2010.

Further, the fighting underlined the President's limited control over the army. Despite a December 2011 order by President Thein Sein to the army to end offensive operations, fighting continued. Thein Sein had asked the army to fire only in self-defence. For the initial months, the army maintained that presidential orders did not reach the soldiers fighting in the advanced frontier. Afterwards, the 'firing in self-defence' clause was used to continue the offensive. Armed offensives continued along with several rounds of peace talks between government negotiators and leaders of the KIA's political wing, the KIO, both in Yunnan province over the border in China and in Maijyang, in Kachin state. In September 2012, Thein Sein wanted the KIO team to hold its next round of peace talks with the government in the capital Naypyidaw, after efforts to agree on a location in the northern region or in China stalled. Chief peace negotiator



Source:  
<http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21571168-burmese-government-rakes-more-foreign-aid-money-while-its-army-kills-more-ethnic>

proposed to the Kachin leadership that they travel to the Myanmar capital for the next round of negotiations.

Starting April 2012, the KIA launched several attacks on non-military targets such as passenger trains, railway tracks and bridges on the Myitkyina-Mandalay railroad. On 18 May, the KIA rebels reportedly blew up four electricity towers of a power grid in Namkham in Shan State, thus affecting power supply across the nation. On 19 May, KIA reportedly blew up two civilian trucks after extorting about 80,000 kyat (US\$100) from the drivers. Of late, the government, under its perception management strategy, has attempted to highlight these incidents, locally as well as internationally. It hoped that international pressure, if not the 'generous' ceasefire offers, would be able to nudge the KIA rebels to negotiate a peace agreement. (Routray, IPCS, 2012)

*The government's ceasefire offer had initiated a flurry of activities both within Myanmar and outside. On 23 January 2013, the UNFC announced that it had agreed to hold talks with the government to end the Kachin conflict. On 31 January, presidential spokesman Ye Htut confirmed that a new round of peace talks with Kachin rebels will be hosted by the UWSA.*

By September 2012, the KIA's fighting ability appeared to be waning, although it had not reached a level of desperation. The KIO in a statement on 15 September urged the military to end its operations to bolster contact between the sides. The KIO spokesperson said that, "(The government) should stop launching offensives in Kachin State. If they do the situation in Kachin state will stabilise at some point. Relations with them (the government) have almost been cut," he said, adding that renewed dialogue is possible if both sides show "restraint". (Dawn, September 2012)

On the contrary, a new phase of military offensive against the Kachins, termed by the media as a "decisive military operation" started in December 2012. A video shot by Chiangmai based humanitarian group Free Burma Rangers showed military attack helicopters firing on the ground and jets flying close to the KIA trenches. Although the President's office denied that attack helicopters have been used in the offensive, a statement by the military on 2 January 2013 acknowledged the air strikes. The military claimed such strikes facilitated the capture of a hilltop post from where the insurgents had attacked government supply convoys.

Both the insurgents and the military suffered heavy casualties. The campaign also produced 90,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) - 30,000 in government controlled areas and 60,000 taking refuge in KIA controlled areas. Despite appeals from the international aid community, the government continued to restrict the number of convoys to deliver supplies to those sheltering in the rebel-held areas, such action influenced by the perception that humanitarian aid could be used to bolster rebel strength. On 1 March 2013, the United Nations issued a statement that it has been able to deliver some aid to more than 2,000 refugees in the Hpakant area between 17 and 21 February. The war situation pushed thousands of the refugees into China, who crossed over into the border towns such as Nabang in the Yunnan province.

### **Finally Truce?**

The Myanmar Parliament on 18 January 2013, the approved a motion calling for a ceasefire to end fighting between Kachin insurgents and the military. On the same day, President Thein Sein ordered a unilateral ceasefire to troops operating in the La Ja Yang area of Kachin State near the border with China, where fighting has been fiercest. Although the order was to take effect since the morning of 19 January, Kachins till the first week of March reported continuing shelling by the military. However, the fact remained that on ground fighting between two sides had significantly reduced unveiling the prospects for peace.

The government's ceasefire offer had initiated in a flurry of activities both within Myanmar and outside. On 23 January 2013, the UNFC announced that it had agreed to hold talks with the government to try to end the Kachin conflict. On 31 January, presidential spokesman Ye Htut confirmed that a new round of peace talks with Kachin rebels will be hosted by the UWSA group at Panghsang, the headquarters of the outfit. However, on 4 February, under Chinese supervision both the KIA and the government negotiators met in the Chinese township of Ruii. While both sides have agreed to carry forward the negotiations in the coming months, President



Thein Sein has been quick to announce the end to armed conflicts in the country. "There's no more hostilities, no more fighting all over the country, we have been able to end this kind of armed conflict", he told the media on 4 March.

### Centre and Periphery Divide

The continuing ceasefires with 13 ethnic armies and the halt to fighting with the Kachins notwithstanding, two factors continue to pose challenge to 'Project Peace' in Myanmar. One, the decades long division between the dominant Barmars and the ethnic groups. The ethnic groups have long accused Tatmadaw of its pathological dislike for federalism and for ignoring ethnic grievances. For the minorities, vivid recollections of unequal and often violent treatment serve as stark reminders to be wary of both the military and the Bamar majority. An example of this mistrust was provided by chief negotiator Aung Min during his initial sojourns into the ethnic territory. He said, "At first they didn't trust me, they carried out body searches on me for weapons, they weren't brave enough to eat food I had brought, in case I poisoned them. They didn't accept gifts and souvenirs in case there were bombs or booby-traps." (Reuters, 2012)

Second, the tactic pursued by the military junta in earlier years to subdue the armed uprisings tend to keep the gulf between the two sides wide open. In addition to the Kachins, this distrust is reflected in the frequent breaches of the ceasefire agreements already signed with most of the ethnic groups. Relative vulnerability of a seemingly well-meaning President vis-a-vis the Tatmadaw appear to be further contributing to the suspicion. The possibility of the hardliners renegeing on the peace deals loom large in the psyche of the ethnic armies. Some other analysts, however, term Thein Sein's reforms a facade "carefully choreographed to ensure the continued political and economic dominance of the military". (Randolph, 2013)

Such skepticism notwithstanding, some of President Thein Sein's moves have indeed attempted to broad base the peace process by involving the military. He constituted two new peace committees ensuring the military's involvement in the peace processes in May 2012. On 26 October, he established the Myanmar Peace Centre under the chief negotiator Aung Min. Since then the MPC has evolved as the single window service centre assisted by independent experts and analysts to assist in the peace process. These steps aimed to address one of the key weaknesses of the government- its inability to ensure the military respects the ceasefire agreements. Since according to the country's constitution, the president is not the country's commander-in-chief, his orders are, thus, not inviolable. The measure led to immediate positive developments i.e. the presence of senior army personnel during the ceasefire negotiations, providing assurances that these agreements would be complied with by the military's rank and file. The military support behind the peace process has since been reaffirmed by the Myanmar's commander-in-chief General Minister Aung Hlaing. (Ba Kaung, 2012)

### III THE WAY AHEAD

Opinions are divided on the direction of the reform process in Myanmar with its repercussions on the peace process with the ethnic minorities. While one school, dominated by the West and also by some of the Southeast Asian countries, believes that the reform process currently underway is genuine and will contribute significantly to the pacification of the insurgency movements in the country. The second school argues in the opposite. It characterises the process as propelled by pressure from the West. It argues, once the pressure begins to slacken, the reform process will slow down. It also points at the differences between the moderate and hardline factions within the government, which will affect the prospects towards any genuine reforms.

The military junta, under its previous ceasefires had allowed rebels to remain armed and create business niches in exchange for cessations of hostilities, temporarily placating rebel leaders into

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not raising issues on political dialogue. Something similar may happen this time around. Since the terms of the ceasefire treaties aren't fully transparent, experts fear that, with regard to the drug problem, the government could have allowed groups like the UWSA more freedom to expand their operations and work with the military, without worrying that the government is going to take action against them. (Joshua Kurlantzick, 2012) This will complicate the problem, with larger impact on neighbours like Thailand, other Southeast Asian countries and even India.

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Winning trust of the ethnic armed groups would remain a key challenge for the government and it is possible that the pace at which the government wishes to bring in peace to the country may arouse further suspicion among the groups. Such mistrust can easily derail the peace process unless carefully handled. It is hence necessary to slowdown the pace, consolidate on the gains achieved thus far and move forward. To that extent, an immediate halt to the offensives against the Kachins could be considered.

There is an obvious need to take the peace process beyond the ceasefires. The government would be ill advised to drown ethnic grievances with either economic incentives or military action. On the other hand, the rebels would have to learn to adapt to a possible new political agreement if the ceasefires hold, entailing the demobilisation of generations of troops. Both projects need time and immense patience from both the sides. In these circumstances, a true federal structure may be the best inclusive and peaceful option for Myanmar's myriad ethnic groups to pursue. To that extent, certain aspects of the 2008 constitution would have to be amended and more power devolved to the regional parliaments.

Myanmar, indeed, stands at the crossroads today. After a spate of reforms, superficial or otherwise, the responsibility of carrying forward 'Project Peace' in the country is the responsibility of both the government and the ethnic insurgencies. While seeking favours from the western capitals might have spurred Naypidaw's proclivity for change, for the ethnic insurgencies the change in time represents an unique opportunity to be a part of the broad movement for democracy, federalism and peace.

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*Myanmar, indeed, stands at the crossroads today. After a spate of reforms, superficial or otherwise, the responsibility of carrying forward 'Project Peace' in the country is the responsibility of both the government and the ethnic insurgencies.*



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