Sustainable peace in Myanmar

THE FUTURE OF ARMED ACTORS

A national ceasefire agreement is close to being reached in Myanmar, thereby ending 65 years of conflict. To build trust and secure sustainable peace there is an urgent need to discuss the future livelihood options for the armed actors.

Myanmar is undergoing one of the most multifaceted transition processes in recent decades: from a military regime towards democracy, and from 65 years of armed conflict in the borderlands towards stability. Since 2013 a national ceasefire agreement has been negotiated between the government and a coalition of ethnic Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs). While an agreement is anticipated to be signed in 2014, the process is contested by hardliners within both government and the NSAGs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Concrete reintegration options for middle- and low-ranked armed actors that consider the heterogeneity of aspirations can create trust in the peace process and mitigate a return to conflict.
- Conventional international programmes' emphasis on disarmament and economic incentives are unrealistic in Myanmar without political options.
- International agencies can support reintegration but need to be context-sensitive and aware of the political implications of supporting government-driven development projects.

'self-reintegrated' as members of political parties, civil society organizations or business corporations. These could be a source of inspiration.

Transforming the NSAGs into political parties would bring the leaders into mainstream competitive politics, and give lower-ranks a conduit for political expression through non-violent means. Technical assistance to run party apparatuses and engage in parliamentary politics is needed to support political integration. To secure enough seats the smaller NSAGs also need to build coalitions with the other ethnic political parties that represent the same ethnic groups. Alternatively ex-combatants could join these existing parties.

Political parties will only be attractive if NSAGs believe they can mobilize enough votes and if lower-ranks feel that they are represented. Because of the heterogeneity of ethnic constituencies, political integration will contribute most to peacebuilding, if political party competition is combined with power-sharing arrangements and positions to NSAG members within national and sub-national government. How this can be done will ultimately depend on what federal system the parties agree on. NSAGs have run administrations and at least rudimentary health, education, policing, and justice institutions. While civil service capacities should be strengthened, explicit efforts could be made to incorporate reintegration efforts with local government reform. This would give ex-combatants formal employment and contribute to political recognition at township and village levels. Here it is important to consider mid-level commanders. They are often overlooked in national political settlements, but enjoy considerable local power and prestige. Rank-and-file with low education need other options, but it is important that their concerns are heard by local government.

Besides including and training low-ranks in local infrastructural and other development projects, they could be integrated within community peace forums that help provide basic security and mediate disputes at the local level. This would give them meaningful occupation and a sense of worth, but they must be accountable to their communities so as not to become independent militias.

Another option for ex-combatants is civil society organisations, which are growing with the political openings and the influx of development agencies in search of local partners. These allow ex-combatants to address development issues and ethnic rights without armed struggle. Already there are NSAG members who have attracted foreign development funds for ceasefire areas where they are often trusted more by civilians than the government is.

Economic integration, like job creation and skills training, should form part of wider economic development efforts that also focus on transforming war economies into licit businesses and clear land ownership. To mitigate tensions, new investments should include ex-combatants and ethnic minorities. This could require explicit job-placements and help to form business corporations.

Reintegration options will ultimately depend on wider political changes, but it is important that a political settlement is capable of translating national power-sharing into local arrangements that give local actors access to power, resources and sustainable livelihoods. This implies embedding DDR within local governance reform and economic development efforts.

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Cover Photo: Christian Karen soldiers with a Baptist priest in Papun, Karen State. By Vinai Boonlue

The peace talks need to open a dialogue on how mid- and lower-ranked armed actors can be integrated into civilian life

> **"There are no real ideas about what could happen to the lower ranking soldiers. Lots of conditions need to be in place before they will even think of surrendering their arms. This can only be realized if there is real democracy. It is also about livelihood."**
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> *Local NGO coordinator, Karen State.*

A key controversy concerns the future status of the numerous NSAGs that represent different ethnic groups. They have controlled resources and trade in the borderlands for decades. The NSAG leaders demand a federal system that also allows them to retain arms. The reform-friendly government now agrees to discuss federalism, but this is not backed by the powerful Burmese Army generals. What the future political system will look like and how power and resources will be divided is unclear, and the army can still act independently of the government according to the constitution.

Meanwhile, a rapid influx of international aid agencies and foreign investors is happening on the sideline of the peace process. The international community however, is not invited to the peace negotiations. Many NSAGs and their supporters view the rolling out of government-supported development projects with suspicion, and at worst as counter-insurgency or land-grabbing. This creates mistrust in the peace process, as NSAGs may fear losing legitimacy among ethnic communities and income through control of resources and taxation.

To create trust in the peace process there is an urgent need to address the future positions and livelihood options for the armed actors. This should be an integrated part of the peace agreement process, and will in the long run support sustainable peace. So far the peace negotiations have focused on leaders. Missing is an open dialogue about what middle- and low-ranked armed actors could become in the future, and how they could be integrated into civilian life. The risk is that these actors feel forgotten and at worst turn into autonomous spheres of violence and predation and/or cause future remobilization. This matter is complicated by the fact that some NSAGs in Myanmar, including splinter groups, are not involved in the peace negotiations.

DDR is unrealistic without a political settlement

For 20 years 'Demobilisation, Disarmament and Reintegration' (DDR) programmes, targeting ex-combatants, have been a preferred instrument of international agencies in peacebuilding missions. DDR is seen as a precondition for stability and sustainable development. Myanmar could draw on DDR experiences, but this should be adjusted to specific contextual factors and be based on in-depth analyses of the heterogeneous incentives and challenges of armed actors.

In Myanmar conventional DDR is unrealistic at present. This is because disarmament and demobilisation are treated as the first steps in a DDR process and because economic incentives are seen as the route to successful integration. The NSAGs in Myanmar will not disarm before they are secured political positions, and they demand to retain ethnic armed units. Keeping arms is seen as necessary to protect ethnic civilians and secure livelihood due to continued mistrust in the Burmese army. Even speaking about disarmament can put the whole peace process at risk.

Instead of disarmament, DDR should begin with reintegration options. Typically, DDR programmes focus on economic reintegration concerned with income and occupation. Undeniably, these are

important to draw ex-combatants away from fighting and criminality, but this should not overlook politics and power. As testified by the 1990s ceasefires in Myanmar, the granting of land, cash and businesses to NSAG did not put an end to fighting, because some groups refused a deal without political options. This calls for a combination of different reintegration options.

Reintegration options for armed actors

Some NSAG members will likely be integrated within a reformed military, but this should be coupled with wider security sector reform that also considers other security forces like the police. For other ex-combatants political and economic reintegration is needed. Some ethnic armed actors have already

THE ROLE FOR INTERNATIONAL AID AGENCIES

If the government invites international donors to assist a future DDR process in Myanmar, there are valuable experiences from elsewhere to draw on. Donors can support in-depth analyses of sustainable reintegration options and assist with skills-training and capacity building. Assistance should not be depoliticised technical exercises that overlook the political implications of DDR or divorce DDR from wider reform efforts. Currently international aid and investments risk undermining peacebuilding and ethnic minority concerns, because projects are being rolled out before there is any political settlement.