

## **Ethnic wars must end for Burma to be ‘on the right track’ to democracy and development**

*Helen Joe*



*(A child suffering from diarrhea in Laiza, camp no. 8 with a population of 8000 people in August 2011. Photo: Banyar Kong Janoi, freelance journalist.)*

Beneath a makeshift roof in the misty morning, a funeral took place on Friday, 2 December 2011 for an eight-year-old Kachin boy who died from diarrhea the night before in a refugee camp in Laiza, Kachin. The boy's mother was suffering from cholera and malaria too. She did not know when would be the last day in her life, or if she could even survive another day. She had no money for the medicine and food she needed, nor did she know how to obtain any money. Sometimes she would just kneel on the concrete floor where she slept at night and pray that the civil war would end soon. She also prayed for the consolation of the sick and hungry children whose cries could be heard everywhere around the camps.

Finally, she would pray that God would give her strength to fight the illness that haunted her. Even though there were doctors and nurses in the camp, they could not give her much attention because they had to take care of other patients who might have been queuing for three days or so.

Kachin state, where the camps are located, is situated in the northern part of Burma, which has been home to the longest running civil wars with the military for more than five decades. Thousands of people have since fled their homes to escape the fighting and associated human rights abuses, with an estimated 50,000 internally displaced persons scattered around the state. Forty of these are in and around Laiza, the headquarters of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), where there has been a recent outbreak of cholera due to lack of sanitation and clean water.<sup>1</sup>

In Burma, ethnic wars are happening not only in Kachin State, but also in many other areas across the country populated by ethnic groups. While some areas may look peaceful, the military dictatorship has been exploiting the local ethnic minorities for over 60 years.

Ethnicity is a longstanding unsolved issue in Burma that has become a major bone of contention. Burma has officially 135 ethnic groups making up 40 percent of Burma's population, and more than 20 armed ethnic groups have fought against the government. For a long period of time, considering these ethnic groups as second class has been common in Burma. The principle of marginalizing them has resulted in their isolation from military rule. These are the reasons for the emergence of armed ethnic groups who have been fighting for greater autonomy from the majority Burma-led central government since independence from the British in 1948.

In the landmark year 2011, when Burma was seen as dramatically transforming towards democracy, the military conflict with these armed groups continued. In remote, indigenous populated areas, the military government is systematically committing crimes and human right violations against the people, including forced labor, religious persecution, human minesweepers, disappearances, torture, rape and widespread pillaging, looting, extrajudicial killings, as well as occasionally burning villages.<sup>2</sup> Both insurgents and local residents are targeted. These acts are not easily forgotten, making the ethnic population more distrustful of the army and government.

The new government has not raised the urgent issue of military reform, and these military abuses persist. The government continues to suppress dissent through a raft of repressive laws and the lack of an independent judiciary.

A 58-year-old Kachin farmer, who said all his possessions had been taken by the Burmese army, told Human Rights Watch, "We lost our homes and properties to the Burmese soldiers several times. That is why I don't have hope in this situation."<sup>3</sup>

In an interview with Asian Calling, Khun Oo reh, the general secretary of the Karenni Progressive Party, stated,

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1 <http://www.mizzima.com/special/kachin-battle-report/6525-cholera-outbreak-in-kachin-refugee-camps.html>

2 [https://s3.amazonaws.com/PHR\\_Reports/Burma-KachinRpt-ExecSum11.30.2011.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/PHR_Reports/Burma-KachinRpt-ExecSum11.30.2011.pdf)

3 <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/10/18/burma-army-committing-abuses-kachin-state>

We have been discriminated against and we have been ignored. The majority Burman ethnic group always wants to control the country. We are not treated fairly. Also, we are fighting to protect our ethnic identity. We want self-determination. We want a federal democratic system in Burma. When Burma gained independence from Britain it was not so that the Burmese people could rule but so all ethnic groups could have self-determination. We all have to live and rule together.<sup>4</sup>

Ethnic minorities want to be assimilated into mainstream Burmese society while maintaining and promoting their culture and dialect free from discrimination. They also want equality before the law. Even the armed ethnic groups believe that trustworthy negotiation is crucial for any peace agreement, together with federal political arrangements.

The government however, demands a ceasefire first, not due to any sympathy with the ethnic cause, but due to its interest in economic development and wanting to transform the entire ethnic minority to one nationality (Burman). Without a guarantee for ethnic rights, the various ceasefire agreements cannot bring peace and can be broken at any time. For genuine peace and development, human rights must be made a priority rather than any other political agenda. Human rights must be developed on the ground, not just passed as laws in parliament. Only then can other sectors develop.

Despite the ongoing conflict with armed ethnic groups, President Thein Sein has tried to quell some ethnic conflicts (for instance in the states of Kachin, Kayin and Shan) and push through reforms, such as four prisoner amnesties during his 11 months of rule.

Another significant change in the country, indicating a loosening of dictatorial rule, is that pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, whose party was the long repressed opposition party the National League for Democracy, is allowed to compete in the by-elections. International observers have been particularly pleased with these two steps towards greater democracy.

While laws are continuously being reformed or enacted in parliament at present, it remains to be seen how they will be implemented and the level of social participation involved. Generally however, the government is focusing on rushing through economic development, rather than institutional reforms. For this reason, the government has not yet implemented basic rights for citizens, and nor has it scrapped politically repressive laws like the electronic transaction law, penal code section 505, Immigration (Emergency Provisions) Act, 1947 and so forth<sup>5</sup>.

Likewise, in this transition period, it is only the parliamentarians who are profiting from government property as a result of opening up the economy. This is another way to monopolize the country, as the old brutal government used to do. As can be seen from the

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4 <http://www.asiacalling.org/en/news/burma/2463-ceasefires-will-not-bring-about-lasting-peace-burmese-ethnic-leaders>

<sup>5</sup> For more information, please see 'Diagnosing the un-rule of law in Burma', <http://www.article2.org/mainfile.php/0902/379/>

2008 constitution drafted by the junta, the military generals can obtain up to 25 percent of seats in parliament. Meanwhile, more land confiscation will occur, affecting ordinary citizens.

While international scholars are debating that social and political development should occur before economic development, the Burmese government is talking about trade delegations; this is like putting the cart before the horse. If economic development is pushed through in Burma before basic freedoms like freedom of expression, freedom of political belief and guarantee for minority rights, there will be massive bribery of government officials as well as ethnic minority leaders. Proper economic development needs the concrete foundation of rule of law, which does not exist in Burma yet.

There can be no development without peace and no peace without properly addressing the human rights and minority issues. In other words, no democratic state will come into being in Burma without first taking into account the specific demands of the ethnic groups.

According to Dr. Kyaw Yin Hlaing, a professor at the City University of Hong Kong, merely pointing out those problems will not allow us to move on to the next stage, and Burma will remain in a poor environment.<sup>6</sup> Does this mean that we should rush towards building concrete economic zones and genuine democracy while ignoring gross human rights violations and wars in ethnic zones? Meanwhile, the chief advisor of the president, Ko Ko Hlain confidently and repeatedly notes that “We are on the right track”.<sup>7</sup> Burmese government representative, U Myint Soe, boldly states there is no human rights abuse in Burma, while blaming the ethnic insurgents for disrupting economic growth.<sup>8</sup> The question that comes to mind now, is how can the government promote the basic rights of ordinary people in Burma, while the wars in conflict zones do not seem to stop?

Additionally, a senior government official bluntly disclosed that

If the people of Myanmar want democracy, the commander in chief will use the constitution and take over the government. The coup is more real than what many people might think. If there is another coup, the situation will be back to square one and this will be very bad for the country. The coup could also bring many more hard-liners back to the government.<sup>9</sup>

What this means, is that those who wish to see political reforms in Burma should not do anything that would cause the return of the senior General to power. To counter this, it is essential to reform the country’s laws, including the 2008 Constitution, under which the President has no authority over the military. It is a grave matter to consider that the military can take over power and rule the country at any time.

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6 <http://kongjanoi.blogspot.com/2012/01/is-government-really-honest-to-ethnics.html>

7 <http://www.mmmtimes.com/2012/news/612/news61218.html>

8 Quoted from 26-27 January conference on “Myanmar after the 2010 Elections”, City University of Hong Kong.

9 [http://www6.cityu.edu.hk/searc/Data/FileUpload/306/WP111\\_11\\_Kyaw.pdf](http://www6.cityu.edu.hk/searc/Data/FileUpload/306/WP111_11_Kyaw.pdf)

All of this shows the country is far from stable, and that genuine democracy and freedom is going to require more change than the moving of parliament and certain cities. Without engaging in a genuine national reconciliation process, it will be difficult to develop democracy, and without practicing federalism, Burma will definitely go back to the old days.

Hkun Okker, regarded by non-Burman ethnic peoples as one of their leading legal experts, strongly criticized the ongoing peace talks and agreements as a “quick fix” to solve what is primarily a political issue between the Burman government and the non-Burman ethnic peoples. “They are generously offering business opportunities under the name of Development or Special Economic Zones and using them as delaying tactics against meaningful political dialogue,” he charged.<sup>10</sup>

While the recent rapid changes in Burma are encouraging, particularly compared to the recent past, it is difficult to predict whether the current progress will bring real change to the country in the future or not. Ethnic groups in Burma have been struggling under the harsh military rule for more than 50 years; now is surely the time to realize their rights and freedom to live with dignity.

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.shanland.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=4383%3Aethnic-leader-unless-charter-is-amended-ethnic-identity-will-be-in-peril&catid=85%3Apolitics&Itemid=266](http://www.shanland.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4383%3Aethnic-leader-unless-charter-is-amended-ethnic-identity-will-be-in-peril&catid=85%3Apolitics&Itemid=266)