

**MYANMAR BACKGROUNDER:
ETHNIC MINORITY POLITICS**

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MYANMAR: ETHNIC MINORITY POLITICS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Myanmar is one of the ethnically most diverse countries in the world and throughout its existence as an independent state has experienced a complex set of conflicts between the central government and ethnic minority groups seeking autonomy. While the world's attention for the past decade has focused on the struggle between the military government and the political opposition over national power, these underlying conflicts perhaps represent a more fundamental and intractable obstacle to peace, development and democracy.

The military capacity and influence of ethnic nationalists has declined significantly over the past decade. Several groups have entered into ceasefire agreements with the government and been granted de facto administrative authority over areas under their control. They complement a number of political parties formed in areas under government control to represent local, ethnic interests in the 1990 election. There are also a growing number of religious or community-based organisations that work to further the interests of their communities and have significant local influence.

Many of these organisations are officially banned, and all face severe restrictions by the military government on their activities. Yet, they are important voices for ethnic minority groups, particular the large percentage who live in their traditional homelands in the hills and mountains surrounding the central plain.

The most fundamental grievance of ethnic minorities in Myanmar today is their lack of influence on the political process and thus on decisions that affect their lives. Like society at large, they have been disenfranchised by a strongly centralised military state that regards them with intense suspicion. They have felt the loss of political and economic power even more acutely than the majority population as

both the government and the officer corps are overwhelmingly Burman in make-up and widely perceived as a foreign force.

Ethnic minority groups consider themselves discriminated against and have openly accused successive governments of a deliberate policy of "Burmanisation". They feel not only marginalised economically, but also that their social, cultural, and religious rights are being suppressed.

While many ethnic groups originally fought for independence, today almost all have accepted the Union of Myanmar as a fact and merely seek increased local authority and equality within a new federal state structure. The military government, however, still suspects them of scheming to split the country and sees this as justification for its repressive, often brutal policies in minority areas.

Since 1988, most ethnic minority organisations have expressed support for democracy, seeing this as their best chance to gain a voice in national politics and press for a redress of their long-standing grievances. But few leaders of the dominant ethnic militant groups are democrats by persuasion or regard democracy as an end in itself. Their main concern is to secure local political and administrative authority, further development of their regions, and enjoy the right to maintain and practice their language, culture and religion without constraints.

The strength of ethnic minority organisations traditionally has been measured in military terms. The shift in national politics since 1988 and subsequent ceasefires, however, have transferred the main struggle from the battlefield to the political and administrative arena. The primary challenge for ethnic minority organisations today is, therefore, to build political and organisational capacity – individually, and as a group – to ensure that they are

not left out of future negotiations about the future of Myanmar and can continue to represent the interests of their communities. They also need to help rebuild their war-torn communities and economies and re-establish a sense of normalcy and confidence in the future.

The new agenda presents ethnic minority organisations with a number of challenges. The political space under a strongly centralised military government is very limited and much historic hostility and distrust remain, not only towards the government, but also towards other ethnic groups and even within each group. The idea of a common Union cause has little hold on these groups as their only experience has been of a repressive, militarised state and a forced, centralised nationalism.

Politically, the ethnic minorities are divided over goals, strategy, and other issues, and have been unable to form any truly effective nationwide or even broadly inclusive fronts. There is also a great discrepancy between available human and financial resources and needs.

To negotiate and eventually overcome these obstacles requires vision, careful balancing of objectives and strategies, and significant implementation capacity. First and foremost perhaps, it requires a genuine

commitment to move beyond narrow agendas and build a better life for local communities and the country at large. Most groups, however, lack these skills. In fact, the weaknesses and approaches of ethnic minority organisations often mirror those of the central government and other local authorities.

Many organisations continue to be dominated by soldiers who have little knowledge of political and social affairs or experience with relevant tools for organisation and negotiation. They may have significant legitimacy rooted in the struggle for self-determination – or, in some cases, the 1990 election – but strong hierarchies and top-down approaches mean that links to local communities often are weak. There is also a dearth of people in these communities at large with relevant education and experience.

Over the past few years, some key ethnic minority organisations have begun to face up to these problems and start on the difficult task of building networks in long-divided communities and training capable leaders and administrators. Yet, much needs to be done and they are often struggling against government repression and international indifference.

Bangkok/Brussels, 7 May 2003

MYANMAR BACKGROUNDER: ETHNIC MINORITY POLITICS

I. INTRODUCTION¹

Myanmar (Burma)² is one of the ethnically most diverse countries in the world. Ethnic minorities make up about one-third of the population and occupy roughly half of the land area.³ Since 1974, the country administratively has been divided into seven divisions, supposedly inhabited by the Burman majority population, and seven ethnically designated states (see map). However, there are significant minority populations in most divisions,

¹ This report is part of a series intended to provide essential background – though not at this stage detailed policy prescriptions – for policy makers addressing the prospects for non-violent democratic transition in Myanmar and ways to achieve that transition. Earlier such background reporting dealt with *The Role of Civil Society* (ICG Asia Report N°27, 6 December 2001); *The Military Regime's View of the World* (ICG Asia Report N°28, 7 December 2001); and *The Future of the Armed Forces* (ICG Asia Briefing, 27 September 2002).

² A note on terminology. This report uses the official English name for the country, as applied by the national government, the UN, and most countries outside the U.S. and Europe – that is, “Burma” for the period before 1989 and “Myanmar” after 1989. The same criteria are used for the capital – “Rangoon” and now “Yangon”. This should not be perceived as a political statement or a judgement on the right of the military government to change the names. In Burma/Myanmar, “Bamah” and “Myanma” have both been used for centuries, being respectively the colloquial and the more formal names for the country in the national language. The more well-known, traditional names of ethnic minority groups and states have been maintained for ease of reference, including Karen State (now Kayin), Karenni State (now Kayah), Arakan State (now Rakhine). All non-Burman groups are referred to as “ethnic minorities”, but some of these groups prefer the term “ethnic nationalities”.

³ There are no reliable statistics on population or ethnic distribution in Myanmar (the last comprehensive population census was carried out by the British in 1931). The military government and armed opposition groups have made their own estimates of population. However, these are all influenced by political and other considerations and must be treated with caution.

and state names merely refer to the largest ethnic group among several in each state.

While the world's attention is focused on the struggle between Myanmar's military government and the political opposition, ethnic conflict perhaps represents an even more fundamental and intractable obstacle to peace, development and democracy.⁴ More than half a century of civil war has caused immense suffering and devastation for the country and its people. A series of ceasefires since the late 1980s has brought relief in some areas but no real solutions yet, and fighting continues. The government's determination to preserve a unified state remains the main justification for military rule, and armed conflict is a root cause of human rights abuses and a deepening humanitarian crisis in ethnic minority areas.⁵

The conflict in Myanmar also has repercussions for regional stability. Burma's geographical position alone, between China and India, makes its stability a key concern. However, more than 120,000 refugees are in camps in neighbouring countries. The fighting regularly spills across international borders and on several occasions has brought Myanmar and Thailand close to war. It has also impeded effective measures to deal with transnational problems, including HIV/AIDS and narcotics trafficking, that greatly affect the region and even countries further afield.

An ongoing, gradual shift away from armed conflict towards more peaceful expressions of ethnic

⁴ For a detailed examination of the history of ethnic conflict in Myanmar, see, for example: Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London, 1999, 2nd edition); Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency Since 1948* (Chiang Mai, 1999, 2nd edition); and Ashley South, *Mon Nationalism and the Civil War in Burma: The Golden Sheldrake* (London, 2002).

⁵ See, for example: Amnesty International, “Myanmar: Lack of Security in Counter-Insurgency Areas”, London, 17 July 2002.

grievances has improved the prospects for national reconciliation. Yet any strategies for change must take into account the nature, demands and capacity of ethnic minority organisations and communities. This background paper provides a general survey of key ethnic minority organisations, their grievances and aspirations (as voiced by their leaders), and the issues that unite and divide them. It also offers an assessment of their political capacity, individually and as a group.

II. NON-CEASEFIRE GROUPS

Armed ethnic conflict dates back to the earliest days of independence and has deep historical roots.

Most of the area constituting present day Myanmar was 'unified' by the Burman king Anawrahta in the eleventh century. However, over the next eight centuries, Mon, Arakanese and Shan rulers periodically defeated the Burman kings and established their own rule over core areas. Other ethnic groups living on the fringes of the main empires in the horseshoe of rugged mountains surrounding the Irrawaddy Valley were only nominally brought under the control of the central kings. Groups thus remained relatively distinct from each other in such matters as language, culture, patterns of production, and political traditions.

The arrival of the British in the nineteenth century imposed external authority over Burma's complex ethnic mosaic but only reinforced existing cleavages. While Ministerial Burma was put under direct rule and subjected to British legal, administrative and educational institutions, the Frontier Areas were largely left alone once British supremacy had been acknowledged. This division effectively hindered Burman-minority interaction and ensured that areas remained on different roads to political and economic development. To make matters worse, the British mainly recruited Karen, Kachin or Chin into the colonial army and administration, leaving the Burman out. Many from these ethnic groups also converted to Christianity. This situation increased Burman antagonisms towards the minorities, as well as towards the British.

During the Second World War, Burman nationalist forces aligned with the Japanese Imperial Army were involved in a series of bloody clashes with ethnic minority groups who stayed loyal to the British. They later turned against the Japanese and cooperated with the returning British army. However, atrocities committed during the early months of the Japanese campaign, particularly in Karen communities in the delta, left deep-seated enmity among many ethnic nationalists that has added to the difficulty of reaching a level of mutual tolerance and trust sufficient to overcome the country's cultural cleavages.

When negotiations about independence gained momentum after the war, many ethnic minority leaders wanted to establish a system that would

protect them against domination by the Burman majority once the British left. At the 1947 Panglong Conference, Shan, Kachin and Chin representatives from the frontier areas agreed to the formation of a Union of Burma in return for promises of full autonomy in internal administration and an equal share in the country's wealth. However, the Karen – which constituted one of the largest minorities – boycotted these negotiations, believing to the last that the British would grant them an independent state, and there were strong critics also among other ethnic groups. The 1947 Constitution further deepened the emerging fault lines by giving unequal rights to different ethnic groups⁶ Thus, the conditions were set for civil war.

The first major group to go underground, three months after independence in January 1948, was the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which felt that its socialist partners in the liberation movement had sold out to the British and failed to secure real independence. It was followed closely, however, by Karen, Mon, Karenni, Pao and Arakan nationalists, who rebelled in protest over the minimal input they had been allowed in the negotiations for the new Union of Burma and the rights of self-determination provided for them in the constitution. The incursion by thousands of Chinese Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) remnants into Shan State in 1949 further aggravated problems for the central government.

Some ethnic minority groups initially rallied around the central government. The Chin and Kachin Rifles of the Burma Army, for example, were deployed against the rebellious CPB and Karen and may have been instrumental in saving the Union. However, during the 1950s, more groups rebelled as dissatisfaction grew among other ethnic minority communities that felt the central government was giving insufficient attention to their areas.

In 1960, Shan leaders organised the “Federal Movement”, which aimed to amend the 1947 Constitution and replace what remained a highly centralised system of government with a genuinely federal one. Prime Minister U Nu apparently was sympathetic. However, the armed forces, led by General Ne Win, seized power, supposedly “to

prevent the nation from breaking up”, and immediately suspended the constitution.

The new military government initiated a two-track approach to counter the threat of armed struggle and the wider demands from ethnic minorities for increased political rights. On the political front, attempts were made to de-politicise ethnicity by promoting equal rights and equal status for all ethnic groups within a common nation. This policy implied a pledge to protect minority cultural practices, as well as conscious attempts to uplift the remote minority regions, both economically and socially. Conversely, it rejected all demands for political autonomy as illegitimate. The special councils and ministries that existed for the ethnic states in the parliamentary era were abolished.

Parallel to these political measures, the armed forces engaged in relentless counter-insurgency operations in areas controlled by the ethnic nationalist armies. In the mid-1960s a new strategy known as the “Four Cuts” was drawn up that aimed at cutting off the rebels from the four main links (food, funds, intelligence and recruits) between them and local villagers. The program proved extremely effective but its results were achieved at the expense of millions of people, mainly from ethnic minority groups, who lost their livelihoods as numerous villages were forcibly relocated and food and crops destroyed. Many civilians were also killed.

Ethnic nationalists reacted very negatively to the attempts by the military to increase central state control over their areas. Most of the old insurrections intensified while several new ones broke out.

In 1967-1968, the Chinese Communist Party stepped up support for its Burmese counterpart. The CPB at this time was being slowly pushed out of central Burma. However, with new resources, it launched a successful invasion from Chinese territory into northern Shan State where it soon absorbed most of the border-based ethnic armies, including those of the Wa and Kokang, and became the strongest anti-government force in the country. Several groups in adjoining areas also formed looser strategic alliances with the CPB to take advantage of the flow of weapons from China, while others took a strong stand against the communists on ideological grounds.

In 1976, other ethnic minority armies formed an alternative alliance, the National Democratic Front (NDF), which reached a total of eleven component members, including the Karen National Union

⁶ While the Shan and Karenni, for example, were given states with the right of secession after a period of ten years, the decision about the future of Karen State was left to after independence, and the Mon and Arakan were not given a state at all.

(KNU), the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and the New Mon State Party (NMSP). Since 1989, the NDF, whose aim is the creation of a federal union, has formed the nucleus of a new grouping, the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), which includes Burman opposition groups as well. The ceasefire movement and the decline of its individual members, however, have seriously diminished its military and political strength and relevance.

The history of these struggles is extremely complex as literally scores of groups have formed, split, reunited, and dissolved at various times. While most ethnic minority armies have been fighting the Myanmar army, some at times have cooperated with it against other groups, or they have fought each other over territory or other resources. The presence of two other powerful armed groups in ethnic minority areas, the CPB and the KMT, that have provided arms and training for many ethnic groups has further complicated matters. Some groups, while purporting to have ethnic nationalist objectives, have essentially become criminal gangs raised by warlords for personal gain.

In the first few years after independence, central government control was limited to Rangoon and some of the major towns. However, all armed opposition groups were gradually pushed into the hills and mountains of the border regions where they no longer presented a direct threat. Several of the main ethnic armies established what were essentially independent mini states, complete with local administration, schools and hospitals, and seemed content to defend their 'liberated' areas. Funds were raised through taxation of the local population, trade with neighbouring countries and, in some cases, opium production and smuggling. The Burmese army, despite regular dry season offensives, was unable to dislodge the nationalists from these strongholds.

The armed struggle underwent a brief revival in the aftermath of the 1988 uprising and 1990 election when thousands of Burman activists fled to the jungle bases of ethnic armed opposition groups, raising expectations for the emergence of a more powerful, truly national alliance. By then, however, the ceasefire movement was already underway, which was soon to include most of the major ethnic nationalist armies and undercut any prospects of a serious armed challenge to the central government.

Today, the only groups continuing armed struggle that have any significant military strength are the

KNU, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the Shan State Army (South) [SSA (South)]. They have formed a new military alliance, including also some smaller groups, but their aims are largely defensive.

A. KAREN NATION UNION (KNU)

The KNU was set up in 1947 by a number of well-known Karen nationalists and took over leadership of a burgeoning rebellion in 1949. Many Karen worked closely with the British colonial government and had pushed for an independent state, fearing that a Burman-dominated government would suppress Karen aspirations and interests. They reacted strongly to the declaration of independence of the Union of Burma, which included their territory and communities.

The KNU rebellion is perhaps the longest running in the world today, and throughout its 54-year existence has presented one of the most serious challenges to the central government. The KNU's administrative apparatus functioned for decades much like a government, exercising authority over large "liberated" areas of Karen State along the Thai border. The armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), at its peak in the 1980s had an estimated 6,000 soldiers and easy access to arms and other resources through Thailand.⁷

In the early 1990s, the KNU headquarters at Manerplaw became the gathering point for a wide array of forces, including the National Coalition Government of Burma (NCGUB) and many of the student groups that fled central Burma after the military crackdown on the pro-democracy movement. Some observers saw this coalition as a viable alternative to the central government and the beginnings of a "new politics".⁸ However, the tide has turned against KNU.

The ceasefires elsewhere in the country, coupled with a rapid build-up of the Myanmar army after the establishment of the State, Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in 1988, have greatly shifted the military balance. The KNU has also come

⁷ Martin Smith, *Burma*, op.cit., Chart 1.

⁸ See, for example, Josef Silverstein, "The Civil War, the Minorities and Burma's New Politics", in Peter Carey (ed.), *Burma: The Challenge of Change in a Divided Society* (Houndsmills, 1997).

under increasing pressure from the Thai government, which in its attempt to win favour from the military regime in Yangon has tried to stop the flows of food and arms across the border to the ethnic minority armies, as well as their access to Thai territory that for decades had provided a safe heaven. Internal divisions have added to the problems.

In late 1994, complaints by Buddhist soldiers over discrimination by the predominantly Christian KNU leadership erupted into open conflict, and a few hundred broke away to form the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). The mutineers subsequently accepted material support and control over parts of Karen State from the Myanmar government in return for help against KNU strongholds. This led to the fall of Manerplaw in January 1995 and of all remaining KNU base areas along the Thai border in a second major offensive in 1997. Sporadic fighting continues between KNU and DKBA troops.

An emergency meeting of the KNU Central Standing Committee was held in March 1995 to reorganise the organisation and come up with a new strategy, but it failed to reduce the growing discontent among the ranks, who blamed the split and resultant defeats on the leadership. Subsequently, three more KNU units and a number of second-line leaders defected. The KNU Minister of Forestry, Padoh Aung San, reportedly absconded with a large share of the organisation's money.

There have been several attempts at peace negotiations between the government and the KNU in recent years. However, the movement's president insists that a political settlement must be reached before it can sign a ceasefire:

SLORC leaders asked us to give up armed struggle policy and return to the legal fold, and they would start Border Area Development Programme. Our point is clear that we have to solve the political problem ... To have a stable peace there must be a political solution acceptable to both sides, and SLORC cannot do that, so the negotiations broke down.⁹

The government, on the other hand, clearly feels it has the upper hand and is unwilling to offer the

KNU the same kind of concessions that helped to pave the way for other ceasefires.

Close observers generally agree that the KNU strongman, General Bo Mya – a hard-line soldier who has fought the Myanmar army in the jungle for most of his life – is unlikely ever to compromise. According to one: “Bo Mya conflates the idea of an end to fighting to abandoning the struggle”.¹⁰ Other KNU leaders also feel that they need, at least, to defend themselves and their areas against Burman exploitation.

B. KARENNI NATIONAL PROGRESSIVE PARTY (KNPP)

The fighting in Karenni State, too, dates back to the earliest days of independence. The area was not officially incorporated into British Burma but was placed directly under the Indian Empire following a treaty of the Burman king in 1875 that acknowledged its independence. According to Karenni nationalists, the fighting thus started in defence of their homeland against Burmese invaders.

The KNPP was set up in 1957 but has split several times. In 1978, internal disagreements over cooperation with the CPB caused a faction to break away to form the Karenni Nationalities People's Liberation Front (KNPLF). Since then strong tensions have existed between the KNPP and the KNPLF, which agreed to a ceasefire with the SLORC in 1994, and occasional fighting between the two groups still occurs. In 1995, 1999 and late 2002, other smaller groups split from the KNPP and made separate ceasefire agreements with the government.

The KNPP itself signed a ceasefire in 1995 under pressure from the local population and Thai authorities across the border upon whom it depends for access to supplies. That agreement broke down after three months, partly as a result of conflicts over logging, and recent talks to renew it have yet to produce results. According to its chairman, Hteh Bu Phe, the KNPP favours an independent Kayah State,

⁹ ICG interview with Saw Ba Thin, KNU President, February 1999. See also KNU Statement on SPDC's Demand for Exchange, Arms for Peace, Office of the Supreme Headquarters, 22 August 2002.

¹⁰ ICG interview, November 2002. Bo Mya was replaced by Saw Ba Thin as KNU President in January 2000 but still dominates the armed wing.

but is open to discuss participation in a future federal Burma.¹¹

C. SHAN STATE ARMY (SOUTH) [SSA (SOUTH)]

The SSA (South) is a 1996 construction of splinter groups of Khun Sa's Mong Thai Army (MTA) that refused to accept their notorious leader's surrender to the central government.¹²

Unlike the MTA, which was basically a drug army operating and dominated by leaders of Chinese descent, the SSA (South) appears to be a true Shan nationalist force. The new army has established bases along the Thai border and is reportedly working with the Thai Army to combat the drugs trade in the area. It remains unclear, though, whether it has in fact abandoned the drugs trade or is simply cooperating in this way to attract external support.

The Myanmar army has reacted strongly to the growing influence of the SAA (South) and has launched several major campaigns against it with the cooperation of the United Wa State Army (UWSA). The fighting on several occasions has spilled over into Thailand and, most recently in the spring of 2002, brought the two countries to the brink of war. More than 300,000 civilians reportedly have been forcibly relocated by the Myanmar army in areas where SSA (South) troops are active.

The SSA (South) has taken a strongly nationalist position maintaining that Shan State is an independent nation, but it supports the idea of a tripartite dialogue to discuss the possibility of a genuinely federal state.¹³ Thus, it has made a military alliance with the KNU and the KNPP, as well as the Chin National Front (CNF) and the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), which recently called upon the State Peace and

Development Council (SPDC)¹⁴ to halt all offensives against the ethnic minorities; to declare a countrywide ceasefire; and to commence a meaningful dialogue and resolve political problems by political means.¹⁵

The government maintains that since the SSA (South) used to be part of the MTA, it cannot negotiate a new ceasefire agreement, but must lay down its arms and accept peace on the same conditions.

D. OTHER NON-CEASEFIRE GROUPS

A number of other small groups operate along the Thai border, including the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP – in the KNU area), the Lahu Democratic Front (LDF – in southern Shan State), and the Wa National Army (WNA - in Kayah and Shan State), as well as some very small groups consisting of factions that refused to accept the ceasefire agreement of their mother organisations. These groups control no territory and often have only a handful of soldiers. They mainly operate from areas under control of the KNU, KNPP, and SSA (South).

Other armed groups exist in Rakhine State near the western borders of Myanmar. The Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) and the National United Party of Arakan (NUPA), a Rakhine group, are active along the Bangladesh border. Both have suffered from internal splits. The Chin National Front (CNF) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) continue their armed struggle along the border with India.¹⁶ Only the CNF has more than 100 men under arms.

¹¹ "The KNPP maintains that Karenni is a sovereign nation. Its sovereignty was violated by the Union of Burma. However, if there is going to be a new union based on the spirit of Panglong, namely the principles of equality, self-determination, and democracy, the KNPP is ready to participate in such a process". Speech by Hteh Bu Phe at the Burma Workshop, Towards Democratic Transition in Burma, Oslo, 8 December 2001.

¹² It is referred to as SSA (South) to differentiate it from the original SSA in northern Shan State.

¹³ ICG interview with SSA (South) leader Colonel Yawd Serk, January 1999.

¹⁴ The name of the ruling council was changed from the SLORC to the SPDC in 1997 as part of a broader restructuring in which most former members – mainly high-level officials from the Ministry of Defence – were retired and replaced by active-duty, regional commanders. Officially, the name change symbolised accomplishment of the first objective of the military government (stability) and a shift in focus to its second objective (development), but it may also have been a way to rid the regime of an acronym that was widely perceived to have rather sinister connotations.

¹⁵ Statement of the ALP-CNF-KNPP-KNU-SSA Military Alliance, 26 August 2002.

¹⁶ NSCN has two factions, one led by Isaac Muivah and one led by Khaplang. Both are mostly active on the Indian side of the border, where they want to create an autonomous Nagaland (Nagalim).

E. THE FUTURE OF ARMED STRUGGLE

The direct military threat to the central government in Yangon has been minimal since the earliest years of independence in 1948-1949, and is non-existent today. None of the non-ceasefire groups control significant base areas anymore. They mostly operate as guerrilla units from remote, often mobile, camps along the borders. Even if all the ethnic armies, including the ceasefire groups, were to unite, they would lack the military capacity to take the capital, and the Burman population no doubt would rise up behind the national army to protect their dominant position.

The political, economic, and social consequences of continued guerrilla warfare are significant, however. This ultimate rejection of the legitimacy of the Myanmar state as currently constituted has symbolic value for the broader opposition movement but may, by the same token, be reinforcing the siege mentality of the government, which uses it as the justification for continued military rule. Meanwhile, continued fighting is closely associated with human rights abuses against the civilian population in ethnic minority areas and presents a major obstacle to development of these regions. It also invites foreign interference in the border areas.

There is some popular support for armed struggle, but increasingly there is widespread war-weariness. Some local community leaders have urged the remaining armed groups to sign ceasefires to relieve the burden on the population. There also appears to be general dissatisfaction with the failure of the armed groups to consult with their supposed constituencies, which often have no idea about their vision or strategy.¹⁷

Nonetheless, the outlook for a nationwide ceasefire seems bleak. The three main armies are all split over the issue, and several of the smaller groups have broken away from ceasefire groups in protest over agreements with the government. The government appears less inclined to negotiate ceasefires now that it has clearly “won” the war, certainly on the favourable terms offered to organisations like the UWSA and the KIO. Meanwhile mediation capacity remains weak. While there are many well-intentioned people, they generally lack experience and technical knowledge of mediation and are greatly under-resourced. Little outside support has been forthcoming for such efforts.

¹⁷ ICG interviews, May-October 2002.

III. CEASEFIRE GROUPS

The ceasefire movement has evolved in several waves, each driven by the models and pressures arising from earlier ones, as well as developments in the broader political and regional environment. In most cases, the initial contacts between the government and armed groups were made through go-betweens from the local communities, often Christian church leaders, who also helped to keep the talks going.

It began somewhat by accident in 1989 in the northeast, when ethnic minority troops mutinied against the largely Burman leadership of the Communist Party of Burma and formed several new organisations along ethnic lines, including the United Wa State Army (UWSA). The government, then under pressure from the pro-democracy movement in the cities, responded by offering advantageous ceasefire agreements to the new groups, and thus effectively eliminated the CPB insurgency, long its strongest military opponent. The NDF also tried to woo the mutineers but failed due to a lack of resources.

The early ceasefires freed the Myanmar army to increase the military pressure on other ethnic armed groups, particularly in northern Shan State, and by 1991 several of the weaker members of the NDF there felt compelled to terminate their struggle. The following year, the government unilaterally called off all offensive action against the remaining members and invited them for ceasefire negotiations.¹⁸

The remaining members of the NDF, on the initiative of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) in particular, also opened contacts with the government in the early 1990s. Their strategy was to negotiate a nationwide ceasefire on behalf of all groups fighting the government as part of an overall political solution. But unity soon broke down, and the KIO signed its own agreement in early 1994. Two other key members, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP),

¹⁸ “We invite armed organisations in the jungle to return quickly to the legal fold after considering the good of the government ... We extend our invitation with genuine goodwill. We do not have any malicious thoughts ... This is official. Please respond as soon as possible”. Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt, quoted in *The Nation*, 27 November 1993.

followed in 1995 (the latter agreement collapsed after a few months).

The government identifies seventeen ceasefire groups¹⁹ but there are major differences in their status that reflect their strength and the timing of their ceasefires.²⁰ While details of the agreements have never been made public, the early ceasefire groups, including UWSA, were given extensive local autonomy, together with material support and business opportunities for developing their areas, in return for ending hostilities and pledging to avoid any cooperation with the remaining armed groups.²¹ The KIO and NMSP have similar arrangements, although their agreements were more military in nature and did not explicitly include business deals. Each organisation is holding on to its arms, supposedly until a new constitution has been agreed. Conversely, most smaller groups have given up their arms in arrangements that are closer to outright surrender. Some have essentially become government militia or border police forces. They receive some support but have little or no autonomy.

The ceasefire agreements are all essentially military accords. The government consistently has maintained that it is a transitional administration and therefore not able to discuss political matters. Instead, it pursues a strategy of “peace through development”. A new Border Areas Development Program was initiated in 1989 with the aim of helping remote areas catch up with the rest of the country.²² In northern Shan State, the breakaway groups from CPB initially seemed to be allowed to

grow and trade opium undisturbed. However, since the end of the 1990s they have come under increasing pressure to close down these operations.²³

A. UNITED WA STATE ARMY (UWSA)

The UWSA was the largest of the new groups that emerged after the collapse of the CPB in 1989. With an estimated 15,000 soldiers, it is the strongest ethnic minority army. It has taken over the former CPB headquarters in Phangsang and controls most of the Wa hills in northern Shan State along the border with China. It also has a southern command on the Thai border and representative offices around the country.

The Wa region for most intents and purposes today is an independent state and has much closer links with China than with the rest of Myanmar. The Wa have their own administration, their own defence force, even their own foreign affairs. The local economy is Chinese as is the administrative language; most schools teach in Chinese, and there is much Chinese investment and immigration. Yet, the Wa appear to accept the nominal authority of the Myanmar government and have cordial relations with its officials. On several occasions, the UWSA has cooperated locally with the Myanmar army.²⁴

¹⁹ See Government of Myanmar, *Endeavours of the Myanmar Armed Forces Government for National Reconsolidation*, 4 January 2000. This list includes the KNPP, which has resumed fighting, but not the many small and splinter groups that have essentially surrendered.

²⁰ ICG interviews with ceasefire groups and close observers, May-November 2002.

²¹ In Shan State, a number of groups have obtained concessions for the ruby mines at Mongshue. NMSP and the SSA (North) have received fishing concessions. Most ceasefire groups are involved in logging.

²² The Border Areas Development Program is run by a separate Ministry of Border Areas, National Races and Development Affairs, but like most other sectors suffers from a lack of resources. According to official figures, about 42 billion kyatt (U.S.\$43 million at the current exchange rate) have been spent over the past ten years, mainly on infrastructure, including roads, bridges, dams, TV relay stations, hospitals, and schools. Ministry of Border Areas, National Races and Development Affairs, *Information Pamphlet*, Yangon, April 2003.

²³ Both Wa and Kokang leaders have announced that they will eradicate opium production in the near future and have made some progress, particularly over the past year. This is confirmed in surveys by the United Nation's Drugs Control Program (recently renamed the United Nation's Office of Drugs and Crime, UNODC) and the U.S. State Department, both of which have publicly expressed satisfaction with the progress (see, for example, Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly, speech at the Burma Conference, Johns Hopkins University, 21 November 2002). Methamphetamine production in these areas has massively expanded, though, and has become a major security threat to Thailand, which in February 2003 began a controversial domestic crackdown on drugs trafficking.

²⁴ In 1996, the UWSA helped push Khun Sa to surrender his Mong Thai Army to the government, in return for control over MTA territory along the Thai border. This precipitated a forced relocation of an estimated 100,000 Wa villagers from the highlands in the North to the valleys around Mong Yun. UWSA leaders say this move will contribute to eradicate opium and bring development for the Wa. ICG interviews, December 2002. However, political and military factors no doubt have also played a role as it strengthens UWSA control over this strategic border area. The UWSA has continued to clash with remnants of the MTA, now

The UWSA, apparently content with the current arrangement, has made few political demands or statements on the future of Myanmar. However, perhaps more than any other minority organisation, the leadership appears to have a long-term strategic plan and to be well on the way to realising it. It has made significant strides toward developing its impoverished region. Several modern towns have sprung up where just a few years ago only small, traditional villages existed. Much of this development is driven by Chinese investments. The Wa also have developed extensive businesses in the main cities of central Myanmar.

That said, the local administration is underdeveloped and conditions remain very difficult for the general population. According to a UN official stationed in the region in the late 1990s:

The Wa only know red-guard administration: they extract an opium tax, a rice tax, and hit down hard on any crime. It is purely extractive and feudal. There is no understanding of planning or participation. There is no administrative structure. The security guard is not under control.²⁵

The central government has provided some support, mainly for human and physical infrastructure, and limited foreign aid has come in through crop substitution projects. Yet, outside the few towns, there is near 100 per cent illiteracy and no social services whatsoever, no health centres, no education, no extension services. Transportation is very difficult. A UN official, echoing other development workers in the area, points out that the development approach of the Wa leadership is decidedly top-down and centred on infrastructure: "They don't understand the community-based approach. They feel it works too slowly."²⁶ Despite significant resources and attention, true broad-based development thus remains a distant prospect.

The most controversial issue in the region is drugs. The Wa leadership under increasing pressure from the international community, the Chinese government and Yangon, has pledged to eradicate opium by 2005 and appears to be interested in

shedding its drug warlord image.²⁷ Yet, it remains highly dependent on drugs for income generation. Both Myanmar and Wa officials admit that local army units and businessmen continue the trade in close cooperation with criminal networks in neighbouring countries.²⁸

While the UWSA'S relations with the government, for the moment, seem among the most positive of any of the major ethnic groups, the intensely autonomous streak of the Wa, their significant military strength and the complex, often opportunistic, politics of the Golden Triangle suggest that the area could still become a major flash point in any future drive to pull the regions of Myanmar further together.

B. KACHIN INDEPENDENCE ORGANISATION (KIO)

The KIO for many years was one of the most powerful armed groups. However, the 1994 ceasefire and the death of its leader, Brang Seng, just a few months later have changed Kachin politics in many ways.²⁹

Like the UWSA, the KIO now has formal administrative authority over territory formerly under its control and functions, at least on paper, as a local government. It has departments of health, education, agriculture, women's affairs and development affairs. It runs civilian hospitals, schools (that teach Kachin language and culture), and even a Teachers Training School. It has also initiated infrastructure projects, including roads, bridges and hydro-electric power, as well as some community development programs, the latter with assistance from international NGOs. The KIO maintains an armed wing, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), along with conscription and other

²⁷ Myanmar government and Wa claims that their joint efforts to curb opium growing in the Wa hills have resulted in a large decrease in production over the past few year are corroborated by the US government and UNDCP. In fact, UNDCP officials are worried about a possible negative impact of this rapid decrease upon the poor farmers, who were dependent on growing opium. ICG interviews, December 2002; also, "Fighting Burma's Drugs Trade", BBC, 11 December 2002.

²⁸ ICG interviews, December 2002.

²⁹ Brang Seng was a major force in ethnic minority politics and widely considered a worthy candidate for head of state under a different regime. His death thus left a vacuum that has been difficult for later leaders to fill.

organised in the SSA (South), while each group accuses the other of drugs trafficking.

²⁵ ICG interview, former UNDCP official, September 2000.

²⁶ Ibid.

military practices from the past but it does not appear to be building up its military strength.

Equally importantly, the ceasefire has facilitated growing cooperation among various groups within the Kachin community, which has stronger community networks than perhaps any other ethnic minority group. Indeed, it is often difficult to distinguish between the KIO's views and activities and those of other local leaders and groups.

The KIO's agreement to a ceasefire was motivated by the devastation of decades of civil war and the changing national political environment, which they felt required a different approach to the quest for ethnic rights. The original expectation was that the KIO ceasefire would pave the way for a countrywide ceasefire and tripartite dialogue about a broader political solution to the civil war.³⁰ However, local leaders have since taken a longer-term perspective:

The government wants the KIO to surrender. We, on the other hand, are protecting the Panglong Agreement. But we agree on the need for development. Instead of talking (politics), which will not bring agreement, we should practice (development). We need to build for the future.³¹

Like many other ceasefire groups, the KIO complains about the lack of political progress. While maintaining a conciliatory attitude overall, Kachin leaders accuse both the government and the National League for Democracy (NLD)³² of taking a confrontational approach to the pursuit of power rather than working for national reconciliation and cooperation:

The SPDC and NLD are both preparing for (political) war; they are building up their strength... When two elephants fight, the grass gets trampled.³³

They also express doubts whether any of the Burman-dominated forces really have the welfare of ethnic minority communities at heart.³⁴

Kachin leaders have asked the UN Secretary-General's Personal Envoy to Myanmar, Ismail Razali to mediate a countrywide ceasefire, as well as to push for a national committee on humanitarian assistance, including the government, the NLD, and local and international NGOs, that would administer increased foreign aid flows.³⁵ They have also made it clear that they consider international aid policies to be short-sighted:

Many ethnic minority groups feel extremely disappointed that, in general, foreign governments are not responding to the progress of these ceasefires or indeed even understand their significance or context ... It seems that certain sectors of the international community have the fixed idea that none of the country's deep problems, including ethnic minority issues, can be addressed until there is an overarching political solution based upon developments in Yangon ... [This] ignores realities on the ground in areas long affected by war. To revitalise these communities and bring about real reform, health, social and economic development must run in tandem with political progress.³⁶

In early 2001, KIO Chairman Zau Mai and two other senior leaders were ousted by younger officers. Officially, Zau Mai was replaced because of health problems, but KIO sources say there was dissatisfaction among the ranks over his ruling style, which left no room for discussion and criticism, as well as his family's business dealings.

The new leadership appears to have strong political commitments and genuinely be looking for ways to move its cause forward. Yet, it faces a lot of internal problems. Outside observers point out that the KIO itself must take some responsibility for the lack of progress:

The KIO has failed to position themselves for talks. They have not been doing any political

³⁰ This was supposedly explicitly mentioned in the ceasefire agreement.

³¹ ICG interview, January 2002.

³² The National League for Democracy (NLD) is the leading opposition party in the country, led by the Nobel Peace Prize recipient Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

³³ ICG interview, January 2002.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ ICG interview, September 2002.

³⁶ Seng Raw, "Views from Myanmar: An Ethnic Minority Perspective", in Robert H. Taylor (ed.), *Burma: Political Economy under Military Rule* (London, 2001), pp. 161-162.

organisation. They see themselves as the only legitimate representatives of the Kachin and have focused primarily on surviving, establishing several businesses to support themselves. This has begun to cost them support – over weak leadership, over corruption, and over failing to take a stronger stand against army abuses.³⁷

The KIO also has difficulties finding sufficient resources to finance the organisation. The ceasefire cost it control of the lucrative jade mines in Hpakant and removed the justification for taxing the local population.³⁸ It needs to prove to the people that it can further their interests in the new political environment.³⁹

Clearly, the KIO has had a hard time adjusting to its new role. Meanwhile, outside developments more often than not have worked against it. Although the danger does not seem imminent, there is a possibility that the younger generations, who have not experienced war and do not recognise its futility and costs, might pick up arms again.⁴⁰

C. NEW MON STATE PARTY (NMSP)

The NMSP, established in 1958, was a leading member of the NDF. However, by the early 1990s, it was under increasing pressure, not only militarily from the Myanmar government, but also politically from elements of the Thai army and business community that were eager to exploit economic opportunities.⁴¹ The fall of Manerplaw further

sapped the resolve of NMSP leaders to continue the armed struggle.⁴²

The 1995 ceasefire has given the NMSP control over some territory in Mon State. However, already much weakened at the time, it has been penned up in a number of small areas, mainly along the Thai border and quite far from the Mon heartland along the coast. Like other ceasefire groups, the NMSP has been given some assistance, mainly in the form of logging and fishing concessions. However, the government revoked the former in 1997 in anger over the Mae Tha Raw Hta Agreement, which expressed support for the NLD.

The NMSP has tried to pursue its political agenda and operates relatively democratically.⁴³ However, the leadership is closely watched by the Myanmar authorities – probably due to its association with Mon activist groups in Thailand that work with the broader democracy movement – and has had little room to manoeuvre. Many hardliners have left the organisation, feeling that it has compromised too much,⁴⁴ and the remaining members are divided over the degree of cooperation with the government.

The extremely influential Mon Buddhist Sangha⁴⁵ plays a key role in mediating conflicts between the NMSP and the government in much the same way as Christian leaders do in Kachin State.

D. OTHER CEASEFIRE GROUPS

The government recognises seventeen ceasefire groups including the four discussed above. Other sources list 22 (see appendix A).

³⁷ ICG interview, September 2002.

³⁸ The KIO, for example, has had to ask the churches to take over some of the schools in its area. ICG interviews with KIO officials, September 2001 and June 2002.

³⁹ According to a Western diplomat who recently visited Kachin State, few local people believe that either the government or the KIO will do anything. “They all agree with the KIO’s political agenda, but there is no expectation that the leaders will help the people economically. They complain about [international] sanctions. There is this assumption that only foreigners can save them”. ICG interview, December 2002.

⁴⁰ Renewed armed struggle in Kachin State would almost certainly quickly be contained. Although the Kachin have difficult terrain to hide in, they lack the easy supply lines that the groups on the Thai border have.

⁴¹ These groups saw the continued armed resistance of the NMSP (and the KNU) as an obstacle to stability in a strategic economic area with an important gas pipeline and the potential for a deep-sea port on the Myanmar coast and new

highways linking Thai producers with Myanmar markets. However, other parts of the Thai army reportedly continue to support the non-ceasefire groups. ICG interview, Bangkok, April 2003.

⁴² ICG interview with NMSP spokesperson, June 2002. See also Ashley South, *Mon Nationalism*, op. cit., pp. 219-231.

⁴³ NMSP members, for example, participate in the election of their leaders and are generally able to express their views.

⁴⁴ Several splinter groups have resumed attacks on the Myanmar army. In late 2002 one, the Hongsawatoi Restoration Party (HRP), even attacked and killed a number of NMSP members, including a senior leader. ICG interviews with Mon sources, November 2002; see also, Ashley South, “Burma’s Ex-Insurgents, the Mon Ceasefire and Political Transition”, *Burma Debate*, vol. 7, nos. 2/3, Summer/Fall 2001.

⁴⁵ The Sangha is the name used for Myanmar’s Buddhist monastic order.

1. Shan State

The situation in Shan State is particularly complex and has often drawn comparisons with Lebanon. This is partly due to the ethnic mosaic of the area, but also owes much to the activities of the CPB and the lucrative drug trade, which over the years have led to numerous splits and alliances among ethnic minority organisations.

Apart from the UWSA, seven other ceasefire groups in Shan State have been provided with special regions and various degree of autonomy: Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA), Shan State Army North (SSA North), Shan State National Army (SSNA), Shan State Nationalities People's Liberation Organisation (SNPLO), Kayan New Land Party (KNLP), and Karenni Nationalities People's Liberation Front (KNPLF). There are also a number of small groups, which have given up their arms and now cooperate with the government in return for various kinds of support.

The situation of the MNDAA and the NDAA is similar in many ways to that of their former BCP allies, the UWSA, although they are less powerful. However, since the areas under their control are isolated and far from the Thai border (and thus from the international media), they have received much less international attention.

The SSA (North) and SSNA work closely together, as do the SNPLO, KNLP and KNPLF. These organisations are generally small and control only limited territory in upland areas. They back the idea of a tripartite dialogue and have released statements supporting the dialogue between the government and the NLD.⁴⁶

2. Kachin State

While less divided than the Shan, the Kachin have three separate ceasefire groups. The New Democratic Army – Kachin (NDA-K) left KIO in 1968 to join the CPB. After the collapse of the CPB in 1989, the group renamed itself the NDA-K and

signed a ceasefire agreement. Today it controls an area along the Chinese border in northern Kachin State and is mainly involved in business activities.

The Kachin Democratic Army (KDA), based in Northern Shan State, was part of the KIO until 1991 when it came under increased military pressure from the Myanmar army and broke away to sign a separate ceasefire. Neither the NDA-K nor the KDA has more than a few hundred soldiers.

The three armed Kachin groups – the KIO, NDA-K and KDA – all supported a Kachin National Consultative Meeting in October 2002 with 267 delegates from across Kachin society. It requested the government “to call a National Assembly soon, consisting of political parties, ethnic nationality delegates, ethnic national peace groups, and representatives from all levels of society”.⁴⁷ It also set up a working committee, an advisory group, and a Kachin National Consultative Assembly, which have been charged with responsibility for considering a future constitution. Members of the working committee reportedly say that they do not intend to serve any overtly political functions but hope to be able support the establishment of political parties at an appropriate time.⁴⁸

E. THE CEASEFIRE MOVEMENT

The ceasefire groups generally maintain their long-standing quest for self-determination and equal rights. Yet, they have chosen to pursue these goals by an alternative path that emphasises dialogue with the government and development of their long divided and war-torn communities.

The ceasefire movement resulted from a number of factors. The new willingness of the central government to consider ceasefires where before it had insisted on complete surrender, together with the prospects of inclusion in negotiations about the future of Myanmar, were important pull factors. At the same time, ethnic minority armies were coming under increased pressure from the Myanmar army, neighbouring countries and their own communities to halt the fighting and reassess their strategic options.

Local populations, in general, have welcomed the ceasefire agreements, which have put an end to most

⁴⁶ “The SNPLO strongly believes that these political problems can be solved by political discussion. In order to have national solidarity in the country, there must be free and equal negotiation between the government of the country, the democratic political parties and ethnic nationalities”. Speech by SNPLO President, General Tha Kalei, on 49th Shan State Revolution Day, 11 December 1998.

⁴⁷ Declaration of the First Kachin National Consultative Meeting, Kachin State, Myanmar, Laiza, 25 October 2002.

⁴⁸ ICG interview, January 2003.

killings and other serious human rights violations. Yet, many people remain disappointed with a lack of more substantial political and economic progress.

The opportunity to participate in negotiations about the country's future, so far, has largely failed to materialise, and no progress has been made towards a political solution to minority grievances. Most ceasefire groups were invited to take part in discussions at the National Convention (the government's declared institution for constitutional debate), which began in 1993 but was discontinued in early 1996. Meanwhile, the government discourages them from making political statements or engaging in any overtly political activities. Most leaders of the ceasefire groups appear to trust Aung San Suu Kyi's promise to work for increased ethnic autonomy and equality within the Union, but they invariably emphasise that, as a Burman leader, she does not represent their groups. They are generally anxious to get directly involved in the talks.⁴⁹

The economic consequences of the ceasefires have been ambiguous as well. There has been some limited government and international assistance, as well as better business opportunities, at least for the leadership of ceasefire groups and their business associates. However, in many cases, the agreements have also opened the territories to increasing external influence and, often, exploitation. Few minority groups have the capital necessary to compete with the new rich from central Myanmar, the drug money flowing in from the Northeast, or foreign investors (mainly Chinese). The uncertainty of the situation in many places has created space for illegal activities such as drug trafficking, gambling, prostitution, logging and black market trading.

The policies of external actors are a big part of the problem. The Myanmar government has failed to establish an appropriate forum for discussions about the country's political future and since the discontinuance of the National Convention has not provided any forum at all. Despite promises to help minority areas catch up with the rest of the country (and some significant efforts to do so), it has also had insufficient will, resources and perhaps technical

capacity to make a real difference. At the same time, the international donor community – much to the exasperation of some minority leaders – has largely failed to provide much-needed aid.

The former armed groups themselves, however, are also partly to blame for the lack of progress. Many leaders lack a sense of where they reasonably want to get to, and the organisational set-up generally has changed little from the days of armed struggle. The strongly hierarchical structures provide little room for discussion or dissent. Local communities also complain about the lack of consultation on issues that affect their lives.

Most groups have been too afraid of the government to pursue solutions proactively beyond the local setting. They have failed not only to engage the government, but also to reach out to other organisations and ethnic groups. As one foreign NGO worker with close links to several ethnic groups says: "They appear to have accepted the role accorded them by the government as the younger brothers in the Myanmar family and are waiting for the government to offer solutions".⁵⁰ In some cases, the leaders seem to have been more interested in building up their own businesses than in broader organisational or development efforts.

The political situation has improved somewhat since the beginning of the very tentative and slow negotiations between Aung San Suu Kyi and the government in October 2000 and has galvanised action by several minority leaders, who have begun preparations for future tripartite talks. Importantly, the government appears to have accepted these initiatives, although the various groups clearly remain uncertain about the limits of permissible activities and therefore exercise significant self-restraint.

The survival of the ceasefires despite the many problems facing local communities testifies to the widespread and deep-felt wish for peace and development. Yet, there is little doubt that the risk of a return to armed struggle, at least by some of these groups (or new ones in their areas), is growing as expected progress fails to materialise. The ceasefire groups also face the prospect of losing support in local communities on which they depend for recruits, taxes, and ultimately legitimacy.

⁴⁹ While some groups have expressed support for the NLD, others have released more general statements in support of the dialogue process between it and the government. See, for example, "Position of the Ceasefire Groups Regarding the Current Situation, 1 March 2001", signed by SSA (North), SSNA, NMSP, KNPLF, SNPLO, KNLP and PSLO.

⁵⁰ ICG interview, November 2002.

IV. POLITICAL PARTIES

The 1990 election presented ethnic minorities with their first opportunity in 30 years to form political parties. Some minority leaders argued that it was better to join or support the NLD to make a united front against the military, but most felt this was a historic opportunity to form organisations to represent their own interests. Although voting was impossible in many minority areas due to ongoing fighting, over 35 ethnic minority parties contested the election, out of a total of 93 parties overall (see appendix B).

Since 1990, most political parties have been banned, and many party leaders and MPs have been arrested and given long jail sentences. However, ten parties still operate legally, including eight minority parties, while several others have been able to keep a low profile and continue their work.⁵¹

The remaining legal political parties, like some of the ceasefire groups, were invited to send representatives to the National Convention in 1993. However, several representatives fled in protest over the regulations and restrictions to Manerplaw, where they joined the government-in-exile, the National Coalition Government of Burma (NCGUB).⁵² Three ethnic minority MPs joined the Committee Representing People's Parliament (CRPP), a shadow government set up by the NLD in 1998 to challenge the authority of the military government. This led to a new wave of arrests, including that of the new CRPP Chairman, Dr Saw Mra Aung, a Rakhine politician from the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD).

⁵¹ The ten legal political parties are the NLD, the National Unity Party (NUP), the Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD), the Union Pa-O National Organisation (UNPO), the Lahu National Development Party (LNDP), Mro or Khami National Solidarity Organisation (MKNSO), Shan State Kokang Democratic Party (SSKDP), Kokang Democracy and Unity Party (KDUP), the Union Karen League (UKL), and the Wa National Development Party (WNDP). The three latter did not win any seats in the election.

⁵² See, for instance, Khon Mar Ko Ban, member of parliament for Pay Khon Township, Personal Statement Regarding the SLORC's National Convention, Shan State, 5 April 1993; also U Daniel Aung, member of the SLORC's National Convention, Statement on Why He Left the Convention and Went to Manerplaw, Manerplaw, May 1994.

A. UNITED NATIONALITIES LEAGUE FOR DEMOCRACY (UNLD)

The UNLD is an umbrella organisation of ethnic minority parties established in 1989 to present a common front. Its main aim is to establish "a genuine federal union based on democratic rights for all citizens, political equality for all nationalities and the rights of self-determination for all member states of the Union".⁵³ One candidate was elected in 1990 for the UNLD itself, but most campaigned under the banner of its affiliated member parties, which included nearly all that won seats in the election.

In August 1990, three months after the election, the UNLD and NLD jointly released the *Bo Aung Kyaw Street Declaration*, which called for a National Consultative Convention consisting of representatives of all the nationalities to lay down the general guidelines for the future constitution. The UNLD was banned by the government in 1992 but in February 1998 a number of exiled politicians, including six elected members of parliament, formed the UNLD Liberated Areas (UNLD-LA) on the Thai border.

B. SHAN NATIONALITIES LEAGUE FOR DEMOCRACY (SNLD)

The SNLD was the most successful ethnic minority political party in the 1990 election, winning 23 seats out of the 57 it contested, the second highest number of any party.⁵⁴

Initially, the SNLD prioritised its survival as a legal entity and kept a low profile. However, this led to criticism both inside and outside the party. In recent years, the party chairman, Khun Htun Oo, who operates out of Yangon, has become quite outspoken, attending meetings with foreign dignitaries and giving interviews to the international press, including opposition radio stations.

⁵³ Lian H. Sakhong, "A Two-Fold Path; The Transition to Democracy and Federalism in Burma", *Burma Debate*, vol. 3, nos. 2/3, Summer/Fall 2001.

⁵⁴ The SNLD's success has been explained by the support of activists from the Shan Cultural and Literacy Movement, who were younger than most of their Shan opponents and had better contacts in the Shan community. ICG interview with Sai Win Pai, SNLD member of parliament from Monghsu, May 2002.

Khun Htun Oo has called for permission to organise a meeting of all ethnic minorities to work out a common position. His proposal involved a nationwide ceasefire and the freedom of assembly and meeting. He also made a plea for free passage for non-ceasefire groups, such as the KNU and SSA (South), to attend such a meeting, and for the reinstatement of all banned political parties.⁵⁵

In an unusual show of unity amidst the complexity of Shan politics, two ceasefire groups – the SSA (North) and SSNA – recently gave the SNLD a mandate to represent them.

C. ARAKAN LEAGUE FOR DEMOCRACY (ALD)

The ALD won eleven of the 26 seats it contested in the May 1990 election to become the third largest party in the country. Like the SNLD, the party leadership mostly operates out of Yangon to be close to the centre of national politics and has recently assumed a relatively high profile.

The ALD is an important ally of the NLD. Its chairman, Dr Saw Mra Aung, was elected chairman of the CRPP when it was established in 1998. He was arrested shortly afterwards, but was released in June 2001. General-Secretary Aye Tha Aung is also a member of the CRPP. He was arrested in April 2000, sentenced to seven years in prison, but released in August 2002 on humanitarian grounds and has returned to his political activities.

D. MON NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC FRONT (MNDF)

The MNDF won four out of twenty seats in Mon State and one seat in southern Karen State but was banned in March 1992. In July 1998, MNDF leaders wrote a letter to the NMSP criticising its cooperation with the government in Yangon and calling on it to support the opposition. This led to the arrest of Vice-Chairman Nai Ngwe Thein, General-Secretary Dr. Min Soe Lin, and Joint-General-Secretary Dr. Min Kyi Win, all of whom

were accused of undermining the relations between the government and NMSP.

In November 1999, Chairman Nai Tun Thein was also arrested – together with Pu Gin Kam Lian, the General Secretary of the Zomi National Congress (ZNC) – a week after they had met with Alvaro de Soto, then the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy to Myanmar.⁵⁶ The MNDF is thus seriously handicapped but continues its political activities.

E. OTHER POLITICAL PARTIES

The Chin National League for Democracy (CNLD) and Zomi National Congress (ZNC) won five of thirteen seats available in Chin State in the 1990 election but were banned in 1992. Today, both parties work closely with the NLD and actively participate in the CRPP.

The Union Pao National Organisation (UPNO) won three seats in the election, all in Pao-majority areas in southern Shan State. It has maintained a low profile, avoiding any close affiliation with the NLD or the UNLD. It operates from its office in Taunggyi and has good relations with the Pao National Organisation (PNO), which signed a ceasefire agreement in 1991.

The Kachin State National Congress for Democracy (KSNCD) won three seats in Kachin State but was declared illegal and seemed to have dissolved until it recently resurfaced. The military government has accused the KSNCD of being a front organisation of the KIO, a charge the party denies.⁵⁷

Twelve other ethnic minority parties won one to two seats each in the 1990 election.

F. PARTY POLITICS

The main objective of most ethnic minority parties is the establishment of a federal state with equal rights for ethnic minorities based on democratic principles. Some parties also have specific demands related to local issues.⁵⁸ Yet none appear to have further

⁵⁵ Speech of Myo Win, General Secretary of the Shan Democratic Union (SDU), "Visions for the Future", at the Burma Workshop, Towards Democratic Transition in Burma, Oslo, 8 December 2001.

⁵⁶ Ashley South, *Mon Nationalism*, op.cit. pp. 322-332.

⁵⁷ ICG interview with Kachin politician, April 2002.

⁵⁸ The Democratic Organisation for Kayan National Unity (DOKNU), for instance, wanted to adjust the state borders in order to bring all ethnic Kayan people together in one state, instead of being spread over the Kayin, Kayah and Shan

ideological underpinnings or more developed party platforms. Their first priority has often been simply to survive as legal entities and be included in the limited political activities allowed by the military government.

The surviving parties have had to balance their activities very carefully under the watchful eye of military intelligence. However, improvements in the political environment after the release of Aung San Suu Kyi in May 2002 have created some space for them to operate.

In June 2002, the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA), a loose grouping of ethnic political parties, was established to prepare for eventual tripartite talks and create a platform to meet and discuss with the UN Special Envoy, Ismail Razali. According to Khun Htun Oo, chairman of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD):

The UNA is not a group per se, but we have formed it as a temporary measure and recognise each other. We regularly meet and discuss matters, such as the needs of the nationalities, how to solve the political problems, the literature and culture of the nationalities, and the right to map our own destiny, [so we can] represent the national races if the dialogue process becomes tripartite.⁵⁹

The UNA has called on the UN Secretary General's envoy, Ismail Razali, to mediate legalisation of the ethnic minority parties banned by the SLORC.⁶⁰

The government appears to have accepted the emergence of the UNA, as well as a recent expansion of the CRPP to include one minority group, and has allowed several ethnic minority party leaders to meet foreign dignitaries. The unofficial line is that this is part of normal party politics and therefore acceptable under the loosened restrictions on such activities. Neither the UNA nor the CRPP are technically legal, though, and the former was recently denied

permission to meet with an organisation of veteran politicians, supposedly for this reason.⁶¹

Few, if any, ethnic minority parties have real organisational strength, partly due to the short time span of their legal existence and the restrictions placed on their activities by the government. Communication between the leadership and members, and between the parties and their constituencies, is often difficult. Party leaders have generally chosen to operate from Yangon in order to be close to the political centre and to be able to meet with foreign dignitaries. This further increases the distance to their constituencies.

Despite their weaknesses, the political parties are an important factor in ethnic minority politics since they are the only organisations to have been elected by the people. At the same time, it is important to remember that many minority communities did not have the chance to vote in 1990 and that some local leaders asked their communities to vote for the NLD in order to avoid splits in the opposition. If new elections were to be held in a freer environment, more ethnic minority parties would participate and would likely win significantly more seats, at the expense of the NLD and other Burman or national parties.

States as is the case now. ICG interview with Khon Mar Ko Ban, member of parliament for DOKNU, May 2002.

⁵⁹ Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), interview with Khun Tun Oo, 5 August 2002. Apart from the SNLD, seven other political parties participate in the UNA: the ALD, CNLD, KNCD, KSNCD, KSNLD, MNDF and ZNC. All except the KNDC won seats in the 1990 election. However, only the SNLD at present functions legally.

⁶⁰ Agence France-Presse, 31 July 2002.

⁶¹ The authorities also remain very suspicious of relations between ethnic minority parties and armed ethnic groups and have regularly accused political parties of being fronts for armed groups.

V. COMMUNITY GROUPS

Since the military assumed power in 1962, most of civil society has been disbanded or co-opted by the government. However, some community groups have been allowed to operate relatively independently within certain narrow areas – and the space appears to be expanding, although slowly and not without reversals.

A. RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS

Historically, the main representatives of civil society in ethnic minority areas (and elsewhere) have been religious groups. The Christian churches, in particular, have long been involved in charity and community development activities and increasingly have come to see this as an essential part of their social responsibilities. Several prominent monks have taken a similar approach outside the formal hierarchy of the Buddhist Sangha, as have some Muslim and Hindu organisations.⁶²

A number of Church leaders have also played an important political role in facilitating the ceasefire negotiations and resolving subsequent tensions and misunderstandings between the government and the ceasefire groups.⁶³ Their part has generally been limited to establishing contact and carrying messages rather than active mediation but has been important, nonetheless, in a society where even basic communication is often difficult after decades of fighting.

The large majority of welfare activities carried out by religious organisations focus on basic health and education. Most lack financial resources and management skills and experience to set up wider community-based development programs. Some groups, like the Myanmar Council of Churches

⁶² There are still many religious leaders, though, who believe that the churches or monasteries should concentrate on religious aspects of their work, and development activities are often linked to missionary activities.

⁶³ Reverend Saboi Jum from the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC), for example, was part of the mediation team in the talks between the government and the KIO. Catholic Bishop Sotero from Loikaw (capital of Kayah State) played an important role in some of the negotiations with groups in Karenni State. Reverend Saw Mar Gay Gyi, the former General-Secretary of the Myanmar Council of Churches, has acted as go-between in the talks with the KNU.

(MCC), the Myanmar Baptist Convention (MBC), and the Catholic Bishops Conference (CBC), are organised at a regional and national level, allowing them to share scarce resources and common problems and experiences. Their programs are usually implemented by local churches with assistance from a central development unit.

Some government officials have openly encouraged the churches to engage in community development but they appear to be more concerned about the activities of Buddhist organisations, probably due to their larger constituency and history of political activism. There is some tension within the government on this issue. The Ministry of Religion reportedly tends toward the view that religion should be separated from social work altogether.⁶⁴

B. NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS (NGOS)

While religious organisations have been a long-standing feature of the social landscape, NGOs and smaller, more informal community groups for specific humanitarian, development, and peace-building purposes are relatively new phenomena.

The Metta Development Foundation, based in Kachin State, was the first organisation to be officially registered as an NGO under the Ministry of Home Affairs in October 1998. Its main objective is to assist local communities recover from decades of civil war by initiating a development process that helps them to evolve into stable, self-reliant societies.⁶⁵ It has established close working relationships with the development departments of various church organisations, as well as with ceasefire organisations, and as a matter of principle works in all ethnic minority communities, regardless of race and religion.

The Shalom Foundation was set up in early 2000, also in Kachin State, for peace mediation and conflict resolution but has expanded its activities to include community development work as a means to build and sustain peace:

The Shalom Centre is for all people. We invite everybody, also the government ... There are four things we need to achieve: (1) Trust

⁶⁴ ICG interview, May 2002.

⁶⁵ For information on specific activities, see Metta's website, www.metta-myanmar.org, and annual reports.

between the government, the armed groups, and the people. (2) Trust between the different ethnic groups. (3) We need to educate people about the law so they can negotiate with the government and perhaps reach some compromises. (4) First we didn't focus on development, but there is such a big need for health and education and broader community development".⁶⁶

Like Metta, Shalom aims to work in all religious and ethnic communities, and its board includes both Christians and Buddhists.

Metta and Shalom both grew out of, and are complementary to, the ceasefire movement. Both appear to have gained the trust of key government officials, through the skills of their leaders and – importantly – a strictly non-partisan approach to politics in Yangon. An official of the former said:

As a national NGO we have to renew our registration every two years, but this is done routinely. The Ministry of Finance and Internal Revenue has granted us tax exemptions on all funds, and we are often able to work in areas which are restricted for international NGOs. Our staff can attend international training or workshop overseas.⁶⁷

The two organisations have come to serve as umbrellas also for a host of smaller community groups. They have limited reach and capacity but are growing in both confidence and experience and, like the church groups, have much wider access to local communities than international NGOs.

Many of these activities have their roots in Kachin State, where there appears to be most initiative and space for local development projects. Yet, local community workers from several other states have also begun setting new development projects. The Mon and Karen are particularly active.⁶⁸ In April 2002, the Karen held a forum with about 100 delegates, organized by the Karen Development Committee (KDC), that agreed, among other things,

to give the KDC organisational responsibility for peace-building activities in their area.⁶⁹

Other independent organisations include various ethnic minority committees working on culture and literacy. The Shan Culture and Literacy Committee has been very active over the years. The Mon Literature and Culture Committee is also actively involved in reviving and promoting Mon language and culture in close cooperation with the Mon Buddhist Sangha.⁷⁰

C. THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The emergence of new civil society groups and initiatives reflects a change in political thinking at the top of the state, however small, and at the same time holds the seeds for a long-term, gradual realignment of political and ethnic relations in the country to the extent that they are able to expand without provoking a backlash from the authorities.

Meanwhile, their greatest impact is on the ground in the communities where they work and where they have begun to foster the development of civil society networks that complement and challenge existing political structures, primarily armed groups. This is particularly important since the behaviour of the latter, as discussed above, has tended to mirror that of the military government, and they have limited potential, therefore, to serve as a vanguard for more plural and participatory structures that would serve the general population better.

That said, the ceasefire groups, in particular, are in many places providing the space within which community groups are able to operate.

⁶⁶ ICG interview with Director, Shalom Foundation, Reverend Saboi Jum, , January 2002.

⁶⁷ ICG interview with Director, Metta Development Foundation, Seng Raw, April 2003.

⁶⁸ See Ashley South, "Burma's Ex-Insurgents", op.cit.

⁶⁹ The KDC is a social organisation funded by overseas Karen that does cultural activities, business development training, computer training, and similar activities. It has not officially registered as an NGO but is considering doing so.

⁷⁰ In 2000, over 46,000 Mon primary school students and 27,000 Shan students attended summer language training courses in their own language. Martin Smith, "Burma (Myanmar): The Time for Change", Minority Rights Group International, London 2002, p. 26.

VI. GRIEVANCES AND ASPIRATIONS

The most fundamental grievance of ethnic minorities in Myanmar today is their lack of influence on the political process and thus on policy decisions that affect their lives. Ethnic minority groups feel discriminated against by the Burman-dominated government and have openly accused it of a deliberate policy of “Burmanisation”. They feel not only marginalized economically, but also that their social, cultural, and religious rights are being suppressed.

A. POLITICAL SPACE

Ethnic minority groups feel that successive Burman-dominated governments have betrayed the promises made at the 1947 Panglong Conference by denying them a role in national political life and influence over conditions in their own areas:

The Panglong Agreement, to a certain extent, could have drawn all the ethnic nationalities to live together within a Federal Union, having the rights of equality and self-determination for each of them. But in practice, 50 years of bitter experiences has convinced [us] that the so-called Union of Burma today has been a total lie. Ethnic nationalities believe that national solidarity can be achieved only through the establishment of a genuine Federal Union, by taking into consideration, the consent of all ethnic minorities⁷¹.

Such sentiments have increased since the military took power in 1962. Ethnic minority organisations argue that General Ne Win’s idiosyncratic socialist policies, while officially aimed at building national unity, in fact served to increase inequality and distrust:

This military government considers the ethnic nationalities issue simply as Burma’s legacy from their British colonisers’ divide and rule strategy rather than critically seeking to understand what historical issue the

nationalities groups were upset about. Thus the nation, under Ne Win, moved into a time of ever intensifying hostilities. All negotiations initiated by the military regime focussed not on developing a truly democratic process, which could settle the ethnic issue facing the country, but rather only on a process of uniting the country as one single state at the expense of other ethnic nationalities’ rights.⁷²

Some ethnic leaders remain suspicious about the intentions not only of the military government, but also of the Burman majority population at large:

We have tried many times to form a stable united front. The thing is whenever we talked about federalism, all Burman did not agree with us. They always say the ethnic groups are breaking up the country, that it is very dangerous. So we felt we had to form a united front with the ethnic groups only, with a common aim. My understanding is that NDF is the only organisation that will stand for the ethnic groups.⁷³

To overcome these problems, many ethnic minority organisations refer to the need for a new Panglong conference to re-negotiate the basis of a more equal Union for all the ethnic nationalities.

B. NATIONAL PRIORITIES

Since the 1988 uprising and 1990 election, international actors have tended to view ethnic minority organisations as part of the broader pro-democracy movement. The ethnic minorities, however, often complain that both the international community and Burman politicians see their grievances and aspirations as being of secondary importance to the quest for democracy. There is thus a fear that an agreement could be reached between the military government and the NLD that would leave the underlying issues of ethnic conflict unresolved:

⁷¹ Khaing Soe Naing Aung, Rakhine armed opposition leader and current General Secretary of the NDF, quote from *A Brief History of the National Democratic Movement of Ethnic Nationalities*, which he authored and published in August 2000.

⁷² Nai Pe Thein Zar, former NMSP and NDF official, “The Indigenous Peoples of Burma and Federal Union of State”, a paper in ICG possession that he presented during a tour of Europe in September 1993.

⁷³ ICG interview with Saw Ba Thin, KNU President, February 1999.

The international community interested in Burma supports the democracy organisations, with the ethnic organisations encouraged to demonstrate their solidarity with the democracy movement and Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. This has reinforced the predisposition of the pro-democracy movement to relegate the ethnic issue to secondary importance.⁷⁴

Some ethnic minority leaders have directly accused the international community of ignoring the ceasefire groups:

The international community is so afraid of taking risks. It is all run by domestic political considerations. They consult with the government and with the NLD, but they do not consult with the ceasefire groups, with the people. If any of the former disagree, they cancel ... The INGOs recognise the need to work with the central government, but not the need to work with the local government ... They are giving power to the central government – we want decentralisation.⁷⁵

There is also a feeling among some ethnic minority organisations that, historically, they have been divided and used by all Burman-dominated organisations:

The Wa people have been pawns in the violent, destructive games of others. We have been used as fighters for both the Ne Win government and in the Burma Communist Party's military arm. Neither army was under Wa officers. The Wa fought other people's wars in return for food and clothes. Finally, we have come to realise that we were being used to kill each other off.⁷⁶

The ceasefire movement, as well as the establishment of political parties and new community organisations, all in different ways reflect the wish by ethnic minority leaders to get on the inside of the political process and work purposefully for the fulfilment of ethnic minority interests rather than rely

on external developments over which they have little influence.

C. ECONOMIC RIGHTS

While five decades of civil war and economic mismanagement have undermined economic development and fed a deepening humanitarian crisis across the country, the ethnic minority areas generally have suffered the most. Many ethnic minority organisations feel that their areas have been deliberately neglected by successive Burman-dominated governments. As a KIO leader puts it:

The Burmese government blames the KIO for the bad condition of the roads. But Burma got independence in 1948, and the KIO uprising started in 1961. During the democracy period they did not build any new roads in Kachin State. They are blaming the problems on us, but that is nonsense.⁷⁷

The ceasefires were supposed to address these issues and have brought some improvements. Yet, while the government has stepped up budgetary allocations to ethnic minority areas, the increasing organisation of economic activities and access for external economic interests have often closed income opportunities for the local population. Mineral resources are being sold off. Large-scale commercial farming is expanding at the costs of traditional, small family farms, resulting in increasing numbers of landless and people migrating to the cities. There are more wealthy people, but the income gap is growing rapidly, with serious implications for social stability.

The rights to Myanmar's natural resources, many of which are in ethnic minority areas, are a particularly important issue. Some Kachin, for example, complain that while the military authorities exploit the natural resources in Kachin State, few profits are spent for badly needed development in the state:

The government has never done any development programs in Kachin State – we do it ourselves. We have plenty of natural resources. They come here and dig it up and sell it to other countries to get dollars. But

⁷⁴ David Taw, "Discussion paper on the situation of Burma's ethnic communities", delivered at a conference in Berlin, 26-28 March 1999, and in ICG's possession.

⁷⁵ ICG interview with minority community leader, September 2002.

⁷⁶ Saw Lu, United Wa State Party, "The Bondage of Opium: The Agony of the Wa People. A Proposal and Plea", a statement issued in 1993 and in ICG possession.

⁷⁷ ICG interview, June 2002.

they never use it to develop our state, the gold, teak and jade.⁷⁸

In many cases, the government has sold timber, gold, jade, rubies and other natural resource concessions to foreign companies without consultation with, or compensation for, local communities, who thus both lose the income and often suffer the social and environmental consequences of extraction industries.⁷⁹ This is causing great resentment among local communities.⁸⁰

D. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

After the 1962 military coup, the use of ethnic minority languages in the education system and for publication of newspapers and books was banned.⁸¹ Ethnic minority communities saw this as a deliberate policy by the central government to Burmanise them:

The ethnic non-Burman communities of the country have systematically been deprived of their birth right to teaching their own ethnic languages and literature and to preserving their own cultural heritage, under a policy of Burman ethnocentrism and Burmanisation traditionally exercised by the successive Burman-dominated governments in Rangoon.⁸²

⁷⁸ ICG interview with Kachin development worker, April 2002.

⁷⁹ In southern Myanmar, for example, international oil companies are operating a gas pipeline through land inhabited by ethnic Karen, Mon and Tavoyan peoples. In Kachin State, Chinese companies have been awarded concessions to use gold dredgers on the Irrawaddy River, thus displacing many local prospectors. Villagers have also not been consulted on many large-scale logging operations by Thai and Chinese companies in the border areas.

⁸⁰ Some ceasefire groups are also involved in such deals. Groups such as the KIO and the NDA-K say they know the consequences of logging for the environment but have no other way to develop their impoverished regions since alternative assistance has not been forthcoming: "In Kachin State there is nothing but trees. We cut down the trees to get development. This is our own right, not other people's right. They complain that the Kachin people are cutting the wood. But are they going to help us with development if we do not cut?" ICG interview with NDA-K official, June 2002.

⁸¹ See, for example, the report published by the human rights organisation Article 19, "Censorship Prevails; Political Deadlock and Economic Transition in Burma", London, March 1995, pp. 36-37.

⁸² Mon Unity League (MUL), "The Mon; A People Without a Country", publication date unknown.

The situation has improved somewhat in recent years in some areas. There is more tolerance at the local level for ethnic minority language classes run by Mon, Shan, Karen, Kachin and other minority groups, outside the government education system.⁸³ In 1999, Mon monks were allowed to take most of their exams in Buddhist literature in the Mon language – a right taken away from them in the early 1980s.⁸⁴ Yet, there are still no newspapers available in ethnic minority languages, and the curriculum at universities in minority states remains heavily Burmanised.⁸⁵

Several armed groups have set up their own schools teaching in their own language. The KNU, for example, had its own education department, which supplied Karen language materials to schools in its "liberated area" until most of its territory was lost. Ceasefire groups, such as the NMSP and the KIO, continue to run their own schools.

E. RELIGION

While Myanmar's multi-religious population enjoys a relatively high degree of religious freedom in central parts of the country, there are frequent reports of discrimination against Christians and, particularly, Muslims in ethnic minority areas.

Many of the non-Buddhist ethnic minorities see the central role of Buddhism in the government's nation-building project and the construction of Buddhist structures in their areas as an attempt to destroy or assimilate their cultures. Local sources claim that villagers from Chin State have been pressured to adopt Buddhism. There have also been reports of restrictions on construction of new churches, both from Chin and Kachin State.⁸⁶

The most serious accusations, however, have come from Muslim Rohingyas in Arakan State, who believe the army is exploiting religious differences for its own benefit:

The SLORC has often tried to stir up religious and racial tensions in Burma in order to divide the population and divert attention from other

⁸³ Martin Smith, "The Time for Change", op.cit., p. 26.

⁸⁴ Ashley South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, op.cit., p. 311.

⁸⁵ Article 19, "Censorship Prevails", op. cit., p. 37.

⁸⁶ U.S. Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report 2002: Burma", Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labour, 7 October 2002.

political and economic concerns. In 1988, the SLORC provoked anti-Muslim riots in Taunggyi, Prome and many other places during the pro-democracy movement. In May 1996, anti-Muslim literature widely believed to have been written by the SLORC was distributed in four towns in Shan State, leading to communal violence.⁸⁷

In February 2001 tensions between the Muslim and Buddhist population of Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State, erupted into large riots during which an unknown number of people were killed and Muslim property was destroyed.⁸⁸

The picture is mixed, though. The churches, for example, currently appear to have more space than the Buddhist Sangha, in particular with regard to community development programs and cooperation with international NGOs.

F. COMMON DENOMINATORS

Many of these grievances reflect underlying centre-periphery tensions.⁸⁹ Yet, they are caused also by racial arrogance on the part of the Burman majority population and exacerbated by the behaviour of the Burman-dominated national army in minority areas, particularly in conflict areas. Most worrying perhaps, they are closely associated with the military government's approach to nation-building that rather than promote unity in diversity seems intent on assimilating the minorities into the dominant Burman-Buddhist culture. The minorities thus often have little reason to feel part of the Union or owe any allegiance to it.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ AFK Jilani, *The Rohingyas of Arakan: Their Quest for Justice*. The author published this book in 1999. See also Tom Kramer, "The Rohingyas of Burma: Unwanted and Unprotected", *Irrawaddy*, vol. 9, N°2, February 2001.

⁸⁸ Anti-Muslim riots have also taken place on numerous occasions in towns in central Myanmar, most recently in 1991 in Toungoo, Pyay and Bago. Human Rights Watch/Asia, "Crackdown on Burmese Muslims", July 2002.

⁸⁹ Ethnic nationalities appear to get along better in the cities and towns of central Myanmar than the discussion in this report of relations between the government and various minority organisations might seem to suggest.

⁹⁰ Each of these factors, of course, is linked to the long history of violent conflict and the resultant images, sentiments and prejudices concerning past or present "enemies".

VII. INTERNAL UNITY

The influence of the ethnic minorities on national politics depends to a large extent on their ability to present a united front. This is no less the case today with constitutional negotiations possibly looming than it was during the days of armed struggle. Minority organisations, over the past half-century, have established several alliances. However, they have yet to form a truly inclusive, nationwide front, and several key issues continue to divide them.

A. DIVERGENT GOALS

Most ethnic minority organisations today have accepted the reality of the Union of Myanmar and support a federal constitution. However, the SSA (South) still maintains that the Shan State is legally independent, and the Union must be renegotiated before it will commit to it:

The Shan State, whether one likes it or not, has been independent according to the abrogated constitution (of 1947). In the future, whether we are going to set up a federal union or an independent nation, we must cooperate with each other, which means Kachin, Karen, and even Burmese, on equal terms, whether it's federalism or independence.⁹¹

Similar claims have been made by the KNPP, which in the late 1980s set up a Karenni Provisional Government and appealed to the international community for diplomatic support.⁹² Neither the SSA (South) nor the KNPP has ever joined an alliance with Burman members.⁹³

More problematic, although it has yet to be fully articulated, are perhaps the different perceptions of what ethnic autonomy should entail. Many ethnic communities, including Karen, Mon and Chin, historically have lived among or been close to the

⁹¹ ICG interview with Col. Yawd Serk, January 1999.

⁹² See, for example, Karenni Provisional Government, "The Question on Karenni Sovereignty and Independence", 1989; also Karenni Provisional Government, "Karenni Manifesto and Karenni History", 1 January 1992. "From a legal standpoint, Karenni, to this day, has not lost its statehood. It is an independent state under illegal occupation" (p. 2).

⁹³ KNPP has in the past argued that it could not join the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) since it did not consider itself part of Burma.

Burman and do not have the same sense of urgency about eliminating the unitary state. The same is the case with the Wa and the Kokang, though for different reasons. They have more autonomy and power now than they could probably hope to get under any future federal arrangement. Thus, they appear to favour the status quo.

Herein lie perhaps the seeds of future disunity. Some groups may get what they desire, but others will not. Such differences will further obstruct cooperation.

B. STRATEGIC DIFFERENCES

The ceasefire movement in the late 1980s to early 1990s caused a serious rift, which has never healed, between key organisations such as the KNU and the KIO that had long been working relatively closely together, at least militarily:

The main policy of the KIO since 1994 has been to find a peaceful settlement of the conflict, to solve the problems at the table, not on the battlefield. Before the ceasefire, we discussed it many times with the DAB and the NDF. But they wanted to find a political solution first and then make a ceasefire.⁹⁴

This is still the main difference between the ceasefire groups and those who continue their armed struggle, one causing significant tensions and mistrust among former allies. Most of the groups still fighting have suffered from factions breaking away to establish ceasefires, and vice-versa, sometimes leading to armed clashes among former comrades.

In many ways, this disagreement among proponents of politics first or development first mirrors the debate at the national level over revolutionary versus evolutionary change, and at the international level over isolation versus engagement.

C. DISTRUST

While differences over goals and strategies make cooperation among ethnic minority organisations difficult, the more fundamental problems perhaps are related to perceptual and behavioural factors.

The size of Myanmar, its difficult terrain and underdeveloped infrastructure, coupled with decades of conflict, has greatly limited interaction among many minority groups.⁹⁵ The lack of knowledge and understanding of each other – compounded by the development of strong ethno-centric identities that not only divide the minorities from the Burman majority but also from each other – naturally creates a lot of distrust.

Closeness between ethnic minority groups has brought other problems. The history of conflict in the country has been rife with clashes between minority armies, even from the same ethnic group. While much of this strife has been driven by opportunism – notably struggles over scarce resources – rather than inter-ethnic hostility as such, it too has left a legacy of distrust.

The military government, by design and default, has added fuel to the flames. In some cases, the army has deliberately played minority groups off against each other. In other cases, failure to treat different groups equally has created jealousies. The former CPB forces in Northern Shan State, in particular, are considered by many other groups to be receiving preferential treatment, in terms of development aid, access to foreign delegations, and the like.⁹⁶

D. RIVALRY AND OPPORTUNISM

Personality clashes and conflicts over territory, trade and other economic resources have been – and are – another cause of much conflict among ethnic minority organisations, particularly those that need resources to maintain armies.

The narcotics trade has been an important element in this. During the early 1990s, there was heavy fighting between the UWSA and Khun Sa's MTA over control of the drug routes along the Thai border.⁹⁷ More recently, SSA (South) has declared its own "war on drugs" and claims to have attacked several convoys and factories. This has brought it into conflict with other players in the drug trade,

⁹⁴ ICG interview with KIO official, February 2002.

⁹⁵ Many minorities live along remote borders and have closer relations – trade, cultural and otherwise – with neighbouring countries than the rest of Myanmar. Thus, they lack even the common focal point represented in most countries by the capital or the heartland.

⁹⁶ ICG interviews, May-November 2002.

⁹⁷ See footnote N°24 above.

including UWSA and a number of Lahu militia aligned with the Myanmar military.⁹⁸

Similar conflicts have erupted about logging and trading and taxation rights in areas of overlapping influence. At the height of the popular uprising in 1988, for example, fighting broke out between the KNU and the NMSP over taxation rights at the lucrative Three Pagoda Pass border post. This emphasised the distance between national and ethnic politics at the time, as well as the growing economic imperatives of the conflict.

Opportunism is evident also in the pursuit of arms and military support, which over the years has seen many ethnic groups abandon alliances or even break away from their own groups in order to join the government, or previously the CPB.

E. PROSPECTS FOR COOPERATION

The degree of division among ethnic minority groups can perhaps be overstated. Whatever their differences and distrust, they do share many grievances and aspirations. There is also a growing awareness of the need to work together if they are to have a real say in any future negotiations on the country's future. Apart from initiatives inside the country discussed above⁹⁹ – two new initiatives are underway on the Thai-Myanmar border.

The National Reconciliation Program (NRP), set up in 1999, works to facilitate inter-ethnic cooperation through training, conferences and seminars. It funds non-ceasefire and ceasefire groups, as well as political parties, to enable them to exchange ideas and work out a common position. Among other things, it has launched a program to start ethnic minority groups thinking about and working on their individual state constitutions in anticipation of a future tripartite dialogue and of a federal arrangement. This is one of the first times any ethnic

movement has seriously considered how it wants to govern itself rather than just being anti-Burman.

The Ethnic Nationalities Solidarity and Cooperation Committee (ENSCC) is another effort by armed ethnic minority organisations operating from the Thai border to prepare for eventual tripartite dialogue. Established in August 2001, it presents itself not as a new organisation but rather as a task force representing non-ceasefire groups in and outside the NDF, as well as ceasefire groups.¹⁰⁰

These initiatives complement earlier efforts by the DAB to reach consensus on the principles of a new constitution. Their location on the border raises questions about the ability of the organisations concerned to represent local communities inside the country. Also, it remains to be seen how effective their initiatives are and how much impact they will have on the national political process. However, they do represent an acceleration of attempts to build unity among Myanmar's minority groups.

⁹⁸ The SPDC accuses Thailand of supporting the SSA (South), a charge the Thai authorities deny. In return they accuse the SPDC of condoning the drug trade by the UWSA. In 2001 and 2002, fighting along the Thai border between the SSA (South) and the Myanmar army, supported by the UWSA, led to a number of international incidents and border clashes between the Myanmar and Thai armies.

⁹⁹ Some potentially important new initiatives inside the country must remain unmentioned as they are at very sensitive stages of negotiation with the government and among local communities.

¹⁰⁰ See ENSCC, "Policy Papers; The New Panglong initiative: Re-Building the Union of Burma", Chiangmai, 2002.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The UN General Assembly has recognised the importance of ethnicity in fuelling conflict in Myanmar, and since 1994 has called for a tripartite dialogue between the military government, the NLD and ethnic minority groups to achieve national reconciliation. Yet, the implicit notion of the ethnic minorities as a “third force” in national politics needs reassessment.

Unlike the armed forces and the pro-democracy opposition, the ethnic minorities lack a unified organisational structure and therefore capacity to pursue shared goals. Indeed, it is unclear to what extent they would be able to agree on a common agenda and who would represent them if tripartite negotiations were to materialise.

It has been encouraging to follow the shift away from armed struggle to political means, and the increasing involvement of civilians, both politicians and civil society actors. Yet, soldiers continue to wield enormous influence within ethnic minority communities (just as they do at the national level). There will come a time – and it may be overdue – for the men in uniform to pass on their responsibilities to people with different training, experiences and means. Indeed, there may be a need for a broader generational shift to allow reconciliation to proceed.

It is vital that ethnic minority organisations strengthen their political and organisational capacity. The most serious and politically oriented organisations are now working to position themselves for longer-term change and are reaching out to their counterparts from other ethnic groups. The challenge is to build a broadly inclusive, nationwide platform, open to all ethnic minority organisations regardless of goals, strategy, race and

religion, and to develop general grievances and aspirations into a set of specific solutions and demands. Unless the ethnic minorities work together for a common cause, they are likely to remain passive subjects of central government policy.

Individual organisations also need to develop their political capacities. Many groups are waiting for change to come from Yangon. It is important that they develop their own vision for change. They also need to strengthen their strategic planning and organisational skills and to establish better contacts with the communities they aim to represent to improve their legitimacy and strengthen their position in possible future negotiations.

One of the most complicated issues facing the ethnic minorities relates to representation in any tripartite dialogue or constitutional assembly. It would appear that the Myanmar government prefers to work with the ceasefire groups, while Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD have been emphasising relations with ethnic political parties. The ethnic minorities, however, need to find their own way of selecting representatives from as broad a cross section of their communities as possible, and minimally including all groups and interests that have the power to disrupt the process of reconciliation.

Equally importantly, ethnic minority organisations need to maintain their independence from the main Burman or national-level groups. Given the depth of antagonisms and confrontation between the military government and the NLD, any attempt to choose sides is likely to create tensions and limit their ability to work for specific minority interests. This would outweigh any short-term material or other gains from siding with a more powerful patron in Yangon.

Bangkok/Brussels, 7 May 2003

APPENDIX A MAP OF MYANMAR



Courtesy of The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin

APPENDIX B

ARMED ETHNIC MINORITY ORGANISATIONS¹⁰¹

Non-Ceasefire Groups Location

Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP)	Kayah State (1995 ceasefire broke down after three months)
Karen National Union (KNU)	Kayin State and Tenasserim Division (1996/97 negotiations broke down)
Shan State Army (SSA) South	Shan State (formed after MTA dissolved)
Wa National Army (WNA)	Shan State (1997 talks broke down)
Hongsawatoi Restoration Party (HRP)	Mon State (break away group from NMSP 2001)
Mergui-Tavoy United Front (former CPB group)	Tenasserim Division
Arakan Liberation Party (ALP)	Kayin State
Lahu National Organisation (LNO)	Shan State
National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN)	Sagaing Division
Chin National Front (CNF)	Chin State
Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO)	Rakhine State
National Unity Party of Arakan (NUPA)	Rakhine State

Main Ceasefire Groups Location and date of agreement

Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)	1989	Shan State
United Wa State Party/Army (UWSP/A)	1989	Shan State
National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA)	1989	Shan State
Shan State Army – north (SSA)	1989	Shan State
New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDA-K)	1989	Kachin State
Kachin Defence Army (KDA) [former KIO 4 th Brigade]	1991	Shan State
Pao National Organisation (PNO)	1991	Shan State

¹⁰¹ Based on Martin Smith, “The Time for Change”, op.cit., p. 38.

Palaung State Liberation Party (PSLP)	1991	Shan State
Kayan National Guard (KNG) [breakaway group from KNLP]	1992	Kayah State
Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO)	1994	Kachin State
Karenni Nationalities People's Liberation Front (KNPLF)	1994	Kayah State
Kayan New Land Party (KNLP)	1994	Kayah/Shan State
Shan Nationalities People's Liberation Organisation (SNPLO)	1994	Shan State
New Mon State Party (NMSP)	1995	Mon State

Other Armed Groups with Ceasefire Status

Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) [breakaway group from KNU]	1995	Kayin State
Mongko Peace Land Force (MPLF) [Kokang splinter group]	1995	Shan State
Shan State National Army (SSNA) [breakaway group from MTA]	1995	Shan State
Mong Tai Army (MTA) [dissolved]	1996	Shan State
Karenni National Defence Army (KNDA) [breakaway group from KNPP]	1996	Kayah State
Karen Peace Force (KPA) [former KNU 16 th Battalion]	1997	Kayin State
Communist Party of Burma – Arakan State	1997	Rakhine State
KNU 2 Brigade Special Region Group – Toungoo	1997	Kayin State

APPENDIX C

ETHNIC MINORITY POLITICAL PARTIES

1990 election

Name	Seats won	Constituency
Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD)*	23	Shan State
Arakan League for Democracy (ALD)	11	Rakhine State
Mon National Democratic Front (NMDF)	5	Mon and Karen State
Chin National League for Democracy (CNLD)	3	Chin State
Kachin State National Congress for Democracy (KSNCD)	3	Kachin State
Union Pao National Organisation (UPNO)*	3	Shan State
Democratic Organisation for Kayan National Unity (DOKNU)	2	Karen and Shan State
Kayah State All Nationalities League for Democracy (KSNLD)	2	Kayah State
Naga Hills Regional Progressive Party (NHRPP)	2	Sagaing Division
Ta-ang (Palaung) National League for Democracy (TNLD)	2	Shan State
Zomi National Congress (ZNC)	2	Chin State
Kaman National League for Democracy (KNLD)	1	Rakhine State
Karen State National Organisation (KSNO)	1	Karen State
Lahu National Development Party (LNDP)*	1	Shan State
Mara People's Party (MPP)	1	Chin State
Mro (Khami) National Solidarity Organisation (MNSO)*	1	Rakhine State
Shan State Kokang Democratic Party (SSKDP)*	1	Shan State
Union Danu League for Democracy (UDLD)	1	Shan State
United Nationalities League for Democracy (UNLD)	1	Sagaing Division
Kokang Democracy and Unity Party (KDUP)*	0	Shan State
Union Karen League (UKL)*	0	Karen State
Wa National Development Party (WNDP)*	0	Shan State
Total seats contested in the election	485	

Only parties marked with an asterisk (*) are operating legally today. All other ethnic minority parties have been disbanded by the government, most in early 1992. The only other legal political parties are the National League for Democracy (392 seats) and the National Unity Party (ten seats).