Minorities, Money And Getting It Wrong in Myanmar

By Bertil Lintner

Myanmar has been riven by armed ethnic conflict for decades, despite numerous efforts to reach peace agreements. The latest iteration of those efforts has notably involved financially well-heeled foreign peace-making groups that have little understanding of the historical complexity of the underlying issues, but who are eager to claim credit for any progress in the peace process, writes Bertil Lintner. China, meanwhile, seems to hold many of the cards.

THE EUPHORIA knew no bounds. When it was announced that a text had been drafted for a proposed ceasefire agreement between the Myanmar government and some of the country’s many ethnic resistance armies, The Center for Humanitarian Dialog, a Swiss-based peace and reconciliation outfit that runs several Myanmar-related projects, hailed it as “the most comprehensive ceasefire agreement in Myanmar’s history” which “will set the stage for resolving the longest-running conflict in Southeast Asia.” Vijay Nambiar, special advisor on Myanmar to the Secretary General of the United Nations, also called the drafting of the proposal “historic” and UNICEF even suggested that it “could be a dawn of a new time of progress for the most disadvantaged children in Myanmar.”

That was on March 31, 2015. Four years on, it is evident that Myanmar’s so-called peace process has been a complete failure. Even as the foreign peacemakers were congratulating themselves in the capital Naypyidaw and in Yangon, the reality on the ground remained depressingly unchanged. Airstrikes and other attacks were continuing against Kachin and Palaung rebel forces in the north and northeast of the country. When what was termed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was nevertheless signed on Oct. 15, 2015, it was announced that “eight groups” were behind it. But five of the signatories had no noteworthy armed forces, and one, the democratic Karen Benevolent Army, had been a government-allied militia since it broke away from the main group, the Karen National Union (KNU), in 1994.

That meant that only two of the signatories — the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) and the KNU — were actually engaged in armed struggle against the government before signing the NCA. Groups representing 80 percent of Myanmar’s armed rebels refused to sign the agreement because they saw it as surrender, not the beginning of a comprehensive settlement for peace and the establishment of the federal union that they envisaged.

‘PEACE,’ FOLLOWED BY FIGHTING

The ultimate irony is that Myanmar has seen the heaviest fighting in decades since a government led by President Thein Sein, a former army general, assumed office in March 2011 and launched its so-called peace process. In fact, Myanmar’s civil war has not been this intense since the country’s military, the tatmadaw, launched offensives against communist forces and ethnic Karen rebels in the 1980s. On Feb. 13, 2018, the government proudly announced that two more groups had signed the NCA — a Mon rebel army and a Thailand-based NGO representing the Lahu, another ethnic minority.

But, at the same time, the war had spread to Kokang, an area populated by ethnic Chinese in the northeastern corner of Shan State. In October 2016 and August 2017, Muslim insurgents from a group called the Arakan Rohingya Sal-
vasion Army launched attacks on security outposts on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, provoking a massive response from the tatmadaw. More than 700,000 Rohingyaas, a Muslim community in Rakhine State, fled into Bangladesh to escape what UN investigators and human-rights advocates have described as “ethnic cleansing.” Then, early this year, the Arakan Army, a group drawing its supporters from the Buddhist majority of the Rakhine State, clashed with the security forces, prompting another crackdown — and the flight of Rakhines and other Buddhists across the country’s western border. The conflict never seems to end, despite, or because of, the involvement of a host of foreign peacekeepers with little or no understanding of Myanmar’s ethnic problems. They — the governments of Norway and Switzerland, the European Union and a host of other governmental and private outfits — have also brought with them hundreds of millions of dollars, turning peacekeeping into a lucrative industry that has achieved nothing when it comes to alleviating the sufferings of the people in the frontier areas. Most Western donors have even aided the groups that have escaped what UN investigators and human-rights advocates have described as “ethnic cleansing.”

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

Instead of spending vast amounts of money on “studying” processes in other countries that bear little or no resemblance to Myanmar’s longstanding ethnic and political conflicts, it would be much more useful to examine Myanmar’s own past experience of peace efforts — and why those, without exception, have failed to end the wars. In 1956, when then army chief General Ne Win took over from the elected government of Prime Minister U Nu and formed a military-controlled “caretaker government,” some communist and ethnic rebels laid down their arms under an official amnesty. No political concessions were offered. Some surrendered while others formed bands of local armed men engaged in trade. On March 2, 1962, when the military seized absolute power after a short interregnum with a new civilian government also led by U Nu, the new junta promised serious peace talks. Those commenced in 1963 and attracted a wide range of ethnic and political rebels. But, again, the ruling military demanded surrender, offering nothing more than “rehabilitation.”

Unsurprisingly, the talks broke down. Some old and new armed bands were converted into home guard units called ka kwe ye, but there was not enough money in the central coffers to pay them, so they were allowed to trade in opium to finance themselves. The two most notorious Golden Triangle drug lords, Lo Hsing-han and Zhang Qifu (alias Khun Sa), actually began their careers as ka kwe ye commanders and were arrested only when they established links with the ethnic rebels they were supposed to fight. In 1980, the government announced a general amnesty for rebels, political prisoners and dissidents. Officially, 1,431 rebels surrendered. This figure was, most likely, a gross exaggeration, but the amnesty also led to the surrender of a right-wing insurgency on the Thai border led by U Nu. In 1980, peace talks were also initiated with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). The talks lasted for months, but the government’s offer was again rehabilitation in exchange for surrender. Needless to say, those talks broke down as well. After the pro-democracy uprising that swept Myanmar in 1988, thousands of urban dissidents fled to the border areas where they linked up with ethnic groups such as the KNU and the KIA. But those groups had only a few guns to spare with the Bamar activists — unlike the CPB, which has warehouses full of weaponry supplied by China during 1968-78. However, few pro-democracy activists fled to the CPB-held areas along the Chinese border in northeastern Myanmar. The situation changed when, in March-April
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1989, the hill-tribe rank and file — most of whom were ethnic Wa from the frontier areas — of the CPB rose in mutiny against the party’s ageing, predominantly Bamar leadership. They were driven into exile in China while the CPB subsequently broke up into four ethnic armies, the largest of which was the United Wa State Army (UWSA). Now, the junta that assumed power in Yangon in September 1988 faced the real danger of a united front. But the tatmadaw acted faster and with more determination than the loose alliances that existed between the ethnic rebels and the pro-democracy activists. The ex-CPB mutineers were offered ceasefire deals and promised unlimited business opportunities. As a result, the UWSA and other former CPB-forces made peace with the tatmadaw.

With the collapse of the CPB and the failure to form new anti-government alliances, about two dozen ethnic armed groups, both large and small, entered into similar ceasefire agreements with the tatmadaw. Among them was the KIA, which was the only group that insisted on having a signed, and not only a verbal, agreement with central authorities. That agreement was broken when the tatmadaw launched an all-out offensive against the KIA in June 2011, only months after Thein Sein had announced his desire for peace. And what happened to the UWSA? The group and its leaders became rich on the deal with the tatmadaw as “business opportunities” in their border areas equalled drug trafficking. The UWSA and its allies became Asia’s main producers of opium and heroin, although in more recent years they have turned to manufacturing meth-amphetamines and other synthetic drugs.

Failed ceasefire agreements are nothing new in Myanmar, and the only difference between the present “peace process” and what happened in 1958, 1963, 1980 and in the late 1980s and early 1990s is the involvement of the foreign peacemakers and their money bags — and, as we have seen, insights into the actual situation on the ground has never been their strong suit. The term “military-industrial complex” is often used to describe a network of defense contracts, flows of money and resources among individuals, institutions and various government agencies in the United States. Myanmar now, it seems, has its own “peace-industrial complex.” A foreign human-rights activist familiar with the situation in the war-torn frontier areas describes the foreign-dominated peace industry as “a cabal of carpetbaggers and con men whose real contribution to the peace process is shrouded in self-laudatory assessments that have no basis in reality.”

A WAY FORWARD
But there is a way forward, and it could look like this. As a first step, the government should announce a ceasefire. Nothing has to be signed at this stage, but some on-the-ground monitoring would be required. After that, the government should invite leaders of the ethnic armed groups as well as civil society organizations and religious communities for talks. Step three would be to study why all previous attempts at establishing peace have failed. Evidently, peace in exchange for surrender or converting rebel groups into money-making militias is not going to work. Next, there should be a study of federal models that would provide lasting solutions to the ethnic conflicts and thereby strengthen the nation. A continuation of civil war will only be detrimental to national unity, as has been the case for decades. As a final step, a political agreement should be signed, and the ethnic armed groups could then be absorbed into local police forces controlled by the respective state governments or whatever they, civil society and the government think would be the best solution.

This will not be easy, but solving decades-long conflicts never is. At the very least, it would be more constructive than pursuing the failed policies of promoting an NCA before talks, which is what the government, the tatmadaw and the international donor community wants. The main task has to be to bring one of the world’s longest-lasting ethnic wars to an end, not to benefit from it in financial terms through the funding of various, meaningless “peace projects.”

THE SHADOW OF CHINA
But there is a big “but” here that the foreign peacemakers have overlooked: China’s strategic interests in Myanmar. China maintains close links with all major groups in the north, and, especially, the more than 20,000-strong UWSA whose arsenal includes man-portable air-defense systems, howitzers, a wide range of mortars, rocket launchers, machine-guns and assault rifles, and even armored personnel carriers, as well as, is it rumored, a few helicopters. All of this has been supplied by China’s military security services, making what’s the United Wa State Army more or less an extension of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army.

The UWSA is also the leading force in a new alliance called the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC), which apart from the Wa army includes the KIA, the Arakan Army, the Shan State Army of the Shan State Progress Party, the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (an ethnic Palaung force), the Kokang-based Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and another former CPB force in eastern Shan State called the National Democratic Alliance Army. The FPNCC brings together more than 80 percent of Myanmar’s armed rebels — and none of its members has shown any interest in signing the NCA.

Through its traditional policy of separatist “government-to-government” and “party-
to-party” relations, China is able to send diplomats to take part in the peace process at the same time as its security agents are arming the UWSA. While Sun Guoxiang, the main Chinese diplomat who attends talks in Naypyidaw and elsewhere, he promotes peace and continued dialogue, another game is being played out from behind the scenes. China does not want to see more war in northern Myanmar, but the UWSA has to be kept strong enough to deter the tatmadaw from attacking it.

For China, the UWSA is an effective bargaining chip when it wants to put pressure on the Myanmar government not to stray too close to the West. The threat posed by the UWSA, and China playing the role as the sole arbiter in talks between the rebels and the government and the tatmadaw, are also useful tools when the Chinese want to protect their investments in Myanmar. That became especially important after then-president Thein Sein in September 2011 decided to suspend a US$3.6 billion Chinese hydroelectric power project at Myitsone in the far north of the country. The Chinese have also had to deal with ongoing protests against a Chinese mine project in Letpadaung, northwest of the central city of Mandalay. Tellingly, when Aung Min, then a government minister, met the protesters at Letpadaung in 2012, he told them that “we don’t dare to have a row with China. If they feel annoyed with the shutdown of their projects and resume their support to the communists, the economy would backslide. So you’d better think seriously.” With “the communists” Aung Min meant the UWSA — and his analysis was correct.

Sending even more arms to the UWSA is what China would do if its strategic and economic interests in Myanmar are under threat. Letpadaung and Myitsone may be important investment projects, but they are not, after all, China’s main interests in Myanmar. China is engaged in, and wants to control, the construction of a deep-sea port at Kyaukphyu in Myanmar’s Rakhine State — and to build high-speed railways that would connect the port with Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan province. The “Myanmar Corridor” from China’s southwestern landlocked provinces down to the Indian Ocean is a vital part of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

For these reasons, China has become involved in Myanmar’s so-called peace process — but Beijing is not necessarily interested in a final, peaceful solution to Myanmar’s civil wars; rather, it wants stability that it can use to protect and enhance its geostrategic goals, now under the aegis of the massive, all-encompassing BRI. And because of its close relations with the UWSA and its allies, China has made all the Western peace-makers redundant.

The West’s inability to understand not only the fundamentals of Myanmar’s civil wars but also the role that China is playing in the process is a recipe for disaster. A completely new approach is needed to bring to an end decades of war in the frontier areas. Myanmar’s ethnic conflict is a political problem demanding a political solution, not merely a repeat of what happened in the 1950s, 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s. The alternative is to leave Myanmar wide open to Chinese penetration and exploitation. And that is not in the interests of Myanmar, its long-suffering people — or those in the region and beyond who are becoming increasingly wary of the rise of China and what it means for the rest of the world.

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