

## **The ceasefire agreement between the Burmese military and the Karen National Union (KNU).**

( a brief analysis based on recent reporting by AFP, BBC, Bangkok Post, The Nation, New Light of Myanmar, Irrawady Online)

*by*

Joern Kristensen\*  
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The significance of the week-long round of talks in Yangon between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Burmese military regime, - the two main parties in a civil war lasting for more than half a century, which on 22. January 2004 concluded in a verbal cease-fire agreement, has not been fully mirrored in the international media. A brief statement on 23 January made by the Burmese government announcing that it had "reached mutual understanding" with the KNU confirmed information given the day before by a member of the KNU delegation. The delegation went to Yangon on 15 January for a second round of peace talks. The two sides had agreed on a ceasefire, "but we didn't put it down on papers," said David Taw, the deputy foreign secretary of the KNU. He also said that the parties had discussed the repatriation of thousands of internally displaced persons in the Karen State of Myanmar, that bilateral talks will continue and that the KNU delegation will return to Yangon in one month.

The fact that no paper was signed before the KNU delegation returned to Thailand is not an indication of failed negotiations. The Karens will need time. It is a serious and sensitive matter for the Karen leaders to give up 55 years of fighting without there being a decisive change on the war front forcing concessions upon them. That change occurred in 1995 when the Karens faced a major setback on the battlefield after the Burmese overran the KNU headquarters in Manerplaw and another stronghold, Kaw Moo Rah near the Thai border, thereby forcing the Karen leadership to relocate permanently to Thailand. The army of the KNU has since been waging small scale guerilla operations by penetrating the border from the Thai side. This has, however, not been seen as having enhanced the Karen bargaining position; rather the opposite. The jungle campaign, while still a headache for the Burmese army, has revealed that the KNU is a far cry from the force it once was, and today the KNU does not have many cards to play in the negotiation.

### **Why is the visit of this 21 member KNU delegation to Yangon so significant?**

Firstly, it is worth noting that the Karen delegation of 21 KNU officials was headed by the Deputy Chairman and Military Commander of the KNU, the legendary General Bo Mya, and that it was him personally who agreed on the ceasefire with the Burmese Prime Minister, General Khin Nyunt. The Burmese government used to refer to Bo Mya as a terrorist and murderer. This time he was treated with the respect usually accorded to the elderly in Burmese society; Khin Nyunt even hosted a birthday party for him on January 20 when Bo Mya turned 77. Though some members of the KNU political wing reportedly had not been interested in making peace with Yangon, the Karens united behind the initiative when Bo Mya seized the opportunity, and agreed to continued talks. That the KNU delegation was lead by Bo Mya himself, who returned to the capital for the first time since he left for the jungle more than fifty years ago, testifies to the seriousness by which the Karen leadership is now responding to repeated invitations by the military government to make peace and join the national reconciliation process which Khin Nyunt outlined in his 7 point road-map after he was appointed Prime Minister in august 2003.

Secondly, the Karens is one of the largest minority group within Myanmar, and KNU the most significant ethnic rebel group among those still fighting the Burmese government. The KNU is also comparably more politically sophisticated, with several university educated among its political leaders. Among the thousands of Karen villagers living as refugees in Thailand, the expectations for a peaceful solution are high. The many years of fighting, resulting in widespread persecution and killing, have taken a heavy toll on the civil population. Now many wish to return to their land in the Karen State. If the KNU comes to an arrangement with Yangon, other, smaller insurgent groups would likely give in and follow suit. And that would in effect end the world's longest civil war which has lasted since the British colonialists left the country in 1948. It would be a major victory for General Khin Nyunt and his plan for national reconciliation as part of political reforms.

And thirdly, the Thai factor: One can see the hand of the Thai Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra and his government in persuading the Karen leaders to travel to Yangon by the very fact that Gen. Bo Mya on his return to Thailand was received by the Thai Foreign Minister, Surakiart Sathirathai. Surakiart offered the assistance of the Thai government in repatriating the more than 100,000 Karen refugees in Thailand and for economic development of the Karen State, once the KNU and the Burmese government had reached a comprehensive peace deal. The Thai Prime Minister has on several occasions revealed his ambition to turn Thailand into a regional economic power-house and a hub for the transport of goods and passengers from India, across Myanmar through Indochina and to Vietnam. One obstacle to the plan which includes the construction of roads and opening up of the border between Myanmar and Thailand to free trade is that the area is now partly controlled by the KNU. Thaksin's policy is in stark contrast to that of previous Thai administrations which perceived the border area between Myanmar and Thailand to be a buffer zone and thus let their military not only tolerate but in fact quietly aid KNU and other rebel groups operating from Thai soil. The change in Thai policy and subsequent pressure from the Thai authorities in the past year has made it increasingly difficult for the KNU to operate along the border, and in fact made it clear to the Karen leaders that they have no other option than to negotiate a ceasefire agreement with their historical adversary, the Burmese.

### **What could these latest developments mean for the bigger political picture in Myanmar**

For 15 years, the political struggle in Myanmar has been defined largely as being between the military regime's State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), inspired and lead by Aung San Su Kyi. Defying high personal costs, including long spells of house arrest, the death of her husband in 1999 and constant tormenting by the SPDC-controlled media, she has held firm, encouraged by her allies in the pro-democracy movement, and backed by the governments of Western democracies and some of the ethnic minority groups, insisting that a political solution needed to be worked out through her. Now, new rounds of negotiations between SPDC and several ethnic minority groups signal a wind of change and appear to swing the focus of the century old conflict in Myanmar back to where it originates: The historically hostile relationships between the Burman majority and the ethnic minorities that make up as much as one third of a population of 52 million in this culturally and linguistically deeply divided country. With the influence of Japan and Western countries waning, and with Myanmar's ASEAN neighbors, China and more recently also India, supporting the process laid out in Prime Minister Khin Nyunt's 7-point roadmap, a ceasefire agreement with the largest ethnic minority insurgent group, KNU, sends a strong signal that old NLD allies in the pro-democracy movement now are ready to work directly with SPDC, if necessary without Aung San Su Kyi being part of the process. The SPDC seems to be more able than ever before to get what they aim for. However, while the outreach they have made to the region has worked well for them politically, the downside of having to depend primarily on their neighbors may be the lack of long term economic development. Much of Chinese investment in Myanmar for example is in extractive industries. Environmental watchdog Global Witness reported in a recent study the massive unsustainable logging undertaken by Chinese companies in large areas of virgin teakwood forest in Kachin State in northern Myanmar.

## **The challenge to the International Donors**

Among the top priorities in a ceasefire agreement between the Burmese Government and KNU are finding a solution for the estimated 250,000 internally displaced people in Karen State, and the repatriation of an estimated 100,000 Karen refugees from camps in Thailand. When an agreement has been formalized, it is to be expected that SPDC would wish to internationalize the issue and seek international assistance to its implementation. A similar approach was followed on the western border in the early nineties when UNHCR was given the mandate to coordinate and oversee the repatriation of more than 250,000 Rohingas of Muslim faith that had fled high-handed operations in the Arakan State by the Burmese Army and sought refugee in neighboring Bangladesh. With only a few thousand still remaining in camps in Bangladesh, this operation is now nearly completed by UNHCR, assisted by other UN agencies and a small number of international NGO's with the financial support of international donors. The problem in the Karen State, however, runs much deeper, and the need for development assistance is of much greater scale after decades of warfare, including not only repatriation but also mine clearing, land use planning, physical infrastructure and health and education. While having been largely absent from Myanmar, the country has received only about USD 50 million per year in ODA - just 1 dollar per capita, since the mid-nineties, the international donor community has for several years been actively engaged in providing assistance to the Karen refugees in Thailand. Switching this assistance to Myanmar may pose a dilemma for some Ngo's and donors. But it could also present an opportunity to move from a policy of isolation and sanctions to one of engagement, support and influence.

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Joern Kristensen is a Senior Consultant on Southeast Asian affairs, presently attached to the Australia based Institute for International Development. He is former head of the Mekong River Commission and UN Representative in Myanmar and Vietnam.

## The Karens and General Bo Mya

According to their legends, the Karen originated somewhere around the Gobi Desert in Mongolia 4500 years ago, from where they have migrated to Southeast Asia in stages. Half of the Karens live in North Western Thailand, and half in Eastern Myanmar and the Ayeyarwady delta, around Bassein. They are the second largest minority after the Shans, and make up 7% or approximately 3.5 million of the total population. Another ancient Karen legend helped make this minority fertile ground for Christian missionaries. It tells that the Karens' ancestors in the Gobi possessed a book of "holy scriptures" that was lost during the migration, but that it would someday be returned to them by a "white brother."

The missionaries, mostly American Baptists in the beginning of the 19th Century, found the Karens eager to embrace the Christian religion. Today the Karen is by far the largest Christian group in Myanmar, numbering an estimated 700,000, the remainder being either Animists or Buddhists, or a mixture of the two. Among Western countries, the Karen is one of better known minorities in Myanmar as they were widely recruited by the British Army and joined hoping that their allegiance to the crown would be repaid with their being granted independent status. As it turned out, the British ignored their pleas, and the Karen found themselves unwillingly included in a "Greater" Myanmar. Upset at the prospect of Burman domination, the KNU refused to be part of independent Myanmar and unilaterally declared their separate independence on 5th May 1948. Because Burmese nationalists sided with the Japanese for most of the war, Karens were ostracized by other groups; and their strong Christian background served to further exacerbate the cultural rift between them and the dominating Buddhist Burmans. There are three generally recognized groups of Karen: the Pwo, who prefer lowland or delta homes; the Sgaw, including the Paku (White Karen), Pa-o and other hill tribes; and the Bwe, whose subgroups include the Kayah (Red Karen), Karenni (Black Karen) and other remote mountain peoples. The Sgaw are less integrated into Burmese society than their Pwo cousins. It is from that group the majority of the KNU fighters are recruited and they used to control a large area of the Karen State, having established its own administration with schools, infirmaries and social services, all financed by control and taxation of most of the illegal trade across the Myanmar-Thai border.

General Bo Mya is born in Papun district, Karen State, in the remote mountains along the Thai border, in 1926. An Animist Sgwa Karen, he attended the local school up to just the fourth grade. Along with many other of his generation he attributes the major turning point in his life to the catastrophic event of the Second World War when, barely in his teens, he witnessed the atrocities carried out by the newly founded Burma Independent Army (BIA) against the Karen when they crossed the border from Thailand in 1942 as part of the Japanese occupation forces to drive out the British. He volunteered to serve as a policeman under the Japanese administration, which many hill Karens saw as offering some protection against the BIA. But, when in February 1945 a British unit parachuted into the Papun hills, Mya was in the first party to join. He stayed with the British Army in Rangoon after the war, until the outbreak of the Karen insurrection in 1949 when he returned to the east and became a commander in the KNU Highlander battalion. He rose rapidly through the ranks of KNU and in the early 1960s was promoted to the rank of colonel to take command of the Eastern Division's 7th brigade. Bo Mya was undoubtedly one of the most successful KNU commanders of his generation. Together with Shwe Hser, the commander of the KNU 6th brigade operating more to the south, his critics, both in Rangoon and in the KNU, have occasionally accused him of building up a personal fiefdom in the manner of a warlord. But above all, Bo Mya's shadow looms large over the Karen nationalist movement; in Burmese society he has enjoyed an almost mythological reputation which, depending on one's perspective, lies somewhere between a modern-day Robin Hood, Billy the Kid, Che Guevara or Abu Nidal. In 1963 came a turning point in his life when he married a Seven Day Adventist Karen and converted to Christianity. From this time on, of all the KNU predominantly Christian leaders, Bo Mya's political statements were the most deeply imbued with references to Christianity and the Bible. Now, as many of the KNU leaders, General Bo Mya is getting on in years and physically frail, and reportedly is keen to see some kind of solution to the Karens' battle for self-determination and autonomy. And he understands probably better than anybody else that if the Karens are to play any role in the country's political future, they need to join now. (The portrait of Gen. Bo Mya is derived from: BURMA, Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity by Martin Smith, Zed Books, London 1991)