

Dilemmas of Burma in transition

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Until a government of Burma is able to accept the role of NSAGs as providers for civilian populations and affords them legitimacy within a legal framework, sustained conflict and mass displacement remain inevitable.

Throughout decades of brutal conflict, which have seen thousands of villages destroyed and millions of people displaced, Burma's ruling regime has made no effort to provide support for affected civilians. As a result, Burma's ethnic non-state armed groups (NSAGs) – thought to hold territory covering a quarter of the country's landmass – play a crucial role as protectors and providers of humanitarian aid.

The approach to governance taken by different NSAGs varies greatly, as does the level of willing support given to them by their respective populations. In these traditional cultures, hierarchical leadership structures have evolved over time, often based largely on loyalty to those who provide support and protection. Leaders linked to or part of NSAGs are now firmly established as being responsible for the governance of millions of people in Burma. This situation poses a threat to the state which, in turn, has responded with brute force, perpetuating the cycle of conflict and protracted displacement.

Areas under the governance of NSAGs in Burma can be divided into what are known as the 'black areas' of active armed groups and the 'ceasefire territories' of those who made agreements with the national government over 15 years ago. These areas are collectively home to millions of civilians, many of whom fled areas of conflict or martial law to find refuge and humanitarian support. In many of these areas, education, healthcare, specialist support for youth and women as well as emergency relief are provided by the NSAGs' civil sectors, in most cases to a much higher standard than that provided by the state in nearby regions. Community workers supporting these projects, however, are heavily restricted and regularly attacked and arrested by Burma Army soldiers.

IDPs who have fled to the 'black areas' are typically considered by the state to be supporters of the rebels and are under continuous threat of violence. Those in the ceasefire zones receive no support from the government and, increasingly since 2009, experience sporadic incidents of abuse by the Burma Army. To many of these people, who are almost all ethnic minority citizens, all forms of state administration are seen as a threat rather than anything resembling a government; such tensions

held in November 2010 were as corrupt as most people expected and set continued military rule in stone. However, parallel to this, many foreign donors and governments have noted the military loosening its grip on civil society, opening up an unprecedented amount of space for humanitarian support and development. In parallel with this, however, all NSAGs have been ordered to incorporate their members into the Burma Army as 'border-guard forces', triggering a new series of threats to civilian communities and little hope for reconciliation between the military and NSAGs or their civil sectors. The majority of NSAGs have refused to be incorporated into the Burma Army and now anticipate



Free Burma Rangers

exacerbate xenophobia between ethnic groups, and heighten people's dependence on NSAG support.

Post-election challenges

Meanwhile, non-conflict regions in Burma are in a state of political transition which has allowed a new set of development actors to come in and new rationales among international donors. The elections

mass offensives by the Burma Army which could potentially lead to the further displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians. In November 2010, a breakaway faction from the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army that had refused the government's demands launched attacks on the Burma Army which then retaliated with mass use of artillery, displacing at least 20,000 civilians. This has

IDPs in
Burma

continued into early 2011, with refugees moving across the border as well as being sent back almost every day since the skirmishes began.

Essentially, while other parts of Burma may see improvements in development and access to services as the economic and political framework of the country is reordered, it is likely that marginalised communities in the east of the country will be left with very little, and will in fact suffer further conflict as a result of the nation's overall transition. If the military's plans are successful, and NSAGs are incorporated into the army, years of experience and training of employees of the NSAG civil sectors – teachers, medics, administrators, and so on – will have been wasted.

This presents a dilemma for those international actors who, alongside NSAGs in Burma, provide support to these populations: how much does support to NSAGs entrench existing divides and perpetuate conflict? Development agencies would normally be advised to avoid legitimising any armed group by allowing them involvement in the distribution of internationally funded supplies. However, when the national government is essentially an armed group itself (perhaps even more so than a number of the political organisations linked to NSAGs in Burma), difficult choices need to be made. These involve far more than moral considerations; they also involve looking at the impracticality of supporting groups which are, alas, no longer potential agents of change. This is especially relevant as, in recent years, more and more development actors and researchers argue that the development of civil society under the military government could not only bring unprecedented successes in development but also help bring about political change over time.

Undoubtedly, however, in the current climate withdrawing support provided through NSAGs would be gravely injurious to people under their governance in the short term and would in no way guarantee even long-term benefits. Until a government of Burma finds a genuine political solution which incorporates NSAG leaders, the environment for

international aid agencies is likely to remain contentious – but must still involve the provision of support though these groups. There should now be a pragmatic focus on what can be done to encourage greater cooperation between legitimate (i.e. government-allowed) and NSAG civil society groups to ensure that, where possible, groups operating in NSAG territory can provide services legitimately in the future.

There is a glimmer of hope in that there are some NSAG civil society groups that have been able to operate in government territory in recent years. The education branch of at least one of the more responsible ceasefire groups now provides support for primary schools in government-controlled areas through the monasteries. However, the question of continued viability of such programmes is largely dependent on the outcome of the expected flare-ups in conflict and the attitude local authorities would take towards the group now that – having refused incorporation into the army – they have been declared illegal. Ominously, offices of the Kachin Independence Organisation and the New Mon State Party have already been shut down in government territory and in early 2010 numerous youth workers of the former organisation were arrested, supposedly as part of a search for terrorist bombers.

The decades-long trend of the government taking a unilateral and belligerent approach to conflict resolution looks certain to continue, as will its policy of non-discrimination between soldiers and civil workers linked to political opposition groups. Without these concessions being made, NSAGs will inevitably retain arms and, in areas of active conflict, continue to target government troops with ambushes, landmines and other guerrilla tactics, even if their power bases are successfully eliminated. These activities protect vulnerable populations but also provoke retribution against civilians, creating a vicious cycle of conflict and displacement.

Conclusion

Some commentators are optimistic that space for officially permitted

relief and development aid will begin to open up, first in non-conflict areas and then spreading to other regions. However, unless some event causes a dramatic shift within or removal of the ruling committee of military generals that continues to dominate politics in Burma, this is likely to take decades, making continued support through NSAGs essential.

In the meantime, those working legitimately in Burma will need to push the boundaries to gain access to vulnerable populations, no matter who controls their territories. But this is difficult. According to an ethnic local NGO leader based in Yangon, "We would like to work more with the community groups in the border areas but if we are seen to be making contact, the government will think we are supporting rebels." Furthermore, commented a foreign consultant to numerous international NGOs in Yangon: "It is already hard enough to get MoUs [Memoranda of Understanding] for development in the most peaceful parts of the country. Weighing up poor peaceful areas or poor conflict areas, organisations will pick their battles.... [and] INGOs will probably be unwilling to send their staff to dangerous areas anyway."

NSAGs will remain critical to the provision of support to considerable numbers of IDPs in Burma, unless the government changes its approach to governance in these regions. Most IDPs and other civilians will continue to choose to live under the governance of NSAGs; and will remain dependent on international support. Steps to encourage a convergence of ideas and resources among legitimate civil society and groups linked to NSAGs should be, and could become, critical to the future peace and development of these regions, yet offer few solutions to the current displacement crisis. International donors should consider increasing support – administered from Thailand – for the most vulnerable populations, while working towards the long-term objective of convergence.

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