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Border-based Insurgency: Time for a Reality Check

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By ASHLEY SOUTH Wednesday, October 11, 2006

The days of Burma's border-based insurgency may be drawing to a close. As elements of the Karen nationalist community barter for an unofficial ceasefire with the junta, armed rebel groups on the border are growing increasingly marginalized.

In the early 1990s the Karen National Union and opposition alliance headquarters at Mannerplaw was an alternative axis of power to Rangoon. Today, the situation along the Thailand-Burma border has become marginal to the "big picture" of Burmese politics—although the plight of hundreds of thousands of conflict-affected civilians remains a grave concern.

This shift in the balance of power is illustrated by recent attempts to mediate an unofficial ceasefire between a faction of the Karen National Liberation Army, the KNU's military wing, and the Burmese military government. Not so long ago, such plotting would have been headline news. However, the decline of the border-based insurgencies means that these alarms today constitute little more than a footnote to history.

Since 2005, a small group of Karen leaders from inside Burma have been attempting to persuade ex-KNU Chairman and Defense Minister, General Bo Mya, and his old colleague-in-arms, the KNLA Seventh Brigade Commander, Brig-Gen Htain Maung, to resume discussion of a ceasefire with the State Peace and Development Council.

The other driving force behind this scheme is Pastor Timothy Laklem—an old friend of the Bo Mya family—assisted by the General's son, Colonel Ner Dah Mya. Both men have seen their influence decline, with the failing health of the latter's father. Having been unable to secure positions on the KNU Central Committee at last year's Thirteenth Congress, they seem to have undertaken this gambit in order to secure a power base.

One of the saddest aspects of this story is the way in which Gen Bo Mya has been manipulated by some of those closest to him. Whatever one thinks of the old warlord's record, he has surely earned the right to a dignified retirement after half a century on the front lines of the Karen revolution. Thus far, Bo Mya has been adamant that he will not return to Rangoon—although an unofficial KNLA delegation has recently visited the old capital, for secretive talks with the SPDC.

These intrigues represent a "win-win" situation for the generals at Naypyidaw, as the return of a faction of the KNU to "the legal fold" would constitute a minor political victory for the SPDC. With Burma now on the UN Security Council agenda, and UN Under Secretary-General Gambari expected to return to the country in November, the SPDC might find it useful to present the international community with a KNU ceasefire, while presenting any remaining KNU rebels on the border as illegitimate remnants.

If such a plan falls through, then the most significant insurgent group in the country has been kept busy with internal squabbling, while the generals get on with their business—a classic example of "divide-and-rule" strategy.

Meanwhile, the end-game in the civil war is well underway. The KNU has lost control of its once extensive "liberated zones," and the Burma Army is now engaged in a protracted and brutal mopping-up campaign, while Snr-Gen Than Shwe and his colleagues pursue their self-serving "roadmap to democracy," and consolidate military control from their new capital.

During more than fifty years of (mostly) low-intensity armed conflict in Burma,

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insurgency has become a way of life for long-suffering villagers, for combatants on all sides and for the networks of traders, loggers, spies and aid workers that grew out of the war. Many of these groups have vested interests in maintaining conflict along the border. For better or worse, the old insurgent paradigm is drawing to an end.

The refugee situation illustrates the changing times. Since the early 1980s, refugee camps in Thailand have provided sanctuary to the victims of civil war and associated human rights abuses in Burma, and served as unofficial base areas for armed opposition groups. Since the mid-1990s, as the number of refugees has grown (to 150,000 in 2006), so has the number of international aid agencies supplying their needs.

The existence of the refugees—and of some two million other internally and externally displaced Burmese—provides testimony to the abuses of the Burmese military regime. At the same time, the KNU's loose control over this civilian population bestows legitimacy on the Karen insurgency.

However, the humanitarian and human rights industry that has grown up along the border may be coming to an end. The next few months will see substantial numbers of Karen and Karenni refugees achieving the durable solution of resettlement to third countries. Many of those registered for resettlement are teachers, medics, administrators, and others from elite sectors of the refugee community.

Although probably fewer than 10,000 will depart by the end of next year, Ellen Sauerbrey, US Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees and Migration was quoted at the end of August as saying that "there will be no cap (for the resettlement of Karen refugees)". These words should alarm the KNU leadership.

There is a warning here from history. As long as there were Lao Hmong refugee camps in Thailand, the Hmong ethnic insurgency in Laos could continue, using the camps as fall-back bases. However, in the 1990s, with the closure of the last Lao-origin refugee camps along the northern border, the Hmong insurgency has been reduced to a few rag-tag guerilla bands that pose no threat to the Lao government, but perhaps serve as a pretext for the continued militarization of remote, ethnic minority-populated areas. Such a dire future is something the KNU should ponder.

Given the decline of the old insurgent paradigm, the options for the KNU and its allies remain limited. The purge of former prime minister and intelligence chief Gen Khin Nyunt in October 2004 effectively put an end to the old-style ceasefires. The SPDC of 2006 sees little reason to negotiate with what it considers a vanquished enemy. Many Karen politicians today recall with misgiving the squandered opportunities to negotiate a ceasefire in 1994 (before the fall of Mannerplaw) or 1996 (before the 1997 Burma Army offensives).

Fifteen years ago it was possible to believe that the then State Law and Order Restoration Council was on its last legs. One final push and the military regime would fall. Today, such assessments may be good for morale, but they serve as poor bases for devising strategy. The days of the free-wheeling border are all but over. It is time for the revolution to move on, and to re-examine basic strategy, while there is still time.

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