

Myanmar peace process in rebel hands: army chief

May Wong | CNA | 19 January 2015

In an exclusive interview with Channel NewsAsia, Myanmar's military chief accuses some ethnic armed groups of flouting the rules, resulting in clashes with the government military.

Kachin Independence Army (KIA) soldiers patrol in Loiye township in Myanmar's northern Kachin state. (Photo: AFP/Files)

YANGON: Myanmar's military has suggested that ethnic armed groups may not be fully committed to end the civil war in the country. In an exclusive interview with Channel NewsAsia, its Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing accused some ethnic groups of flouting the rules, which has resulted in clashes with the military.

In a sign of how volatile the situation is, fresh clashes between the ethnic Kachin Independence Army and the government military erupted a few days ago. But the Myanmar government is still keen to sign a national ceasefire agreement with key ethnic armed groups next month.

Ethnic armed groups have been fighting the government military in Myanmar for 60 years. Their demands are clear - they want political equality and the right to self govern. As minority communities, these ethnic groups have often felt unfairly treated - their rights as citizens ignored.

Several violent conflicts have occurred over the years. One such incident in 2011 between the Kachin Independence Army and the government military in the northern state left more than 100,000 people homeless. Many remain housed in temporary camps today.

Recent negotiations between the ethnic armed groups and the government have calmed the situation somewhat and reduced the frequency of clashes. The aim of the talks is to have the groups sign a nationwide ceasefire pact. But sporadic battles still occur, hampering negotiations.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing said: "This depends on the armed ethnic groups. Do they really want peace? If they really want peace, there is no reason why they should not get it. If they wish to go along the path of democracy, and if they have the desire to bring unity and development in their region, they can choose this path. We cannot keep arguing. Disputes hinder the country's development."

The Nationwide Ceasefire Co-ordinating Team (NCCT) agrees the agreement will push Myanmar forward. And the team, which represents 16 major ethnic armed groups, is determined to end the conflict.

Dr Lian Sakhong, a NCCT member and Chin National Front Supreme Council member, said: "We are truly committed for peace. We're truly, truly committed for national ceasefire agreement. Look, we're the ones who proposed and drafted this nationwide ceasefire agreement text. As soon as President Thein Sein came to power, we issued a statement, calling for a dialogue, calling for a ceasefire agreement."

Two issues remain a challenge: the future of ethnic armed groups and the government's commitment to continued political dialogue after the ceasefire pact has been signed.

The ethnic armed groups believe it will be more realistic to sign the ceasefire agreement in early April, rather than in February as President Thein Sein has hoped. Failing to do so, however, will result in wasted efforts and jeopardize the entire negotiation process as the country may see a change in administration after this year's general elections.

<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/myanmar-peace-process-in/1600208.html>

Myanmar not ready for reduced military role in Parliament: Army chief

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In an exclusive interview with Channel NewsAsia, Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing says the military needs to be in Parliament because Myanmar is still a young democracy.

Myanmar's military chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. (Photo: May Wong)

YANGON: Myanmar's military chief feels his country is not ready for a reduced military role in Parliament. In an exclusive interview with Channel NewsAsia, Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing said the military needs to be in Parliament because the country is still a young democracy.

The current Constitution mandates a 25 percent military representation in Parliament. Military officers occupy one quarter of the elected seats in Parliament. But under the Constitution, they are appointed and not elected by the people.

Citizens are calling for that clause, known as section 436, to be amended. The military chief however is reluctant to do so at this stage of Myanmar's transition.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing said: "It's been only about four years. We are still a young democracy. When we are moving towards a multi-party democratic system it needs to be a strong system. The military representatives in Parliament only give advice in the legislative

process. They can never make decisions."

"It will depend a lot on the country's unity, its peace and stability. To specify an exact time is difficult," he said, referring to the call to amend section 436.

But that uncertainty is making many uneasy. Some feel the 25 percent military representation will hinder Myanmar's democratization process.

Said political analyst Dr Yan Myo Thein: "Most of the Myanmar people are worried about who will make the decision on the assessment of Myanmar's maturity on the democratisation process, and when the process will end.

"The military's 25 percent representation in the Parliament is not a solution. The real solution is for the military to perform its major duties of safeguarding and protecting the state and the people, out of the Parliament and not inside the Parliament, and not direct involvement of the military officers in the Parliament."

Outside of Parliament, the 59-year-old military chief's name has been tossed up as a potential presidential candidate, as he nears the retirement age of 60.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing said: "About becoming President, I will decide, depending on the situation of the times. If I turn my attention to (politics) now, it is likely to weaken the job I'm doing. Right now it is too early to make a decision and talk about it."

The military chief however did not rule out the possibility of entering the political arena. Recently, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing also started to slowly lift the veil of secrecy often associated with the military, by communicating with the media and acknowledging the need to be more in touch with the people - signs that his contributions may not end with his retirement from the military.

<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/myanmar-not-ready-for/1603394.html>

Myanmar's military says will not unilaterally stage a coup

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Myanmar's military commander-in-chief says though the military will not unilaterally stage a coup, it will not hesitate to step in to restore law and order when a state of emergency is declared.

Myanmar's military chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. (Photo: May Wong)

YANGON: Myanmar's military commander-in-chief gave the assurance on Wednesday (Jan 21) that the military would not unilaterally stage a coup. However, it would not hesitate to step in to restore law and order if the president instructed.

Speaking in an exclusive interview with Channel NewsAsia, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing also cautioned that external groups might incite violence ahead of the country's planned general elections at the end of the year.

Thailand's military had staged a coup in May last year, and according to coup leaders it had seized control of the country to restore order and to introduce political reforms.

About two months later, Myanmar's military chief visited Thailand and had expressed his support for the coup.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing said: "The military coup in Thailand was without bloodshed. It was done to protect the people. That's why I supported their action. In fact, if you consider carefully, there was simply no other option. They will just need to carry on according to the law."

But the senior general believes Myanmar's military will not have to resort to a coup, due to the country's Constitution. He does not, however, rule out the possibility entirely.

He said: "We cannot override authorities just because they are not in control. When things become really out of control, if the President says the military needs to step in, in that region or state, the military will step in when a state of emergency is declared. If we don't act according to the law, we have to face a lot of consequences."

Myanmar experienced its last coup in 1988. But after more than two decades of military rule that saw the nation become largely cut off by much of the world, the government has since embarked on numerous reform programmes and insists it will not turn back on its transition to democracy. Some, however, remain unconvinced.

Dr Yan Myo Thein, a political analyst, said: "According to opinion, likelihood is 50/50." He said it would depend on how the army leaders interpret and assess the situation of the country.

"From the point of the Myanmar people, they would like to move forward to democracy. But from the perspective of the army and the army leaders, they thought the people are not matured enough to move to democracy ... In the future, if the military leaders fail to interpret the real situation on the ground, the coup can happen anytime," he added.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing is aware of how citizens perceive the military. He said it is important to be in touch with the people, as Myanmar matures as a democracy. But the military chief said this does not mean giving in to all the demands of the populace.

Myanmar to "wait and see" on constitutional change: Army chief

May Wong | CNA | 28 January 2015

In part 2 of an exclusive interview with Channel NewsAsia, Myanmar's army chief Min Aung Hlaing says any amendments to the constitution on military representation in parliament will have to wait, as there are still ongoing conflicts between armed groups.

Myanmar's military chief Min Aung Hlaing speaks to Channel NewsAsia's May Wong on issues including the country's opinion of the military, and the constitution.

NAY PYI TAW: Myanmar's army chief Min Aung Hlaing said he is aware that there is a negative perception of the military in some quarters, but he defended its role in helping the country's transition to democracy.

In an interview with Channel NewsAsia, he also said Myanmar needs to "wait and see" in response to questions on changing the constitution - which has a section that stipulates the army's representation in parliament.

Q: The constitution – you need more than 75 per cent of votes in parliament in order to change it. The military wields a lot of power in that.

The constitution is the main or mother law of a country. When writing it, careful consideration was taken. The history, the traditions and the situation of the ethnic groups are carefully considered. Another thing is the location of the country. All this is carefully thought of in writing the constitution.

It is not suitable to change a law often. A law needs to be strong. It should not be changed according to one's whims. It can affect stability. There are laws which are easy to change. But some laws are not easy to change. As mentioned before, the constitution of a country is its main law. Therefore, careful weighing of possible amendments has to be considered in writing the provisions.

Q: When do you think that it will be an appropriate time to change that particular section?

This should be based on the experience mentioned – democratic experience. It will depend a lot on the country's unity, its peace and stability. To specify an exact time is difficult. We are still trying to resolve conflicts with armed groups. Currently the process is still ongoing. We are not sure of the results.

The country's peace will depend on the results. We need to wait and see.

Q: Are you suggesting that until you sign a ceasefire agreement for the country, in near future you will not be touching the law which stipulates the army represents 25 per cent of the parliament?

I'm not saying that – I mean it just depends on many conditions. If we talk about the law, people keep talking about section 436 only. We can consider this in many ways.

You look at the military's situation and talk about that provision. If the military's situation was different, amending or not amending section 436 could have a different implication. That is why in my opinion you need to weigh pros and cons carefully when you talk about amendment.

Q: What are the cons – what are you most worried about if you were to touch it now?

There is nothing to be worried about. Because when the law was written it was with the people's consent. If according to people's wishes, it needs to be changed, we can change the law according to their wishes. There's nothing to be concerned about.

But the people do want to change it. And they want to change it now.

In the parliament, work is being done to review and amend the constitution. We have to wait and see what happens next.

Q: I know you mentioned earlier that it's too early to tell – in terms of when you can have a truly democratic result here in this country because the parliamentary system is so very young at this stage. However, what are some of the elements which you think are important before you feel that the military's role can slowly be reduced and eventually be completely out of the system?

It will largely depend on the path we take. Regarding what you mentioned about the military keeping control, the military acts according to the power given by the country – the provisions prescribed in the law.

I am the military commander-in-chief. I control only the military. Those who control the country are the government, the parliament and the judiciary. They balance the power according to their roles. However, the head of state is the president. Under his leadership we act according to the law. In doing so, firstly I don't think there can be any problems.

On the other hand, regarding the matter of reducing the role of the military, depending on the improvement of ongoing process of the country, this is possible I think.

Q: Myanmar has moved very quickly over a short period of time. In terms of the perception of the military and of you by the people, how much of a change do you want to make?

There is the history of the military – the struggle for independence. You cannot separate the

country's history from the history of the tatmadaw (army). Everyone knows about the role taken by the military.

But people may have their own feelings. For people to accept that we are protecting the country, serving the interests of the people, and protecting their interests, we are doing a lot. I think most of the people have full confidence in us. There may be some people who don't like us – that is possible.

Q: You said you are doing a lot to help people understand the role of the military. What are you doing to help them better understand?

In our history, from 1962 to 1974 the Revolutionary Council or military government ruled the country. Next from 1974 to 1988, we had the Myanmar Socialist Programme party, a one-party system. Then from 1988 to 2011, the military government ruled the country. During this period, individually or politically or economically there had been painful feelings.

To help people overcome their problems, and to serve their interests, we are doing a lot. We cannot all be the same. There will be some differences.

However, the military had been born from the people. To show it is protecting the interests of the people, protecting the country and serving the people we have made a lot of effort. If you look at the practical things we have done, you will understand.

Q: What are some of the practical things you have done that people should notice?

For example, we are doing regional development activities. Some states and regions are not very developed, and we are doing a lot for them. We protect their lives, property, homes in some areas where there are armed groups. There are places which lack security, and we are helping the police force which provides security and enforce the rule of law.

More obviously, for a country to be developed, people must be able to work, and they can work only if they are healthy. The military is providing assistance in health care.

The government also does a lot, but there are places – remote areas where they cannot reach. The military helps out by giving medical aid in those remote areas. We provide support. This is among the more obvious activities we do.

If you look at the whole country, there are many places where they accept the actions of the tatmadaw. There may be a few who say such things.

Like mentioned earlier there are people who individually or politically or economically, feel they have been unfairly treated and have feelings against us. Such people are saying these things. Someday when they understand, they will accept us.

There are people who understand what we're doing. We lack experience. Those who harbour negative feelings, those who are interested in politics are the ones who say such things. People

listen to them, and are influenced by them. So they don't have a good impression of us. I admit there are people who feel that way. However, I feel that the majority of people view us positively.

Q: In this day and age with social media as well, how else are you intending to help people better understand the military and the military's role in Myanmar?

Essentially, the military also needs discipline. If they observe discipline and act properly, people will understand them. Discipline is very important for the tatmadaw. I give this priority.

If the tatmadaw acts with discipline, and obeys the law, there is no reason why people should misunderstand us.

Right now, I am doing a lot for the military to observe discipline and act according to law. But among the many individuals, there may be those who break rules, I'm not saying this doesn't happen.

But if they break rules, severe action is taken. If it is a case involving the people, we have to take action according to law. If it is found out that a person breaks the law, we take more severe action than in civilian court. The penalty will be severe enough so that he will not dare to commit the act again. If people know about these things, they will accept us.

Q: You talked about the need to be disciplined, and you talked about the need to obey the law, particularly by the military. But there are also instances where military personnel have gone unpunished for some of their actions. How do you explain that to people?

People can complain if they feel they have suffered. That's the first thing. Another thing is it depends on the region or area where the military personnel is stationed.

A citizen may consider his act to be a crime or wrongdoing, but he may have the right or authority to do it. The people may think it is wrong. Because we are performing our duty with weapons, we cannot make mistakes.

An armed personnel has many rights, but he also has many rules that restrict his actions. He has to respect the rules. If he violates the rules action will be taken. Therefore if that happens, people can complain to us. We can do many things to take action.

<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/myanmar-to-wait-and-see/1612338.html>

Myanmar army won't take unilateral action in conflicts: Chief

May Wong | CNA | 30 January 2015

In the final part of an exclusive interview with Channel NewsAsia, Myanmar army chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing said the military will only step in on the president's orders.

Myanmar's military chief Min Aung Hlaing speaks to Channel NewsAsia's May Wong on issues including the country's opinion of the military, and the constitution.

NAY PYI TAW: Myanmar's army chief said the military will only step into conflict on the president's orders, as the country grapples with conflict in various states.

In an interview with Channel NewsAsia, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing also blamed the communal unrest on "external groups" which incite negative feelings among the public.

Q: Who are you referring to, when you talk about external groups that incite negative sentiment?

They're not the people who suffer, have feelings - they are the outside groups which egg them on. They tell them what they do is right. And tell them to continue doing it. It's not the persons themselves. It's groups which have no connections with them.

Q: How big is that problem in Myanmar and do you feel as though the military will have no choice but to step in? How big is the problem of external group or groups you refer to in Myanmar, and how likely will that force the military to step in?

That depends a lot on the situation. For example, if their incitement is minimal, we will need to do less to deal with the problem. If it is big, we have to do more. We have the law. For the rule of law, the judge has to start doing something.

Then, there are things that need to be done by the administrative bodies. There are also things that the police force has to do. For what the police are unable to do, assistance is asked from the military. There are provisions in the constitution.

In this way, we must act step by step. We cannot override authorities just because they are not in control. There are institutions that can do a lot. There is the executive, and they carry out their duties. Only when they cannot manage and assistance is requested, then the military can step in.

Q: When do you think there'll come a time for you to do that?

When things become really out of control - when the chief minister of the relevant state or region government reports the situation to the president. And when the president says the military needs to step in, in that region or state. The military will step in when a state of emergency is declared. If we don't act according to the law, we have to face a lot of consequences.

Q: So you are saying that the military will never unilaterally step in without the orders from the president or the prime minister?

Very true. The person who can make the final decision regarding the situation of the country is the president. The president can make a request to us saying to please step in. He also has his rights. He cannot go beyond his rights. There must be weighing of the pros and cons.

The problems we faced in Rakhine and in Meiktila were handled stage by stage - to stop a situation from getting worse, and to make it change direction so that it can become better. It started to go in the wrong direction, but we were able to redirect it before things got worse so that it returned to a good situation. If you look at these steps, you will know the process we are using.

Q: You mentioned a number of times about peace in the country - the need to maintain peace, the need to maintain unity, and the need to bring about development. Myanmar wants to sign its national ceasefire agreement hopefully by February. How likely is that going to happen?

This depends on the armed ethnic groups. Do they really want peace? If they really want peace, there is no reason why they should not get it.

We are moving along the path of multi-party democracy. We tried to sign the ceasefire agreement in Aug 2014 but due to various reasons we didn't succeed, because in some cases they are asking for things which are not possible.

If they wish to go along the path of democracy, and if they have the desire to bring unity and development in their region, they can choose this path. If they join us on this path, we will welcome them. Essentially they should accept the democratic system, and have a willing attitude. Some things cannot be done because they are not consistent with the law. We have to act according to law.

I have expectations. This is what I expect most, because we want our country to move in a positive direction. We cannot keep arguing. Disputes hinder the country's development. So it is important that we should have the same goal and work together for the country.

Q: But the ethnic armed groups are saying that the military is the one that is not helping to progress talks when there are pockets of fighting every now and then. Did you discuss during the peace talks and peace negotiations that you take one step forward but because of the fighting you end up taking three steps back? And the military is responsible for that.

Regarding peace, we on our side have drawn up six points - there must be genuine wish for peace. Not to exploit the agreement and not to be a burden on us. And to obey the laws which have been passed. To accept the democratic system we are adopting, and respect the constitution and to walk on the same path to democracy. They need to keep their promises.

If we look back, there are places of fighting and there are peaceful areas. The reason why there is no fighting in some areas is because they take the agreement seriously. In the areas where there is fighting they don't follow the rules.

In some areas, they harass authorities and prevent them from doing their administration work.

For such things, we have to provide protection. If you look at the areas of fighting, there is none in their headquarters. We don't do anything (attacking) to their headquarters. In some communication channels, and administration they are causing problems. That is why if we take it seriously and work on the ceasefire agreement, we can take not just one step but two, three or more steps forward.

Q: But they say they are respecting the agreements, but the military is the one that is not respecting the agreement and they are encroaching on their territory.

That's what they say. There are many areas where there's no fighting. But we don't hear anything about them. They don't complain. They are very keen on peace. The other day I met them and they only talked about peace. We have a genuine wish for peace in the country. That is our true attitude.

Q: Ultimately do you believe that it is realistic to expect to sign the ceasefire agreement before the election at the end of this year?

On our part, we wish to sign the agreement. It also depends on their situation. If the points gained by negotiating with us become strong, they will also become willing partners.

Q: In order to see this through, are you going to retire any time soon or will you see this through before you retire?

According to the laws for military and civilian staff, we have to retire at 60. For this to happen before I am 60, it depends on many things. I can't say I will not retire because these matters are not completed. I have to follow the law. So before I am 60, it could happen. If it doesn't happen before I retire at 60, the next person responsible will continue to work on it. I will help in what every way I can. Of course I would like it to happen while I am still here.

Q: And if you don't, will you consider perhaps contributing through the political arena in order to bring about this national ceasefire agreement?

I can't say for sure. It depends on many things. On my part, as I said before, for the country's peace, unity and development, as a citizen I intend to do my best to assist in whatever role I am assigned. It will depend on the effects of the developments in the situation.

<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/myanmar-army-won-t-take/1612488.html>
