

A Risky Farewell to Arms

The Burmese junta has succeeded in forging ceasefires with 17 ethnic minority rebel groups since 1989. But now its attempt to disarm them could backfire.

By **Kyaw Zwa Moe**

Burma's military regime seems to have practiced the maxim from Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu's *Art of War*: "Supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting." The junta has used this approach since assuming power in 1988 by reaching ceasefire agreements with 17 ethnic minority armed groups. Since that time, fighting has died down in many areas and the generals probably think they have defeated their ethnic minority enemies—who took up arms against Rangoon after independence from Britain in 1948—without firing a shot.

But maybe that comfortable situation is about to change.

On the surface, it looks like the regime has also brought the groups into the political arena by now including them in the National Convention, which resumed in 2004 after eight years suspension. The NC is supposed to draft a new constitution aimed at resolving the country's long stalemate among the ruling military, the opposition and ethnic minority groups. In fact, however, they are allowed only a token presence. They cannot take part in open discussions.

Having reached ceasefire accords over more than a decade, the junta has offered former insurgents sops, in the form of privileges to run businesses—even illegal ones. In effect, the junta has offered financial inducements to rebels to return to the fold.

On the other hand, most of these groups have claimed they would use the ceasefire period to strengthen their positions, both physically and ideologically. Then they would be able to talk more from a position of strength to forge post-ceasefire political settlements, they thought.

But to the junta, ceasefires apparently were not seen as an end in themselves. Hence, the new move to eliminate any lingering status enjoyed by the ceasefire groups by ordering them to disarm. Everything looked fine until late May when the Shan State National Army, which reached a ceasefire with the junta in 1995, merged with the Shan State Army-South, which has remained one of the few insurgent groups keeping up the armed struggle.

The merger came after the government had pressured the SSNA to surrender their arms under the government's "exchange arms for peace" program. The junta also launched a crackdown on other Shan organizations, arresting leaders of the

also surrendered their arms. It is widely believed this was after junta pressure, even though Rangoon denies having put any pressure on ceasefire groups to disarm.

The ceasefire groups evidently thought they could gain politically by stopping their fight and taking part in the junta's political process. They came under strong criticism from opposition groups, mainly outside Burma, for agreeing to join the NC in 2004. They insisted they could use their presence there to bring about political change. Alas, that was a false hope.

Ceasefire group leaders are now wary about the prospect that all groups will eventually be forced to disarm. They had thought the junta would leave such a move until after a new constitution was drafted, with a view to allowing them to form political parties to fight in an election. But it appears the regime wants to render them toothless before this happens.

In fact, the ceasefires have allowed

“ Ceasefire leaders are now wary about the prospect that all rebel groups could be forced to disarm ”

the junta to move selectively among the former rebel groups to form squads of "special police." Rangoon supplies them with fuel and food and, of course, they are allowed to keep their arms. They effectively comprise private armies for the junta, which uses them as security forces in their areas.

1990 general election's runner-up party, the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, and other Shan groups. The SSNA's return to armed struggle was the first such action in 10 years by any of the ceasefire groups.

A day before the SSNA joined the Shan State Army-South, the government media reported that 325 SSNA members had surrendered their arms to the government. The United Wa State Army, the most powerful ceasefire group since its deal with Rangoon in 1989, attacked SSA-South troops in April and May. Observers believe the UWSA is being used by Rangoon as an ally against the SSA.

Just before the SSNA's move, the ethnic Palaung State Liberation Army, further south in Shan State,

the junta to move selectively among the former rebel groups to form squads of "special police." Rangoon supplies them with fuel and food and, of course, they are allowed to keep their arms. They effectively comprise private armies for the junta, which uses them as security forces in their areas.

Although, from the junta's point of view, ceasefires have neutralized insurgent groups, this has hardly brought more stability to the country. It may have sapped some morale among the groups, but they are still there. And now the junta wants to disarm them, making them feel more exposed.

In the absence of any positive move by the Junta to exploit the ceasefire, some ethnic minority leaders forecast other ceasefire groups might follow the SSNA's example. The danger then would be of an escalation to full-scale civil war. And that would be a return to square one. ■

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Activities to do Before Reading

Activity 1

Prediction: Title

Look at the title of the article: *A Risky Farewell to Arms*.
Check that students understand the work *risky* (*unsafe, possible that something bad might happen*).
Based on this title, what do students think will be in the article?

Activity 2

Brainstorm: Who's fighting?

How many groups have signed ceasefires with the Burmese military government?
How many groups are fighting?

Make a chart on the board, and get students ideas.

Example Answers:

This is a list of some groups that have signed ceasefires since 1988, and some groups that are fighting the military government as of July 1, 2005¹. (*Sources: Irrawaddy magazine and Non-Violence International*)

Ceasefire groups	non-ceasfire groups
UWSA (United Wa State Army) MTA (Mong Tai Army) SSPP (Shan State Progress Party) NDAA (National Democratic Alliance Army) PNO (Pa-O National Organisation) PSLA (Palaung State Liberation Army) KNPLF (Karenni State Nationalities Peoples' Liberation Front) KNLP (Kayan New Land Party) SSNPLO (Shan State Nationalities Peoples' Liberation Organization) NMSP (New Mon State Party) CPB (Communist Party of Burma) MNDA (Myanmar National Democracy Alliance Army)	KNLA (Karen National Liberation Army) KNPP (Karenni National Progressive Party) CNF (Chin National Front) SSA-South (Shan State Army) ABSDF (All Burma Students Democratic Front) WNO (Wa National Organisation) All Burma Muslim Union Arakan Liberation Army PDF (People's Defense Force) PLF (People's Liberation Front) Arakan Rohingya National Organisation Kuki National Army Zomi National Front

¹ It is difficult to get up-to date, accurate information about all armed groups. By the time you read this, some of these groups may have stopped, or resumed fighting. Also the size of many of these organisations is difficult to estimate. There are also many smaller breakaway groups, some fighting, some under ceasefire.

Activity 3**Prediction: True or False?**

- a) Students read the introductory paragraph. Clarify anything they don't understand. They then read the sentences, and decide whether they are true or false.

You are about to read an article about the situation for Burma's ceasefire groups. There has been civil war in Burma since 1948, when many ethnic minority groups took up arms against the Burmese government. Since 1988, many of these groups have signed ceasefire agreements. A ceasefire agreement means that both sides agree to stop fighting each other. When these groups signed ceasefire agreements, they kept their weapons. Now the Burmese government is asking some of these groups to disarm – to give up their weapons.

Currently Burma's military government is holding a National Convention, to try to write a new constitution for Burma. Many of the ceasefire groups have been invited to attend the National Convention. Groups who attend the National Convention hope that they can participate in the political process, and achieve their goals by political means.

1. More than twenty ethnic minority armed groups have signed ceasefires with the Burmese military government since 1988.
2. The National Convention re-started in 2004, after an eight year break.
3. Ceasefire groups have been invited to attend the National Convention.
4. In May, the SPDC asked the Shan State National Army, a ceasefire group, to disarm.
5. The Palaung State Liberation Army still have their weapons.
6. Many opposition groups criticized ceasefire groups for participating in the National Convention.

- b) After students have done activity 2, give them the article. Students read the article, and check their predictions.

Answers:

1. *False – seventeen groups, according to the article.*
2. *True*
3. *True*
4. *True*
5. *False – they surrendered their arms.*
6. *True*

Activities to do During Reading

Activity 4

Paragraph Summaries

- a) Give students these paragraph summaries. Students match the summaries with the paragraphs. They can do this alone, in pairs, or in groups.
1. There is fighting between UWSA and SSA.
 2. Many ceasefire groups are participating in the National Convention to write a new constitution. However, they cannot participate in open discussions there.
 3. The ceasefire groups thought participating in the National Convention would help their cause. Other opposition groups criticised them for this.
 4. Perhaps other ceasefire groups might take up armed struggle again.
 5. The government has offered money and business opportunities to encourage ceasefires.
 6. Ceasefire groups are worried the junta will force them to disarm.
 7. The Burmese military has signed 17 ceasefires with ethnic minority armed groups. Therefore they can think they have beaten their enemies.
 8. Ceasefires have not created stability in Burma.
 9. The junta has been cracking down on Shan groups.
 10. The Palaung State Liberation Army gave up their weapons.
 11. The junta uses the ceasefire to set up extra security forces in ceasefire areas.
 12. The ceasefire groups thought that they would gain political strength from signing ceasefires.
 13. Recently, the junta has asked ceasefire groups, including the SSNA, to disarm. The SSNA decided to join the SSA in armed struggle.

Answers:

The paragraphs are in this order: 7, 2, 5, 12,13, 9, 1,10, 3, 6, 11, 8, 4

Activity 5**Key vocabulary**

- a) Students scan the text and underline any words they don't know.
- b) In groups, encourage them to identify the meanings of these words in their dictionaries.
- c) Here are some words from the text. Students use them to fill the gaps in the sentences.

resume	draft	stalemate	privileges	merge	take part
wary	stability	token	morale	exposed	forecast

1. The weather is getting wetter. I _____ a lot of rain for tomorrow.
2. It was raining, so the football game stopped. Now it isn't raining, so we can _____ the game.
3. The soldiers are standing in the open field. They are very _____, the enemy can see them easily.
4. It is good to _____ your essay before you write a final version.
5. I failed my examinations – I feel very disappointed, and my _____ is very low. I want to quit school.
6. Neither side can win – they have reached a _____.
7. A country can get _____ if there is no war, and people can get all their basic needs.
8. Government officials get a lot of _____. They sometimes get free cars, and free air travel, and many business opportunities.
9. There are a lot of dangerous dogs in our street. I am very _____ when I walk home at night.
10. Our school and another school are going to _____ to form one big school.
11. "Are you going to _____ in the singing competition?" "No, I can't. I'm busy that day"
12. The committee had one _____ women, but nobody listened to her ideas.

Answers:

1. *forecast* 2. *resume* 3. *exposed* 4. *draft* 5. *morale* 6. *stalemate*
7. *stability* 8. *privileges* 9. *wary* 10. *merge* 11. *take part* 12. *token*

Activity 6**Words and phrases from context**

Here are some excerpts from the article. Students locate the phrase in the text, and choose the best synonym or definition for the underlined words.

1. *The junta has used this approach since assuming power in 1988...*
(paragraph 1)
 - a. method
 - b. food
 - c. weapon
 - d. money

2. *In effect, the junta has offered financial inducements to return to the fold*
(paragraph 3)
 - a. ideas
 - b. assistance
 - c. businesses
 - d. encouragement

3. *But to the junta, ceasefires apparently were not seen as an end in themselves.*
(paragraph 5)
 - a. written document
 - b. meeting
 - c. final conclusion
 - d. peace agreement

4. *The merger came after the government had pressured the SSNA to surrender their arms...* (paragraph 16)
 - a. threatened
 - b. forced
 - c. asked
 - d. suggested

5. *They came under strong criticism from opposition groups...* (paragraph 9)
 - a. deserved
 - b. needed
 - c. attacked
 - d. received

6. *...this has hardly brought more stability to the country* (paragraph 12)
 - a. eventually
 - b. not
 - c. slowly
 - d. very

Answers:

1. a 2. d 3. c 4. a 5. d 6. b

Activity 7**Identify the main point**

Students decide which is the main point, which are supporting points, and which is not part of this article.

a) What is the main point of this article?

1. The SSA and the SSNA have joined together to fight the government, because the SSNA did not want to disarm.
2. Most opposition groups want to join the National Convention, because they want to participate in the political process.
3. The military regime has signed ceasefires with many armed groups, and some of these groups are not happy with their situation.
4. Many ceasefire groups are attending the National Convention, but they cannot participate in open discussion.

Answer: 3

b) Look again at the options above. One option is the main point. Which of the other options are:

- *supporting points?*
- *not a point of the article?*

Answers: *supporting points – 1, 4 not a point of the article – 2*

Activity 8**In fact**

In fact is a phrase that tells you that the next piece of information is a little surprising.

e.g. He looks like an old man. In fact, he is only 25.

The information 'he is only 25' is surprising, as he looks like an old man.

I keep a pet tiger in my bathroom. In fact, I have four tigers in my house.

The information 'I have four tigers in my house' is surprising, even after the information about the bathroom tiger.

a) Match the sentences that go together.

- | | | |
|---|----------|--|
| 1. Everyone thinks she is Thai. | | he was lying very still, waiting for the enemy to leave. |
| 2. The soldier pretended he was dead. | | they cost 100 baht for a kilo. |
| 3. The government claims the country is peaceful. | | I have never been to medical training. |
| 4. I told them I am a doctor. | In fact, | her mother is Japanese, and her father is Palaung. |
| 5. The President never went to high school or university. | | she left school after fourth standard. |
| 6. Bananas are not cheap at the market this week. | | there is a lot of fighting in the border. |

Answers:

1. Everyone thinks she is Thai. In fact, her mother is Japanese, and her father is Palaung.
2. The soldier pretended he was dead. In fact, he was lying very still, waiting for the enemy to leave.
3. The government claims the country is peaceful. In fact, there is a lot of fighting in the border.
4. I told them I am a doctor. In fact, I have never been to medical training.
5. The President never went to high school or university. In fact, she left school after fourth standard.
6. Bananas are not cheap at the market this week. In fact, they cost 100 baht for a kilo.

b) Find two examples of *in fact* in the article. What is the surprising information? Why is it surprising?

Answers:

Paragraph 2 – In fact, however, they are allowed only a token presence.

This is surprising because it contrasts with the previous information that they are participating in the National Convention.

Paragraph 11 – In fact, the ceasefires have allowed the junta to move selectively among the former rebel groups to form squads of “special police.”

This is surprising because of the information in the previous paragraphs, where the ceasefire groups think that the ceasefire is useful for them.

Activity 9

Timeline

What order did these things happen?
Put the events on the timeline.

- Many ethnic minority groups take up arms against government
- National Convention is suspended
- The military junta takes power
- National Convention resumes
- SSNA signs a ceasefire agreement
- SSNA merges with SSA-South
- Junta pressures SSNA to disarm
- UWSA agrees to a ceasefire
- Palaung State liberation Army surrenders arms.
-

*Many ethnic minority
groups take up arms
against government*

1948

now

Activities to do After Reading

Activity 9**Causes and Effects**

- a) Many people think that education in refugee camps is better than education inside Burma. What are the consequences of this thinking?

Students make a lists of consequences. You may want to do this on the board, or in groups. You may want to write a few examples on the board first.

Some possible consequences:

- *more people come to the refugee camps*
- *less students are educated in Burma*
- *the Burmese government gets angry with the camps*
- *the camps need more food for the new students*
- *camp schools get bigger*
- *schools need more materials and buildings*
- *schools need more teachers*
- *more teachers come to the camps to get jobs*
- *there are less teachers inside Burma*
- *education inside Burma gets worse*

You may need to **prompt** students to think of consequences, by saying ‘*What about the teachers inside Burma?*’ ‘*What about the Burmese government?*’ etc.

- b) Do you think it is a good idea for people to come to refugee camps to get an education? Why/why not? Can you think of any better solutions? Have a discussion, and write students’ ideas on the board.

Activity 10**Debate**

How is your school similar to KEDC? How is it different?

Students write sentences comparing and contrasting KEDC with their school.

- e.g. - *Both KEDC and our school are in refugee camps.*
 - *Our school has a longer program. KEDC is only two years, but we are a three year program.*

Activity 11**Word Families**

Here are some words from the article. Students complete the chart, by adding other parts of the word families.

A few of the words are quite rare, such as *economise* and *authoritative*, so don’t expect students to know every word family member.

noun	verb	adjective	adverb	person
development	develop	developing	developmentally	X
	study			
ability	X			X

success				X
			differently	X
				educator
	X	ethnic		X
				authorities
		additional		X
economics				

Answers:

noun	verb	adjective	adverb	person
development	develop	developing	developmentally	X
<i>study</i>	study	<i>studious</i>	<i>studiously</i>	<i>student</i>
ability	X	<i>able</i>	<i>ably</i>	X
success	<i>succeed</i>	<i>successful</i>	<i>successfully</i>	X
<i>difference</i>	<i>differ</i>	<i>different</i>	differently	X
<i>education</i>	<i>educate</i>	<i>educational</i>	<i>educationally</i>	educator
<i>ethnicity</i>	X	ethnic	<i>ethnically</i>	X
<i>authority</i>	<i>authorise</i>	<i>authoritative</i>	<i>authoritatively</i>	authorities
<i>addition</i>	<i>add</i>	additional	<i>additionally</i>	X
economics	<i>economise</i>	<i>economic</i>	<i>economically</i>	<i>economist</i>

Activity 12

Poster Presentations

- a) Students work in groups of four or five. Give each group a large sheet of paper and some pens (coloured marker pens or paints are best). If you have any old newspapers or magazines students can cut up, distribute them too.
- b) Groups make posters advertising their school. They should think of all the good points about their school:
- the subjects (what subjects? why are they useful?)
 - the teachers (what are the teachers like?)
 - the students (what are the students like? what do they do after they graduate?)
 - the resources (what are the classrooms and other buildings like? What books and other teaching resources are in the school?)
 - the school aims and objectives
 - other things (how much does it cost to attend? who can attend? etc.)
- They should think of the most important points, and include these on the poster. Remember, the aim of the poster is to encourage people to attend the school!
- c) Groups present their posters to the class. They should encourage each member of the

group to participate in the presentation.

If this is appropriate, send the posters to local high schools and community organizations to put on their walls.