

Peace and Security - C1W1 Conflict Resolution from Below

How do different ethnic and religious groups work together to solve armed conflict?

Speaker - Harn Yawngwe was born in Burma. He completed his high school in Thailand and studied engineering in Canada. He later got an MBA and worked in the money market, foreign exchange market and stock markets in Canada and Thailand. He also worked in Hong Kong as a management consultant in the Asia Pacific region. In 1988 he became involved with the Burmese democracy movement and in 1997, established the Euro-Burma Office in Brussels. Since 1999 he has been working with the National Reconciliation Programme in Burma. He advises many organizations and governments on the issue.

ABSTRACT - Myanmar/Burma has experienced more than 50 years of internal armed conflict. There are more than 40 ethnic-based armies numbering a total of about 50,000 men fighting against a 500,000 strong central government controlled army. The top down approach to conflict resolution has always been one of using superior force to impose an uneasy 'peace' with varying results in different areas. In 1999, a different approach was applied from below. This approach tried to get at the root of the conflict. Instead of imposing a solution, an attempt was made to see how in the recent past, the various ethnic groups were united - i.e. the struggle for independence from Britain. The principles that were applied then were re-applied to the present, giving all participants something in common. From being 'victims', the participants were also encouraged to think of how they could become the change agents. The process is still in progress. The conflict in Myanmar/Burma has not been resolved. Conflict continues especially with the central government. Prospects look bleak since the ruling party has not changed its approach to conflict resolution. But for those involved in the process of reconciliation, there is a new hope and a clear vision for the future. They are confident that the resolutions from below will eventually influence the outcome.

THE EXPERIENCE OF MYANMAR/BURMA

Many people, are not aware of the ethnic conflict in Burma. When most people think of Burma, they think of the conflict between the military rulers and the democracy advocates led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. In fact, we have had an ongoing civil war or ethnic conflict in Burma since independence in 1948. Even the United Nations did not officially recognize this problem until 1994 when the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for a 'Tripartite Dialogue' to resolve the problem in Burma. By tripartite, the UN meant the ruling military, the democracy advocates and the ethnic nationalities or minorities who make up 40% of the population of 50 million. The ethnic conflict in Burma is different from Bosnia in two important aspects:

1. The conflict is vertical, not horizontal. In other words, the ethnic nationalities are in conflict with the central authority and not with each other;
2. The conflict grew because a key legal agreement was not implemented after independence. In other words, the conflict is a political one. This means that a political solution is possible.

To explain the situation briefly:

Map No.1 shows British Burma. When Britain defeated the Burman king in 1886, they annexed his kingdom and made it a British colony. The surrounding areas, which were independent principalities were ruled indirectly as protectorates. They served as buffer states between British interests and the growing French influence in Indo-china.

Map No.2 shows Burma during the Second World War. Burman nationalists led by General Aung San had worked with Japan to drive the British out so an 'independent' Burma was set up. The area under the authority of the Government of Burma is clearly shown.

Map No.3 shows the area that makes up the Union of Burma after independence in 1948. This came about because the leaders of the neighbouring states agreed to join Burma as equal partner states in a Union of States. This is known as the Panglong Agreement of 1947.

The troubles started when the Constitution of the Union recognized the existence of the neighbouring states but made them subordinate to the central government in Rangoon. The troubles intensified in 1958 when the Shan State tried to exercise its constitutional right to secede. As a compromise, a 'Federal Movement' was started to amend the constitution in 1960. But General Ne Win believed that a federation would break-up the country and seized power. In the process, he suspended the constitution. Therefore, the neighbouring states felt they were no longer legally bound to the Union and started wars to liberate themselves.

The National Reconciliation Programme (NRP), which was started in 1999 is based on -

1. Preserving the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Union of Burma;
2. Finding a political solution that would be acceptable to all the constituent states;
3. Preparing the ethnic nationalities for a 'Tripartite Dialogue' as called for by the UN.

This last point is especially important because if you look at the three partners in a 'Tripartite Dialogue', the military is well prepared; and the democracy advocates have a recognized leader in Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. But the ethnic nationalities are divided geographically and legally. How can 40 different armies and political parties negotiate meaningfully?

Since all the ethnic nationalities agree on the concept of equality and federalism, the NRP based its strategy on working initially with each state. Instead of focussing on problems, they were asked to develop a vision for their state. All groups - legal political parties; community leaders; armies with cease-fire agreements with the military; armies still fighting the central government; political leaders in exile - from each state, were encouraged to work together.

One of the tools we use is to have workshops for senior leaders on Conflict Resolution to make them aware of how similar problems were resolved in other conflict situations.

Another tool is to encourage each state to draft their own state constitutions. In this process they have had to deal with how they want to govern themselves, how to be inclusive, how to respect the minorities in their midst and how they want to relate to the central government. It is a very useful exercise to deal with sensitive issues in a non-emotional setting. The idea is not to come up with a finished constitution but to go through the process of working together and thinking through issues collectively - especially sensitive ones.

An example is the issue of the Muslim Rohingyas who make up about 40-50% of the population in Arakan State. For years, the Buddhist Rakhaing and Muslim Rohingyas have lived separate existences, each suspicious of the other. Buddhist-Muslim riots have from time to time created tension. To make matters worse, the Rakhaing political groups have also in the past been split into 4-5 groups. But the Rakhaings have now formed an Arakan National Council. In the process of creating a vision for their state and drafting a state constitution, the Rakhaing have begun to seek input from the Muslim Rohingyas.

The Chins were also divided along dialect and political lines into about 8 groups. In working together, they have now formed the Political Affairs Committee for Chinland.

The Kachins used to be dominated by the Kachin Independence Organization which agreed to a cease-fire with the Burmese military in 1995. There is now some tension as community leaders and some segment of society start to question the benefits of a cease-fire. More work is needed but the inclusive process of dialogue for drafting a state constitution has begun.

The Shan State is the most populous and multi-ethnic of all the ethnic states. An inclusive process of drafting a state constitution has also begun. But more important, the leading legal political parties; the cease-fire armies; community leaders; the non-cess-fire armies; and exile politicians; have begun a process of close political consultations. The task is to develop a common vision acceptable to all the ethnic communities in the State. This is in progress.

The Karenni or Kayah State has the most dramatic story. Karenni did not agree to the Panglong Agreement. They were recognized by the British as a sovereign state in the 19th century and they continued to maintain that they were independent. They even rejected the Federal Movement in 1960. But now, Karenni is one of the strongest advocates for re-building a Union of Burma with equal participation by all member states.

The Karen have been the backbone of all the resistance movements - ethnic and democratic. But they were weakened by a split in the mid-1990s. A splinter Democratic Karen Buddhist Army was supported by the Burmese military to counter the influence of the Christian-led Karen resistance. The Karen have, however, recovered and are now leading the ethnic nationalities in the National Reconciliation Programme.

The Mon have a cease-fire with the Burmese military. They are, therefore, unable to participate openly in many of the NRP activities. But they are aware and have also initiated a state constitution drafting process.

In addition to these developments in each state, the ethnic nationalities have now formed an Ethnic Nationalities Council. In time, such a council could represent the seven ethnic states if and when a UN-sponsored 'Tripartite Dialogue' takes place.

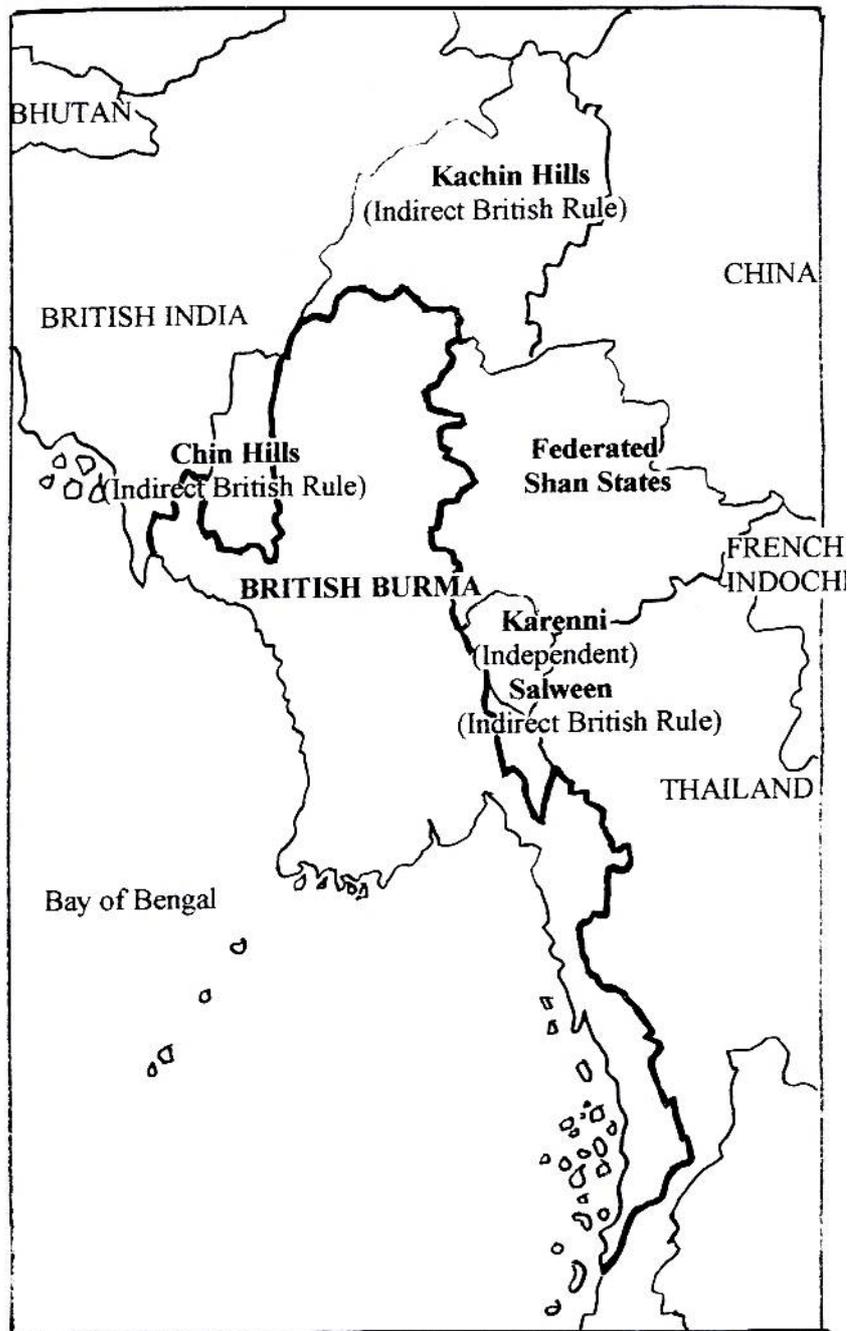
In the meanwhile, the Council is developing political options for the ethnic nationalities. A good example is that when the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) announced a Road Map to Democracy in August 2003, the ethnic nationalities were able to propose modifications to the Road Map to make it more acceptable and workable. Their proposal was ignored but for the first time the ethnic nationalities were able to work together and make a common proposal that could have helped resolve the political conflict.

Again when the SPDC announced a convening of a National Convention to draft a new constitution, the ethnic nationalities (through the cease-fire groups) were able to make their suggestions. Again they were ignored. But the cohesion amongst the ethnic nationalities irrespective of whether they are legal political parties; cease-fire armies; or non-cess-fire armies has been noticed by the international community. This is a major departure from the normal perception that the ethnic problem and armed conflict in Burma is unsolvable.

The idea then is for the ethnic nationalities to prepare for a 'Tripartite Dialogue' or respond to SPDC initiatives. But even if nothing developed along those lines, the ethnic nationalities will have in the process been strengthened. They will be capable of jointly laying the groundwork for nation building based on equality, inclusiveness, and respect for each others diverse backgrounds and ethnicity. They can then decide whether to continue in the current Union of Burma or build their own version of a better Union of Burma without the SPDC.

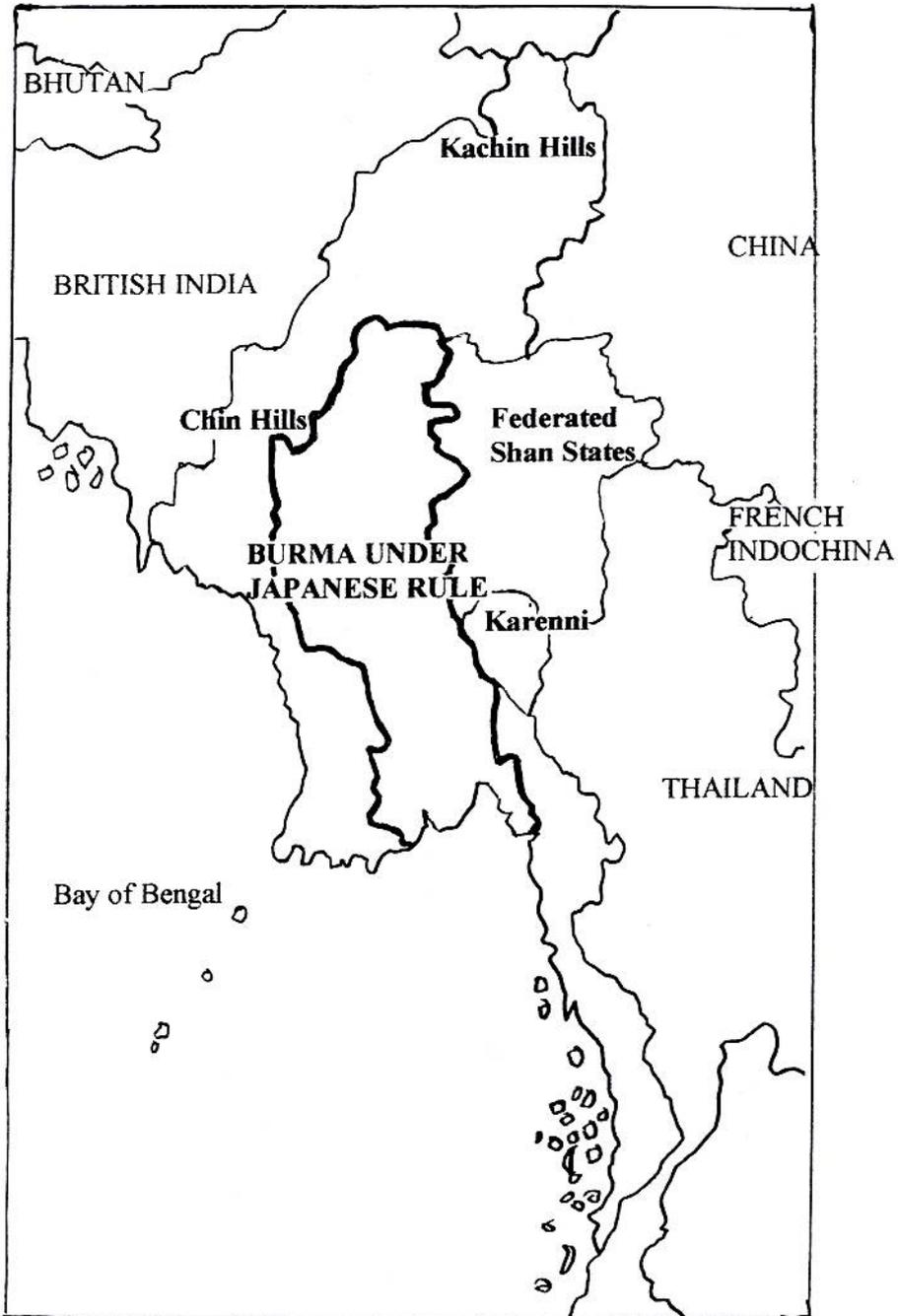
Map No.1

BRITISH BURMA
Before the Second World War



Map No.2

BURMA UNDER JAPAN
During the Second World War



Map No.3

UNION OF BURMA
Independence 1948

