

'Democracy can only be a transition in Burma'

*In a nation where ethnic minorities constitute 40 per cent of the population and occupy 60 per cent of the land, democracy can only be a starting point, says a delegation of Burma's **Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC)** that visited India recently at the invitation of Indian Parliamentarian Forum for Democracy in Burma (IPFDB). The ENC represents the seven ethnic States of the Union of Burma, Arakan, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan, and its members include all groups within each state. Following are excerpts from the ENC delegates' interaction session with the media in New Delhi*



The ENC Delegation: (from right) Dr Lian H Sakhong – General Secretary, Harn Yawng hwe - Advisor, Saw David Taw - Joint General Secretary, Dr Sui Khar - Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee
Photo: Mizzima News

What led to the formation of ENC? What are your political objectives?

Dr Lian H Sakhong (General Secretary, ENC): Burma has large proportion of ethnic minorities, several of whom have taken up armed struggle against the junta. The ENC is a collective of armed groups, political parties and civil society members. While we want democracy, we also want our communities have rights of self-determination. There are political parties in Burma that share their ideology and objectives with us, but we have no formal links with them, partly because that could jeopardise their position in the country.

What is your position regarding the current crisis in Burma?

Harn Yawng hwe (Advisor to ENC): We insist on tri-partite dialogue between the Burma government, the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi and the [Ethnic Nationalities] to solve the current crisis in the country.

Dr Lian H Sakhong: At present, the military might try to buy time by allowing certain concessions. At the same time, since they are engaging with Aung San Suu Kyi, we need to take advantage of this and push for genuine

dialogue. Now there is pressure from both inside – as with the recent protests by students and monks – and outside, with the international community and bodies like ASEAN criticising the regime.

But there's no mechanism for dialogue currently except the UN Security Council. We need to get all the parties on board – we don't want another veto like in January when China and Russia vetoed the resolution to apply sanctions on the Burma regime. What we need is multi-party talks like in North Korea, involving the UN and the neighbouring powers. And all the powers must be part of it, so that any one of them doesn't take advantage of their exclusion from the talks and side with the junta. I would say all the parties – Russia, Japan, us, India and China, apart from the ASEAN and the UN, but especially the US and China, must be involved in the talks.

But despite their criticism of the regime, the ASEAN didn't allow UN Special Envoy to Myanmar Ibrahim Gambari to address their recent meeting in Singapore...

Harn Yawnghwe: They didn't allow him because of they did, then the issue of democracy in Burma becomes a regional issue, that the problems in Burma is a threat to regional stability. But the Burma government wants it to be treated as a domestic issue.

Dr Lian H Sakhong: Even though Gambari's visit didn't achieve much, he is important because he has access to the top generals. And with a regime like this, there is no point in talking to lower level officials.

What has been the reaction of the Indian Government from your interaction with them so far?

Harn Yawnghwe: Indian government representatives – especially those in the embassies and consulates abroad – are happy to meet us abroad, but when we come to India, no one has time for us. We've been trying to meet with people in the MEA, but it's doubtful that it will happen.

We were happy to see in the papers that India has decided to stop supplying arms to the Burma government. On the ground it may not mean much – they can get arms from anywhere, not just India. But it sends a strong message – that we are not willing to support you with arms when these same arms are being used to crush the people of Burma.

Overall, Its clear that India's 'Look East' policy hasn't worked to India's advantage. It's been a failure on all three fronts – containing china, controlling north eastern militancy and procuring energy resources. Ironically, people in Burma are talking about approaching communist China to initiate democracy in Burma and not democratic India!

Dr Lian H Sakhong: India must re-look its foreign policy – not just towards Burma, but in general – the shift from the morality-based policy of the past to that of ‘pragmatism’ in the 90s hasn’t even served India’s national interest. Murli Deora’s trip to Burma to sign a gas deal in the middle of the protests is a case in point. When your neighbour’s house is burning, you shouldn’t be taking advantage of it!

How about China? Have you been talking to them as well?

Harn Yawngkhwe: We do have contact, but we can’t say anything more than that. That’s the way they prefer to do things. If we reveal more, it might damage our chances.

How do you explain the fact the two key players in the opposition movement – both the ENC and the NLD had very little role to play in the recent wave of protests, which were started by students and monks

Harn Yawngkhwe: The demonstrations took place not just in the capital of Yangon, but all over Burma. There were about 300 separate incidents of protests. It happened in the (majority) Burman areas as well as in the ethnic states. So the people of Burma are in it together. People also assume that the monks who took part in the protests were mostly Burmans, whereas there were monks from all communities.

What is the background of the ethnic movement?

The ethnic states weren’t part of Burma at the time of independence, they joined later. At the time, we wanted Burma to be a federation, and the ethnic minority communities came together and proposed amendments to the constitution towards this end, but that didn’t happen. The army seized power and since then the country has been under military rule. The issue is not just that of removing military rule and creating a democracy. In a country as diverse as Burma, democracy can only be a transition.

Dr Lian H Sakhong: The struggle, as we see it, is at two levels- the first, for democracy – for individual rights, and second, for the collective rights of the ethnic communities. From 1948 to 1962, Burma was democracy, but at that time also we had an armed struggle. This is related to constitutional problems. We want a federal system, as opposed to unitary system.

Dr Sui Khar (Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee, ENC): Each of the ethnic groups taken individually might seem small, but together, the ethnic minorities in Burma constitute 40 percent of the population and occupy 60 percent of the land.

Harn Yawngkhwe: Democracy won’t happen unless the military agrees to it; after all they’re the ones holding the power. The recent protests didn’t

assume the magnitude of 1988, when there was a countrywide uprising that gripped the country for 6 months.

What about those rebel groups that have struck cease-fire agreements with the government?

Dr Lian H Sakhong: Some of the rebel groups have accepted the cease fire with the government – some attended the National Convention, and are even engaged in business with the government. But they've realized that they have no political status. Organisations like the KIO – the Kachin Independence Organisation - have repeatedly approached the govt with memoranda but have always been rejected.

Some of the rebel groups have also been involved in the drug trade...

Harn Yawnghwe: We admit that there are problems. Some of the rebel groups are engaged in the drug trade. But you have to take into consideration the local realities. These are people fighting for their freedom. Besides, where this happens, the area is so barren nothing grows there. Even if they were to cultivate something, they're cut off from access to any markets where they can sell their produce. That's why people have turned to opium trade. With opium, there are people who would collect it from the farmers, and pay good money for it. The fact is that, this is all happening because people are denied their rights.

Dr Lian H Sakhong: But the root cause of all the problems is political. It is because people's basic rights are denied that the other problems take root.

By SAJAI JOSE

http://www.tehelka.com/story_main36.asp?filename=Ws081207Burma.asp