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Myanmar's Ethnic Divide

The Parallel Struggle

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Myanmar's Ethnic Divide

The Parallel Struggle

Medha Chaturvedi

Myanmar is at the doors of a political change and stability which has eluded the country for over two decades. However, the gravest challenge Myanmar faces in the process of nation-building today is integrating the ethnic minorities of the country in the mainstream. Myanmar's diverse ethnic population is a result of the country's strategic location, shared borders with China in the northeast, India in northwest, Bangladesh on West and Laos and Thailand on east. As a result, settlers, belonging to different ethnicities have migrated to the extremely fertile land around River Irrawaddy.

There are about 135 different ethnic minorities in Myanmar comprising approximately a third of the estimated total population of 54 million and more than half of the total land area (primarily the mountainous and deeply forested border areas) of approximately 6,77,000 sq km (*Worldstat.info*). The majority Burman (Bamar) population constitutes nearly 60 per cent of the total population and most of the important positions in politics, education, economics and other spheres, are occupied by the Burmans who are mainly found in the inland plains of the country. Myanmar's ethnic conflict has existed since before independence in January 1948. The ethnic minorities of the country have since felt marginalised, excluded from the mainstream and being given differential treatment as opposed to the favoured Burman people. After the

assassination of Gen Aung San (Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's father), who is called the 'Father of the Union of Burma' in July 1947, the ethnic minorities were left out in the cold by subsequent governments. Eventually, an armed struggle ensued between the Myanmar junta's Tatmadaw (Main Army) and the ethnic armies (local militias), which continues even today. Since the 1962 military coup and subsequent takeover by Gen Ne Win, the situation deteriorated further as the ethnic minorities were discriminated against even more with Ne Win's policy of Burmanisation. The ethnic minorities were further excluded from political decision-making and brutally repressed by the ruling junta which led to a simmering anger within them.

Since the last two decades, the talking point for the international community about Myanmar has been the repression of civil liberties, human rights violations and the tribulations under the authoritarian regime, pushing ethnic issues somewhat out of the focus. With the November 2011 elections and non-acceptance of the outcome by the ethnic minorities of the country resulted in heavy fighting in the ethnic areas, especially in Shan, Kachin and Karen states along the country's borders. This has, once again, brought the ethnic issues of Myanmar to fore and into international discussions as the litmus test for the country's new civilian government. With a string of positive reforms and

efforts to reach a compromise with the ethnic armies, President Thein Sein's government seems to be on the right track, but will this new approach lead the country to a united Myanmar?

I THE ETHNIC DIVIDE IN MYANMAR

The failure to manage Myanmar's immense diversity, has resulted in ethnic conflicts, some of them started even before independence, hence making it the longest civil war in the world. The main demand of the ethnic minorities is greater autonomy and acceptance of their cultural and religious identity in the process of their integration in Myanmar's mainstream.

The conflict was initiated by the armed rebellion by the Burma Communist Party, some elements of the People's Volunteer Organization, a paramilitary force comprising WW II veterans, and members of two army battalions in 1948. The Karen National Defence Organization started its armed struggle in January 1949 and soon after, more ethnic armies followed suit (For a summary, see Smith, op cit., pp. 44–48, 50–53, 62–64, 71–87, 110–18. See, also, *KNDO Insurrection* (Rangoon: Government Printing and Stationary, 1949). For a different perspective, see, e.g., Smith Dun, *Memoirs of the Four-Foot Colonel*, Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program Data Paper no. 113 (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1980). Since then, Myanmar government has been seeking a military solution to this problem which has proven to be highly counter-productive over the years. In fact it has, over the years, intensified the problem further and early this year, the offensives became extremely violent with thousands of civilian deaths and an equal number of people escaping across the border to take refuge in China and Thailand.

The recent spurt of violence came in two



phases: Post 2009 and post 2010 elections. Some of the ethnic armies, who had signed the ceasefire agreement with the government in 1994, started rearming themselves after the Myanmar army asked them to assimilate with the country's Border Guard Forces and come directly under junta's rule. This would mean downsizing and reorganizing the ethnic groups along with the army with training, logistics, maintenance and remuneration being the army's responsibility. Except for a few smaller groups, none of the ethnic armies agreed to join the BGF. Once the junta started pressurizing the ethnic groups on the issue with repressive tactics, they started rearming themselves. Those who agreed to join the BGF were permitted to register themselves as a political party and contest the general and state elections.

The dissident ethnic armies refused to

accept the 2010 elections as legitimate and fighting between the ethnic armies and the junta intensified in the forward areas. The attacks increased with demands of respective separate states becoming louder and louder. The Kachin Independence Organisation, one of the most prominent ethnic armies in the country, led the offensives against the junta in areas bordering China in Kachin state and northern Shan state. It had signed the ceasefire agreement with the government in 1994, but reportedly, started rearming itself ahead of the general elections last year.

Karen and southern Shan state, bordering Thailand, also saw some strengthened offensives against the junta, which responded by brutally cracking down on the dissidents in the area. The Shan State Army suffered major setbacks by proactive military crackdowns since the beginning of the year. The Myanmar army resorted to Gen Ne Win's 'Four-cuts' policy (*Saw, 2011*) of military offensive in these areas to repress any action against the government. This policy refers to cutting off supply of food, funds, news and new recruits to the ethnic armies, isolating them completely and drawing them out eventually. Gen Ne Win had first used this policy in 1965 against the Burmese Communist Party and Karen National Union. This weakened the fighting further. In addition, periodical retaliation by the Thai army station close to the border after being hit by stray shells put the ethnic armies in Karen and southern Shan state in a difficult position with attack from both sides. Amidst reports of military action accompanied by other human rights violations like rape of local women by soldiers, killing of children and women and indiscriminate attack on the ethnic groups, more and more ethnic armies started signing up to join the BGF.

Subsequently, in February 2011, 12 major ethnic minorities joined forces to form the United Nationalities Federal Council with the aim of forming a bigger, stronger and combined armed force. Having faced brutal offensive actions by the Myanmar army, the UNFC changed its position in May to constitute six associations, which would have their own political party and armed forces and increase their zone of influence. As a result, the Shan State Progressive Party, the New Mon State Party, the Karenni National Progressive Party, the Karen National Union, the Chin National Front and the Kachin Independence Organisation became the six dedicated associations under the UNFC.

II

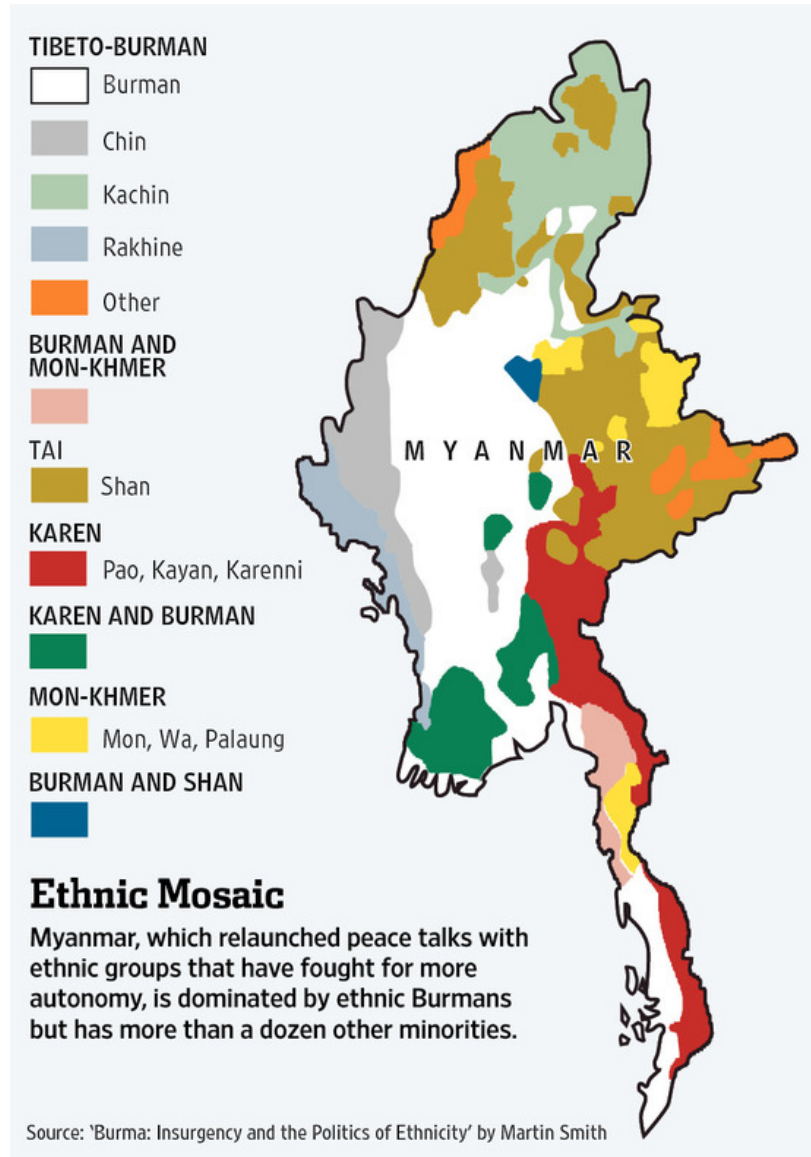
PROFILE OF MAJOR ETHNIC ARMIES IN MYANMAR

To understand the dynamics of the ethnic conflict, it is imperative to understand the make-up of the ethnic minorities whose interests are at stake. As mentioned before, there are about 135 ethnic minorities in Myanmar, primarily concentrated in the mountainous border areas of the country.

The ethnic groups in Myanmar are divided into seven classifications – Tibeto-Burman, Burman and Mon-Khmer, Tai, Karen, Karen and Burman, Mon-Khmer and Burman and Shan. There are six major ethno-linguistic groups – Rakhine/ Arkanese, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Mon and Shan and over a hundred ethnic minorities. The adjoining map provides a description of these divisions. The percentage of major ethnic groups to total population is Burman 68 per cent, Shan 9 per cent, Karen seven per cent, Rakhine four per cent, Chinese three per cent, Indian two per cent, Mon two per cent, other five per cent (*CIA Fact book*).

Major religions practiced in Myanmar are Buddhist 89 per cent, Christian four per cent (Baptist three per cent, Roman Catholic one per cent), Muslim four per cent, animist one per cent, other two per cent (*CIA Fact book*). The primary grievance of the ethnic minorities is their disenfranchisement from the political process of the country making them absolutely excluded from the mainstream. This in turn results in their social and economical exclusion. In Myanmar, during the military rule, they were also repressed culturally, religiously and socially which further marginalized them. The ethnic minorities now dwell in abject poverty with barely any means of formal employment or identity. In addition, the majority Burman population subjected some of the ethnic minorities like Mon and Karen to hatred and cruelty, somewhat like the Shudras in the Indian Varna system, based on age-old beliefs and customs and animist religion they followed. Even the change of the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar in 1989 by the junta government was controversial as Myanmar is the historical name of the majority Burman ethnic group. The ethnic minorities feel that the new flag of the country as prescribed by the 2008 Constitution is another indicator of their exclusion from the country's mainstream as the stars on the old flag represented the ethnic minorities in the country while one star in the new flag represents only the Burman group.

The ethnic armies which refused to join the BGF in 2009, rearmed themselves and are at present involved in violent clashes with the junta. The primary reason for this 45,000-odd strength insurgent group to be able to sustain its offensives against a 4,00,000-troops strong army is the forested, mountainous terrain, conducive to hit-and-run guerilla attacks. Many (11 so far) of these have signed peace accords of varying nature with the government in 2012 but



the KIA and some other ethnic minorities continue fighting. Some of the major ethnic insurgent groups are:

United Wa State Army is the largest ethnic armed group in the country. It was a signatory to the ceasefire agreement with the government in 1989, but started rearming itself after rejecting the government's offer to integrate itself with the BGF in 2009. Its estimated strength in troops is 20,000 to 25,000.

Kachin Independence Army was founded in 1961 and is the second largest and best organized armed group. Its political wing,

Kachin Independence Organisation had signed a ceasefire agreement with the government in 1994 and the Panglong Agreement in 1947. It also started rearming itself after rejecting the government's offer to integrate itself with the BGF in 2009. Its estimated strength in troops is 10,000.

Shan State Army with 6,000 to 10,000 troops, its political wing is the Shan State Progressive Party. The two factions SSA-South which entered into a ceasefire agreement with the government in November 2011 and the SSA-North which entered into a ceasefire agreement in 1989 were integrated into a combined force since May 2011. Some units of the SSA-N faction have joined the BGF some factions of SSA-S continue fighting in Shan.

National Democratic Alliance Army is also called the Mongla Group and has troop strength of 1200. It signed a ceasefire agreement in 1989.

Chin National Army is a part of the Chin National Front and signed a peace agreement in January 2012.

Karen National Liberation Army is a part of the Karen National Union and never entered any ceasefire agreement earlier

The Panglong agreement promised complete autonomy to the frontier regions post independence in return for their support for the formation of the Union of Burma. The ethnic minority signatories also had the option of seceding from the Union, 10 years after independence. However, with Gen Aung San's assassination, that promise died.

but in February 2012, they signed an informal peace agreement.

Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, also known as the Kokang group, was attacked in August 2009 by the Junta and the capital Laogai seized. 30,000 residents reportedly fled to China.

Democratic Karen Buddhist Army has 6,000 troops and split from the parent organisation KNU in 1994. Its political wing is Democratic Karen Buddhist Organisation, and it was the first ethnic armed group to join the BGF. Many defections including complete units have been reported since it joined the BGF. In November 2011, it entered a peace agreement with the government but in February 2012, it resumed fighting.

New Mon State Party, with 700 troops, it signed the ceasefire agreement in 1995 but refused to join the BGF. In January 2012, it entered a peace agreement with the government.

The ethnic groups turned further against the government after the implementation of the 2008 Constitution. Firstly, the ethnic minorities were excluded from the referendum which arrived at the Constitution. Secondly, the provisions regarding ethnic groups were completely biased and put the ethnic groups on the back foot. The new additions in the 2008 Constitution were:

- A Presidential system of government will come into effect along with a bicameral legislation in all ethnic areas.
- There will be seven regions and seven ethnic states.
- Nay Pyi Taw administration will lie with the President. Responsibility for special self-administered zones within certain regions or states will be given

to minorities (Wa, Naga, Pa-O, Pa Laung and Kokang groups).

- Regions and states will have a chief minister who will be selected by the President from within the region. "Leading bodies" will take care of the special self-administered zones but, with limited legislative and executive powers.

However, issues like the appointment of the chief minister remained doubtful because according to section 261 of the constitution, the President had to select him from among the state legislature, which implied that he may not belong the same ethnic group. Also, the 25 per cent mandatory reservation for the military in the parliament along with military nominated Minister of Home, Defence Services and Border Affairs increased the ethnic groups' suspicions.

III AGREEMENTS

Ceasefire Agreements

The ceasefire agreements that the Myanmar government signed with 17 ethnic armed groups between 1989 and 1997 brought the signatories under the government's Border Area Development Programme. Basically, the armed groups were allowed to retain their arms and their territory in return for a ceasefire with the junta. As a result, these groups posed less of a challenge to the junta-backed State Peace and Development Council. Gen Khin Nyunt, former chief of intelligence in the Myanmar army, who was subsequently put under house arrest for criminal charges against him in 2004, was the brain behind this strategy. This allowed the junta to focus its energies away from the armed insurgents in the ethnic areas and the territories under their control. Some of the ethnic groups who signed the ceasefire

Successive governments' failure to implement the Panglong Agreement caused immense dissatisfaction and mistrust in the people of the ethnic areas, forcing them to take up arms to demand for their rights. Peace agreements have never been sustained in Myanmar.

agreements were, Kachin, Mon, Karenni, Wa, Pa-O, Palaung and Rakhine. The Panglong Agreement under the leadership of Gen Aung San in 1947 was the pivotal point in the Ethnic history of Myanmar (Tinker, 1984). The agreement brought to the table representatives of the government and the Shan, Kachin and Chin ethnic minorities to reach a consensus on the future course of action for Myanmar. However, before his efforts could bear fruit, he was assassinated in July 1947.

The Panglong agreement promised complete autonomy to the frontier regions post independence in return for their support for the formation of the Union of Burma. The ethnic minority signatories also had the option of seceding from the Union, 10 years after independence. However, with Gen Aung San's assassination, that promise also died. The Shan, Kachin and Chin minorities pledged their support in the formation of 'Union of Burma' with the hope of complete autonomy and equal economic, social and cultural status as was promised, but it never materialized.

Successive governments' failure to implement the Panglong Agreement caused immense dissatisfaction and mistrust in the people of the ethnic areas,

forcing them to take up arms to demand for their rights. Peace agreements have never been sustained in Myanmar. These ethnic minorities have, from time to time, reiterated that their demand is for regional autonomy and not disintegration of the Union of Myanmar, however, the ruling junta always felt that granting autonomy to them may lead to the collapse of the Union. The demand for political autonomy is primarily aimed at preserving their identity, culture and language. Over the years, with excessive repression and military crackdown on the ethnic armies, the ethnic demands have further diluted to limited autonomy and special privileges for the indigenous population to promote development in the areas.

Since the civilian government took over in Myanmar post-elections in November 2010, there have been talks of a possibility of a second Panglong-like conference. In fact, since her release from house arrest in December 2010, Myanmar's pro-democracy leader and daughter of Gen Aung San, Aung San Suu Kyi has also hinted at convening a conference to discuss minority issues with representation from the government as well as the ethnic minorities. However, no concrete action has so far been taken on this issue.

Rohingya Issue

There were unprecedented communal riots in Rakhine state in May-June 2012 between the ethnic Rohingyas and Rakhinese Buddhists which left over 60 people dead and more than 1500 Rohingyas displaced. The incident which sparked off these riots was that of the gang rape and murder of a Buddhist woman, allegedly by three Rohingya youth. Despite the arrest of the alleged perpetrators, revenge attacks between the Rakhinese Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims continued in the major towns of the state.

The military was deployed to control the situation. Consequently, the Rakhinese were forced to take shelter in the local monasteries, while, scores of Rohingya families, mostly women and children, tried to escape from the riots into the bordering territories of Teknaf and Cox Bazaar in Bangladesh by crossing the Naf River in their rickety wooden trawlers. However, the Bangladesh government, citing high population pressure on the existing limited resources in an impoverished region, refused to take in these refugees and asylum seekers. Border security was heightened and about 1500 Rohingyas were returned from Bangladesh by their border guard forces despite pressure from the HRW and UNHRC. More than 2,500 houses and nine monasteries, seven mosques and a school in different parts of the state were razed by incidents of arson. According to official reports, some locals have already started rebuilding their homes and 37 refugee camps have been set up to house 32,000 victims so far. President Thein Sein and leader of the opposition Suu Kyi did not react very sharply to the incidents, but the government's actions were appreciated by the West. The impact of these riots must not be seen in isolation. The larger issue of the Rohingya-Buddhist animosity has to be factored in.

The Rohingyas are a Sunni Muslim ethnic group which is not among the 135 recognised indigenous ethnic groups of Myanmar. They are of south Asian descent and speak a dialect of Bengali. In 1982, Gen Ne Win stripped the Rohingyas of their citizenship rights under a new law, effectively classifying them as illegal migrants. Bangladesh has refused to accept them as their citizens as majority of the group have lived in the Northern Rakhine state for centuries. Now, they are a stateless ethnic group who not only face repression at the hands of the government, but also by the local Buddhist community

who treat them as a burden. In 1978, Over 200,000 Rohingyas escaped into Bangladesh from repressive military crackdown. Another 250,000 followed suit in 1991. After deliberations between the two countries, the erstwhile junta-led Myanmar government took back most of the 1991 refugees leaving about 28,000 who still live in UN-run refugee camps on the Bangladesh side of the border. However, since 1992, Bangladesh has also refused asylum to them. The Rohingyas have for long demanded their rights as most of them have been living in the country for many generations.

In Myanmar, almost 800,000 of them live in camps and shelters and spend their life in abject poverty. Due to the lack of citizenship rights for them, they cannot pursue education or employment and are subjected to humiliating laws pertaining to their living, matrimony and procreation and they undergo all forms of repression, from racial profiling to blacklisting for education and marriage. The problem is so acute that even the locals treat them as a threat to the civil life in the state and therefore, Rakhine state has remained on tenterhooks due to frequent skirmishes between the Rohingyas and the Rakhinese. Ironically, in the 2010 national elections, the Rohingyas were allowed to vote and yet, there have been many cases when they have been arrested on unlawful immigration charges in the country.

IV

Current Situation

Reports of some positive developments by the civilian government is cause for optimism. With greater involvement of a trusted leader, Aung San Suu Kyi in the government's approach towards solving the ethnic issue and President Thein Sein showing signs of reaching a compromise with the ethnic armies through dialogue,

the prima-facie situation seems to be improving. President Sein held a fresh round of peace talks with five ethnic armies to jointly reach an amicable compromise which is acceptable to all. With US State Secretary, Hillary R. Clinton's upcoming visit to Myanmar on 1-2 December 2011, ending this six-decades-old stalemate is one of the expressed demands by the US for removing sanctions from that country. The exact nature of these peace talks are still unclear, but initial reports have suggested that the government is urging the insurgents to give up arms in return for greater economic and social development of the affected states (*Barta, 2011*).

As an added incentive, Suu Kyi, 67, the country's 'super-woman' of democracy after winning a seat in the opposition in the Parliament, brings hope to this situation. Her election may strengthen the case of the ethnic minorities further as they will find a strong supporter in Suu Kyi, should she get elected. However, after the riots that broke out between Rakhinese Buddhists and ethnic Rohingya community in Rakhine state in May-June 2012 and Suu Kyi's measured remarks over the issue has hurt her credibility a little. Also, the government has declared its willing to drop the proposal of integrating the ethnic armies with the BGF if the talks go in a positive direction.

Another remarkable development over the last few days has been of the suspension of the construction of a dam on River Irrawaddy in Myitsone, Kachin state. This dam was being built by a Chinese enterprise; however, the ethnic population of the state was vehemently opposing its construction and thus, President Sein suspended its construction. As part of the ASEAN, the south Asian leaders approved Myanmar's bid for the chairmanship of the regional bloc in 2014. This will further open up Myanmar to economic upliftment

and since, the ethnic areas are the most resource-rich in the country, they will benefit from such opening up.

V

Conclusion

Myanmar's ethnic conflict is the world's longest running conflict and has had an estimated 600,000 casualties so far (*Kramer, 2004*). There is no quick fix solution to this long-drawn conflict. There is a need for inclusion and participation of all ethnic groups in the country's affairs and giving them the status of stakeholders. There needs to be a group of mediators facilitating dialogue and compromise.

The US now has an all important role to play. With its condition on solving the ethnic crisis in the country as a benchmark for any further engagement with Myanmar. Also, Myanmar government's positive steps need to be seen with foresight and understanding. President Sein's move to scrap the disqualifications in the 2008 Constitution which prevented Suu Kyi from being actively involved in any political process and her election to the Parliament will go a long way in reinforcing the ethnic groups' trust in the incumbent government. Suu Kyi wrote an open letter in July 2011 to President Sein with copies to the ethnic groups stating her willingness to work with the government on resolving this issue for good and reaching a mutually acceptable compromise. She also called for an immediate end to the fighting in the ethnic areas. It is in everyone's best interest to continue opening up to Myanmar at this point because the more isolated it is, the closer it will get to China.

On the ethnic issue, it is in the country's best interests to address the question of autonomy of the ethnic minorities. Re-convening a second Panglong-like

conference may be an option which the government may exercise in the near future. Striking a peace deal with the ethnic minorities is the key and at present, the way President Sein is going at it, it is a very likely scenario in the near future. Moreover, regional groupings like ASEAN and BIMSTEC and external agencies like the United Nations must take an initiative to assist Myanmar in resolving this crisis.

A more proactive role by the government is needed, though, to ensure the success of these efforts. For the first time in four decades, the government in Myanmar has understood that a military solution is not the way to go in solving the ethnic issue. It is more of a problem of identity and autonomy and can only be solved by developmental and political initiatives and including the ethnic minorities in the mainstream. What remains to be seen is how sustainable are the government actions and for how long.

The Rohingya problem has always been a ticking time bomb in every sense. Not only does the exclusion of this community pose a threat to the process of national reconciliation, it also poses a serious law and order problems in Rakhine and other states too. Due to the state's denial to gainfully employ them, the youth remains in a state of frustration and is ripe for indoctrination by militant outfits. They are also vulnerable to human trafficking all over the South Asian region. The cost of not handling this issue is much higher than the government of Myanmar has so far estimated. Considering that their concentration is in the Rakhine state, Kyakphue and Sittwe being two of the cities with a comparatively high Rohingya population, it might impact Myanmar's investment prospects adversely. Rakhine state has an international border with Bangladesh, access to the Bay of Bengal and consequently, all the countries in the BoB region, including India and the

offshore oil and Natural Gas blocs where major exploration work by international companies is being carried out. In fact, Kyakphue port is the origin of the oil and gas pipelines being built by China National Petroleum Corp. that connects it to the Yunnan province. Therefore, having simmering tensions in the state may not be in the best interest of the country as that questions the safety of institutional infrastructure which supports investments. The next census is due to take place in 2014 in the country and it is unlikely that the Rohingya community would be included in it. This would only add to the unorganized sector and for a fractured economy like Myanmar's that is bad news.

Suu Kyi, in her essay, 'Towards true Refuge', in 1993 stated, "...Karl Popper, explaining his abiding optimism in so troubled a world as ours, said that the darkness had always been there but the light was new. Because it is new it has to be tended with care and diligence... But a small light cannot dispel acres of encircling gloom. It needs to grow stronger, to shed its brightness further and further. And people need to accustom their eyes to the light to see it as a benediction rather than a pain, to learn to love it." In Myanmar, it is time for such optimism again. In this period of transition, the ethnic minorities of Myanmar are a big stakeholder in the country's future nation-building efforts and excluding them will serve no purpose to the new civilian government. Therefore, the recent developments must be taken

with cautious optimism and patience. For now, the only strategy that the international community must employ with regard to Myanmar is "Wait, Watch and Engage."

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