

# The Lingering Question

Why didn't the ethnic groups do more to help the September protesters?

Monday 5 May 2008, by [CHO Violet](#), [Shah Paung](#) (Date first published: February 2008).

**Nearly five months after the anti-regime demonstrations that shook Burma late last year, one central question is still waiting for a definitive answer: Couldn't the ethnic groups have done more to support the protesters in Rangoon and other cities?**

As monks and lay protesters filled the streets, there was some speculation that the armed forces of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and the Shan State Army—South (SSA-S) might at the very least launch offensives to pin down Burma Army divisions in Karen and Shan State. At the height of the brutal crackdown on the demonstrations in Rangoon it was reported that government troops had been sent from Karen State to help suppress the protests.

The Karen National Union (KNU), which has been fighting for Karen rights for more than 60 years, declared at the outset that it was prepared to help the protesters in any way it could. But no military assistance materialized.

Htay Aung, a researcher with the Thailand-based Network for Democracy and Development, pointed out that armed ethnic groups were in no logistical position to take action. They were ill-prepared and had no strategy to deal with the kind of crisis that occurred in September 2007, he said.

Burma expert Bertil Lintner said ethnic armed forces in border regions would probably not have been able to act without the approval of the government of neighboring Thailand.

Several leaders of ethnic groups did, however, participate in the demonstrations in Rangoon and Arakan State, lending some semblance of national unity to the uprising. They included the Zomi National Congress's Cin Sian Thang, the Chin leader Thawng Kho Thang and Thar Ban of the Arakan League for Democracy.

The September 2007 demonstrations, however, will still enter the history books as an urban uprising that lacked truly nationwide backing, especially from ethnic groups.

Ashley South, an independent researcher specializing in ethnic politics, displacement and humanitarian issues in Burma, said the negligible role played by ceasefire groups and other ethnic organizations in the demonstrations did not mean they weren't working for social and political change in Burma—"only that they have sometimes chosen different strategies."

Mahn Sha, KNU general-secretary, conceded that the ethnic groups lack unity and cooperation. But, he said, "We are trying to build up the unity among our ethnic groups. We still have our weak points, and we need to do more about it."

Sai Lao Hseng, the SSA-S spokesman, agreed with Mahn Sha. "What we need is for all ethnic groups and the Burmans to unite to reach our goal," he said.

Unity, however, is difficult to attain under the divide-and-rule strategy of the military regime that

took power in Burma after the last popular uprising in 1988.

From 1989 onwards, several ethnic groups reached separate ceasefire agreements with the regime, which came to prize among its trophies the Shan, Kachin, Pa-O, Palaung, Kayan, Karenni, Mon and Karen groups. The powerful Wa army, which once served the Communist Party of Burma in northern Shan State, also signed a truce with the government.

South said that despite the accommodations they reached with the regime, the ethnic ceasefire groups shared no common ground but were primarily motivated by “economic interests and maintaining positions of power and influence.”

Several ceasefire groups, such as the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), a KNU splinter group; the United Wa State Army; and the Kachin Independence Organization are engaged in illegal car smuggling, logging and mining. The Wa group is known to be involved in drug trafficking, and the DKBA in small-scale narcotics production.

Their varying interests keep the ethnic groups disconnected, and that suits the regime, whose military control is strengthened because of ethnic diversity and lack of unity.

It wasn't always so. Some degree of unity was needed before Burma could take the step of shedding colonialism, and on February 12, 1947, representatives of the Shan, Kachin and Chin nationalities joined Gen Aung San in signing the Panglong Agreement leading to independence.

Various ethnic groups, however, claimed they were being denied the equal rights and self-determination promised by the Panglong Agreement, and civil war broke out just after independence in 1948. Hostilities have continued on many fronts to this day.

Ethnic peoples make up about 30 percent of Burma's population of more than 50 million, and no true national unity will be achieved without their full participation in the political process. The country has more than 130 ethnic tribes mainly distributed among seven main ethnic groups: Shan, Karen, Mon, Arakan, Chin, Kachin and Karenni.

There was a time when Burma's main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), and ethnic groups united in defiance of the regime. When the junta failed to accept the result of the 1990 general election, they formed a Committee Representing the People's Parliament (CRPP).

The CRPP was chaired by Dr Saw Mra Aung, chairman of the Arakan League for Democracy, and included NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi and Shan, Mon and Zomi leaders.

The junta's response to the appearance of the CRPP on the political scene was to demand its dissolution and to arrest 110 NLD members and officials, including Saw Mra Aung, and to shut down 43 NLD offices across the country.

Despite the post-election alliance between the NLD and some ethnic leaders, Burma's geography and the regime's splinter policies have combined to isolate the already divided ethnic groups from the democratic movement in Burma's cities. Burmese army positions in ethnic areas, particularly Karen State, were strengthened during the September demonstrations, sealing the region off.

Some border-based ethnic groups even took a moderate stance during September's uprising, arguing that if they took part it could prove counter-productive.

“We do not want the international community to see peaceful, pro-democracy demonstrators supported by armed groups,” said Mahn Sha.

The peaceful nature of the September demonstrations was emphasized by several ethnic leaders, who invariably contrasted the restrained nature of the protests with the violence used by the authorities to suppress them.

Despite the regime's brutality, there were no calls for violent resistance—let alone intervention by armed ethnic groups. On the contrary, several ethnic groups, including the UWSA, the National Democratic Army (Kachin State) and the National Democracy Alliance Army issued a joint statement in October calling for a settlement using “democratic and peaceful means.”

This was also the tenor of a rare statement issued by Suu Kyi through UN Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari. She urged the regime to “give constant and serious considerations to the interests and opinions of as broad a range of political organizations and forces as possible, in particular those of our ethnic national races.”

Suu Kyi's reference to Burma's “ethnic national races” didn't please the regime, which rooted out some ceasefire groups willing to criticize her approach and question her role in the process of national reconciliation. The regime is clearly unhappy about any hint of rapprochement between ethnic leaders and a woman they would like to see excluded from the political scene.

Held under house arrest for 12 of the past 18 years, Suu Kyi has anyway been silenced as effectively as many distinguished ethnic leaders who are serving long terms of imprisonment.

Maj-Gen Sao Hso Ten, president of the Shan State Peace Council, and Hkun Htun Oo, chairman of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), were arrested in 2005 and sentenced to 106 years and 92 years respectively after holding a clandestine meeting in Shan State and allegedly planning to boycott the military-sponsored National Convention.

The SNLD is Burma's largest ethnic-based party and the second biggest winner in the 1990 election after the NLD. Its general-secretary, Sai Nyunt Lwin, is serving a 75-year prison term.

With such leaders excluded indefinitely from Burma's deadlocked political process and the threat of similar treatment hanging over the heads of any acolyte tempted to push for change, it's small wonder that the regime can smile cynically at talk of “national unity”—and can confidently believe itself secure from any united threat to its continued existence.

### **The Panglong Agreement: A Path to Unity**

February 12 is Union Day in Burma, a date that commemorates the signing of an agreement between the central government and various ethnic groups in 1947. But where has the vision of national unity gone?

For many years, Burma's nationalist leaders blamed the “divide and rule” policy of Western imperialists and the “servile streak” of the ethnic people for all the country's woes. In turn, the indigenous groups, such as the Karen, Karenni, Mon, Shan, Kachin, Chin and Rakhine, would point their collective finger at Burman “chauvinism” and “oppression.”

There was a day, however, when the people of Burma achieved a momentous breakthrough. It was February 12, 1947, and representatives from across the land gathered in Panglong, Shan State, with a common vision of establishing an independent state. The central government in Rangoon was represented, as were the Chin, the Kachin and the Shan. Twenty-three delegates came together and voluntarily signed an agreement—thereafter known as the Panglong Agreement—in support of national unity.

The Panglong Agreement stated: "Freedom will be more than speedily achieved by the Shans, the Kachins and the Chins by their immediate cooperation with the interim Burmese Government."

February 12 was designated "Union Day."

Soon after this historical accord, the architect of the Panglong Agreement, Gen Aung San, was assassinated and the dream of unity in diversity was buried along with him.

The ethnic groups felt that the new constitution failed to exercise the guarantee of equal rights and self-determination, as agreed upon at Panglong.

After strongman Gen Ne Win seized power in a military coup on March 2, 1962, the military government began dominating every corner of the country with little tolerance for dissent and by the imposition of absolute, dictatorial control. The spirit of mutual trust and respect that had been shown in the Panglong Agreement was lost and the blame game started again.

On Union Day 2007, Burma's current dictator Snr-Gen Than Shwe said with no hint of irony: "Certain powerful countries desirous of gaining dominance over the Union of Myanmar [Burma] are stirring up racial conflicts to break up national unity and cause the recurrence of armed conflicts."

Many people today, especially ethnic leaders, feel that another Panglong Agreement is long overdue. However, the debate needs to move on from the old black-and-white caricatures of "imperialist stooges" and "chauvinist oppressors" if any progress is to be made.

Aung San Suu Kyi once suggested: "Unity in diversity has to be the principle of those who genuinely wish to build our country into a strong nation that allows for a variety of races, languages, beliefs and cultures to flourish in peaceful and happy coexistence. Only a government that tolerates opinions and attitudes different from its own will be able to create an environment where peoples of diverse traditions and aspirations can breathe freely in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and trust."

Was there not a day in February 1947 when the diverse people of Burma came together in an atmosphere of unity?

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From The Irrawaddy magazine February 2008, Vol. 16 N° 2

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