

Media Monitoring Report

SPECIAL EDITION – September 2018

Union Peace Conference – 21 Century Panglong (3rd Session)

Nay Pyi Taw, 11-16 July 2018



Credit : Shan News

Background¹⁻²

Myanmar government held its third round of 21st Century Panglong Conference in Nay Pyi Taw from 11-16 July 2018, attended by hundreds of delegates from the government, the armed forces, ethnic armed groups, political parties, and members of parliament, civil society organizations, invited guests and observers.

The conference is an effort by the government to end decades of armed conflict between the military and ethnic armed groups, and to lay foundation for the establishment of a democratic federal union based on freedom, equality and justice as agreed upon in the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) signed by the government and eight armed ethnic groups in October 2015.



Credit : Myanmar State Counselor's Office

Though the current civilian government has made attaining peace a key priority, the ongoing armed conflict in Shan and Kachin states, and the disputes with NCA signatories especially armed clashes with Karen Nation Union (KNU) in March, has prevented the holding of the conference up until July 2018.

The previous two rounds, held in late August 2016 and in May 2017 in which 37 principles were signed as the first part of the Union Peace Accord. The principles addressed politics, economics, land and the environment, and social issues.

Opening remarks³⁻⁸

State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the armed forces chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, Karen National Union chairman Saw Mutu Say Poe and the deputy chair of the Arakan National Party, Daw Aye Nu Sein delivered their respective opening speeches representing the government, the armed forces, the ethnic armed groups and the political parties.

Aung San Suu Kyi

In her opening remarks, Aung San Suu Kyi expressed concern over delays in holding the conference and emphasized the importance of having such conference to jointly find a political solution for the country.

“I am worried that any delay in the peace conference could affect our people’s chance to achieve peace [...] That is the reason we are trying today to solve the problems politically by this peace conference.”

Inviting all the groups to sign the NCA, State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who also chairs the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre, said the NCA is not an end but a starting point for stakeholders in the peace process.

“We are not stopping at the NCA terms [...] For ending armed conflict, it is important to have a political agreement or a pact acceptable to all the different elements...”

For those ethnic armed groups that have not signed the NCA, she reassured, “the peace door” remains open for them.

The opening ceremony was also attended by the seven members of the Northern Alliance, or Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee, led by the powerful United Wa State Party, at the invitation of the government as an observer.

Min Aung Hlaing

Given the legitimacy of the NCA, which was ratified by the parliament in 2015, the military commander-in-chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing emphasized the importance of going through the NCA path to attain peace and find a solution for the country.

“Every armed ethnic group has to sign the NCA. The notion that there is no need to sign the NCA as there is no fighting and other agreements already exist, may go against democratic ethics ...”

The speech by the senior general highlighted the armed forces’ rigid insistence on peace at its terms.

“The government and the armed forces are actively leading the peace process today not because we are weak, but because we are committed to [the] interests of [the] state and national ethnic people,” General Min Aung Hlaing said, adding that if all the groups that genuinely wanted peace observed the NCA then the sound of guns would be silenced.

“All must control their own men, instead of giving groundless reasons,” he added, in comments directed to non-signatories of the NCA.

However, the comment that the government and the armed forces were working for peace “not because we are weak” caused disquiet among ethnic armed groups, which regarded it as a threat.

Pado Saw Kwe Htoo Win, vice chair of the KNU, said the military chief’s comment was like a warning to armed ethnic groups.

“Whether groups are powerful or not does not matter in building peace for Myanmar. The main point is that it is only the inclusiveness of all armed ethnic groups that will make the peace process successful.”

Several delegates from ethnic groups continued to take issue with Min Aung Hlaing’s opening remarks earlier in the day, and especially a comment that the country’s armed forces represent all Myanmar nationals.



Aung San Suu Kyi and Min Aung Hlaing deliver their opening speeches to open the conference
Credit: Associate Press



Representing ethnic armed groups and the political parties, General Mutu Say Poe and Daw Aye Nu Sein also share their opinions at the opening of the conference
Credit: Gettv Imaaes & Mizzima

Mutu Say Poe

The Karen National Union Chairman, General Mutu Say Poe offered a different view on building national unity and peace for the country. He said on behalf of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) signatories in his opening speech,

“National solidarity cannot be built through force and military pressure. National solidarity must be built through the elements of independence, equality, and justice. It must be built through trust, understanding, and goodwill...”

"We think that hastily-made political negotiations cannot help the national reconciliation and it cannot solve any problems."

Daw Aye Nu Sein

Representing the political parties, Daw Aye Nu Sein, vice-chair of the Arakan National Party shared her opinion on how to solve the problem between the Burmese majority and the ethnic minority groups.

“Ethnic groups shouldn’t be regarded as narrow-minded and extremists. We want to hope for magnanimity from powerful groups especially big Burmese parties and strongly-built Tatmadaw. Narrow-mindedness tends to disappear under magnanimity...”

Proposed topics rejected at Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee prior to the conference¹²

Prior to the conference, the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee announced that only 12 of 32 proposed peace topics had been approved for formal consideration at the Panglong conference. The UPDJC was created in October 2015 and is responsible for holding and overseeing the political dialogue process, including convening the peace conferences.

Its 15-member secretariat features five members from the Tatmadaw, government and national parliament; five selected by the ethnic armed groups; and five chosen by registered political parties.

Before each conference, this secretariat is responsible for reviewing policy papers submitted by Thematic Working Committees (TWC) and producing a single draft policy paper. Once approved by the full UPDJC, this paper is then submitted to the Panglong conference. Approval at the conference means the text becomes part of the Union Peace Accord from which the future democratic federal union is to be based.

Most of the points rejected were related to politics and the economy. TWCs had proposed seven political and 11 economic topics, of which only two and one were approved, respectively.

The two political topics that were approved both relate to gender equality, including a proposal to draw a policy to ensure equal rights for all genders and to eliminate discrimination based on gender, and for women to hold at least 30 percent of positions in politics. However, the UPDJC rejected other gender-related proposals regarding protection for women and improving the capacity of women.

On the economy, a proposal related to taxation and sharing of income from natural resources was approved for discussion. The other approved topics are from the working concerned with social affairs and land and the environment.

The rejection of the proposed topics has frustrated negotiators from the ethnic armed groups and some political parties who attended the UPDJC meeting.



Credit : Myanmar Times

For the past year, the armed groups have been preparing for the talks by holding national-level political dialogue meetings and attending thematic working committees to develop and finalize proposals for discussion at Panglong but only a few had made it through the UPDJC vetting process.

Fourteen points signed as Part II of the Union Accord ⁸⁻¹²

After six days of gruelling talks, participants at the third session of the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference finally adopted 14 principles as Part II of the Union Accord, involving politics, social affairs, the economy, land issues and environmental issues and were signed by leaders of participant groups of the government, parliament, military, ceasefire ethnic armed groups and political parties (see Annex).

The agreement comes despite tensions between the government, the armed forces and ethnic armed groups.

- Four political-related basic principles entail gender equality, the inclusion of at least 30 percent of women in each sector, prevention of violence against women and raising women's capacity.
- One economic-related principle upholds rights for regional or state governments to draw up and implement economic development policy and projects of their own.
- Seven social-related principles include implementation of an all-inclusive education system, universal health coverage, enactment of laws that guarantee women's rights and harm reduction for drug addicts.

- The two land and environmental-related principles prescribe land in the country which belongs to local citizens only and foreigners shall not own it directly or indirectly, and pre-assessment shall be made in terms of environmental, social and health impact as well as coordination with local people before using the land.

With 14 basic principles adopted in the third session of 21st Century Panglong, the total number of basic principles incorporated into the union accord so far has come to 51.



Credit : Mon News Agency

State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi underlined the essence of the conference as being the ability to continue the political discussion through mutual effort notwithstanding the differences among participants, and that the signing of the Union Accord Part II indicates that the conference had not stopped or turned back but was progressing forward albeit with difficulties.

However, she lamented the fact that the conference was unable to reach agreement on the security sector, emphasizing agreement on security has to be made if stakeholders were to build a strong federal union base on equal rights and justice for all. In order to have agreement on the security issue, she advised reconsideration of the current political framework, structure and design.

“We found that with some points at the conference agreement could be reached, but some could not. All groups participating in the session have different histories and dreams. There are big challenges in this process that require patience and will take time to achieve agreement [...] To reach agreement on the security sector is important in the peace-making process because it is essential to become a perfect Union peace agreement,” she added.

“To create a perfect union peace agreement [...] agreements related to security must be included.” “To achieve that situation, we need to try by boldly reconsidering our political framework, structure and design.”

To resolve the difficulty, it was suggested that the current device of political discussion framework needs to be reviewed and changed to a more appropriate one and strive toward making a better work process.

Closing and Declaration of the Third Session of the Union Peace Conference — 21st Century Panglong¹³⁻¹⁵

In the closing remarks, State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi expressed satisfaction with the conference outcome insisting that the conference had produced positive results that are vital to the country's fragile peace process.

Noting the conference result may be seen as meager, she defended it by saying, the fact that the conference itself was held successfully amid various challenges and yielded results can be taken as "a symbol" that the country's peace process is "moving forward."

On the other hand, Mann Nyein Maung, a senior member of the Karen National Union commented the fact that the conference results are not encouraging due to a "lack of understanding" of ethnic concerns by the government and military leaders.

At the end of the conference, a statement or declaration was issued in which representatives pledged to hold another session later this year and two more in 2019 in order to strive for laying down more fundamental principles necessary for the establishment of a democratic federal union country.



Credit : Frontier Myanmar

The Declaration reads as the follows.

1. The Third Session of the Union Peace Conference-21st Century Panglong was held in Myanmar International Convention Centre II, Nay Pyi Taw from 11 to 16 July 2018. The conference was attended by 700 delegates from all groups, 29 specially invited guests, 204 observers, 27 facilitators and 152 support group members, and sector-wise and group-wise meetings were conducted in stages and proposals obtained were signed as Part Two of the Union Accord.
2. In addition to this, conference delegates attending the Third Session of the Union Peace Conference-21st Century Panglong pledges to strive toward achieving the following aims.
 - (a) Union Peace Conference-21st Century Panglong meetings will be held according to political dialogue framework, once in 2018 and twice in 2019.
 - (b) Meetings at all levels leading toward the next conference will be held successfully and after the three conferences are held, the basic principles related to democracy and federal, which are the basic foundation of a Union based on democracy and federal system, are to be established.
 - (c) In the subsequent conferences, all groups are to strive toward setting up the basic principles related to democracy and federal as foundation.

(d) In 2020, Union Peace Conference-21st Century Panglong meetings are to be held as required.

3. Aiming toward non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of sovereignty, based on freedom, equality and justice and in accordance with the Panglong spirit, the Union Peace Conference-21st Century Panglong delegates will continue to strive toward establishing a Union based on democracy and federal system that assures democracy, national equality and self-determination rights, founded according to the outcomes of the political discussions.

Voices from the youth¹⁶

In addition to government and ethnic armed group leaders, youth activists also attended the conference. From their points of view, the peace process has failed to include young people, women, and others at the grassroots level.

Ei Thinzar Maung, a young leader of the Democratic Party for New Society, expressed her thoughts that she was dismayed that young people who demonstrated against the war in Kachin state in May had been arrested.

“People who asked the government to end the war in Kachin state and who read peace poems have been arrested, charged, and sentenced...Powerful top leaders from various groups are holding peace conferences,



Credit : Karen Information Center

but for people at the grassroots level — women and young people — their right to participate in the peace process is restricted.”

Khun Barrnet from the Union of Karenni State Youth stressed the need for negotiators to strike a balance between their goals and equality for ethnic minorities.

“Because many ethnic groups live in our country, we have to create a balance by thinking about ethnic equality, federal issues, and history when we talk about peace [...] Every ethnic group needs to recognize and respect each other [...] We are happy to see almost all ethnic groups participate in the third Panglong Conference, and we want all leaders to talk about peace after they stop fighting in all areas...”

Lin Let Kyae Sin, a member of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front disagreed with the fact the current Panglong Conference being held while the 2008 constitution, drafted by a former military government, is still in place.

“The government authorities’ speeches are emotional, but the military chief’s speech was like a threat [to the ethnic armed groups [...]] “We don’t want this. We want them to willingly speak the truth so we can have a better future by learning lessons from the past.”

Sideline talks¹⁷⁻¹⁸

During the week of the Conference, there were several sideline meetings held separately between Aung San Suu Kyi, the armed forces leaders and the ethnic leaders of both signatories and non-signatories to NCA.

- Aung San Suu Kyi met on Friday, 13 July with 10 ethnic armed groups that have signed the government's cease-fire accord to stress the need for more discussions on ethnic autonomy and the creation of a federal union to advance a peace initiative that aims to end decades of civil war. They also discussed how to overcome hurdles now being encountered at the conference, during their meeting at the National Reconciliation and Peace Center (NRPC) in Naypyidaw.
- Earlier, Aung San Suu Kyi met representatives of the Northern Alliance, a coalition of ethnic armed groups that have not signed NCA, includes the Arakan Army (AA), Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and United Wa State Army (UWSA), Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army (SSPP/SSA), and the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA-Mongla group) to discuss reducing conflicts, signing the government's nationwide cease-fire agreement (NCA), and participating in political discussions.

Members of Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee, also known as the Northern Alliance, an alliance of seven ethnic armed groups headed by the United Wa State Army also met with the armed forces leaders on the sideline of Panlong

- The armed forces commander-in-chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing met representatives of four non-signatory groups that have previously signed bilateral ceasefire agreements: the UWSA, the Kachin Independence Army, the Mongla-based National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Shan State Army-North.
- The armed forces deputy commander-in-chief, Vice Senior General Soe Win, held talks with representatives of three non-signatory groups that have never signed bilateral ceasefire agreements: the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Arakan Army, and the Kokang-based Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army.

Both meetings had discussed signing the NCA and achieving progress in the peace process through dialogue.

Endnotes

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Annex

Union Accord Part II

1. Aiming toward non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of sovereignty, based on freedom, equality and justice and in accordance with the Panglong spirit, the Third Session of the Union Peace Conference-21st Century Panglong was held in Nay Pyi Taw from 11 to 16 July 2018 to establish a Union based on democracy and federal system that assures democracy, national equality and self-determination rights, founded according to the outcomes of the political discussions.
2. At this conference, sector-wise and group-wise meetings were conducted in stages on policy proposals submitted by Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee (UPDJC) and the proposals obtained were agreed as Part II of the Union Accord.
3. The Part II of the Union Accord signed at this conference and all other agreed sections obtained at the subsequent conferences will be compiled and signed as Union Accord.
4. The Union Accord Part II signed in this conference are –
 - (a) Four agreements in political sector basic principle
 - (b) One agreement in economic sector basic principle
 - (c) Seven agreements in social sector basic principle
 - (d) Two agreements in land & environment sector basic principle totalling fourteen which are shown in addenda (a), (b), (c) and (d).
5. The above agreements are signed by heads of each group at the Third Session of the Union Peace Conference-21st Century Panglong and witnessed as Union Accord Part II, according to Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement Section 20 (e).

Addendum (a)

Political sector basic principle agreement

(16 July 2018) Gender Equality

1. In establishing a Union based on democracy and federal system, no citizen of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar must be treated differently based on gender difference and policy must be established for equality.
2. A minimum of 30 percent involvement of women in each sector is to be encouraged.
3. In establishing a Union based on democracy and federal system, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar is to establish and implement policies that prevent gender-based violence.
4. Increase the capability of women to support gender equality.

Addendum (b)

Economic sector basic principle agreement

(16 July 2018)

Region/State governments have the right to draw up and implement economic projects that benefit the people. In drawing up the projects, it is to be in accord with the Union economic development policies and projects, and consideration must be made toward not adversely affect the adjacent states and regions.

Addendum (c)

Social sector basic principle agreement

(16 July 2018)

1. In the decision-making stages of conducting resettlement, redevelopment and social development matters, attempts must be made towards having women participation of at least 30 per cent.
2. Establish an education system that is accessible by all and is all-inclusive.
3. Establish a universal health coverage system that is accessible by all and is all-inclusive.
4. Enact laws that provide rights of the handicapped persons, children, elders, expecting mothers.
5. To widely consider and include the concept of social cohesion in conducting social development matters.
6. Establish and conduct effective policies against harm reduction, treatment and reintegration of drugs and psychotropic substances usage.
7. Set up and conduct programs to ensure children's rights, abide by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child for all-round development of children and eliminate Six Grave Violations against children.

Addendum (d)

Land and environment sector basic principle agreement

(16 July 2018)

Preventive arrangements

1. Only citizens can own land in the country, and foreigners and illegal settlers must not own it directly or indirectly.
2. In conducting and implementing land-use project work, assessments must be made not to damage the natural environment, not to have social effect, not to have health effect and to conduct coordination work with the local people.

SOURCE: GLOBAL LIGHT OF MYANMAR <http://www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/14-points-signed-as-part-ii-of-union-accord/>

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