



Women and the 21st Century Panglong Conference

Dispatch by Hanney Lwin Oo, Yangon Office

Today, 31st August 2016, the historic Panglong Conference started in Myanmar, aimed at reaching comprehensive peace in the conflict-torn country. The participants of the Conference include the government, political parties, ethnic armed groups, ethnic representatives, the Myanmar military, and some civil society actors. Participating Women's Organizations include Women and Peace Action Network, Shan State Gender Equality Network, Women's League of Burma (WLB), Nyein Foundation Women's Organizations Network (Myanmar), Gender and Development Institute-Myanmar, and Alliance on Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process (AGIPP).

UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon [will deliver a speech](#) at today's 21st-century Panglong Conference, which he called a "promising first step" of the new administration's attempt to solve Myanmar's decades-long armed conflicts. Visiting the country for the fifth time, the UN chief said yesterday that the peace process will need further strengthening. But he congratulated the participants' "patience, determination and spirit of compromise". "The steps you have taken toward peace and national reconciliation will need to be further strengthened, broadened and consolidated. This is the real expectation of the international community," he said. He added that the United Nations will continue to support the peace process, as it has done since the reign of the oppressive military regime. Mr Ban said the United Nations has consistently backed Myanmar's journey toward democracy and human rights.

"It has been a great honour to work with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in particular," he said, while standing alongside the state counsellor. "Today, I am very pleased and honoured to be back to witness the latest phase in your transition marked by the peaceful, dignified and enthusiastic participation in the election last November," he said. He welcomed the new administration's "emphasised" initiatives to hold a dialogue to build reconciliation, including between the leaders of military establishment, civil society groups, political parties and ethnic armed groups. Mr Ban said that former president U Thein Sein had steered Myanmar on its "path toward harmonious, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and prosperous democracy". However, under the former president's watch inter-communal religious tension, fomented by nationalist sentiment, erupted between Muslim and Buddhism communities, including the deadly 2012 violence in Rakhine State, and subsequent episodes throughout the country.

Bringing religious communities into harmony still [remains a key challenge](#) for the National League for Democracy-led administration, which [has been criticised](#) as keeping "silent" about the country's persecuted, stateless Muslim community in Rakhine State.

Mr Ban said the NLD-backed government has promised him that it will solve the root of the problem in Rakhine State – the [issue of citizenship](#) for those who self-identify as "Rohingya", a term that both the previous government led by U Thein Sein and the current NLD-led administration have declined to use. "I conveyed the concerns of the international community about the tens of thousands of people who have been living in very poor conditions in IDP camps for the past four years. Like all people everywhere, they need and deserve a future, hope and dignity," he said. "This is not just the question of the Rohingya community's rights to self-identify; the broader issue is that all of Myanmar's people of every ethnicity and background should be able to live in equality and harmony, side-by-side with their neighbours." He also welcomed the establishment of the [newly founded advisory commission](#) on Rakhine State, which will be led by his UN predecessor Kofi Annan. Critics, however, have pressed the UN to take more urgent action as the commission submits its report within a one-year deadline.

“We need long-term solutions and short-term action to start to address the Rohingya crisis,” U Tun Khin, president of the Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK, said in a statement yesterday. “We hope that Ban Ki-moon is stressing the need for this approach rather than just waiting for the Annan Commission to make its report.”

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was not asked specific questions about Rakhine State yesterday. However, when asked what the government is doing to ease tensions over the [issue of inclusivity](#) at the Panglong Conference after some three groups were effectively barred from attending, she said, “We are trying our best for their participation in the conference. It is up to them should they want to join the conference or not.”

The much-heralded Union Peace Conference is finally here and delegates from across Myanmar and the world are gathering in Nay Pyi Taw for an event that recalls the negotiations of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s beloved father with ethnic minority leaders almost seven decades ago. But while today’s 21st-century Panglong Conference will be recorded on mobile phones and instantly uploaded, attitudes toward gender equality have not advanced so rapidly, and [only a tiny number of those delegates](#) involved in the negotiations are women. Peace experts and rights campaigners have repeatedly [warned of the risks of excluding women](#) from the talks – warnings which have been ignored by the government, the Myanmar military and the ethnic armed groups.

The specific experiences, rights and needs of [women affected by conflict](#) are clearly being disregarded in the peace process. But also crucially at this time of sensitive deal-brokering, vital skills and experience are being overlooked because of gender stereotyping. The male leaders of the Myanmar military and ethnic armed organisations have for decades failed to reach a long-lasting, nationwide peace agreement in this country, which has the tragic claim of being home to one of the world’s longest-running civil wars. Even as leaders arrived in the capital yesterday, [fresh battles were reportedly taking place](#) in Kachin and northern Shan states. Yet once again, these armed men are claiming dominion over the path to peace, and the government has failed to champion the rights of women and other civic representatives to have a significant role in the proceedings.

The assumption that being capable of perpetrating violence somehow provides someone with the skills to negotiate an end to violence [is a non sequitur](#). Yet such an attitude is prevalent.

Coverage of women in conflict tends to focus on them as victims – and not without good reason. But there is a danger of overlooking the more powerful roles women also play in conflict – including conducting negotiations with armed actors.

The issue of women’s exclusion from the peace negotiations was recently highlighted by UN special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar Yanghee Lee. Writing ahead of this week’s conference, she [pointed to studies](#) showing that the involvement of women in peace processes increases the likelihood of an enduring agreement. “Myanmar in general has not performed well so far on this score, with women comprising only 16 percent of the senior delegation negotiating the NCA [the so-called nationwide ceasefire agreement of October 2015, which excluded key armed groups],” she wrote, highlighting the government’s failure to introduce a 30pc quota.

But women’s inclusion in the peace process is not just a matter of ticking a few boxes to meet internationally prescribed equality quotas, which is often how it is perceived. A Human Rights Watch (HRW) [report this month](#) titled “‘A Gentleman’s Agreement’: Women’s Participation in Burma’s Peace Negotiations and Political Transition,” noted, “Beyond women holding few, if any, senior positions in the parties involved in these negotiations, many women’s rights groups report being treated with disdain or as ‘spoilers’ for pressing for the inclusion of women’s rights.”

The absurdity in aiming for ethnic equality and national reconciliation while ignoring gender equality and women’s needs and voices should be evident to all involved. But apparently it is not. The HRW report cited male members of armed groups saying the [called-for quota of 30pc of participants](#) in all negotiations to be female should be a ceiling – that is, the maximum number of women rather than the minimum.

In reality, 30pc remains a faraway dream for equality campaigners. According to AGIPP, just 7pc of delegates at the last Union Peace Conference, held in January, were women. “In theory, we can do it [increase women’s participation in the peace talks], but in practice it’s difficult. So we made a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ to wait until later,” one ethnic armed organisation representative told HRW. Apparently they found it easier to agree to sit at a table with other men – even those who had been their deadly enemies on the frontlines – than to sit at a table with women from civil society organisations who are campaigning for peace. Such attitudes underscore the challenges women in Myanmar face in trying to make their voices heard in public forums. Yet away from the national stage, women in ethnic minority areas not only serve as soldiers, but also, in civilian villages, have [regularly taken on community leadership roles](#) that have required them to deal with armed actors from the Myanmar military and the ethnic armed groups.

Examples reported in this paper include a group of Ta’ang women in northern Shan State who [remained to guard their village](#) after the rest of the community fled to IDP camps amid fears that the men would be detained by the Tatmadaw. Female and male community leaders said that while the women were frightened, they also felt women would be better able to negotiate with the soldiers and avoid violence. The group’s leader, Daw O Khe, who spoke strongly of her determination to stand up to any marauding military personnel, told in April, “I’d like to work for peace negotiations and to present [my ideas] to the authorities. I will dare to speak out if I get the chance.” Likewise, testimonies from women in southeast Myanmar, [published earlier this month](#) by the Karen Human Rights Group, highlighted how women were often given leadership roles that required them to deal with armed leaders who came to their village looking for supplies and other support. Women village leaders there spoke of fears and abuses, but also reported how they developed positive, respectful relationships with different armed actors.

Meanwhile, female activists and politicians such as Shan Nationalities League for Democracy state hluttaw MP Nang San San Aye (Thibaw/Hsipaw 1) have proven themselves more than capable of frontline negotiations to assist civilians affected by armed conflict. What is holding women back from the peace process is not women’s inability to negotiate with armed leaders, or their “natural” reserve, or their inexperience with conflict; it is their exclusion from the table by those armed power-holders who seek to ensure their own interests in any peace deal.

Any agreement which clearly prioritises the interests of those with guns over the interests of those without guns risks exacerbating conflict rather than ending it. Women’s groups have been among the most vocal advocates for a peace deal that demands an end to military impunity for crimes, particularly those of sexual violence.

Many equality campaigners are also committed community activists. While the leaders of ethnic armed organisations are aware of their reliance on support from within their own communities, many have also gained considerable wealth from resource exploitation or drug production in areas under their control. It is easy to see why neither side is particularly keen to have a significant number of women at the table. Zaw Khin Lay, a member of the AGIPP steering committee, said the alliance had been invited to send 10 representatives as observers, and had drawn up a brief paper they hoped to present, but would probably only be able to “hand it out” to key delegates from the sidelines.

In reality, today’s high-profile conference opening will be more a matter of public show than gritty negotiation. “I’m not hopeful for any concrete or accountable solution from [this opening] event,” said Zaw Khin Lay. It is widely recognised that it is principally a symbolic occasion. The real horse-trading over peace will take place in the days, months and, likely, years to follow. It is clear there is a desire for a genuine peace agreement from many quarters. But the lack of women delegates does not bode well for equality, for peace or for democracy.)