



by Bertil Lintner

Junta will now try to neutralism as many of the border insurgencies as possible

Burmese Election **Show**

A general election may or may not be held in Myanmar later this year and speculations about what may happen then is keeping foreign political pundits and the isolated diplomatic community in the old capital Yangon busy. But few ordinary people inside the country seem to believe that these "elections" will lead to anything more than ensuring the military's decades-long iron grip on the country. They are saying that it is just another government-orchestrated event in which they are

required to participate, not unlike the May 2008 "referendum" in which a new constitution was approved by a Stalinesque 92 per cent of the electorate - or the frequent, stage-managed rallies where people are forced to gather to chant slogans in support of a military regime almost everybody despises. The show goes on. The military has a clear vision of what kind of state Myanmar should be - and that is not a democracy.

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nearly two dozen former rebel armies which for the past two decades have had cease-fire agreements with the government to finally give up their autonomous status. The demand from the central authorities is that they have to convert their respective armies into "Border Guard Forces" under the command of the Myanmar army. Their "political wings" can then become recognised political parties which will be allowed to participate in the promised election. If successful, this policy may mean an end to Myanmar's ethnic civil war, which has been raging

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since the country's independence from Britain in 1948. But if the former rebels do not accept the offer, hostilities could break out again - which would affect the country's neighbours as most ethnic armies are active in areas bordering Thailand, China and India. At least in early 2010, the latter scenario seems the most likely as only a handful of the weakest of the former rebel armies so far have agreed to become such "Border Guard Forces".

The cease-fire agreements emerged in the wake of two political events in recent Myanmar history: the crushing of a popular uprising against military rule in 1988 and an unrelated mutiny the

protest. In the wake of the massacres in Yangon and elsewhere, more than 8,000 pro-democracy activists fled the urban centres for the border areas near Thailand and in Kachin State in the far north of the country where a multitude of ethnic insurgencies were active. The 1988 uprising shook the military establishment and it feared a potentially dangerous alliance between the ethnic rebels along its frontiers and the pro-democracy activists from Yangon and other cities and towns. However, these rebel groups, Karen, Mon, Karenni, and Pa-O along the Thai border and the Kachin in the north were unable to provide the urban dissidents with more than a hand-

government claims of a "communist conspiracy" there was at that time no linkage between the anti-totalitarian, pro-democracy movement in central Myanmar and the orthodox, Marxist-Leninist-Maoist CPB. However, given the strong desire for revenge for the bloody events of August-September 1988, it is plausible that the urban dissidents would have accepted arms from any source. Thus, it became imperative for the junta that had assumed power on September 18, 1988 to neutralise as many of the border insurgencies as possible, especially the CPB.

A situation which was potentially even more dangerous for the junta arose in March-April 1989

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following year among the rank and file of the then most powerful rebel army in the country, the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). In August-September 1988, millions of people in virtually every town and major village across Myanmar took to the streets to demand an end to 26 years of stifling military rule and for the restoration of the democracy that existed before the army took over in a coup d'état in 1962. Myanmar's military establishment responded fiercely. Thousands of people were gunned down as the army moved in, not to seize power - which they already had - but to shore up a regime overwhelmed by popular

ful of weapons. None of the ethnic armies could match the strength of the CPB whose 10,000-15,000 troops then controlled a 20,000 square kilometre territory along the border between Myanmar and China in the northeast. Unlike the ethnic insurgents, the CPB had vast quantities of arms and ammunition, which were supplied by China during the decade 1968-1978 when it was Beijing's policy to support communist insurrections in Southeast Asia. Although the aid had dwindled to a trickle by 1980, the CPB still had vast stockpiles of munitions, probably enough to last for at least ten years of guerilla warfare against the central government. Despite

when the hill-tribe rank and file of the CPB led by the military commanders, who also came from various minorities of its northeastern base area, mutinied against the party's ageing, mostly Burman political leadership. On April 17, 1989, ethnic Wa mutineers stormed party headquarters at Panghsang on the border with China's Yunnan province. The old leaders and their families, altogether about 300 people, escaped to China while the former CPB army soon split up along ethnic lines and formed four different, regional resistance armies: The United Wa State Army (UWSA) comprised the bulk of the old CPB's fighting force, about 8,000-

10,000 at the time of the mutiny. This figure was soon to increase as the UWSA began procuring more weapons from China and Thailand. It is based in the Wa Hills, the centre of what used to be the CPB's base area along the Yunnan frontier. The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDA) became the new group in Kokang, a small district north of the Wa Hills, which is inside Myanmar but dominated by ethnic Chinese of Yunnanese stock. The strength of the MNDA was approximately 1,500 in the wake of the mutiny.

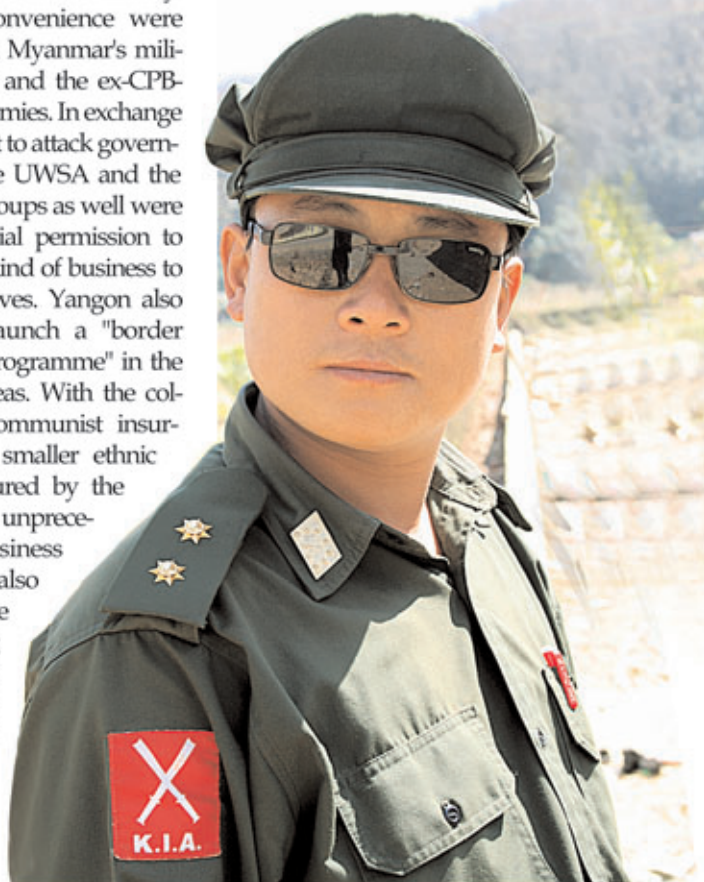
The National Democratic Alliance Army - Eastern Shan State (NDAA-ESS) took over the area east of the UWSA's territory. This group was led by Lin Mingxian and Zhang Zhiming, two former Chinese Red Guards from Yunnan who had joined the CPB as volunteers during the Cultural Revolution and then stayed on. Its headquarters at Mong La on the Chinese border soon developed into a boom town, thriving on gambling, drug trafficking, prostitution, smuggling - and tourism from China. At the time of the mutiny, this former CPB force had about 3,500-4,000 men under its command.

The New Democratic Army (NDA) with less than 1,000 men is the smallest of the former CPB forces - and its area is separated from the old CPB base area in Myanmar's northeastern Shan State. Its area of operation is around Kambaiti, Panwa and Hpimaw passes on the Yunnan frontier in Kachin State.

With the demise of the com-

munist in Myanmar, a link-up between these four groups and the ethnic minority groups along the Thai border, as well as the urban dissidents who had taken refuge there, became a possibility that worried the junta in Yangon. A delegation was indeed sent from the ethnic rebels and the dissidents to negotiate with the CPB mutineers soon after the break-up of the party. The military authorities in Yangon, however, reacted faster, and with more determination and with much more to offer than the pro-democracy forces. Within weeks of the mutiny, the then chief of Myanmar's military intelligence, Maj-Gen. Khin Nyunt, travelled to the border to meet the leaders of the mutiny. Alliances of convenience were forged between Myanmar's military authorities and the ex-CPB-turned-ethnic armies. In exchange for promises not to attack government forces, the UWSA and the three smaller groups as well were granted unofficial permission to engage in any kind of business to sustain themselves. Yangon also promised to launch a "border development programme" in the former CPB areas. With the collapse of the communist insurgency, several smaller ethnic rebel armies, lured by the same offers of unprecedented business opportunities, also gave in. The 2,000-strong Shan State Army (SSA), which for decades had waged war

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for autonomy for Shan State, made peace with Yangon on September 24, 1989. It was granted timber concessions in the Hsipaw area in northern Shan State, and trucks laden with logs were soon seen being driven across the border to China. The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) with 8,000 men in arms, once Myanmar's most powerful ethnic rebel army, made peace with the Myanmar military in October 1993 and signed a formal cease-fire agreement with Yangon in February 1994. As a result, hundreds of pro-democracy activists, who had fled to the KIA-controlled area in the north, surrendered in early July 1994.

On the Thai border, the pow-

Myanmar had turned against the regime, thousands of former insurgents thus rallied behind the ruling military. The threat from the border areas was thwarted, the regime was safe - but the consequences for the country, and the outside world, were disastrous. The term "business" in Myanmar's remote, northeastern border areas not only timber exports to China but also, inevitably, opium and heroin. The area under opium cultivation shot up from 92,300 hectares in 1987 to 161,012 in 1991 and, in 1993, to a peak of 165,800 hectares. Chemicals, mainly acetic anhydride, which is needed to convert raw opium into heroin, were brought in from across the Chinese border and by truck from

has the highest incident of HIV infection in India. In late 1999, more than 200 UWSA cadres arrived at the Myanmar border town of Tamu, opposite Moreh in Manipur, where they set up an unofficial "trade office" to market their drugs - and weapons from their own old stockpiles as well as newly acquired guns from China. The move from the Wa Hills to the Indian border - a distance of hundreds of kilometres through government-controlled areas - could not have happened without the tacit permission of Myanmar's central, military authorities. But now all that is supposed to become history. The cease-fire groups have been given an ultimatum: accept to

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erful Karen National Union and its armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army, split in late 1994 as the Buddhist rank and file of the Christian-led KNU broke away and formed the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). It did not enter into a formal cease-fire agreement with Yangon, but allied itself with the Myanmar military and launched attacks on the KNU. New Mon State Party along with its armed wing, the Mon National Liberation Army - also on the Thai border - made peace with Yangon in June 1995.

Ironically, at a time when almost the entire population of

India. Within a year of the mutiny, there were at least 17 new heroin refineries in Kokang alone, with more in the areas controlled by the UWSA and the NDAA(ESS). In recent years, the opium production has decreased significantly - but, instead, the UWSA and other former CPB forces have turned to producing vast quantities of synthetic drugs, mainly methamphetamines.

These new drugs as well as heroin were smuggled - and are still being smuggled - into Thailand, China and India. As a consequence, drug abuse is rife in Manipur, which borders Myanmar. The small state also

become Border Guard Forces and take part in the election, or face military action. To show that it means business, in August last year the Myanmar army moved into Kokang and deposed the leaders of the MNDAA. Shortly afterwards, a drug-burning show was put on in Yangon for the benefit of some visiting American government officials who had come to "engage" the junta in a naïve attempt to "nudge" them towards democracy. But Myanmar's officials failed to mention that the MNDAA, from whom the drugs had been "seized", had been an ally until it broke with the government in



A campaign in the north against the KIA could lead to a flood of refugees into India

August 2009. Until then, the Myanmar government had even praised the MNDA for its "drug-suppression" efforts. Such is the politics of drugs in Myanmar - and the authorities are now playing the drug card as well to solicit international support for action against their long-time ally, the UWSA. At the same time, there is a strong argument against taking military action: China. When Kokang was attacked, at least 30,000 people fled across the border to China. A war against the UWSA would produce even more refugees - and China wants stability on the border so as not to jeopardize its lucrative trade with Myanmar. The UWSA is also closely connected with Chinese security services, and if it were to be

placed under Myanmar command as a "Border Security Force", China would lose an important foothold inside the country, which it has had since the CPB first established a base area there in the late 1960s. Trade and other relations between China and Myanmar may be firm, but it is also obvious that Beijing does not want to put all its eggs in one basket. The fact that the UWSA has been able to buy rather sophisticated weaponry, including anti-aircraft artillery, from China proves this point. The UWSA's involvement in the drug trade evidently takes second place to strategic concerns in China's designs for the region. A campaign in the north against the KIA could lead to a flood of

refugees into India. More action on the Thai border would produce the same result even there - and there are already more than 200,000 Myanmar refugees in Thailand. Consequently, Myanmar's military has to weigh its options very carefully. Several of the cease-fire armies - including the UWSA and the KIA - are now preparing for war. China is watching developments across its southern border with utmost concern. The outcome of this imbroglio - and the ethnic conflicts that have been tearing Myanmar apart since independence - is going to be far more important for the future of the country than the showcase election that no one inside the country is taking seriously. ■