

Federalism (Myanmar): Suu Kyi Will Now Understand Her Mistakes: Karen National Union

“There is no guarantee people can safely flee into Thailand”

Thursday 8 April 2021, by [KNU](#), [Padoh Mahn Mahn](#), [The Irrawaddy](#) (Date first published: 6 April 2021).

The Karen National Union (KNU) is one of the ethnic armed organizations that has attacked Myanmar’s military since its February coup.

KNU Brigade 5 has seized two military outposts in Papun District in Karen State and blocked food deliveries to military troops based in Papun, prompting the military to carry out airstrikes, which killed several people and forced thousands to flee their homes.

Besides military action, the KNU is negotiating with the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (National Parliament), the CRPH, a body representing elected National League for Democracy (NLD) MPs, to discuss establishing a federal union.

KNU Brigade 5 spokesman Padoh Mahn Mahn told The Irrawaddy about the situation in Papun and the KNU’s talks with the CRPH.

How is the fighting between the military and KNU Brigade 5? Was there further bombing?

There were bombings from March 27 to 31. There has not been bombing since April 1. But it is not yet safe and there is still air reconnaissance.

We have seen a unilateral ceasefire announcement by the military council. It has stopped attacking perhaps because of its ceasefire. Perhaps, they are making preparations, citing a ceasefire.

How are the displaced coping?

The villagers dare not return home. Some of them fled to the Thai border but the majority are hiding in caves and forests to avoid further bombing. Some are in Thai forests and are struggling to find food and shelter.

At first, we heard the authorities in Mae Hong Son province prepared for the refugees. How is the situation on the ground?

First they said they made preparations in various places but when our people began to appear, they turned them back. There is no guarantee people can safely flee into Thailand.

Did the airstrikes deliberately target Karen villagers?

All the people who were killed or injured are villagers. All the buildings damaged are inside villages.

We can say that the military targets civilians. This has never changed since the very beginning. They attack Karen fighters but they never spare villagers. Everyone has seen that they have brutally killed unarmed civilians even in cities which are not conflict zones. Such bombing is common to us.

What is your view on the CRPH federal democracy charter? Did Brigade 5 participate in drafting the charter?

They consulted the KNU as a whole rather than Brigade 5. Since they started drafting the charter, the KNU participated as an armed revolutionary organization. The KNU central committee leaders participated in the process.

The CRPH talked about establishing a federal army with ethnic armed organizations? What are the chances of that?

We don't see clear principles about a federal army in the charter. But we can see they will establish defense forces. On our participation in any proposed army, ethnic groups already fight for their autonomy. So we will continue to defend our land.

While the CRPH has issued the federal democracy charter, it has also scrapped the 2008 Constitution. We welcome that. We are satisfied to an extent with the charter to establish a federal union.

However, there is a question about how to overcome obstacles in the process of implementing the charter.

Do you mean many things remain to be done to establish a federal army?

The armed organizations have political backgrounds, clear political objectives and territories. It would be pragmatic to establish a federal army based on the existing ethnic armed organizations.

We have to defend and repulse the injustice and violence of the military council. A federal army can be established either by adopting a new constitution or based on existing armed organizations.

We heard that ethnic groups are concerned the CRPH will renege on commitments if Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is released? Is that the case?

Many expected Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to amend the 2008 Constitution. But there was no tangible progress after five years. What's worse, the NLD only looked to get along with the military. It did not just ignore ethnic armed organizations but adopted policies to suppress them. These things still haunt us.

However, under the current political landscape, if the CRPH is totally committed to implementing a federal charter, we have nothing to worry about. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi might now understand that she was wrong to think she could change the military and that her national reconciliation efforts have failed. Though we have reasons to be concerned, we assume that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi understands this now.

The Irrawaddy

P.S.

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<https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/interview/suu-kyi-will-now-understand-mistakes-karen-national-union.html>