

# INSURGENCY OF NARCO-DIPLOMACY IN NORTHERN MYANMAR: AN EMERGING GLOBAL THREAT

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## ABSTRACT

*The highlands between the trijunction of India-Myanmar-China and India-Myanmar-Bangladesh have huge ungoverned space. The region is home to several insurgent groups. The jade mines of Kachin state and the drug economy of the neighbouring Shan state in Myanmar, fuels the protracted insurgency. Recent military takeover in Myanmar complicates the situation further with the different groups sharing competing and conflicting interest vis-à-vis military junta. This paper looks at the operations of different insurgent groups in Northern Myanmar, particularly in Kachin state. The paper further recommends to closely watch the groups outside the umbrella of ceasefire with the government of India.*

**Keywords:** EAOs (Ethnic Armed Organizations), Insurgency, Kachin, Kaladan, Manipur, Nagaland, Rakhine, Shan, ULFA, Walong, yaba pills.

## INTRODUCTION

The Christian Kachins reside in the north of Myanmar sharing borders with India at the trijunction at Walong, where China's border also meet. For fifty years the Kachin guerrillas are fighting against the Myanmar army in a war of attrition, with no peace in sight. In the geopolitical chessboard of South East Asia, Kachin, a landlocked state, is sandwiched between two Asian heavy- weight nations, India and China, often with shifting alliances. Myitkyina straddles the Ledo road that connects the Indian town of Ledo, in Assam with Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province of China.

The formation of KIO (Kachin Independence Organization) in 1960, is the brainchild of ZauSeng and LamungTu Jai. But the credit for creating the political movement and eventually the Kachin insurgency goes to Kachin war hero NawSeng, who was in China since the year 1951. ZauSeng took guidance from NawSeng in exile.

For his services in routing the Japanese by British Gen Slim's Fourteenth Army, the Northern Kachin Levies (NKL) of whose officer NawSeng was, awarded the Burma Gallantry

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medal twice. In January, 1945 . the British formed the 1st Kachin Rifles after the war out of the soldiers of the NKL .

It was a difficult time for the nascent Burnese state after the British left the country on January 4, 1948, with the formation of Karen National Union and the KNDO(Karen National Defence Organization) in April of the previous year. The assassination of Aung San( July 19, 1947) who negotiated the transfer of power from Britain to independent Burma even before independence, was bad news for the hill tribes of Burma.U Nu succeeded Aung San as the first Prime Minister of Burma. The Karen commander of Burma Army, Gen Smith Dun was replaced by Ne Win as Commander-in-Chief. The removal of the Karen Army Chief and the subsequent riots in which the predominantly Karens dominated; the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions became restive as Burmans began to attack Karen settlements in the delta region of Burma. Two of the battalions revolted, but Ne Win and his loyal 4<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifles put the revolt down in the suburbs of Rangoon.The revolt also made the other hill tribes uneasy.

On February 16, 1949 Captain NawSeng of 1st Kachin Rifles took his entire battalion and joined forces with the 1st Karen Rifles. But the combined Karen and Kachin forces were defeated near Meiktila by April 1949. By the year 1960, Burmese government under U Nu could stabilize the country, and NawSeng withdrew to the hills north of Hsenwi, in northern Shan state.

### **Kachin Independence Army (KIA)**

Founded on February 5, 1961 the KIA was the handiwork of three brothers-ZauSeng, ZauTu and Zau Dan. The Kachins consist of six groups: Jinghpaw, Lachid, Lhaoovo, Lisu, Rawang and Zaiwa. The Jinghpaw dominates the social and cultural life, and the nationalist elements of the Kachin society. The NDA-K was formed in 1989 and it became a BGF (Border Guarding Force) under Zankhung Ting Ying, who engineered the first split of KIO in 1968 to join the BCP (Burma Communist Party). The NDA-K was finally dissolved in 2009, which during its BGF role profited from the cross-border timber trade at Kambaiti and Pangwa, the group's base area. But the fissure within KIA developed as the second group emerged. It was based in Shan State. The 4th Brigade led by MahtuNaw was founded in 1990.The ousting of KIA camps near Indian border by Tatmadaw (Myanmar Army) in 1992, led BrangSeng to sue for peace in the year 1994.The first ceasefire was inked. Tatmadaw formed a militia from the 4th Brigade of KIA that is located in the Shan state and it is better known as Kaungkha militia. With the Rawangs, who are residents of Putao and Nawngmun towards the Arunachal Pradesh border, in the year 2011, the Tatmadaw formed an EAO (Ethnic Armed Group) known as Rebellion Resistance Force (now known as People's Militia Force). The group is based in Khaunglanphu, and used as a counter-weight to the KIA in Kachin state. Similar groups of Lisu sprang up in Myitkyina that were supporting the Tatmadaw's offensive against the KIA in the year 2016 and clearly shows which side the wind is blowing in the Kachin state.

In the 1960s, KIA gave access to Naga and Mizo rebels through its territory. The Naga and Mizo militancy peaked due to the ideologically motivated foreign- returned insurgents.

Since the year 1988, the KIO came closer to New Delhi.The ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) and NSCN-IM (National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isaac Muivah)was

denied sanctuary soon after rapprochement, that resulted in Indian Army to launch Ops Bajrang in Assam in November 1990. Subsequently Ops Rhino was launched in September 1991 that dismantled the ULFA from their bases close to Myanmar border, as well as in Arunachal Pradesh.

KIA is with the Northern Alliance of UWSA (United Wa State Army), MNDA (Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army), TNLA (Ta-ang National Liberation Army), NDA (National Democratic Alliance Army) and Arakan Army. Out of this alliance all the EAO are from Shan State, but Arakan Army is from Rakhine State, which lies in the coastal Myanmar, near India's Mizoram.

All the Shan State EAOs are heavily invested in the drug trade, with UWSA being the most important. UWSA has a large standing army too. In 1984, the KIO had banned opium poppy cultivation in Kachin State. Increasing political pressure on KIO to accept the BGF proposal was the reason of the breakdown of the 17-year old ceasefire. As KIA came under pressure, it supported the formation of new armed groups-the TNLA (Ta-ang National Liberation Army) and Arakan Army equipping and training them in Laiza since 2009. These groups increased conflict in northern Shan State, aligning with like-minded armed groups. Similar pressure tactics was put on MNDA in Laukkaing, the capital of Kokang, famous for its notorious casinos on the Chinese border, with an attack in August 2009. Later, the MNDA chief Peng Jia Sheng fled to China.

### **New Conflict Situation in Kachin State**

The Tatmadaw broke the ceasefire with KIA. Later, a truce was implemented that saw peace from 1994 for seventeen long years. The current flare up of conflict is part of the recent political developments in Myanmar from February 2021. The centre of the unfolding clash is the Hpakant jade mines, between Tatmadaw and KIA, with other EAOs fishing in between. If the Kachin timber and jade is out of bounds for Tatmadaw and their intermediaries like UWSA and AA from Myitkyina, northern Kachin areas and Hpakant, it will sap at the very base of the financial interest of Myanmar army.

Since February 1, 2021 when Myanmar military junta organized another coup, from March onwards the KIA stepped up attack on military positions that are aimed at stopping the jade mining in the Kachin state. This area denial attacks by KIA will seriously affect the jade trade that profits both the state and the KIA.

Just like KIA trained ULFA in 1980, it has trained the Bisheswar Singh-led PLA (People's Liberation Army) of Manipur in 1985. PLA surfaced as a secessionist organization in 1978. The PLA is in the spotlight with the ghastly ambush on an Assam Rifles convoy on November 13, 2021 in which the life of Col Viplav Tripathi, the Commanding Officer of 46 Assam Rifles, his wife, son and five other soldiers were lost. The incident happened in the Indian state of Manipur at Sekhan village of Churachandpur district. The place of incidence is close to Chin Hills of Myanmar.

Indian border with Myanmar is 1643- km long that begins at Walong, in Arunachal Pradesh in the north at the trijunction of India, China and Myanmar's Kachin state. The border

ends at Parva in Lawngtlai district of Mizoram state, at the trijunction of India, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Through this lightly manned border, insurgents groups of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland trained by KIA ingress through Kachin, Sagaing, Chin and Rakhine state of Myanmar to India. From the 1960s to late 1980s these groups fought low-intensity warfare with Indian security forces. Ceasefire between governments of India with NSCN-IM in 1997, brought peace to Nagaland state. Nagaland shares international borders with Myanmar.

The two-decade old Mizoram insurgency of MNF (Mizo National Front) ended in the year 1986. Manipur state, sharing borders with Sagaing and Chin state of Myanmar, has groups like PLA, which are still not onboard for the ceasefire with the Indian government. The beginning of 2014 saw Arakan Army operating from Chin state from their northern bases close to Chinese border, complicating the drug and insurgent activities in Manipur. The Arakan Army then started to target the Kaladan Multi-Modal Project, an Indian strategic interests in Rakhine province. Rakhine is incidentally the home turf of Arakan Army. Recently Arakan Army extended their support to the junta like UWSA, SSPP (Shan State Progressive Party) political party of SSA-N (Shan State Army-North).

With the KIA and the Kachin insurgency beginning to bare its fangs once again, with the junta government in power, the KIO has voiced their opposition to the junta takeover from the civilian democratically elected government. Their opposition resonates with the Bamar public opinion in the Irrawaddy delta. But that does not change the dynamics of the Kachin conflict. And like the other EAOs of the Northern Alliance it is not any richer with weapon as the UWSA or AA secures from their patrons, that includes Manpads (surface to air missiles) to name a few.

## **CONCLUSION**

Between the jade mines of Kachin state and the drug economy of the neighbouring Shan state's Golden Triangle in Myanmar, the protracted insurgencies continue to thrive. Both the state and EAOs (Ethnic Armed Organizations) are locked in a vortex of conflict, with the state responding by forming militias to control the EAOs. One such militia is KDA or Kaungkha militia, based in Shan state that is involved in drug trade with supplylines to Manipur state in North East India. The Kaungkha militia is supplying meth or yaba pills to Arakan Army, that is swarming the NEI (North East India) and Bangladesh with tablet methamphetamine. During the past decades of 1970s and 1980s, it was Kachins who shaped the future guerrilla armies of North East India (NEI). Currently, the Kachin militias form the backbone of Tatmadaw and its war with EAOs. The new found official identity has given the militias much needed impunity to indulge in drug trafficking. The cost of Myanmar's low-intensity war against the Kachins and Shan insurgents, both of which have interest in jade and drugs respectively, presents NEI with a security conundrum, as the latest Churachandpur ambush by PLA shows.

The EAOs like UWSA, AA, MNDAA, NDAA use the ceasefire with the state and forge alliance with government militias like Kaungkha, to keep the informal drug economy running into billion of dollars. Therfater ethnic insurgents fund their standing armies out of the booming meth trade of which Myanmar, is largest producer in the world. The yaba pills and heroin are

pouring into North East India. The militant groups both across the spectrum, in ceasefire or in conflict mode, benefit by the drug trade, like the Shan State groups.

The Kachin and Shan State imbroglio in northern Myanmar presents not just a security threat to India but it is a global threat. The EAOs are hand-in-glove with mafia organizations like Sam Gor or Chinese triads who are trafficking meth and precursor chemicals to Amsterdam and New Mexico. Militias like Kaungkha, are producing methyl fentanyl, which is many times lethal than heroin, that is eventually finding its way to the US.

The no-holds-barred approach by the State as far as these EAOs, BGF and militias are concerned is creating a global threat to democracy.