

Burma Holds Peace Conference

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In what many observers hope could be a step toward ending Burma's six-decade long, low-grade civil war and establishing a process eventually leading to reconciliation and possibly the formation of a democratic federated state, over 1,400 representatives of ethnic political parties, ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), the government in Naypyitaw and its military (Tatmadaw), and other concerned parties attended a peace conference in Naypyitaw, Burma, on August 31–September 3, 2016. Convened by Aung San Suu Kyi, State Counsellor for the government in Naypyitaw, the conference was called the "21st Century Panglong Peace Conference," a reference to a similar event convened by Aung San Suu Kyi's father, General Aung San, in 1947 that led to the creation of the independent state of Burma.

Aung San Suu Kyi stated that she had hoped the conference would be an initial gathering of all concerned parties to share views for the future of a post-conflict Burma. Progress at the conference appeared to be hampered by the Tatmadaw's objection to inviting three EAOs to the conference, and two other ethnic organizations downgrading their participation. In addition, differences over protocol matters during the conference were perceived by some EAO representatives as deliberate disrespect on the part of the organizers. Statements presented by Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and representatives of several EAOs, moreover, indicated a serious gap in their visions of a democratic federated state of Burma and the path to achieving that goal.

Differing Visions of the Future

Most of the conference consisted of representatives of over 70 different organizations presenting their views on how to achieve peace in Burma. [Aung San Suu Kyi began the conference with a speech](#) calling on all parties to "work together, with mutual understanding and trust, to seek solutions." [Senior General Min Aung Hlaing reiterated the Tatmadaw's insistence](#) on adherence to its "[six-point peace policy](#)" that require the EAOs to accept the 2008 constitution and disarm their militias. Several EAO representatives rejected the Commander-in-Chief's speech, and focused on the need to form a federated state in which the ethnic groups coexist as equals.

Pre-conference Complications

Efforts to organize the conference were dogged by differing views among key players in the peace process on who should attend and what should be discussed. In addition, a few days before the conference was to begin, the Tatmadaw reportedly attacked two of the ethnic militias, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Shan State Army-North

(SSA-N), raising questions about the Tatmadaw's support for national reconciliation. According to the KIA, [Burmese Army forces including two helicopters](#) struck a KIA outpost on August 23, 2016. [Tatmadaw soldiers reportedly launched an offensive against the SSA-N](#) on August 29, 2016. Episodic fighting between the Tatmadaw and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) has been reported throughout 2016.

Aung San Suu Kyi had sought to make the conference as inclusive as possible, particularly with respect to the EAOs. The Tatmadaw, however, [set preconditions](#) (including eventual disarmament) for the participation of three of the EAOs—the Arakan Army (AA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the TNLA—that the three EAOs rejected. As a result, the three EAOs were not invited. The Chairman of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), Khun Tun Oo, [decided not to attend the conference](#) because of the exclusion of the three EAOs. The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) announced it would attend the conference, but only as observers, possibly to protest the exclusion of the three EAOs and the recent attacks on KIA positions by the Tatmadaw. In addition, some of the ethnic-based political parties [refused to attend the peace conference](#) because of the limited number of participants they were allowed.

Planning the conference was also problematic. Aung San Suu Kyi has continued to use a framework established by the partial ceasefire agreement signed 2015, which created the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee (UPDJC), consisting of representatives of the government in Naypyitaw, the Tatmadaw, the seven EAOs that signed the ceasefire agreement, and selected political parties. The UPDJC pressed for a conference agenda focused on getting the other EAOs to sign the ceasefire agreement and abide by its process for national reconciliation. A coalition of some of the non-signatory EAOs, the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), rejects the 2008 constitution and pushed for the conference to focus on the governance structure of a new federated state in Burma. On May 31, 2016, the government in Naypyitaw created a joint conference preparatory committee with representatives of both the signatory and non-signatory EAOs to negotiate the conference agenda, but other interested parties—particularly ethnic-based political parties—objected to their exclusion from the committee.

Problems During the Conference

On the first day of the conference, the [United Wa State Army \(UWSA\) delegation walked out](#) after its representatives were provided badges identifying them as "observers" rather than as "delegates" to the conference. Although the conference organizers said the incorrect badges were an administrative error, the UWSA refused to attend the conference. In addition, nametags for delegates representing the ethnic militias did not denote their rank, while nametags for the Tatmadaw did. Some militias' officers said they perceived the nametag differences as an intentional disrespectful act by the conference organizers.

Implications for U.S. Policy in Burma

Prior to the conference, [U.S. Ambassador to Burma Scott Marciel said](#), "We hope the meeting will be a milestone in Myanmar's efforts to achieve a durable peace, national reconciliation, and a democratic federal Union." The Obama Administration has not released a post-conference comment.

The conference was notable for its ability to bring together most—but not all—of the important organizations that will affect Burma's ability to achieve a lasting peace. Nevertheless, the exclusion of some parties and the major differences of opinion on how to end the nation's civil war would indicate that progress toward peace will likely be difficult and slow. As a result, Congress may consider what role, if any, the U.S. government should play in fostering peace in Burma.