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Myanmar: Government's Peace Offensive with Arakan Army:

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In the midst of intensive and heavy fighting between Myanmar Army(Tatmadaw) and the Arakan Army, Suu Kyi's Government is making efforts in tandem to secure peace and stability in Rakhine Province. But one cannot fight with one hand and try to shake hands with the other. This is what is happening in Rakhine State in a new front that has opened in the West in Myanmar.

It all started on March 12, when the Myanmar Army had heavy casualties with the Arakan Army in an encounter near Paletwa earlier. Zaw Htay, a Spokesman of President's Office told the Press that the Arakan Army is welcome to sign the Government's National Cease-fire Agreement even though the Government had excluded the Group from inking the agreement in the past.

Zaw Htay added that the Government and the Army have reviewed the situation in Rakhine State and have concluded that cease-fire and peace are necessary. It was indeed a great discovery when the Arakan Army was specifically excluded from the four months ceasefire unilaterally ordered by the Army followed by diversion of additional troops to that area after the announcement of the cease-fire.

Zaw Htay also added that the Myanmar Peace Commission led by Gen. Khin Zaw Oo had also held the same view.

The response from the Arakan Army was quick. Its Spokesman Khine Thu Kha said that the Government is not sincere and does not want talks. He added that it is impossible to hold talks when they wield a stick!

Three days later, a bigger surprise was to follow. The NRPC (National Reconciliation & Peace Centre that is led by Suu Kyi herself, issued invitations to eight of the groups that have not signed the National Cease-fire Agreement (NCA). Of these eight, seven belong to the China

backed and UWSP led Federal Political Negotiation & Consultative Committee which had all along pushed for an alternative narrative to the Peace Process. The Only other member is the KNPP which had suspended its participation in the Peace Process. This includes the Arakan Army and its Political Wing ULA (United League of Arakan) that had been excluded all the while with the tacit support of China.

The invitation from the NRPC said that the Groups should send two Representatives each and the NRPC will be holding talks with the group collectively on March 21. It is significant that the Government has finally agreed to deal with them collectively. In contrast, the invitation said that the Army's Negotiating Team will meet the individual Groups the next day if they so desired.

The response from the Arakan Army is yet to be received and their Representative said that they would decide in a day or two. Surely the AA should not miss this opportunity to put forth its agenda and see the reaction of the Government and the Army.

Separately the same day, the Government announced a new committee specially tasked to bring stability to Rakhine State. It would consist of 14 members and would directly report to the President's Office. It will be headed by the Deputy Speaker of Union Parliament U Aye Tha Aung and two deputies, all ethnic Arakanese. The ANP will also have a member. The ANP is said to have been not consulted in including it or in choosing its representative!

There is no doubt that the Government is concerned about the deteriorating law and order situation in Rakhine State with the Arakan Army inflicting heavy casualties on the Army.

While no word is forthcoming from the Army Sources on the nature of fighting and casualties, the Arakan Army websites have detailed accounts of the fighting that is going on the Arakan area. There has been heavy fighting since the beginning of this month. On 11th March the Arakan Army announced that it had captured 11 soldiers of the 564 Light Infantry Battalion of 5th Division when they overran a strategic hill controlled by the Government soldiers near Pyan So Village, Paletwa's Pee Chaung area. A large quantity of arms and other equipment have been captured.

Earlier on March 9, 2019 Nine Police Officers have been killed in an attack on a Police Post in Yoetayoke village in Paletw's Ponnagyun Township. Hundreds of civilians have fled their homes. In retaliation the Army is said to be using Helicopter Gun ships and Artillery in pounding the AA positions. Though not confirmed, it is said the the Indian Army as a quid pro quo attacked three of Arakan Army Posts in Chintuipui district of Mizoram. The Burmese Army had completely dismantled the NSCN Khaplang Group's bases near the Taga River. The ULFA post was also attacked and there were some casualties to ULFA also. It remains to be seen what ULFA will do. Will they go north and seek protection from the Chinese authorities?

From the foregoing a few things are clear.

1. There has been very intensive and heavy fighting between the Myanmar Army and the Arakan Army Insurgents, causing casualties on both sides, resulting in exodus of civilians. Some may have also come into India.
2. The Government, led by Suu Kyi which had ordered the Myanmar Army to go after the AA insurgents, now feels that the situation may soon go out of hand and something has to be done to get round the Arakan Army Leaders to talk.
3. The Myanmar Army is not yet seen to be convinced of the critical nature of the situation and want to continue the fight with the Arakan Army to the finish. This needs to change.
4. India should be concerned with the escalation in fighting with the danger of the war spilling into Indian territory. If Indian media is to be believed, the Indian Army had to attack offensive action against an Arakan Army base inside India - an outfit that is supported by over 95 percent of population of the Rakhine State. Here is the dilemma for India.

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