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Myanmar: Peace talks with Non-Signatories of NCA by the Government Fail:

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The much-hyped peace talks with the non-signatories of the National Cease-Fire agreement ended in failure thanks to the rigid stand of the Government.

It was thought that the Government of Myanmar having realized the futility of putting down the Arakan Army militarily made the first reconciliatory move to rope in the AA for talks along with six other non-signatories and talk to them as a group. The door was kept open for the representatives of the organisations to talk to the Army also individually with the groups the next day. It was also known that the talks had the full backing of China though left to themselves the Chinese would have avoided inviting the Arakan Army whose operations are in the western theatre far away from the Chinese border but close to the Indian border.

It was therefore not a surprise that Chinese had pressured the KIA not to support the Arakan Army any way and would like to it to be crushed if it was possible! The idea appears to be not to provide strategic space to India in Myanmar. But the surprise was that the Government took a very confrontational and an aggressive stand against the Arakan Army in the talks.

In the meeting on 21st March, the Peace Negotiators of the Government failed to agree on a proposal to allow the Arakan Army to establish a base in Rakhine region.

U Tin Myo Win, the Deputy Chairman of National Reconciliation and Peace Committee said that the Government will continue to take measures to prevent the Arakan Army to establish a base in Rakhine.

U Zaw Htay, the Director general of State Counsellor's Office maintained that they would continue to take the responsibility for security of Rakhine State and *suppress* any armed group that wants to establish a base in Rakhine. He tried to justify this hard stance claiming that the main issue is that they do not want to make the people suffer and therefore the Government will carry out necessary action.

If this was the objective, intensifying the military operations against the AA and shelling and strafing the villages in the Rakhine area will not help as the conflict has already given rise over 20000 internally displaced persons. Even the ancient capital with sacred Buddhist monuments in the town of Mrauk U has not been spared.

The town of Mrauk U is an architecturally important town in the Northern Rakhine State. It was the capital of Mrauk U kingdom from 1430 to 1785. Important sites include Shite-thaung temple- a temple of 80000 Buddhas, Andaw thein temple, Koe Kaung temple with 90,000 Buddha images and an archeological museum all in the nearby areas of the township.

On 18th the civilians in Mrauk U complained that soldiers in vehicles in the town started firing indiscriminately as they moved round the town.

The Army resorted to shelling the village Ywan Haung Taw and there were airstrikes close to Myelon village.

The Ta'ang National Liberation Army a smaller group allied to the AA and a part of the Northern Alliance called on the military to end its operations and targeting Arakanese civilians. It warned that other armies allied to them will enter the fight on AA's behalf. A joint statement was also issued on 19th accusing the Myanmar Government and the Army targeting civilians and attacking the Pagodas.

What we see now is that the Army with full support of the Government is trying to put down the Arakan Army with a heavy hand and in quick time. But it looks that it may not be that easy. It is likely to be a long haul, undermining the country's move towards democracy.

Myanmar's media reports indicate that the Myanmar Army in coordination with the Indian Army had eliminated around twelve posts of Arakan Army near the border. The operation was ostensibly to protect the Kaladan Multi Modal Project being built by India for reaching Mizoram through Sittwe. Will the intensification of conflict in the Sittwe-Paletwa region bring in stability and Peace and secure the project? One cannot be sure.

It is also hinted that in return, the Myanmar army has dismantled the camps of Khaplang faction of NSCN as well as other Indian Insurgent Groups operating from Myanmar around the Taga river. There has been no response from AA either denying or confirming this news and if it has happened it will raise the level of conflict by another notch in the stability of Sittwe- Paletw region.

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