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## Myanmar: Fighting in Northern Rakhine: AA is getting Unbeatable:

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Tue, 03/24/2020 - 14:38

**Paper No. 6552    Dated 24 - Mar- 2020**

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Fighting in Northern Myanmar between the Myanmar Armed Forces and the Arakan Army has of late intensified and the Myanmar Army despite having more than 20,000 Soldiers in the area is certainly not winning.

If the latest incident of March 10 and 11 in the area near the Kyanktaw township is any indication, there is a full scale civil war going on in the State. The Arakan Army appears to be fully informed of the movement of the Myanmar Armed Force deployment while the Army on the other hand appears to have poor intelligence on the movement of the Arakan Army.

It all started with the Myanmar Army trying to insert a large contingent of the Army (Para troopers?) for reenforcing the Mee-wa hill top, a strategically located outpost in the Paletwa township of Chin State.

The newly arrived troops were outnumbered by the Arakan Army who perhaps had advance information and the result was a major disaster for the Army with 20 killed and 38 including Officers taken prisoners. This included the Battalion commander of 7th Bn. of 77th infantry division and many officers including captains and medical officers. Of those captured four were said to be in a critical condition and the Arakan Army Spokesman Klaing Thuka has called on the Army to take back the four critically injured Soldiers and provide them medical facilities that are not available with the Arakan Army.

The first point of interest is that the fighting between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar Army is no longer restricted to Northern Rakhine but has spread to the Chin State where Paletwa is located and where the major Indian aided Kaladan Multi Modal Project that was expected to open up India's East is located.

There are indications that the fighting may spread further south thus coming uncomfortably close to the Chinese aided projects, their gas pipe line including their star project Kyaukphyu Port Project. While Indian projects have been affected, so far no Chinese aided project or worker has been targeted.

This brings us to two interesting articles in the media one by Anthony Davis in Asia Times and another by Yun Sun of Brookings Institution.

The article by Anthony Davis titled “Myanmar- War Killing India’s Act East Dream, said that the “struggle for Paletwa has suspended indefinitely a key leg of India’s vision for eastward economic connectivity and efforts to counter balance China’s expanding influence” and ended with the statement that India’s much touted geo-strategic counterbalance is stalled by civil war and bureaucratic lethargy

To me the Indian projects in east Myanmar were in no way intended to counter balance the Chinese efforts to open up to the Indian Ocean but to develop India’s northeast particularly the Mizoram State.

Ever since the major fighting that erupted in January 2019, we have in our site cautioned about the fighting affecting the Indian projects. Our papers 6553, 6497 and 6424 (6484) may be referred to. We had pointed out that Twan Mrat Naing the chief of the Arakan Army had declared during the 30th anniversary celebration of Wa State in Pangshang that they will not disrupt the development projects that included Indian Aided Project like the Kaladan Project.. There were indications that they were in touch with the Indian authorities.

There appeared to be no serious development except for an odd incident of destruction of bridge materials meant for the Indian Kaladan project in the middle of last year. But this changed when in the third week of November a boat carrying Indian Project personnel, ten of them including four Indians was stopped and taken away by the Arakan Army militants. Of those four Indian Personnel who were marched to a hideout, one by name Vinoo Gopal died.

The AA returned the dead body and also the three Indians kidnapped. The AA Spokesman Khaing Thukka declared that they did not target the Indians and that they were not aware of the presence of the Indians in the boat. There are however reports to indicate that the AA rebels are indulging in extortion from Indian Fabricators working on the Kaladan Project.

Unfortunately, the Indian media in the North East, had given the impression that the Indian Security Forces are jointly fighting the Arakan Army rebels. In the paper 6497, we had referred to an Indian media report that the Arakan Army had set up several camps across Mizoram’s Lawingtala district- a report that is suspected to be a fake one. Reports as recently as February in the Indian media said that over 10,000 Indian Army security forces are deployed along the Rakhine State border giving the impression that they are to jointly fight the AA. While these reports do not appear to be true, it gives the impression that India is against the Arakan Army. The Security forces are deployed mainly to prevent the fighting from spilling over into Indian territory and prevent civilian refugees from crossing over. Already a

large number of refugees have crossed over.

With the fighting having escalated and the Arakan Army firmly entrenched in the Rakhine State it is in Indian interest and Indian projects that a cease fire takes place as soon as possible. The stand of the Myanmar Army that only when the Arakan Army Regulars return to their Headquarters in Laiza in Kachin Territory will consider the question of cease fire is unrealistic and will never be acceptable to the Arakan Army either.

It is interesting that the Chinese have not pressed Myanmar for a cease-fire with the Arakan Army, although it is part of the Northern Alliance consisting of KIA, TNLA, MNDAA and the AA. But the Chinese Representative for dealing with the insurgents Su Guo liang had repeatedly pressed the Myanmar- Army to have a cease fire with the three groups only and not the AA. We suspect that it is because the AA is fighting far away from the Chinese border and more in the area where India is operating the Kaladan Multi modal project. But the situation may soon change when the fighting is likely to get intensified in southern Rakhine State also where the Chinese are active with their prestigious Belt Road Initiative Projects. So far no Chinese project has been touched!

It is in this connection that one should read the report of Yun Sun of Brooking Institution who raises the question whether China could stop the fighting in Rakhine State and comes to the conclusion that China is in no position to force the Arakan Army to stop fighting.

She concedes that Arakan Army is part of the Northern Alliance where the other three are proxies of China as also the more powerful FPNCC the Chinese proxy led by the United Wa Group that has a totally different narrative on the cease fire process.

The reasons given by Yun Sun for this conclusion were

1. Of Arakan Army's growing capability, battle field success and economic strength and it is no longer a small or a weak outfit.
2. Increasing popularity of the Arakan Army among the Rakhine People - the fundamental source of its legitimacy, strength and sustainability.
3. Public anger over long imprisonment of an activist Dr. Aye Maung for subversion for having accused the NLD Government of treating the Rakhine People like slaves.

But despite being supported and fostered by the KIA, the Arakan Army never appeared to be close to China and it has reached a stage where it is no longer dependent on China for its Arms. The KIA will be in position either to evict the AA from Laiza.

It is assessed that the Arakan Army can act independently (other partners have not come to its rescue either ) for at least next three years without outside help.

With the elections coming this year and in the interest of stability, security and prevention of further casualties a cease fire between the Myanmar Army and the Arakan Army is very necessary and should be insisted upon. India should work for it and should ensure that fake reports emanating from the North East are discounted at the earliest.

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