

Kachin Conflict and China's concerns

Janani Govindankutty, Project Associate, China Studies Centre, IITM

The ongoing Kachin conflict in Burma poses a challenge for China in managing its border regions. Since 1947, successive regimes in Burma have shared good relations with China, who now want Yangon to end the conflict. Though China has largely maintained a policy of “non-interference” in internal affairs of another country, its actions in the Kachin conflict portray a change in this position.

With resumption of hostilities between the Kachins and the Burmese army in June 2011, there has been a regular influx of refugees into China. The internally displaced Kachin people are forced to seek refuge in China due to lack of humanitarian aid and protection in their state. Apart from refugees, Burma's offensive has also resulted in ordnance landing in Chinese territory. This has continued despite the Chinese Foreign Ministry expressing its concern over the issue.

China is interested in ethnic reconciliation in Burma and has participated in the latest round of talks between the Burma government and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in Myitkyina. This effort is also indicative of China's efforts in building regional peace and stability. China has been involved in the peace-talks between the warring parties. It played a significant role in the Ruili talks held in February 2013. According to *Global Times*, a Chinese expert on Burma's northern affairs commented publicly that China carefully listened to the demands and conditions of both sides and actively mediated between them.

China has vital interests in ending the conflict in Burma. The Kachin region borders China's Yunnan Province and is its largest trading partner. Chinese corporations source raw materials from Burma. China can also gain access to the Indian ocean through Burma from Yunnan. China is involved in transporting crude oil from the Middle East or Africa through Burma via the Indian Ocean. A pipeline is being constructed for the same from Burma to Kunming, Yunnan province to meet China's increasing energy requirements. The pipeline through Burma would reduce China's dependency on the Straits of Malacca, which is risk prone. China has also invested in hydro-power projects in north-western Burma.

It is arguable that any coercive measures against the Kachins by China might provoke the Jingpo group in Yunnan Province leading to an internal security threat in Yunnan. Both the Kachins in Burma and Jingpo belong to the same ethnic group.

Though Burma is on the path of economic liberalization and development, the Kachin region has not benefitted due to the ongoing conflict. Lack of economic opportunities for the Kachins compels them to cross into China for survival. Citizens of Burma are allowed to get border passes, which allows them to stay in China for a year. The Kachins do not have access to border passes, which is a pre-requisite to enter China legally. Burma's immigration offices were closed down due to the conflict. Thus, Kachins cross the border as illegal migrants who cannot claim for privileges or rights in China. The Kachin migrants might assimilate into

Yunnan with the help of their brethren. However, it could lead to tensions between the locals and migrants over distribution of resources and employment opportunities in future.

The conflict has also resulted in human trafficking along the Sino-Burma border. According to a report by the Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT), young women and girls displaced by the conflict are sold to Chinese men or families as brides and bonded laborers. In most cases, the victims were drugged and raped before being sold. Despite the Burmese authorities setting up anti-trafficking forces, the situation has not changed. However, in certain cases according to the KWAT report, the Chinese authorities have helped the victims get back to their country. This is a significant development since last year when China had sent back many refugees to Burma. A joint mechanism to combat human trafficking in the border areas can be developed by both countries. It would be beneficial for Burma, which is in transition towards democracy, and also increase China's credibility in protection of human rights.

There is competition between the western powers and China in bringing peace to Burma. China has reworked its strategies towards Burma as the Thein Sein government has developed friendly relations with western powers. Hoping to gain leverage through diplomatic channels, China replaced its ambassador to Burma and also appointed its ex- Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yingfan as an envoy for Asian affairs earlier this year. The envoy's mandate is to solve the crisis in Burma. China's role as an effective mediator in the peace-process has reduced the differences between the conflicting parties; they are willing to finalize a cease-fire agreement and engage in political dialogue. China's sustained role as a mediator and observer could help in conflict resolution.

析