Resolving Internal Conflict in Myanmar:
A Human Security Approach

National security in Myanmar has always been equated with state security by the ruling military junta. However, the drive to protect the state has led to insecurities for its people. This paper argues that a comprehensive human security approach offers the best opportunity to address ethnic grievances, thereby resolving Myanmar's long-running internal conflict.

by Pau Khan Khup Hangzo

So Near, Yet So Far

On 10 May 2008, just one week after Cyclone Nargis tore through Myanmar's Irrawaddy Delta resulting in more than 100,000 deaths and leaving at least 1,000,000 others home-less, the ruling military junta, through the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), held a referendum on its new draft constitution. It was hoped that the SPDC would draft a constitution which would eventually resolve the long standing conflict in Myanmar. The SPDC claims that the new constitution will pave the way for a return to democratic rule with general elections due in 2010. The constitution was hastily ratified after it secured a 92.48 per cent 'yes' votes in the referendum. So, what does the new constitution actually offer to the citizens of Myanmar? Will it help resolve long-standing internal conflicts?

Certainly the new constitution does not offer the opportunity for a return to democracy. The generals have arrogated to themselves the leading political role. The commander-in-chief

of the armed forces is entitled to fill 110 seats in the 440-seat parliament with appointees from within the ranks of the armed forces. And in the event of a 'state of emergency', the commander in chief will assume full legislative, executive and judicial powers. Further, article 392 (d) of the constitution bars 'persons serving prison terms' from participating in future elections. Most individuals who contested the 1990 elections, including Aung San Suu Kyi would be prohibited from contesting future elections as they have or are presently serving time in prison as a result of their pro-democracy activities. Most importantly, the new constitution falls short in addressing the long-standing grievances of minority ethnic groups who desire equal political representation and autonomy. The new constitution, it seems, was meant to ensure that the military will remain the dominant power in Myanmar wherever the road map leads.

National Security Equals State Security

The military's steadfastness in holding onto the reins of power relates directly to its interpretation of national security. The regime's national security ideology equates the security of the state of Myanmar with that of the regime and the Tatmadaw (military). This ideology is a brand of state nationalism defined by the 'three national causes.' The three national causes are first, non-disintegration of the Union; second, non-disintegration of national solidarity; third, perpetuation of national sovereignty. The regime explicitly forewarns any potential challengers to its ideology by attempting to co-opt citizens to:

• Oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views;

• Oppose those trying to jeopardize stability of the State and progress of the nation;

• Oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State and

• Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy.

The regime believes that the concept of Tatmadaw embodies the nation's history, destiny and goals. It is intolerant of political pluralism which is viewed as damaging to national unity and therefore to national security. Such a single-minded approach to national security blinds the regime to the many grievances harboured by Myanmar's ethnic minorities. The failure of the regime to effectively address these grievances led to an armed revolt which was brutally crushed by the military in the name of protecting national security. Thus for ethnic minority groups, national security issues serve only as a smokescreen for oppression, perpetuating insecurity and untold misery.

National Security Equals Human Insecurity

The combination of prolonged internal conflicts, economic mismanagement, bad governance and poor state capacity perpetuated by the state-centric approach to national security has created human insecurity on a colossal scale.

Death Toll

The Political Economy Research Institute of the University of Massachusetts characterised the conflict in Burma as an 'Ethnic War' and puts its overall death toll from 1948 at more than 130,000. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), on the other hand estimates that between 1948 and 2006, more than 20,000 people died in the conflict involving Karen National Union (KNU) rebels and the government in the state of Karen.

Cross-Border Refugees

According to the Alternative Asean Network on Burma (ALTSEAN Burma), Myanmar is the world's third largest source of refugees after Afghanistan and Iraq. Between 1995 and 2005, the flow of refugees from Myanmar to its neighbours has increased between 48 per cent and 800 per cent. It is estimated that during the last 20 years, as many as 2,000,000 people from Myanmar have fled as a result of the military regime's widespread and systematic human rights abuses, military offensives as well as religious and ethnic persecution.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

ALTSEAN Burma estimates that the current number of IDPs within Myanmar is close to - or even exceeds – 1,000,000. As of November 2006, there were an estimated 500,000 IDPs in conflict areas bordering Thailand. IDPs are more vulnerable to poor health, diseases, violence, human trafficking, exploitative labour and have reduced access to health services, education and employment.

Child Soldiers

In 2002, Human Rights Watch reported that Myanmar has an estimated 70,000 child soldiers under the age of 18, the largest number in the world. According to the accounts of former soldiers interviewed by Human Rights Watch, 20 per cent or more of its active duty soldiers may be children under the age of 18. These children are often kidnapped without their parents' knowledge while on their way home from school.

Declining Expenditure on Public Welfare

According to the Human Development Report 2007/2008, Myanmar was ranked 132 out of 177 countries in the Human Development Index (HDI). Public expenditure on health as a percentage of total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2004 averages only 0.3 per cent. Not surprisingly, Myanmar has the second-highest rate of child mortality in Asia after Afghanistan. Between 100,000 to 150,000 children under the age of five die every year and most of the deaths are from preventable diseases. Spending on education between 2002 and 2005 is 1.3 per cent of GDP while research and development expenditure over the same period stood at 0.1 per cent.

In contrast, Myanmar allocated 33.33 per cent (USD 7 billion) of its GDP towards defence in 2008. This high rate of defence spending means that spending in other sectors vital to human development suffer, and is one of the reasons for declining expenditure in public welfare. Besides a low HDI score, Myanmar also scored low in other global indices.

Table 1 Myanmar's score in other global Indices

Particulars	Rank	Score	Year
Failed States Index 2008[i]	12 (out of 60 countries)	100.3	2008
Global Peace Index Ranking 2008[ii]	126 (out of 140 countries)	2.590	2008
Democracy Index 2008[iii]	163 (out of 167 countries)	1.77	2008

What Can We Conclude From This Observation?

Quite simply, the current approach to national security adopted by Myanmar's military re-

gime undermines the security of its people in general and those of ethnic minority groups in particular whose grievances are seen as threats to the state. The failure of the regime to recognise the sources of minority ethnic group's insecurities and grievances fuels the conflict which continues to this day.

Thus, any attempt at resolving the longstanding conflict in Myanmar must adopt a comprehensive approach to security designed to promote not only state security but human security as well. A human security approach to conflict resolution thus provides the best chance of leading Myanmar out of the bloody quagmire.

Human Security Approach to Resolving Internal Conflicts

The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Report 1994 is often regarded as a major challenge to traditional views of security. The attractiveness of the concept, as outlined in the report, lies in the fact that it is people centred and is concerned with the well being of individuals. As such, it defines human security as 'first, safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease and repression. And, second, it means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life - whether in homes, in jobs or in communities'. Threats to human security, according to the report, can be categorised under seven headings: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security and political security.

Thus the concept of human security can be used to analyse grievances associated with socio-economic, political, ethnic and cultural factors. Given that internal conflicts are not caused by a single factor, but an amalgamation of socio-economic, political and cultural factors, a comprehensive human security approach offers the best way to address the root causes of internal conflicts. It is in addressing the root causes of conflict that a more effective way of solving problems can be found and long-term security of not just individuals but of the state can be realized.

The framework presented in Figure 1 (page five) attempts to explain how human security can be used as a means to resolve conflict. It considers only four elements of human security which are more salient in the case of Myanmar, i.e. community, economic, political and personal security.
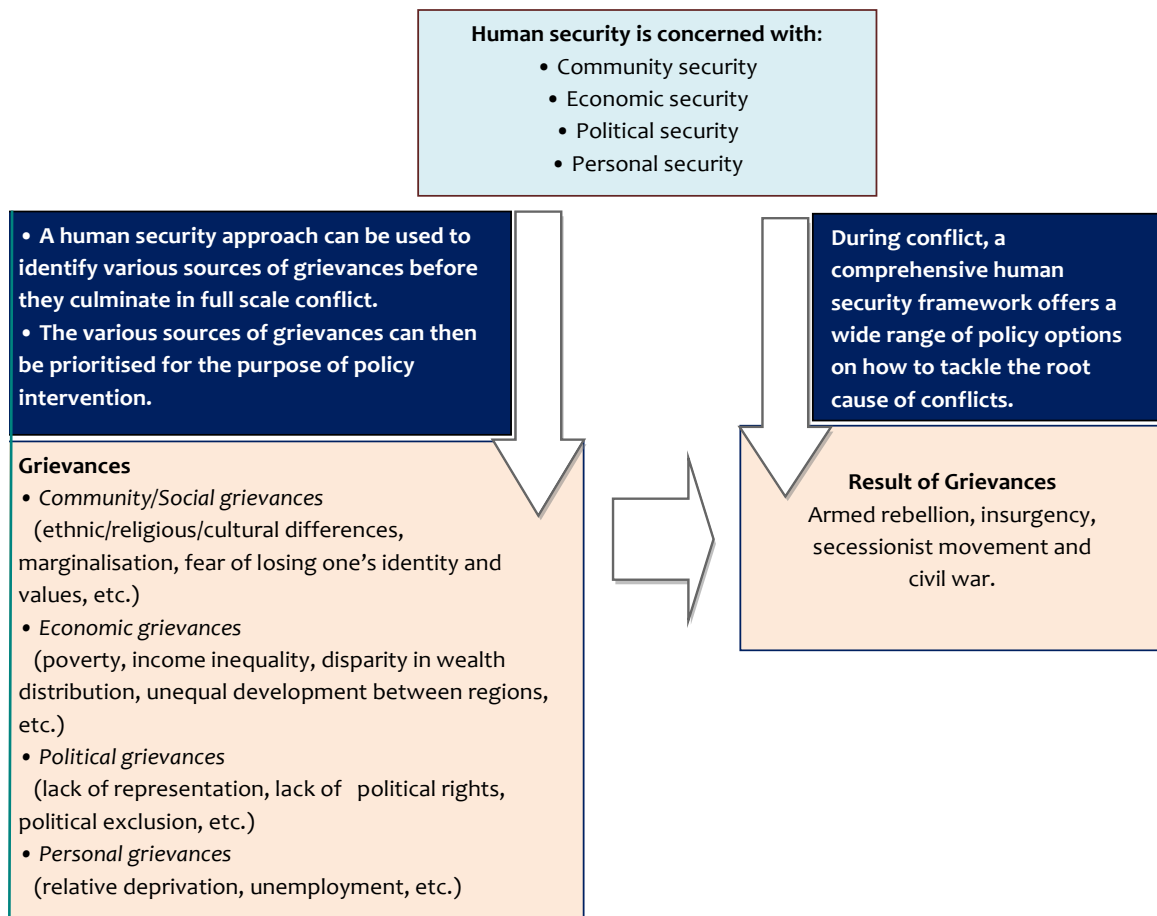
Resolving Conflict in Myanmar: The Human Security Approach

Human security approaches allow us to look at the conflict in Myanmar not from the perspective of the state but from the perspective of the aggrieved parties. It also helps us to identify the sources of grievances which eventually lead to conflict.

From the perspective of the ethnic minorities, the unresolved question of genuine political representation lies at the heart of conflict in Myanmar. During negotiations over the terms of independence, ethnic minority leaders demanded that certain rights be guaranteed before they would agree to join the proposed Union of Burma. A historic meeting was held at Panglong in Shan State on 12 February 1947, where the leader of the Burmese independence movement, Aung San, signed an agreement with leaders of the Shan, Kachin and Chin ethnic minorities paving the way for the foundation of the Union of Burma. The Panglong Agreement preserved the rights of ethnic minorities by recognising their autonomous status within the Union of Burma.

Following this Agreement, a constitution was drafted which established a quasi-federal

Figure 1 Human Security Approach to Resolving Internal Conflict

Human security is concerned with:
- Community security
- Economic security
- Political security
- Personal security

• A human security approach can be used to identify various sources of grievances before they culminate in full scale conflict.
• The various sources of grievances can then be prioritised for the purpose of policy intervention.

During conflict, a comprehensive human security framework offers a wide range of policy options on how to tackle the root cause of conflicts.

Grievances
• *Community/Social grievances*
  (ethnic/religious/cultural differences, marginalisation, fear of losing one's identity and values, etc.)
• *Economic grievances*
  (poverty, income inequality, disparity in wealth distribution, unequal development between regions, etc.)
• *Political grievances*
  (lack of representation, lack of political rights, political exclusion, etc.)
• *Personal grievances*
  (relative deprivation, unemployment, etc.)

Result of Grievances
Armed rebellion, insurgency, secessionist movement and civil war.

form of government in which a great deal of autonomy was given to the states where ethnic minority populations formed the majority of the population. Chapter 9 of the Constitution included special provisions for ethnic states with respect to representation in parliament and internal governance. Chapter 10 granted the right to secede from the Union if they so desired. This constitution was put into force on 24 September 1947. In 1948, Burma was granted independence from Britain but the autonomy promised to ethnic minorities was never fully realised. As early as 1949, ethnic minority groups began taking up arms to demand greater autonomy. Although many of the ethnic groups opposed to the government initially fought for independence from Burma, their objectives have altered over the course of the conflict and now many opposition groups appear to be content with greater control over local areas and increased political representation.

Then there is conflict over the restoration of democracy which began after the military junta seized power in 1962. The junta not only cracked down on pro-democracy supporters but also refused to acknowledge the 1990 election results that favoured the National League for Democracy, led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

Thus, conflict in Myanmar involving ethnic minority groups is principally centred on the restoration of autonomy they enjoyed before their merger with the Union of Burma and as promised in the Panglong Agreement. There is a sense of insecurity among the various ethnic groups on issues related to community, social, cultural, political, economy etc. It was feared that being a minority, they will eventually be overwhelmed by the majority Burmans. Autonomy was thus seen by these groups as the only way to maintain their iden-

tity and political status within the Union of Burma. Any resolution to the conflict in Myanmar must then take into account these factors.

Policy Recommendations

Dissolve the New Constitution

The new constitution by no means offers a framework for the peaceful resolution of conflict. Using this constitution as a framework for future political transitions will only serve to increase the grievances of ethnic minority groups, and drag the country back into violent ethnic strife. Many in the opposition believed that the constitution is no more than a ploy to perpetuate the power and privileges of the military. A new constitution, or at least a revised one should be drafted with the full participation of all aggrieved parties.

Counterinsurgency Strategy Grounded in the Concept of Human Security

Current counterinsurgency operations undertaken by the regime was aimed at engaging insurgent groups directly through the use of overwhelming force. Such an approach produces untold suffering to the people of Myanmar.

Counterinsurgency operations do not only mean the use of force. It also means winning the hearts and the minds of the people. In order to do this, counter-insurgency policies must be grounded in a framework of comprehensive engagement designed to promote the security of the people of Myanmar. This requires an understanding of the underlying factors which causes conflicts in the first place. In the case of Myanmar, certain priority areas i.e. socio-political-economic and cultural issues should be identified and policy actions should be planned within the broad framework of human security.

Multi-Stakeholder Approach to Conflict Resolution

A human security approach to conflict resolution should be representative of all parties to the conflict. Successful resolution of conflict begins from a sustained collective effort by as many levels of society as possible.

In the case of Myanmar, the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC), an umbrella organisation of seven major ethnic groups declared that the ongoing problems were rooted in the constitution and the best means to resolve it is through a negotiated settlement in the form of a Tripartite Dialogue involving:

• the military led by the ruling SPDC,

• democracy advocates led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) and

• representatives of the ethnic nationalities.

The ultimate goal of the ENC is to establish a genuine Federal Union of Burma based on the principles of the Panglong Agreement, which will guarantee democratic rights for all citizens, political equality for all ethnic nationalities and the right of self-determination for all member states of the Union.

A More Pro-Active ASEAN

The principle of 'non-interference in the affairs of one another' was the principle upon

which ASEAN was founded. As a result of this policy, ASEAN member states place in-dividual state sovereignty before collective security considerations and tiptoe delicately around each other's internal conflicts. However, there is a growing awareness within member countries that, increasingly, conflicts within one state affect another state. As far back as in 2004, former Indonesian foreign minister Ali Alatas declared that ASEAN needed to re-examine its policy of non-interference, in order to permit its members to act as peace brokers for the internal conflicts of other member states.

Notes and References

Note: Cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar on 2 May 2008. The final death toll from Nargis was estimated to be at least 146,000, with 90,000 confirmed dead and 56,000 missing. The latter were never found and it was assumed that all 56,000 missing people had also died.

Note: The constitution was drafted through a process called the National Convention - step one in the SPDC's seven step 'Roadmap to Democracy' - which was launched in 1994 as a military-controlled democratization process. The National Convention consisted of 1,100 delegates handpicked by the SPDC and excluded members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and other ethnic political parties. The constitutional referendum repre-sent step two of the roadmap. An English version of the 457-article constitution called The Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar 2008 was released on 1st November 2008.

•   Available online at http://www.mizzima.com/edop/commentary/1234-constitution-of-the-republic-of-the-union-of-myanmar-2008.html.

Note: The new charter is set to create 14 regional assemblies in areas that are home to the major ethnic groups, marking the first offer of political space since the country gained independence from the British in 1948. However, the regional assemblies will be placed under the Junta, who has the power to appoint a fourth of the members. Whereas States and Regions are formed on the basis of ethnic identity, ethnic groups will have no power to determine who their Chief Minister/Representative will be as it will be nominated by the President and he or she may not be the same nationality as the people of the States.

ICG Asia Report No. 11, 'Burma/Myanmar: How strong is the military regime?', Bangkok/Brussels, 21 December, 2000.

•   Available online at http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=1529&l=1.

Note: One government publication declared that, 'What did the Tatmadaw do at the time of the four political crises of 1948, 1958, 1962 and 1988? Had the Tatmadaw kept itself aloof in those days, the country would have been destroyed four times over. Had the Tatmadaw not taken over power, particularly in 1988, the Union would now be in shambles and blood-shed would have continued.'

Note: Myanmar's ethnic distribution according to CIA Factbook: Burman 68 per cent, Shan 9 per cent, Karen 7 per cent, Rakhine 4 per cent, Chinese 3 per cent, Indian 2 per cent, Mon 2 per cent, others 5 per cent.

•   Available online at https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/bm.html.

The Irrawaddy, 'Human Security in Burma', vol. 8, no. 10, October 2000.

• Available online at http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=2060&page=2.

Modern Conflict Database: Alternative Estimates for Death Tolls, Political Economy Research Institute, University of Massachusetts.

• Available online at http://www.peri.umass.edu/fileadmin/pdf/dpe/modern_conflicts/death_tolls.pdf.

Note: Estimates include civilian and military casualties, and indirect deaths from conflict-related famine, disease, and disruptions as well as violent deaths.

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• Available online at http://www.altsean.org/Key%20Issues/KeyIssuesDisplacement.htm.

Human Rights Watch, 'Burma: World's Highest Number of Child Soldiers', 15 October, 2002.

• Available online at http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2002/10/15/burma-worlds-highest-number-child-soldiers.

2007/2008 Human Development Report, 'Priorities in Public Spending', p. 296.

• Available online at http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2007-2008.

The Military Balance 2009, International Institute of Strategic Studies, London, p. 403.

Foreign Policy and The Fund for Peace rank countries using twelve indicators of state vulnerability - four social, two economic and six political. The list of the world's 60 most vulnerable states of 2008 is available at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4350&page=1.

Note: The Global Peace Index ranked 140 nations according to their relative states of peace. The index is composed of 24 qualitative and quantitative indicators which combine internal and external factors, ranging from a nation's level of military expenditure to its relations with neighbouring countries and the level of respect for human rights.

• Available online at http://www.visionofhumanity.org/gpi/results/rankings.php.

Note: The Economist examined the state of democracy in 167 countries and attempted to quantify this with an Economist Intelligence Unit Index of Democracy which focused on five general categories; electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, functioning of government, political participation and political culture.

• Available online at http://a330.g.akamai.net/7/330/25828/20081021185552/graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy%20Index%202008.pdf.

UNDP, Human Development Report 1994, New York: United Nations Development Programme,1994, p. 23.

- Available online at http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/hdr_1994_en_chap2.pdf.

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See Chapter I, Article 2 (c), Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, Indonesia, 24 February, 1976.

- Available online at http://www.aseansec.org/1217.htm. See also John Funston, ASEAN and the Principle of Non- Intervention: Practice and Prospects, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, March 2000. Available online at http://www.iseas.edu.sg/trends520.pdf.