

The Elders' trip to Myanmar and Northern Thailand: 23-28 March 2014

The Elders returned to [Myanmar](#) for their second visit from 23-26 March. The delegation was led by former Norwegian Prime Minister [Gro Harlem Brundtland](#) (Deputy Chair of The Elders) and included former Finnish President [Martti Ahtisaari](#). Both were members of the delegation led by former US President [Jimmy Carter](#) that [visited in September 2013](#).

A primary objective of the new mission was to diversify The Elders' relationships, expanding them to include more civil society, ethnic minority groups and grassroots organisations; while, at the same time, deepening and consolidating ties with the Thein Sein Government and armed forces (the *Tatmadaw*). Listening to all sides is always a core Elders objective.

In the capital, Nay Pyi Taw, The Elders were pleased to be again invited for in-depth discussions with President U Thein Sein, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing (Commander-in-Chief of the *Tatmadaw*) and U Aung Min (Minister in the President's Office in charge of the peace process). They were also happy to have an opportunity to meet Thura Shwe Mann (Speaker of Parliament) and other leading parliamentarians, for the first time.

The Elders then travelled to Myitkyina to learn about the unresolved conflict in Kachin State. There they met Kachin State Chief Minister La John Ngan Sai and his cabinet; local Kachin elders; and civil society groups, including the Kachin Women's Union, the Sha-it social development foundation and students. They also visited a camp on the outskirts of the city for several hundred villagers displaced by the ongoing conflict. Earlier in their visit, the Elders met Kachin activist Seng Raw in Yangon and Kachin MP Doi Bu in Nay Pyi Taw.

From Kachin State, the Elders flew to northern Thailand (26-28 March) to see and hear for themselves how the decades-long conflict in Myanmar's eastern border region has affected people's lives. The Elders visited Mae La refugee camp on the Thai/Myanmar border and the Mae Tao Health Clinic in Mae Sot. In Mae Sot, they also met representatives from a range of Karen civil society organisations, including the Karen Departments of Health, Welfare and Education, the Karen Women's Organization, the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People, the Karen Youth Organization and the Karen Human Rights Group.

In Chiang Mai the next day, they met representatives from the United Nationalities Federal Council – an umbrella body for the ethnic armed groups – for a frank exchange of views on the state of the national ceasefire negotiations and prospects for the peace dialogue expected to follow signing of an accord. They also met the Women's League of Burma.

Assessments of Myanmar's political transition

The Elders were pleased to see that in some key areas the reform process in Myanmar is progressing. One encouraging sign that bodes well for the development of a lively, inclusive democratic culture is the visible reduction of fear and the willingness of people at all levels to speak out publicly against perceived injustice.

The following are The Elders' assessments of certain aspects of the political and economic transition, based on conversations with people and groups inside and outside the country:

➤ *Ceasefire and peace process*

The Elders heard a good deal of optimism and hope regarding the peace process. They were gratified that government leaders remain firmly committed to a lasting and inclusive peace. Moreover, the stepped-up participation of military representatives in the national ceasefire negotiations seemed to reflect a renewed commitment to it on the part of a central actor in this historic conflict.

For their part, ethnic armed group leaders appear more unified and committed to peace than ever before and have proven willing to negotiate and compromise on key issues while insisting on pursuing their main goal, a new type of federal union. While praising ethnic leaders for the pragmatism they were showing in talks with the government, The Elders were however concerned that some elements among them were said to be involved in illegal activities, such as the flourishing narcotics trade.

Civil society organisations (CSO) that work with refugee and IDP populations in Karen State reported positive benefits from local ceasefires that are already in place. These benefits include diminished levels of fear among local people, expanded livelihood opportunities, and increasing cooperation and trust-building between communities, government authorities and ethnic leaders. These positive accounts, though, also contained warnings and scepticism. The ceasefires already reached remain tenuous and many of those directly affected felt that without tangible political reforms the benefits enjoyed may not last.

Fighting reported in parts of Kachin and Shan states was a cause for concern. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing had assured The Elders in Nay Pyi Taw that all fighting had halted. The Kachin met argued nevertheless that, in places, military actions were still continuing. Karen civil society groups cited the Kachin experience as well as their own observation of military and government advances on the ground in Karen state. They voiced long-standing fears that the ceasefire could be merely a cover for the exploitation of their natural resources by outsiders, expanded land-grabbing or even, at some stage, a renewed military offensive.

➤ *Political and constitutional reform*

Constitutional reform remains a highly important issue on Myanmar's political agenda, but its outlook is still unclear. Political and military leaders acknowledged the need for reform while hinting at the possible limits to decentralisation by stressing the importance of maintaining the country's sovereignty and stability. The constitutional priorities for those ethnic civil society groups The Elders met during the trip were described as "genuine federalism" and the devolution of decision-making to state and local authorities.

Decentralisation of power would facilitate another aspect of the reconciliation process: the need for the government to recognise the role CSOs and ethnic armed group (EAG) service-delivery structures already play in the areas of education, health and local development. The Elders felt that the gradual integration of this capacity and accumulated expertise with government structures could strengthen prospects for the long-term reintegration and reunification of what has been a deeply divided country.

➤ *The national census*

The national census carried out in early April – the first to be held in over 30 years – is one of the most controversial and divisive issues in present-day Myanmar. The Elders heard criticisms about the way it was prepared, as well as fears that it could be a tool to cause dissension within and between groups. Every non-Burman group expressed concerns that the census was not designed effectively to capture ethnic self-identities. The Elders fully recognise the importance of an accurate census for development purposes. At the same time, the institutionalised discrimination – especially against the unrecognised Rohingya minority in Rakhine State – that formed a backcloth to the census reinforced the need for greater transparency, accountability and inclusivity in all spheres of national life.

➤ *Gender equality*

Despite lip-service by all those met to the need for gender equality, many women informed The Elders that they were still not being permitted to play decision-making roles, whether by the government or by male leaders in the ethnic groups. Myanmar women are evidently to the fore in civil society and public services such as health and education. However, as the Elders saw for themselves, their participation in political life remains very low.

➤ *International aid and development*

All those The Elders met acknowledged the importance of economic development in a poor country. This is, rightly, a top priority for the government. But activists expressed concerns regarding the way development plans are being drawn up and executed without genuine popular consultation. They also felt that the way some international aid was being used could have unintended negative consequences. The Elders took note of these concerns.

In this regard, two particular issues were raised:

1. Without political and legal reforms, as well as institution-building to protect the rights of communities, economic development projects run the risk of promoting illicit land-grabbing and other abuses. Socio-economic inequality could deepen.
2. Myanmar's opening-up has caused a decline in support for refugee communities along the Thai/Myanmar border, at a time when support organisations face increased demands. Refugees also lack reliable information about conditions in the areas they left. Well-intentioned projects seeking to create stable conditions conducive to return might inadvertently exacerbate fears of forced repatriation.

Conclusions

The Elders encouraged the government to strive for greater inclusiveness, to overcome decades of mistrust within society and reflect the full diversity and talents of the population. They also left the country heartened that the national ceasefire negotiations held over the past year appear to be moving towards a positive outcome. Once the accord is signed, they felt it essential to move quickly to an inclusive, but manageable, political process that addresses the core issues underlying the decades-long conflict. At the same time, they feel reform of the 2008 constitution will be required ahead of the 2015 elections.

The Elders reconfirmed their intention to remain fully engaged over the coming years with Myanmar, its government, army and other public institutions, and its rich, diverse society.