

The Burmese regime is surrounded on almost all sides by ethnic cease-fire groups that are gearing up for a showdown over demands that they form themselves into border guard forces.

If Burma's junta is serious about holding an election later this year, it will soon have to get down to the business of dealing with restless ethnic armies based along the country's borders.

In addition to a number of active insurgencies in Karen and Shan states, as well as lesser challenges from armed ethnic groups in the western part of the country, there is growing tension with cease-fire groups in the north and south.

Last weekend, the regime sent its top negotiator, Lt-Gen Ye Myint, to the northern Shan State city of Lashio to meet Shan and Wa leaders. As expected, he delivered an ultimatum, demanding that they join the junta's controversial border guard force scheme by the end of February or face the consequences.

In recent weeks, Ye Myint and other senior officers from Naypyidaw have been busy traveling around the north, meeting with ethnic leaders and Burmese army commanders. So far, however, there has been no sign that the Shan, Kachin, Wa or ethnic-Chinese Mongla armies are warming to the regime's proposal.

Now both sides—the Burmese military and the ethnic armies—are bracing for a confrontation. According to recent intelligence reports, the Burmese army has moved heavy artillery closer to the Wa territory, while rebel sources say that the Wa and Kachin are recruiting more soldiers in case fighting breaks out in the region.

Since clashes last August between Burmese and Kokang forces, groups along the Sino-Burmese border have been on high alert. Some, like the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the strongest ethnic armed group in Burma with an estimated 20,000 troops, have been preparing for this moment for a long time.

According to a report in the March 2008 issue of *Jane's Intelligence Review*, “As the possibility of a war with the junta has loomed larger, the UWSA has acquired more sophisticated weapons including anti-aircraft systems. In or around 2000, the Wa added to their small arsenal of Soviet

Streal-2 (SA-7) man-portable air defense systems [MANPADS] when they acquired HN-5N systems, an improved Chinese version of the first-generation Soviet system.”

Adding to the sense of imminent crisis, some analysts now say that they believe that the lines of communication between Wa and Burmese leaders are no longer active.

Ye Myint was recently scheduled to hold a meeting with Wa leaders in Lashio, but they told Burmese officials that they were not available to meet him there. Lashio, the headquarters of the Burmese army's Northeast Regional Command, was the base from which Burmese troops overran the Wa's allies in the Kokang area last August.

Aside from the Wa, Kachin leaders are also restless, but still open to negotiations. La Ja, general-secretary of the Kachin Independence Organization, told *The Irrawaddy* late last year: “We want long-lasting peace and we don't want to wage war, but if the junta forces us to transform our troops, the regional peace will be destroyed.”

In the south, Mon rebel leaders remained defiant to the regime's proposal. Nai Htaw Mon, leader of the New Mon State Party, told *The Irrawaddy* last week: “Our people don't agree with this plan [to form a border guard force] and we have already told the regime we cannot accept it. However, we told the Burmese authorities that they could discuss it with us if they wanted to.”

Despite the ominous signs of a possible resumption of open hostilities, however, some analysts say that the regime won't risk a fight with the armed groups. Instead of using force against the UWSA and other ethnic armies, the junta may try to undermine them by creating divisions among their leaders—a tactic that has worked well for Burma's rulers in the past.

Bertil Lintner, a Swedish journalist who has written several books on Burma, said late last year that the pressure is clearly on the Wa. “The Wa will be the main target of the present offensive,” he told *The Irrawaddy* soon after fighting broke out between Kokang and Burmese troops in August.

Another consideration for the regime is China's reaction to any renewed outbreak of hostilities.

The junta's military offensive against the Kokang militia known as the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army upset Beijing, Burma's most powerful ally, because it sent thousands of ethnic Chinese fleeing across the border into China. A clash with the Wa would undoubtedly prove far more destabilizing for the border region.

According to Lintner: "The Kokang was just the weakest link in the chain of former Communist Party of Burma cease-fire groups. The United Wa State Army is the main one, and the biggest obstacle for Naypyidaw's attempts to establish its writ over the entire country.

"An attack on the UWSA would open a Pandora's box of problems for the regime, including a new refugee crisis in China and the possibility of war on many fronts inside the country."

The prospect of a hostile confrontation between the Burmese army and ethnic groups along the Sino-Burma border has Chinese leaders worried.

In late January, Ye Dabo, the Chinese ambassador to Burma, met with Burmese Information Minister Brig-Gen Kyaw Hsan in Napyidaw to discuss stability in the border area and the security of Chinese citizens in Burma.

The meeting came after Min Ein, the secretary-general of the Mongla ceasefire group known as the National Democratic Alliance Arm, was killed in Mongla, a town on the Sino-Burmese border in eastern Shan State.

Diplomats in Rangoon say they believe that the Chinese are warning both Burmese and ethnic leaders not to resume fighting along the border. Several ethnic groups want China to play a negotiator role in the stalemate.

In the past few months, several Chinese officers based in Yunnan Province have traveled to Wa territory to gather firsthand information about the Wa position.

The regime wants to settle the border guard force issue as soon as possible ahead of the poll. But if this proves impossible without a show of force, diplomats fear that the regime could end up postponing the planned election. So far, the regime hasn't promulgated an electoral law or committed to a date for the election.

As things stand at the moment, all's quiet on the northern front. But with everyone there digging their trenches, this could just be the calm before the storm.

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