



# MAKING PEACE IN THEIR OWN WORDS

PEOPLE OF MYANMAR'S  
PEACE PROCESS



Making Peace In Their Own Words  
People of Myanmar's Peace Process

***Book coordination by:***

Nerea Bilbatúa

***Photographs:***

© Kannan Arunasalam (pages 12, 18-19, 34 and 60-61)

Myanmar Peace Center (pages 44, 49, 64-65, 70 and front cover)

***Copy-editing by:***

Sue Williams

***Layout by:***

Boonruang Song-ngarm

***Published by:***

The Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS), 2015

***Funding support by:***

The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

ISBN: 9 789996 381775

This book would not have been possible without the generosity, openness and trust of the men and women featured in it. Our heartfelt thanks go to each of you. We hope we have given justice to your words.

We dedicate this book to Dr. Nay Win Maung and to Padoh David Taw who helped to build the foundations of the process for peace we know today.

Despite different ideas and concepts, the people of us have to work closely in matters of same views in the national interests. If an individual or organization stands for election in accordance with the democratic practice to come to power in a justice way, that will be acceptable to everyone. Therefore, I would say our government will keep the peace door open to welcome such individuals and organizations. (President U Thein Sein inaugural address to Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, March 30, 2011)

For a peace process to be successful, a number of conditions must be met. The President, as the head of state, must be prepared to do whatever is necessary to achieve peace. Second, the Parliament also must want peace and be prepared to do whatever is needed to achieve it. Third, Tatmadaw (the Myanmar Armed Forces) and other parties have to want it. Fourth, ethnic groups have to want it. Fifth, political parties must also want peace. Every organization and citizen, the entire country, must want it. (U Aung Min, Myanmar President's Office Minister, Interview with Nikkei Asian Review, April 21, 2015)

# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	7
BIOGRAPHIES OF FEATURED PEOPLE OF THE MYANMAR'S PEACE PROCESS .....	9
CHAPTER 1 <i>"Because, you know? Ordinary citizens with strong determination can change the system."</i> .....	13
CHAPTER 2 <i>"I guess when people talk about the Peace Process they think about two years ago, but the reality is that it started a long time ago."</i> .....	23
CHAPTER 3 <i>"If you work inclusively you cannot be 'the other person'."</i> .....	29
CHAPTER 4 <i>"Engaging in dialogue is a very serious business. Even more than engaging in war. How do you put an end to sixty years of conflict?"</i> .....	35
CHAPTER 5 <i>"You treat me well, that is all I am asking"</i> .....	71
LIST OF ACRONYMS .....	79

*Sometimes in life lots of accidental things happen and  
it becomes life itself.*

*(Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong)*

*I never dreamt that I would be involved in the peace process.*

*(U Hla Maung Shwe)*

*When I was twelve I was sent to live in a village, and I hated it. I lived  
at the headman's house. I remember his son asking me how were the  
mountains like. He had never seen them. And I was trying to explain it,  
and I was thinking, "This guy is so stupid. How come he doesn't know?"*

*But years later, after I ran away, I was talking to some villagers that  
were in the army with my brother and this old man asked me what an  
ocean is like. I began to understand how people might not be able to  
conceive certain things.*

*(U Harn Yawnghwe)*

*I have always believed in inclusiveness. At that time 'participatory'  
was not a big word. But in my cultural, ethnic background, we make  
decisions together; as a family you discuss things with those who will  
be affected by your decisions.*

*(Lahpai Seng Raw)*

*What you must understand is that none of us were prepared for peace.  
But because we had been working since 2006 on the political openness  
and the political reform, on the changes in Myanmar, we were a little  
bit more ready than others.*

*(U Tin Maung Thann)*



## INTRODUCTION

The book you are about to read tells the story of a group of people who embarked on a common journey without knowing how would it end. This book is an invitation to accompany these women and men, who, for a long time, opposed each other in their quest for a common vision. Theirs is a difficult journey. They have encountered obstacles and have been challenged. But they have also found solidarity, camaraderie, mutual support and recognition. They have transformed themselves and those around them. Their journey has not ended yet.

The protagonists of this book are men and women playing essential roles in the current peace process in Myanmar. They are the ones seated at the negotiation table or accompanying those seated there. They are members of revolutionary armed organisations, of the Myanmar Peace Center, and of Civil Society Organisations. We are aware of the fact that this is a snapshot, a glimpse into only a small group of those engaged in the Myanmar peace process. Many voices are missing and their stories should be told too. This story is (as any story), by definition, incomplete.

What you will encounter in the following pages is the journey of a group of people imagining a different Myanmar, who ended up working together to make it reality. Their perspectives are diverse; so are their intentions, their feelings, their motivations and their personalities. Every one of them is unique, and so is the story they tell. But they also provide a collective account of the origins, the development, the challenges, the determination that has shaped, and it is still shaping the current Myanmar peace process.

Only by listening to them we can understand them. This book wants to contribute to the creation of complex narratives that acknowledge the diversity and the difficulty of transition periods. And what is a peace process but a moment of transition, a moment of change? This collective account shows how individual women and men can shape history when daring to take risks, when imagining a different future.

By weaving their stories together, by presenting their own narratives through their own voices, this book wants to contribute to strengthening a culture of dialogue, especially among those who disagree the most, in Myanmar. Read this book. Imagine yourself seated at the table with these women and men. Try to see the world through their eyes. Drink a cup of coffee with them. Listen to them. Understand them. Even, disagree with them. This is what complexity is about. The grey between the black and white, the friends among enemies.

## **BIOGRAPHIES OF FEATURED PEOPLE OF THE MYANMAR'S PEACE PROCESS**

**U Kyaw Soe Hlaing** is the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC) Executive Director. The MPC provides policy advice and strategic level guidance and coordinates the Myanmar government activities in areas such as ceasefire negotiations and implementation, peace negotiations and political dialogue, coordination of assistance in conflict-affected areas among others. U Kyaw Soe Hlaing spent more than a decade studying first and working afterwards at the Bangkok-based Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) where he focused on capacity building and external relations-related activities covering South East Asia. He returned back to Myanmar in 2012.

**U Than Khe** is the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) Chairperson. A former student at the Mandalay Institute of Medicine he left Myanmar (Burma at that time) in 1988 to join the armed struggle. He has been the ABSDF Chairman since 2001.

**Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win** was elected as the Karen National Union (KNU) General Secretary in 2012. In 1990 he became District Chairman of the, at that time, KNU's controlled Mergui/Dawei District. He has held numerous positions within the KNU including Chairman of Karen Youth Organization. The KNU was founded in 1947

**U Tin Maung Thann** is a special advisor at the Myanmar Peace Center. U Tin Maung Thann is also the President of the Myanmar Egress (a non profit Organization founded in 2006 by Myanmar scholars and social workers who have been actively involved in various civil society activities in Myanmar in the last fifteen years). He is also the Vice-President of the Myanmar Fisheries Federation.

**Naw Zipporah Sein** is the current Karen National Union (KNU) Vice-Chairperson and a former KNU General Secretary. She has also been the Secretary of the Karen Women Organization. She is a teacher by training.

**Daw Ja Nan Lahtaw** is the Director of the Nyein/Shalom Foundation, an NGO founded by Reverend Dr. Saboi Jum, active on mediation and peace process support in Myanmar. In addition to her role in Nyein/Shalom Foundation Daw Ja Nan Lahtaw is a technical advisor at the NCCT. She holds an MA in Conflict Transformation from Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia, USA.

**Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong** is the Executive Director of the Burma Centre for Ethnic Studies (BCES), as well as a member of the Supreme Council of the Chin National Front (CNF), a member of the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) and a Senior Delegation for Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement Negotiation (SD). He is both an activist and a researcher and holds a PhD from the Uppsala University (Sweden) and is the author of numerous book and articles. He was awarded the Martin Luther King Prize in 2007.

**Nai Hong Sar** is the New Mon State Party (NMSP) Vice-Chairman. He joined the NMSP in 1968; he has held different positions at township, district and Headquarters levels. He is the NCCT Vice-Chairman and the UNFC Vice-Chairman (1).

**U Hla Maung Shwe** is a Special Advisor at the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC). He is also the Vice-President and the Director of Communication of Myanmar Egress, as well as the Vice President of the Republic of Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI).

**Saya Kyaw Thu** is the Director of the Paung Ku Consortium, a civil society strengthening initiative established in 2007 by a consortium of international and local agencies in Myanmar. He has more than fifteen years' experience in the development sector in Myanmar.

**U Harn Yawnghwe** is the Executive Director of the Euro Burma Office (EBO), established in Brussels in 1997 to promote the development of democracy in Myanmar; It is the operations centre of Associates to Develop Democratic Burma, Inc (ADDB), which is a Canadian non profit organisation founded in 1990 and incorporated in 1994. U Harn Yawnghwe is the son of Sao Shwe Thaik, the last hereditary ruler of the Shan principality of Yawnghwe and the first president of the Republic of the Union of Burma. He holds a mining engineering degree and an MBA in International Business and Finance. He spent forty-eight years in exile before returning to Burma.

**General Sumlut Gun Maw** is the Chief of Staff of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) founded in 1961. He is a graduate from the Mandalay University, and has held different positions in the KIO, which he joined in 1986. General Sumlut Gun Maw is also an NCCT deputy leader 2.

**Lahpai Seng Raw** is the founder, and former Executive Director, of the Metta Development Foundation, an NGO established in 1997 to provide communities with assistance in areas such as health care, agriculture and peace. Before 1997 she worked with the internally displaced people from Myanmar-China border. Lahpai Seng Raw is a graduated in Psychology from the Rangoon University. In July 2013, she was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award.



# CHAPTER 1

***“Because, you know? Ordinary citizens with strong determination can change the system.”***

I was born in a small village in Karen State. My father worked as a revolutionary at the Karen army. Since my father’s duties were not always in the same place, we moved around a lot. I have eight brothers and sisters. I am the fifth child. All of us, brothers and sisters, work for the Karen organisation. My two elder brothers joined the Karen army, and most of my sisters worked as teachers in the Karen National Union areas.

*(Naw Zipporah Sein)*

I was born in a free family, because both of my parents used to live far away from the government under the Burmese Socialist Program Party regime. At that time, without the approval from the government, people’s lives were very hard. But my family’s life was a little bit different because of my father’s political background and his history. My father, who was a teacher, always told us that our responsibility was to read and to study. All my childhood he used to say, “We all have a responsibility, no one can avoid it; as a citizen you have responsibility; as a son you have responsibility, as a student you have responsibility.”

*(U Than Khe)*

I come from a big, traditional family. I am the youngest son. I have older brothers and in this kind of families the older brothers are the important ones. Nobody cares about the younger ones. There is no vision, no ambition for us. You can enjoy your life. So I never had any kind of future vision for

me. As kids, we were never allowed to ask the servants to do things for us. We had to do them ourselves. And my father made us work. He loved experimenting. We had to dig in the garden and we always tried to run away; but he was trying to teach us something.

*(U Harn Yawngghwe)*

I worked as a development expert in this region for twelve years based in the Asian Institute of Technology (Thailand). In 1996 I came back to Myanmar and started working closely with the fishery sector, because, you know, my original background is on fisheries and agricultural development planning, so some of my work experience and educational background helped me

*(U Tin Maung Thann)*

The very reason why I am involved in the current peace process is because, luckily, I am a member of Chin National Front and the CNF appointed me to be part of the peace process. I feel it is a great privilege to be involved in something I have wanted to do for a long time.

*(Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong)*

My father is 100% Myanmar; my grandfather from my mother's side is 50% Shan. My father is a former army officer. Due to my father's work, we moved a lot around the country, and lived in different places. From 1974 to 1978 I attended the Yangon University. I studied chemistry. After I graduated, I moved near Meik Htila. I have never been a government civil servant. My wife owned a private business and I became a businessmen

*(U Hla Maung Shwe)*

My childhood has brought me here today. I must not forget that I am here today because of my dad. Under the military regimen, when facing problems, the powerless, the voiceless, the people who did not have any access to the decision-makers, turned to their respected elders, respected Ministers and Pastors, their leaders. And this is what my dad was. As a Baptist Pastor coming from the Kachin community, they would go to him, "My son has been forcibly recruited by the Bamar army, he is still very young. Can you find ways to get him back?" Also, "My son was forcibly recruited by the KIO, he is still very young. Can you find ways to talk to the KIO leaders and get him out? He still needs to go to the school". These are the things I heard whilst we were having breakfast. Guests came during



the day and at night. As a young girl, at the age of ten, I had to host these guests, offer them tea, or coffee; that was my duty. As I brought them tea or coffee, I would normally end up sitting next to my dad listening. My sister was not interested. But I was curious about what were they talking.

*(Daw Lahtaw Ja Nan)*

When I look at my personal insight, at the time when I was in school, I see a strong hate towards the government because of the way they mistreated the people. We heard bad stories about how they mistreated people, particularly the ethnic people. That amazed us.

*(Saya Kyaw Thu)*

The national spirit was born inside me when I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. That was at the age of twelve. That was in the 1960s. I remember the Mon People's Front's music and messages. In middle school, in high school there were also Burmese students in the classroom. We would argue. They called us "phayar kyun" "Slave of God", because when the Ayutthaya king took over Suvarnabhumi, which is the kingdom of Mon, the king brought Mon people to Bagan to build the pagoda as slaves; so, Mon people were given to God as slaves. It really offended us when Burmese people, especially from the middle level, called us "slaves of God". As students, we always talked about Mon history. We realised that we have a long history; we used to have a big kingdom. When I became a civil servant at the Agriculture Department, I worked in a town in the Irrawaddy Division. I saw that the names of the pagodas, the names of the roads, the names of the villages, of the towns; they were all Mon names. Some of the Burmese living in that area worshiped Mon Nats. I realised that the Mon Kingdom had spread out up to the Irrawaddy Division. Because of this, I only worked as a government servant for nine months; I got in touch with the New Mon State Party and joined it. I was twenty years old.

*(Nai Hong Sar)*

I am an ethnic Kachin. My own family has been impacted by the civil war. But, I actually started very late in this kind of social work, only at forty. I am an only daughter and my father passed away when I was ten months old. I grew up among boys who later took part in armed revolt, seeing the family members going in and out of prison. I was the only one obtaining higher education. My mother was a teacher. I think that when you are small, you hold to nationalism, but not at the expense of others. I turned

forty and something clicked. Because at that time the KIO Chairman asked me: “What are you going to do that can be useful?” So, I travelled along the Thai Burma border, the Sino Burma border, and I said: “OK there are a few things I could do”. And then, the more I got involved, the more I got to meet with very, I would say, committed, resourceful people. You know, this is a country that attracts many good people.

*(Lahpai Seng Raw)*

The first time I joined the KNU was in 1968, when I was sixteen years old. In 1971 I got malaria and the KNU leader asked me to go back to study. I did so, passed the exams, went to university for two years and then, again, decided to join the KNU for the second time; that was in 1975. I never joined the armed wing but the political one, because at that time very few people were working for the organisation; people wanted to fight. But in my understanding, I joined the revolution not to revenge, but to change the system, that was always my idea. Revolution, to me, was a way to change the system, not to take vengeance, not to kill people. For thirty-seven years I have moved from Township to District, to Headquarters positions.

*(Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win)*

After I finished college in Myitkyina I moved to the Mandalay University. When I was in the Mandalay University a few of us, Kachin students from different universities and colleges across Myanmar, met and discussed about what should we do about our people. We had this small group of people and we decided, “OK, after we finish university we will join the Kachin Independence Organisation.” And every year, once the students graduated, we did so. At that time there was no military academy so we started with a basic training school. I was not so bad, so I continued in the military wing. I have been member of the KIO Central Committee, and Joint Secretary of the organisation. I have also been responsible for the Intelligence Office, and I am now still responsible of the Foreign Affairs Department.

*(General Sumlut Gun Maw)*

Seeing the effects of the civil war stayed with me. I was living in the capital city of Kachin State, and my parents were very protective; we could not even go three miles away from the city area where we were living because the armed groups were already there and it was not safe. And I was a very good kid, you know, very obedient. But even if I never experienced the civil war, we were also affected, because we did not have freedom, we could not move around.

*(Daw Lahtaw Ja Nan)*

Many people think that poverty is the main reason why the ethnic armed organisations are fighting. Go back to history. When we got independence in 1948 the Karen, who started the fighting in this country, were the most sophisticated ethnic group; they controlled the armed forces: the army chief, the commander in chief, air force chief the navy chief, they were all Karen. The doctors, nurses, they were all Karen, too. And then, the Shan; Harn's mother was a queen. And his father, her husband, was the first democratically elected president. Go and visit their palace, were they poor? Poverty is the result of sixty years of civil war.

*(Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong)*

If we go back to History, the Karen revolution did not start from the rural areas but from the cities, from people's experiences of oppression and inequality. And from the cities it moved to the jungle. Because of the constant attacks by the Burmese army, the Karen people have been fleeing, abandoning their villages and becoming displaced, as well as refugees, for more than sixty years. It's been very difficult.

*(Naw Zipporah Sein)*

In the early 60s, the New Mon State Party had been recently established, so it was quite small. We had to work very hard; even to get food, we had to grow rice, and do all this cropping, raise oxen and ducks just to eat. At that time we just had one uniform; that was our special treasure.

*(Nai Hong Sar)*

To make it short, "why we took arms and revolted?" Because the Panglong agreement was broken. Until now, the Myanmar government has perceived the ethnic armed organisations as organisations challenging the sovereignty, and they do not accept it.

*(General Sumlut Gun Maw)*





We would like to develop our own language and culture. We want to develop ourselves as other peoples have done. But we cannot get these two things by fighting. Our struggle has not been carried out by a desire of revenge. I think we, Karen and Burmese, have to learn to live together; and for that we have to come together, we have to talk to each other. That's why I am involved in this peace process. To me, peace is based on justice. You cannot reach peace without justice. To me, justice means that you have to have the rights you are entitled to. For us Karen people, this means, for example, that we have to have the right to decide our own future, thrive as people, learn in our own language.

*(Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win)*

I guess from my personal perspective, my family was involved in politics; when the army took over in 1962, we had the experience of moving overnight from the top of the society to the bottom. Because, after the coup, even our friends did not want to be involved with us; they were scared, they did not know what would happen to them if they were seen with us. So, suddenly, we became outcasts. At that time I was only fourteen. Those events turned me into someone very bitter. I was very angry. I would have killed anyone at that time. The first job I got in Canada when I arrived as an immigrant, with no experience, was at a gas station, pumping gas. And my main concern was, "What if someone from Burma comes and sees me? What a shame." I still had not changed my mindset.

*(U Harn Yawnghwe)*

My parents always told us about the Karen struggle; we always knew that we were in the struggle. We knew that we were growing up under the oppression of the Burmese regime; that is why we lived in poverty; we did not have properties, land; we were constantly on the move from place to place. But my parents always said, "There will be one day when there will be peace and freedom and we will enjoy our life". So, even since we were very young we knew that there would be one day when there would be justice, equality, when we would enjoy living as a nation. We were looking forward to it. This is what we were dreaming, what we have been hoping, and we still are.

*(Naw Zipporah Sein)*

When the 1988 killings happened in Yangon, a friend of mine who is Chin said to me, “Kyaw Thu, this your first experience, but for us, this is very common. In our areas they can shoot at us at any moment”. He mixed the terms ‘Burman’ and ‘Government’. And I could see how they were difficult to separate. Burmese were doing bad things to them, and I wanted to do something good to change the feelings of my friend. After the ‘88 government crack down, most of my friends disappeared; some were sent to prison, some went away to the border areas. Hearing their difficulties whilst they were in exile was very depressing.

*(Saya Kyaw Thu)*

Up to 1988, we lived very individual lives in our hometown. Myself, I studied medicine at the Institute of Medicine, in Mandalay; my brother studied technology at the Rangoon Institute of Technology, and my younger brother studied in the Mandalay Art and Science University. My parents were very pleased because all their children were studying at the university as they had dreamt. But this dream faded after 1988. We understood that, yes, this democratic movement needs us; we are not leaders, we are not heroes, but we have responsibility in this democratic movement. Ever since, our family normal life never came back again. In these twenty-five years, my father was sentenced to long-term imprisonment; he died shortly after his release. My mother was forced to retire from her service. We, the three brothers, were eternally dismissed from the university by the authorities and never went back to the classrooms again. Instead of regret and bitterness we have never had any remorse for our choices.

*(U Than Khe)*

The National League for Democracy was established at the end of 1988 and I joined it in 1989. At that time, I did not know much about Aung San Suu Kyi. I joined because I wanted to support the people, and because I wanted Myanmar to become a democratic country. In 1990 I became the township NLD Joint Secretary. At that time, the people’s expectations were too high; they wanted to taste democracy. When Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, I felt very happy. The Nobel Peace Prize Committee announced, “This is not only a prize to Aung San Suu Kyi, but also to all the people who want democracy and who fought in 1988.” I wrote a draft congratulatory letter to our leader. It was an official letter to circulate at the township level. Soon after, we were arrested; that is why I was in jail in Meik Htila from 1990 to 1992. All sixteen of us were tied with

the same rope. Until now I am still very close to my prison colleagues. I was released in 1992. My wife was very worried. Before I left the prison, she decided we should move to Yangon. For more than one year, my family had not been able to visit me in jail.

*(U Hla Maung Shwe)*

We always claim that the kind of peace we want to see has to have justice in it. So, we would like to see that justice is done in every life of people in Myanmar. Because, when we grew up, in my teenage life, in our college life, in your career, you know, looking at the people in this country, particularly ethnic minority groups are not always treated equally, because we are Christians, because we are not Bamar, we are always treated unequally. I have seen this all my life. I think that was there, at the very heart of my mind. I am not an activist. We are not expressive about injustices, but by doing we are bringing justice and peace. That kept me going.

*(Daw Lahtaw Ja Nan)*

Learning itself is painful. When my friends with an ethnic background express their bad feelings towards the Burmans, it is a very painful experience. This is a feeling you can't get out. You are Burmese. What you need to do is to practically show them that they are generalising, stereotyping. It is a never-ending process. To be very honest, I think the political groups representing the Burmese majority are very ignorant about the real thinking and feeling of the ethnic armed groups and the ethnic populations. This is a huge gap. And from the ethnic side, they always mix up the Burmese ordinary people and the people in power.

*(Saya Kyaw Thu)*



## CHAPTER 2

***“I guess when people talk about the Peace Process they think about two years ago, but the reality is that it started a long time ago.”***

Around the late 70s, early 80s my dad and several religious leaders and elders from the church community said, “OK, we cannot continue living like this. We have to do something. Fighting is not the solution”. At that time I was around twelve or thirteen. So my dad started travelling again on peace missions, not just the usual church work. He started travelling more and more and what I remember is a military jeep coming to pick him up and we did not know where was he going because he would not tell us. Peace work at that time was very sensitive. What we knew was, “OK, this military jeep is coming to pick him up, we don’t know when he will be back.”

*(Daw Lahtaw Ja Nan)*

Since the KIO was established in 1961, the principle has always been, “We have to have negotiation.” Therefore the KIO has been in negotiation with the Myanmar government many times; around four times in the 60s, and the 70s. In 1981, the late Chairman Brang Seng, and also former Chairman Zau Mai, and current Chairman Zawng Hra were in the team to negotiate with U Ne Win’s government in Yangon. At that time, the KIO was not even asking about self-determination, but they were saying, “We would agree to the socialism, but what we want is self-administration.” In 1989-1990, during that time, there was another round of negotiations. In 1992, KIO declared a bilateral ceasefire until a ceasefire agreement was reached two years later in 1994 after seventeen years of war.

*(General Sumlut Gun Maw)*

In 1990, we held a United Nationalities League for Democracy conference where I presented a paper calling for a peace conference and a national convention to which I invited all the ethnic armed groups to hold a dialogue for peace. That is the very reason why I was arrested after the conference finished. I was arrested but I was not sent to jail; I was continuously interrogated for almost seven days. So, since that time I realised that the only way to solve the problems of this country is to engage in a dialogue, meaning peace talks. What I am trying to say is that, since then, we have been involved in this call for dialogue and have been trying through different means.

*(Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong)*

During the difficult years, churches and monasteries, the religious institutions, became the backbones of the communities. We thought about ways of supporting those who were returning after the ceasefire agreement. To work on these issues, you had to be a legal entity, so this is how the Metta Development Foundation was set up in 1997. Reverend Saboi Jum was the one who gave us our name. Our primary aim was to sustain the ongoing peace process.

*(Lahpai Seng Raw)*

In 1994 I met Dr. Nay Win Maung. One day he approached me and said he would like to interview me. After that, he understood me better. He visited my office and we became closer step by step. He was a good guy. In 2004 he had the opportunity to study at Yale as a fellow. And then in 2003 I met U Tin Maung Thann who had also had opportunities to study abroad. We became friends, and the three of us started to meet regularly and to discuss the situation in our country. In 2005, together with others, we decided to set up a training centre, which we called Myanmar Egress. U Tin Maung Thann had strong ties with different foreign education institutions. I also have a solid network inside the country among political parties, and the business sector. We thought we could try the best for our country. In 2006 we started a series of capacity building programmes for the Myanmar youth. At that time that was the best way to move forward.

*(U Hla Maung Shwe)*

In 1997 we started the Euro Burma Office. We decided it was important to focus on how to prepare for a transition, as we knew one day there would be one. I was clear that it was not possible to overthrow the government by force; that the only way forward would be to reach some kind of compromise. So as far as in 1999, we started what we called 'the National Reconciliation Programme' and I started making approaches to the government. We understood that there would not be reconciliation without them. And things worked out quite well. I even managed to talk to some government members. At the same time, we also knew that you can't have reconciliation without the armed groups either, so we became probably one of the first NGOs to start talking to them. Our view was that unless you talk to the armed groups you can't find any solution. We asked them, "What is your vision for the country?" "How are you going to achieve your goals?" "How are you going to work together?" So we came to the idea of establishing some kind of political dialogue, some kind of negotiation. Armed groups reacted quite positively. We brought them together and then they started working with each other. That took years and years. In a way, I think that we laid the foundations for the peace talks by already working with them in a non-threatening way, by looking at different solutions. That is how they got to know me, and I got to know them.

*(U Harn Yawngghwe)*

In 1998 I worked in Mon State. The local Rakhine, Shan, Kachin, Mon, Karen, Chin groups became very close to me. Around that time, I came to know some of the people who were involved on the peace processes. There was training on conflict transformation and, as part of that training they had a one-day exercise that included analysis on the background of the conflict. And through this exercise they could express their anti-Burmese sentiments. It is very crucial to go beyond that, but unfortunately they became further divided at that time.

*(Saya Kyaw Thu)*

I was comfortably, happily teaching at the Bible College and at that time my dad had already started the Nyein/ Shalom Foundation and I was also helping him at home. At that time 'peace work' meant 'ceasefire work'. The work at that time focused on trying to find the political space to be able to talk politics. That was the year 2000.

*(Daw Lahtaw Ja Nan)*

In 2001 we formed the Ethnic Nationalities Council. The very reason why we formed it was to engage in dialogue; we thought that the armed struggle was not the solution. Within the ENC, we differentiated: we are holding arms only to protect ourselves; armed struggle is not the solution; problems are political, and they need to be resolved through political means, through dialogue. In 2001 we called for a tri-partite dialogue, which became our main objective.

*(Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong)*

In 1999, before I left the country to continue my studies, I used to work for the government as a researcher, as a case officer for foreign investment delegations. I spent two years at the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok, where I got my second MBA. Afterwards I started working for the AIT in charge of the alumni relations and promotion of activities (recruitment, external relations and communications and so on). So most of my activities at the AIT were related to capacity building for partner countries and external relations. Myanmar was one of my programme countries. That is why since 2005 I used to visit very often. During those days I could not officially engage in political activities because of the strict neutrality rules of my university, but we had this dream of a political change in this country, because we saw that there was the possibility of change through the government activities; also the perception from the international community, which had been very polarised in the past, was slightly changing.

*(U Kyaw Soe Hlaing)*

We started cooperating with Myanmar Egress in 2004. Dr. Nay Win Maung was one of the key persons I worked with. He would bring the perspective from inside and I would bring the outsider's perspective. We, the groups from inside and the groups from outside, used to meet in Bangkok every few months to discuss issues, compare perspectives, see how things could be moved forward. So, in that way, we have been cooperating in the distance. And I suppose Myanmar Egress was advising the Government. We were slowly, slowly, building the momentum.

*(U Harn Yawnghwe)*

In 2005, one of the senior NLD members was released from prison. The young lawyer came to visit me and asked me to meet this gentleman. I said, "Why not? Please bring him", so he came to visit. He had been in jail for fourteen years, so you can imagine what had happened to his family life.

He is a very simple, very honest, very gentle man. I appreciated him coming to see me. We talked about the situation in the country. I tried to organise a meeting between him and my colleagues U Tin Maung Thann and Dr. Nay Win Maung. I wanted to show him my appreciation for his resistance and his loyalty to his party. I also wanted to highlight other sides' views, my own perspective on the NLD and on their analysis of the situation and about the future. And I thought that through this dialogue we could also bring some of our own ideas to the NLD. My point of view was, "He is my friend, I appreciate his resistance and loyalty to the party, so I would like to share my perspectives with him so that he can also appreciate them." So since 2007 or 2008, I met regularly with some of the NLD leaders and explained them the way I saw the current situation, my perspectives about the future; and I know they would share these ideas with Aung San Suu Kyi.

*(U Hla Maung Shwe)*

Since 2006, prior to the 2010 changes, we had regular meetings with people like Aung Naing Oo, the expats, those who came back to Myanmar and started working with us. We wanted to build the future of that force. Our thinking was, "When institutions are ready for change, even the Generals will behave differently".

*(U Tin Maung Thann)*



## CHAPTER 3

***“If you work inclusively you cannot be ‘the other person.’”***

In 2008 Cyclone Nargis hit the country. It was a tragedy. But we saw some opportunities to foster the engagement between the international community and the Myanmar government. So, even though it was a tragedy, we saw the potential for Myanmar.

*(U Kyaw Soe Hlaing)*

2008 was an eye opening for me. After Cyclone Nargis, when the country was closed down for international assistance, many local businesses, entrepreneurs supported us. That was a big surprise for me. Not because they responded, but because they provided big sums. That showed me that we need to have a common issue that we can all work together and put our common energy.

*(Lahpai Seng Raw)*

In 2008 the Constitution was ratified. OK, there are people who did not like it, and there is some others who did. I consider it paved the way for democratization. Before the Constitution, there was no role for democracy, for discussing issues such as decentralisation, or the possibility of a civilian government. At least the Constitution brought the space for political change. Yes, it might not be 100% perfect, but no Constitution is perfect. Constitutions evolve, are a process; they need to be amended. So, I saw the 2008 Constitution as a platform to move forward.

*(U Kyaw Soe Hlaing)*

When the 2008 Constitution was approved, we thought that there could be a gradual change in the country; that there could be a new political landscape. We tried to explain this to people; we started training people, preparing people with very different political and ethnic backgrounds within the state structures and out of them for this possible change. We tried to train them, to support them, so that they could participate in this transition moment as agents of change. We thought a strong opposition was needed.

*(U Hla Maung Shwe)*

What we achieved during the military rule is, in a way, amazing, but I have always believed that, if you work inclusively, you cannot be 'the other person'. As a mother, as a woman, you learn to work within the family network, and I think the same thing applies at the political level. Even if the circumstances are not ideal, you cannot wait until the situation is perfect. I always remember that I am the outsider; I have only a facilitation role, to make sure that all the different groups are included. I think that is the success; that is the change.

*(Lahpai Seng Raw)*

To be clear and honest, during the pre-election period, I supported the election. At that time I accepted the idea of taking, expanding, the existing political space. But when you say this you are labelled as pro-military. When I reflect about myself and I ask the question, "Am I pro military?" the answer is "No". I am very much against, but when you start looking for a change, you have to change yourself. If you want to be part of a process of change you can't be black or white, you must be on a grey area. 'Grey' doesn't mean you are not clear. It means that you accept that nothing is simple. And 'Grey' also keeps changing.

*(Saya Kyaw Thu)*

If you are the kind of person who wants everything to be in order, transition periods can be very challenging because nothing is clear, there is no more 'black' and 'white'. But I have always lived in ambiguous situations, and I have always tried to manage chaos in the best possible way.

*(U Harn Yawnghwe)*



Our politics are so polarised. We asked both sides to come a little bit closer from their two ends. The proposal was very simple and straightforward, “We can find a common ground; from that common ground we will have something to work together in order to have a change.” That was a very simple proposal.

*(U Tin Maung Thann)*

In 2009 we met U Aung Min. At that time he was the Minister of Railways. We explained him our opinion on State building, and Nation building. He took lots of notes; it was a very wonderful thing. From then on we would meet with him every two weeks and our discussions lasted from two to four hours. In 2010 U Aung Min brought Minister U Soe Thein, who is now the Minister of the President’s Office, to one of these meetings. He is a former Commander in Chief of the Myanmar navy, and had studied abroad in the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan and in many countries. He is more modern. So we met, the five of us.

*(U Hla Maung Shwe)*

At that time, nobody was with us. Because you know, both sides labelled us. We got many labels. From the democratic movement, especially the exiled, they labelled us as ‘regime apologists’; they said we wanted to strength, to support the military regime; but at that very same moment that regime labelled us as a ‘threat to the State’. But somehow we could establish that engagement mechanism to prepare for this change.

*(U Tin Maung Thann)*

At that time peace was only a dream, but of course, these dreams were also realistic thinking, because we should dream, but dreams should be realistic; you should dream about what you can deliver. We had a dream about bringing peace, and we found a possibility.

*(U Kyaw Soe Hlaing)*

When we formed Myanmar Egress we had this vision of Myanmar becoming a great country. And for that to happen, we thought that peace was very important. Since 1948, when we became independent, we have been fighting each other. This is too much. Without peace, there is no development, no democracy, no federalism. So we were clear that we needed peace. But, how do we get peace?

*(U Hla Maung Shwe)*

That was part of our proposal, because, you know, when two polarised ends come together and try to find ways of working together for change, it is people like U Aung Min who will come forward. That was our belief at that time; it was not an assumption, but a belief, because we know the military system, we know our political system, we know our political history, we know our cultural history, we know the people of Myanmar. My work experience as a development expert has been helpful. U Hla Maung Shwe has a business background, but his interest is on politics within a given space, like business associations. Dr. Nay Win Maung was the publisher of *The Voice*. Different networks and backgrounds combined; we became the interlocutors of the forces that came to work together.

*(U Tin Maung Thann)*

The first person I got in touch with when I first started contacting the government in 1999 was the Myanmar ambassador to Canada, who used to be U Ne Win personal physician. I don't know why he agreed to meet me, but I felt that we had to make contact, to reach out. I also wanted to show them that I did not have a grudge against them. And that, actually, had to do with my personal faith. After arriving in Canada I became a Christian, and that really helped me to deal with many issues, and not to hold revenge. So, this was also about my own transformation. You can be bitter, yes, but what will you achieve? To me, that is the thing. By the time I contacted the government, I did not have any hatred. Yes, I wanted to change the system, but not because of hatred, but because I believed the system was wrong, that we could do better in a different system. If you want a country that is peaceful, if you want a country that is prosperous, then you have to look at what will make this to happen. And unless you talk to your enemies you can't do that.

*(U Harn Yawnghwe)*

There was always this 'them' and 'us'; this 'we' and 'they'. This trend continued for a long time, and you could see how the division was growing. 'Us' and 'them' is 'black' and 'white'. And you want to be on the good side, but as time passed it was clear that there is no such 'black' and 'white'; that there is always a grey area. I became more aware of this; of the grey inside the government, but also of the fact that I, myself, had to be greyer too. And this is very difficult.

*(Saya Kyaw Thu)*

At that time we did not have any idea about peace, we did not know how to make peace. All we wanted was to win the war, to overthrow this government. But later on we realised that, because of the conflict, of the fighting, the situation in the resistance areas where we were living was much worse than in other areas; we did not have any resources, we did not have any doctor, education was very poor. That is why I say we need to solve the problems through political means. That is why I am involved in the peace process. I believe this is the only way we can solve our problems. It is the only way for our country.

*(Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win)*



## CHAPTER 4

***“Engaging in dialogue is a very serious business. Even more than engaging in war. How do you put an end to sixty years of conflict?”***

So it was U Aung Min and U Soe Thein who told the President, “you have many advisors already, but you should meet our friends; they are very seriously thinking about the country.” The President invited us to his office. He and three of his ministers attended. We were four Egress staff (U Tin Maung Thann, Dr. Nay Win Maung, myself, and Dr. Kyaw Yin Hlaing who was still working at the Hong Kong City University). We were initially given one and a half hours, but the meeting lasted for over three. We did not expect it. The meeting took place at a small, very simple room. I was the last one to be introduced. We highlighted the country’s situation as we saw it. We were not afraid, so we talked very honestly. We talked about many issues: exile, peace, youth, economics, education, civil society. I don’t think anybody had told the President those things before. I think he listened to us. We also suggested him to meet Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. After some time we also advised him to meet with members of the civil society. Only that showed how much the country had already changed. This is why we appreciate the President, and why we move on the President’s name.

*(U Hla Maung Shwe)*

So, when the moment came up, after the 2008 Constitution, and the 2010 elections, and the formation of a new government, we could establish the confidence among the reform-minded ministers, especially U Aung Min and U Soe Thein. And afterwards, through them, we got a chance to meet with the President. In that meeting one of our key proposals related to ethnic affairs; not only to peace, not only to national reconciliation, but broader than that. Because you know, if we don't have a political settlement with the ethnic groups in this country, this society cannot move forward. That was our proposal. And the President agreed with it, and only within two, three months time the President decided to offer, to open the door for peace.

*(U Tin Maung Thann)*

In March 2011 the Myanmar government announced its intention to engage in peace talks, but nobody came forward. So, later that year, in October 2011 Minister U Aung Min came to Bangkok to see me and asked my opinion about the President's offer. And I thought that was very strange, "A General wanting to know my opinion?" That was very unusual. I thought, "This might work, but it will take a lot of effort because it is not going to be easy after so many years of conflict." He asked me, "Can you help?" and I said, "Yes, I can help". This is how I got involved. My answer was positive because of several reasons. All the armed groups were ready to negotiate. With this I mean that they had been talking about it for years, but they had never had a counterpart. Lots of ideas had been worked out, but there was never a dialogue partner. I was very impressed by the President's inaugural speech; this was the first time anyone had ever addressed the conflict publically, so I thought being involved was worthy. Also, for the Minister to come and see me was something very unusual. Because for the last forty-eight years I had been on the wanted list, on the black list, everything. So, for him to take the step to come and see, and to ask my opinion was very rare. So, I thought, "The armed groups are ready, and the government is willing; maybe there is a chance that this could work." So, basically I introduced the Minister to a number of groups and since then they have managed to work ceasefire agreements out.

*(U Harn Yawnghwe)*

In 2010 a new government was put in place in Myanmar. In 2011 President U Thein Sein released a statement in which he invited all ethnic armed organisations to engage in peace talks. He also sent some personal

representatives to meet with the KNU. Before we agreed to meet them, we called an emergency Central Committee meeting, where we decided that maybe the door was open for talking. We were clear in that we can only solve our problems by political means. We have been holding arms to protect our political stand, our people from the Burmese army. So, we created a KNU Peacebuilding Committee, which was formed by seven leaders. At that time the Chairman was Padoh David Tharckabaw, and the Secretary was Padoh David Taw, who has already passed away.

*(Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win)*

When in 2011 the Myanmar President announced the invitation to the armed groups to come for peace negotiations, the United Nationalities Federal Council established a Political Dialogue Committee, which I headed. When the announcement came I thought, "Maybe this invitation is another opportunity to solve the armed conflict through political means." That is why we responded to the invitation. This ethnic armed conflict cannot be resolved through violent means but through civil and political means. That has always been clear. Political problems should be dealt with through political means. Our belief is, "If we continue with this kind of armed conflict, who suffers most? Our own ethnic nationalities, because they have so many problems, they have to live in IDP camps, in refugee camps. So who are the most affected? Our own people." That is why we are always welcoming to deal with this armed conflict through political means. Because of that, the 2011 invitation was an opening door to deal with the political problem.

*(Nai Hong Sar)*

In 2011, when the Myanmar Government first approached the ABSDF to participate in peace talks, we found giving them a quick response very difficult. We had to discuss it in the leadership first. We had to analyse the political situation from all corners. Some of our alliance groups had already started talking to the government, but not the ABSDF. Anyway, we always thought about political dialogue, about a political solution, so we had to engage. At the same time, some of our ABSDF members did not agree, in the sense that even if we all want political dialogue, they thought we could not trust the government. So we decided, "If their request to talk comes with dignity, we have to accept it". Bilateral dialogue alone cannot solve the problem. We all understood that. But for the ABSDF as an organisation, we need to talk, with our own identity, and we need to be

very careful. That is what the Central Committee decided, “Yes we should start talking with the government”.

*(U Than Khe)*

Some members of the government, especially the President, are sincere in that they would like to change the country. They might also have felt some pressure from the outside to start a peace process. They understand that without peace they cannot develop our country, nor we can have a democratic system. The areas controlled by the ethnic people are very rich. Some people say that the peace process is a way of benefiting from the natural resources. But I think they are clear about changing the political system. And I agree with them. So, I think their thinking goes in the correct direction. Even some members of the army would like to move ahead with the peace process but, unfortunately, not all of them share the same views. We worry that if we do not make it, the fighting will resume. So, to achieve peace, the leaders of the ethnic organisations, as well as the government, must want to change and love peace, no war. But also the entire population must want to see peace in the country, and the international community has to support peace. But we were never trained to make peace. We are learning, the ethnic organisations, the government, other ethnic people, and the Burmese people as well; all of us.

*(Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win)*

Who has ever heard about negotiating with sixteen groups at the same time? People think that the armed groups are all the same and they are not. They all have different backgrounds, they all come from different situations, some are small, some are big. There are lots and lots of issues.

*(U Harn Yawnghwe)*

At the beginning it was quite difficult; it was not a formal negotiation yet, just a moment of contact, of getting to know each other, so most of the trips were secretly arranged, and Minister U Aung Min travelled with a very low profile. On one of the first trips, we travelled to Mae Sot. At that time, Thailand was suffering great floods. At one point, the delegation could not continue their road trip; they had to find shortcuts and alternative ways to reach Mae Sot. One of the delegation members called me, “We are stuck in the middle of the water; we might need to be evacuated”. So he asked me to arrange it. I said, “You have to return to



Bangkok, but the way back might be already flooded. In the worst-case scenario you might need an airlift. “He asked me to check with my friends on the Thai side and I called them and asked, “We need to evacuate this and this”. My friend asked me, “Who are they?” I said, “I cannot tell”. My Thai friend told me, “If you cannot tell the names, it will be difficult to arrange an airlift”. So we tried to hire a private helicopter. Unfortunately, there was none available because all of them were being used by the news agencies. Fortunately, the delegation managed to find a way out because the drivers were quite good and listened to all the local emergency radio channels. So, after twelve hours they reached Mae Sot. That moment looks funny now, but at that time we faced so many difficulties; the meeting itself was confidential, they were stuck in the middle of nowhere and it was not safe to travel. We could not have meetings in public, so most of the times we would meet at the outskirts of the cities. For the Myanmar government delegation, moving around was not easy, but it was the same for the leaders of the ethnic armed organisations. The unofficial times were very difficult.

*(U Kyaw Soe Hlaing)*

In October 2011 the President ordered Minister U Aung Min to meet with the KNU leaders, the KNU, the ethnic group that has been fighting the government for the longest time. U Aung Min, U Tin Maung Thann, Dr. Kyaw Yin Hlaing and myself travelled to Thailand. I remember the heavy rain, the floods all over the country. Normally you can travel from Bangkok to Mae Sot in five or six hours, but because of the flooded roads it took us thirteen. That made me appreciate U Aung Min even more.

*(U Hla Maung Shwe)*

For U Aung Min’s first trip, we arranged that we were going to travel to Mae Sot and meet with Naw Zipporah; at that time she was the KNU General Secretary with another KNU leader. They received U Aung Min and they talked about the possibility of peace. That was the first time to meet with the KNU leaders, not just for us, but also for U Aung Min. On that same trip, we organised to meet with several Myanmar exiled in Bangkok without informing U Aung Min in advance. Initially he was shocked. He asked us, the Egress guys, “Why did you arrange this?” “Please Minister, think about them as if they were your sons, or your nephews. Imagine that we have sent them abroad with a scholarship, or in an excursion trip to

the outside world. Now they have experience. So, please, meet the exiled guys so that you, and the President, can understand their perspectives.” U Aung Min smiled and said, “OK, I agree to meet them.” They were Aung Naing Oo, former ABSDF, Nyo Ohn Myint a senior NLD member, Bo Bo Kyaw Nyein, Aung Thu Nyein and some others. An important thing we are especially proud of was organising the first meeting between U Aung Min and U Harn Yawngkhwe, the son of the first Myanmar President. This was the right time for the meeting. U Harn Yawngkhwe explained U Aung Min that he had never been able to return to his native hometown. He also explained that he was thinking on how could he support the peace process. Two weeks after that meeting, U Harn Yawngkhwe was allowed to return to his motherland.

*(U Hla Maung Shwe)*

After forty-eight years in exile I returned to Burma. I found that the country had not changed that much. Yes, the streets names are different, there are a few new buildings, but I grew up in Yangon and I went to school here, so I can still make my way around. Even the small towns still look the same. Being back is, however, a bit strange. Especially when I am in posh places, because we were part of the elite before, but the Generals expelled us. It was a deliberate plan to wipe us out. And we became exiled, outcast. Everything we owned was taken away, and we had to start from zero. And now, after fifty years, I am back, and these guys are gone. I am back, and it is a very strange feeling. Coming back to Yangon was not very emotional, but there were two times that really affected me: when I flew back to Heho in Shan State. I remembered that the last time I had flown back was with the body of my father, to bury him. That was emotional. And the other time was in Inle Lake. I was sitting on the boat looking around and suddenly I thought, “Yes, I remember the name of every mountain.” All my memories came back.

*(U Harn Yawngkhwe)*

Myanmar Egress supported Minister U Aung Min, and U Harn Yawngkhwe supported Myanmar Egress. Within two weeks U Harn Yawngkhwe was back in Bangkok and he arranged one meeting. That was the first time that a meeting between the Myanmar government special envoy and ethnic armed groups leaders could take place. It was November 2011. The meeting took place in Chiang Rai. U Harn Yawngkhwe arranged everything for those

in Thailand. And I did the same from the Myanmar side. We crossed the border. This time group was bigger. We crossed the border like common people; no one noticed it. We hired a small bus and continued our trip to Chiang Rai. We met with five ethnic armed groups, and each of them had the same amount of time, one and a half hour; they were all equal. This is how we started. First we met with the RCSS/SSA. General Yawd Serk and those who accompanied him wore the Shan national dress. At the other side were U Aung Min and the Egress guys. U Aung Min explained the Government policy and the peace process. U Harn Yawng hwe was like a mediator. It was a very significant moment. One and a half hours later, U Harn Yawng hwe said, "Gentlemen, the time is over." We took a group photo. The second group was the KNU. Three KNU leaders attended: David Taw, who later passed away, Mutu Say Poe, who at that time was the KNLA Commander in Chief, and now is the KNU Chairman, and another KNU Central Committee member. I was very excited because we have been fighting against each other for sixty-two years. Within one and a half hours they talked about what they needed. After this we shook hands and arranged for next meeting. Third was the CNF, fourth was the KNPP, and number five was the KIO. There were so many feelings in that room. They tried to explain their background, their situation from the 40's up to now. "Gentlemen, please we have a next appointment, please understand us. Right now we should focus on how to understand, and how to work on the peace process, we have no special answers." I felt very happy because although we are different, we were now in the same room. The next day U Aung Min arranged for another meeting only with the KNU and KIO. Unfortunately the KIO could not attend the meeting. So, the KNU leaders had twice the time for them. It was about a three hours meeting. It did not take place at the meeting room, but at U Aung Min's bedroom. I acted as a note taker. I learnt lots of lessons from that meeting. After the meeting, Mutu Say Poe said, "Why didn't we meet each other the previous time? If we have a chance to meet the former Generals from the army like you, we would have no damage like this." And then he saluted U Aung Min doing the military salute, and U Aung Min replied in the same manner. I saw how U Aung Min liked it. Never miss a chance to talk. After that we started going back and forth to Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Sangkhlaburi, Mae Sot, Mae Sai, Bangkok... so many places.

*(U Hla Maung Shwe)*

The armed groups had always said that they would negotiate the ceasefire agreements separately, but that they would like to negotiate the political issues together. But when I talked to them, they said, “We can’t organize a meeting with all the groups together, could you help us?” So, we did. They also asked us to help them coordinate, so we got involved. Never directly as negotiators, but playing a facilitator role, bringing people together, bringing resource people etc. We can support whatever they need because we have an NGO programme that is quite flexible. The funders trusted us; the armed groups trusted us, and now the Government too.

*(U Harn Yawnghwe)*

After the invitation from the President, the government delegation started to meet bilaterally with the armed groups. On December 22, 2011 the government delegation met with the New Mon State Party delegation in Sangkhlaburi, by the Thai border. I led the NMSP delegation. We met with U Aung Min. For the first hour I talked about the grievances of the ethnic nationalities. How we have been oppressed, and how much patience we have had, and how we have never had equal opportunities. I spoke for one hour. U Aung Min was patiently listening to me. Since I was able to express, and present about how much the ethnic nationalities have been unequally treated based on our perspective, because of what I was able to tell him, I was very satisfied with that opportunity itself. On the other hand, it was very difficult for U Aung Min to accept what he was hearing. At that meeting even some members of his team were whispering to him, “Maybe we should stop him”, but U Aung Min said, “No, let him talk, we are entering into a negotiation process, let’s listen.” That was his response. U Aung Min did not respond to what I said directly, but he said, “We have to solve this problem in a political manner.” Until today, from time to time, U Aung Min refers to the “one hour conversation listening to the grievances.”

*(Nai Hong Sar)*

I did not attend the two initial informal meetings between the ABSDF and the Myanmar government delegation. There were many different ideas within the organisation. Some people did not want the Chairperson to meet with the government, whilst some others thought that the Chairman should lead the delegation. Taking a decision was very difficult, very hard.

For the first official meeting between the government delegation and the ABSDF, U Aung Min, a former General and Union Minister of the President's Office, was the Myanmar government side team leader. From the ABSDF all the leaders decided, "OK, this time you should lead the delegation and explain all the positions of the ABSDF". When we set the date for the first formal meeting in Chiang Mai, our team sat together and we divided the duties among ourselves. We prepared a lot for this meeting. It was a strange feeling, "Who will sit beside the General Secretary? Who beside the Chairperson?" Even for shaking hands we prepared, "Who is going to shake hands with whom? And how? If we are too polite, they might think we are weak; if we do something aggressive and arrogant, they can think we are very rude." There are so many small things. If you look at the members of the Myanmar government delegation, they are older than us, and in our Burmese culture the elders are always regarded with due respect. So, if we see it from the age angle we, the ABSDF delegates, are younger and, therefore, below them. So, even the manners at the talks played a role, how we need to keep our Burmese culture, how if the elder people keep talking we have to listen, quietly, never complaining. At the same time, we were also concerned about our history. We are very proud of our students' history, of the role students have played in our Burmese history; students have always stood for the people. This is our dignity. So, keeping ourselves quiet meant betraying our dignity. I think the government delegation also faced many difficulties in engaging with us. It is a natural phenomenon because they also have mixed feelings like us, because their position is also very difficult; they are older than us; they were thinking the same things we were, "What being polite would mean?" So, every step we go on this process; we need to be careful and we need to balance ourselves. During the first meeting, their team leader explained the Myanmar government policy and what did they think about the ABSDF. From our side, we explained them our history, our role, our dreams. The meeting only went these two ways. I don't think this was dialogue yet, but an exchange of positions between two opponents. But we met each other and we exchanged our different views. The most difficult thing in negotiations is the starting point.

*(U Than Khe)*



At that time I could not join in these meetings as I was still at the university. I learnt from my colleagues how difficult building trust was. Even to sit face-to-face was difficult. But we were able to bypass these difficulties because the leaders from all sides dare to take risks. If they had not taken risks, things would not have happened. And we tried to support them.

*(U Kyaw Soe Hlaing)*

Many people think that magic will happen. That once we have a democratic, a federal system, everything will change. I always say that if you want democracy, you can't wait for the government to give it to you, you have to push for it. It is the same with federalism. You don't wait for the government to give it to you. You make it happen. Lots of people say, "This is a trick, they haven't given us anything yet." No! They won't give you anything! Why should they? What you have to do is to get it. How do you get it is how you negotiate. And if you get it, that's it. That is, the kind of federalism you get will be what you negotiate. If you do not know what you want, and how to negotiate it, you won't get anything. And that is part of the problem with people saying, "The army is still in power, this is a trick, this is not real." And I say, "Which person wants to give up power? Why would the Generals give up power? There is no reason. You have to

know what is it that you want, and how to get it, without being a dictator.” They say, “If the government would be sincere, they would give us what we want.” And I say, “Why should they? “If they were sincere and give you what you want, you would not have had to fight for the last thirty years, why would they give you anything now? You still have to fight for it. The only difference is that now you are not using arms.” I think the mindset is one of the biggest blockages. Expecting the government to come up with a solution that you will 100% like. This will never happen.

*(U Harn Yawnghwe)*

Although there are many big challenges ahead, the NSAGs, I think, are almost exhausted; they openly say that they can’t prove any real achievement from their side. The government side, as well, they might have acceded power, but they have lost their dignity and reputation. And those in power need precisely this, recognition, legitimacy; what they have lost. Only the peace process can bring these to them. We should not expect much from the peace process; the country economic problems are not going to be solved in one day. But having a space where people can speak out, can take their feelings out, will bring some level of peace. I think the peace process, in general, will positively contribute.

*(Saya Kyaw Thu)*

I think the whole peace process is not slow; on the contrary, it is going quite fast. Of course, public expectations are different. For the people, a three years peace process is already too long; especially in those areas where there are no clashes, where there is no fight. A preliminary ceasefire agreement is signed, and then there is preparation for the comprehensive ceasefire agreement. Since it is comprehensive and all-inclusive it takes time. Every clause needs to be defined thoroughly, so it takes time. But for the people on the ground, this feels too long; they do not see the overall process and the difficulties. In those areas, I understand both sides, the government officials and the armed groups leaders; they have to address this frustration. People see there is no fight, and therefore, they ask, “Why do we need to wait?” Their perspective is limited to their area. But all of us, the dialogue partners, have to look at the whole process. Managing the public expectations has become an issue.

*(U Kyaw Soe Hlaing)*

## **On dialogue and trust building**

In early 2012 my colleagues asked me to help in designing a peace center, including its financial management and its sustainability. I thought we have to design an institution that had never existed in this country before. Establishing a 100% governmental institution would have been very easy because the government already had the structures in place. People ask, "Why not a 'Peace Ministry'?" That would have been positive from a government perspective, but it would have made working with the ethnic armed groups more difficult; especially to build trust with them. It would have also made proving that we are impartial to the international community much more difficult. But the other way around, creating a 100% non-governmental peace center, was not the solution either, because we need a mandate, we need authorisation. Armed groups are under the unlawful association list; anybody who engages with unlawful associations is a criminal. Our thinking was, "If we don't talk, if we don't negotiate, if we don't bring the ethnic armed groups to the negotiation table, who do we work with?" We are trying to engage in the peace process. At the beginning we need to engage the two key stakeholders: the government and the armed groups. To implement a ceasefire agreement, we need to bring those who are engaged in the armed conflict. In this case, we needed a mandate, we needed a kind of legality. That is why working with the support of the government was more appropriate. Of course for operational matters, since we are dealing with different systems, we need a lot of flexibility. We need to travel, we need to talk; if we are 100% government officials, there are rules and regulations, restrictions that may limit that flexibility. Even talking to you, if I would be a 100% government official I would need clearance from different levels. But here we enjoy that flexibility. That flexibility helps us to work positively with the ethnic armed groups. And also, being a semi-government organization allows us to advocate to both sides. The perception from both sides might be different: the government might think we are close to, or work with, or facilitate the peace process; at the same time the armed groups might think that we work with the government, are close to the government. But for us, ourselves, first we need to be clear; we need to be conscious about what we are doing. But we also need be aligned with both. We live here in Myanmar, so we need to comply with the country's laws. But at the same time we have to understand the armed group's nature, their priorities. We all need to work together for this peace process to move forward. I think the current model, a hybrid model, is the most appropriate one for the time being; maybe in the future, during the



political dialogue process, we might need to change our status. Designing this Center was not easy because of this in-between situation.

*(U Kyaw Soe Hlaing)*

In the past ceasefire negotiations, during the military regime, the local, respected elders, religious leaders and businessmen were involved as “go-between”. They delivered messages at a time when the communication between the two sides did not exist, as they had access to both sides. In the case of Kachin, that included religious leaders, one of them was my father, and also businessmen, my uncle, and retired politicians, a retired diplomat, my distant uncle. But when U Thein Sein became the President and made the peace call in 2011, the approach started to change. Gradually the role of the insider local mediator/facilitator was not necessary any more because over the seventeen years ceasefire the government and the armed groups had built relationship. And we had to adjust to this transition. After 2011 and for almost one year we were also learning, we were trying to analyse the context, and to identify where could we actually fit in this process. So, we thought, “Maybe we can share our analysis with the Committee for the Emergence of a Federal Union”, and we met with their Dialogue Committee a few times, just to provide them with our analysis. From then, the lesson learnt is that the trust was always there. At the beginning, I did not have much doubt that the government side would trust me because they still know my father and my uncle, and in our culture, I guess in every culture, the linkages are important, the trust goes from the family, so when they know whose daughter I am they can either stereotype me, or they can accept who I am. So, from the government side I felt they trusted me. But on the other hand, with the armed groups, particularly with the KIO, I had feelings of doubt, because during the Border Guard Force negotiation in 2009, my dad was still very closely involved in the conversation; his analysis was, “This BGF is a door that can lead to the political process”. He was not saying to accept the BGF proposal, but to be used as an opportunity to open the door. But some KIO leaders misunderstood that message, so they lost trust in my dad; therefore when I became involved in the current peace process, I had mixed feelings about whether the Kachin community, and the KIO would fully trust me. That is why we were not sure about how much should we get involved in the KIO/Myanmar government negotiation process. So, we started to build trust again through our own analysis of the situation.

*(Daw Lahtaw Ja Nan)*

We have been fighting each other in the field, in the cities, in the jungle, and now at opposing sites of the table inside a room. For almost twenty-five years, they accused the ABSDF of being a terrorist group. From our side, we used to say they are a brutal military regime that has taken the power illegally. Now the meeting is between two enemies. Yes, two enemies are sitting in the same room. Negotiating is very difficult.

*(U Than Khe)*

Compared to previous governments, this one is more open to political dialogue; we have a chance if we make a clever use of this opportunity. But, according to our experience, the other ethnic people, and also the other side, we don't trust each other. The intention is good, but we see things differently, we need to find ways to agree. The current government cannot agree to some of our demands, they go beyond the government scope. For that, we need to change the Constitution. So, we have to negotiate. We have to be clear and we have to be careful. Even if we reach a nationwide ceasefire agreement, we will still need to negotiate a framework for the political dialogue. This difficulty is not only with the government, but also with the ethnic organisations; but we want this political dialogue to be inclusive, so civil society, political parties will have to participate. How long will it take?

*(Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win)*

I am often asked, especially by the media, if I trust the people at the Myanmar Peace Center and the Generals in the government side. To me, trust is not the most important element in peacebuilding, because for a long time I did not trust the SPDC, their policies, their people, but I have a commitment for peace, this is what I want, so I tried to engage, to talk to them, not because I trusted them, but because I wanted peace. So, for me, trust is important, but more important than trust is the commitment to find a solution. Trust might be helpful but commitment is more important. I don't think you need to trust to be able to move ahead. Trust can be built on the basis of two categories: policy and personality. At that time I did not trust the SPDC. But we tried so hard to find a meaningful way to engage in dialogue with them.

*(Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong)*

I think building trust will take time. I need to look at the whole situation. If I am satisfied with the whole I will say, "OK". I do not want to make the wrong decision; I have to be very careful because I am representing my Karen people. We can build personal relationships, and maybe we can

understand each other, and forgive each other, but this is not about you and me. It is about politics. It is about the nation. We need more time, more patience; more understanding.

*(Naw Zipporah Sein)*

The problem is that we are blaming each other and sometimes, especially ethnic leaders, are frustrated. And we need to be very careful with what we say, and its repercussions; whether what we are saying will block, or open our next step. But we only know how to fight. We don't know how to negotiate. That is a problem. Engaging in dialogue is very serious business, even more than war.

*(Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong)*

And then we brought the KNU team to Pago, Yangon and Naypidaw. U Aung Min agreed to organise a meeting with the Vice-President. That was the first time. Later on we requested a meeting between the President and the KNU leaders. I talked to the KNU Commander in Chief, "Gentlemen, please bring one Karen national dress; we will ask the President to wear it." So, when they met with the President, they said, "Mr President, we brought you this, would you like to wear it? This is a symbol for the peace process; to encourage it. Please wear it." The President put it on. And they saw the President as a human being. It was very special. First the President was



worried because he was a Lieutenant, he fought against the ethnic armed groups. So the President explained, “We don’t like to fight each other, let’s talk to each other instead.” So finally the KNU leaders agree. I have been in all meetings and I am very proud. I am very lucky.

*(U Hla Maung Shwe)*

Even if we have decided to solve the problems through political means, building trust is the most difficult thing because of all the experiences we carry with us. We have regular communication with U Aung Min and his team. We have a good relation with them. I understand they are very sincere in this process. They would like to do something, they would like to change the system, but they also face their own problems; they are criticised by their own people. When we meet with him, he talks to us very openly. And sometimes he is very upset, and we have to encourage him. You know, making peace is more difficult than making war. Sometimes we also feel very tired. But, do we have any other option to reach our goal? KNU is the only ethnic armed organisation that has met with the President and the Commander in Chief of the Myanmar Army. We are the only ones with access to them because we said to them very openly, “We formed our army not to occupy Rangoon, not to overthrow the government, but to protect our people; after the ceasefire was signed, we never attacked your posts”. He said: “Yes, I understand”. Sometimes it is difficult to explain our position to him. That’s why last year we presented our framework for political dialogue to the UPWC members. Some were very confused; some agreed; some did not participate much. It was difficult. Sometimes I am very sorry for U Aung Min; he works very hard on this peace process. I don’t want him to resign, to stop this work. He is the only person right now moving. For the rest of the people, I am not so sure if they are sincere. There is also limited trust on the MPC among some people because they see them as working only for the government. The first time we went to Yangon we stayed at the MPC guesthouse. Some people did not want to stay there. I had no problem with that; we are making peace now.

*(Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win)*

We must create personal trust first. And then we must institutionalise it. So the last three years, when the President called the peace, nobody trusted this, now it is already happening. So now the President can ask everyone: do we need a real peace or not?

*(U Hla Maung Shwe)*

Honouring the agreements is one important step to build trust. After we reached the ceasefire agreement, there were some small clashes between us and the Burmese army, mostly for security reasons, because the demarcation lines were not clear. Because we still did not trust each other, we asked them, "Please do not close these and those lines." The other important element is holding regular meetings. Some of our people think that regular meetings are not a good idea because we can manipulate things; they would prefer that we keep the distance. But if we do not speak openly we cannot know what it is in their minds, and, therefore, we cannot reach agreements. Sometimes we do not understand each other. Trusting each other takes time, because historically this distrust is in our mind. But we need to move forward taking the lessons from the past; we don't have to live in the past.

*(Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win)*

Since this is a peace talk, we have to engage, we have to try to find the commonground, we need to see the same issues from different perspectives, and that is a very important part of our job. But this is also very dangerous; dangerous because our own friends could distrust you. So during the talks, over the coffee break, I will go to talk to the Generals, shake hands with them, and try to engage them, maybe in the evening I will go and try to talk to them over a glass of wine or something, and try to understand them, to create the situation where you can build understanding. But all these can be you, know, ill perceived by your own people. I am often criticised in Internet; some people say I am too close to the Generals, and they post photos of me with them. I can see that kind of danger also. People are still in a confrontation mindset, not in a negotiation one.

*(Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong)*

In 2011 at the very early stages of the negotiations, the President had assigned the Chief Minister of Kachin state to ask me who the KIO would want to be in the government's negotiation time. My response was, "It does not matter, who, but it has to be representative of the government." We do not enter into negotiation because we trust a particular person, but because we have work that needs to be sorted out. So, whoever comes that has a mandate from the government, we will accept. I also mentioned how much work we still have to do to build trust between the government and the people. When we talk about trust, it is not only between the KIO

and the government, it is between the government and the armed groups, and also among the armed groups.

*(General Sumlut Gun Maw)*

Most of the Burmese still don't see how this peace process is relevant to them. And they don't understand the reasons why the people in the armed groups are fighting. They just think, "They should not be causing trouble". As you know, there are seven States and seven Divisions, so if you are talking about federalism, about a more decentralized power structure, you need to have a strategy in which you include the seven divisions, so that the Burmese feel included. But there are some ethnic leaders who cannot accept that. I have always told the ethnic leaders, "if you want federalism and you are Kachin, you cannot only think about the Kachins, you have to think about the whole country; otherwise don't call it federalism." I think that is still a problem. What is going to happen to the country? The vision of the ethnic groups is too small and this is one of their weaknesses. And the Bamar majority always has a bigger vision, so they always win.

*(U Harn Yawnghwe)*

We listen. The key is that we listen. We don't limit anybody. We invite everybody. We can institutionalise the process in a way that it does not deviate from the ultimate goal, getting the confidence to build the trust with the ethnic leaders. So, we listen, and then we don't go for the ideals. We always aim at the ideals, but the tool we use is the practical solutions. U Aung Min, who was a General, said, "Don't leave minor things behind; they will come back later as big problems." This is what we have learnt from him. We never try to be idealistic to solve the problems.

*(U Tin Maung Thann)*

Relationship and communication depends on the background of the leaders. Some already have experienced working with the Burmese government, and they understand them better. Some others have only fought; they have never been inside Burma, they see the Burmese government as the enemy. That's why you have to be decisive, not just with the other but also with your own people. Some people, especially those living in the border areas and outside the country, would like to revenge, to retaliate. I understand them. That is why the leadership has to be decisive. Some of the leaders who have experience living deep inside Burma and

among the Burmese ethnic people sometimes have different views. People born and grow up in areas controlled by the KNU have not an understanding of life inside Burma. They say, "This is our land, the Burmese invaded us. We are calling for federalism." However, federalism means we have to live together. These two views contradict each other. Therefore, we need to talk and negotiate. But as time passes, I think trust increases; we need to learn to live together. I believe the President is committed to solve this problem, but according to our experience some of the Burmese top leaders do not trust us. The main challenge is that everyone has to put their own interests aside.

*(Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win)*

Our responsibility is to make things happen. And we put a lot of effort on this. Even on the logistics. We want to make sure that negotiators come to the table and feel comfortable; they should not feel hassled on their journey. The actual negotiations, the decisions, this is up to them, and for us, our job is to facilitate it. If you keep this in mind, then you are relieved. This is a process; there is many people involved. There is no one single decision maker. Both sides need to agree. This is a kind of team working, collective approach. This process will only succeed if all sides work together. The next step, the political dialogue, will include even more important stakeholders like political parties, civil society.

*(U Kyaw Soe Hlaing)*

## On words

Even now, while we are sitting with the government at the same table, talking to them, we still use the word 'enemy'. Sometimes the other side uses the word 'insurgent', especially those in the army. We look at the language they use to refer to the KNU, it shows where their minds are. Words are very important. That is why I think we need to keep communicating with them regularly; we need to be open with them, explain things clearly. We formed an armed organisation not to overthrow the government, not to occupy the cities, but to protect our political stand, our people. I am very clear. Even if we militarily defeated one another we need to solve this conflict through political means.

*(Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win)*

The polarization that the civil war has brought is so deep that it has created two different political cultures, which are very difficult to reconcile. I can see how the Tatmadaw and the ethnic armed groups have a very different political culture; and every word we use is shaped by it. Even when we used words like 'unity' and 'Union': we speak the same language but mean differently. When U Ne Win came to power in 1962 he claimed to protect the Union from dis-integration. But on the name of Unity and non-disintegration, we are not allowed to learn, protect and promote our own language, to worship different religions. This is what they call 'ethnic unity'. But we talk about 'unity in diversity'. You have to accept our diversity first, and then create unity. Without recognizing Chin as a Chin, Karen as a Karen, Shan as a Shan, etc., who speak different languages, practice different cultures, worship different religions, the so called 'ethnic unity' that you imposed on us is not unity but uniformity. This is the kind of different political culture that we need to reconcile. What I am trying to say is that after sixty years of armed conflict we have developed totally different political cultures; totally different types of understandings. Because we also want a strong Union, we also want unity. And a negotiation process is about trying to find a common language, a common understanding; and you cannot find this common understanding at the battlefield, only at the dialogue table. Once, when we were having a break during the negotiations, one of the Generals asked me over coffee: "But why do you want to use the word 'Federalism'? You are not secessionists, you are not pro independence". I tried to explain him that federalism is not about separation but about building a united



country based on the principle of unity-in-diversity. And he said, “But this is acceptable.” He said he did not know how much he could convince the other Generals.

*(Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong)*

We are now not only working within our own organisation, but with many others. Sometimes they would like to use very strong words; even the words are not meaningful, cannot be implemented; for example: a ‘genuine’ federal union. I don’t know what ‘genuine’ is. That’s why when I met with U Aung Min I explained to him why people are afraid of wording. We use ‘ethnic armed revolutionary organization’, but the government opposes the word ‘revolutionary’. I explained him that the idea of revolution is linked to a desire to change the system. Later on he said, “Yes, our President is also a revolutionary. He wants to change the system, too”. But I think he would not dare to say this in other places.

*(Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win)*

Not everybody is ready to compromise. From their side there are some people and from our side, too. Sometimes I think for myself, “Now I am talking to the enemies, we are sitting together, we are having lunch together”. But inside what I think is, “This is strange”; Even if we can create a personal relationship between two enemies, there are many words we have to chew. Some of the words, we have to work them out ourselves, because we cannot rely on them totally. It is very clear, and normal. Yes, we have to compromise with each other.

*(U Than Khe)*

We have now signed a preliminary ceasefire; this means that the fighting has to stop. We have to understand the process. We have to negotiate step by step. I feel that people are confused. They think that there is peace, but we are not there yet, there are many steps left. The government has a different understanding of peace. To them, peace is the absence of fighting, but, to us, peace means our right to be equal, to understand each other; like we live in a house and we share our things but no one is above the other, we have common rules.

*(Naw Zipporah Sein)*

I am happy with how I can assist to the negotiators in the table, and I also feel that as a woman I am being respected. I guess because having been educated abroad, the way I do things is efficient. Maybe that is what men respect in me. Or maybe it is because I can speak English, I don't know. I work very hard. Once I am tasked to do something, I get it done; looking at the peace process from the perspective being a technical support to the armed groups leaders, you need lots of patience; if someone has ego, that is a major block. That is why I am happy I am a supporter. I don't need to have ego. I am happy with what I can do behind the scenes. The process is tough, but we do what we can do. The toughest is trying to suggest something without stepping on their toes. They are the main key stakeholders, we are the supporters. I should not be jumping but crafting the language. Sometimes I think, "OK, I should not be saying this, because I guess they already know it". But then another part of me says, "OK, even though you think they know, you should just say it." Sometimes I don't know if they know, or they don't, and if they know, whether they want to hear it again. Balancing when to say, what to say, how to say... that is the main challenge for me.

*(Daw Lahtaw Ja Nan)*

From that time onwards I have been questioning myself more and more and asking, "Where are you, Kyaw Thu? Previously you were very clear; you did not like the government, the military. But now, as you start being more involved in the peace processes, you need to change, and when you change, you feel that you lose part of your identity." The 'Anti' (military, government) is a strong identity; when you start engaging, you feel that you are losing part of your identity. But the practicality is that you need to go for that. If you choose being practical, then it becomes clear that you need engagement, you need to engage with those with whom you might disagree. Without engaging, you can't move forward.

*(Saya Kyaw Thu)*

## **On sitting at the negotiation table**

Sitting at the negotiation table is difficult, especially at the beginning, because the setting is very formal, and you are facing each other after so many years of fighting. But later on, we become familiar with each other, we can say to each other whatever we want to, we can talk as friends. We have seen how the other side comes to the meetings well prepared. They know what they want to say; they can explain what they mean. From our side we sometimes feel that we are not well prepared. But the more experience we get, the easier it is for us. Language is also one of the problems, I think, because we are Karen, our Burmese language is sometimes not enough; but I think they understand. Negotiating is also difficult. You have to be clear what can you agree on, what is not negotiable. We have to be realistic. We have to think on what should be done according to situation; we cannot bring 100% change; we cannot change everything within a short time, we have to change things gradually, step by step. And we have our own internal differences about this; we need to decide which is the priority change and what will come later on.

*(Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win)*

When you are physically fighting, you have one strategy, but when you come to the political problem-solving, then that is a different story. You really have to strategize, use different tactics when you are in the battlefield holding a gun. When you come to the table and talk, when you are in the political fight, then is a different story.

*(Nai Hong Sar)*

Not always, but some few occasions, they also explain the difficulties they are facing in their work; how they are willing to run this country towards democratization; how they are leading for the transition, how much they have worked for the change to happen. We have to understand, yes, because some feelings are coming from different ways. Even though we are listening to their words, the feelings are different.

*(U Than Khe)*

On November 4-5, 2013 the NCCT and the UPWC met for the first time. From time to time, you know, at the negotiation there were times when we felt that we can achieve something, but sometimes we also dropped back. You keep moving back and forward, and back again. Some leaders went to

Yangon for the negotiations. Sometimes people raise concerns about their security; knowing that, yes, there are still some concerns that we all share; we have to take risks to enter into negotiations.

*(Nai Hong Sar)*

When we met with the government the last time, I could see how the army people came very well prepared. And I was happy. Because it meant that they are involved in the peace process. They have prepared. They are engaged. People see this as aggressiveness, but I think you should appreciate it; they are for peace. Of course they will try to control the process, why not? If I would be them, I would do the same. When I left that meeting I was very positive. I was the only person who paused and talked to the media, and people accused me and said I had been bought by the military... no! I saw what they are doing, how they prepared, because until that time no initiative for peace and dialogue never ever came from the Generals; most of the time, dialogue and peace talks are demanded only by people who came from us, by ethnic groups. If you have your own role clear and you see how they respond, which are the areas they want to control, when you see all these things I feel very good that they are prepared. You have to win on the table. We have tried to get into the dialogue table for sixty years and now we got it... use it!

*(Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong)*

Negotiating is a kind of art, because it is not only about negotiating with the enemy alone, we have to negotiate with other people, and there is no exception for the members inside one's own organisation. So, it is also a challenge. So, many, many different perspectives we have to argue.

*(U Than Khe)*

When in negotiations, when the other side explains, and knowing that what they are saying is not fair, it is very, very, hard to take it in, and very uneasy to listen, you know? But we should overcome these feelings and respond to them with other opinions.

*(Nai Hong Sar)*

Even within the NCCT members, a lot of leaders were very negative about talking to the government; even about going to Yangon. But after one, two, three meetings you see them changing. They have realised that

there is a need for dialogue. And also, they have realised that talking is not as dangerous as they thought; that, after all, we both are human beings; we come from the same country; although we have been fighting against each other in the battlefield, those on the other side also have families, they also like to go to the movies, listen to good music; we are the same. We have to see each other as humans; we need to find a way to connect, a way to understand each other. You know, one day one General, who was known as a strong hardliner within the army, told me, “You know, I have read all your books, all your papers; I used to read them so that I could find the point to fight you, but now I read them differently”. I did not ask what was the difference, but I thought that was positive already. That is why I try to engage with them during the talks. For me, this is not about the person, the individual (although there are some persons who created the problem), we have to look at the system, at the mechanism.

*(Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong)*

A challenge I face is how to balance my role as head of the NGO and also technical advisory team member. We believe that, to make this peace negotiation successful, we need to support the weaker part, because the government side has enough resources, but although the armed organisations have their own people they need additional support. In order to make the peace table even, we feel that we need to level this up. Sometimes people might get confused about us, because we sit with the armed groups, but sometimes we wear our civil society hat. Balancing these identities is sometimes very challenging. Sometimes people get confused and ask me, “Are you changing sides now?” Just because I often sit at different sides of the negotiation table, depending on the role I am playing. We have to find a balance and this is the most challenging part, “Where do I sit? Where do I stand?” I try to avoid being in the pictures because, again, we are not the key actors, we are behind the scenes and people might misinterpret it. On the other hand, I am the head of an NGO and I also do not want our work to be affected. Being a civil society member, plus being a peace builder, I want to keep relations with both sides. As a peace builder, our job is to bridge the gap, therefore I do not want to see one against the other, I need to continue building relations with both sides; that is essential, and I need to keep doing it.

*(Daw Lahtaw Ja Nan)*





## On signing an agreement

And then, in the New Year night of 2012, my colleague Dr. Nay Win Maung passed away. Ten days after, an official delegation from the KNU was also coming. We were very proud. The media was outside: “U Hla Maung Shwe, ten days ago your colleague Dr. Nay Win Maung passed away; do you think that he is seeing you from heaven?” “I think he is smiling.” That was a very special moment in my life. I will never forget it.

*(U Hla Maung Shwe)*

After some informal meetings on January 12, 2012 we met formally with U Aung Min in Hpa-an and we reached a preliminary ceasefire agreement. That was the first time in over sixty years of the Karen movement that we reached a preliminary ceasefire agreement with the government. In 1992-3, when other ethnic armed groups signed ceasefire agreements, the KNU was the only organization that continued to struggle alone for seventeen years without any assistance from other organizations.

*(Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win)*

The UNFC was concerned, “It is OK that individual organisations reach bilateral ceasefire agreements, but when it comes to the political dialogue, we have to come together.” So, UNFC came into the picture to organise that political dialogue. U Aung Min always says, “Each group is unique, each group is different, therefore we have to deal with each group bilaterally.” But from the UNFC side we respond, “Yes, we may be different as organizations, but our political aim is the same: equality, national equality and also self determination. Therefore, we need to come together.” At the end, to make it short, U Aung Min understood and kept meeting us as a group. Within 2013, UNFC and the Myanmar government officially met two times, and there were also many unofficial meetings, to talk about how do we organise and how do we conduct the political dialogue.

*(Nai Hong Sar)*

When President U Thein Sein offered ceasefire talks, the way he offered them was preliminary talks with the State government by the respective armed organisations (for example the CNF to talk to the Chin government). We thought this was reasonable, because ceasefire is related to issues such as troops positions, armed forces location, fighting conditions and so on. We could have not negotiated these things collectively, as the situation



differs in different States. At that time, the UNFC was saying that we should go collectively, and they rejected the government proposal. We wasted so much time. The ceasefires should have been signed before the end of 2012, and 2013 and 2014 should have been time for dialogue. But convincing our own leaders was a very difficult process. We did a lot of dialogue within our own ethnic groups, but also between ethnic groups. So we wasted time and lost a big opportunity, and confused people even more instead of clarifying. And this created so many internal problems. 2012 - 2013 was the most chaotic period I have gone through in all my experience, the period of more disunity. But luckily for the ethnic groups, the KIO organised the Laiza conference, which united us again. During the first two days there was a lot of blaming each other, but thankfully on the third day we were able to find a common ground and decided to extend the meeting two extra days, and finally we came out with something concrete, the Laiza Agreement.

*(Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong)*

## **On changing**

There are two main issues to include in the future political dialogue: the root causes of the conflict, and the consequences of the conflict, because after sixty-five years of fighting we do not want to see each other's faces; reconciliation, building a real peace will take a long time. Maybe the Constitution can be changed in two or three years, but healing the consequences of the conflict, the suffering, will take a long time. But we would like to start with this process now; we do not want to leave this situation to the next generation, we would like to stop it, to find a way to stop this. But, you know? Making peace is not so easy; sometimes fighting is much easier; if you are stronger than the enemy you fight, otherwise you ran, but to make peace you have to stay. When you are making peace, the fight does not only come from those you have to face in front of you, you have to look at your own back too.

*(Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win)*

When I engage with the Generals, I am looked with suspicion by my own people; it is not a comfortable position for me, it is not easy, but I still think I need to do it. Talking to them is not easy. That is why sometimes I prefer writing. And then some people also accuse me of revealing our strategies in my articles and papers. What they don't understand is that I want them





to know our strategy. We are not engaging a zero-sum game but trying to find a win-win solution. We want them to adopt our strategies and our policies. So they need to know them! I am glad that we are starting a kind of transition and are engaged in dialogue, although this is not easy and still a long way to go. But still, it is easier than fighting on the battlefield. After all, talking is better than killing.

*(Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong)*

When we are involved in the peace process, we try to communicate regularly with the other side. I think we can talk to each other frankly, with good intention. I am often seen as very close to the other side, even by my own people, but I believe we can talk to each other. I would like to question those who do not believe in the peace process, “Would you like to keep on fighting?” “For how many more years?” We have been fighting for sixty-five years. I do not think we can achieve more than what we have accomplished by military means. We control our territories. We collect taxes, we have a system in place, but that is not enough to provide for our people.

*(Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win)*

Last night I was thinking about 2002 or 2003 when we were trying to develop the Ethnic Nationalities Council roadmap, we went to Ireland and met with both sides, the Sinn Fein and the Unionists, we met with many people who shared their stories with us. One thing that reminds me to our current situation is what the Sinn Fein Secretary told me: “You know, after signing the Good Friday Agreement, and even before, I spent 80% of my time trying to convince my own people to talk to the other side; this will eventually happen to you too.” And that is true! At least 60 to 70% we spend trying to convince our own leaders from many different ethnic groups that this is an opportunity. In sixty years of our history, this is the best opportunity we have, because the people want peace, we have the international community assistance, they are willing to see peace in Burma, and now the government also wants to talk. This is the best time, our best chance, and we should take this opportunity!

*(Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong)*

The people from the Myanmar Peace Center are very much criticised by many groups, and for many reasons. When I work with them I see how they face many challenges at the personal level. They feel pressure from their previous allies and are now also a target for being aligned with the

government. They are in a very difficult position. When I deal with Ministers U Aung Min and U Soe Thein, I see how their own colleagues perceive them as traitors; as if they have betrayed their own old colleagues from the military. The point I want to highlight here is that, when you become involved in the peace process, you need to change at the personal level. And this is very complicated. And very painful. You need to push yourself, and you need courage, and you need to be brave. And I see these people as brave people. And I feel the same about the leaders of the ethnic groups. They share a belief that they can contribute to lay the foundations of something different.

*(Saya Kyaw Thu)*

I guess at the personal level engaging with the top leaders from both sides has given me more confidence. But dealing with the military leaders from the government side is still difficult. I am still not sure about how they perceive us. Because sometimes I am wearing a civil society hat, sometimes I am wearing a NCCT consultant hat; that makes me feel insecure about how do they see me. I have to try reaching out to the other side, to the Generals and Ministers; I still have to build up my confidence to engage with the government side. This is something from my personal level. During the talks, you know, they listen to the facilitator, even though I am a woman they listen, they respect the process and the facilitator role, they don't go against me, but sometimes it is hard. One time both of us were, not exactly scolded, but we were trying to summarise because all of them in the negotiation team did not get what was the end of the discussion, so we were trying to paraphrase and summarise and one of the Generals said, "Don't waste time! We know what we have discussed." So we moved to another issue. So, yes, it is exploring new things and discovering yourself and also the new challenges as well. I hope, I think this new challenge has made me more mature; it has given me more maturity, as I grow older, yes.

*(Daw Lahtaw Ja Nan)*

What is really quite incredible is that the reform minded ministers are really trying their best. And it is amazing that, although they are ex Generals they are more open minded than some of our own leaders. This is quite astonishing. And I did not expect it. I knew we had to work with them, but I did not think they would be so committed. Once I was at a conference in Norway with U Soe Thein and he had to go and meet the Norwegian foreign minister, but he did not have a necktie, so I gave him mine. We met again the next day and he said, "I have to give your necktie back," and I said,

“Don’t worry, just keep it because I am leaving now”, and he replied, “No, no, everybody accuses the government of taking things from the people; I don’t want you to accuse me of stealing”. And the funny thing is that when I was working with the government in exile, its members never had neckties, and I would always give them mine, and they never returned them to me! Neckties are small thing, but you can see a change of attitude. Not only U Soe Thein, but also U Aung Min and U Khin Yin... they are incredible. They are open, and they are ready to openly talk. And within the democracy movement it is the same. I think things have really changed. When I came back the first time I was coming very quietly but what happened was that there were reporters at the airport waiting for a Korean film star because there was a Korean film festival taking place. And one of the journalists recognized me and started taking pictures of me and then the rest followed and I ended up in the news. But also, at that time, the secret police were very active; they were following me. I had to move hotels because I had not booked ahead. I came to this hotel where we are now, took my key and went up to my room; my friend was standing nearby and saw the secret police coming to the reception and asking for the number of the room I was staying in, and the receptionist replied: “I am sorry, I can’t give you this information”. That was so great! And my friend was so shocked. It was an indication that things were indeed changing.

*(U Harn Yawnghwe)*

It is very clear to me that, with hatred within, you cannot work on peace; to work on peace, you need to change at the personal level, which is very difficult. Sometimes you will become vulnerable to attacks, even at the personal level, which can destroy your whole reputation and identity, so I really admire those who are involved in the peace process. Two days ago I met with a senior ethnic leader. He used to be a strong critic of the MPC and U Aung Min. When we met the other day he said to me, “Kyaw Thu, do you believe me if I say I trust U Aung Min?” He has changed; the process has changed him. A peace process can easily create new enemies, but getting new friends is more difficult. In a peace process, organising big conferences or meetings is easy. But finding a person who is willing to change is not. Because when you change, you become isolated, and criticised by the people who surround you, and by the whole society. It is very easy to say, “You have to start from the personal change”. But doing it, the reality of it, is very difficult. Even sometimes you cannot sleep. You don’t know where you are. It is like losing your life. I am not saying, “I am braver”, or “I am better”. What I want to say is that you have to change; and

that change is not easy; that sometimes you feel lost. And this becomes your daily reality, your life; people not wanting to be associated with you; people who stop trusting you; it is painful. You receive small attacks to you personally, but also to your organisation. It is a real challenge. In my experience, getting involved in a peace process is not easy. And it involves self-improvement, which is constant. You have to understand what is it that you hate, and what is it that you need to change within yourself. But if you change, you will definitely get new things from the people, the actors you are working with. In real life politics, there is people like those politicians that can present a strong position, but what is actually needed is people who can go through processes of change.

*(Saya Kyaw Thu)*

I attended a workshop on women as peacebuilders. I learnt a lot. I did not know how important inner peace is. We just worry and worry and feel that we will never get peace. Since the fall of the KNU Headquarters, I struggled with the word 'peace', because I felt we were never going to get it. But during that workshop, the woman said, "first, we have to have peace inside ourselves, and we have to take care of ourselves." And I thought, "Oh! I have just learnt about taking care of myself." In the past we only worried about other people, we never thought about ourselves. I suddenly felt relaxed and relieved.

*(Naw Zipporah Sein)*

And in this peace process transition from a military regime to a semi-democratic country, you are in a very lonely position. The work that our organisation used to do, suddenly it seems that, "OK, you are no longer useful". And when the new "go-between" from the government side, but other groups also, came into the picture, they tend to forget what was done before, and they want to start new, I guess. It was very disheartening to see that what we had done for many years was not being recognised, was not being acknowledged, but actually now government and armed groups can contact each other directly because the space was created before, and the relationship was established before. So, the changes in the approach put us in a very lonely position.

*- Daw Lahtaw Ja Nan)*

The only thing we have got here is the genuine will of the leaders from all sides who are committed themselves for peace this time.

*(U Tin Maung Thann)*





## CHAPTER 5

### ***“You treat me well, that is all I am asking”***

I wish we could do more, because the truth is that we will leave this world for the next generation much worse than before if we are not able to resolve the armed conflict in our lifetime.

*(Lahpai Seng Raw)*

I believe in the peace process. I want it to succeed. I want it to keep going on. But I worry. We have to find the way to stand firm for our goals. This is the important thing. In the future I want the political dialogue to develop and a peace agreement to be signed where there is guarantee for security, our internally displaced people can return to their villages and work in their own lands. They will live peacefully, enjoying their lives.

*(Naw Zipporah Sein)*

Until now I am hopeful and that is why I am still working hard. I don't know when I will lose my hopes.

*(General Sumlut Gun Maw)*

What I have noticed is that the younger generation is fed up with ideology, with listening to the old tale of 'who did what to whom'. They are the ones with a fresh mind. I think the younger generation does not want to accept hatred. They have already started working on that direction.

*(Saya Kyaw Thu)*

At one point the war became a way of life. And I believe we need to expose everyone to see beyond the armed conflict. Many of the energies go to moral activism, but I think that some should go to work with the government too.

*(Lahpai Seng Raw)*

Confrontation has become part of the Burmese political culture. General Aung San successfully negotiated independence with the government without fighting and we gained independence in 1948. Three months later, Thakin Than Tun, the communist leader, declared that the independence that we had gained through a negotiated settlement was not a genuine one; that we should fight, so he went underground and fought against the U Nu's government to get hold of power through confrontation. And this political culture, the idea that we have to fight, is in people's mindset.

*(Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong)*

Fighting against each other has been part of our history. To dominate and rule everywhere is the mentality of the military leaders; they see the ethnic people as second-class citizens. They do not respect our rights. But we cannot continue like this. If we want to develop our country, we need to get peace, and to get peace, we have to solve the root causes of the conflict. Only the Burmese people cannot build the nation, we all have to contribute. This is my dream. We would like to see the fruit of the last sixty years.

*(Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win)*

We are poor, even in our dreams. Our dreams are very much deprived.

*(U Tin Maung Thann)*

I think people in general want justice and peace. 'Peace' can have different definitions, but they want to be peaceful. Creating the situations where people can engage and learn from each other is a very important part in our day-to-day work. We have to learn to live together, and learn each other's pains. I want people to understand that this is very difficult. When people ask me directly, "Do you believe U Aung Min?" I say, "Yes". And this is often not the answer they want to hear. But you need to be clear. "Yes". I trust him, and we need to show that we trust him. And we need to work with him. And trusting him is a challenge. But when you first say, "Yes,

I trust him” it is very difficult for some people to accept this. And when you talk to the ethnic people, and they put all the faults on the Burmans, again, you need to be clear, “Don’t mix up the racial issue and the system issue”. And again, it is difficult. Because what they would like to hear from you is an admission, “Yes, Burmese people are bad”. But ethnic people have done bad things to the ethnic people too. Also, some religions want to blame everything on other religions and I say, “Yes, Myanmar is a country that has gone through sixty years of conflict, main governments are Burmans Buddhists. When the Saffron revolution crackdown happened Burman Buddhists were killed by other Burmese Buddhists. There is not one single view.” Doing uneasy things can be very depressing, but the reality is that it also gives you strength; it gives you energy. This can also be a positive process.

*(Saya Kyaw Thu)*

The peace process has given us the possibility to engage with the Bamar nationality. Their perception of us is, “These guys are insurgents; they are bad guys.” But when they started to engage with us, they also understood us, like U Aung Min did. The political parties have also begun to accept our stands. There is also some acknowledgment of our struggle from the side of the political parties.

*(Nai Hong Sar)*

Now is a critical moment. The President will transfer his powers to the new President. Until now we don’t know who will be the next president. I hope the peace process will experience a smooth transition.

*(U Hla Maung Shwe)*

The peace process is the key. Without it we cannot build a democratic Myanmar. We have no choice. We don’t have the luxury of doing one thing after the other.

*(U Tin Maung Thann)*

## On Learning

In these past two years I have learnt that we get blamed, criticised by our own organisation and also by the outside world. I have also learnt how to negotiate with the other side. And I have learnt that, even if our country needs peace, there are some who benefit from war. I have also learnt that those making peace need courage, they have to be decisive and have to educate other people. I have learnt a lot. I have learnt that you have friends among your enemies, and enemies among your friends.

*(Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win)*

At the first meeting with the KNU I made my determination. They deserved something better than my previous life as a development worker. So that really struck me to transform myself as someone 200% committed to be involved in the peace process. That is what I learnt. That you must be open enough for the new challenges; to deal with a lot of uncertainties. If you don't have this kind of open mind, you cannot transform yourself to be the key player in this process, because you know, some of the personalities, the ones who believe that they are better than us, we expected them to get more involved, but a lot of them are in a dead end, because their mindsets cannot change, so they don't have the capacity enough to liberate, to transform themselves, to make the necessary adjustments to become peace makers.

*(U Tin Maung Thann)*

In this process what I have found is that making it all-inclusive is possible but not easy.

*(U Kyaw Soe Hlaing)*

Until now one learning point for me is during the negotiation, we should always be connected to the people. Therefore, in order to move forward with the current negotiation, we need to consult with the people, we need to have that kind of consultation. Without public participation, this peace process will not be sustainable and successful. In the case of Kachin, at the moment the Kachin public are so angry because of the war. Without calming them down, without getting them to understand, it will be difficult to move forward.

*(General Sumlut Gun Maw)*

All the ethnic groups have said that they want a federal union. If you want a federal union, you will have to learn to live with other people, so, how are you going to live with them? There is still a lot of discrimination in Burma. One of the reasons I am able to get along with the ethnic armed groups is because I am not a Bamar. If I would have been a Bamar trying to do the same, I don't think I would have succeeded. The fact that I am not a Bamar already opened some doors to me. Then my personal background opened more doors. And also the fact that my brother joined an armed group opened more doors. And the same applies to the government. With this government, even if I am a Shan, I am helped by the status of my parents before the coup. So there are lots of factors that help. It is not what the Westerners think, "You are so capable, you are so great." There are many different reasons behind. I have found that you are able to do more if you don't take credit, and if you are not in competition; you can achieve a lot more. I can work with many different groups, from political parties to armed groups, civil society, government. For countries like Burma, there is so much everyone can do; there is a role for everybody, if they can find the area where they can contribute; and there is so much need.

*(U Harn Yawngghwe)*

For us as peacebuilders, we should try and further explore. Knowing that the government is the one controlling the power, when the Head of the State invites, we should at least try. I believe that, if we can use this door to open, the invitation is there. If we know how to push and open it, then we have to engage with the armed groups and with the government. Let's take this as an opportunity.

*(Daw Lahtaw Ja Nan)*

I am still learning. As long as I am alive I will put my energy as an ordinary man to have a change and not to collapse this opportunity. We are learning every day. We have been learning for the last three years. But you know, the key thing I learnt from the peace process is that the people at the other side of the fence are often good people. Ethnic leadership, the majority of them, 99% of them, are good people. OK we have this one, that one, who are not good, the one with the vested interest, the one who cannot behave according to principles. That is normal. But, surprisingly, when people ask me about the political dialogue, about what is it that we can expect, I tell them that it is very simple. What I think, what I truly believe in is simple solutions. Because you know, we have been discussing, and we

have been working with the ethnic leadership, we have been having this kind of conversations. They always try to talk down their grievances. And at the end of the long conversation, the conclusion can be summarised in only one phrase, “You treat me well, that is all I am asking”. And that I can give them. That, we are prepared to give them. It is as simple as that. Yes. Simple answers. That is why I am optimistic about this peace process.

*(U Tin Maung Thann)*

One thing I have learnt so far is that when we work for normal development projects we have immediate results, expected outcomes; things are easily defined, and are more or less possible to deliver. In this peace process we still need the same things (targeted results, expected outcomes) but the sequencing is not the same. For example, in this dialogue process, yes, everybody expects good results, positive results, but you never know what is going to happen because you are dealing with human nature; if everything would be positive, there would be no conflict at all. We cannot predict what is going to exactly happen. This process has been like a roller coaster. It has gone up and down. Only the long-term perspective can show us how far we have gone. Today might be a good day, but tomorrow might be a totally negative one; uncertainty is always there.

*(U Kyaw Soe Hlaing)*

Over the past two years I have learnt a lot from the peace negotiation process. I have learnt that I get more self-confident as I negotiate. We tried for women to participate in the peace process, but this is also a challenge. Women see peace beyond the absence of fighting. We also look at safety, security and protection, because women are victims of the war at all times.

*(Naw Zipporah Sein)*

We all have to seek common solution for the sake of people; not for the interests of players only, but everyone must be pleased from the result.

*(U Than Khe)*

A lesson learnt, particularly regarding the CSOs’ participation in this peace process, is that we should not wait until the two sides are saying, “OK, here is what you can do, this is the space for you to participate”. We have to create these spaces and we have to broaden them. That is why we

initiated the Civil Society Forum for Peace. This is something I have learnt. In the peace process you cannot be in your own shell, you have to be open enough and you have to welcome others. And this is also about practicing democratic values: participation, expand ownership. This has been our main principle as we are involved in this process. We invited UPWC, MPC's U Hla Maung Shwe and U Tin Maung Thann. CSOs representatives were asking them, "What can we do?" U Hla Maung Shwe said in the forum. "Look at Ja Nan, this is the thing that you have to do. Don't wait until you are given the space, you have to create your own space"

*(Daw Lahtaw Ja Nan)*

Until today nobody has asked me to do this job. But we think this is an important thing to do. Whether we achieve our goals or not, we don't know yet, but this is the right thing to do. I have thought a thousand times to go back to Uppsala and teach, earn better money and stay with my family. I can go back, it is not that I don't have any other choice. I always wanted to be an academic. But I don't know why I come back to Myanmar again and again, and again and again. Maybe it is destiny, and a sense of responsibility. In 1988 I was around twenty-eight years old. I am over fifty now. This has been all my life. But we should not claim ourselves as heroes; this is part of our human nature. As human beings, we have to do the right thing and we have to try to contribute something to our humanity, serve other people as much as we can.

*(Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong)*

What I have learnt is that the door is open from the government side for the full political dialogue as a way to deal with the problems in a peaceful way. At the same time, we have been able to engage with the public and also the international community has been supporting this idea, the peaceful way of solving problems. So in that environment, we have to continue to engage; this is the direction for us.

*(Nai Hong Sar)*

Now I am worried. I am not an expert, I am not a scholar, I am like a layman, I have normal experiences. In my understanding there should be a national ceasefire agreement, and after that a framework meeting, and after that a political dialogue to discuss the details of the foundation of the new Myanmar, and then move towards 2016 and the new government. If there

are enough foundations they can continue the peace process and finish it and reach a political settlement, a political agreement, which maybe it will take two, five years to reach, depending on the stakeholders. If everything is fine, Myanmar will be a country in peace in maybe ten, fifteen years. My expectation is to hold to 2016, the transition. If we can pass 2016, we can continue with the process in the right track. Myanmar and the minorities are going together under a federal system in a democratic country, happy, working; this is my dream.

*(U Hla Maung Shwe)*



## LIST OF ACRONYMS

ABSDF	All Burma Students' Democratic Front
AIT	Asian Institute of Technology
BGF	Border Guard Force
CEFU	Committee for the Emergence of a Federal Union
CSFP	Civil Society Forum for Peace
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CNF	Chin National Front
ENC	Ethnic Nationalities Council
IDP	Internally Displaced People
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNPP	Karenni National Progressive Party
KNU	Karen National Union
MPC	Myanmar Peace Center
NCCT	Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team
NDL	National League for Democracy
NMSP	New Mon State Party
NSAG	Non-State Armed Group
RCSS/SSA	Restoration Council of Shan State/ Shan State Army
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
UNFC	United Nationalities Federal Council
UNLD	United Nationalities League for Democracy
UPWC	Union Peacemaking Working Committee

To me, this is really the first time in fifty years that the government has offered to talk; it might be a trick, or it might be whatever, but you have to try. And if you are careful, you might get some of the things that you wanted.

*(U Harn Yawnghwe)*

So things can collapse at any moment, but the one thing I can tell you is that, whenever we enter into a new round of meetings it is like going to the killing field, or the danger zone. But each and every meeting we come out with a better outcome. There are lots of uncertainties, and problems every time we enter into a meeting. That is the big sign of how committed, of how strong this process is. But it is still fragile. The last mile is always the most difficult one. And we are on the last mile.

*(U Tin Maung Thann)*

So, after twenty-five years, when I arrived back to my homeland inside Burma, my friends welcomed me very warmly. I am very thankful to them for this. Some of them hosted lunch, and a welcome ceremony for me. We had studied together at the university. Yes, they are professionals now. But my life is very, very different, totally different. Life is very strange. I also told my mother and my friends, "Life is very strange. Twenty-five years ago we dreamt together, but today I came back from another life." We rejuvenated ourselves by refreshing the old odysseys that we had been rowing together on the same boat.

*(U Than Khe)*

My family stays in Uppsala. They are used to this now. My children are teenagers now. One sad thing is that, when my daughter was still in the kindergarten, I was travelling too much. And sometimes, when I went to pick her up, she would take me and bring me to her classroom and introduce me to her teachers, "This is my daddy, this is my daddy." I think she wanted to have this feeling that she still had a father. I have a friend, a Kachin lady, her husband had

been the member of an ethnic armed organisation and she once told me, “You know, we fought so hard for our people, but at the end of the day, we lost our children.” She meant that her children had grown up in other countries, married to other nationalities, to people from different countries. You know, my own children cannot speak Chin, because we are the only Chin family in Uppsala. So I am working for the Chin people in Burma but my own kids don’t speak Chin anymore; this is a big sacrifice. But usually we don’t express these kind of personal things, so lots of people might think that we have a good life in Sweden, but we have lost lots of things; we lose our community. But we are lucky that we are Christians, we belong to the church and the church is the community we belong to in Sweden. This sense of community is so important. Because it is already so difficult; it is the community that sustains us, whether we are in Burma or outside.

*(Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong)*

I am the same person as I was before we started the peace process, but I am busier now. I am also more tired. I have less time to work with my organisation. And to visit my family; last year I only saw them two or three times. Now we are working with other ethnic armed organisations through the NCCT, and everything is getting more complicated.

*(Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win)*

So, yes, in this long journey, there are multiple challenges: for me to be able to survive alone is not problem; but I have family, I am a husband and a father, I have to feed my family. And that is a challenge.

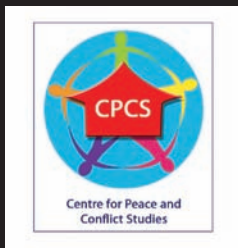
*(Nai Hong Sar)*

We don’t know what is going to happen. We go day-by-day, day-by-day. This is a long journey. Sometimes I review the last three, four, five years. So many wonderful things have happened.

*(U Hla Maung Shwe)*







The Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies is home to a range of interconnected programmes that promote the advancement of peace processes, research and learning. It creates opportunities for practitioners, students, academics and analysts to access information and resources that are contextually grounded.

[www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org](http://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org)

Funding support by

