**Ways to Success for the Karen Struggle for Freedom and Autonomy**

By Naw K'nyaw Paw

**Introduction:**

The Karen revolution or Armed resistance started in 1949 however the Karen struggle for recognition of Karen people’s identity, culture rights and the right to live as a nation had been going on before Burma gained independence. The Karen National Association was formed in 1881 to fight for Karen people’s right to self-determination and respect for the Karen identity. The peaceful struggle for Karen people’s right to self-determination has faced many challenges, but Karen people did achieve some successes under the British government such as the recognition of Karen New Year, the Karen Flag and the Karen National Anthem. These were important for the Karen however, to have full respect for Karen people’s rights, the Karen must have self-determination so the Karen people can decide our own affairs, elect our own leaders/government and be able to develop the Karen community. We must be able to practice political, cultural and economic rights. At first the Karen were fighting for independence, which would meet the ultimate goal of having self-determination over Karen affairs. The demand for Karen independence changed in 1956 at KNU Mawko Congress from fighting for an independent country to fighting for a move to federalism in Burma. This shift maintained the root of Karen desire for self-determination over Karen affairs. That goal has not changed. Karen people will still be able to determine our own affairs under federalism. The demand changed because Karen leaders saw that many other ethnic people in Burma suffered under the Burma Army or the Burman chauvinism or the penetration of Burmanization into ethnic areas, just like the Karen. The international community did not support dividing the country into several independent nations. The Karen leadership also saw it was much more difficult for Burma Army to crush us when we are united with other ethnic groups and the Karen are not alone in demanding rights within Burma and an end to persecution. Before he died, the President of the Karen, Saw Ba Oo Kyi, told Karen leaders about three paths to Karen freedom and autonomy:

1. Armed struggle;
2. Political dialogue and a negotiated settlement with the Burmese government; and
3. International intervention and arrangement on the Karen people's behalf.

All three ways are still possible but none can succeed on its own. We still need to maintain efforts in all of these three ways and find opportunities to win our rights. It is only through using all our strength and tools that we can have the best chance of success. Here is why:

**1. Armed Struggle**

The Karen Armed struggle started because Karen efforts for peaceful negotiations were confronted with the Burmese armed forces. There was no choice but for the Karen to form an armed group to defend the people. Karen people have never wanted to fight or oppress others. The aim of the armed struggle is only to defend the people, the land and territories when we are attacked. When your enemy uses violence, and is killing you, it is necessary for a nation to rise up and protect its people. So Karen leaders started the armed struggle. It is very rare in history that we have seen any people fight successfully for their rights through peaceful means when the oppressor is using violent force. In the context of Burma when the Burma Army was first building their army they received training from the Japanese Army during World War II. They quickly began violent persecution of the Karen people, and other ethnic groups. Fighting back to defend the people was not the wrong thing to do. Even today, without arms the Karen people would not be able to defend our territory and people. The Burma Army is even bigger and more well-equipped, and continues its persecution of ethnic peoples. Without some level of armed resistance, we would be completely overrun, and lose our Karen identity, our heritage, culture and traditions. The Burma Army does not show any respect for any of these things. Sadly, until the Karen people have our basic rights respected, we need an armed struggle just to survive. It might seem that the Karen Army alone cannot defeat the Burma Army, but there are other ethnic armed groups in Burma as well, and if we are united, if we work together strategically, we will be able to achieve our common goal.

**2. Political dialogue and a negotiated settlement with the Burmese government:**

The current peace talks depend on the armed struggle as well. You cannot have meaningful negotiations for Karen rights without the armed struggle. If we look at the context of the current peace process, we can see the KNU is respected by the other ethnic groups and by the Burmese Army (even though it is just a little). This is because we still have an army, our land, and an administration. If the KNU did not have any of this, the Burma Army wouldn’t even sit at the table with the KNU. However, the Karen Army must be professional, uphold the highest ethical standards, respect international law related to war and the defending of our land, territories, people, and natural resources. Our army must defend our people and our culture. The Karen army also must work with other ethnic armed groups. The armed struggle is one avenue, but if we could win our rights through peaceful negotiations, that would be the best way. There could be an end to the killing and the displacement of people. However any peace process must have everyone respected. The dialogue can only work when both sides are sincere and want to resolve the conflict. The current peace process is not working in Burma, because the Burma Army is using its power to bully and abuse the peace talks. They behave like they are the owners of the peace process rather than just one party to it. They design the peace process so that they control it. The Burma Army has always seen ethnic people as 2nd class citizens. They always have a mindset that they are better and more capable than the ethnic people. They always say: what can we do for you? how can we help you? we will do this development for you. They act as if they are adults and we ethnic people are children. Instead of respecting ethnic rights and promoting equality for all, the Burma Army still wants to control everything, in their way.

The Burma Army continues their long-held strategy, even within the context of a peace process, to fight one ethnic group and make peace with other groups. Then they change sides, change their enemies and allies. They use this divide and conquer strategy successfully so that ethnic people will join together and fight them as a united force. We can see in those ethnic areas where there is no fighting, the Burma Army exploits the opportunity to expand their administration instead of recognizing the ethnic people's existing administration and services. The Burma Army wants to control everything instead of allowing ethnic people to live peacefully within Burma and administer our own affairs. This has only gotten worse in recent years, not better. The penetration of Burma culture over ethnic culture is being achieved through education in schools, through clinics and health care, by changing the names and boundaries of ethnic areas to Burmese names, including territory, rivers, and village names. This oppressive mindset must change or there can be no dialogue. The peace process cannot go anywhere.

To help advance our political desire, we have to take every opportunity including political dialogue. We can not give up our desire. There is a need for our Karen army to back us up so we can talk, we can be treated as equals in any political negotiations. There is a need for more pressure to Burma Army from ethnic groups, international communities and people movement inside Burma so Burma Army will take peace talk seriously. Only pressure can force Burma Army to sit in the peace talk and treat ethnic as equal partner and only when ethnic groups are treated as equal partner the peace negotiations will be successful.

**3. International intervention and arrangement on the Karen people's behalf.**

We need International intervention to force more meaningful peace talks. Peace talks will not be more meaningful unless all the ethnic people are included and we need international pressure on the Burma Army to force a change. There are many other ethnic armed resistance organizations who are fighting for the same thing as the Karen. We always have to keep this in mind and work hand in hand with them to overcome our common enemy, the Burma Army. Right now there is a lot of international attention because of the Burma Army attacks on the Rohingya. More countries have come to know about the Burma Army’s true colors through the atrocities they committed against the Rohingya. Even though we Karen and other ethnic people have been suffering from this same Burmese military for over 70 years, our case did not draw as much international attention because there was less access to the media and less technology at that time. Now with modern technology, there is more exposure of Burma Army crimes reaching the international community. We should use this new opportunity to get more pressure from the international community onto the Burma Army and improve all of our chances of success in the peace talks.

Before 2011, the Burma Army did receive quite a lot of pressure from the international community as they were seen as anti-democracy. Many countries imposed economic sanctions, visa bans, boycotts, or arms embargos of Burma. When the peace process started in 2011, many of those countries relaxed their restrictions on Burma. They believed that Burma was transitioning to democracy and so they gave their support to the government. International pressure on the Burma Army and Government only came back on when the atrocities against the Rohingya took place. This attention even led to Burma being charged in the ICJ court and to the recognition by the ICC that an international crime had taken place. Many countries came to know that the Burma Army has not changed its tactics. Now that we have the attention of the international community again focused on Burma, we need to continue to expose the crimes of the Burma Army against all ethnic groups. We need to work in unity with other ethnic groups and support each other.

Now is our best opportunity to combine the leverage of the long-standing armed struggle with International pressure and unified ethnic struggles to begin meaningful peace talks.

**Conclusion:**

With the right international pressure, through different means, on the Burma Army, and having our professional army to back us up we can have a powerful voice in the peace dialogue. Together with other ethnic groups it is possible that this is the best time for us to achieve our goals. With the 3 ways of Saw Ba Oo Gyi combined, I'm sure we can gain our rightful self-determination within a federal union. This can be our future and I will work with all my heart to make it ours.