

LETTERS FROM THE FIELD

Shan State - South



A fisherman in Inlay Lake. (credit: CDNHR)

In the mark of the nationwide survey dedicated to the State of Social Harmony and the Citizen Voices in Myanmar's Transition, CDNHR Research Team travelled extensively in Shan State. Shan State is the easternmost administrative unit of Myanmar. Within Myanmar, Shan State shares borders with Kachin State, Mandalay Region and Kayah State. It is the largest of the 14 administrative units of Myanmar covering almost a quarter of the total country area. It is commonly referred to as a combination of 3 entities: Shan North, Shan South and Shan East, encompassing a total of 14 districts and 83 townships.

According to the 2014 Census, approximately 5.8 million people live in

Shan State, belonging to diverse ethnic and religious groups. Shan State is home to only a minority of Bamar ethnicity, the majority being Shan. This contradiction to the nationwide picture (where Bamar are a majority) underscores the long history of armed conflict that hampered the development and affected the quality of life of the inhabitants of the region.

Due to the size of the State, part of the data collection is still ongoing. Thus, this letter from the field is dedicated to present findings and impressions from first part of the trip to Shan South.

In Shan South, CDNHR Research Team spent approximately two months and distributed more than

4500 questionnaires for the two research undertaken. In addition to quantitative data, CDNHR researchers conducted a total of 31 interviews with individuals selected due to their specific knowledge on the area. In order to capture diverse thematic and the complexity of the area, more interviews are planned for early 2017 before the release of the report.

In October 2016, our team started the research in Shan South, with the objective of surveying 15 Townships. Security concerns were largely affecting the research. For example, in Mongshu Township, the Research Team could not survey according to the plan defined. Indeed, the arrival in Mongshu on 25 Oct, 2016, tensions between Myanmar authorities and the SSA suddenly increased after members of an ethnic armed group entered the town with weapons, leading to retaliation from part of local police officers. Subsequently, data collection in Mongshu Township was cancelled.

The present letter from the field highlights some first impressions of CDNHR Researchers during their trip. Rather than a proper research document, these impressions are more to be considered as current topics that are being dug by researchers prior to release a report on Shan South. These impressions include thoughts and in-

formation on the Self-Administered Zone, economic concerns, drug issues and ethnic armed group impacts.

To begin with, and at a first sight, Shan South seemed to be socially harmonious. However, underlying tensions seem to exist between certain ethnic groups, notably between Pa-O and Shan. It is notably the case in two townships: Pinlaung and Taunggyi. In Pinlaung, Shan respondents interviewed in the area shared their perception and how they feel inferior to Pa-O. According to interviewees, in the past, majority of inhabitants in Pinlaung were Shan while nowadays, Pinlaung has a large Pa'O majority, impacting the social structure of the area. Shan reminisced their golden times in the past and they have suspicion towards Pa-O - who benefit from a recent and sudden economic boom.

The Self-Administered Zones seem to be the source of the tensions ex-

to put the city under its self-administered zone have been expressed.

Taunggyi, the heart of the State, plays an important role in various sectors. According to some respondents, the township is in appearance harmonious, but deep inside, people - notably Shan and Pa'O - do not get along well together. It should however be noted that these tensions are mostly due to the leadership of the different groups rather than the result of everyday life people's hatred toward each other. To the contrary, at the grass root level, Pa-O and Shan seem to coexist peacefully.

The question of the Self-Administered Zones also impacts the relation between Pa'O and Intha people, in the surrounding of Inlay lake, Nyaungshwe Township.

These tensions existing within the different SAZ between the minority and majority groups suggest that the advantage of ethnic Self-administered Zone can be considered as disadvantage for the smaller groups within the SAZ. As mentioned earlier Self-administered Zone seem to be one of the root causes of the ethnic tensions. When one ethnic group gained a Self-administered Zone of their own, the remaining ethnic groups also longed to have their own Self-administered Zones. Having several ethnic Self-administered Zones within Shan State could very well lead to boiling point of all the ethnic tensions that could explode as armed clashes. Therefore, due to the unique status of Self-administered Zone (SAZ), CDNHR Research Team

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Townships surveyed in
Shan South

isting between Pa-O and Shan. On 20 August 2010, Pinlaung became part of the Pa-O Self-administered Zone (Pa'O SAZ), where a majority of the inhabitants are now Pa-O. The granting of SAZ status to the Pa'O have strong repercussion in the minds of non-Pa'O residing outside the SAZ. In Taunggyi, fears of Pa-O attempt

intends to prepare the ground for us to conduct detailed research on all the SAZs in Shan State.

Yet, at this stage, different elements related to SAZ can be developed. First, having a Self-administered Zone gives a huge boost to the development of that region. For example, one of the multiple reasons why some Intha interviewed were strongly in favour of a SAZ for their ethnic group is the fact that the income coming from tourists' entrance fee to Inlay lake would be directly managed by the Intha people, contrary to the current legislation.

The presence of Ethnic Armed Groups (EAOs) in Shan South is also a point to highlight in this letter from the field. Former ethnic armed group, Pa-O National Army (PNA), which has now become a peoples' militia after signing a ceasefire agreement with State Peace and Development Council on 11 April 1991, and its political wing Pa-O National Organisation (PNO), currently administers the

Pa-O Self-Administered Zone. This powerful Ethnic Armed Organisation is not welcome by all. For example, Shans have negative perspectives on PNO as they believe that the latter has affiliation with military backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).

The Shan State Army (SSA) is also a powerful force in the region. While ethnic tensions exist between Pa-O and Shan, PNO and SSA had already set up several steps to resolve if problems were to occur. However, the relationship between those ethnic armed groups and military is fragile at best.

Also of note the presence of the Kayan New Land Party (KNLP). Its intention to reunite all the Kayan who are scattered all around in four different places and ask for Kayan Self-Administered Zone. One of those four places is Shan South. Thus, it will become a crucial matter which is necessary to be addressed in the near future.

Shan South is diverse not only in ethnicity but also in religion. Different religious groups can be found in Shan State. According to interviews conducted and observations made in the field, Shan South seems to be relatively religiously harmonious. Yet, relating to Muslims, Shan South is indifferent from the rest of the States and Regions in the country. Distrust towards Muslims still remains at large in Shan South. Some respondents interviewed mentioned that they kept a watchful eye on the Muslims living in their communities after the racial and religious crisis that occurred in 2012. Though the mistrust towards Muslim community remains at large, CDNH Researchers have been positively surprised by the existence of youth inter-faith groups, notably in Taunggyi.

Economically, Shan South is highly reliant on agriculture. The main local products that Shan State is famous for are tea leaves and Thanaka. Yet the prices of these products drop significantly, leading the farmers to a higher degree of financial uncertainty.

To make a living, some farmers turn toward poppy cultivation because of the easiness to earn a consequent living from it.

Drugs have become an alarming issue in Shan South. The vast mountain ranges which are difficult to travel in become a secret hideout for poppy farmers where they can grow poppy in secret. The importance of poppy business is deeply rooted in the economy of Shan State. Economic functionality of township like Pekon

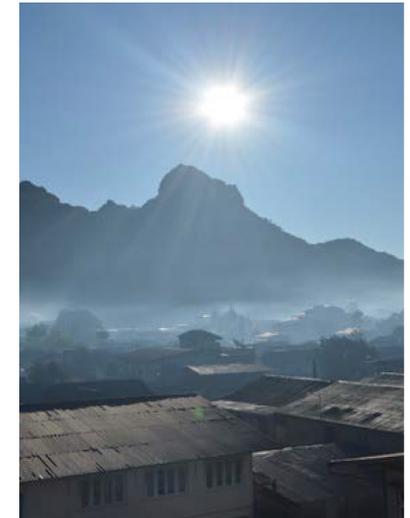
depends on the drug trade. If the poppy farmers make a huge amount of money from poppy business, they come to the town to buy goods. If not, all the business in the town rarely functions.

For locals, there are links between EAOs and drug trade, as people think that one way for ethnic armed groups to make money is to trade drugs. People also consider that the existence of drug trade highlights is linked to corruption within the local authorities. The local authorities destroy poppy fields every year but the drugs are produced every year and people are tired of endlessly repeating vicious cycle. As a consequence, people lose faith in authorities and have doubt on the transparency of local authorities.

Of note, the youth addiction to drugs has been highlighted by several participants to the survey and seems to be a particularly serious issue.

Another pillar supporting the economy of Shan State is tourism. The hot air balloon festival held in Taunggyi during Ta Saung Taing Festival captures the heart of not only locals but also foreigners. Inlay Lake, the second most popular place in Myanmar, is located in Nyaungshwe, a township close to Taunggyi. In addition, Shan South is famous for its landscapes, the caves of Pindaya or the different treks offered between Kalaw and Inlay Lake.

Speaking of economy, there is an issue which captures our attention. If people that we encountered in the field expressed their concerns



Sunny morning in Pekon city. (credit: CDNH)

towards Muslims when they talked about religious issue, when the conversation turned about economic issues, the topic which is mostly brought up by the people is the influence of Chinese in economic sphere. Certain respondents mentioned that Chinese were running their business with the support from the Chinese who are from main land China. There are some Shan respondents who expressed their concerns that China will devour Myanmar in the future as the China's influence on Myanmar has become bigger and bigger.

Reports analyzing the data collected and providing key elements of understanding on Shan State will be published by April 2017 and shared with relevant stakeholders. For more information and to keep posted on our reports, please subscribe to our CDNHR Research Team Updates research@cdnh.org

The CDNHR Research Team.

Questionnaires distributed per Township - Social Harmony Research

