

Conflict adds 'genocide' to the lexicon of Burmese politics
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AS WESTERN powers make encouraging sounds towards Burma's recent political reforms, on the country's far-flung northern border with China a dark conflict is still raging.

The ethnic Kachin people – a largely Christian minority who picked up guns in 1961 to fight the Burmese army – say they have been left out of the reform process, which has seen ceasefires and a renewed attempt at reconciliation between the central government and the country's myriad ethnic groups which have been in conflict with Rangoon.

In recent weeks, the outnumbered and outgunned Kachin have begun to use the word "genocide" to describe the campaign against them, as they fight to defend their defacto capital of Laiza.

An open letter sent a week ago to the United Nations, signed by the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) central committee chairman Zawng Hra, warned: "There is strong evidence that the Burmese army is not only waging war against the KIO, but also against the Kachin population as a whole. The Burmese army is now engaged in ethnic cleansing. The conflict has now turned from one of political to racial in nature."

Since a coup in 1962, Burma's history has been blighted by decades of military rule and human rights abuses. This year, the country earned international points by releasing democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest along with hundreds of political prisoners and signing ceasefire agreements with some of the warring ethnic groups in the country's peripheries.

In Kachin, however, there is no sign of change. Government attacks on KIO positions have intensified since the April elections. What were occasional skirmishes are now full blown battles, with air attacks, heavy artillery and mortar fire.

Despite an order in January by reformist president Thein Sein to stop the fighting, continued aggression by the Burmese Northern Command has led to onlookers theorising that in fact the president has no control over the Burmese military, which is fighting in to take control of KIO territory because of lucrative Chinese hydropower projects in the region, and to establish an oil and gas pipeline that runs through the area into China.

In the last eight weeks, three attacks on Laiza from the north, south and west have brought the frontline – a mass of trenches, bamboo fortifications and heavily land mined jungle – as close as six miles from the town.

Many Kachin people have fled their homes, afraid of the fighting and stories they hear about treatment of villagers by the Burmese troops – allegations include arbitrary arrest, interrogation, torture, rape and killing.

Before Kachin's 17-year ceasefire with Rangoon broke down in 2011, there were virtually no internally displaced people in Kachin. Now groups say the refugee population is at least 50,000.

Many have fled over the border, but the Chinese government has refused to accept them. Heavily involved in resource extraction in Kachin, China has long downplayed the intensity of the Kachin conflict and even outright denied the existence of refugees on their side of the border, estimated at 7,000.

“The Burmese government plan to wipe us out completely,” said, Brang Mai, a farmer-turned-commander who now leads 300 men on Laiza’s western front, ten miles away over one of the mountainsides. “They want to destroy the Kachin people.”

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