

Factional Fighting in Burma's Military?

Contributed by Our Correspondent
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Generals sacked, others arrested

Strains appear to be forming among Burma's elite military, with six top generals reportedly sacked and arrested since February on the pretext of an investigation into corruption.

The latest was Saturday, when Maj. Gen. Khin Maung Htay was arrested. Khin Maung Htay was only recently promoted to head the Coastal Regional Military Command in September 2010. Other arrests of high-level officers are expected soon, according to a diplomatic source outside Burma.

Given that Burma's generals have been smuggling billions of US dollars out of the country and into Singaporean banks over the past several years, the sackings appear to have more to do with a power struggle than with recognition of corruption although, as one source put it, Burmese corruption has never been a free-for-all but rather organized at the top. The top ruling generals do not like to see underlings stealing on their own.

Than Shwe, the general who led the junta from 1992, supposedly stepped aside with the installation of a nominally civilian government after rigged elections last November. However, sources say, he remains an extremely powerful figure. He continues to go to his office in the new capital of Naypyidaw on weekdays, working closely with a group of senior generals to keep an eye on the government's operations.

Although the dissention first appeared last February, the source said, it blew into the open during a June meeting of the military to discuss ideas on how to improve living conditions for the Tatmadaw, the Burmese military. During the meeting, the source said, some of the generals blamed current government policy for the poor state of the military, the second-biggest in Southeast Asia

Gen. Min Aung Hliang, the commander in chief, reported the dissention to Than Shwe, the source said. That kicked off an investigation into allegations of corruption on the part of the dissenting officers.

In addition, another source said, there is a split between allies of President Thein Sein and those of Than Shwe on other issues. Than Shwe is said to favor a hard line on the ethnic factions that have been fighting a low-level war with the central government for decades.

The forces allied with President Thein Sein, the source said, favor negotiations. Tensions with the ethnic factions particularly have been increasing in recent months, with a virtual civil war underway in Kachin State in the north of the country over dozens of projects promoted or funded by foreign interests, mostly Chinese ones. In addition, the Karen National Liberation Army has been blocking the construction of a US\$8 billion port and industrial estate on the Thai border. The civilian populations in several regions have been caught in the fighting and devastation.

How deeply the arrests will cut into the top command is uncertain. More than 50 officers were promoted into new positions last September to fill slots that came open when members of the junta "retired" to run for office in the November elections.

Among the most recent arrests were some of those who were promoted into the new positions. Maj. Gen. Kyaw Phyo, the new inspector and auditor general of the country's armed forces, was formerly the commander of the Triangle Regional Military Command before he was promoted to become auditor general. He is believed to have been accused of smuggling cars via Burma's porous border with Thailand. He was previously based in Kengtung in eastern Shan State, an area known for trade routes and smuggling syndicates.

Kyaw Phyo was taken into custody along with Maj. Gen. Than Htun Oo, whom he succeeded as commander of the Triangle Region. They were arrested on Aug. 8, the source told Asia Sentinel.

Other generals being interrogated by Military Affairs and Security include Lt. Gen. Tin Ngwe, who is in charge of the Rangoon Division, Lt. Gen. Myint Soe, in charge of the Sit Kaing and Magwe Divisions and Maj. Gen. Htun Than, the Rangoon commander.

According to sources speaking with the Chiang Mai-based news portal The Irrawaddy, Adjutant Gen. "Thura" Myint Aung, Brig-Gen Tun Than, the former commander of Rangoon Regional Military Command, and Maj-Gen Tin Ngwe, the former chief of the Bureau of Special Operations-5 were sacked earlier.

In late July, media reports suggested five generals were being investigated for corruption: Kyaw Phyo; Maj-Gen Myint Soe, the chief of the Bureau of Special Operations; Maj-Gen Khin Zaw Oo, the adjutant general and chair of the military-run Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd; Brig-Gen Thein Tun Oo, the commander of the Triangle Regional Military Command and Khin Maung Htay.

(With reporting from The Irrawaddy)