

Table of Contents

- ***Christians facing persecution in Burma for turning to Christ, 'angering Buddhist spirits'***
 - ***Christian organisation calls for halt to plans to demolish mosques***
 - ***NGOs urge government to protect religious minorities***
 - ***Why Burma is trying to stop people from using the name of its persecuted Muslim minority***
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Christians facing persecution in Burma for turning to Christ, 'angering Buddhist spirits'

A Christian couple from Burma, who were previously Buddhists but have since turned to Christ, have reportedly been targeted by relatives who want to kick them out of their home for their Christian faith, and who believe that Christians are "angering spirits" associated with Buddhism.

By Stoyan Zaimov

WWRN (21.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2hL31on> - The couple, whose names were not given in the report by Christian Aid Mission, which assists indigenous ministries overseas, are said to have found Christ during a work stay in Thailand. But when they returned back home to their village in Burma, their relatives denied them the use of property they had bought.

Although the couple, who have two children, were finally given a small piece of land where they can live on a temporary basis, they are being denied the practice of their faith.

"Moreover, they were strictly prohibited not to receive any Christian pastor or guests at their home, and not to have worship services at their home," an indigenous missionary revealed.

The relatives are reportedly monitoring the couple closely, and are threatening to kick them out if they receive any Christian missionaries.

Burma, officially called the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, has only a minority Christian community, who make up between 5 to 9 percent of the country's population. Buddhism, which claims between 80 to 90 percent of the population, has been fused in the country with occult and spiritual beliefs that pre-date the religion.

As CAM's report explained, the typical home consists of a shrine to Buddha, with people performing rituals that they believe imbue the Buddha statue with sacred qualities that protect the home.

"Mixed into the attribution of powers to Buddha is worship of spirits — including 37 'great spirits,' most of whom were humans who died violently, along with the rest of the more common spirits associated with trees, water, mountains and other aspects of nature," the report noted.

"Worship of these spirits predates Buddhism in Burma, but the beliefs and rituals merged with Buddhism as the religion gained prominence in the country. Professing allegiance to

Christ alone is seen as angering the very spirits both villagers and urban dwellers hope to placate," it added.

Christians face severe persecution in Burma, as watchdog groups such as Open Doors USA have pointed out. The nation was ranked 23rd on Open Doors' World Watch List of places that are most hostile to followers of Christ for their faith, with believers regularly prevented from practicing their religion.

Groups such as the Ma Ba Tha, an organization of radical Buddhist monks, have reportedly helped introduce "Protection of Race and Religion" laws, which are said to build "insurmountable hurdles for conversions and religiously mixed marriages."

Major evangelists, such as the Rev. Franklin Graham, have successfully attracted massive crowds at events in the country, however, with the three-night Yangon Love Joy Peace Festival in November, where Graham preached, reportedly bringing over 7,000 people to Christ.

Missionaries who are helping the Christian couple in the village in Burma say they are committed to sharing the Gospel and encouraging others to come to Christ despite the difficulties they face.

"These believers are not dismayed and dispirited even though they are in many troubles, but they are still strong in their faith, trusting God that we will get a small amount of land soon for worship at a village and evangelize all the villagers," the missionary revealed.

"They do not even want to move anywhere. We have a big dream and prayer that we will get permission and land for worship services at this very village to proclaim the Gospel of Christ for the extension of the Kingdom of God."

Christian organisation calls for halt to plans to demolish mosques

Mizzima (28.09.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2f1AIC0> - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), in a statement on 27 September, called on the Rakhine State Government to halt plans to demolish more than 3,000 buildings associated with the Rohingya population on the pretext that they have been built illegally. This includes 12 mosques and 35 madrasas in the Muslim-majority townships of Maungdaw and Buthidaung.

The demolition order was announced on 18 September by Rakhine State's Security and Border Affairs Minister, Colonel Htein Lin, and later confirmed by Maungdaw District General Administrator U Ye Htut. The Myanmar Times reports that at a press conference on 24 September, Colonel Htein Lin said that buildings in Maungdaw will be the first in Rakhine State to be examined for their legality and that no demolitions have started yet.

In a joint statement on 23 September, local and international Rohingya Muslim groups stated that the plans have "caused consternation to the entire Rohingya community," adding that "this demolition project is part of their [Rakhine State Government's] long-drawn-out annihilation and ethnic cleansing policy of the defenceless Rohingya people."

The statement calls for a halt to the demolition plans, for the protection of religious sites and for the right to freedom of religion or belief to be upheld. Other calls include for basic freedoms to be restored to the Rohingya Muslim community in Rakhine State, the lifting of aid restrictions and the restoration of internally displaced persons to their homes and properties.

The Rohingya in Myanmar were stripped of their right to vote in Myanmar's 2015 election, excluded from the most recent national census, and continue to be denied their legal right to citizenship. In a statement to the United Nations Human Rights Council in May 2016, CSW urged the government of Myanmar to repeal the 1982 Citizenship Law and guarantee the right to freedom of religion or belief for all.

Recent years have seen a dramatic escalation of human rights abuses, repression, discrimination and violence against the Rohingya. An estimated 150,000 people have been displaced and are living in camps which have been described by senior United Nations officials as having some of the worst conditions in the world. Over 100,000 Rohingya, more than ten percent of the population, have fled the country in the face of increasing repression, of whom thousands are believed to have drowned fleeing by boat.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are deeply concerned by the proposal to destroy mosques and madrasas in Rakhine State and urge the government of Myanmar to desist from any such action. Destroying these buildings would only further stoke tensions in the country and fuel the persecution of an already severely marginalised and dehumanised people group. We call on the government of Myanmar to uphold and protect freedom of religion or belief for all. We also urge the government to lift the block on humanitarian aid access to parts of Rakhine state, as well as Kachin and northern Shan States, and to ensure that all those displaced by conflict receive the humanitarian aid they urgently need."

NGOs urge government to protect religious minorities

CSW (05.07.2016) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), together with over ten other organisations working for human rights in Burma, today calls on the government of Burma to take urgent action to protect vulnerable religious minorities in the country, following two recent violent attacks on Muslims.

On 1 July, a mosque was destroyed by a mob in Hpakant township in Kachin State. On 23 June, a mob destroyed a mosque, a school and homes in a village in Waw township, Bago Division in central Burma. According to reports, security forces failed to prevent these attacks, and the government failed to respond to calls for action.

These attacks are the latest in an anti-Muslim campaign of hatred led by militant Buddhist nationalists over the past four years, and which has included violent attacks, hate speech and the introduction of discriminatory legislation that restricts religious conversions and inter-faith marriage.

In November 2015, just after the election which was overwhelmingly won by her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), Burma's State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi told the BBC that "hatred has no place" in the country and that her government would protect minorities and bring to justice those who incite hatred or violence. However, according to reports three members of the NLD participated in the attack in Bago Division.

The human rights organisations have called on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the Burmese government to ensure that the perpetrators of these two attacks are brought to justice, and that police are instructed to prevent further attacks. They also urge the government to adopt the principles and non-legislative proposals set out by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief in his 2013 report on hate speech and the Rabat Plan of Action. Burma should also invite the new UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to visit the country at the earliest opportunity.

CSW's East Asia Team Leader Benedict Rogers, said: "We are deeply shocked by these two incidents, and we are very concerned that the authorities appear to have failed to respond effectively to these serious acts of violence. We urge the government to take all necessary actions to prevent further violence, to end the climate of impunity that is prevailing, and to protect freedom of religion or belief for all. The government should speak out against hate speech, prosecute those responsible for inciting and perpetrating violence, and support initiatives to promote inter-faith reconciliation, dialogue and harmony. If this hatred and violence continues, it puts in jeopardy everything that has been achieved in the democratic transition in Burma, and creates a very dangerous situation. The international community must understand the potential gravity of this situation, and urge the Burmese government to act."

Why Burma is trying to stop people from using the name of its persecuted Muslim minority

Despite international calls to help the country's Rohingya people, indications are that Burma's new government is trying to scrub the very term Rohingya from use

By Feliz Solomon

Time (09.05.2016) - <http://ti.me/1T8nBrm> - Burma's newly installed government is trying to get foreign diplomats to refrain from using the name Rohingya, in the latest blow to the country's heavily persecuted Muslim group. The move is an apparent bow to pressure from a small but influential ultra-nationalist movement that refuses to recognize the rights of the Rohingya people to belong in Burma.

A spokeswoman for Burma's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Aye Aye Soe, tells TIME that the government is "not objecting [to] the term [Rohingya] but requesting not to use it." The suggestion was made during private "courtesy calls" between Aung San Suu Kyi — in her role as Minister of Foreign Affairs — and the U.S. Ambassador to Burma Scot Marciel, after the embassy had been targeted by Burmese over its use of the word. Protesters see the term — which means a person of Rohang, the old Muslim term for what is now Arakan state in western Burma — as conferring historical legitimacy on the Muslim presence in the country that is also known as Myanmar.

Though the historical origins of the term Rohingya are muddy, many Rohingya families have lived in western Burma for generations and the majority choose this term to describe themselves. However, during the 2014 census, the Rohingya were forced to identify themselves as "Bengali" — the official term for them — or they would not be registered. They are not recognized as one of the 135 official ethnic groups in the country, and nearly all of the 1.1 million Rohingya are denied citizenship and basic rights.

The U.N. considers the Rohingya, who reside near Burma's border with Bangladesh, to be among the world's most persecuted minorities, but in most of Burma they are viewed as dangerous interlopers. In western Arakan state, a spate of deadly riots beginning in 2012 between the local Buddhist population and the Muslim Rohingya claimed more than 100 lives and displaced some 140,000 people — mostly Rohingya. Many are still confined to squalid camps where they are denied freedom of movement, education and health care. Conditions are so dire that tens of thousands have fled by boat, undertaking perilous voyages in the hands of traffickers in the hope of finding refuge in Muslim-majority Malaysia or other Southeast Asian countries.

While the international community has repeatedly urged the government to end persecution and allow the group to call themselves Rohingya if they wish, last week's advisory signals that the county's new government, led by Nobel laureate Suu Kyi, is not inclined toward concessions and will continue to scrub the term from official usage.

"Many Buddhists believe the name Rohingya is a political claim that they cannot agree to," according to Ronan Lee, a researcher and former Australian lawmaker who has conducted extensive studies in Arakan state.
