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Rohingya Muslims flee as more than 2,600 houses burned in Myanmar's Rakhine

Reuters (02.09.2017) - <https://yhoo.it/2eL2Qgp> - More than 2,600 houses have been burned down in Rohingya-majority areas of Myanmar's northwest in the last week, the government said on Saturday, in one of the deadliest bouts of violence involving the Muslim minority in decades.

About 58,600 Rohingya have fled into neighbouring Bangladesh from Myanmar, according to U.N. refugee agency UNHCR, as aid workers there struggle to cope.

Myanmar officials blamed the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) for the burning of the homes. The group claimed responsibility for coordinated attacks on security posts last week that prompted clashes and a large army counter-offensive.

But Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh say a campaign of arson and killings by the Myanmar army is aimed at trying to force them out.

The treatment of Myanmar's roughly 1.1 million Rohingya is the biggest challenge facing leader Aung San Suu Kyi, accused by Western critics of not speaking out for the Muslim minority that has long complained of persecution.

Former colonial power Britain said on Saturday it hoped Suu Kyi would use her "remarkable qualities" to end the violence.

"Aung San Suu Kyi is rightly regarded as one of the most inspiring figures of our age, but the treatment of the Rohingya is, alas, besmirching the reputation of Burma," foreign minister Boris Johnson said in a statement.

The clashes and army crackdown have killed nearly 400 people and more than 11,700 "ethnic residents" have been evacuated from the area, the government said, referring to the non-Muslim residents.

It marks a dramatic escalation of a conflict that has simmered since October, when a smaller Rohingya attack on security posts prompted a military response dogged by allegations of rights abuses.

"A total of 2,625 houses from Kotankauk, Myinlut and Kyikanpyin villages and two wards in Maungtaw were burned down by the ARSA extremist terrorists," the state-run Global

New Light of Myanmar said. The group has been declared a terrorist organisation by the government.

But Human Rights Watch, which analysed satellite imagery and accounts from Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh, said the Myanmar security forces deliberately set the fires. "New satellite imagery shows the total destruction of a Muslim village, and prompts serious concerns that the level of devastation in northern Rakhine state may be far worse than originally thought," said the group's deputy Asia director, Phil Robertson.

Full capacity

Near the Naf river separating Myanmar and Bangladesh, new arrivals in Bangladesh carrying their belongings in sacks set up crude tents or tried to squeeze into available shelters or homes of locals.

"The existing camps are near full capacity and numbers are swelling fast. In the coming days there needs to be more space," said UNHCR regional spokeswoman Vivian Tan, adding more refugees were expected.

The Rohingya are denied citizenship in Myanmar and regarded as illegal immigrants, despite claiming roots that date back centuries. Bangladesh is also growing increasingly hostile to Rohingya, more than 400,000 of whom live in the poor South Asian country after fleeing Myanmar since the early 1990s.

Jalal Ahmed, 60, who arrived in Bangladesh on Friday with a group of about 3,000 after walking from Kyikanpyin for almost a week, said he believed the Rohingya were being pushed out of Myanmar.

"The military came with 200 people to the village and started fires...All the houses in my village are already destroyed. If we go back there and the army sees us, they will shoot," he said.

Reuters could not independently verify these accounts as access for independent journalists to northern Rakhine has been restricted since security forces locked down the area in October.

Speaking to soldiers, government staff and Rakhine Buddhists affected by the conflict on Friday, army chief Min Aung Hlaing said there is no "oppression or intimidation" against the Muslim minority and "everything is within the framework of the law".

"The Bengali problem was a long-standing one which has become an unfinished job," he said, using a term used by many in Myanmar to refer to the Rohingya that suggests they come from Bangladesh.

Many aid programmes running in northern Rakhine prior to the outbreak of violence, including life-saving food assistance by the World Food Programme (WFP), have been suspended since the fighting broke out.

"Food security indicators and child malnutrition rates in Maungdaw were already above emergency thresholds before the violence broke out, and it is likely that they will now deteriorate even further," said Pierre Peron, spokesman for the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Myanmar.

More than 80,000 children may need treatment for malnutrition in northern Rakhine and many of them reported "extreme" food insecurity, WFP said in July.

In Bangladesh, Tan of UNHCR said more shelters and medical care were needed. "There's a lot of pregnant women and lactating mothers and really young children, some of them born during the flight. They all need medical attention," she said.

Among new arrivals, 22-year-old Tahara Begum gave birth to her second child in a forest on the way to Bangladesh.

"It was the hardest thing I've ever done," she said.

Russian tourist who wore shoes inside Bagan pagodas refuses to pay K500,000 fine, gets one-month jail sentence

By Coconuts Yangon

Coconuts.Co (03.08.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2uqiVHj> - A tourist who was arrested for wearing shoes inside several Bagan pagodas has been sentenced to a month in jail.

Authorities say that the tourist, a Russian national, was given multiple warnings to take off her shoes but refused to comply.

Finally, locals went to the Nyaung-U police station and filed a case against the woman under Section 295 of the Penal Code for intentionally causing religious insult. Under the charge, the defendant faced a jail sentence of up to two years and/or a monetary fine.

"For days, she was walking around pagodas with her shoes on.... She would be given warnings and sent back to her hotel, but she kept returning and still wearing shoes on the pagodas. The locals couldn't stand it anymore, which is why they opened a case against her under Section 295," First Lieutenant Myo Nyunt of the Tourist Police Force told *Eleven*.

On August 1, the woman was ordered to pay a fine of MMK500,000. When she failed to do so, the judge handed down a one-month jail sentence.

In addition to the religious insult charge, the defendant is now also being tried under Section 13(1) of the Immigration (Emergency Provisions) Act for violating visa regulations.

Last October, a Dutch tourist was found guilty under a similar religious insult charge after he unplugged a speaker at a Buddhist dhamma sermon taking place at a religious hall in Mandalay. Although he was sentenced to three months in jail, he managed to avoid an additional six-month sentence by paying a K100,000 fine.

We're not lawyers, but we feel like someone should've also advised the Russian tourist that US\$370 is a small price to pay to avoid a month in a Myanmar prison.

Correction: An earlier version of this story stated that the tourist in question was a man. The defendant is a woman. We apologize for the error.

Myanmar Baptists face eight years in prison for helping journalist to photograph bombed church

World Watch Monitor (27.06.2017) - <https://wwrn.org/articles/47171/> - Two Kachin Baptist pastors who helped a journalist to photograph a Catholic church bombed by Myanmar's army face up to eight years in prison, reports the US-based Baptist Standard.

Langjaw Gam Seng, 35, and Dumdaw Nawng Latt, 67, went missing on 24 December 2016 during a period of intense armed conflict between an alliance of ethnic militias and government forces in the northern state of Shan, which, together with neighbouring Kachin state and Chin state in the west, are home to most of Myanmar's Christians.

"Using helicopter gunships, warplanes and heavy artillery, the military drove a coalition known as the Brotherhood of the Northern Alliance out of Mong Ko [town, in Shan state], and in the process intentionally targeted and bombed the St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church," said Elijah Brown, the newly-elected general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance following a recent visit to Myanmar. According to Brown, the army claim the militia was hiding weapons in the church, something "flatly denied" by Catholic Bishop, Philip Za Hawng, whose diocese covers Shan state.

The two Kachin Baptist Convention men were charged with aiding the rebels and have been detained in Lashio prison in northern Shan, where, according to Amnesty International, Latt has been denied medical treatment for breathing difficulties.

Brown said Christians he spoke to during his visit reported "significant advancements" in religious freedoms, but that "makes the case of these two Kachin pastors so alarming: it seems a deviation from positive progress".

Seng and Latt were scheduled to appear in court yesterday (26 July) for the first of a series of hearings. "These next few weeks are critical" for the two men, Brown added.

Myanmar Muslims face charges for holding Ramadan prayers

Police charge three men who prayed in street after school where they used to worship was shut down by nationalists

The Guardian (02.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2rkAhr5> - Authorities in Myanmar have charged three Muslim men for holding Ramadan prayers in the street after the local school where they used to worship was shut down by a nationalist mob.

Police brought the charges after about 50 Muslims gathered to pray on Wednesday on a road in Yangon's Thaketa township, the site of one of a growing number of raids by Buddhist hardliners on Islamic events.

Two nearby Islamic schools were closed in late April after ultra-nationalists complained that local Muslims were illegally using them to conduct prayers.

Authorities have said the closure is temporary, but have given no timeline for when they may be reopened.

"We feel sorry. This month is important for us," said the local Muslim leader Zaw Min Latt, referring to the holy month of Ramadan, which began last week.

"We used those schools for prayer for decades. These restrictions have been brought in after more than 60 years."

Local authorities issued a statement saying the prayer session threatened "stability and the rule of law" in the mainly Muslim neighbourhood in the east of Myanmar's commercial capital.

A police officer who asked not to be named confirmed the charges.

Two officers tried to stop AFP journalists from filming when they visited one of the madrasas on Friday.

"It's our mosque as well as our school. We don't know when it will be reopened," Khin Soe, a local resident in his 50s, said as he set off to pray in another part of town.

The case comes as Myanmar's government has been seeking to clamp down on hate speech after a spike in anti-Muslim actions by hardliners from the country's Buddhist majority.

Religious tensions have soared since a group of Rohingya Muslims attacked police posts in Rakhine state in October, sparking a bloody military crackdown that has drawn widespread international condemnation.

Last week Myanmar's top Buddhist authority officially banned the Ma Ba Tha, an ultra-nationalist movement affiliated with the firebrand cleric Wirathu, which responded by simply changing its name.

The move came after nationalists this month clashed with Muslims in another Muslim neighbourhood in Yangon, after pushing police to raid a house there in search of illegal Rohingya Muslim hideouts.

'We must protect our country': extremist Buddhists target Mandalay's Muslims

Ultra-nationalist Buddhist group Ma Ba Tha has been spreading anti-Muslim rhetoric across Myanmar for years. Cosmopolitan Mandalay is at the heart of this hostility – which many fear is here to stay.

By Poppy McPherson

The Guardian (08.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2pk6OxW> - In a cluttered room in a monastery in Mandalay, Myanmar's second city, a group of crimson-robed monks and their followers feverishly smoke and talk. One monk wearing black, thick-rimmed glasses feeds paper into a photocopier. Another lies on the floor, stapling pages of propaganda together. Hangers-on laugh loudly and flick cigarette butts into an ashtray.

They're forming petitions, explains a monk with oversized sunglasses perched on his forehead. A local journalist recently criticised the group's front man, the vitriolic monk Ashin Wirathu, known for his violently anti-Muslim rhetoric. They now want the reporter arrested.

"Jihadi Muslims want to overwhelm the country, so we have to protect it," says Eindaw Bar Tha, the monk lying on the floor.

This is the headquarters of the Committee to Protect Race and Religion, or Ma Ba Tha. It is an ultra-nationalist Buddhist organisation, and for years it has been spreading anti-Muslim sentiment across the country from this unassuming base. Self-anointed protectors of Myanmar's dominant Buddhist religion, Ma Ba Tha members have sown

insidious new tensions in Mandalay, a diverse city home to sizeable Muslim, Christian and Hindu populations.

In 2014, the hostility culminated in anti-Muslim riots widely linked to Ma Ba Tha – a tension that’s still present throughout Mandalay. On the street, a Muslim man passing a monk freezes up for fear of saying a wrong word. A Buddhist taxi driver, driving away from an Islamic neighbourhood, mutters: “So many Muslims.”

Smar Nyi Nyi, a softly spoken Muslim businessman, puts it like this: “When we are speaking with the Buddhists we have to be careful. We don’t want our words to harm them. Also, we are thin-skinned about their words.”

The people in his neighbourhood have responded by putting up huge grey gates, which are shut each night at 10pm. “We are preventing trouble,” he says. “Some of the young kids, when they are insulted they will speak back, they will act back.”

Two eras: before and after 2014

The country’s ancient royal capital situated in the dry and dusty northern lowlands, has long been viewed by western travellers through a romantic lens. Britain ruled Myanmar from here, and colonial-era writer Somerset Maugham called the reconstructed palace and surrounding moat “one of the minor beauties of the world”.

Today, Mandalay is a rapidly modernising trading town, strongly influenced by its proximity to China – the motorbike-choked streets are packed with Chinese hotels, clothes stalls and cosmetics shops.

It’s also the country’s Buddhist heartland, home to hundreds of golden pagodas and monasteries. When King Mindon founded the city in the 19th century, he was fulfilling an old Buddhist prophecy that the location would be a centre for the revival and study of the religion.

Nevertheless, the city has become a melting pot of cultures and religions. Mosques, churches and sculpture-encrusted Hindu temples stand interspersed with the glittering spires of pagodas. Burmese kings had Muslim advisers. One of them, U Bein, lent his name to a spectacular teak bridge – now a popular tourist site.

During British rule, the city drew Armenian businessmen, Iraqi Jews and many south Asians. It wasn’t continuous harmony – anti-Muslim riots in 1938 claimed hundreds of lives – but relations have mostly been peaceful.

However, the city’s status as a centre of Buddhism gives Mandalay a special place in the national psyche. In the 1960s, the Ministry of Information referred to the city as “the indestructible heart of Burma” – and Ma Ba Tha has its roots in this nationalistic attitude.

“According to the constitution, most of the civilians’ religion is Buddhism,” says Eindaw Bar Tha. “The government has the responsibility to respect the rights of Buddhist citizens, too. But they’re not doing this. That’s why we have the full responsibility to protect our religion.”

The biggest threat, in their eyes, comes from their Muslim neighbours, who they view with atavistic suspicion: they say Muslims steal Buddhist women, outbreed the Buddhist majority and plot terror attacks.

While many people in cosmopolitan Mandalay eschew Ma Ba Tha's fanaticism, the city's Muslim residents date the escalating hostility to the emergence of the group (and its precursor, the 969 movement) in 2013.

When the movement's logo began to appear on car decals and in shops, and they started handing out pamphlets listing Muslim businesses to avoid, people such as Zin War Law, a Muslim office worker in her mid-30s, thought it was a joke. "It is very childish, their activity, and their manners are childish," she says. Later, she heard Buddhist friends parrot their views.

"I feel disgusted," says her friend Yin Yin Mya, a spritely 61-year-old Muslim woman. Her great-grandfather, who was also Muslim, served in the royal palace. "I hate them because actually the communities got along since a long time ago, but because of them they started to split."

For many Mandalay residents, recent history falls into two eras: before and after 2014.

After a local Muslim was accused of raping a Buddhist girl, several nights in July brought the worst intercommunal riots in years. A mob on motorbikes, armed with machetes, rampaged around targeting Islamic homes and businesses. Two men died.

"After 2014 we lost the peacefulness," says Yin Yin Mya.

She lives around the corner from the Muslim-owned chapati shop where the violence first broke out. Her own daughter, Pwint Phyu Latt, helped broker peace, but was later arrested – after a campaign by Ma Ba Tha – and remains in prison.

Yin Yin Mya says she saw rioters drive motorbikes down the road that leads from Wirathu's monastery. "At the time the groups of people – they were drunk – were sent by Wirathu," she says.

Ma Ba Tha denies any involvement in the riots. At the suggestion that they paid rioters, Eindaw Bar Tha snorts with laughter. "We have no money to buy a tea," he says.

The 'water' to Wirathu's 'fire'

Most people don't dispute the role the nationalists played in the riots. At another monastery a short drive away lives an eccentric, round-faced monk who calls himself the "water" to Wirathu's "fire". Kar Wi Ya, 60, lives with a collection of cats and kittens named after Myanmar film stars. He was one of the people responsible for calming the violence in 2014, and Muslim groups consider him a friend and sometime protector.

"After I was called by the Islamic leader, I came there with about 200 people," he recalls. "When I arrived, there were two groups fighting. I went into the middle and stopped them ... I led both groups to their respective homes."

He insists Ma Ba Tha members were among the rioters. "When they saw me, they went back," he says. "Actually, this violence was created by Ma Ba Tha."

But because he has relationships with both the Muslim community and Ma Ba Tha, some view him with suspicion. In 2013, he led protests against a visit to Myanmar by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. "He's like a gecko, easy to change colour," says Yin Yin Mya.

Nevertheless, the monk, who spent more than a decade in prison for opposing the former military junta, says he has no love for Wirathu. He echoes the commonly held belief that

Ma Ba Tha has close ties to the army and was created to foment trouble ahead of the pivotal 2015 election.

Last year, after half a century of military rule, the generals handed power to a civilian government led by longtime opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. They retain control over key institutions, including the security forces.

The fact that large-scale violence has not broken out in Mandalay since 2014 is partly thanks to the grassroots work of sympathetic monks like Kar Wi Ya, and activists who have calmed the skirmishes that are publicised and manipulated by nationalist groups on social media.

"These small things happen occasionally," says Harry Myo Lin, who runs an advocacy group called the Seagull. "It's solved underground."

He gives the recent example of a Buddhist man and Muslim woman who eloped together. Ma Ba Tha supports a ban on interfaith marriages, and local monks used this case to rile up anti-Muslim sentiment.

On another occasion, two groups of young people fought in the city and a Buddhist boy was killed. Although both groups contained Muslims and Buddhists, the incident was framed as a religiously motivated killing.

Such situations have been resolved quietly through interventions, Harry Myo Lin says. Sometimes, money changes hands.

"There are countering forces which make peace," he says. "Maybe it's not continuous peace messaging, but at least they are easily coming together to stop any possible violence."

But activists like him face continuous interference from nationalist groups. In addition to Ma Ba Tha, there are numerous youth organisations that follow their example.

"Interfaith activists in Mandalay operate amid a climate of severe hostility and fear, facing parallel forms of harassment and discrimination from both state and non-state actors," says Shaivalini Parmar, Myanmar programme officer for Civil Rights Defenders.

'We don't need Ma Ba Tha'

While it has done nothing to help persecuted interfaith activists, the NLD government led by Aung San Suu Kyi has shown some limited willingness to act against Ma Ba Tha. Shortly after taking power, Yangon chief minister Phyo Min Thein breezily told crowds on a trip to Singapore: "We don't need Ma Ba Tha."

Meanwhile the group has demonstrated callousness that may have dented its popularity. After the popular Muslim NLD legal adviser Ko Ni was assassinated in February, Wirathu publicly thanked the killer, prompting widespread ire.

Last month, Ma Ha Na, the state Buddhist organisation, sought to clamp down on Wirathu's hateful preaching – but he has continued to travel the country, broadcasting pre-recorded sermons with duct tape plastered across his mouth.

While the case against the journalist accused of defaming Wirathu was thrown out on a technicality this month, the incident demonstrates the group's continuing political sway.

Kar Wi Ya is skeptical about the government's ability to rein in Ma Ba Tha. He predicts further clashes between Buddhists and Muslims. "No hope," he says, when asked about relations between the communities.

Muslims and activists in Mandalay tend to view extremist Buddhist nationalism as a multi-headed hydra that, no matter how many heads you cut off, is liable to keep coming back.

"If you remove Ma Ba Tha, another group will come," says Smar Nyi Nyi. "We have to remove the power[ful] guys stringing behind."

In the meantime, the climate of mutual distrust they have helped foster in Mandalay will be hard to shift.

Zin War Law, for her part, regrets the loss of her Buddhist friends. "They changed," she says. "Whenever they see Muslim people they feel afraid."
