

Interfaith prayer rally held in Myanmar as religious minorities face violence

By Kayla Goodson

HRWF (11.10.2017) – Thousands of people gathered in Yangon, Myanmar, for an interfaith prayer ceremony on 10 October, reports Agence France-Presse. The event was meant to be a show of unity in a country that is overwhelmed by ethnically-charged violence, especially against the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State.

The western border area has been in a state of violence since a group of Rohingya militants attacked police posts. Since then, more than half the Rohingya Muslim population has fled their homes, according to AFP.

The violence has affected other religious minorities in the Buddhist-majority country, as well.

Hindus, which make up half a percent of the country's population according to the CIA World Factbook, have fled Rakhine State after being caught in the middle of the violence. Nearly 500 of these Hindu refugees are now sheltering in a "Hindu hamlet" in Bangladesh, only a couple of miles from where the 421,000 Rohingya Muslim refugees live in camps, according to Reuters.

The Hindu refugees do not want to return to the conflict in their hometowns, but they are also nervous to stay in Muslim-majority Bangladesh, according to Reuters. Instead, they hope to be accepted into Hindu-majority India, which they view as a religious safe-haven; however, the Indian Supreme Court is contemplating whether to deport Rohingya Muslims, so a decision as to the fate of the Hindu refugees will not be made

until the Court decisions comes through.

Christians, which make up 6.2 percent of the population in Myanmar according to the CIA World Factbook, experience systemic discrimination and military violence. According to Asia News, Christianity is seen as a foreign religion that poses a threat to traditional Burmese cultural and religious values, of which the military is the protector.

Christians face a new threat in light of the current conflict, as well. Al Qaeda has encouraged jihadists to go to Myanmar to fight in support of Rohingya Muslims, according to the Barnabas Fund. The Barnabas Fund writes that if foreign jihadists flock to Myanmar, there is a high chance they will attack Chin State, which is the only Christian-majority state in the country. This would significantly escalate the violence being experienced throughout the country.

Despite the violence against religious minorities in Myanmar, attendees of Tuesday's prayer ceremony, who came from a variety of religions, contended that Myanmar is a place of acceptance.

"This is the ceremony which shows the world that people of all religions in our country are friendly and love each other," Win Maung, a regional MP from Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) who helped organize the event, told AFP.

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