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Myanmar rejects U.N. resolution on Rohingya Muslims

Reuters (21.11. 2013) - Myanmar rejected on Thursday a U.N. resolution urging it to grant citizenship to the Rohingya, a stateless Muslim minority group, and accused the United Nations of impinging on its sovereignty.

The U.N. General Assembly's human rights committee resolution, which passed on Tuesday, also called on Buddhist-majority Myanmar to curb an increase in violence against Muslims since military rule ended in March 2011.

"Citizenship will not be granted to those who are not entitled to it under this law no matter whoever applies pressure on us," government spokesman Ye Htut said in a statement. "It is our sovereign right."

After emerging from 49 years of military rule in 2011, Myanmar has faced repeated spasms of sectarian violence that have marred its transition to democracy and threatened to undermine its nascent political and economic reforms.

Clashes between Rohingya and ethnic Rakhine Buddhists exploded in June and October last year, making 140,000 people homeless, most of them Rohingya. Myanmar's government says 192 people were killed in the unrest; Rohingya put the toll at 748.

Since then, tens of thousands of Rohingya have fled from Myanmar by boat, hoping to get to Malaysia, a majority Muslim country.

Violence against Muslims spread further this year, most recently in Thandwe, a township on the Rakhine coast where ethnic Rakhine mobs killed five Muslims in a series of attacks between September 29 and Oct 2.

Myanmar's government says the Rohingya are migrants from neighbouring Bangladesh. A 1982 Citizenship Act excluded Rohingya from Myanmar's official list of 135 ethnic groups, effectively rendering them stateless. Bangladesh also disowns them and has refused to grant them refugee status since 1992.

Many of the 1.1 million Rohingya in Myanmar's western Rakhine State, however, trace their roots back generations.

The United Nations calls them "virtually friendless" and says they are subject to many forms of "persecution, discrimination and exploitation".

The United States embassy in Yangon said on Wednesday it was "deeply concerned" about reports of violence against Muslims in Rakhine state, including the burning of a mosque and threats against internally displaced people.

It urged the national and state authorities to do more to "ensure progress in security, rule of law, justice, humanitarian access, and reconciliation".

The dark side of transition: Violence against Muslims in Myanmar

(01.10.2013) - Following the outbreak Asia Report of deadly intercommunal clashes in Rakhine State in 2012, anti-Muslim violence has spread to other parts of Myanmar. The depth of anti-Muslim sentiment in the country, and the inadequate response of the security forces, mean that further clashes are likely. Unless there is an effective government response and change in societal attitudes, violence could spread, impacting on Myanmar's transition as well as its standing in the region and beyond.

The violence has occurred in the context of rising Burman-Buddhist nationalism, and the growing influence of the monk-led "969" movement that preaches intolerance and urges a boycott of Muslim businesses. This is a dangerous combination: considerable pent-up frustration and anger under years of authoritarianism are now being directed towards Muslims by a populist political force that cloaks itself in religious respectability and moral authority.

Anti-Indian and anti-Muslim violence is nothing new in Myanmar. It is rooted in the country's colonial history and demographics, and the rise of Burman nationalism in that context. Deadly violence has erupted regularly in different parts of the country in the decades since. But the lifting of authoritarian controls and the greater availability of modern communications mean that there is a much greater risk of the violence spreading.

Among the most discriminated against populations in Myanmar is the Muslim community in northern Rakhine State, the Rohingya. Most are denied citizenship, and face severe restrictions on freedom of movement as well as numerous abusive policies. In June and October 2012, clashes between Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine State left almost 200 people dead and around 140,000 displaced, the great majority of them Muslims. Communities remain essentially segregated to this day, and the humanitarian situation is dire.

In early 2013, the violence spread to central Myanmar. The worst incident occurred in the town of Meiktila, where a dispute at a shop led to anti-Muslim violence. The brutal killing of a Buddhist monk sharply escalated the situation, with two days of riots by a 1,000-strong mob resulting in widespread destruction of Muslim neighbourhoods, and leaving at least 44 people dead, including twenty students and several teachers massacred at an Islamic school.

There has been strong domestic and international criticism of the police response. In Rakhine State, the police – who are overwhelmingly made up of Rakhine Buddhists – reportedly had little ability to stop the attacks, and there are allegations of some being complicit in the violence. The army, once it was deployed, performed better. In Meiktila, the police were apparently incapable of controlling the angry crowds that gathered outside the shop, and were hopelessly outnumbered and ineffective when the clashes rapidly escalated.

The violence has regional implications. There has been a sharp increase in the number of Muslims making the treacherous journey by boat from Rakhine State to other countries in the region, prompting public criticism from some of those countries. The intercommunal tensions have also spilled over Myanmar's borders, with the murders of Myanmar Buddhists in Malaysia, and related violence in other countries. There have also been threats of jihad against Myanmar, and plots and attacks against Myanmar or Buddhist targets in the region. As Myanmar prepares to take over the rotating chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2014, this could become a serious political issue.

The Myanmar government understands what is at stake. President Thein Sein has spoken publicly on the dangers of the violence, and announced a "zero-tolerance" approach. The police response has been improving somewhat, with faster and more effective interventions bringing incidents under control more quickly. And after some delay, perpetrators of these crimes are being prosecuted and imprisoned, although there are concerns that Buddhists sometimes appear to be treated more leniently.

But much more needs to be done. Beyond improved riot-control training and equipment for police, broader reform of the police service is necessary so that it can be more effective and trusted, particularly at the community level, including officers from ethnic and religious minorities. This is only just starting. The government and society at large must also do more to combat extremist rhetoric, in public, in the media and online. At a moment of historic reform and opening, Myanmar cannot afford to become hostage to intolerance and bigotry.

See full report at [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/251-the-dark-side-of-transition-violence-against-muslims-in-myanmar.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/251-the-dark-side-of-transition-violence-against-muslims-in-myanmar.pdf)

Myanmar Muslims hide from Buddhist mobs amid sectarian violence

The Huffington Post (02.10.2013) - Terrified Muslim families hid in forests in western Myanmar on Wednesday, one day after fleeing a new round of sectarian violence that erupted even as the president toured the divided region for the first time since clashes flared there last year.

Tuesday's unrest near the coastal town of Thandwe, which saw Buddhist mobs kill a 94-year-old Muslim woman and burn dozens of homes, underscored the government's persistent failure to stop the sectarian violence from spreading.

Rights groups say President Thein Sein has done little to crack down on religious intolerance and failed to bridge a divide that has left hundreds of thousands of Muslims marginalized and segregated, many of them trapped by security forces in prison-like camps for those who fled their homes.

Wednesday was Thein Sein's second day in Rakhine state. In the capital, Sittwe, he visited camps for both Muslims and Buddhists who have been displaced, according to state spokesman Win Myaing.

"He personally met leaders of both communities and had told them to live in peace and harmony," Win Myaing said.

While Thein Sein has condemned the violence in Rakhine state before, critics say his security forces have not done enough to contain it. They also say his government has failed to crack down on radical monks who have instilled hatred and fear of the nation's Muslim minority, arguing they pose a threat to Buddhist culture and traditions.

In a message to religious leaders that ran in Myanmar's state-run newspapers Wednesday, Thein Sein said the sectarian unrest threatens the government's reform process "and tarnishes the national image internationally."

"The constitution of Myanmar fully guarantees freedom of religion as the fundamental right of citizens," Thein Sein said. "We all should never misuse this noble idea of freedom of religion, or use it as a springboard for any kind of extremism or for fueling hatred."

Thein Sein has been widely praised for overseeing an unprecedented political opening in the Southeast Asian nation since the army ceded power two years ago to a nominally civilian government led by retired military officers.

On Tuesday, Thein Sein traveled to Mrauk-U, the spiritual heartland of the state's majority ethnic Rakhine Buddhist population. He also traveled to the northern town of Maungdaw, and was expected to visit Thandwe later Wednesday.

Thandwe was tense but quiet, with security forces out in force ahead of the president's arrival.

That boosted security presence, however, failed to deter the attackers a day earlier as unrest engulfed several other villages in the area. Witnesses said soldiers and police made no efforts to step in.

In Thabyuchaing, about 20 kilometers (12 miles) north of Thandwe, more than 700 rioters, some swinging swords, took to the streets, police officer Kyaw Naing said. A 94-year-old Muslim woman died from stab wounds in the clashes that followed, the officer said, adding that between 70 and 80 houses were set on fire.

Another officer, however, said only 19 homes were burned.

Smoldering buildings — and several injured Buddhist Rakhines — were also seen by The Associated Press in the village of Shwe Hlay. A police officer, speaking on condition of anonymity because he did not have authority to talk to the media, said the village of Linthi also was hit by rioters. Both villages are about 32 kilometers (20 miles) outside of Thandwe.

A Muslim resident of Thandwe, Myo Min, said a small mosque in Kyikanyet, about 43 kilometers (27 miles) from Thandwe, was burned by attackers Tuesday night. Police said they were trying to confirm that report.

Myo Min said he was concerned about the safety of families who fled Tuesday's violence. Many families in Thabyuchaing, he said, fled into forests when their village was attacked.

"Many of them, including women and children, are still hiding, and they are cornered and unable to come out," Myo Min said. "They need food and water, and Muslim elders are discussing with authorities to evacuate them or send food."

One Muslim resident who fled Tuesday, Thar Thar, said he went to the home of a friend with his wife and child. It was not clear how many people have fled.

Sectarian clashes that began in Rakhine in June 2012 have since morphed into an anti-Muslim campaign that has spread to towns and villages nationwide. So far, hundreds of people have been killed and more than 140,000 have fled their homes, the vast majority of them Muslims.

Most of those targeted in Rakhine state have been ethnic Rohingya Muslims, considered by many in the country to be illegal migrants from Bangladesh, though many of their families arrived generations ago. But in the latest flare-up this week, the victims were Kamans, another Muslim minority group, whose citizenship is recognized.

Muslims, who account for about 4 percent of Myanmar's roughly 60 million people, have been the main victims of the violence, but they have been prosecuted for crimes related to the clashes far more often than members of the Buddhist majority.

Woman, 94, killed as Buddhist rioters attack Muslim villages in western Myanmar

AP (01.10.2013) - Buddhist mobs killed a 94-year-old Muslim woman and torched more than 70 homes on Tuesday as sectarian violence again gripped Myanmar's Rakhine state despite a visit by President Thein Sein, officials and residents said.

With attacks reported in several villages on the outskirts of Thandwe, where tensions have been mounting for days, the number of casualties could rise.

More than 700 rioters, some swinging swords, took to the streets in Thabyuchaing, about 20 kilometers (12 miles) north of the coastal town, on Tuesday afternoon, police officer Kyaw Naing said.

An elderly Muslim woman died from stab wounds in the clashes that followed, the officer said, putting the number of houses set on fire at between 70 and 80.

Smoldering buildings — and several injured Buddhist Rakhines — were seen by The Associated Press in Shwe Hlay. A police officer, speaking on condition of anonymity because he did not have authority to talk to the media, said Linthi also was hit by rioters.

Both villages are about 17 kilometers (10 miles) from Thandwe.

The visit by President Thein Sein to the divided region was his first since sectarian violence broke out more than a year ago.

He arrived in the Rakhine state capital of Sittwe under tight security early Tuesday and was scheduled to travel to several more towns, including Maungdaw to the north and, on Wednesday, Thandwe to the south, said a senior official in the president's office, declining to be identified because he was not authorized to speak about the sensitive trip.

He said Thein Sein "is going there to help find a long-term solution to the problem" and would meet with government officials and residents.

A heavy security presence failed to deter the attackers, however, with witnesses saying soldiers and police made no efforts to step in. A 6 p.m. curfew was imposed.

Sectarian clashes that began in Rakhine in June 2012 have since morphed into an anti-Muslim campaign that has spread to towns and villages nationwide. So far, more than 240 people have been killed and more than 140,000 have fled their homes, the vast majority of them Muslims.

Thein Sein, who has been praised for making moves to transition from half a century of harsh military rule, has been criticized for failing to contain the unrest and protect the country's embattled Muslim minority.

Many of those targeted so far have been ethnic Rohingya Muslims, considered by many in the country to be illegal migrants from Bangladesh, though many of their families arrived generations ago.

But in the latest flare-up, the victims were Kamans, another Muslim minority group, whose citizenship is recognized.

The trouble started Saturday, when a Buddhist taxi driver alleged he'd been verbally abused by a Muslim shop owner while trying to park his vehicle.

Hours later, rocks were thrown at the man's home. And by Sunday, as anger spread, two houses owned by Muslims were burned to the ground.

The violence has proven to be a major challenge for Thein Sein's government, which rights groups say has done little to crack down on religious intolerance and failed to bridge a divide that has left hundreds of thousands of Muslims marginalized, many of them trapped in prison-like camps for those who have been displaced.

Initially confined to Rakhine state, sectarian attacks have spread this year into Myanmar's heartland, ravaging several other cities across the country. At the same time, a Buddhist-led campaign called "969" has taken root nationwide. Its supporters urge Buddhists to shop only at Buddhist stores and avoid marrying, hiring or selling their homes or land to Muslims.

While radical monks have helped fuel the crisis, saying Muslims pose a threat to Buddhist culture and traditions, critics say a failure by the government and society as a whole to speak out is helping perpetuate the violence.

"Political, religious and community leaders need to condemn hate speech," Jim Della-Giacoma of the International Crisis Group said in a statement.

"Those who are spreading messages of intolerance and hatred must not go unchallenged. Otherwise, this issue could come to define the new Myanmar, tarnishing its international image and threatening the success of its transition away from decades of authoritarianism," he said.

Muslims, who account for about 4 percent of Myanmar's roughly 60 million people, have been the main victims of the violence since it began. But most criminal trials have involved prosecutions of Muslims rather than members of the Buddhist majority.

Fresh Myanmar clashes signal growing Muslim desperation

Reuters (12.08.2013) - Attempts to bring stability to Myanmar's strategic northwest Rakhine State could be unraveling after police opened fire on Rohingya Muslims for the third time in two months, reviving tensions in a region beset by religious violence last year.

Villages outside the state capital Sittwe remain volatile after a dispute over custody of a dead Rohingya quickly escalated into a day of clashes on Friday in which police raked Rohingya crowds with gunfire, according to witnesses.

The violence underscores the growing Rohingya desperation in the face of an increasingly unsparing police response. At least two people were killed and more than a dozen injured, locals said.

The renewed tensions come despite government efforts to bring calm to Rakhine State, after two eruptions of communal violence with ethnic Rakhine Buddhists last year killed at least 192 people and left 140,000 homeless, mostly Rohingya.

The battered corpse of the fisherman washed ashore at Ohntawgyi village after Friday morning prayers, triggering a day of clashes in which police raked crowds of Rohingya with gunfire.

A military intelligence source in Sittwe put the toll at one dead and nine injured, while the state-run New Light of Myanmar newspaper said only three people had suffered "minor injuries".

Activists blamed the clashes on restrictive measures imposed after last year's violence in the Buddhist-majority country.

Apartheid-like policies have segregated Buddhists from Muslims, many of whom fester in primitive camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) with little hope of resettlement.

A Reuters photographer and video journalist who visited the area said the situation remained tense as Tomas Ojea Quintana, U.N. special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, arrived in Sittwe on Monday.

The clashes heap pressure on President Thein Sein as he struggles to contain nationwide religious violence since taking power in March 2011 after nearly 50 years of military dictatorship.

Strategic region

Rakhine State is one of Myanmar's poorest regions, but in the reform era it is emerging as one of its most strategic.

In Sittwe's harbor, India is funding a \$214 million port, river and road network that will carve a trade route into India's landlocked northeast. From Kyaukphyu, a city 105 km (65 miles) southeast of Sittwe, gas and oil pipelines stretch to China's energy-hungry northwest. Both projects capitalize on Myanmar's growing importance at Asia's crossroads.

"Rumors of extensive mineral wealth in Rakhine State would add or perhaps are now adding fuel to the existing ethnic tensions," said the Harvard Ash Center in a July 2013 report.

Aung Win, a well-known Rohingya activist who visited the troubled area on Sunday, blamed the unrest on deteriorating relations between the displaced Rohingya and police.

Rohingya blamed the police for beatings, extortion and other "inhuman" treatment, he said. "People have no trust in the police anymore," he said. "They want the police out of their areas and the military there instead."

The IDPs also demand the release of Rohingya leaders detained since late April after violent protests at a camp near Sittwe over a government resettlement plan.

The plan required the stateless Rohingya to identify themselves as "Bengali", a term Rohingya reject. The government says they are Muslim migrants from Bangladesh and denies them citizenship. Many Rohingya say their families have lived in Rakhine for generations.

Growing desperation

As tempers rose on Friday, Rohingya villagers and IDPs burned down a police outpost in Ohntawgyi and erected a nearby roadblock, witnesses said. Police fired rubber bullets, tear gas and live rounds. The IDPs fought with sticks and catapults.

Chris Lewa of the Rohingya advocacy group Arakan Project sees the latest violence as an attempt to resist oppressive measures common in northern Rakhine State, a Rohingya-majority region of three townships bordering Bangladesh.

In two townships, Buthidaung and Maungdaw, the state government recently announced the enforcement of a two-child limit on Rohingya families, one of several measures that the United Nations has called a violation of human rights.

The violence near Sittwe follows two other recent instances of fatal police gunfire in Rakhine.

On June 4, three Rohingya women were shot dead by police in Mrauk-U township, said U.N. envoy Ojea Quintana who arrived in Myanmar on Sunday. In June, he called it "the latest shocking example of how law enforcement officials operate with complete impunity" in Rakhine.

Then, on June 27, two IDPs were killed and six wounded when security forces opened fire on a crowd outside a military post in Pauktaw township, according to the UNHCR.

Rakhine State government spokesman Win Myaing blamed the Rohingya for Friday's violence, which he said was timed to coincide with the U.N. envoy's visit.

"They want to show to the international community the Rakhine State government is neglecting them," he told Reuters.

Ojea Quintana was met in Sittwe by Rakhine Buddhist protesters wearing T-shirts reading "Get Out" and carrying signs labeling him a "Bengali Lobbyist".

Myanmar jails Buddhists in Islamic school massacre of Muslims

AP (11.07.2013) - State media in Myanmar say a court has sentenced seven Buddhists to between three and 15 years in jail for their role in a massacre at an Islamic boarding school that left dozens of students and teachers dead.

The Kyemon daily says a Muslim man was also found guilty Wednesday, but provided few details.

A wave of sectarian violence that has gripped Myanmar in the last year has left more than 250 people dead – most of them Muslims – and sent 140,000 others fleeing their homes.

The March 21 attack on the Mingalar Zayone Islamic Boarding School in the central town of Meikhtila was one of the most brutal, with Buddhist mobs hunting down children and teachers with metal pipes, chains and stones as security forces stood by.

Kachin civilians killed despite agreement to end hostilities

CSW (28.06.2013) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that a Kachin civilian named Zahkung Lum Hkawng was tortured, beaten and shot dead by the Burmese Army in Northern Shan State on 14 June. The killing occurred just weeks after the Burmese government and the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) signed a seven-point agreement in Myitkyina on 30 May.

On the night of 14 June, Zahkung Lum Hkawng, aged 45, was taking his turn as a security guard for his village, Nawng Hen, when Burmese troops entered the village and demanded that the village head provide a guide for them. Lum Hkawng was forced to accompany the troops to Mung YaHka Zup village where they clashed with the Kachin

Independence Army (KIA), the armed wing of the KIO. The Burmese Army troops accused Lum Hkawng of deliberately leading them into an ambush. They beat and tortured the victim and before shooting him dead.

On the same day, an unnamed villager was killed by the Burmese Army at the road between Nan Gat and Ying La villages. A group of villagers from Nawng Hen who went to retrieve the victim's body were stopped by Burmese Army troops at Nan Gat village and told that they were not allowed to go any further. The same afternoon another round of fighting took place between Burmese troops and the KIA, giving the neighbours the opportunity to take the victim's body back to his remaining family members, including his elderly mother, wife, and six children.

The Burmese Army and KIO are engaged in ongoing talks to resolve the two-year conflict. On 30 May the two sides reached a seven-point deal in which they agreed to "undertake efforts to achieve de-escalation and cessation of hostilities". There is an urgent need to end the conflict, which has resulted in the displacement of at least 100,000 civilians as well as numerous human rights violations.

In a four-week fact-finding visit to Burma earlier this year, CSW reported testimonies of internally displaced Kachin people who had experienced horrific physical, psychological and sexual torture. CSW report welcomed signs of political change in the country, but highlighted "many very grave challenges and concerns, particularly in respect to the protection of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief".

Despite the 30 May agreement, villagers in this area report the daily reinforcement of Burmese troops, prompting fears that incidents like those mentioned above could multiply.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We condemn the killing of these two civilians by Burmese troops. We call on the Burmese Army's to take seriously its commitment to the de-escalation of the conflict and encourage all parties involved in the conflict to work towards the cessation of hostilities and a lasting peace agreement."

Special Report: Myanmar gives official blessing to anti-Muslim Buddhist monks

Reuters (27.06.2013) - The Buddhist extremist movement in Myanmar, known as 969, portrays itself as a grassroots creed.

Its chief proponent, a monk named Wirathu, was once jailed by the former military junta for anti-Muslim violence and once called himself the "Burmese bin Laden."

But a Reuters examination traces 969's origins to an official in the dictatorship that once ran Myanmar, and which is the direct predecessor of today's reformist government. The 969 movement now enjoys support from senior government officials, establishment monks and even some members of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), the political party of Nobel peace laureate Aung San SuuKyì.

Wirathu urges Buddhists to boycott Muslim shops and shun interfaith marriages. He calls mosques "enemy bases."

Among his admirers: Myanmar's minister of religious affairs.

"Wirathu's sermons are about promoting love and understanding between religions," SannSint, minister of religious affairs, told Reuters in his first interview with the international media. "It is impossible he is inciting religious violence."

SannSint, a former lieutenant general in Myanmar's army, also sees nothing wrong with the boycott of Muslim businesses being led by the 969 monks. "We are now practicing market economics," he said. "Nobody can stop that. It is up to the consumers."

President Thein Sein is signaling a benign view of 969, too. His office declined to comment for this story. But in response to growing controversy over the movement, it issued a statement Sunday, saying 969 "is just a symbol of peace" and Wirathu is "a son of Lord Buddha."

Wirathu and other monks have been closely linked to the sectarian violence spreading across Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. Anti-Muslim unrest simmered under the junta that ran the country for nearly half a century. But the worst fighting has occurred since the quasi-civilian government took power in March 2011.

Two outbursts in Rakhine State last year killed at least 192 people and left 140,000 homeless, mostly stateless Rohingya Muslims. A Reuters investigation found that organized attacks on Muslims last October were led by Rakhine nationalists incited by Buddhist monks and sometimes abetted by local security forces.

In March this year, at least 44 people died and 13,000 were displaced - again, mostly Muslims - during riots in Meikhtila, a city in central Myanmar. Reuters documented in April that the killings happened after monks led Buddhist mobs on a rampage. In May, Buddhists mobs burned and terrorized Muslim neighborhoods in the northern city of Lashio. Reports of unrest have since spread nationwide.

The numbers 969, innocuous in themselves, refer to attributes of the Buddha, his teachings and the monkhood. But 969 monks have been providing the moral justification for a wave of anti-Muslim bloodshed that could scuttle Myanmar's nascent reform program. Another prominent 969 monk, Wimala Biwuntha, likens Muslims to a tiger who enters an ill-defended house to snatch away its occupants.

"Without discipline, we'll lose our religion and our race," he said in a recent sermon. "We might even lose our country."

Officially, Myanmar has no state religion, but its rulers have long put Buddhism first. Muslims make up an estimated 4 percent of the populace. Buddhism is followed by 90 percent of the country's 60 million people and is promoted by a special department within the ministry of religion created during the junta.

Easy scapegoats

Monks play a complex part in Burmese politics. They took a central role in pro-democracy "Saffron Revolution" uprisings against military rule in 2007. The generals - who included current President Thein Sein and most senior members of his government - suppressed them. Now, Thein Sein's ambitious program of reforms has ushered in new freedoms of speech and assembly, liberating the country's roughly 500,000 monks. They can travel at will to spread Buddhist teachings, including 969 doctrine.

In Burma's nascent democracy, the monks have emerged as a political force in the run-up to a general election scheduled for 2015. Their new potency has given rise to a conspiracy theory here: The 969 movement is controlled by disgruntled hardliners from

the previous junta, who are fomenting unrest to derail the reforms and foil an election landslide by Suu Kyi's NLD.

No evidence has emerged to support this belief. But some in the government say there is possibly truth to it.

"Some people are very eager to reform, some people don't want to reform," Soe Thein, one of President Thein Sein's two closest advisors, told Reuters. "So, regarding the sectarian violence, some people may be that side - the anti-reform side."

Even if 969 isn't controlled by powerful hardliners, it has broad support, both in high places and at the grass roots, where it is a genuine and growing movement.

Officials offer tacit backing, said Wimala, the 969 monk. "By letting us give speeches to protect our religion and race, I assume they are supporting us," he said.

The Yangon representative of the Burmese Muslim Association agreed. "The anti-Muslim movement is growing and the government isn't stopping it," said Myo Win, a Muslim teacher. Myo Win likened 969 to the Ku Klux Klan.

The religion minister, Sann Sint, said the movement doesn't have official state backing. But he defended Wirathu and other monks espousing the creed.

"I don't think they are preaching to make problems," he said.

Local authorities, too, have lent the movement some backing.

Its logo - now one of Myanmar's most recognizable - bears the Burmese numerals 969, a chakra wheel and four Asiatic lions representing the ancient Buddhist emperor Ashoka. Stickers with the logo are handed out free at speeches. They adorn shops, homes, taxis and souvenir stalls at the nation's most revered Buddhist pagoda, the Shwedagon. They are a common sight in areas plagued by unrest.

Some authorities treat the symbol with reverence. A court in Bago, a region near Yangon hit by anti-Muslim violence this year, jailed a Muslim man for two years in April after he removed a 969 sticker from a betel-nut shop. He was sentenced under a section of Burma's colonial-era Penal Code, which outlaws "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings".

Quasi-official origins

The 969 movement's ties to the state date back to the creed's origins. Wimala, Wirathu and other 969 preachers credit its creation to the late Kyaw Lwin, an ex-monk, government official and prolific writer, now largely forgotten outside religious circles.

Myanmar's former dictators handpicked Kyaw Lwin to promote Buddhism after the brutal suppression of the 1988 democracy uprising. Thousands were killed or injured after soldiers opened fire on unarmed protesters, including monks. Later, to signal their disgust, monks refused to accept alms from military families for three months, a potent gesture in devoutly Buddhist Myanmar.

Afterwards, the military set about co-opting Buddhism in an effort to tame rebellious monks and repair its image. Monks were registered and their movements restricted. State-run media ran almost daily reports of generals overseeing temple renovations or donating alms to abbots.

In 1991, the junta created a Department for the Promotion and Propagation of the Sasana (DPPS), a unit within the Religion Ministry, and appointed Kyaw Lwin as its head. Sasana means "religion" in Pali, the liturgical language of Theravada Buddhism; in Burma, the word is synonymous with Buddhism itself.

The following year, the DPPS published "How To Live As A Good Buddhist," a distillation of Kyaw Lwin's writings. It was republished in 2000 as "The Best Buddhist," its cover bearing an early version of the 969 logo.

Kyaw Lwin stepped down in 1992. The current head is Khine Aung, a former military officer.

Kyaw Lwin's widow and son still live in his modest home in central Yangon. Its living room walls are lined with shelves of KyawLwin's books and framed photos of him as a monk and meditation master.

Another photo shows KyawLwin sharing a joke with Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt, then chief of military intelligence and one of Myanmar's most feared men. Kyaw Lwin enjoyed close relations with other junta leaders, said his son, Aung Lwin Tun, 38, a car importer. He was personally instructed to write "The Best Buddhist" by the late Saw Maung, then Myanmar's senior-most general. He met "often" to discuss religion with ex-dictator Than Shwe, who retired in March 2011 and has been out of the public eye since then.

"The Best Buddhist" is out of print, but Aung Lwin Tun plans to republish it. "Many people are asking for it now," he said. He supports today's 969 movement, including its anti-Muslim boycott. "It's like building a fence to protect our religion," he said.

Also supporting 969 is Kyaw Lwin's widow, 65, whose name was withheld at the family's request. She claimed that Buddhists who marry Muslims are forced at their weddings to tread on an image of Buddha, and that the ritual slaughter of animals by Shi'ite Muslims makes it easier for them to kill humans.

Among the monks Kyaw Lwin met during his time as DPPS chief was Wiseitta Biwuntha, who hailed from the town of Kyaukse, near the northern cultural capital of Mandalay. Better known as Wirathu, he is today one of the 969's most incendiary leaders.

Wirathu and Kyaw Lwin stayed in touch after their 1992 meeting, said AungLwinTun, who believed his father would admire Wirathu's teachings. "He is doing what other people won't - protecting and promoting the religion."

Kyaw Lwin died in 2001, aged 70. That same year, Wirathu began preaching about 969, and the U.S. State Department reported "a sharp increase in anti-Muslim violence" in Myanmar. Anti-Muslim sentiment was stoked in March 2001 by the Taliban's destruction of Buddhist statues in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, and in September by al Qaeda's attacks in the United States.

Two years later, Wirathu was arrested and sentenced to 25 years in jail for distributing anti-Muslim pamphlets that incited communal riots in his hometown. At least 10 Muslims were killed by a Buddhist mob, according to a State Department report. The 969 movement had spilled its first blood.

969 versus 786

Wirathu was freed in 2011 during an amnesty for political prisoners. While the self-styled "Burmese bin Laden" has become the militant face of 969, the movement derives

evangelical energy from monks in Mon, a coastal state where people pride themselves on being Myanmar's first Buddhists. Since last year's violence they have organized a network across the nation. They led a boycott last year of a Muslim-owned bus company in Moulmein, Mon's capital. Extending that boycott nationwide has become a central 969 goal.

Muslims held many senior government positions after Myanmar gained independence from Britain in 1948. That changed in 1962, when the military seized power and stymied the hiring and promoting of Muslim officials. The military drew on popular prejudices that Muslims dominated business and used their profits to build mosques, buy Buddhist wives and spread Islamic teachings.

All this justified the current boycott of Muslim businesses, said Zarni Win Tun, a 31-year-old lawyer and 969 devotee, who said Muslims had long shunned Buddhist businesses. "We didn't start the boycott - they did," she said. "We're just using their methods."

By that she means the number 786, which Muslims of South Asian origin often display on their homes and businesses. It is a numerical representation of the Islamic blessing, "In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate and Merciful". But Buddhists in Myanmar - a country obsessed by numerology - claim the sum of the three numbers signifies a Muslim plan for world domination in the 21st century.

It is possible to understand why some Buddhists might believe this. Religious and dietary customs prohibit Muslims from frequenting Buddhist restaurants, for example. Muslims also dominate some small- and medium-sized business sectors. The names of Muslim-owned construction companies - Naing Group, Motherland, Fatherland - are winning extra prominence now that Yangon is experiencing a reform-era building boom.

However, the biggest construction firms - those involved in multi-billion-dollar infrastructure projects - are run by tycoons linked to members of the former dictatorship. They are Buddhists.

Buddhist clients have cancelled contracts with Muslim-owned construction companies in northern Yangon, fearing attacks by 969 followers on the finished buildings, said Shwe Muang, a Muslim MP with the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party. "I worry that if this starts in one township it will infect others," he said.

Our lives are not save

For Zarni Win Tun, the 969 devotee, shunning Muslims is a means of ensuring sectarian peace. She points to the Meikhtila violence, which was sparked by an argument between Buddhist customers and a Muslim gold-shop owner. "If they'd bought from their own people, the problem wouldn't have happened," she said.

Her conviction that segregation is the solution to sectarian strife is echoed in national policy. A total of at least 153,000 Muslims have been displaced in the past year after the violence in Rakhine and in central Myanmar. Most are concentrated in camps guarded by the security forces with little hope of returning to their old lives.

A few prominent monks have publicly criticized the 969 movement, and some Facebook users have launched a campaign to boycott taxis displaying its stickers. Some Yangon street stalls have started selling 969 CDs more discreetly since the Meikhtila bloodbath. The backlash has otherwise been muted.

Wimala, the Mon monk, shrugged off criticism from fellow monks. "They shouldn't try to stop us from doing good things," he said.

In mid-June, he and Wirathu attended a hundreds-strong monastic convention near Yangon, where Wirathu presented a proposal to restrict Buddhist women from marrying Muslim men.

In another sign 969 is going mainstream, Wirathu's bid was supported by Dhammapiya, a U.S.-educated professor at the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Yangon, a respected institution with links to other Buddhist universities in Asia.

Dhammapiya described 969 as a peaceful movement that is helping Myanmar through a potentially turbulent transition. "The 969 issue for us is no issue," Dhammapiya told Reuters. "Buddhists always long to live in peace and harmony."

No Mosques here

The only mass movement to rival 969 is the National League for Democracy. Their relationship is both antagonistic and complementary.

In a speech posted on YouTube in late March, Wirathu said the party and SuuKyi's inner circle were dominated by Muslims. "If you look at NLD offices in any town, you will see bearded people," he said. Followers of Wimala told Reuters they had removed photos of SuuKyi - a devout Buddhist - from their homes to protest her apparent reluctance to speak up for Buddhists affected by last year's violence in Rakhine. SuuKyi's reticence on sectarian violence has also angered Muslims.

The Burmese Muslim Association has accused NLD members of handing out 969 materials in Yangon.

Party spokesman Nyan Win said "some NLD members" were involved in the movement. "But the NLD cannot interfere with the freedoms or rights of members," he said. "They all have the right to do what they want in terms of social affairs."

Min Thet Lin, 36, a taxi driver, is exercising that right. The front and back windows of his car are plastered with 969 stickers. He is also an NLD leader in Thaketa, a working-class Yangon township known for anti-Muslim sentiment.

In February, Buddhist residents of Thaketa descended upon an Islamic school in Min Thet Lin's neighborhood which they claimed was being secretly converted into a mosque. Riot police were deployed while the structure was demolished.

A month later, Wimala and two other Mon monks visited Thaketa to give Buddhists what a promotional leaflet called "dhamma medicine" - that is, three days of 969 sermons. "Don't give up the fight," urged the leaflet.

Today, the property is sealed off and guarded by police. "People don't want a mosque here," said Min Thet Lin.

As he spoke, 969's pop anthem, "Song to Whip Up Religious Blood," rang over the rooftops. A nearby monastic school was playing the song for enrolling pupils.

The 969 catechism of Myanmar's anti-Muslim Buddhists

Reuters (27.06.2013)- Wimala Biwuntha is a pint-sized monk with boyish features who could barely see over the lectern during his recent sermon to a mesmerized crowd at a Yangon monastery. Yet his stature in Myanmar grows daily, thanks to his stark message to fellow Buddhists: "We are digging our own graves."

Wimala's sermon in the low-rent suburb of Insein was billed as an "introduction to the Buddhist logo". To warm up the crowd, a catchy pop tune called "Song to Whip Up Religious Blood" was played at high volume on a continuous loop on the monastery's loudspeakers. "Buddhists should not stay calm anymore," ran the lyrics.

Wimala hails from Mon, a coastal state near Yangon. The Mon pride themselves on being Myanmar's earliest converts to Buddhism. In October, with violence raging in Rakhine, he and fellow Mon monks set up the "Gana Wasaka Sangha" network to propagate 969 teachings.

It distributes a map showing Myanmar surrounded by Muslim-majority countries where Buddhism once flourished, such as Indonesia. "If necessary," runs its slogan, "we will build a fence with our bones."

Wimala's preaching style is by turns intimate and hectoring. He cracks jokes. Often, he closes his eyes and intones like a revivalist preacher. Unfurling a poster of the 969 logo, he led the audience through the first of many renditions of the movement's catechism.

"When you eat?" he asked.

"Nine six nine!" shouted his followers.

"When you go?"

"Nine six nine!"

"When you buy?"

"Nine six nine!"

"When you wake up?"

"Nine six nine!"

"When you sleep?"

"Nine six nine!"

Afterwards, Wimala spoke approvingly of monks in Karen State who fine Buddhists caught buying from Muslims.

The Mon monks have delivered dozens of sermons in known sectarian trouble-spots. Wimala's speech in the Bago farming town of Minhla in February was followed by rising communal tensions, Muslim residents told Reuters. Four weeks later, a Buddhist mob destroyed mosques and Muslim houses in the town. Many of Minhla's 500 Muslims fled.

Wimala arrived for his sermon barefoot, his shaven head shielded from the searing pre-monsoon sun by white umbrellas held aloft by disciples. His sermon was filmed by two cameramen, who later burned it onto DVDs that are distributed across Myanmar. Now that junta-era controls on the Internet have gone, 969 speeches are also widely disseminated on Facebook and YouTube.

In an interview, Wimala said 969 might have inspired followers to commit anti-Muslim violence. But they were an ill-educated minority whose actions had been exaggerated by "Muslim-owned media", he said.

Emboldened, Wimala wants to reach a younger audience. He and other abbots are promoting compulsory religious education for Buddhist children.

The Mon monks plan to teach 60,000 children at more than 160 schools in Yangon and Moulmein, said Yin YinHtwe, 34, a Wimala donor and disciple who runs a jewelry business. "I want children to learn the dhamma (Buddhist teachings), improve their manners and protect the nation and religion," she said.

Outside, waiting to greet Wimala, are dozens of primary school children with 969 logos pinned to their shirts.

EU condemns Myanmar for violence against Rohingya

AFP (13.06.2013) - European Union lawmakers have condemned violence against Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim minority and called on authorities to protect them.

Scores of people have been killed in two waves of sectarian unrest between Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine last year.

Thousands fled the country in overcrowded boats but many died making the journey south towards Thailand and Malaysia.

The European Parliament said it "deplores ... the failure of the government to protect the Rohingya from organised violence".

It passed a motion that "condemns the grave violations of human rights" and has called on authorities to do "everything in their power to protect Rohingya Muslims from violent actions".

Myanmar views its population of 800,000 Rohingya as illegal Bangladeshi immigrants.

The United Nations considers them to be one of the world's most persecuted minorities.

A return to sectarian unrest has tempered international optimism about reforms in the country after decades of military rule.

Just two months ago, the EU lifted sanctions on Myanmar, and two days ago the European Commission readmitted Myanmar to a trade pact.

The EU parliament expressed "deep concerns" over allegations that security forces have taken part in the violence.

EU supports SuuKyri's policy

The EU motion welcomed pro-democracy icon Aung San SuuKyri's opposition to a two-child policy for the Rohingya.

The controversial two-child rule was imposed by the previous junta and reaffirmed recently by local authorities in the wake of unrest in the country.

"It is not good to have such discrimination," Ms SuuKyri said.

"It is not in line with human rights."

Ms SuuKyri had previously been facing criticism for failing to speak out about the violence.

The European parliament also urged Thailand to end the "inhumane detention" of at least 1,700 Rohingya asylum seekers.

Two-child limit for Rohingya Muslims in parts of Myanmar

AP (25.05.2013) - Authorities in Myanmar's western Rakhine state have imposed a two-child limit for Muslim Rohingya families, a policy that does not apply to Buddhists in the area and comes amid accusations of ethnic cleansing in the aftermath of sectarian violence.

Local officials said Saturday that the new measure would be applied to two Rakhine townships that border Bangladesh and have the highest Muslim populations in the state. The townships, Buthidaung and Maundaw, are about 95 percent Muslim.

The unusual order makes Myanmar perhaps the only country in the world to impose such a restriction on a religious group, and is likely to fuel further criticism that Muslims are being discriminated against in the Buddhist-majority country.

China has a one-child policy, but it is not based on religion and exceptions apply to minority ethnic groups. India briefly practiced forced sterilization of men in a bid to control the population in the mid-1970s when civil liberties were suspended during a period of emergency rule, but a nationwide outcry quickly shut down the program.

Rakhine state spokesman Win Myaing said the new program was meant to stem rapid population growth in the Muslim community, which a government-appointed commission identified as one of the causes of the sectarian violence.

Although Muslims are the majority in the two townships in which the new policy applies, they account for only about 4 percent of Myanmar's roughly 60 million people.

The measure was enacted a week ago after the commission recommended family planning programs to stem population growth among Muslims, Win Myaing said. The commission also recommended doubling the number of security forces in the volatile region.

"The population growth of Rohingya Muslims is 10 times higher than that of the Rakhine (Buddhists)," Win Myaing said. "Overpopulation is one of the causes of tension."

Sectarian violence in Myanmar first flared nearly a year ago in Rakhine state between the region's Rakhine Buddhists and Muslim Rohingya. Mobs of Buddhists armed with machetes razed thousands of Muslim homes, leaving hundreds of people dead and forcing 125,000 to flee, mostly Muslims.

Witnesses and human rights groups say riot police stood by as crowds attacked Muslims and burned their villages.

New York-based Human Rights Watch has accused authorities in Rakhine of fomenting an organized campaign of "ethnic cleansing" against the Rohingya.

Since the violence, religious unrest has morphed into a campaign against the country's Muslim communities in other regions.

Containing the strife has posed a serious challenge to President Thein Sein's reformist government as it attempts to make democratic reforms after nearly half a century of harsh military rule. It has also tarnished the image of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been criticized for failing to speak out strongly in defense of the country's embattled Muslim community.

The central government has not made any statement about the two-child policy, which was introduced at a local level. Calls seeking comment Saturday from two government spokesmen were not immediately returned, but Rakhine state official Myo Than said all local policies require "consent from the central government."

Win Myaing said authorities had not yet determined how the measures – which include a ban on polygamy – will be enforced. The policy will not apply yet to other parts of Rakhine state, which have smaller Muslim populations.

In its report issued last month, the government-appointed commission wrote: "One factor that has fueled tensions between the Rakhine public and (Rohingya) populations relates to the sense of insecurity among many Rakhines stemming from the rapid population growth of the (Rohingya), which they view as a serious threat."

Predominantly Buddhist Myanmar does not include the Rohingya as one of its 135 recognized ethnicities. It considers them to be illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and denies them citizenship. Bangladesh says the Rohingya have been living in Myanmar for centuries and should be recognized there as citizens.

China has been carrying out a planned birth policy since the late 1970s, generally limiting one child to urban couples and no more than two to rural families, to stem rapid population growth that Beijing believes is not sustainable economically and environmentally.

Myanmar jails seven Muslims for up to 28 years for rioting

Egypt Independent (21.05.2013) - On Tuesday, Myanmar sentenced seven Muslims to prison terms ranging from two to 28 years in connection to religious violence in March that left dozens of people dead, a justice official said.

The defendants, who were spared the death penalty, were accused of murdering a Buddhist monk in the central town of Meiktila, which ignited unrest across the region, most of which targeted Muslims.

The suspects were jailed on charges which included murder, incitement to murder, arson and damage to public property, Mandalay Advocate General Ye AungMyint told AFP by telephone from Meiktila.

The main suspect was sentenced to life imprisonment -- equivalent to 20 years -- and to an additional four years for other charges, he said.

One of his accomplices received a 10 year prison term for the murder, and an additional 18 years for other crimes, including arson and damage to public property.

Their family members broke down in tears at the court after hearing the verdict, defense lawyer TheinThanOo told AFP.

"Whether they appeal depends on their relatives," he said.

According to the government, at least 44 people were killed and thousands left homeless after the wave of violence, which was apparently triggered by a quarrel in a gold shop.

Three Muslims including the gold shop owner received 14 year prison terms in April for assaulting a Buddhist customer.

So far, no Buddhists have been convicted in connection to the unrest in Meiktila, but Ye AungMyint insisted that both sides were being treated equally.

"We are sentencing people based on evidence presented during trial, according to the law. We have no religious bias whatsoever," he said.

A total of 87 people have been arrested in the Meiktila area including approximately 38 Buddhists, he said.

Attacks against Muslims -- who make up an estimated four percent of Myanmar's population -- have exposed deep fractures in the formerly junta-ruled country, and cast a shadow over widely-praised political reforms.

Some monks were involved in the clashes and others, as part of a nationalist campaign, have called for a boycott of Muslim-owned shops.

President TheinSein, who sent in the army to restore order, has vowed to deliver a strong response to the violence, which he attributed to "political opportunists and religious extremists."

This conflict comes after Buddhist-Muslim clashes in the western state of Rakhine last year left approximately 200 people dead, mostly among the Muslim Rohingya minority to whom Myanmar has denied citizenship.

The verdicts coincide with the release of a Physicians for Human Rights report detailing "horrific" violence against Muslims in Meiktila.

It quoted eyewitnesses who described a Buddhist mob -- including monks assisted by security forces -- hunting down and killing at least 20 children and four teachers from a Muslim school and injuring many more.

Witnesses saw the decapitation of one student and another being set on fire, according to the US-based group, which aims to prevent human rights violations through the use of medicine and science.

"Innocent children and adults were humiliated, beaten, and killed with complete impunity, which -- if not addressed -- will only lead to more human rights violations," said the author of the report, Holly Atkinson, who also directs the Human Rights Program at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York

Answers to Written Parliamentary Questions on the situation of Rohingya Muslims in Burma

House of Lords (25.04.2013) -

Q) Lord Alton of Liverpool:

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the Human Rights Watch report "All You Can Do is Pray": Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma's Arakan State.

A) The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi):

The Human Rights Watch report published on 22 April contained a number of disturbing allegations. The chief of staff to my right honourable friend the Prime Minister visited Burma from 21 to 23 April and, together with our ambassador, pressed senior members of the Burmese Government to ensure that any allegations of complicity in violence by individuals within the police or the Nasaka Force in Rakhine state be thoroughly investigated.

The UK continues to be one of the most vocal members of the international community in calling for action in Rakhine state. We regularly raise specific allegations of human rights abuses with the Burmese Government at the most senior levels, pressing for adequate humanitarian provision and security to prevent any further violence. We are also clear that those responsible for acts of violence should be held to account, and ultimately the issue of citizenship for the Rohingya people must be resolved.

Most recently the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right honourable friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), and I made these points to a senior delegation of Burmese Ministers visiting London, including the Burmese Minister for the President's Office, during meetings on 15 and 16 April.

Q) Lord Alton of Liverpool:

To ask Her Majesty's Government what representations they have made to European Union member states about speaking out publicly on progress on Rohingya rights in Burma; what representations they have made to the Government of Burma about such rights; and whether they have raised the issue in international forums.

A) The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi):

The Government meet regularly with EU member states to discuss the situation in Burma, most recently during EU Foreign Ministers' discussion on Burma sanctions on 22 April. In the discussion, the UK highlighted the need for greater international action to resolve the serious situation in Rakhine state, and called for future EU engagement with Burma to place human rights at its centre.

At the UK's request, Vijay Nambiar, Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General on Burma, briefed the Security Council on the situation in Burma on 18 April 2013. The briefing followed his visit to Burma in late March and included his assessment of the humanitarian situation in Rakhine state which he found "deeply disturbing."

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right honourable friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), and I also met Aung Min, Minister for the Burmese President's office, and Khin Yi, Minister for Rakhine State, in meetings on 15 and 16 April. We made clear our concerns about the need for urgent co-ordination of humanitarian aid to Rakhine state and a resolution to the Rohingya's citizenship status which is consistent with helping them to achieve their human rights.

The UK will continue to be one of the most vocal and active members of the international community in supporting those calling for human rights and democracy in Burma, including in respect of the rights of the Rohingya community.

Q) Lord Alton of Liverpool:

To ask Her Majesty's Government what representations they have made to the Government of Burma about allowing the United Nations special rapporteur on Burma to conduct an independent investigation into alleged abuses in Arakan State; and what steps they are taking to promote an office of the High Commissioner for Refugees in Burma with a full protection, promotion, and technical assistance mandate, and sub-offices in states around the country, including in Arakan State.

A) The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi):

We have not made a specific request for UN representatives to investigate allegations of human rights abuses in Rakhine state. However, UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights Tomas Quintana visited Burma in February 2013. His report following his visit highlighted allegations of human rights violations in Kachin and Rakhine states. Vijay Nambiar, Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General on Burma, briefed the Security Council on the situation in Burma on 18 April 2013. The briefing followed his visit to Burma in late March and included his assessment of the humanitarian situation in Rakhine state which he found "deeply disturbing."

We are clear that all those who are guilty of instigating, inciting or carrying out violence in Rakhine state need to be held accountable for these crimes. This should be done through a clear and transparent investigative and prosecutorial process.

During my meeting on 15 April I pressed Aung Min, Minister for the Burmese President's office, to follow up on the commitment made by President Thein Sein to open an office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right honourable friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), reiterated this point during his meeting with Aung Min the following day. We continue to make clear that an OHCHR office in Burma would be a crucial means for maintaining more constructive relations between the international community and the Burmese Government on human rights.

Q) Lord Alton of Liverpool:

To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to support reconciliation efforts between the Arakan and Rohingya populations in Arakan State; and what representations they have made to the Government of Burma regarding the reform of the 1982 Citizenship Law in order to bring it into line with international standards, and discrimination against that country's ethnic minorities.

A) The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi):

The UK has been one of the most vocal members of the international community in calling for action in Rakhine state. We remain concerned about persecution of all minority religions in Burma, but in particular the situation in Rakhine state and the recent violence in central Burma, which points to a worrying trend of targeting Muslim communities. We have offered our support to help the Burmese Government to strengthen the rule of law, and we are funding work to promote interfaith dialogue.

We regularly raise ethnic reconciliation and allegations of human rights abuses with the Burmese Government at the most senior levels. Most recently, in meetings on 15 and 16 April with Aung Min, Minister for the Burmese President's office, and Khin Yi, Minister for Rakhine state, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right honourable friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), and I made clear our concern about the need for urgent co-ordination of humanitarian aid to Rakhine state; and a long-term resolution to the Rohingya's citizenship status which is consistent with helping them to achieve their human rights. Our officials in Burma have been liaising with the UN High Commission for Refugees, which is currently conducting a review into Burma's 1982 citizenship law and its conformity with international standards.

Myanmar forces accused of 'ethnic cleansing' as EU ends sanctions

Los Angeles Times (22.04.2013) - The European Union discarded the last of its economic sanctions against Myanmar on Monday, despite fresh reports that Rohingya Muslims there face bloody and persistent attempts at "ethnic cleansing."

The decision worried activists working to help the ethnic minority. They warned that it was premature. "The international community is quite keen now to do business with Burma," said Chris Lewa, director of the Arakan Project. "I'm afraid this commercial interest may weaken their pressure on the government."

In a report released Monday, Human Rights Watch said Buddhist monks and local leaders have orchestrated a deadly campaign to purge Rohingya Muslims from Rakhine state, a coastal area on the Bay of Bengal. The rampant and coordinated attacks amount to crimes against humanity, the rights group said.

The latest outbreak of slayings and destruction in October was permitted and sometimes even perpetrated by soldiers and police, according to the rights group. When people in the village of Yan Thei took up sticks and crude weapons to defend themselves from a mob armed with swords and Molotov cocktails, government forces disarmed them and assured the Rohingya they would protect them.

"But later they broke that promise," a 25-year-old survivor told the rights group. Undeterred, their attackers "beat and killed us very easily. The security did not protect us

from them." At least 70 people were killed there on a single day, including 28 children, according to the report.

The findings emerged the same day that the BBC released video of police standing idle as mobs ransacked a Muslim gold shop and torched buildings in central Myanmar. One man writhes on the ground, burning, as policemen watch. The BBC said the video was taken last month.

The bloodshed has alarmed activists at the same time that Myanmar, also known as Burma, has taken steps toward greater democracy and openness. Hundreds of political prisoners have been freed, including opposition leader Aung San SuuKyi, who was allowed to stand for election and is now a member of parliament. The government grip on the press and protest has been loosened.

Applauding the changes, the U.S. has steadily eased restrictions, allowing new investment in Myanmar for the first time in more than a decade. The EU first lifted economic sanctions last year and decided to permanently scrap them Monday.

"The EU is willing to open a new chapter in its relations with Myanmar/Burma, building a lasting partnership," said a draft EU foreign ministers' statement obtained by Agence France-Presse. However, it added that "there are still significant challenges to be addressed."

The deadly violence is the latest episode in decades of ethnic strife in the country. Though most Rohingya were born in Myanmar and many have lived in the country for generations, the Rohingya are in effect barred from citizenship there, rendering them stateless.

Last year, tens of thousands of Rohingya tried to escape by sea to Bangladesh, Malaysia or Thailand, but many were turned back to their tormentors. After the raging violence pushed more than 125,000 people out of their homes, the government threw up obstacles to helping the displaced.

Human Rights Watch said that in many areas, local government forces were acting like jailers, keeping the Rohingya away from jobs and blocking them from getting aid. Corpses were dumped by a government truck near one camp for the displaced, an apparent threat to make the Rohingya leave for good, according to the rights group.

Last July, President TheinSein called for "illegal" Rohingya to be sent elsewhere. Months later, as alarm rose about the attacks, the Myanmar leader condemned the "senseless violence." But activists say there has been little done to hold the perpetrators accountable or prevent future violence.

"These nice words aren't being translated into actions," Lewa of the Arakan Project said in a Skype interview from Thailand. Conditions for the Rohingya remain "appalling."

Ironically, Lewa said, "the reform process became a vehicle for this hatred to suddenly erupt." Ethnic groups once firmly under the thumb of the military were free to organize -- for good or ill.

The EU arms embargo on Myanmar will remain in place, according to news reports.

Burma: End 'ethnic cleansing' of Rohingya Muslims

Unpunished Crimes Against Humanity, Humanitarian Crisis in Arakan State

HRW (22.04.2013) - Burmese authorities and members of Arakanese groups have committed crimes against humanity in a campaign of ethnic cleansing against Rohingya Muslims in Arakan State since June 2012, Human Rights Watch said in a new report released today.

The 153-page report, "'All You Can Do is Pray': Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma's Arakan State," describes the role of the Burmese government and local authorities in the forcible displacement of more than 125,000 Rohingya and other Muslims and the ongoing humanitarian crisis. Burmese officials, community leaders, and Buddhist monks organized and encouraged ethnic Arakanese backed by state security forces to conduct coordinated attacks on Muslim neighborhoods and villages in October 2012 to terrorize and forcibly relocate the population. The tens of thousands of displaced have been denied access to humanitarian aid and been unable to return home.

"The Burmese government engaged in a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya that continues today through the denial of aid and restrictions on movement," said Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director. "The government needs to put an immediate stop to the abuses and hold the perpetrators accountable or it will be responsible for further violence against ethnic and religious minorities in the country."

Following sectarian violence between Arakanese and Rohingya in June 2012, government authorities destroyed mosques, conducted violent mass arrests, and blocked aid to displaced Muslims. On October 23, after months of meetings and public statements promoting ethnic cleansing, Arakanese mobs attacked Muslim communities in nine townships, razing villages and killing residents while security forces stood aside or assisted the assailants. Some of the dead were buried in mass graves, further impeding accountability.

Human Rights Watch traveled to Arakan State following the waves of violence and abuses in June and October, visiting sites of attacks and every major displaced person camp, as well as unofficial displacement sites. The report draws on more than 100 interviews with Rohingya and non-Rohingya Muslims and Arakanese who suffered or witnessed abuses, as well as some organizers and perpetrators of the violence.

All of the state security forces operating in Arakan State are implicated in failing to prevent atrocities or directly participating in them, including local police, Lon Their riot police, the inter-agency border control force called Nasaka, and the army and navy. One soldier told a Muslim man who was pleading for protection as his village was being burned: "The only thing you can do is pray to save your lives."

Displaced Rohingya told Human Rights Watch how in October security forces stood by or joined with large groups of Arakanese men armed with machetes, swords, homemade guns, and Molotov cocktails who descended upon and attacked their villages. In some cases, attacks occurred simultaneously in townships separated by considerable distance.

Satellite images obtained by Human Rights Watch from just 5 of the 13 townships that experienced violence since June show 27 unique zones of destruction, including the destruction of 4,862 structures covering 348 acres of mostly Muslim-owned residential property.

In the deadliest incident, on October 23, at least 70 Rohingya were killed in a daylong

massacre in Yan Thei village in Mrauk-U Township. Despite advance warning of the attack, only a small number of riot police, local police, and army soldiers were on duty to provide security, but they assisted the killings by disarming the Rohingya of their sticks and other rudimentary weapons they carried to defend themselves. Included in the death toll were 28 children who were hacked to death, including 13 under age 5. "First the soldiers told us, 'Do not do anything, we will protect you, we will save you,' so we trusted them," a 25-year-old survivor told Human Rights Watch. "But later they broke that promise. The Arakanese beat and killed us very easily. The security did not protect us from them."

"In October, security forces either looked the other way as Arakanese mobs attacked Muslim settlements or joined in the bloodletting and arson," Robertson said. "Six months later, the government still blames 'communal violence' for the deaths and destruction when, in truth, the government knew what was happening and could have stopped it."

Considerable local organizing preceded and backed October's attacks. The two groups most influential in organizing anti-Rohingya activities were the local order of Buddhist monks (the *sangha*) and the regionally powerful Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP), which was founded in 2010 by Arakanese nationalists. Between June and October, these groups and others issued numerous anti-Rohingya pamphlets and public statements, explicitly or implicitly denying the existence of the Rohingya ethnicity, demonizing them, and calling for their removal from the country, at times using the phrase "ethnic cleansing." The statements frequently were released in connection with organized meetings and in full view of local, state, and national authorities who raised no concerns. Local authorities, politicians, and monks also acted, often through public statements and force, to deny Muslims their rights to freedom of movement, opportunities to earn a living, and access to markets and to humanitarian aid. The apparent goal has been to coerce them to abandon their homes and leave the area.

"Local officials and community leaders engaged in an organized effort to demonize and isolate the Muslim population as a prelude to murderous mob attacks," Robertson said. "Moreover, since the bloodshed, the central government has taken no action to punish those responsible or reverse the ethnic cleansing of the forcibly displaced Muslims."

Human Rights Watch uncovered evidence of four mass-grave sites in Arakan State – three dating from the immediate aftermath of the June violence and one from the October violence. Security forces actively impeded accountability and justice by digging mass graves to destroy evidence of crimes.

For instance, on June 13, a government truck dumped 18 naked and half-clothed bodies near a Rohingya displaced person camp outside of Sittwe, the state capital. Some of the victims had been "hogtied" with string or plastic strips before being executed. By leaving the bodies near a camp for displaced Rohingya, the soldiers were sending a message – consistent with a policy of ethnic cleansing – that the Rohingya should leave permanently.

"They dropped the bodies right here," said a Rohingya man, who saw the bodies being dumped. "Three bodies had gunshot wounds. Some had burns, some had stab wounds. One gunshot wound was on the forehead, one on the chest."

Arakan State faces a major humanitarian crisis brought on by the Burmese government's systematic restrictions on humanitarian aid to displaced Rohingya.

More than 125,000 Rohingya and non-Rohingya Muslims, and a smaller number of Arakanese, have been in displaced person camps in Arakan State since June. While President Thein Sein's government has hosted high-profile diplomatic visits to displacement sites, it has also obstructed the effective delivery of humanitarian aid. Many

of the displaced Muslims have been living in overcrowded camps that lack adequate food, shelter, water and sanitation, schools, and medical care. Security forces in some areas have provided protection to displaced Muslims, but more typically they have acted as their jailers, preventing access to markets, livelihoods, and humanitarian assistance, for which many are in desperate need.

Tens of thousands of Rohingya face a range of deadly waterborne diseases if they are not moved to higher ground before the rainy season begins in May.

"The problem with aid delivery in Arakan State is not a failure of coordination, but a failure of leadership by the government to allow displaced Muslims access to aid and freedom of movement," Robertson said. "An entirely predictable and preventable humanitarian crisis is just weeks away when the rains fall and camps flood, spreading waterborne diseases."

The displaced Rohingya have not been consulted on their right to return to their original towns and villages, heightening concerns of a long-term intent to segregate the population.

Lacking aid, protection, and facing violence and abuses, tens of thousands of Rohingya have fled the country by sea since June with hopes of reaching Bangladesh, Malaysia, or Thailand, and many thousands more appear ready to do the same – several hundred people have already died at sea.

Under international law, crimes against humanity are crimes committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack by a government or organization on a civilian population. Among the crimes against humanity committed against the Rohingya since June were murder, deportation and forcible transfer of the population, and persecution.

"Ethnic cleansing," though not a formal legal term, has been defined as a purposeful policy by an ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas.

Central to the persecution of the Rohingya is the 1982 Citizenship Law, which effectively denies Burmese citizenship to Rohingya on discriminatory ethnic grounds. Because the law does not consider the Rohingya to be one of the eight recognized "national races," which would entitle them to full citizenship, they must provide "conclusive evidence" that their ancestors settled in Burma before independence in 1948, a difficult if not impossible task for most Rohingya families.

The government and Burmese society openly consider the Rohingya to be illegal immigrants from what is now Bangladesh and not a distinct "national race" of Burma, denying them consideration for full citizenship. Official government statements refer to them as "Bengali," "so-called Rohingya," or the pejorative "kalar."

Human Rights Watch urged the Burmese government to urgently amend the 1982 Citizenship Act to eliminate discriminatory provisions and to ensure that Rohingya children have the right to acquire a nationality where otherwise they would be stateless.

"Burma should accept an independent international commission to investigate crimes against humanity in Arakan State, locate victims, and provide redress," said Robertson. "Burma's donors need to wake up and realize the seriousness of the Rohingya's plight, and demand that the government urgently stop abuses, promote the safe return of displaced Muslims, and ensure accountability to end the deadly cycle of violence in Arakan State."

When the lid blows off

Sectarian violence was not supposed to be part of Myanmar's bright new direction

The Economist (30.03.2013) – When Myanmar's newly installed president and former soldier, Thein Sein, kick-started the country's political transition two years ago, he hoped to usher in a clean and steady advance towards some sort of orderly democracy. Now, however, things are starting to turn out rather differently.

Unwittingly, it seems, in relaxing decades of tight army control over the country, Mr Thein Sein and his reforming ministers have breathed life into some of the uglier forces in Myanmar society that authoritarian rule kept suppressed, notably sectarian violence. (In the past, when such violence took place, it was the prerogative of the armed forces to conduct it.)

On March 20th, provoked by a small argument in a gold shop, a Buddhist mob rampaged through the central Burmese town of Meiktila, killing over 30 people and injuring about another 70. The Buddhists burned mosques and Muslim homes before marching many of the terrified survivors out of town. The intercommunal violence has so far displaced over 12,000 people.

Meiktila, between Mandalay and the new capital of Naypyidaw, was put under a curfew, together with three nearby townships. But the violence quickly spread to other areas, creeping always closer to Yangon, the old capital and commercial centre. On March 25th mosques and houses in Okpho and Gyonbingauk townships were attacked, just 125 miles (200km) north. In Yangon itself rumours of imminent and co-ordinated attacks by Buddhist youths have swept through Muslim districts for weeks. People have been stockpiling rice and other food, anticipating a prolonged siege. So far, only sporadic attacks have taken place. But Yangon is on edge, and Muslim shopkeepers lock up at the first hint of trouble.

This violence in the Burmese heartland follows on from, and is clearly inspired by, the massacres of Rohingya Muslims around Sittwe, the capital of the western state of Rakhine, that happened last year. About 180 were killed and over 100,000 Rohingyas made homeless in two bouts of ethnic cleansing. Those Rohingyas now live in squalid refugee camps, under curfew and prevented from travelling into Sittwe, let alone to anywhere else in Myanmar. Cut off from their sources of income and livelihoods, many attempt each day to flee to neighbouring countries in rickety fishing boats. Some make it, but others drown. Still more fall victim to traffickers.

In Sittwe recently, mobs of Buddhist bigots and extreme Rakhine nationalists exercised their newly gained freedoms by marching through town past the charred remains of Rohingya houses and mosques. They screamed hatred at Muslims and denounced countries such as Turkey that want to aid the helpless refugees. Buddhist monks, heroes of the 2007 "saffron revolution" that tried to unseat the old military regime, egg on the crowds and help organise the protests. This is the looking-glass world of the new Myanmar. Now it is only the once-reviled army that stands between minority Muslims and the bloodlust of Buddhist chauvinists.

In Rakhine animosity towards Muslims goes back a long way, and now that central political control is loosening, old scores are being settled. Local Rakhines regard all Rohingyas, who are denied citizenship, as illegal "Bengali" immigrants, even though Rohingyas were in Rakhine not only before the British came, but even before Burmese rule.

Elsewhere in Myanmar ethnic Burman Buddhists have always resented the descendants of Indian Muslims who arrived on the coat-tails of the British in the 19th century to take all the best jobs and, to their mind, swamp the local cultures. In the early 20th century over half of the population of the booming commercial hub of Yangon were South Asian. A British administrator, J.S. Furnivell, coined the term "plural society" to describe the extraordinary diversity of races and religions in Burma's cities under British rule: Bengali Muslims jostled alongside Iraqi Jews and Armenian Christians.

The indigenous Buddhists, however, lost out, so the first thing the generals did when they seized power in 1962 was to exact revenge by nationalising businesses and forcing hundreds of thousands of Indians back to India or what then was East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. The 2.5m people of Indian origin who remain are stigmatised and vulnerable; most have no citizenship. In this sense the Buddhist mobs are finishing off what the Burman chauvinist generals started in the 1960s. Piled on top of ancient resentments, more recent prejudices circulate via the internet and social media and feed into the ideologies of Buddhist-chauvinist groups, some of which are implicated in the Meiktila violence. So much for a plural society.

Immersed in their reform agenda, the country's politicians, including Aung San SuuKyi and her opposition National League for Democracy, have been taken by surprise. But even a correct response to the violence carries risks. A government commission into last year's brutalities in Rakhine state is due to be published soon. If, as is expected, it recommends some sort of legal security for the Rohingyas, though just short of citizenship, that could spark another round of anti-Muslim rioting across the country. MrTheinSein and Miss SuuKyi will need to show moral leadership in the face of Buddhist chauvinism. The alternative could be ugly.

Sectarian clashes are reported in Central Myanmar

New York Times (21.03.2013) - At least five people have been killed in fighting between Buddhists and Muslims in central [Myanmar](#), residents and a hospital official said Thursday, in another sign of a resurgence of communal violence that is testing the country's fledgling democracy.

Buddhists, including monks from nearby monasteries, led a rampage through the Muslim quarter of the city of Meiktila on Thursday seeking to avenge the death of a monk the day before, according to a news photographer who witnessed the fighting.

"The area was like a killing field," said the photographer, WunnaNaing. "Even the police told me that they could not handle what they witnessed. Children were among the victims."

Muslims and Buddhists have clashed several times in western Myanmar over the past year, but the fighting in Meiktila has raised fears that religious strife is reaching into the heartland of the country.

News agency photographs showed gruesome scenes of devastation in at least a small area of the city, with homes burned to the ground, thick black clouds rising above a mosque that residents say was attacked, and a charred corpse.

Daw Mae Yee, an official at Meiktila General Hospital, said at least five people had died from burns and slash wounds, and Reuters reported that another employee of the hospital said the dead included Muslims and Buddhists. U Win Htein, a member of

Parliament from Meiktila, said that rioting was "still out of control" on Thursday afternoon, and that the death toll was probably significantly higher.

The clashes on Wednesday appeared to have started with a disagreement in a gold shop owned by a Muslim family.

Religious violence has shaken the government of President [TheinSein](#) over the past year as the gradual rollback of five decades of authoritarian rule has coincided with a rise in nationalism and racial and religious hatred.

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, is about 90 percent Buddhist, with the rest of the population Christian, Muslim and animist.

More than 150 people, most of them Muslims, have been killed since June in Buddhist-Muslim clashes in Rakhine State, a sliver of land in western Myanmar where religious hatred runs high. Some vocal Buddhist monks have been stridently anti-Muslim after those communal clashes, which pitted Buddhists against a group of Muslims who call themselves Rohingya and are not recognized as citizens of the country.

Until this week, there were hopes that religious conflicts would be contained to that region. But the clashes in Meiktila are renewing concerns that religious strife will surface in other cities in Myanmar, which are typically multiethnic, a legacy of British colonial rule.

There have been signs of rising tensions. Last month in a township on the outskirts of Yangon, the commercial capital, Buddhists attacked what they said was a mosque being built without permission.

Meiktila, a garrison city with a strong military presence, is halfway between the new capital, Naypyidaw, and the old royal city of Mandalay. Reports from residents indicated that the military units based in the city had not yet joined the police in helping to quell the violence.

The police in Meiktila, reached by telephone, declined to comment on the violence.

Two mosques and a Muslim school were burned, residents said, and many houses in the Muslim quarter were destroyed.

The authorities declared a curfew on Thursday for the second consecutive night.

Toll rises as sectarian violence spreads to nearby villages

The New York Times (22.03.2013) - Rioting and arson attacks spread on Friday to villages outside a city in central Myanmar where clashes between Buddhists and Muslims have left at least 20 people dead, according to residents, a member of Parliament and local journalists. A picture of chaos and anarchy emerged from the city of Meiktila, where mobs of Buddhists, some of them led by monks, have ransacked and burned Muslim neighborhoods since Wednesday.

U AungSoe, a reporter for a local weekly journal, said he saw 15 charred bodies on the streets Friday morning. He estimated the death toll at more than 40.

Mobs of rioters attacked Muslims' houses in villages outside Meiktila on Friday, Mr.AungSoe said.

Security forces, which during decades of military rule brutally suppressed any signs of unrest, seemed unable or unwilling to stop the rioting, according to witnesses.

Nyan Lin, a former political prisoner, told the Mizzima news agency that the police "just stood watching the rioters, and did not take any action."

Video footage from Meitkila posted on Friday showed harrowing scenes of what appeared to be Muslim women and men cowering as they fled the violence.

The Associated Press quoted a member of Parliament from Meiktila, U Win Htein, as saying that at least five mosques had been burned since the violence started Wednesday. Mr. Win Htein said the death toll was at least 20. Local residents were preventing authorities from putting out fires in the city, he told The A.P.

Journalists said they feared for their safety after Buddhist monks, one of them wielding a sword, forced them to hand over the memory cards in their cameras.

On Thursday, Buddhists, including monks from nearby monasteries, led a rampage through the Muslim quarter of the city of Meiktila seeking to avenge the death of a monk the day before, according to a news photographer who witnessed the fighting.

"The area was like a killing field," said the photographer, WunnaNaing. "Even the police told me that they could not handle what they witnessed. Children were among the victims."

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News agency photographs showed gruesome scenes of devastation, with homes burned to the ground, thick black clouds rising above a mosque that residents say was attacked, and a charred corpse.

Muslims residents have fled the city and gathered in a sports stadium, according to Reuters.

The clashes on Wednesday appeared to have started with a disagreement in a gold shop owned by a Muslim family.

Religious violence has shaken the government of President TheinSein over the past year as the gradual rollback of five decades of authoritarian rule has coincided with a rise in nationalism and racial and religious hatred.

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On Thursday, a leading monk in the country, AshinNyanissara, called for restraint in Meiktila, saying in an interview with the Democratic Voice of Burma that "all religions should live peacefully with loving kindness and tolerance."

Until this week, there were hopes that religious conflicts would be contained to the Rakhine region. But the clashes in Meiktila are renewing concerns that religious strife will surface in other cities in Myanmar, which are typically multiethnic, a legacy of British colonial rule.

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