

# Burma Briefing

## An international task force is needed to help tackle growing religious violence in Burma



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### Commentary by Burma Campaign UK

The consequences of failing to address the growing religious tensions in Burma are so serious that they justify the urgent creation of a task force which helps Burma's political and religious leaders, both in government and in opposition, learn from the past experience of the international community in addressing these problems.

#### Current situation

On 20th March violence erupted in Meiktilar, central Burma, between Buddhists and Muslims. While atrocities were committed on both sides in the ensuing violence, the majority of victims were Muslim, and Muslim shops, Mosques and people were systematically attacked. Many lives have been lost and thousands of people have fled their homes.

The violence in Meiktilar has been attributed to a fight that started in a gold shop. Accounts of the incident vary. Some state that the Muslim shopkeeper attacked Buddhist customers, others that the Buddhist customers tried to sell fake gold and became violent and abusive when the shopkeeper refused to buy it. Regardless of which of these accounts is true, the fact is that an incident like this should not lead to religious riots, where dozens are killed, buildings are destroyed and thousands flee in fear, unless underlying tensions are already very high.

These tensions are being actively stirred up by organisations and individuals. For many months anti-Muslim leaflets and letters have been widely distributed across Burma. Many of them target and make accusations about Muslim shopkeepers, and a 969 movement is calling for a boycott of

Muslim businesses, and for Buddhists not to serve Muslim customers. One letter being circulated around Meiktilar before the violence even attacked Muslims for eating Halal food and going to Mosques regularly. In an atmosphere like this, the smallest incident can trigger violence.

Since the violence in Meiktilar, attacks spread out to nearby towns. Burma Campaign UK received one eyewitness account of roadblocks set up where Muslim drivers were stopped by mobs who attempted to kill them. Violence has now spread across the country, with reports of anti-Muslim attacks in several places, and attempted attacks in Rangoon.

This latest round of violence follows an incident in Rangoon earlier in March, and almost constant violence in Rakhine State since June 2012, as well as the two large-scale outbreaks of violence in June and October. Smaller scale anti-Muslim riots also took place in early 2012.

This violence is taking place in a context of growing religious tensions which are not being sufficiently addressed by the government of Burma or other political and religious leaders in the country.

#### The response

Buddhists have killed Muslims and Muslims have killed Buddhists, while those organisations and individuals responsible for inciting hatred and violence continue to do so with impunity.

The government of Burma has failed on every level to address the current crisis. By its inaction it has allowed the current violence to happen. It has

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refused to changes laws which underpin prejudice. It has failed to stop the incitement of hatred and violence against Muslims. When attacks have taken place security forces have failed to prevent them. Those responsible for inciting and carrying out attacks have not been held accountable. The President and government ministers have failed to take appropriate public steps to challenge prejudice, and have failed to implement any effective communal projects to tackle religious intolerance and promote religious harmony.

Growing religious tensions are the biggest threat to peace and any future transition to democracy in Burma. Violence is spreading across the country and will get much worse in the coming months if urgent action isn't taken. There are many countries with experience in addressing religious and communal tensions. Political leaders in Burma, government and opposition, have no such experience and they need help dealing with this crisis.

Playing down the religious nature of the violence, as some have done, may seem like a tactic to try to defuse the problem, but it fails to address the root causes. The same applies to treating the issue as a question of law and order. Of course action must be taken to stop violence, and the government of Burma is manifestly failing in its responsibility to prevent the attacks, to stop people inciting the violence, and hold those responsible to account. However, the root causes behind the violence must also be addressed.

The violence currently taking place cannot be considered individual, isolated incidents, as some have argued. They are indicative of a broader and major problem which has to be faced, no matter how uncomfortable it is to do so. For many months, anti-Muslim leaflets have been circulated in many parts of the country, including by Monasteries. In an environment like this, the smallest incident can trigger violence.

When violence began in Rakhine State it was argued by many that it was not about religion, it related just to immigration and the Rohingya, but we have seen how violence there spread to attacks against the Kaman and other Muslims in Rakhine

State. The prejudice and incitement of hatred and violence in Rakhine State was left virtually unchallenged, and is now spreading across the country.

Some political leaders believe that sensitivities are so high that saying anything might raise tensions and unintentionally lead to further violence. They hope that a period of calm will help reduce tensions, and once the situation is calmer approaches at reconciliation can begin. However, this approach is being undermined by the growing incitement of anti-Muslim sentiment, and tensions and violence are spreading, not abating. A new approach is needed to tackle this growing problem. Prejudice must be acknowledged and confronted, and Burma's political and religious leaders should be given help and advice on how to do so in the most effective way.

### **Historical and cultural context**

Nationalism, Buddhism, and Burmese identity are historically closely intertwined in the eyes of many people from Burma. Burma's independence movement was led by nationalist Buddhists. Monk Saya San led a rebellion against British colonial rule in the 1930s. The Young Men's Buddhist Association began the movement which led to Burma regaining independence. While Burma's independence leader Aung San understood the need for what he called unity in diversity, Burmese leaders who followed him attempted to tap into Buddhist nationalism for their own political agendas.

Part of the extreme nationalist response to colonialism was hostility to anyone considered non-indigenous, and this attitude was encouraged by General Ne Win when he took power. One of the widespread arguments for denying the Rohingya citizenship is that they arrived during colonial times, despite there being evidence that Rohingya were in Burma long before colonial times.

Prejudice can extend to almost anyone seen as 'outsiders', including Chinese, Hindus and others. The British colonial period is seen as a time of humiliation for many Burmese and Burma was classed by Britain as being part of India. There were large numbers of immigrants from India, and they were associated as being part of colonial rule.

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During Burma's brief period of post-colonial democracy, Prime Minister U Nu sought to achieve national unity and bolster his own political support base through the promotion of Buddhism. This included making Buddhism the state religion of Burma and promoting Buddhism, particularly in ethnic states where there were large numbers of Christians. This was a major factor in the predominantly Christian ethnic Kachin and Chin taking up arms against the central government. The conflict in Kachin State continues to this day.

Nationalism and Buddhism have also consistently been misused by successive dictatorships in Burma in attempts to justify their rule and build public support. This has created a volatile environment in Burma which is currently being exploited by various organisations and individuals.

Many ethnic Burmese see Burmese identity and Buddhist identity as one and the same. An example of this is the response of one former political prisoner who, when asked if he was Christian, replied; "No, I am Burmese."

Religious and ethnic minorities have faced almost constant persecution since independence. Nationalist dictatorships pursued policies of Burmanisation, trying to crush ethnic and religious diversity in the country.

The refusal of central governments to accept Burma as a multi-religious multi-ethnic country, and give ethnic people more rights and autonomy over their own affairs, is the root cause of conflict and dictatorship in the country. It was when U Nu, facing increasing political instability as well as armed uprisings because of his policies, decided to discuss the possibility of greater autonomy for ethnic groups, that General Ne Win launched his military coup in 1962.

In dealing with the situation in Burma now, it is important to understand the connections between why Burma has never known peace since independence, why there has been military rule for decades, the discrimination against non-Buddhist religions and ethnic people, and the anti-Muslim violence in Burma currently taking place. They are different branches of the same tree.

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### **Lack of religious freedom in Burma**

The current growing anti-Muslim sentiment in Burma takes place in a context of a general lack of religious freedom in Burma, which has been the policy of governments and the military for decades. Christians in particular have faced persecution, which successive Burmese governments have viewed as non-indigenous, and therefore unwelcome.

In its 2012 report, 'Threats to our Existence', the Chin Human Rights Organisation document the widespread and systematic denial of religious freedom faced by the predominately Christian ethnic Chin. They stated:

'Chin political identification with Christianity has arguably been at the root of extreme Burman nationalist resentment towards the Chin. The denial of religious freedom in Burma today, particularly for minority groups like Chin Christians, is rooted in discrimination on the dual basis of ethnicity and religion. This endemic discrimination is arguably a product of extreme Burman nationalism based on a distorted version of Buddhism characterized by the State Law and Order Restoration Council/State Peace and Development Council (SLORC/SPDC) regime.'

Since 1999 the United States has designated Burma a 'country of particular concern', because of its 'systematic on-going, and egregious violations' of religious freedom.

Christians in Burma should be concerned at how there has been justification for violence against Muslims based on the argument that they are non-indigenous, as in the past this accusation has also been made against their religion. It is in their own interests to confront the current wave of anti-Muslim violence.

### **Facing up to prejudice in Burmese society**

While persecution of Christians, ethnic minorities, and the Muslim Rohingya minority, has gained some international attention, less well known is a general problem with anti-Muslim prejudice in Burma. It is not unusual to hear people expressing prejudicial feelings against Muslims.

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The word 'kalar' is still in general use when referring to Muslims, a word which many Muslims find as offensive as a black person would be called a 'nigger'. Kalar is a word which can have different meanings and understandings according to who uses it. A discussion on what it means can provoke long debate. Generally it is understood to mean Muslims and certain other dark-skinned people. Some people are casually racist without really realising or thinking about it. While some people use the word as a deliberate insult, others use this word without understanding the offence it can cause, or intending to cause offence.

Anti-Muslim prejudice is seen as socially acceptable by a surprising number of people. There needs to be an acceptance in Burmese society that casual racism and prejudice exists, and that in this environment extreme intolerance can flourish and spread, leading to violence.

This applies not only to Buddhist leaders. Christian leaders must also confront anti-Muslim sentiment in Christian communities, and Muslim leaders must confront prejudice against Buddhists and Christians.

Burmese society needs to decide what it means to be Burmese. There needs to be an acceptance that Burma is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, and that people of different ethnic groups and religions can live side by side, different but equal. This would help address both religious and ethnic tensions in Burma.

### **The danger of a return to direct military rule**

If violence continues to spread, it will increase instability across the country. There will then be the danger of the military stepping in to seize power again, urging, as they often did in the past, that they have to be in power as only they can hold the country together and keep law and order.

Burma's 2008 Constitution allows the military to seize power if it decides that:  
'If there arises a state of emergency that could cause disintegration of the Union, disintegration of national solidarity and loss of sovereign power or attempts therefore by wrongful forcible means such as insurgency or violence, the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services has the right to take over

and exercise State sovereign power in accord with the provisions of this Constitution.'

The military could attempt to apply the catch all phrase 'disintegration of national solidarity' in this instance.

There could also be the danger of a military coup outside the Constitution, from an officer or officers using the same justification of restoring law and order as the State Law and Order Restoration Council used in 1988.

### **The international community can and must help**

The current violence, widespread prejudice, and complex historical background will make addressing religious tensions incredibly difficult, but no matter how daunting the challenge is, these issues must be addressed.

Many nations around the world have faced problems with religious and communal tensions, including where such tensions have led to violence and widespread killings. The experiences are wide and varied, including the experience of some ASEAN countries, and the experience in Western countries after 9/11. Members of the international community have come together before to help Burma at times of crisis, most notably after Cyclone Nargis. Joint initiatives have also been launched in the past to such as the Three Diseases Fund on HIV/Aids, TB and Malaria, the LIFT fund on livelihoods and food security, and the Three Millennium Development Goals fund.

The potential for violence to spread and the consequences if this does happen are so serious that they justify an equivalent effort to promote inter-communal harmony.

There are a great many think tanks, institutions and non-government organisations which have experience of working on communal tensions. Their expertise is also needed.

With any proposal, a default position from many governments is to start off by looking at how difficult a proposal will be to achieve, with a view to rejecting it, rather than taking a proposal and looking for

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what might work and seeing how it can be made to happen.

There are undoubtedly a great many difficulties in setting up some kind of task force or mechanism whereby the international community provides assistance to Burmese political and religious leaders on promoting racial and religious harmony. Not least of these is that it touches on so many sensitivities with the government and with Burmese society. Burma's government and some members of Burma's democracy movement can be highly sensitive about what they see as external interference. But the fact that these issues are so sensitive is exactly why it is so important to try.

There are reasons for hope that the current crisis and deep rooted causes behind it can be addressed.

Burma is lucky to be one of the few countries with political and religious leaders who are widely admired and who carry real influence. That influence can be used to calm the situation and confront prejudice. They will need help to do so.

We have already seen how Islamic and Buddhist leaders in Burma have met and pledged mutual understanding on religious freedom, and respect for each-others religion. They need assistance and advice on how to make sure that trickles down and that the message reaches their followers. They need to be ensuring that there is discussion and education that reaches the people on the street. Mutual understanding must happen at the grassroots level, not just the leadership level.

We have also seen how willing some members of the 88 Generation Students have been to engage on this issue. They also need support and advice on how to address these complex issues.

It should also be remembered that while prejudice is widespread, it most certainly isn't representative of all of Burmese society, and that there are a great many people who reject nationalism, racism, religious prejudice and intolerance. As one Muslim leader told Burma Campaign UK, even while riots in Meiktila and surrounding towns were taking place:

"I don't want the international community to think all the Buddhist people in our country are like that because they are not. Only some people have created this hatred against Muslims."

Buddhist Monks helped Muslims fleeing the attacks in Meiktila, and Buddhists came onto the streets when there were fears of further attacks against Muslims in Rangoon. There are a great many people who are willing to put themselves at risk to confront prejudice.

There is no quick fix and there are no easy answers in addressing these deep rooted problems in a society fractured by decades of dictatorship and conflict. The challenges in addressing these problems are immense and will require a wide variety of approaches. But the potential consequences if the current tensions continue to rise and violence spreads are unthinkable. Everything that can be done must be done.

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