

# **BURMA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

Muslim, Christian, and other religious minorities faced physical abuse, arbitrary arrest and detention, restrictions on religious practice and travel, and discrimination in employment and access to citizenship. Reported security-force involvement in intercommunal violence included killings and forced displacement of religious minorities. The UN high commissioner for human rights (UNHCHR) and others alleged Rohingya were killed during intercommunal violence that took place in early January in Du Chee Yar Tan village of Maungdaw Township. Continued significant deficiencies in the respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom included reported societal violence against Rohingya and other Muslims and Christians, the destruction of religious buildings in areas of conflict in Kachin State and other areas of the country during skirmishes associated with a long-running civil war, policies prohibiting or impeding Muslim land ownership and property occupation in some areas, and reports of unwritten government policies favoring Buddhism for promotion into senior government and military ranks. Government officials reportedly participated in anti-Muslim discrimination, for instance by restricting places of worship for Muslims, and were slow to respond to allegations of attacks on Muslims and Muslim-owned property.

Similarly to 2013, the president, cabinet ministers, and senior government officials made public statements on religious diversity and tolerance. President Thein Sein called for tolerance and respect for diversity in response to an episode of intercommunal violence and on other occasions in his monthly radio addresses. Despite this and other action to counter hate speech and violence, the lack of transparency in the arrests and convictions of individuals connected with previous instances of violence targeting religious minorities, the absence of anti-discrimination legislation, and a lack of rule of law continue to contribute to mistrust and heightened tensions among religious communities, ethnic groups, and the government.

Anti-Muslim violence, resulting in at least two deaths, erupted from reportedly random, commonplace disputes between members of different faiths. The anti-Muslim sermons of monks in the 969 Movement, other prominent monks, and the Buddhist Committee for Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha) circulated widely via print journals, DVDs, and the internet. The sermons denigrated Muslims and sometimes Christians and Hindus, called for a national boycott of all Muslim-owned businesses, and cautioned Buddhists against interaction with

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Muslims. Journalists and activists received death threats for covering and speaking out against anti-Muslim hate speech and religious-based violence. With the rise in religious hate speech, religious and community leaders and civil society activists increasingly organized intrafaith and interfaith events and worked jointly to develop mechanisms to monitor and counter hate speech as a means to promote religious tolerance and diversity. For example, in response to the intercommunal violence that took place in Mandalay Division July 1-3, religious, interfaith, and community leaders monitored the spread of hate speech inciting mob violence over social media and coordinated to prevent further escalation of violence.

The U.S. government advocated religious freedom in meetings with all sectors of society, including government officials, religious leaders, private citizens, scholars, diplomats of other governments, and journalists. During his visit in November President Obama spoke out against the discrimination against all religious minorities, including the Rohingya. In his August visit to Burma, Secretary of State Kerry called on the government to promote tolerance and diversity and eliminate laws that discriminate upon the basis of religion and race. The Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights similarly made these points following a visit to Meiktila in Mandalay Division, the site of March 2013 violence. In June the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor led a delegation of senior U.S. officials to discuss the country's peace process, national reconciliation, and to engage senior military officials on human rights. The Ambassador consistently called on senior government officials to ensure a timely and appropriate response to outbreaks of religious-based violence, to hold accountable perpetrators of the violence, and to take concrete measures to counter anti-Muslim hate speech. The Ambassador and senior U.S. officials traveled extensively to Rakhine State and other ethnic border regions, offered support to local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious leaders, including through small grants and training programs, and hosted numerous events promoting religious freedom and diversity. In December Burmese President Thein Sein submitted a legislative package of four proposed laws, commonly referred to as the "Protection of Religion and Race Laws," to the parliament. U.S. officials raised concerns with the government about certain provisions in the four bills and stressed the possible implications of such legislation, which if enacted could be enforced in a manner that would significantly undermine religious freedom.

Since 1999, the Secretary of State has designated Burma as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for

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having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations or abuses of religious freedom. The Secretary redesignated Burma as a CPC in July. Although the United States has eased most sanctions in response to the Burmese government's political and economic reforms, the U.S. government maintains specific sanctions against the country for its violations of religious freedom.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 51.4 million (2014 census estimate). Approximately 90 percent are Theravada Buddhists. Approximately 4 percent are Christians (primarily Baptists, Roman Catholics, and Anglicans, along with several small Protestant denominations). Muslims (mostly Sunni) comprise approximately 4 percent of the population. There are small communities of Hindus and practitioners of traditional Chinese and indigenous religions. There is a very small Jewish community in Rangoon.

The country is ethnically diverse, with significant correlation between ethnicity and religion. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion among the majority Bamar ethnic group and also among the Shan, Rakhine, and Mon ethnic groups. Christianity is dominant among the Kachin, Chin, and Naga ethnic groups. Christianity also is practiced widely among the Karen and Karenni ethnic groups, although many Karen and Karenni are Buddhist and some Karen are Muslim. Citizens of South Asian origin, who are concentrated in major cities and in the south-central region, are predominantly Hindu or Muslim, although some are Christian. Islam is practiced widely in Rakhine State and in Rangoon, Irrawaddy, Magwe, and Mandalay Divisions, where some Bamar, ethnic Indians, ethnic Kaman, and Rohingya are Muslims. Chinese ethnic minorities generally practice traditional Chinese religions. Traditional indigenous beliefs are practiced widely among smaller ethnic groups in the highland regions.

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states, "Every citizen is equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess and practice religion subject to public order, morality or health and to the other provisions of this Constitution," and notes that, "every citizen shall be at liberty...if not contrary to the laws, enacted for Union security, prevalence of law and order, community peace and tranquility or public order and

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morality...to develop...[the] religion they profess and customs without prejudice to the relations between one national race and another or among national races and to other faiths.”

Antidiscrimination laws do not apply to ethnic groups not formally recognized under the law as citizens, such as the Muslim Rohingya in northern Rakhine State, and some other ethnic groups.

The law bars members of religious orders (such as priests, monks, and nuns) from running for public office, and the constitution bars members of religious orders from voting. The constitution forbids “the abuse of religion for political purposes.” Although the country has no official state religion, the constitution notes that the government “recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union.” The constitution “also recognizes Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Animism as the religions existing in the Union at the day of the coming into operation of this Constitution.”

The government restricts by law the political activities and expression of the Buddhist clergy (*sangha*). The government bans any organization of Buddhist monks other than nine state-recognized monastic orders. Violations of this ban are punishable by immediate public defrocking and criminal penalties. The nine recognized orders submit to the authority of the State Sangha Monk Coordination Committee (SSMNC), the members of which are elected by monks.

Religious organizations are not required to register with the government.

### Government Practices

There were reports of killings, physical abuse, arbitrary arrest, and continued detention of religious leaders and believers, restrictions on religious practice and travel, forced displacement, and discrimination in employment, granting of building permits, and access to citizenship. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

On January 13-14, military, police, and paramilitary security forces allegedly killed dozens of Rohingya Muslims in retaliation for the alleged killing of a police officer in Rakhine State. The UNHCHR said she received credible reports of killings in the area although the number of deaths was disputed. The government

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investigation concluded that only one death, that of the police officer, occurred. For several weeks following the incident the military and other security forces sealed off the village, allegedly destroying evidence. The government did not grant access to independent forensic experts to examine the scene or conduct a credible, independent investigation, making any definitive account of the events impossible. The UN Secretary-General's August report to the General Assembly stated, "In early January 2014, violent incidents were reported in Du Chee Yar Tan village of Maungdaw Township. Reports of the disappearance of a police officer and alleged killings of several local Muslims caused concern within the international community."

Since late September local security forces arrested an increasing number of Rohingya on charges of extremism. Between September and November the Arakan Project documented approximately 150 arbitrary arrests of Rohingya by the Border Guard Police, mostly for alleged links to Islamic terrorism. In some cases, those arrested reportedly were able to secure their release with payment of bribes. Of those arrested, the Arakan Project reported at least four were killed due to torture and beating. There also were reports of mass detentions of Muslims who were denied basic due process rights and of Muslim detainees suffering physical and verbal abuse, being denied access to food, and having their movements restricted, which affected their employment opportunities and ability to access healthcare.

There were episodes of violence against Muslim communities scattered throughout the country, usually following the same pattern of a dispute rapidly escalating into mob violence. For instance, according to news reports, on September 20, a personal dispute between a Buddhist and a Muslim in Myit Chae town, Magway Division, escalated into a physical altercation. News of the altercation spread and a mob of between 100-200 Buddhists destroyed the Muslim's home and shop and partially destroyed a nearby mosque. While initially slow to respond, local police deployed forces and stabilized the situation by September 21.

Government soldiers reportedly injured Christian religious leaders and damaged buildings during skirmishes in Kachin State, blocked access to churches in areas of active conflict, and built Buddhist monasteries in predominantly Christian areas. In Kachin State, there were reports that government soldiers occupied churches and left the properties in disrepair.

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The government continued to detain Shin Nyana, a monk sentenced in 2010 to a 20-year term of imprisonment for teaching a religious doctrine that did not comport with Theravada Buddhism. The government released U Ottama, reportedly a member of Moe Pyar, the same group as Shin Nyana.

Authorities reportedly denied the monks permission to keep the Buddhist Sabbath, wear robes, or shave their heads while in prison. They were also at times not allowed food compatible with their monastic code. According to media reports and embassy contacts, Shin Nyana was the only monk in detention at year's end.

On June 10, police raided Mahasantisukha Monastery in Tamwe Township, Rangoon, reportedly over a dispute between the State Sangha Monk Coordination Committee and monk Pyinyar Wuntha on the ownership of the monastery, and arrested five monks and several laypeople. The police released the laypeople the same day without charges and charged the five monks with trespassing and defiling a place of worship. On June 13, the monks were transferred to Insein jail where they were defrocked; on June 20, they were released on bail.

After a July visit to camps for some of the 140,000 persons the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates to be displaced by intercommunal violence in Rakhine State, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar said that conditions were "deplorable" in camps for both Buddhists and Muslims. She said she had received reports of deaths due lack of access to emergency medical assistance and due to preventable, chronic, or pregnancy-related conditions, and that the health situation in the Muslim internally displaced person (IDP) camps was of particular concern.

In Rakhine State, security forces also imposed restrictions on the movement of villagers and Rohingya IDPs because of reported persistent threats of violence from members of Rakhine communities. These restrictions impeded the ability of Muslims, including Rohingya, to pursue livelihoods, access markets and humanitarian assistance, and engage other communities. Some reports questioned whether security forces were being used to isolate Muslims and urged the government to end the separation of Muslims so it did not become permanent.

Government officials denied Muslims access to government hospitals, except for emergencies. Groups in some townships complicated efforts by aid workers to provide humanitarian assistance to Muslims. Senior government officials condemned these practices and stated that assistance should be made available without limitations.

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Authorities often denied Muslims living in Rakhine State permission to travel for any purpose; however, permission sometimes was obtained through bribery. Authorities granted Muslims in other regions more freedom to travel, but they still faced restrictions. For example, Muslims living in Rangoon needed permission from immigration authorities to travel into and out of Rakhine State.

Authorities in Mandalay Division denied freedom of movement to Muslims displaced by violence in Meiktila and living in camps for IDPs, and those officials withheld permission for the majority of the displaced Muslims to return to their homes and rebuild on their land. In August the government began resettling Buddhist and Muslim IDPs; as of December, more than 3,200 persons remained displaced. Local authorities in some cases reportedly denied Muslims permission to own land.

Citizens and permanent residents were required to carry government-issued national registration cards, also known as citizenship “scrutiny” cards, which permitted holders to access services and prove citizenship. These identification cards often indicated religious affiliation and ethnicity, but there appeared to be no consistent criteria governing whether a person’s religion was indicated on the card. Citizens also were required to indicate their religion on certain official applications for documents such as passports, although passports themselves do not indicate the bearer’s religion. Members of many ethnic and religious minorities, particularly Muslims, faced problems obtaining national registration cards. Muslims were required to indicate a foreign ethnicity if they self-identified as Muslim on applications for the national registration cards.

The government denied Rohingya citizenship status on the basis that the Rohingya were “illegal immigrants” and stated the Rohingya did not meet the legal requirement for citizenship (i.e., that their ancestors resided in the country before the start of British colonial rule in 1824). Many Rohingya stated their ancestors’ presence in the area predated the British arrival. Without citizenship status, the Rohingya did not have access to secondary education in state-run schools. Authorities did not permit Muslim high school graduates from Rakhine State, including Rohingya and others living in IDP camps, to travel outside the state to attend college or university. Authorities continued to bar Muslim university students who did not possess national registration cards from graduating. These students were permitted to attend classes and take examinations, but they could not receive diplomas unless they claimed a “foreign” ethnic minority affiliation. The

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Rohingya also were unable to obtain employment in any civil service positions. Rohingya couples needed to obtain government permission to marry. In addition, Rakhine State authorities continued to enforce a two-child only policy with regard to Muslim families. Authorities also restricted Muslims' access to healthcare. Authorities prevented Muslims from living in Rakhine State's Gwa or Taungup areas.

The government launched a citizenship verification exercise to address the issue of citizenship of the Rohingya. In a pilot exercise initiated in Myebon Township in June, the government required Rohingya to identify as "Bengali" if they wished to be considered citizens, claiming that the Muslim residents of northern Rakhine State were illegal immigrants from Bangladesh or descendants of migrants transplanted by the British during colonial rule. On September 22, the government awarded naturalized full citizenship to 209 Rohingya and Kaman Muslims out of the total 1,049 Muslims who participated in the pilot verification exercise and continued its review of the remaining applications in December. The government announced its intent to conduct a similar verification for the entire state after the pilot process' completion. The government did not make provision for Rohingya and Kaman Muslims who gained citizenship to move out of IDP camps. Moreover, naturalized citizens do not hold the same rights as other citizens.

Numerous individuals in Chin State reported a significant easing of restrictions affecting the Christian majority in the state. Unlike in past years, there were no reports of the destruction of Christian crosses. Authorities did not, however, provide for the restoration of crosses previously destroyed under the military regime and in some cases rejected applications from Christian organizations to construct a cross.

Civil society groups reported the Chin State government did not widely or consistently make use of the authority the central government granted it in 2013 to approve requests for the construction of religious buildings. The Chin State government had requested this authority in an effort to facilitate timely approval of permits. There were continued reports that some local government officials denied or delayed permits to renovate or build Christian churches in Chin State and other areas. Local authorities in Chin State also continued to prohibit Christian groups and churches from buying land in the name of their religious organizations. Individual members circumvented this requirement by purchasing land on behalf of the group, a practice the government tolerated.



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In March authorities tried a pastor after he refused to stop constructing a building for Christian worship without prior official permission in Yesagyo Township, Magwe Division. The pastor submitted an application for the construction, but local Buddhist townspeople and monks objected to his application, which subsequently led to an order issued by the local administrative authority to cease construction. The court subsequently acquitted the pastor of the charge.

In most regions, Christian and Islamic groups that sought to build small places of worship on side streets or other inconspicuous locations continued to be able to do so only with informal approval from local authorities. Christian groups said formal construction requests for religious buildings in prominent locations often were approved and with fewer delays than in the past. Religious officials in Kachin State, however, reported state officials refused permission for churches to construct any buildings, including a health clinic, suggesting that only the central government could approve such requests.

Muslim groups reported building requests encountered significant delays, were often denied, and even when approved could subsequently be reversed by more senior authorities. It remained extremely difficult for Muslims to acquire permission to repair existing mosques, although internal maintenance was allowed in some cases. Historic mosques in Mawlamyine, Mon State, and Sittwe, Rakhine State, as well as in Rangoon and other areas continued to deteriorate because authorities did not allow routine maintenance. There were reports of local authorities bulldozing and claiming land ownership of historic Muslim cemeteries, including in Mandalay and Yangon Divisions. On November 20, local authorities ordered the demolition of a historic mosque in Yamethin, Mandalay Division. Local administrative authorities had verbally granted ownership of the mosque's land to the board of trustees of the adjacent Buddhist pagoda more than 10 years previously. The mosque has been sealed off to Muslim worshippers since 2008. When the mosque's board of trustees refused to demolish it under local administrative order in October, local authorities moved to demolish the property.

Christian groups reported that in many cases, including in ethnic minority areas, the government no longer enforced the requirement that religious organizations obtain government permission to engage in certain activities such as religious education or charitable work. Christian groups in Kachin State reported that approval from the military was required to engage in activities in remote areas.

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The government continued to subject public events, including religious ceremonies and festivals, to security regulations and other controls. There were reports that Islamic events required prior written permission first from ward, and then township, police, district, and division level authorities. Law enforcement officers reportedly questioned participants on what transpired at these events. Civil society organizations reported that approvals were frequently delayed until the day of the event.

Some Christian theological seminaries and Bible schools continued to operate, along with several Islamic madrassahs.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs' Department for the Perpetuation and Propagation of the Sasana (Buddhist teaching) oversaw the government's relations with Buddhist monks and schools. The government continued to fund two state *sangha* universities in Rangoon and Mandalay, which trained Buddhist monks under the purview of the SSMNC, as well as the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Rangoon.

Some teachers at government schools reportedly still required students to recite Buddhist prayers, although such practice was no longer a mandated part of the curriculum. Many classrooms displayed Buddhist altars or other Buddhist iconography.

Authorities continued to restrict gatherings to celebrate traditional Islamic holidays. The government designated specific towns surrounding Rangoon where Muslims generally could gather for worship and religious training outside the mosque, but only during major Islamic holidays and with prior permission. All public religious celebrations required prior written permission from the police and religious affairs authorities; applications for approval were required to indicate the number of participants and agenda for the event.

Muslim sources reported that, in some cases, Muslim businesses were unable to procure government contracts without a Buddhist "front" person and were prevented from owning licenses to open airlines and banking businesses.

Nearly all promotions to senior positions within the military and civil service continued to be reserved for Buddhists. The government discouraged Muslims from enlisting in the military and Christian or Muslim military officers who aspired to promotion beyond the rank of major were encouraged by their superiors

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to convert to Buddhism. Some Muslims who wished to join the military reportedly had to list “Buddhist” as their religion on their applications, although they were not required to convert.

The government provided funding for monasteries and pagodas, and support for Theravada Buddhist monastic schools and Buddhist missionary activities. The government supported Buddhist seminaries and permitted them to construct large campuses. Buddhist groups generally did not experience difficulty obtaining permission to build new pagodas, monasteries, or community religious halls, in contrast with religious minority groups.

Some departments within the Ministry of Religious Affairs were charged with supporting the SSMNC and religious ceremonies. The government allowed members of religious groups to establish and maintain links with coreligionists in other countries and to travel abroad for religious purposes.

The government eased its burdensome passport issuance procedures for Muslims making the Hajj and for Buddhists going on pilgrimage to India. There were approximately 3,900 Hajj pilgrims. The government expedited passport issuance for 280 of the pilgrims and simplified procedures for all Hajj travelers.

Unlike in the past, when the government expelled foreign missionary groups, the government permitted some foreign religious groups to operate. Local religious organizations were also able to send official invitations for visa purposes to clergy from faith-based groups overseas, and Rangoon-based groups were allowed to host international students and experts.

The SSMNC and Ministry of Religion subjected the *sangha* to restrictions on political expression and association. A September 2013 SSMNC directive issued to Buddhist clergy in response to the participation of monks in sectarian anti-Muslim violence and in the 969 Movement, a nationalist movement ostensibly aimed at protecting and promoting Buddhism but characterized by anti-Muslim messaging, was not enforced. The directive explicitly called for a halt to the formation of 969 organizations. The directive followed the SSMNC’s July 2013 decision that the formation of 969 organizations by Buddhist clergy was tantamount to the establishment of a non-recognized religious sect in violation of *sangha* rules.

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The government took actions against individuals whose actions were construed to be insulting to religion. On December 17, authorities arrested Htin Lin Oo, a member of the National League for Democracy (NLD), for insulting religion, which could result in a maximum three-year prison term. Htin Lin Oo gave a speech in October in which he criticized extremist interpretations of Buddhism. The NLD subsequently stripped him of his membership.

State-controlled media frequently depicted government officials and family members paying homage to Buddhist monks; offering donations at pagodas; officiating at ceremonies to open, improve, restore, or maintain pagodas; and organizing “people’s donations” of money, food, and uncompensated labor to build or refurbish Buddhist shrines nationwide. The government published and distributed books on Buddhist religious instruction.

While communal violence increased, the government took some positive steps to address it. From July 1-3, rumors of the rape of a Buddhist woman by two Muslim tea shop owners in Mandalay spread on social media and resulted in riot and intercommunal violence, killing one Buddhist and one Muslim and injuring more than 10 individuals. The government imposed a curfew in Mandalay between July 4 and August 11. Angry mobs stopped journalists who tried to report on the violence. In at least two incidents, Buddhist mobs tried to destroy reporters’ cameras or cell phones. A columnist who openly criticized religious discrimination was threatened by a subgroup of the nationalist Buddhist Organization to Protect Race and Religion. President Thein Sein issued a radio address soon after in which he condemned the events, emphasized the importance of ethno-religious tolerance, and pledged accountability for those perpetrating the violence. The government reported that it arrested 53 individuals, Buddhists and Muslims, in connection with the violence and sentenced 11 Buddhists to three-year prison terms for rioting and spreading misinformation to incite fear. On October 14, four individuals were convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison with hard labor for the death of the Muslim. The government continued to investigate and try others in connection with the violence.

The government abolished the censorship office that subjected all publications, including religious publications, to preapproval. Many Muslim and Christian groups noted the government no longer required the submission of religious materials prior to publication and no longer instructed publishers of Christian literature to remove any of the more than 100 words prohibited in non-Buddhist literature because of their status as “indigenous terms” derived from the Pali

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language long used in Buddhist literature. Unlike in previous years, religious organizations were not subjected to post-publication censorship and review by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The government eased restrictions on local publication of the Bible, Quran, and other Christian and Islamic texts. Reportedly to prevent exacerbation of religious conflict, authorities did, however, request that all religious organizations not distribute sermons that could inflame other religious groups without first obtaining permission.

Government officials increased their participation in public interfaith events, including the participation of Presidential Religious Affairs Adviser Myint Maung and Rangoon Chief Minister Myint Swe at an Eid al-Fitr dinner on August 6.

The Ministry of Information established an intergovernmental committee, chaired by one of the two vice presidents, to address hate speech on social media, liaise with social media operators, and facilitate the consideration of hate speech-related complaints from the public. The Ministry of Information worked with civil society to develop hate speech monitoring platforms. Authorities took initial steps to address hate speech in print publications. For instance, on October 17, the Ministry of Information decreed that the local, anti-Muslim journal *Aung Zay Yatu* violated media-related laws for containing subject matter that might cause harm to an ethnic group or among ethnic groups, or might insult other religions. On October 29, the ministry requested the Interim Myanmar Press Council to resolve the issue. Also in October sources reported the Rangoon Region authorities cautioned the chief editors of publications printing and distributing anti-Muslim hate speech that such articles could incite violence.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

The July 1-3 intercommunal violence in Mandalay, resulting in the deaths of a Buddhist and Muslim, erupted after rumors of a rape were reposted by monk U Wirathu on social media and subsequently spread. Civil society, religious, and community leaders reportedly monitored the spread of the rumor on social media sites to determine the potential locations for further outbreaks and to curb violence. With the rise in religious hate speech, religious and community leaders and civil society activists increasingly organized intrafaith and interfaith events and worked jointly to develop mechanisms to monitor and counter hate speech as a means to promote religious tolerance and diversity.

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The 969 Movement and MaBaTha published and spread anti-Muslim hate speech in print and social media, which in turn was said to have fueled anti-Muslim mob violence. Anti-Muslim literature circulated widely in communities throughout the country and included incitement to violence and calls for boycotts of Muslim business and other forms of anti-Muslim discrimination. Authorities began to discuss addressing the issue of hate speech but did not take concrete legal measures.

UNHCR estimated some 87,000 people, mostly Rohingya, have left the country on boats after intercommunal violence broke out in June 2012. This included nearly 15,000 from January to April. According to the UNHCR, 615 died on the journey in 2013. Many who survived were subject to kidnapping, trafficking, exploitation, and other forms of brutality and abuse in inhuman conditions, and were malnourished and otherwise in poor health.

There were numerous media reports of local officials' role in the smuggling of asylum seekers and related extortion and abuse of the Rohingya. It was reported that security forces used naval boats to escort asylum seekers out to sea. There were reports alleging Thai officials' complicity in selling asylum seekers to Thai fishing boats as forced labor.

Following false rumors that an international NGO worker had desecrated a Buddhist flag, mob violence directed against international NGOs and UN agencies, in Sittwe Township from March 26 to 27, resulted in damage to 33 offices and facilities and the emergency relocation of up to 300 humanitarian workers from Rakhine State. The attacks against international NGOs and UN agencies followed a reportedly widespread perception among the Rakhine that these organizations disproportionately assisted the Rohingya over the Rakhine. More than 1,000 humanitarian staff members were forced to stop working following the outbreak, but most agencies resumed humanitarian services in late April. On July 24, the government made an announcement to welcome all international NGOs and UN agencies back into Rakhine State and pledged its commitment to ensure the security and safety of staff and operations.

In Kyaukpadaung Township near Bagan, some Buddhists reportedly prevented Muslims from living in the area and displayed signboards pronouncing the area had been "purified" of Muslims. In Karen and Mon States there were anti-Muslim sermons and campaigns to prohibit business dealings between Buddhists and Muslims, and in Tamwe Township in Rangoon Division, Buddhists reportedly

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impeded economic interaction between Muslims and Buddhists. In other areas, Buddhists reportedly would not sell or rent property to Muslims.

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government increased its engagement with the government on religious freedom issues. During his visit in November, President Obama spoke out against discrimination against all religious minorities, including the Rohingya. Senior U.S. officials raised ongoing U.S. concerns about religious freedom and called for a new plan to grant citizenship to the Rohingya without forcing them to self-identify as Bengali. These officials included the Secretary of State; the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs; the Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights; the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs; the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor; the U.S. Deputy National Security Adviser; and the Senior Advisor for Burma.

Embassy officials at all levels discussed the importance of addressing ethno-religious based violence and anti-Muslim hate speech and promoting religious freedom in meetings with high-level government officials, including the ministers of religious affairs, foreign affairs, and home affairs, the presidential religious affairs adviser, the speaker of the lower house of parliament, parliamentarians, including opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, members of civil society, scholars, and representatives of other governments.

Embassy officials traveled to states containing ethnic minorities to discuss human rights and religious freedom with state and local government officials, NGOs, and members of community-based organizations and religious communities. The Ambassador made a number of visits to Rakhine State to assess the situation and express U.S. concern about the continuing violence, and coordinated the diplomatic community's response to the crisis.

The embassy called for an end to all religious-based violence and for the promotion of religious freedom in its contacts with all sectors of society. The Ambassador and Deputy Chief of Mission spoke out against intercommunal violence and for religious freedom at high-profile events, including an August 6 event celebrating Eid al-Fitr. Embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, met repeatedly with Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim leaders, including ethnic minority religious leaders, members of faculties of theology, and

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other religiously affiliated organizations and NGOs to show support for religious diversity and tolerance. The Ambassador hosted an iftar in July to bring leaders of civil society groups and various faith communities together.

The embassy published statements condemning religious-based violence and calling for respect for religious diversity and regularly distributed U.S. government and NGO statements and reports on violations of religious freedom in the country. The embassy integrated messages on diversity and tolerance, including religious tolerance, in numerous programs and activities, including its English language and youth exchange programs. The embassy sent youth civil society leaders to the United States on visitor programs on religious pluralism, and sponsored U.S. speakers to discuss interfaith tolerance. As in prior years, the embassy partnered with and supported numerous faith-based and civil society organizations on programs promoting religious freedom and tolerance.

In December Burmese President Thein Sein submitted a legislative package of four proposed laws, commonly referred to as the “Protection of Religion and Race Laws,” to the parliament. U.S. officials raised concerns with the government about certain provisions in the four bills and stressed the possible implications of such legislation, which if enacted could be enforced in a manner that would significantly undermine religious freedom.

Since 1999, Burma has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act. The Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC in July, for engaging in or tolerating particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Although the United States has eased most sanctions in response to the Burmese government’s political and economic reforms, the U.S. government maintains specific sanctions against the country for its violations of religious freedom.