

New ethnic violence in Burma's Rakhine state

John Roberts
3 November 2012

A new wave of violence broke out in Burma on October 21 between the Muslim Rohingya and Buddhist communities in the townships of Minbya and Mrauk U and spread to other areas of the western coastal state of Rakhine.

According to Burmese authorities this week, at least 88 people have been killed, many of them women, and more have been injured. Some 4,600 homes have been burnt down and 22,000 people left homeless, the vast majority being Muslims. Similar communal clashes in June left 80 people dead and displaced 75,000.

Other sources have put the figures higher. Satellite pictures published by the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) showed hundreds of buildings destroyed, just in the Muslim section of the coastal town of Kyaukpyu. HRW claimed that 633 buildings and 178 house boats were burnt out, with destruction of a similar scale in six other towns.

Last weekend the situation was reportedly “calm” after troops and police stepped in and violently cleared the streets. According to Reuters, the security forces sent to the area by Burmese President Thein Sein fired on both Rohingya and Buddhist crowds. At least 27 patients were treated in Sittwe general hospital for gunshot wounds.

The trigger for the latest clashes is not clear. The violence in June erupted after a Buddhist mob went on a rampage and murdered 10 Muslim men on a bus, allegedly in revenge for the rape of a Buddhist woman.

What is clear, however, is that a systematic campaign of persecution of Rohingya is underway. Muslim Rohingya, who number about 750,000 in the state of Rakhine, are treated as illegal “Bengali” immigrants

from Bangladesh and have been denied citizenship rights since 1982, even though many have lived in Burma for decades.

Buddhist monks rallied in Rangoon on October 25, urging the government to “drive out the Bengali kalar dogs.” The previous day, Sittwe University students held protests against the presence of Rohingya homes near the campus and for an end to “studying with terrorist Bengalis”.

Following similar racist protests earlier in October, Thein Sein suspended plans to open a humanitarian liaison office with the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation in Sittwe. The plight of many Muslim Rohingya is now desperate, both for those in refugee camps and those who remain in their homes.

The UN Refugee Agency warned this week that the situation in camps was deteriorating as the new influx of people pushed facilities “beyond capacity in terms of space, shelter and basic supplies of food and water.” It added: “Food prices in the area have doubled and there are not enough doctors to treat the sick and wounded.”

Melanie Teff, a researcher with Refugees International, visited the area before the latest violence. “Conditions in these camps are as bad, if not worse, than ones in Eastern Congo or Sudan,” she told Agence France Presse. “Child malnutrition rates are startlingly high. There’s an urgent need for clean water and food. If further aid does not come through there will be some unnecessary deaths.”

As in June, Bangladeshi authorities closed their border to Rohingya fleeing from Burma. Bangladesh border guard Colonel Zahid Hasan told AFP that patrols had been stepped up to stop boats carrying

refugees from entering “our territory”, including those trying to cross the Nar River at night.

Rohingya sources told *Deutsche Welle* this week that more than 14,000 Muslims fled the violence by boat. “Most boats sought to land in Sittwe. But people from only 19 boats managed to land here after they paid bribes amounting to 1.6 million kyats [about \$US2,000] to the navy,” Aung Kyaw Oo told DW. A Bangladeshi fisherman said he had seen about 50 boats loaded with Rohingya refugees stranded in the Bay of Bengal last Sunday.

Around 3,000 people are unaccounted for. On Wednesday, Bangladeshi authorities asked fishermen to search for survivors after a boat heading for Malaysia with about 130 people sank. Only six people had been rescued. Lieutenant Badruddoza, a Bangladeshi coastguard commander, told AFP that no sign of any wreckage or bodies had been found, and no coastguard rescue operation would be launched because the exact location of the sinking was not known.

The Burmese government has made no political concessions to the persecuted Muslim minority. The military, which has ruled since 1962, actively promoted anti-Rohingya racism to try to consolidate a base of support among the country’s Buddhist majority. In 1978 and 1991 the army made attempts to drive the Rohingya out of the state of Rakhine.

Since June, the government has stoked up the communal tensions. The state capital of Sittwe is effectively segregated. According to an Associated Press report on September 30, Border Affairs Minister Lieutenant General Thein Htay, speaking to visiting US diplomats in Sittwe, drew his finger across a city map and declared that there were now “lines that cannot be crossed” or there would be “aggression”. The article detailed how Rohingya were cut off from their former livelihoods and living like prisoners.

Anti-Rohingya racism is not confined to the military-backed regime. The opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi is rooted in communal politics. Suu Kyi has refused to take a stand in support of citizenship rights for Rohingya, and

prominent NLD figures have made anti-Rohingya remarks.

The NLD is playing a critical role for both the Burmese military and the Obama administration. The NLD’s support for the country’s cosmetic political reforms has enabled Washington to cloak its embrace of the regime in democratic garb. The government and NLD opposition have supported international calls for a resolution to ethnic conflicts in northern Burma, but are not prepared to make concessions on the Rohingya question.

Washington is not about to champion the democratic rights of the Rohingya. Asked about the issue on October 25, US State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland refused to say whether the renewed conflict would affect the lifting of US sanctions on Burma. While calling for restraint, Nuland declared there were “communal issues on both sides” that “have to be worked out ... I’m not going to make any predictions about where this is going to go.”

Nuland’s comments underscore the fact that the US reengagement with the military-backed regime in Burma has nothing to do with defending the democratic rights of the Burmese people. Rather it is part of the Obama administration’s aggressive campaign throughout Asia to undermine China’s economic and strategic position.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact