

Anti-Muslim violence erupts in Burma

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Anti-Muslim violence carried out by Buddhist mobs last month left at least 43 people dead and hundreds of homes, shops and buildings razed to the ground in towns in central Burma (Myanmar). Official figures put the number of displaced at 9,000, but other reports put the number even higher, at 12,000.

The attacks began in the town of Meiktila on March 20. Two days later, the government declared a state of emergency and sent troops to end the violence. However, the pogroms spread to at least 10 more towns in the Mandalay and Pegu divisions.

U Nyan Lynn, a former political prisoner, told Reuters: “Mobs were destroying buildings and killing people in cold blood”. Journalists covering the situation were also attacked. “With a monk holding a blade to his neck, U Khin Maung Win, an AP photographer, handed over his camera’s memory card,” Reuters reported.

The US-based Human Rights Watch released satellite images on April 1 of Meiktila that showed three Muslim neighbourhoods covering 24.5 hectares reduced to ashes. HRW Asia director Brad Adams said: “The government should investigate responsibility for the violence in Meiktila and the failure of the police to stop wanton killings and the burning of entire neighbourhoods.”

President Thein Sein blamed “political opportunists and religious extremists” and promised to suppress further unrest. A Ministry of Home Affairs spokesman said: “Sixty-eight mobsters who were involved in the violence were arrested and action is being taken against them”. But there are already indications that the security forces in many cases condoned the violence.

UN Special Human Rights Rapporteur on Myanmar, Tomas Ojea Quintana, told the media: “I have received reports of state involvement in some acts of violence.” These included instances in which “military, police and other civilian law enforcement forces have been standing by while atrocities have been committed before their very eyes, including by well-organised ultra-nationalist Buddhist mobs.”

A Reuters report said that the violence was “well

organised, abetted at times by police turning a blind eye. Even after the March 21 killings, the chief minister for the region did little to stop rioting that raged for three more days. He effectively ceded control of the city to radical Buddhist monks who blocked fire trucks, intimidated rescue workers and led rampages that gutted whole neighbourhoods.”

Human Rights Watch noted: “Some well-known members of the Buddhist monkhood, or Sangha, have given sermons, and distributed anti-Muslim tracts and directives that call on Buddhist residents to boycott Muslim businesses and shun contact with Muslim communities.”

Buddhist monks involved in the 969 movement have been prominent in promoting anti-Muslim chauvinism. Leading monk U Wirathu reportedly described himself as the “Burmese Bin Laden”, claiming that “militancy” was needed to counter the “aggressive expansion by Muslims”. The 969 movement claims Muslims, who constitute just 4 percent of the country’s population, are taking over Burma and threatening Buddhism.

Muang Zarni, a research fellow at the London School of Economics, explained that “the military authorities are tolerating the message of hatred coming from the Buddhist preachers”, and “elements within the military leadership are passively backing it”.

The promotion of reactionary Burmese Buddhist supremacism has a long history, going back to the struggles against British colonialism a century ago. Buddhism was made the state religion in 1961 and used to sanction discrimination against the country’s minorities, including Muslims and Christians.

It is not just the military junta but the entire political establishment which is deeply imbued with chauvinism. Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who is assiduously promoted in the Western media as an icon of democracy, remained silent on last month’s anti-Muslim violence, saying only that it could spread if not dealt with by the rule of law.

Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD)

took a similar stance in response to the widespread violence against Muslim Rohingyas in the western state Rakhine last year, refusing to recognise them as citizens. The Rohingya are a particularly oppressed minority who are treated as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, even though many have lived in Burma for decades.

In June last year and again in October, Buddhist mobs attacked Muslim Rohingya, leaving 200 people dead and at least 120,000 displaced. Many are still living in refugee camps in appalling conditions without basic necessities, including food and shelter. With the rainy season coming, the conditions will worsen with the danger of outbreaks of waterborne diseases.

The anti-Muslim violence has erupted as the government, backed by the US and its allies, is carrying through a pro-market agenda and opening up the country to foreign investment. Far from creating a new era of democracy and prosperity, the transformation of Burma into a source of cheap labour and raw materials is deepening the social divide between rich and poor. Anti-Muslim chauvinism is being whipped up to divide working people and divert attention from the responsibility of the government for rising social tensions.

US State Department spokesman Patrick Ventrell told reporters that the US was “deeply concerned” about the latest communal violence in Burma and had insisted that Burmese authorities to “restore order”. The only reason for Washington’s concern about the anti-Muslim violence is that it exposes its promotion of Burma as “a developing democracy” and Suu Kyi as its champion.

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.



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