

Sectarian violence spreads in Burma

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5 June 2013

Anti-Muslim violence erupted in Lashio, in the eastern Shan state of Burma (Myanmar), on May 28. The communal clashes, which began last June in the coastal western Rakhine state, displacing tens of thousands of ethnic Rohingya Muslims, are spreading throughout the country.

The outbreak in Lashio, the Shan state capital, followed an incident in which a man from outside the town allegedly doused a young Buddhist woman with petrol and set her alight. Police quickly arrested the man and charged him with inflicting serious injury. Authorities said the incident had nothing to do with religious or ethnic issues but followed an argument over the sale of fuel. The assailant reportedly had a history of psychological problems.

The violence began when a mob of about 100 gathered outside a local police station and demanded the prisoner be handed over. When this was refused, gangs on motorbikes, armed with iron rods, machetes and bamboo poles, attacked Muslim areas in Lashio over the next two days. The thugs included monks in saffron robes. A large mosque, an orphanage, two Muslim boarding schools, a hotel and dozens of homes and shops were torched.

The Muslim population numbers only 3,000 in the town of 130,000. They hid in their homes and 1,200 took refuge in the Buddhist Mansu monastery, which was guarded by troops. Police reported that one Muslim male had been killed and five Buddhists injured. A Buddhist gang also assaulted a journalist.

Muslims cleaning up after the violence told the Associated Press that there had been no previous communal incidents in Lashio.

Shan state borders China, and hosts the main economic corridor into the Chinese province of Yunnan. Lashio is only 60 kilometres from the gas and oil pipelines, which are due to begin operation shortly.

Unlike in earlier incidents, the military-backed

government of President Thein Sein moved quickly to suppress the violence. Some 300 soldiers and 200 police used a state of emergency decree to ban gatherings and set up roadblocks to stop people entering the city. According to presidential spokesman Ye Htut, 25 people were arrested.

President Sein wanted no interference with the 22nd World Economic Forum on East Asia, due to start in the Burmese capital of Naypyidaw today. Burma's hosting of the event is another sign that the regime is moving the country into the orbit of the United States and its allies. The shift is a product of the Obama administration "pivot to Asia," which seeks to undermine China's influence throughout the region.

The Forum allows the Burmese government to showcase the country to investors as a new cheap labour platform and source of raw materials. However, the *New York Times* warned on May 30: "The United States and other countries supporting Myanmar's transition, as well as international companies eager to do business there, must impress on Mr Sein and his government that Myanmar's promise could evaporate if they cannot control the deadly sectarianism gaining strength there."

The violence in Shan state follows three days of communal clashes in the city of Meiktila, in central Burma, during March. At least 40 people were killed, over 60 injured and 12,000 displaced. Some 828 buildings, mostly homes, were destroyed in Muslim areas of the city near the main markets. Three other instances of violence in Burma's central Pegu region followed the Meiktila incident.

The violence in Meiktila erupted after an argument between a Muslim gold shop owner and Buddhist customers. According to media reports, police stood by as anti-Muslim gangs attacked people and burned down buildings.

Last June and November, widespread violence

against Rohingya Muslims in the western state of Rakhine resulted in at least 168 deaths, hundreds of injuries and the displacement of 120,000 people. Members of the ethnic Rohingya minority are denied citizenship in Burma. They are treated as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, where they are also refused citizenship. Many have lived in Burma for generations.

In the latest move on May 25, the Rakhine state government revived discriminatory laws that limit the number of children that a Rohingya family can have to two. It also required couples in the Rohingya majority towns of Buthidaung and Maungdaw to obtain official approval before marrying. There are about 800,000 Rohingya in Rakhine. Overall, Muslims constitute about 4 percent of the country's population of 60 million.

The eruption of communalism over the past year points to rising social tensions as the regime opens up the country as a low-wage platform. The entire political establishment—including the military-backed regime and the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi—is imbued with the ideology of Buddhist chauvinism.

The country's military, which installed the quasi-civilian government of President Sein in 2011 and still effectively controls the parliament, has long promoted anti-Rohingya racism as a means of dividing working people and cultivating support among the Buddhist majority. In 1978 and 1991, the army tried to drive the entire Rohingya population into Bangladesh.

Today, the policy of ethnic cleansing is promoted by openly chauvinist organisations, such as the “969” movement among sections of the Buddhist clergy and the newly-registered Rakhine National Development Party, both of which are tolerated by the regime. For President Sein, the violence is a convenient pretext for maintaining the police-state measures built up under the previous military junta.

Opposition leader Suu Kyi and President Sein have condemned Rakhine's two-child policy but a central government commission established after last year's communal violence in Rakhine recommended discriminatory population controls. Suu Kyi has never condemned the government over the Rakhine violence nor advocated citizenship for Rohingya Muslims. Her limited criticism of the two-child policy was aimed at

appeasing domestic and international criticism of her anti-democratic stance, while not alienating Buddhist chauvinist layers within her own NLD.

Following Washington's embrace of Burma's military-backed government, Suu Kyi has worked hand in hand with President Sein as his government opens up the country to Western investors and re-orient its foreign policy toward the US. She has played the key role in promoting the illusion that Burma, as Washington claims, is a “developing democracy,” and in covering up the government's discriminatory and anti-democratic measures.



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