

THE WAR ON THE ROHINGYAS

BURNING MOSQUE:
Buddhists burned
homes, businesses and
this mosque over four
days of mob violence
against Muslims in
central Myanmar.

REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN

Buddhist monks incite Muslim killings in Myanmar

Monks incited a deadly four-day rampage against minority Muslims in central Myanmar, Reuters found. The killings come amid the rapid spread of an apartheid-like movement known as 969.

BY JASON SZEP

MEIKHTILA, MYANMAR, APRIL 8, 2013

The Buddhist monk grabbed a young Muslim girl and put a knife to her neck.

“If you follow us, I’ll kill her,” the monk taunted police, according to a witness, as a Buddhist mob armed with machetes and swords chased nearly 100 Muslims in this city in central Myanmar.

It was Thursday, March 21. Within hours, up to 25 Muslims had been killed. The Buddhist mob dragged their bloodied bodies up a hill in a neighborhood called Mingalarzay Yone and set the corpses on fire. Some were found butchered in a reedy swamp. A Reuters cameraman saw the charred remains of two children, aged 10 or younger.

Ethnic hatred has been unleashed in Myanmar since 49 years of military rule ended in March 2011. And it is spreading, threatening the country’s historic democratic transition. Signs have emerged of ethnic cleansing, and of impunity for those inciting it.

Over four days, at least 43 people were killed in this dusty city of 100,000, just 80 miles (130 km) north of the capital of Naypyitaw. Nearly 13,000

people, mostly Muslims, were driven from their homes and businesses. The bloodshed here was followed by Buddhist-led mob violence in at least 14 other villages in Myanmar’s central heartlands and put the Muslim minority on edge across one of Asia’s most ethnically diverse countries.

An examination of the riots, based on interviews with more than 30 witnesses, reveals the dawn massacre of 25 Muslims in Meikhtila was led by Buddhist monks – often held up as icons of democracy in Myanmar. The killings took place in plain view of police, with no intervention by the local or central government. Graffiti scrawled on one wall called for a “Muslim extermination.”

Unrest that ensued in other towns, just a few hours’ drive from the commercial capital of Yangon, was well-organized, 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 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 neighborhoods.

Not all of the culprits were Buddhists. They may have started the riots, but the first man to die was a monk slain by Muslims.

Still, the Meikhtila massacre fits a pattern of Buddhist-organized violence and government inaction detailed by Reuters in western Myanmar last year. This time, the bloodshed struck a strategic city in the very heart of the country, raising questions over whether reformist President Thein Sein has full control over security forces as Myanmar undergoes its most dramatic changes since a coup in 1962.

In a majority-Buddhist country known as the “Golden Land” for its glittering pagodas, the unrest lays bare

“A monk has been killed! A monk has been killed!”

Soe Thein

Buddhist mechanic



SEEKING REFUGE: Thousands of Muslims in the city of Meikhtila were taken to makeshift refugee camps in schools and a nearby stadium.

REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN

THE WAR ON THE ROHINGYAS BUDDHIST MONKS INCITE MUSLIM KILLINGS IN MYANMAR

an often hidden truth: Monks have played a central role in anti-Muslim unrest over the past decade. Although 42 people have been arrested in connection to the violence, monks continue to preach a fast-growing Buddhist nationalist movement known as “969” that is fueling much of the trouble.

The examination also suggests motives that are as much economic as religious. In one of Asia’s poorest countries, the Muslims of Meikhtila and other parts of central Myanmar are generally more prosperous than their Buddhist neighbors. In Myanmar as a whole, Muslims account for 5 percent of the populace. In Meikhtila, they comprise a third. They own prime real estate, electronics shops, clothing outlets, restaurants and motorbike dealerships, earning conspicuously more than the city’s Buddhist majority, who toil mostly as laborers and street vendors.

As Myanmar, also known as Burma, emerges from nearly half a century of isolation and military misrule, powerful business interests are jockeying for position in one of Asia’s last frontier markets. The recent violence threatens to knock long-established Muslim communities out of that equation, stoking speculation the unrest is part of a bigger struggle for influence in reform-era Myanmar.

The failure of Nobel Peace Prize-winner Aung San Suu Kyi, now opposition leader in parliament, to defuse the tension further undermines her image as a unifying moral force. Suu Kyi, a devout Buddhist, has said little, beyond warning that the violence could spread if not dealt with by rule of law.

Suu Kyi declined to be interviewed for this story.



HELPING HAND: Displaced Muslims reach out for donations from aid workers at a camp near Meikhtila. **REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN**

GOLD HAIR CLIP

The spark was simple enough.

Aye Aye Naing, a 45-year-old Buddhist woman, wanted to make an offering of food to local monks. But she needed money, she recalled, sitting in her home in Pyon Kout village. At about 9 a.m. on March 20, a day before the massacre, she brought a gold hair clip to town. She had it appraised at 140,000 kyat (\$160). With her husband and sister, she entered New Waint Sein, a Muslim-owned gold shop, which offered her 108,000 kyat. She wanted at least 110,000.

Shop workers studied the gold, but the clip came back damaged, she said. The shop owner, a young woman in her 20s, now offered just 50,000. The stout mother of five protested, calling the owner unreasonable. The owner slapped her, witnesses said. Aye Aye Naing's husband shouted and was pulled outside, held down and beaten by three of the store's staff, according to the couple and two witnesses.

Onlookers gathered. Police arrived, detaining Aye Aye Naing and the owner. The mostly Buddhist mob turned violent, hurling stones, shouting anti-Muslim slurs and breaking down the shop's doors, according to several witnesses. No one was killed or injured, but the Muslim-owned building housing the gold shop and several others were nearly destroyed.

"This shop has a bad reputation in the neighborhood," said Khin San, who says she watched the violence from her general store across the street. "They don't let people park their cars in front. They are quarrelsome. They have some hatred from the crowd."

That hatred had been further stoked by a leaflet signed by a group calling itself "Buddhists who feel helpless" and handed out a few weeks before. It suggested Muslims in Meikhtila were conspiring against Buddhists, assisted by money from Saudi Arabia, and holding shady meetings in mosques. It was addressed to the area's monks.

Tensions escalated. By about 5:30 p.m., four Muslim men were waiting at an intersection. As a monk passed on the back of a motorbike, they attacked. One hit the driver with a sword, causing him to crash, witnesses said.

Ethnic violence

The government is struggling to contain anti-Muslim hostility which began on March 20 in Meikhtila



A second blow sliced the back of the monk's head. One of the men doused him in fuel and set him on fire, said Soe Thein, a mechanic who saw the attack. The monk died in hospital.

Soe Thein, a Buddhist, ran to the market. "A monk has been killed! A monk has been killed!" he cried. As he ran back, a mob followed and the riots began. Muslim homes and shops went up in flames.

Soe Thein identified the attackers by name and said he saw several in the village days after the monk was murdered. Police declined to say whether they were among 13 people arrested and under investigation related to the Meikhtila violence.



WITNESS TO A KILLING: Soe Thein, a Buddhist mechanic, witnessed the killing of a Buddhist monk, which helped touch off four days of violence against Muslims. **REUTERS/MINZAYAR**

"WE JUST WANT THE MUSLIMS"

That evening, flames devoured much of Mingalarzay Yone, a mostly Muslim ward in east Meikhtila. The fire razed a mosque, an orphanage and several homes. Hundreds fled. Some hid in Buddhist friends' houses, witnesses said. About 100 packed into the thatched wooden home of Maung Maung, a Muslim elder.

As the mob swelled in size, Win Htein, a lawmaker in Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party, tried to restrain the crowd but was held back. "Someone took my arm and said be careful or you will become a victim," he said.

About 200 police officers watched the riots in the neighborhood before leaving around midnight, he said.

By about 4 a.m., the Muslim men inside Maung Maung's house were braced for battle, chanting in Arabic and then shouting in Burmese, "We'll wash our feet in Burman blood." (The Burmans, or Bamah, are Myanmar's ethnic majority.) Nearly a thousand Buddhists were outside.

When dawn broke, at about 6 a.m., the only police presence in the area was a detail of about 10 officers. They slowly backed away, allowing the mob to attack, said Hla Thein, 48, a neighborhood Buddhist elder.

The Muslims fled through the side of the house, chased by men with swords, sticks, iron rods and machetes. Some were butchered in a nearby swamp, said Hla Thein, who recounted the events along with four other witnesses, both Buddhist and Muslim.

Others were cut down as they ran toward a hilltop road. "They chased them like they were hunting rabbits," said NLD lawmaker Win Htein.

Police saved 47 of the Muslims, mostly women and children, by encircling them with their shields and firing warning shots in the air, Hla Thein said. "We don't want to attack you," one monk shouted at the police, according to a policeman. "We just want the Muslims."

Ye Myint, the chief minister of Mandalay region that includes Meikhtila, told reporters later that day that the situation was "stabilizing." In fact, it was getting worse. Armed monks and Buddhist mobs terrorized the streets for the next three days, witnesses said.

They threatened Thein Zaw, a fireman trying to douse a burning mosque. "How dare you extinguish this



CYCLE OF REVENGE: Meikhtila residents observe the riot's aftermath. The unleashing of ethnic hatred in Myanmar, suppressed during a half-century of military rule, has been the biggest challenge yet to the reformist government in one of Asia's most ethnically diverse countries. **REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN**

fire," he recalls one monk shouting. "We are going to kill you." A group of about 30 monks smashed the sign hanging outside his fire station and tried to block his truck. He drove through a hail of stones, one striking below his eye, and crashed, he said, showing his wound.

"A monk with a knife at one point swung at me," said Kyaw Ye Aung, a junior firefighter who, like Thein Zaw, is Buddhist.

Three days later, on the hill where Muslim bodies were burned, this reporter found the remains of a mix of adults and children: pieces of human skull, vertebrae and other bones, and a singed child's backpack.

Nearby, municipal trucks dumped bodies in a field next to a crematorium in Meikhtila's outskirts. They were burned with old tires.

MURKY POLITICAL FORCES

Knife-wielding monks jar with Buddhism's better-known image of meditative pacifism.

Grounded in a philosophy of enlightenment, nonviolence, rebirth and the vanquishing of human desires, Buddhism eschews crusades or jihads. It traditionally embraces peace, clarity and wisdom — attributes of the

Buddha who lived some 2,500 years ago.

About 90 percent of Myanmar's 60 million people are practicing Buddhists, among the world's largest proportion. Sheathed in iconic burgundy robes, Buddhist monks were at the forefront of Myanmar's struggle for democracy and, before that, independence.

Many Burmese find it easier to assume a cherished institution has been infiltrated by thugs and provocateurs than to admit the monkhood's central role in anti-Muslim violence in recent years.

On the streets of Meikhtila, witnesses saw monks from well-known local monasteries. They also saw monks from Mandalay, the country's second-largest city and a center of Burmese culture about 100 miles (160 km) to the north. One such visitor was the nationalistic monk Wirathu.

Wirathu was freed last year from nine years in jail during an amnesty for hundreds of political prisoners, among the most celebrated reforms of Myanmar's post-military rule. He had been locked up for helping to incite deadly anti-Muslim riots in 2003.

Today, the charismatic 45-year-old with a boyish smile is an abbot in Mandalay's Masoeyein Monastery, a sprawling complex where he leads about 60 monks and has influence over more than 2,500 residing there. From that power base, he is leading a fast-growing movement known as "969," which encourages Buddhists to shun Muslim businesses and communities.

The three numbers refer to various attributes of the Buddha, his teachings and the monkhood. In practice, the numbers have become the brand of a radical form of anti-Islamic nationalism that seeks to transform Myanmar into an apartheid-like state.

"We have a slogan: When you eat, eat 969; when you go, go 969; when you buy, buy 969," Wirathu said in an interview at his monastery in Mandalay. Translation: If you're eating, traveling or buying anything, do it with a Buddhist. Relishing his extremist reputation, Wirathu describes himself as the "Burmese bin Laden."

He began giving a series of controversial 969 speeches about four months ago. "My duty is to spread this mission," he said. It's working: 969 stickers and signs are proliferating – often accompanied by violence.

Rioters spray-painted "969" on destroyed businesses in Meikhtila. Anti-Muslim mobs in Bago Region, close to Yangon, erupted after traveling monks preached about the 969 movement. Stickers bearing pastel hues overlaid with the numerals 969 are appearing on street stalls, motorbikes, posters and cars across the central heartlands.

In Minhla, a town of about 100,000 people a few hours' drive from Yangon, 2,000 Buddhists crammed into a community center on February 26 and 27 to listen to Wimalar Biwuntha, an abbot from Mon State. He explained how monks in his state began using 969 to boycott a popular Muslim-owned bus company, according to Win Myint, 59, chairman of the center that hosted the abbot.

After the speeches, the mood in Minhla turned ugly, said Tun Tun, 26, a Muslim tea-shop owner. Muslims were jeered, he said. A month later, about 800 Buddhists armed with metal pipes and hammers destroyed three mosques and 17 Muslim homes and businesses, according to police. No one was killed, but two-thirds of Minhla's Muslims fled and haven't returned, police said.

"Since that speech, people in our village became more aggressive. They would swear at us. We lost customers," said Tun Tun, whose tea shop and home were nearly destroyed by Buddhists on March 27. One attacker was armed with a chainsaw, he said.

A local police official made a deal with the mob: Rioters were allowed 30 minutes to ransack a mosque

before police would disperse the crowd, according to two witnesses. They tore it apart for the next half hour, the witnesses said. A hollowed-out structure remains. Local police denied having made any such an agreement when asked by Reuters.

Two days earlier in Gyobingauk, a town of 110,000 people just north of Minhla, a mob destroyed a mosque and 23 houses after three days of speeches by a monk preaching 969. Witnesses said they appeared well organized, razing some buildings with a bulldozer.

“ENEMY BASES”

Wirathu denied directing the monks in Meikhtila and elsewhere.

“You have the right to defend yourselves. But you don’t have the right to kill or destroy,” he said in the interview.

Wirathu said he was in Meikhtila to persuade monks not to fight. At one point, he delivered a speech on a car roof. A first-hand account of what he said was not available.

He acknowledged spreading 969 and warned that Muslims were diluting the country’s Buddhist identity. That is a comment he has made repeatedly in speeches and social media and by telephone in recent weeks to a large and growing following.

“With money, they become rich and marry Buddhist Burmese woman who convert to Islam, spreading their religion. Their businesses become bigger and they buy more land and houses, and that means fewer Buddhist shrines,” he said.

“And when they become rich, they build more mosques which, unlike our pagodas and monasteries, are not transparent,” he added. “They’re like enemy base stations for us. More mosques mean more enemy bases, so that is why we must prevent this.”

Wirathu fears Myanmar will follow the path of Indonesia after Islam entered the archipelago in the 13th century. By the end of the 16th century, Islam had replaced Hinduism and Buddhism as the dominant religion on Indonesia’s main islands.

Wirathu began preaching the apartheid-like 969 creed himself in 2001, when the U.S. State Department reported “a sharp increase in anti-Muslim violence” in Myanmar. Anti-Muslim sentiment was fueled in March that year by the Taliban’s destruction of Buddhist images in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, and in September by al Qaeda’s attacks in the United States.

The monk continued until he was arrested in 2003 and sentenced to 25 years in prison for distributing anti-Muslim pamphlets that incited communal riots in his birthplace of Kyaukse, a town near Meikhtila. At least 10 Muslims were killed in Kyaukse by a Buddhist mob, according to a U.S. State Department report.

Wirathu has a quick answer to the question of who caused Meikhtila’s unrest: the Buddhist woman who tried to sell the hair clip. “She shouldn’t have done business with Muslims.”

“STATE INVOLVEMENT”

Wirathu should be arrested, said Nyi Nyi Lwin, a former monk better known by his holy name U Gambira who

969

Symbol of a radical Buddhist creed that’s suddenly appearing on walls across Myanmar

led the “Saffron Revolution” democracy uprising in 2007 that was crushed by the military. “What he preaches deviates from Buddha’s teachings,” he said. “He is a monk. He is an abbot. And he is dangerous. He is becoming very scary and pitiful.”

But Gambira said only the government can stop the anti-Muslim mood.

“In the past, they prevented monks from giving speeches about democracy and politics. This time they don’t stop these incendiary speeches. They are supporting them,” he said. “Because Wirathu is an abbot at a big monastery of about 2,500 monks, no one dares to speak back to him. The government needs to take action against him.”

Hla Thein, a witness to the massacre in Meikhtila, said authorities did surprisingly little to stop the violence. “It was like they were waiting for an order that never came,” he said.

One senior policeman told Reuters he expected to be ordered to forcibly restrain the riotous mob, but was told not even to use truncheons.

That pattern echoes what Reuters reporters found last year in an examination of October’s anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar’s western Rakhine State. There, a wave of deadly attacks was organized, according to central-government military sources. They were led by Rakhine Buddhist nationalists tied to a powerful political party in the state, incited by Buddhist monks, and, some witnesses said, abetted at times by local security forces.

The latest bloodshed could have been nipped in the bud, said NLD lawmaker Win Htein, a former army captain who spent 20 years as a political prisoner. He said the region’s military commander, Aung Kyaw Moe, could have stopped the riots with a few stern orders – especially given that thousands of soldiers are permanently stationed in Meikhtila and nearby.

Aung Kyaw Moe insisted authorities did their job. “It is like a battle. When it first starts you can’t really guess the manpower needed or how big it is going to be. But there was protection.”

Min Ko Naing, a former political prisoner revered by Burmese nearly as much as Suu Kyi, was in Meikhtila as the violence began. After the massacre, he said, the mob looked well organized. Cell phones in hand, monks inspected cars leaving town, he said. A bulldozer was used to destroy some buildings. “The ordinary public doesn’t know how to use a bulldozer,” he said.

The U.N. special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar said he had received reports of “state involvement” in the violence. Soldiers and police sometimes stood by “while atrocities have been committed before their very eyes, including by well-organized ultra-nationalist Buddhist mobs,” said the rapporteur, Tomas Ojea Quintana. “This may indicate direct involvement by some sections of the state or implicit collusion and support for such actions.”

Ye Htut, a presidential spokesman and deputy minister of information, called those accusations groundless. “In fact, the military and the government could not be concerned more about this situation,” he said.

Authorities imposed martial law on the afternoon of March 22, the third day of violence. By then, only three people had been arrested, all of them for carrying weapons, a police official said. As they began to make more arrests, the unrest ended the next day. A total of 1,594 buildings were destroyed, the regional government said.

It started up a day later in Tatkon on the outskirts of the capital Naypyitaw. The riots then swept south to Bago Region, erupting along a highway just north of Yangon. By March 29, at least 15 towns and villages in central Myanmar had suffered anti-Muslims riots. In Yangon, some Muslims prepared for violence by Buddhists, shuttering shops and leaving to stay with relatives elsewhere.

On April 2, 13 Muslim boys died in a fire at a Yangon religious school. Many grieving relatives say they

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MOB RULE: The violence in Meikhtila was well organized, abetted by police who at times turned a blind eye. It also affected Buddhists, such as the woman at right. **REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN**



believe the blaze was deliberately set. The floors were surprisingly slick with oil during the blaze, they said. Yangon officials say it was caused by an electrical short circuit.

Some speculate the violence may be orchestrated by conservative forces pushing back at reformers. Or that crony businessmen linked to the former junta hope to knock Muslims out of business and create an economic vacuum in the heartlands that only they can fill. This last theory resonated with some Muslim businessmen such as Ohn Thwin, 67.

“This is both religious anger and economics,” he said, surveying the remnants of his 30-year-old metalworking shop at a popular corner of Meikhtila, a strategic city where three highways intersect. Like many Muslims, he can trace his ancestry back several generations. And like many, he runs a profitable business and has dozens of Buddhist friends, including one who helped him escape the violence.

MAKESHIFT REFUGEE CAMPS

Across town, about 2,000 people cram into a two-story high school, one of several makeshift refugee camps housing about 11,000 of the town’s Muslims, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Many more squeezed into a nearby stadium.

It’s unclear if the Muslims whose businesses were destroyed will be able to reclaim their prime real estate. Ye Myint, the region’s chief, said they may be moved to new areas – a policy that backfired in Rakhine State, where segregation has only led to further communal violence.

“Once we have achieved a time when there is peace, stability and the rule of law, then we look into resettlement,” said Ye Myint.

The high school feels like a jail. Muslims inside cannot leave at will. Friends and relatives are kept waiting outside. Police block journalists from speaking with Muslims – even through a gate.

“I can’t sleep at night. I keep thinking there will be another attack,” said Kyaw Soe Myint, 40, who was waiting to see his 10 cousins inside before a guard shooed him away. “We’re living with fear.”

The identity of those arrested is unclear. But according to police, among those detained was the gold shop owner.

Aye Aye Naing, owner of the hair clip, remained shocked by the violence. “I feel sad for the Muslims who have been killed,” she said. “All humans are the same; it’s just the skin color that is different. We have friends who are Muslims.” She said she doesn’t know what became of her hair clip.

(Additional reporting by Min Zayer Oo. Editing by Andrew R.C. Marshall, Michael Williams and Bill Tarrant)