THE WAR ON THE ROHINGYAS

The 969 catechism

BY ANDREW MARSHALL
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Wimala’s sermon in the low-rent suburb of Insein was billed as an “introduction to the Buddhist logo”. To warm up the crowd, a catchy pop tune called “Song to Whip Up Religious Blood” was played at high volume on a continuous loop on the monastery’s loudspeakers. “Buddhists should not stay calm anymore,” ran the lyrics.

Wimala hails from Mon, a coastal state near Yangon. The Mon pride themselves on being Myanmar’s earliest converts to Buddhism. In October, with violence raging in Rakhine, he and fellow Mon monks set up the “Gana Wasaka Sangha” network to propagate 969 teachings.

It distributes a map showing Myanmar surrounded by Muslim-majority countries where Buddhism once flourished, such as Indonesia. “If necessary,” runs its slogan, “we will build a fence with our bones.”

Wimala arrived for his sermon barefoot, his shaven head shielded from the searing pre-monsoon sun by white umbrellas held aloft by disciples. His sermon was filmed by two cameramen, who later burned it onto DVDs that are distributed across Myanmar. Now that junta-era controls on the Internet have gone, 969 speeches are also widely disseminated on Facebook and YouTube.

Wimala’s preaching style is by turns intimate and hectoring. He cracks jokes. Often, he closes his eyes and intones like a revivalist preacher. Unfurling a poster of the 969 logo, he led the audience through the first of many renditions of the movement’s catechism.

“When you eat?” he asked.
“Nine six nine!” shouted his followers.
“When you go?”
“Nine six nine!”
“When you buy?”
“Nine six nine!”
“When you wake up?”
“Nine six nine!”
“When you sleep?
“Nine six nine!”

CALM NO MORE: Wimala Biwuntha pointing to a map showing Buddhist Myanmar adjacent to Muslim-majority countries, such as Bangladesh. REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN
Afterwards, Wimala spoke approvingly of monks in Karen State who fine Buddhists caught buying from Muslims.

The Mon monks have delivered dozens of sermons in known sectarian trouble-spots. Wimala’s speech in the Bago farming town of Minhla in February was followed by rising communal tensions, Muslim residents told Reuters. Four weeks later, a Buddhist mob destroyed mosques and Muslim houses in the town. Many of Minhla’s 500 Muslims fled.

In an interview, Wimala said 969 might have inspired followers to commit anti-Muslim violence. But they were an ill-educated minority whose actions had been exaggerated by “Muslim-owned media”, he said.

Emboldened, Wimala wants to reach a younger audience. He and other abbots are promoting compulsory religious education for Buddhist children.

The Mon monks plan to teach 60,000 children at more than 160 schools in Yangon and Moulmein, said Yin Yin Htwe, 34, a Wimala donor and disciple who runs a jewelry business. “I want children to learn the dhamma (Buddhist teachings), improve their manners and protect the nation and religion,” she said.

Outside, waiting to greet Wimala, are dozens of primary schoolchildren with 969 logos pinned to their shirts.

(Reporting by Andrew Marshall; editing by Bill Tarrant)