



LAST MONTH IN BURMA

News from and about Burma

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Anti-Muslim violence spreads

Anti-Muslim attacks continued in May, with violence spreading to Kachin State and Northern Shan State.

On 2 May a mob of about 30 people destroyed Muslim-owned shops and houses in Hpakant Township, Kachin State. On 28 May a mosque, an orphanage, and Muslim-owned shops in Lashio, Northern Shan State were destroyed. The attacks occurred after reports that a local Muslim man had doused a Buddhist woman with fuel and set her on fire.

In a bid to restore order, authorities imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew in the city. Unrest continued for a second day in Lashio. Buddhist mobs armed with sticks and iron rods roamed the streets on motorcycles shouting anti-Muslim slogans and burning Muslim-owned homes and shops. One Muslim man was killed in the violence. About 1,200 Muslims fled their homes and took refuge in a local monastery.

On 21 May, the National Parliament approved a 60-day extension of martial law in Meikhtila, Wundwin, Mahlaing, and Tharzi Townships in the Mandalay region, following Anti-Muslim riots in March.

Despite President Thein Sein's pledge to bring all perpetrators of "inter-communal violence" to justice, to date no Buddhists have been formally charged with serious crimes in connection with the violence. However, prosecutions of Muslims have continued. On 21 May, seven Muslims were sentenced to prison terms ranging from two to 28 years in connection with the killing of a Buddhist monk in Meikhtila on 20 March.

UN expert Quintana condemns impunity for violence in Rakhine State

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Myanmar, Tomás Ojea Quintana, responded to the report by the Rakhine Investigation Commission, which was published in April. While he welcomed some of the recommendations, he expressed concerns over the lack of any recommendations to address impunity or ensure investigations into the "widespread and systematic human rights violations targeting the Muslim community in Rakhine State".

The Investigation Commission was set up last year by President Thein Sein to look into the violence in Rakhine State in June, and later in October. The Commission did not include any Rohingya members and the report refused to acknowledge Rohingya identity and only referred to them as 'Bengali'.

Quintana also expressed concern that the current policy of segregation will become a permanent arrangement, and reiterated his call to amend the 1982 Citizenship Act:

"I have always said that discrimination against the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State is one of the underlying causes of the violent conflict between communities there. The statelessness of the 800,000 Rohingya population underlies their marginalisation and makes them particularly vulnerable to discrimination and human rights violations."

Political party ordered to expel Rohingya members

According to reports in the Democratic Voice of Burma, the Union Election Commission (UEC) has ordered the Democracy and Human Rights Party (DHRP) to expel six senior members because they are Rohingya and therefore 'non-citizens'.

UEC director Tin Maung Cho told DVB that "They were listed as the 'Rohingya', which is not recognised by the state. Foreigners are not allowed to take part in political parties."

The state in Burma not only denies Rohingya citizenship but also their existence as an ethnic

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group, instead calling them foreigners or Bengalis. This was reiterated by President Thein Sein in an interview with the Washington Post on 19 May 2013, where he said that “There are no Rohingya among the races [in Burma]. We only have Bengalis who were brought for farming [during British rule].”

‘Two Child’ policy renewed against Rohingya
Authorities in Rakhine (Arakan) State have renewed a policy which restricts Rohingya Muslims to having two children.

Win Myaing, the Rakhine State spokesperson, told the media on 26 May that local authorities had reaffirmed a 2005 regulation for Rohingya Muslims in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships in northwestern Rakhine State along the Bangladesh border.

Kachin talks continue but no ceasefire

Three days of talks were held between the military-backed government and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in Myitkyina, Kachin State from 28-30 May.

UN Secretary-General Special Advisor on Burma Vijay Nambiar, two Chinese embassy officials, and United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) representatives from other ethnic groups were present as observers.

A seven-point agreement was signed but no ceasefire agreement was reached.

According to the agreement, both sides pledged to work towards a cessation of hostilities; hold political dialogue; establish joint-monitoring committees; resettle IDPs; and continue dialogue on troop movement and positions.

Burmese Army continues attacks in Shan State

Thousands of villagers have been forced to flee their homes after the Burmese Army continued its attacks in Shan State, north east Burma.

On 9 May, Burmese troops attacked a Shan State Army-South (SSA-S) base near China, causing over 3,000 people from 32 villages to flee their homes. About 2,000 people crossed into China, and 1,000 fled to the town of Namkham. Over 1000 villagers were forced to flee attacks in April.

The Burmese Army has stepped up attacks in Shan State since February, despite on-going peace talks. Shan community groups believe the recent attacks are linked to China’s oil and gas pipelines in the area and have called for a halt to the pipeline project.

Thein Sein visits USA

President Thein Sein made a four-day visit to USA in May. It was the first visit by a Head of State from Burma to Washington, DC in nearly five decades.

During his trip, Thein Sein met President Barack Obama at the White House and held a series of other meetings including with Congressional representatives, World Bank President, US Chamber of Commerce members, and former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton.

Given the scale of the on-going human rights abuses in Burma and the lack of any justice or accountability, campaign groups criticised Obama’s red carpet welcome for Thein Sein.

US Campaign for Burma Executive Director Jennifer Quigley said, “President Obama is sending the message that crimes against humanity by state forces against ethnic and religious minorities in Burma will be ignored by his Administration.”

On 2 May the US announced the extension of the National Emergency Act for another year but the visa ban on regime officials and others has been lifted.

Political Prisoners released ahead of Thein Sein’s US visit

On 17 May, 19 political prisoners were released, just hours before Thein Sein left for a trip to the USA. Burma Campaign UK accused President Thein Sein of blatantly using political prisoner releases as PR tools.

The previous dictatorship, of which President Thein Sein was one of the most senior members, was notorious for using the strategic release of political prisoners to try to alleviate international pressure. Thein Sein has continued this policy.

“The release of any political prisoner is welcome, but two years after the reform process began, people should be asking why there are still hundreds of political prisoners still in jail,” said Wai Hnin, Campaigns Officer at Burma Campaign UK. “These releases are blatantly designed to get good publicity ahead of Thein Sein’s visit to the USA.”

While hundreds of political prisoners have been released since Thein Sein became President, hundreds more have been arrested in Kachin State and in Rakhine State. The exact numbers are not known, but could mean that the overall number of political prisoners in the country has fallen by a figure in the low hundreds, rather than almost a thousand.

Four of the 19 political prisoners released, Win Myint, Kan Min Thar, Tun Oo, and Aung Naing, were highlighted in Burma Campaign UK's 'No political Prisoner Left Behind' campaign.

Another of those released was political activist Nay Myo Zin. There was deep concern earlier in the month when Nay Myo Zin was put back in prison to serve his old prison sentence after being convicted on a new charge, the first former political prisoner to be forced to serve his old prison sentence, after his conditional release under a presidential amnesty in 2012.

Almost all the political prisoners released since 2011 have only had their sentences suspended under Burma penal code 401, rather than receiving full pardons.

This means that if they are arrested again they will serve the new prison terms, and the old prison term which they didn't finish serving will be added to it.

Burma ranks bottom for resource governance

Revenue Watch Institute released its '2013 Resource Governance Index' in May, which measures the quality of governance in the oil, gas, and mining sectors of 58 resource rich countries. Burma is ranked last in terms of resource governance.

The 58 countries surveyed produce 85 percent of the world's petroleum, 90 percent of diamonds and 80 percent of copper, generating trillions of dollars in annual profits.

The report said that Burma is near the bottom of global measurements of control of corruption, government effectiveness, democratic accountability, and the rule of law. There is almost no information available on the management of the extractive sector and a near-total lack of official oversight mechanisms.

Number of displaced in Burma rises to 450,000

Conflict and communal violence displaced at least 166,000 people in Burma in 2012, bringing the total number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country to "at least 450,000 people," according to a global report released by the Internal Displaced Monitoring Centre.

Violence in Arakan State displaced 125,000 people, while the ethnic conflict in Kachin State caused more than 75,000 civilians to flee, the report said. In south eastern Burma in Karen and Shan states, there are an estimated 250,000 IDPs.

Burma fails to demobilise Child Soldiers

Burma has failed to make progress in ending its use of child soldiers nearly one year after signing an agreement with the United Nations, according to a new report by Human Rights Watch. In June 2012, Burma and the UN signed a Joint Action Plan to end all recruitment and use of children in the armed forces by December 2013.

In the action plan, Burma's government committed to identify and register all children in its forces by November 2012, and to release all children from the armed forces by December 2013. Nearly one year since the action plan was signed, the registration process is far from complete and progress in releasing children is unacceptably slow.

"One year into the Burma-UN action plan, the Burmese military has failed to meet even the basic indicators of progress," said Jo Becker, children's rights advocacy director at Human Rights Watch.

On at least four occasions, the Burmese military has reneged on its commitments by refusing the UN access to military facilities to assess the presence of child soldiers.

"The Burmese army is not only dragging its feet in ending its use of child soldiers, but is also obstructing the UN from doing its job to verify its efforts," Becker said.

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