



LAST MONTH IN BURMA

News from and about Burma

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Renewed violence in Arakan State

On 21 October violence renewed in Arakan (Rakhine) State between Arakan Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims. The violence continued until 30 October, affecting nine townships.

According to the government, 89 people were killed and 5,351 houses burnt down, leaving 32,231 people homeless. However, there are fears that the death toll is much higher, with possibly hundreds killed. Since the violence started in June, more than 100,000 people have been displaced.

UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, reported that more than 3,000 people fled in boats towards the state capital, Sittwe, to seek assistance in existing camps for internally displaced people (IDP). According to UNHCR, "these already overcrowded camps are being stretched beyond capacity in terms of space, shelter and basic supplies such as food and water." There were reports that at least 130 refugees drowned after their overcrowded boat sank. UNHCR also called on Bangladesh to open its borders to Rohingyas fleeing the violence in Burma. However, Bangladesh has said that it will not accept any Rohingya refugees.

While there was violence on both sides, the vast majority of violence appeared to be systematic attacks against the Rohingya. There were reports that Burmese security forces took part in attacks against Rohingya. Andrew Heyn, British Ambassador to Burma, told the BBC that there was "compelling evidence, that this latest wave of attacks against the Rohingya ...were pre-planned, coordinated and organised."

Burma Campaign UK called for independent international observers to establish the facts about what is taking place and help prevent violence.

Satellite images obtained by Human Rights Watch revealed extensive destruction of homes and other property in the predominantly Rohingya Muslim areas of Pauktaw, Mrauk-U, and Myebon townships, with some areas almost completely destroyed. Attacks were also made against Muslims from the Kaman ethnic group.

UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar, Tomás Ojea Quintana called on the Burmese Government to "pursue a policy of integration and long-term reconciliation between the two communities. This will necessarily involve addressing the underlying causes of the tensions, which includes the endemic discrimination against the Rohingya community."

In September the military-backed government in Burma had agreed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to open a liaison office and provide aid in Arakan State. However, on 15 October, Thein Sein reversed his earlier decision to allow the OIC liaison office after thousands of people held protests against the plan. The President's Office was quoted as saying "the opening of the OIC office will not be allowed as it is contradictory to the aspirations of the people."

Meanwhile, members of the government's investigation commission into the violence in Arakan State, including former political prisoner Zarganar, have said it has been unable to operate effectively. The commission has been criticised as deeply flawed for its lack of independence and failure to include any Rohingya members. The publication of its report has already been delayed.



Kyaukpuyu on 25 October 2012



Satellite images obtained by Human Rights Watch show widespread destruction of Rohingya homes and property.

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Fighting continues in Kachin State despite ongoing talks

Burmese government officials, led by President's Office Minister Aung Min, met Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) officials on 30 October in Ruili, Yunnan Province, China. They agreed to hold further talks next month to focus on political negotiations.

Despite the talks, fighting has continued in Kachin State and Kachin civilians continue to suffer. In his report to the UN General Assembly in October, UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Burma Tomás Ojea Quintana said that "Tatmadaw soldiers in Kachin State continued to commit serious human rights violations, including attacks against civilians, extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, arbitrary arrest, and torture."

The Kachin Women's Association (KWAT) has documented that nearly 60,000 people sheltering in Kachin-controlled areas have received only 4% of their basic food needs from international aid groups, including the UN. About 100,000 have been displaced in total since the Burmese government broke its 17-year ceasefire with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in June 2011. KWAT reported that ongoing Burmese military offensives and abuses continue to cause displacement, including about 10,000 people newly displaced in the jade-mining area of Hpakant.

Peaceful protesters charged

In contrast to the numerous and often large anti-Rohingya demonstrations that have been allowed to go ahead in Sittwe, Mandalay and Rangoon, the government continues to restrict and refuse permission for activists to organise peaceful demonstrations to protest against government policies.

In October a number of cases were brought against human rights activists for organising peaceful protests. Thirteen activists face possible charges under the Peaceful Gathering and Demonstration Law for leading a peaceful demonstration on International Peace Day in Rangoon on 21 September 2012.

Myint Aye, a lawyer who staged a one-man demonstration in Prome on 18 October, was charged for protesting against increased prices for court stamps, which are necessary to file lawsuits. Former political prisoner Than Htaik Aung and Yei Kheh were also charged for allegedly assisting him. On 6 October at least 10 activists in Mandalay were charged under the Peaceful Gathering and Demonstration Law for participating in peaceful

protests against electricity shortages in Mandalay in May.

Burma invited to US-Thai military exercises

The United States stepped up its engagement with Burma in November with officials from the Defense, State, and Treasury Departments visiting Burma. The United States has also backed Burma's participation as an observer at the US-Thai Cobra Gold joint military exercises in 2013.

A Pentagon spokesman said "If the Burmese come and attend as observers, we would ensure that they observe the portions of Cobra Gold that deal with humanitarian relief, that deal with military medicine, things like this."

The joint military exercise involves more than 10,000 US and Thai troops and other participants from countries in the region.

International Financial Institutions continue re-engagement with Burma

On 11 October, ahead of the annual meeting of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank in Tokyo, leaders from 26 countries and five international organisations, including the IMF, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), confirmed their willingness to support Burma in infrastructure development and in clearing debt arrears.

Japan's Finance Minister Koriki Jojima said the state-owned Japan Bank for International Cooperation would provide a US\$900 million bridge loan to clear Burma's debt arrears with the World Bank and the ADB, allowing them to resume lending to Burma. Japan announced in April 2012 that it would cancel US\$3.8 billion of Burma's debt.

Land confiscation 'rampant' according to new report

A new report by The Network for Human Rights Documentation–Burma (ND–Burma), an umbrella group of NGOs, youth and women's groups, has highlighted the increasing problem of "rampant land confiscation and forced relocation by the Burmese government."

It cites the recent arrests and beatings of farmers protesting the forced relocation of landowners from 66 villages for the Letpadaung copper mine in Monywa as an example of the on-going human rights violations by the Burmese government. The project has resulted in the confiscation of 7,800 acres of land. The mining project is a joint venture by the military-owned Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings, in conjunction with a Chinese corporation.

The new Farmland Law passed this year has increased concern about land confiscation. According to the Asian Legal Resource Centre, “far from reducing the prospects of land grabbing, the Farmland Law opens the door to confiscation of agricultural land on any pretext associated with a state project or the ‘national interest’.”

Opium poppy cultivation rises for 6th consecutive year

Opium poppy cultivation in Burma rose for the sixth consecutive year, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

The latest UNODC report, South-East Asia Opium Survey 2012, estimates that opium poppy cultivation jumped 17% in 2012 to 51,000 hectares (up from 43,000 ha in 2011) in spite of Government claims to have eradicated 23,717 ha of opium poppy.

UNODC Regional Representative Gary Lewis said, “The significant increase in opium poppy cultivation in Myanmar coupled with significant increases in trafficking in methamphetamines and other illicit drugs reflect a growing human security threat to the region.”

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**for Human Rights, Democracy
& Development in Burma**