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International Crisis Group
WORKING TO PREVENT CONFLICT WORLDWIDE

The Dark Side of Transition: Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar

Asia Report N°251 | 1 October 2013

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Executive Summary

Following the outbreak of deadly intercommunal clashes in Rakhine State in 2012, anti-Muslim violence has spread to other parts of Myanmar. The depth of anti-Muslim sentiment in the country, and the inadequate response of the security forces, mean that further clashes are likely. Unless there is an effective government response and change in societal attitudes, violence could spread, impacting on Myanmar's transition as well as its standing in the region and beyond.

The violence has occurred in the context of rising Burman-Buddhist nationalism, and the growing influence of the monk-led "969" movement that preaches intolerance and urges a boycott of Muslim businesses. This is a dangerous combination: considerable pent-up frustration and anger under years of authoritarianism are now being directed towards Muslims by a populist political force that cloaks itself in religious respectability and moral authority.

Anti-Indian and anti-Muslim violence is nothing new in Myanmar. It is rooted in the country's colonial history and demographics, and the rise of Burman nationalism in that context. Deadly violence has erupted regularly in different parts of the country in the decades since. But the lifting of authoritarian controls and the greater availability of modern communications mean that there is a much greater risk of the violence spreading.

Among the most discriminated against populations in Myanmar is the Muslim community in northern Rakhine State, the Rohingya. Most are denied citizenship, and face severe restrictions on freedom of movement as well as numerous abusive policies. In June and October 2012, clashes between Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine State left almost 200 people dead and around 140,000 displaced, the great majority of them Muslims. Communities remain essentially segregated to this day, and the humanitarian situation is dire.

In early 2013, the violence spread to central Myanmar. The worst incident occurred in the town of Meiktila, where a dispute at a shop led to anti-Muslim violence. The brutal killing of a Buddhist monk sharply escalated the situation, with two days of riots by a 1,000-strong mob resulting in widespread destruction of Muslim neighbourhoods, and leaving at least 44 people dead, including twenty students and several teachers massacred at an Islamic school.

There has been strong domestic and international criticism of the police response. In Rakhine State, the police – who are overwhelmingly made up of Rakhine Buddhists – reportedly had little ability to stop the attacks, and there are allegations of some being complicit in the violence. The army, once it was deployed, performed better. In Meiktila, the police were apparently incapable of controlling the angry crowds that gathered outside the shop, and were hopelessly outnumbered and ineffective when the clashes rapidly escalated.

The violence has regional implications. There has been a sharp increase in the number of Muslims making the treacherous journey by boat from Rakhine State to other countries in the region, prompting public criticism from some of those countries. The intercommunal tensions have also spilled over Myanmar's borders, with the murders of Myanmar Buddhists in Malaysia, and related violence in other countries. There have also been threats of jihad against Myanmar, and plots and attacks against

Myanmar or Buddhist targets in the region. As Myanmar prepares to take over the rotating chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2014, this could become a serious political issue.

The Myanmar government understands what is at stake. President Thein Sein has spoken publicly on the dangers of the violence, and announced a "zero-tolerance" approach. The police response has been improving somewhat, with faster and more effective interventions bringing incidents under control more quickly. And after some delay, perpetrators of these crimes are being prosecuted and imprisoned, although there are concerns that Buddhists sometimes appear to be treated more leniently.

But much more needs to be done. Beyond improved riot-control training and equipment for police, broader reform of the police service is necessary so that it can be more effective and trusted, particularly at the community level, including officers from ethnic and religious minorities. This is only just starting. The government and society at large must also do more to combat extremist rhetoric, in public, in the media and online. At a moment of historic reform and opening, Myanmar cannot afford to become hostage to intolerance and bigotry.

Yangon/Jakarta/Brussels, 1 October 2013

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The Dark Side of Transition: Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar

I. Introduction

At a time when Myanmar is emerging from decades of authoritarianism and isolation, the rise of intercommunal violence threatens to complicate its transition and damage its standing in the region and beyond.[1] The violence swept Rakhine State in two waves in 2012 and then spread to central parts of Myanmar earlier this year. It has been accompanied by rising intolerance and anti-Muslim rhetoric, in part spread by radical Buddhist nationalist groups and a small but vocal group of extremist monks. If the country is unable to confront this issue, the violence could escalate.

This report is based on detailed background research and in-depth interviews with a wide range of individuals conducted in towns that have experienced violence in recent months, as well as in the main cities of Yangon and Mandalay. It discusses the history of intercommunal tensions in the country since colonial times, the situation in Rakhine State and the more recent violence in other parts of the country. It looks at the dynamics of the violence and who may be responsible, its regional ramifications, as well as the response of the authorities and what more can be done to tackle the violence and extremist rhetoric.

[1] For previous Crisis Group reporting on Myanmar since the present government took power, see Crisis Group Asia Briefings N°140, *A Tentative Peace in Myanmar's Kachin Conflict*, 12 June 2013; N°136, *Reform in Myanmar: One Year On*, 11 April 2012 and N°127, *Myanmar: Major Reform Underway*, 22 September 2011; and Asia Reports N°238, *Myanmar: Storm Clouds on the Horizon*, 12 November 2012; N°231, *Myanmar: The Politics of Economic Reform*, 27 July 2012 and N°214, *Myanmar: A New Peace Initiative*, 30 November 2011.

II. A History of Intercommunal Tensions

A. *Previous Incidents of Violence*

Anti-Muslim and anti-Indian sentiments are not a new phenomenon in Myanmar. They are rooted in dissatisfaction at unchecked immigration from the sub-continent during the colonial period. Large numbers of Indians moved to Myanmar as part of the colonial administration; in commerce and moneylending; and as low-income migrants seeking menial work. Many of these were Muslims, but there were also Hindus and other religions among them.

The "Chettiar" moneylenders came to be particularly hated figures. They had become the main source of credit in the rice-growing areas, and when the Great Depression resulted in the collapse of rice prices, farmers were unable to repay their debts and many lost their land as the moneylenders foreclosed on them.[2] Large numbers of Myanmar agricultural workers moved to the cities seeking jobs held by Indian immigrant labourers, creating tensions. Things came to a head in May 1930, when Indian dockworkers went on strike and were replaced by Myanmar workers. When the Indian workers resumed their jobs, the Myanmar workers were sacked. Clashes broke out and escalated into several days of anti-Indian riots during which several hundred Indians were killed; the violence also spread to other parts of the country.[3] Another outbreak of anti-Indian rioting occurred in July 1938 in Yangon, and then spread over much of the country, leaving at least 200 people dead. The violence began when Burman nationalists started a campaign against a book by an Indian Muslim author that was allegedly offensive to Buddhism.[4]

Indians became targets of the growing Burman nationalist movement. A popular song from the 1930s had lyrics saying that Indians were "exploiting our economic resources and seizing our women, we are in danger of racial extinction" – strikingly similar to the terms in which the present day nationalist agenda is framed.[5] In that period, the Dobama Asiayone ("We Burmans Movement") emerged as the main pro-independence political organisation, with the principle of "Burma for the Burmans" and the slogan "let him who desires peace prepare for war".[6] One of the young leaders of the movement was Aung San, the father of Aung San Suu Kyi. He and other prominent Dobama leaders, known as the "Thirty Comrades", went on to establish the Burma Independence Army with support and training from Imperial Japan; it formed the backbone of the post-independence armed forces.

Occasional outbreaks of anti-Indian and anti-Muslim violence continued after independence.[7] In 1983, there were serious anti-Muslim riots in the Mon State capital Mawlamyine, leading to several hundred refugees fleeing across the Thai border. At the time of the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, violent communal attacks targeted Muslims in Pyay in central Myanmar, and in Taunggyi and other towns in Shan State.[8]

[2] See Robert Taylor, *The State in Myanmar* (2009), p. 198.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid. "Burman" (or "Bamar") denotes the majority ethnic group in Myanmar, whereas "Burmese" (or "Myanma") denotes all people of the country.
[5] Khin Yi, *The Dobama Movement in Burma (1930–1938)* (1988), p. 96.
[6] Ibid.
[7] The particular situation in Rakhine State will be examined separately, in Section II.B
[8] Images Asia, "Report on the situation for Muslims in Burma", 1997.

In 1997, a large mob including hundreds of Buddhist monks attacked Muslim shops, homes and mosques in Mandalay, creating major destruction and resulting in several deaths. The violence then spread to several other towns across the country. An English-language Thai newspaper, *The Nation*, carried a picture showing monks attacking a mosque, while security looked on, seemingly doing nothing to stop the destruction.[9] Leaflets were apparently circulating earlier, urging Buddhists to boycott Muslim stores and not to marry Muslims.[10]

In May 2001, there were attacks on Muslim residents in Taungoo in central Myanmar. One of the triggers was the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan by the Taliban, and calls by Buddhist monks in Taungoo for the destruction of Mosques in retaliation. Six mosques were wrecked, as were most Muslim-owned shops in the town. Nine people were reportedly killed. Violence spread to other towns, then erupted again in Pyay in September 2001, and Bago in October. Curfews were imposed by the authorities.[11]

Many of the underlying prejudices, the forms of hate speech, and the way the violence has been conducted have been very similar over the decades, and have emerged again in the latest wave of violence.[12]

B. *Violence and Discrimination against the Rohingya*

The situation for one Muslim population in Myanmar, the Rohingya in Rakhine State, has been particularly serious, longstanding and intractable. As noted Myanmar scholar Martin Smith remarked almost two decades ago, "while Burma has many complex ethnic problems, the plight of the Muslims of Arakan [Rakhine] is by far the most tense and difficult of all the ethnic problems I have encountered in over a decade of writing on the political and ethnic situation in Burma".[13]

Not all Muslims in Rakhine State consider themselves to be Rohingya. First, there are Muslim populations in the state that are ethno-linguistically distinct from the Rohingya, including the Kaman who are recognised as one of Myanmar's indigenous ethnic groups. Second, members of the Rohingya ethno-linguistic group do not always accept the term itself, which has come to be linked with a particular political/religious agenda and is identified mainly with communities in the northern part of Rakhine State near the Bangladesh border. Because the recent discrimination and violence has been blind to such subtleties, however, there now seems to be a greater willingness to identify as Rohingya.

The origins of this group, and the use of the term itself, are highly contested. Rohingya leaders claim that the community has lived in Rakhine State for many centuries, and there is historical evidence of a Muslim population living in the area for hundreds of years.[14] The Myanmar government, however, often claims that most Rohingya are illegal immigrants who arrived very recently from Bangladesh. It is known that a number of Chittagonians (from the neighbouring Chittagong division

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] See "Crackdown on Burmese Muslims", Human Rights Watch, July 2002.
[12] See Section IV.
[13] Martin Smith, "The Muslim 'Rohingya' of Burma", Paper presented to the conference of the Burma Centrum Nederland, Amsterdam, December 1995.
[14] See Moshe Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar* (2001), chapter 1.

of Bangladesh) did flee across the border to Myanmar as a result of the civil war in then East Pakistan in the 1960s, but probably very few since.[15]

Whatever the extent of the historical population, and of recent migration, there was undoubtedly also significant migration from Chittagong to Rakhine during colonial times, with the encouragement of the British administration.[16] This changed the ethnic and religious mix, created socio-economic problems, and led to considerable resentment from the Rakhine Buddhist community.

These tensions erupted into violence during the Second World War. The Japanese advanced into Rakhine State in 1942, and the area became the front line until the end of the war. The Rohingya remained loyal to the British, while the Rakhine supported the Japanese, as part of the broader Burmese independence movement. Each community formed armed units, and launched attacks on the other. Rohingya fled or were expelled from areas under Japanese control to areas in the north of the state, and Rakhine similarly moved south away from the areas held by Allied forces. The effect was to further segregate Rakhine State into Muslim and Buddhist areas.[17]

After the Second World War, just as the country gained independence, a Rohingya mujahidin rebellion erupted. They sought the right to live as full citizens in an autonomous Muslim area, and an end to what they saw as discrimination from the Buddhist officials that replaced the colonial administrators. The rebels targeted Rakhine Buddhist interests as well as the government, quickly seizing control of large parts of northern Rakhine State. Relations between Buddhist and Muslim communities deteriorated further. The rebellion was eventually defeated, leaving only small-scale armed resistance and banditry. Partly in response to political demands from mujahidin, in 1961 the government established a Mayu Frontier Administration in northern Rakhine State, administered by army officers rather than Rakhine officials.[18]

The 1962 military coup in Burma then ended Muslim political activity, as it also banned other forms of political organisation, and brought about a more hardline stance toward minorities. New policies effectively denied citizenship status to the majority of Rohingya, and the short-lived Mayu Frontier Administration was dissolved.[19]

In 1977, the government began a nationwide operation to tackle illegal immigration (operation *nagamin*, or "dragon king"). The lack of formal immigration status of many Rohingya, combined with the abusive or violent way in which the operation was implemented in Rakhine State – including serious episodes of intercommunal violence – caused some 200,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh. Most of these refugees returned over the course of the following year, under intense pressure from Bangladeshi authorities, but there were no real efforts at reintegration, and the majority still had no citizenship papers, or were registered as "foreign residents" with fewer rights.[20]

[15] Ibid, chapter 7; see also J.P. Anand, "Burma-Bangladesh refugee problem", Strategic Analysis, 2, 1978.

[16] Since colonial Burma was, at least for part of the time, governed as a province of British India, Chittagong and Arakan (Rakhine) were part of the same political entity. Migration was encouraged by the colonial administration as part of efforts to develop the agriculture of the sparsely-populated Arakan region. Yegar, op. cit., chapter 3.

[17] Ibid, chapter 4.

[18] Ibid, chapter 5.

[19] That is, the Emergency Immigration Act (1974) and the fact that Rohingya were mostly not provided with citizenship cards that the act required people to carry.

[20] See "The Rohingya Muslims: Ending A Cycle Of Exodus?", Human Rights Watch, September 1996.

In 1991, the new military regime – which had come to power following the 1988 coup against the socialist government – began a significant deployment of troops to northern Rakhine State. These troops confiscated land from Rohingya for their camps and for agriculture to provide for their food, levied arbitrary taxes, and imposed forced labour on the Rohingya villagers. In addition to violence, the economic burden of these various demands became unsustainable and by early 1992 more than 250,000 Rohingya had fled to Bangladesh, where they were housed in crowded refugee camps. Some 200,000 were subsequently repatriated, under the auspices of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), but human rights groups and other observers denounced the poor conditions in which the repatriation took place, and criticised the fact that it was sometimes involuntary.[21]

In 2001, riots between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya broke out in the state capital Sittwe. An argument between a group of young monks and a Rohingya stallholder escalated into a night of violence during which perhaps twenty people were killed and homes and businesses were torched. A curfew was imposed in the city for several months. Violence also spread to Maungdaw township, and several mosques and madrasas were destroyed.[22] In 2001, violence also targeted Muslim communities in other parts of Myanmar.[23]

C. *The Role of Buddhism*

Many observers have been surprised at the links between Buddhism – a central precept of which is non-violence – and the extremist views and violence against Muslim communities, including by Buddhist monks.[24] Although most Buddhists and monks eschew violence, Myanmar's history and experience from elsewhere in the region demonstrate that in certain political circumstances, Buddhism and Buddhist monks can become vehicles for violent ideologies and actions, for example in Sri Lanka, southern Thailand and other Buddhist countries.[25]

In Myanmar, Buddhist monks played a prominent role in the anti-colonial movement, leading some of the armed resistance against the colonial occupation in upper Myanmar in the 1880s. They were in the forefront of the Burman nationalist pro-independence movement in the 1920s and 1930s, often preaching non-violence, but not always; for example, some monks led or participated in deadly anti-Indian and anti-Muslim riots.[26]

[21] Ibid.
[22] See "Crackdown on Burmese Muslims", op. cit.
[23] See Section II.A.
[24] For an insightful discussion of the issue, see Matthew J. Walton, "Myanmar needs a new nationalism", *Asia Times Online*, 20 May 2013.
[25] On the situation in southern Thailand, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°105, *Thailand's Emergency Decree: No Solution*, 18 November 2005, pp. 11-15 and N°140, *Southern Thailand: The Problem with Paramilitaries*, 23 October 2007, pp. 19-24. For an overview of the political situation of Sri Lanka's Muslim communities, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°134, *Sri Lanka's Muslims: Caught in the Crossfire*, 29 May 2007, especially pp. 4-5 and N°243, *Sri Lanka's Authoritarian Turn: The Need for International Action*, 20 February 2013, pp. 23-24. A future Crisis Group report will consider in detail the rise of new militant Buddhism groups in Sri Lanka and their campaign against Muslims.
[26] See, for example, Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (2001), chapter 8; and Robert Taylor, *The State in Myanmar* (2009), chapter 3.

Just as monks have been prominent in Burman nationalist organisations, they have also been influential in ethno-nationalist movements for those ethnic groups that are predominantly Buddhist. They have played a vital role in supporting ethnic insurgencies against successive military regimes and there has been a long tradition of monks disrobing to become insurgent fighters.[27] Nearly all the leaders of the staunchly Rakhine nationalist Arakan Liberation Party armed group – which signed a ceasefire in April 2012 and which has been implicated in the 2012 violence against Muslims in Rakhine – were formerly monks.[28] The Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army (DKBA), which was established and led by the Karen monk U Thuzana, provides another example.[29] The group emerged from a split in 1994 in the Karen National Union (KNU) armed group, partly as a result of tensions between the KNU's rank and file and its mostly Christian leadership. The DKBA was accused of targeting Muslim communities in Kayin State to force them to relocate and destroying mosques.[30]

[27] Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, second edition (1999), p. 182.
[28] Ibid; and "Thousand interrogated for Arakan strife role", *The Irrawaddy*, 1 November 2012.
[29] U Thuzana was initially described as "chairman" of the DKBA, and subsequently came to be referred to as its "chief patron".
[30] See "Easy targets: The persecution of Muslims in Burma", Karen Human Rights Group, May 2002.

III. Attacks on Rohingya Communities in Rakhine State

A. *Violence Erupts in 2012*

The rape and murder of a Buddhist woman by Muslim men on 28 May 2012 led long-simmering tensions between the Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim communities to flare in Rakhine State the following month.[31] Most of the violence was in the northern part of the state and around the provincial capital of Sittwe. According to government figures, 98 people were killed and 123 injured, from both communities.[32] In addition, 5,338 homes, mostly of Rohingya, were destroyed and some 75,000 people, again mostly Rohingya, were displaced.

A few days later, the 3 June murder in Toungup township of ten Muslim pilgrims, who were not Rohingya, came after the anonymous distribution of inflammatory leaflets attacking followers of Islam. It thus cast the tensions as Buddhists versus Muslims and demonstrated how easily the distrust between religions could be manipulated by rising ultra-nationalist sentiments.

As violence spread in the state, a state of emergency was imposed on 10 June and additional troops dispatched to enforce it.[33] This restored order for only a few months, during which tensions continued to simmer, and small incidents were reported. Hostility had already been high in the months leading up to the rape incident, and extremist propaganda was circulating. Many Rakhine people were angry at pledges by the "establishment" Union Solidarity and Development Party prior to the 2010 elections to grant Rohingya people citizenship, as part of an effort to secure the Rohingya vote and thereby limit the electoral success of the Rakhine party.[34]

B. *Revenge Attacks*

Widespread violence erupted again on 21 October 2012 in other areas of Rakhine State, in the townships of Kyaukpyu, Kyauktaw, Minbya, Mrauk-U, Myebon, Pauktaw, Ramree and Rathedaung. While Muslim Rohingya did attack Buddhist Rakhine communities in June, those displaced at that time tended to be overwhelmingly from the Rohingya side or Buddhists who had been living in Muslim neighbourhoods that were destroyed.[35]

In this second wave, the attacks appeared to be well-coordinated and directed towards Muslims in general and not just Rohingya, a potentially serious escalation. Muslim ethnic Kaman communities, who are one of Myanmar's recognised nationalities, were among those targeted.[36] Given the systematic nature of some of the attacks, it is highly probable that they were at least partly planned in advance in reaction to

[31] See Crisis Group, "Myanmar Conflict Alert: Preventing communal bloodshed and building better relations", 12 June 2012.
[32] "Final Report of Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State", 8 July 2013, appendix C.
[33] See Crisis Group, "Mynamar Conflict Alert", op. cit.
[34] Crisis Group interview, analyst, Yangon, September 2012; see also "Final Report of Inquiry Commission", op. cit., p. 15, para. 4.5. The Rakhine party in question is the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party, the dominant party in Rakhine State, where it won over 50 per cent of the elected seats in 2010.
[35] See "Burma: New Violence in Arakan State", media release, Human Rights Watch, 27 October 2012; and Crisis Group interviews, civil society activist, Yangon, September 2012; October 2012.
[36] "Fleeing Muslims seek food, shelter after Myanmar sectarian chaos", Reuters, 26 October 2012.

the June violence. The senior army officer with authority for the region, Lieutenant-General Hla Min, suggested that there might be political aims behind the riots.[37] He did not elaborate, but this second wave of clashes took place amid rising local political tensions.

According to government figures, 94 people were killed, 142 injured and 3,276 homes burned down.[38] The detailed breakdowns of these figures indicate that the impact was overwhelmingly on Muslim communities. The vast majority of the 32,000 people displaced were Muslims, whereas there were 42 Rakhine Buddhist houses destroyed, leaving a few hundred homeless.[39]

In late September 2012 in Sittwe, in what was billed as the biggest ever public meeting of ethnic Rakhine, delegates laid out an ultra-nationalist manifesto approving, among other things, resolutions supporting the formation of armed local militias, enforcement of citizenship laws, removal of Rohingya villages, and the reclamation of land that had been "lost" to them. The conference objected to the plans to reunite communities, issue national identity cards to Rohingya, and the establishment of a liaison office of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Yangon.[40]

Monks, women's groups and youth organisations in early October 2012 held demonstrations in Sittwe against the proposed OIC mission.[41] These protests were part of a national movement against the OIC led by prominent monks, with thousands protesting in Yangon and Mandalay. In response, the national government reneged on a signed agreement to allow the establishment of the mission.[42] It was clear that the violence in Rakhine State was reverberating nationally. Muslims cancelled public celebrations of Eid al-Adha on 26 October and on the following day hand grenades were thrown at two mosques in Kayin State's Kawkareik township.[43]

C. *The Rakhine Commission*

In response to the first wave of violence in June, President Thein Sein on 17 August 2012 established an "investigation commission" to look into the situation in Rakhine State.[44] The commission had a broad mandate, covering the causes of the violence, the official response, solutions and suggestions for reconciliation and socio-economic development. It also had a broad composition, including Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist religious leaders, academics, civil society representatives, lawyers and politicians – although none of the Muslim members specifically represented the Rohingya community.[45] The commission also included as members a number of former

[37] "Authority, resident representatives of UN agencies look into situation in Yanbye [Ramree], Kyaukpyu", *The New Light of Myanmar*, 29 October 2012.
[38] "Final Report of Inquiry Commission", op. cit., appendix C.
[39] Ibid; and border affairs ministry, summary document covering the period 22-30 October.
[40] "Arakan public meeting successfully concludes in Rathedaung", Narinjara Independent Arakanese News Agency, 29 September 2012.
[41] "Myanmar: Displacement in Rakhine State", Situation Report No. 10, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 28 October 2012.
[42] "Buddhist monks march in Myanmar to thwart Islamic office plan", Reuters, 15 October 2012.
[43] Lawi Weng, "Two mosques attacked in Karen State", *The Irrawaddy*, 29 October 2012.
[44] President Office Notification No. 58/2012, 17 August 2012.
[45] It seems that the president's decision not to include a Rohingya leader on the commission was a reflection of the huge sensitivity about this issue in Myanmar, the concern being that such a move would have been counterproductive by making any such decision the main focus of discussion, and

dissidents, including 88 Generation leader Ko Ko Gyi and the comedian and social critic Zarganar.

The commission was initially given three months to complete its work, but its mandate was extended following the second round of clashes in October.[46] It submitted a confidential interim report to the president in November 2012, and a final, public report in April 2013.[47]

The report was very detailed, running to 70 pages in the English version, with a further 50 pages of appendices. Given the contentious nature of the issue, and the broad composition of the commission, it is perhaps inevitable that many, including those from the two communities in Rakhine, were not happy with some aspects of the report and the compromises that were perhaps an inevitable result of divergent views between commission members.[48] Nevertheless, the report did present contrasting views from both communities, and spoke frankly about a number of sensitive issues. It contained a detailed list of recommendations on various issues.

President Thein Sein welcomed the report and committed to implementing the recommendations, and different organs of the state were explicitly assigned responsibility for this.[49]

Internationally, the report received a mixed reception. The UN special rapporteur for Myanmar said that it contained "many worthwhile recommendations" but expressed concerns that more needed to be done to ensure freedom of movement and end discrimination against the Rohingya.[50] Amnesty International saw "some positive steps in the report but also several flaws", including a lack of mention of the need for comprehensive reform of the security forces to prevent additional abuses in the context of the commission's recommendation to double the number of security forces in Rakhine.[51]

Particularly controversial aspects of the report included the fact that it declined to use the term "Rohingya", instead adopting the government usage "Bengali" and noting that use of the former term is highly controversial in Myanmar. This could be interpreted as reinforcing the serious state discrimination against this group by denying them the identity and recognition that they are seeking. However, the strength of feelings on this issue, not only in Rakhine State but in Myanmar as a whole, should not be underestimated. The commission's position is that had the report chosen to use the term "Rohingya", it would likely have been interpreted by a majority of domestic readers as an indication of the commission taking sides on a highly con-

likely making it impossible to get any Rakhine representatives to join the commission. Crisis Group interview, member of the commission, Yangon, November 2012.

[46] Crisis Group interview, member of the commission, Yangon, November 2012.

[47] An English translation of this report was subsequently released as "Final Report of Inquiry Commission", op. cit.

[48] See, for example, "Joint Statement on the official report of the Rakhine (Arakan) Investigation Commission" made by ten Rohingya organisations, 3 May 2013; and the comments of Aye Maung, head of the main Rakhine political party and a member of the commission in "Report on Arakan unrest stalled three weeks", *The Irrawaddy*, 2 April 2013.

[49] President U Thein Sein's remarks on the report of the Rakhine Investigation Commission, *New Light of Myanmar*, 7 May 2013, p. 1; table showing division of responsibility for recommendations published in *New Light of Myanmar*, 1 May 2013, pp. 2-9.

[50] "Myanmar: UN expert calls on government to address impunity for crimes in Rakhine", UN News Centre, 1 May 2013.

[51] "Myanmar must look beyond 'flawed' report to stop cycle of Buddhist-Muslim violence", Amnesty International, 30 April 2013.

tentious and emotive issue, and could have detracted from other important messages and recommendations making implementation all the harder.[52]

Another controversial aspect was the discussion of family planning for Rohingya communities. This had been reported in some media outlets as a recommendation in the text.[53] In fact, the report said that some Rakhine had called for family planning education as a way to help alleviate their concerns over alleged rapid population growth of Rohingya communities, but cautioned that if this went ahead it "should be voluntary and should not be forced on any group".[54] Contrary to the recommendation, local authorities in Rakhine State subsequently announced the reactivation of a "two-child" policy for Muslims in northern parts of the state.[55]

D. *Current Situation*

The many recommendations of the Rakhine commission were endorsed at the highest political level, but the practical implementation has been somewhat mixed.

The humanitarian situation remains serious. Around 140,000 people displaced in Rakhine State in 2012, the great majority of whom are Muslim, live in very poor conditions in temporary camps, where basic services, including education, are inadequate. The heavy monsoon rains have made conditions even worse. There was great concern at the onset of the rains that lack of donor funding, constraints on access, and high risks of flooding could create a serious humanitarian crisis. These fears were particularly acute in May 2013, when there was a possibility of a tropical cyclone hitting the area.[56] In all, some 79,000 people from the lowest-lying areas were relocated to temporary shelters.[57] The funding situation has improved.[58] But there are serious problems, with the communities still segregated. There also remain draconian restrictions on the freedom of movement of Rohingya and strong pressure from Rakhine communities on the UN and NGOs not to provide assistance to Muslim communities, which sometimes impedes humanitarian access.[59] State authorities must develop long-term plans to resolve this dire situation.[60]

Intercommunal relations remain seriously strained, and are being addressed at present through segregation. While this may be unavoidable in the short term to ensure security and stability, it is not viable, even counterproductive, in the medium term. Work needs to begin urgently to create the conditions for a reintegration of communities. Encouraging positive intercommunal interactions and dialogue can help, but will not be sufficient. It will also be necessary to address issues of status and rights of the Rohingya, including granting them freedom of movement. But it also requires acknowledging and addressing the concerns of the Rakhine community, which have tended to be ignored or dismissed as extreme. These include perceptions

[52] Crisis Group interview, member of the Commission, Yangon, April 2013.
[53] For example, "Burma proposes family planning regime to control Muslims", *The Telegraph* (London), 29 April 2013.
[54] "Final Report of Inquiry Commission", op. cit., p. 66, para. 12.27.
[55] See Section III.D below.
[56] "Myanmar: Relocations must continue ahead of Cyclone Mahasen, urges UN", OCHA, 15 May 2013.
[57] "Myanmar: Displacement in Rakhine State", Snapshot, OCHA, August 2013.
[58] As of August 2013, around 75 per cent of the $109.3 million response plan had been funded.
[59] For examples of some of the challenges, see "Medical aid to Arakan State Rohingya blocked, MSF says", *The Irrawaddy*, 7 February 2013.
[60] Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker, Yangon, September 2013.

that international aid is being given disproportionately to the Rohingya, and more general fears of an erosion of Rakhine culture and identity – which there was limited scope for expressing under the decades of military rule. Addressing underdevelopment and lack of economic opportunities in Rakhine State will also be critical in ensuring longer-term stability.

Some positive steps have been taken, such as the disbanding of the Nasaka paramilitary security force, widely seen as abusive and corrupt.[61] Conversely, some of the steps taken by local authorities, such as an administrative ban on Muslim families in northern Rakhine State having more than two children – the current status of which is unclear – are discriminatory and in violation of fundamental human rights standards.[62]

[61] See "Myanmar's 'Nasaka': Disbanding an Abusive Agency", Crisis Group blog post, 16 July 2013, available at www.crisisgroupblogs.org/resolvingconflict.
[62] "Myanmar to examine two-child rule for Rohingya Muslims", *Straits Times*, 3 June 2013.

IV. Violence in Other Parts of Myanmar

A. *Attacks on the Muslim Community in Meiktila*

In a context of rising anti-Muslim sentiment across Myanmar following the events in Rakhine State, violence broke out in the town of Meiktila in central Myanmar. Clashes started following an argument between a Buddhist customer and the staff at a Muslim-run gold shop on 20 March 2013, and quickly escalated into attacks on Muslim residents of the town and their property by Buddhist mobs, including monks. The killing of a Buddhist monk – who was apparently uninvolved in the events – by a group of Muslims caused the already volatile situation to explode, greatly increasing the intensity and extent of the violence. This led to widespread destruction of Muslim neighbourhoods of the town, and a massacre of at least twenty students and several teachers at an Islamic school.[63] The official death toll was 44, but there are indications that it may have been higher.[64]

Meiktila is a key trading town in central Myanmar, strategically located at the intersection of the main north-south and east-west highways. It has a comparatively large Muslim population, including some wealthy traders and other businessmen. While local people from both communities said they did not sense any particular increase in tensions prior to the outbreak of violence,[65] it came in the context of a very obvious upsurge in anti-Muslim sentiment and rhetoric in Myanmar as a whole, including the rise of the "969" movement.[66] Meiktila, with its large and visible Muslim population, certainly had the potential to become a hotspot.

The spark in this case was the argument at the gold shop. A dispute between the female staff and a female customer turned violent, with the latter reportedly receiving a serious beating.[67] The police did not intervene, allegedly because the staff paid a bribe.[68] When an angry crowd started to assemble, local authorities arrived and the shop staff were arrested. The incident appeared to have ended, but then (false) rumours started to circulate that the customer had died of her injuries. A large crowd, including some monks, started to ransack the shop. Outnumbered and unable to control the situation, the police reportedly told the crowd that they could destroy the shop, but must then disperse. They looted and destroyed several nearby Muslim shops before doing so.[69] A short time later, a group of Muslims in another part of the town, possibly in retaliation, attacked a monk passing by on a motorbike, who later died of his injuries in hospital. When news of this spread, the situation escalated from a relatively contained incident to a deadly rampage by a mob at least 1,000 strong over the following two days.

[63] Crisis Group interviews, witnesses to the violence, Meiktila, August 2013. For a detailed account based on numerous interviews conducted shortly after the events, see "Massacre in central Burma: Muslim students terrorized and killed in Meiktila", Physicians for Human Rights, May 2013. See also "Burma: Satellite images detail destruction in Meiktila", Human Rights Watch, 1 April 2013; and "Satellite-based damage assessment for city of Meiktila, Mandalay Region, Burma", Human Rights Watch, 27 March 2013.
[64] Physicians for Human Rights, op. cit.
[65] Crisis Group interviews, Meiktila, August 2013.
[66] See Section IV.D below.
[67] Crisis Group interviews, individuals who witnessed the events, Meiktila, August 2013.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.

The response of the security forces was clearly inadequate. Witnesses described police officers standing by while people were killed in front of them, and video footage shot by police has depicted this.[70] The only time when police reportedly fired their weapons was when a rock thrown by the crowd struck an officer.[71] When the mob surrounded a large group of Muslims who had sought refuge in a compound, the police did escort some of them to safety, but were apparently unable to prevent several being killed by the mob while under escort.[72] On 22 March, President Thein Sein declared a state of emergency in Meiktila and surrounding townships, which was enforced until it was revoked on 20 July; a night-time curfew remained in force.[73]

At present, several thousand people are still living in crowded shelters and camps around and outside the town, the great majority of them Muslims. Most have suffered the destruction of their homes and belongings, and have lost their livelihoods. There continues to be a strong presence of armed police in town, but those Muslims who have stayed in their homes remain fearful. Many Muslim shops are shuttered, and intercommunal interactions remain tense and are minimised. Few Muslims shop in the central market, and those who do are reportedly being extremely cautious, even about haggling over the price of goods (a standard and usually good-natured practice) for fear of sparking an incident.[74] Some Muslim students have returned to school, which at the primary level tends to be separate (since there is a primary school for each area, and communities tend to live separately or send their children to separate schools). At middle- and high-school levels, however, schools are mixed and there are reportedly tensions between students, with some parents telling their children they can no longer have friends from the other community.[75]

It is unclear when the displaced Muslim population – both those in the camps and the many others staying with friends and relatives in other townships – will be able to return. Two main Muslim areas in the town were destroyed: a poor neighbourhood of mainly wooden houses, Chanayethaya Quarter, which has since been razed by the authorities in preparation for rebuilding, and a richer area in the centre of town, which as of August was still in its post-riot condition – burned out and partially destroyed buildings.[76] Under a law dating from the colonial period, ownership of municipal land damaged by fire reverts to the authorities, and "no trespassing" signs have been erected. The authorities have indicated that the land will be returned to its original owners, but it is not clear when this will take place.[77]

[70] Crisis Group interviews, witnesses to the violence, Meiktila, August 2013. Physicians for Human Rights, op. cit. For the video footage, see "Burma riots: Video shows police failing to stop attack", BBC, 22 April 2013 (http://bbc.in/108cJgn).

[71] Physicians for Human Rights, op. cit., p. 13.

[72] Ibid; Crisis Group interviews, witnesses to the violence, Meiktila, August 2013; also see Section IV.C below.

[73] President Office Ordinance No. 1/2013, 22 March 2013; and Ordinance No. 2/2013, 20 July 2013.

[74] Crisis Group interviews, Muslim residents of Meiktila, August 2013.

[75] Ibid.

[76] The same is true of a third area of destruction, which was somewhat more mixed, where the massacre at the Islamic school occurred. As of September 2013, the authorities had reportedly begun bulldozing these other two areas.

[77] Crisis Group interviews, residents and community leaders, Meiktila, August 2012.

B. *Violence Continues in Other Areas*

There have been several subsequent outbreaks of anti-Muslim violence in other parts of Myanmar, although Meiktila remains by far the most serious to date outside of Rakhine State. These other clashes have followed a similar pattern: an apparently random incident between a Buddhist and a Muslim sparks attacks by Buddhist mobs on Muslim shops, homes and religious buildings, with the security forces often caught unprepared and arriving too late (however, as noted below, the police have more recently shown the intent and ability to intervene promptly to good effect).

On 30 April 2013, there was an outbreak of anti-Muslim violence in the town of Okkan, north of Yangon. One person was killed and several others seriously injured in a few hours of violence and looting sparked by a Muslim woman bumping into a novice monk in a crowded market, causing his alms bowl to be knocked over. Dozens of Muslim shops and homes were looted and destroyed, and a mosque burned down. After several hours, a large number of police and some military personnel arrived in the town, and security was then quickly restored.[78]

A few days later, on the night of 2 May, several Muslim shops and houses were destroyed in the far north of Myanmar, in the jade mining town of Hpakant in Kachin State; two people were arrested and the situation was brought quickly under control.[79]

On 28 May, anti-Muslim violence erupted in the north-eastern town of Lashio. One person was killed, and a number of Muslim homes and shops were looted, damaged or destroyed in a night of attacks by a mob of 200-300 people. Parts of the town's main mosque were damaged by fire, and a large building nearby that housed an Islamic school and orphanage was burned down. The violence was sparked by an incident in which a Muslim man – who sources described as suffering from mental illness – poured petrol over a Buddhist woman and set fire to her, leaving her with serious burns.[80] Several hundred Muslims took refuge in a Shan Buddhist monastery in the town, where many stayed for several weeks.

Lashio is a somewhat unexpected place for anti-Muslim violence to break out. Located in northern Shan State, it has a long history of various insurgencies in the surrounding hills, but the town itself has always been relatively calm, and its focus has been on the role it plays as a key trade hub, on the main road from Mandalay to China. It has a large Chinese population particularly active in the commercial and trade sectors, a Muslim community that – unlike Meiktila – is not particularly large, and a fairly small population of Buddhist Burmans. The great majority of Buddhists in the town are Shan, among whom there does not appear to be any significant anti-Muslim sentiment – if they harbour any resentment, it tends to be against the growing Chinese immigrant population.

The Muslim population in Lashio is mixed. Some are of Indian origin, like in Meiktila, others are Chinese Muslims, known as Panthay, who are, and look, ethnically Chinese. But the largest group are Shan Muslims, most of whom have partial Indian ancestry but are culturally Shan and speak the Shan language. This population does not fit the stereotype of Indian Muslims who have been the targets of violence elsewhere. Some Muslims whose homes were attacked describe mobs search-

[78] "One dead after new anti-Muslim riots in Myanmar", Agence France-Presse, 1 May 2013.
[79] "Two arrested in Kachin", *Myanmar Times*, 4 May 2013.
[80] Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Lashio, August 2013. The man was convicted and imprisoned for 26 years on 11 June 2013.

ing for particular houses owned by particular named individuals; others said that some among the mob would point out which houses and shops were owned by Muslims.[81] Arson was used much less, perhaps because in mixed residential areas, it is not feasible to burn down only Muslim homes without fires spreading. There may also have been opportunism at work: the mob created a climate of lawlessness and impunity which, according to several sources, was taken advantage of by people with no anti-Muslim agenda to profit from looting.[82] This dynamic is very likely present in many of the recent cases of intercommunal violence.

On 29 June, an alleged rape of a Buddhist woman by a Muslim man in Thandwe town in Rakhine State led to mob violence that resulted in the destruction of fourteen homes. A curfew was imposed by the authorities and order was restored the following day.[83]

On 24 August, anti-Muslim violence erupted in a village in Kanbalu township in Sagaing Region. The trigger was again a sexual assault of a Burman woman by a Muslim man. Police reinforcements sent from nearby were able to contain the situation, but only after a mob of several hundred people burned dozens of Muslim houses and shops. The mob also prevented firefighters from tackling the blazes, and the regional security minister, a monk, and several villagers were injured by projectiles from slingshots when they tried to intervene to stop the violence. The situation was only brought under control when police reinforcements fired several rounds of warning shots, and then detained some dozen suspected arsonists.[84]

In several other cases in recent months, incidents that could potentially have sparked intercommunal violence did not do so, sometimes because of the quick intervention of police or community and religious leaders.[85]

C. *The Government Response*

The government and police have been widely criticised, domestically and internationally, for the poor response by security forces to the violence, which in many cases was clearly biased and woefully inadequate.

In Rakhine State in 2012, the police reportedly did little to stem the violent attacks.[86] Police in the area are overwhelmingly made up of Rakhine Buddhists who are at best unsympathetic to Muslim victims and at worst may have been complicit in the violence against them. The army, recruited nationally and rotated into the region, has been better at maintaining security – preventing or deterring attacks against Muslim villages, and guarding the last Muslim-majority neighbourhood in downtown Sittwe.[87]

In Meiktila, witnesses spoke of police being apparently incapable of initially controlling the angry crowd at the gold shop, and then rapidly outnumbered. They appeared to lack the training, equipment, and rules of engagement or leadership that

[81] Crisis Group interviews, Muslim residents, Lashio, August 2013.
[82] Ibid.
[83] "Arrests made over Thandwe rape case", *Myanmar Times*, 4 July 2013.
[84] "Shops, houses torched in fresh anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar", Radio Free Asia, 25 August 2013.
[85] See Section V.B for discussion.
[86] See, for example, "'The government could have stopped this': Sectarian violence and ensuing abuses in Burma's Arakan State", Human Rights Watch, August 2012.
[87] Crisis Group interviews, civil society activist and community representative, October 2012.

might have enabled them to contain the situation and restore order more quickly, potentially saving many lives.[88]

One important factor influencing the nature of the response appears to have been the bungled police crackdown on demonstrators at the Letpadaung copper mine near Monywa in upper Myanmar on 29 November 2012.[89] In this incident, the police were strongly criticised for their heavy-handed operation to clear demonstrators from the mine site, which included the improper use of military-issue smoke grenades containing an incendiary substance that caused many demonstrators, including monks, to suffer severe burns. The incident sparked protests across the country by monks and lay people, and the regional head of the police had to appear before senior monks to give a personal apology.[90] President Thein Sein then set up an investigation commission, headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, and sent a minister from his office to a ceremony in Mandalay to present a formal government apology to senior monks.[91]

The Letpadaung incident, and the enormous criticism and scrutiny of the police that followed, seems to have had a significant impact on the willingness of the police to use force in the context of riot control.[92] Police on the ground in Meiktila had no specialised competence in riot-control techniques, nor did they have non-lethal riot control equipment. A government official also identified a lack of vehicles as a constraint preventing police from mobilising quickly, especially to more remote areas.[93] Heavily outnumbered and possibly lacking clear rules of engagement and direct orders from above,[94] their actions were mainly limited to self-defence, negotiating with the mob (to limit its destruction to the gold shop or, later, to allow women and children to be escorted away from areas of violence), and videotaping crimes for later prosecution (some of these videos were subsequently leaked, see above).

This analysis is supported by the fact that incidents of communal violence in the wake of Meiktila, and particularly since Lashio, have generally been responded to more quickly and more assertively by police, with the result that mob violence has lasted hours not days, and casualties have been less. It therefore appears that the events in Meiktila may have been a wake-up call, and have pushed the police towards tougher responses that they had avoided in the wake of Letpadaung. It remains to be seen whether this positive trend will continue. A flashpoint has traditionally been the Muslim festival of Eid al-Adha in October, which also coincides with a major Buddhist lunar holiday, Thadingyut.[95]

Following the various incidents, police have arrested and prosecuted a significant number of people accused of violence and arson. There had been concerns that mainly Muslim suspects were being sentenced, despite the fact that most of those arrested

[88] Crisis Group interviews, witnesses and community leaders, Meiktila, August 2013. See also Physicians for Human Rights, op. cit., May 2013.

[89] For discussion of the background to social tensions at this mining project, see Crisis Group Report, *Myanmar: Storm Clouds on the Horizon*, op. cit., Section III.B.

[90] See "Myanmar monks protest to demand crackdown apology", Associated Press, 12 December 2012; and "Police apologize for crackdown", *Myanmar Times*, 3 December 2012.

[91] "Myanmar makes apology to monks over copper mine crackdown", *Myanmar Times*, 24 December 2012.

[92] Crisis Group interviews, source close to the police, Meiktila, August 2013, and government official, Yangon, August 2013.

[93] Government spokesperson Ye Htut, quoted in "Police inaction blamed for scale of new Myanmar violence", Radio Free Asia, 26 August 2013.

[94] Crisis Group interview, source close to the police, Meiktila, August 2013.

[95] In 2013, Eid al-Adha will most likely be on 14-15 October; Thadingyut will be on 19 October.

were Buddhists; but subsequently greater numbers of Buddhists have been imprisoned. On 17 July 2013 a sting operation by police from Naypyitaw arrested six people in Toungup in Rakhine State in connection with the murder of the Muslim pilgrims in June 2012.[96] In early July 2013, 25 Buddhists were found guilty of murder, assault and arson in connection with the riots in Meiktila, including two monks who were caught on camera engaging in violence.[97] The authorities have also made a point of quickly prosecuting those responsible for the incidents that sparked the violence, presumably in an effort to ease communal tensions in those areas.[98]

D. *The Role of Buddhist Monks*

These incidents have cast a harsh light on elements of the Buddhist monkhood in Myanmar, some of whom preach extremist anti-Muslim views, and a small number of whom have been involved in perpetrating acts of violence.

The "969" movement, led by prominent monks including Wirathu and Wimala, has been particularly vocal in its extremist rhetoric, including making wild claims of a Muslim plot to take over the country, jihadi infiltrators and of schemes to pay Muslims for marrying and converting Buddhist women.[99] It also encourages Buddhists to boycott Muslim businesses, and has been a leading voice for the adoption of a law to restrict inter-faith marriage – with one monk threatening to launch an electoral boycott of parliamentarians who oppose the law.[100] The movement's name, a numerological shorthand for the special attributes of Buddha and his teachings, was coined as a counterpoint to the number "786", long used by Muslims in Myanmar to designate Halal shops and restaurants. Although 969 is new, it is repeating old prejudices: a British colonial inquiry into anti-Indian riots in Yangon in 1938 noted that "one of the major sources of anxiety in the minds of a great number of Burmese was the question of the marriage of their womenfolk with foreigners in general and with Indians in particular".[101]

Wirathu denied that the 969 movement is contributing to anti-Muslim violence. He accepted that it may be causing Burmans to have greater hatred of Muslims, but said that this is because, through the information provided by 969, they are finding out "the truth about Muslims". Such information includes a book, distributed under

[96] "Burma arrests six Buddhists for role in Muslim massacre", Democratic Voice of Burma, 18 July 2013.
[97] Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Meiktila, August 2013; and "25 Buddhists sentenced in deadly Myanmar riot", Associated Press, 11 July 2013.
[98] See, for example, "Burma riots: Muslim gold shop workers jailed", BBC, 12 April 2013; "Myanmar court sentences Lashio violence instigator to 26 years' prison term", Xinhua, 12 June 2013; "Burma imprisons two Muslim women for sparking Okkan unrest", *The Irrawaddy*, 18 June 2013; and "Burma jails Muslim for attempted rape that sparked riot", BBC, 5 September 2013.
[99] Crisis Group interview, Ashin Wirathu, Mandalay, 9 August 2013. A subtitled video of a sermon by Wirathu is available at http://bit.ly/14qsdDZ.
[100] "Monks and religious leaders back interfaith marriage ban", Democratic Voice of Burma, 26 June 2013.
[101] "The Riot Enquiry Interim Report", 1939, quoted in Derek Tonkin, "A fresh perspective on the Muslims of Myanmar", NetworkMyanmar.org, 7 July 2013.

Wirathu's name, containing a lengthy interview with a Buddhist woman who says she suffered domestic abuse at the hands of her Muslim husband.[102]

The 969 movement has resonated strongly with many Buddhist Burmans, and has considerable popular support. Promotional DVDs containing sermons by the movement's leaders are widely sold in Myanmar. Partly this reflects the disturbing reality of strong anti-Muslim sentiment in many quarters, but it is also due to the fact that 969 is often sold as a "Buddhist solidarity" movement intended to strengthen the religion. Many followers say that they are supporting Buddhism, not attacking Islam.[103] Even Burmans who do not follow 969 are very reluctant to criticise it for fear of being seen as critical of Buddhism. This sense of indivisibility between 969 and devout Buddhism has certainly been strengthened by the movement's leading monks in the way they have presented it, and by the choice of a logo that incorporates a Buddhist flag and other Buddhist iconography. In many ways, it resembles a populist political movement, and this could be regarded as a section of the monkhood seeking to assert its moral-political authority as the country reforms and opens up.

The reluctance to criticise 969 extends to the Buddhist clergy itself. Many prominent monks believe that the movement's message of intolerance and religious nationalism is inconsistent with, and even antithetical to, Buddhist teaching.[104] Most are reluctant to say so publicly. They are worried about a backlash, held back by a general taboo against criticising other monks, particularly those from other sects, or because many of the more orthodox monks follow a practice of disengagement from worldly affairs.[105] If influential moderate monks do not speak out clearly and repeatedly against the violence, the Myanmar people and the world will only hear voices of intolerance. This would be hugely damaging for the country and the religion. In this regard, it is encouraging that the top Buddhist regulatory body in Myanmar has refused any religious status for the 969 movement.[106]

E. *Conspiracy Theories*

There have been repeated claims that the recurrent outbreaks of intercommunal violence have been instigated by shadowy political forces to destabilise the country.[107] According to some versions, the intention is to create the conditions for a return to

[102] Crisis Group interview, Ashin Wirathu, Mandalay, 9 August 2013; and *The Heartfelt Words of One who Escaped from the Fox's Jaws* (2013, in Burmese). Wirathu presented this book, and an English translation, at the end of the interview.
[103] Crisis Group interviews, shop owners and taxi drivers displaying 969 stickers, Yangon and Mandalay, throughout 2013.
[104] Crisis Group interviews, prominent monks, Yangon, Mandalay and Lashio, August 2013.
[105] Ibid.
[106] See Section V.B below.
[107] See, for example, "Religious violence being instigated behind the scenes – NLD", ElevenMyanmar.com, 9 September 2013; "Local residents suspect plot behind Sagaing riots", ElevenMyanmar.com, 27 August 2013; "Old monsters stirring up trouble: Some say gangs from past regime provoked clashes to undermine Myanmar's democracy", *Straits Times*, 2 June 2013; and Aung Zaw, "Are Myanmar's hopes fading?", *The New York Times*, 24 April 2013.

military rule; according to others, it is to politically undermine reformist President Thein Sein, or even Aung San Suu Kyi, to the benefit of more hardline factions.[108]

No evidence has ever been presented to back up these claims, and they appear prima facie implausible. It is certainly possible that there are some influential individuals, perhaps even in powerful institutions, who may be encouraging or funding extremist movements as a result of their personal prejudices. In Rakhine State, some Rakhine Buddhist political forces have a fiercely anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim agenda and may even have been involved in acts of violence.[109] But at the national level it is hard to see how any political actor could stand to gain from the violence. The military has only just finished engineering its two-decade withdrawal from absolute power, and there are no signs that it has any interest in reversing that; even if individual officers might, there are no indications that they would have any real support, or could succeed.

As for party politics, the big issue is the next election in 2015, and whether the "establishment" Union Solidarity and Development Party can compete with the massive popularity of Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy. There is no plausible scenario in which intercommunal violence could shift the outcome, and it is hard to believe that any such plot would not at some point be exposed.

A related question is whether the main perpetrators of the mob violence have been locals, or whether they were from outside the area – which would suggest a degree of advance planning and orchestration. Witnesses in both communities have reported that they did not recognise some of those involved in the violence.[110] There have also been reports that it was locals who were to blame.[111] Credible community leaders and other well-informed sources and witnesses from both communities in Meiktila and Lashio insisted that the mobs were made up overwhelmingly of locals, and they did not believe that outsiders had any significant role.[112] Some people had said otherwise but there may be a number of explanations for this, including that they may not have known or recognised some of the individuals involved. There is a fear of being pressed by police to identify the attackers, which could lead to retribution or social ostracisation for informing on neighbours. There is also an element of guilt and disbelief on the part of Buddhists that their community was capable of such brutality.[113]

Another factor to consider in assessing this question is that this kind of anti-Muslim violence is not a new phenomenon.[114] In the past, it was often blamed on the military junta, with suggestions that it was instigating these events in order to re-direct anti-regime sentiments among the monkhood or the general population toward a

[108] Aung San Suu Kyi has been criticised by some human rights groups for not speaking out clearly enough to condemn the violence. For recent comments, see "Suu Kyi says unable to stop anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar", Agence France-Presse, 12 September 2013.

[109] See "Burma gov't suspects cease-fire group fueled Rakhine violence", *Mizzima News*, 1 November 2012. See also "People should never ever be swayed by instigations of any armed group and political organizations: Union Border Affairs Minister", *New Light of Myanmar*, 30 October 2012, p. 1.

[110] See, for example, "Meiktila violence work of 'well-trained terrorists'", *Myanmar Times*, 1 April 2013; "UN envoy slams anti-Muslim campaign", Agence France-Presse, 27 March 2013; and "One dead, five injured after second day of rioting in Shan state", Democratic Voice of Burma, 30 May 2013.

[111] "Anti-Muslim violence erupts in Myanmar", Tempo.co, 1 May 2013; see also "Freedom from hate", Al Jazeera, 101 East documentary, September 2013.

[112] Crisis Group interviews, Meiktila and Lashio, August 2013.

[113] Ibid.

[114] See Section II above.

different target. Those claims were also not backed up by any evidence and nor was such a Machiavellian strategy particularly plausible.

If the violence was being orchestrated by political malcontents, this would make it a potentially more manageable problem, requiring only that they be identified and held to account. The more likely, and in many ways more disturbing possibility, is that this violence is not driven by any master plan, but instead reflects deep societal divisions and hatred that were at least partially supressed in the authoritarian past. Addressing this is one of the key challenges the country now faces; there are no simple solutions.

V. The Way Forward

A. *The International Dimension*

The violence in Myanmar has reverberated internationally. There has been a sharp increase in the number of Muslims fleeing Rakhine State, many of them taking to rickety boats for the perilous journey to Malaysia or elsewhere in the region; scores have died in the attempt, or fallen prey to ruthless gangs of traffickers.[115] The large numbers have become an issue for Myanmar's neighbours, in particular Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. The Indonesian foreign minister called it "a classic case of an internal problem with regional ramifications" and pushed the Myanmar government to address the problem in a fundamental way "sooner rather than later".[116] The Malaysian foreign minister urged Myanmar to take stronger action to prevent persecution of Muslims and bring the perpetrators to justice, saying "they have to address the problem in a transparent manner so that we can see what actions had been taken".[117]

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation was also very critical.[118] After the second wave of anti-Rohingya violence, Surin Pitsuwan, the then secretary general of ASEAN, said "the entire region could be destabilised, including the Malacca Straits".[119] With Myanmar taking the rotating chair of the organisation in 2014, further violence could have significant ramifications for the government if it were to coincide with any of the high-profile events scheduled throughout the year.

The tensions have resonated in the region in other ways. There have been attacks in Malaysia on Buddhist migrant workers from Myanmar, with five killed.[120] Violence has also erupted between Buddhists and Muslims from Myanmar in an Indonesian detention centre.[121] Rakhine Buddhist residents in Bangladesh have also been attacked, had their houses burned and temples vandalised.[122] All of these incidents appear to have been directly related to the escalating intercommunal tensions in Myanmar.

Extremist Muslim groups in the region have plotted attacks. In May 2013, Indonesian police foiled what they say was a plot by Islamist extremists to attack the Myanmar embassy in Jakarta with pipe bombs.[123] In July, one of Buddhism's most revered sites, Bodh Gaya in India, was bombed in an attack that has been blamed on

[115] Crisis Group interview, researcher specialising in Rohingya issues, Yangon, September 2012; Jason Szep and Stuart Grudgings, "Special Report: Thai authorities implicated in Rohingya Muslim smuggling network", Reuters, 17 July 2013; and "Desperate Rohingya not waiting for safe sailing season to flee Myanmar", *South China Morning Post*, 12 September 2013.
[116] Quoted in "Myanmar communal strife has regional impact – Indonesia minister", Reuters, 10 July 2013.
[117] Quoted in "Malaysia urges Myanmar to stem anti-Muslim violence", Reuters, 30 June 2013.
[118] "Ihsanoglu tasks Myanmar's government on responsibility to eradicate discrimination against Muslims", OIC statement, 7 July 2013.
[119] Yohanna Ririhena, "ASEAN chief: Rohingya issue could destabilize the region", *The Jakarta Post*, 30 October 2012.
[120] "Four dead as Myanmar violence spills into Malaysia – police", Reuters, 5 June 2013; and "Five Myanmar workers dead, six injured in separate attacks in Malaysia", *New Light of Myanmar*, 14 June 2013, p. 16.
[121] "14 Muslim Rohingya on trial for brawl in Indonesia", Associated Press, 31 July 2013.
[122] "Buddhists from Bangladesh resettle in Myanmar, Rohingya Muslims cry foul", *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 May 2013.
[123] "Indonesian extremists and the Rohingya Issue", briefing note, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, 6 August 2013.

Muslims.[124] In August, a Buddhist centre in Jakarta – frequented by Chinese and with no particular links to Myanmar – was bombed, causing some minor injuries; an accompanying note read "we respond to the screams of the Rohingya".[125] These incidents are a warning that Buddhist-Muslim tensions and violence could spread across the region. They also highlight the possibility of attacks in Myanmar by Muslim extremists from either foreign or domestic groups.

The likelihood of terrorist attacks in Myanmar for the moment seems fairly low: foreign groups probably do not have the levels of contacts and access needed to plan and carry out an attack, and there have to date been no indications of domestic extremist groups emerging in central Myanmar.[126] But the country should not be complacent. Although its Muslim population is one of the least radicalised in the region, the current tensions and violence provide a potent context in which radicalisation could take place.

Beyond these concerns, violence against Muslims in Myanmar has seriously damaged the country's reputation at a time when it is just beginning to emerge from decades of authoritarian isolation. This presents an economic risk – sending a message of caution to foreign investors who already have concerns about entering the Myanmar market. There is also the political risk that Myanmar could seriously damage its standing in the Muslim world, including parts of ASEAN. As it attempts to chart a new course of openness and reinvigorate its economy, Myanmar can ill afford these risks.

B. *Strengthening the Government Response and Combating Extremism*

Addressing the issue of anti-Muslim violence presents a huge challenge for the government. President Thein Sein has been setting the right tone, clearly urging restraint, warning of the broader dangers of the violence, and stating that he has "zero tolerance" of such actions.[127] The security response to incidents, although still far from adequate, has been improving. And, after some delay, perpetrators are being prosecuted and imprisoned, though there is a perception that Buddhists are being given more lenient sentences.

But much more needs to be done to translate the president's words into action on the ground. Police training and equipment for dealing with riots need to be urgently upgraded. Beyond this, the police service needs to be reformed, drawing officers from all communities and developing the kind of community policing that would provide the intelligence needed to give early warnings. The Myanmar police are going through a major reform process, and have actively sought international assistance on some of these issues.[128] The European Union is preparing a support package covering community policing and riot control, and the U.S. is also exploring the possibility of supporting police reform; the UN Office on Drugs and Crime has prepared an assess-

[124] Ibid.
[125] "Jakarta bomb a warning that Burma's Muslim-Buddhist conflict may spread", *Time*, 7 August 2013.
[126] Crisis Group interview, analyst, August 2013.
[127] See the televised speech of President Thein Sein to the nation, 28 March 2013, the text of which is reproduced in English in *New Light of Myanmar*, 29 March 2013, p. 1; and speech at Chatham House, London, 15 July 2013, at http://bit.ly/15hoKoB.
[128] For a detailed discussion of police reform in Myanmar, see Andrew Selth, "Police reform in Burma (Myanmar): Aims, obstacles and outcomes", Griffith Asia Institute, Regional Outlook Paper No. 44, 2013.

ment of the capacity-building needs within the police.[129] The International Committee of the Red Cross has also provided training to senior officers, including on the appropriate standards applying to riot control.[130]

The government and society as a whole must also do much more to combat extremist rhetoric. Political, religious and community leaders must condemn such language, make clear that it has no place in a modern Myanmar, and appropriate administrative and legal action should be taken against those who incite hatred and violence. In this regard, the decision of the top regulatory body for the Myanmar Buddhist clergy that the 969 movement cannot register or present itself as an official Buddhist organisation is positive.[131] It is important that extremist voices do not go unchallenged, and that communities have access to a wider range of alternative views. In this regard, the local media in Myanmar has a critical role to play, and training to journalists should be supported to sensitise them to the issues involved and expose them to how other racially mixed societies deal with these matters of race, religion and ethnicity. Ways to more quickly report inappropriate language on social media should also be explored. In Rakhine State, the government must do more to ensure the security of humanitarian workers and their access to vulnerable populations.

Local communities have an important role to play. In understanding the societal dynamics involved in the intercommunal tensions, in addition to looking at outbreaks of violence it is also necessary to look at incidents that have been resolved or contained peacefully. Several recent events in Mandalay had the potential to turn violent, but did not. Religious leaders put this down to the existence of strong inter-religious relations and wise leaders on both sides.[132] In one case a Muslim man riding a motorcycle accidentally hit a monk, and religious leaders were quickly able to defuse the situation.[133] However, in an indication that extremism is rising in both communities, two of the Muslim leaders who were involved in defusing this and other incidents subsequently fled the country following what they said were death threats from extreme elements in their own communities.[134]

Other examples are more hopeful. An informal secular school adjacent to the destruction in downtown Meiktila, run by Muslim teachers, was unscathed and the teachers have been able to run classes in the school for children from the camps for internally displaced people (IDPs). They put this down to the fact that they were well known to local residents and had always taught children from both Buddhist and Muslim communities.[135] The school was apparently spared as local Buddhists considered it a community asset and had good relations with the teachers. This suggests that intercommunal linkages can be important in mitigating violence, and also that promoting a greater understanding of the cost of violence among communities could be a useful step.

[129] Crisis Group interviews, European and U.S. diplomats, Yangon, September 2013.
[130] "Myanmar: First seminar on international policing standards", press release, ICRC, 12 September 2013.
[131] "Buddhist committee's 969 prohibitions prompts meeting of movement backers", *The Irrawaddy*, 10 September 2013; and "Senior Myanmar Buddhist clergy ban activist monks from forming own groups", Associated Press, 11 September 2013.
[132] Crisis Group interviews, Mandalay, August 2013.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Crisis Group email correspondence, journalist who interviewed the two leaders, September 2013.
[135] Crisis Group interviews, teachers at the school, Meiktila, August 2013.

The police have also been much quicker to respond to potential sparks in Mandalay and Yangon, and perhaps more sophisticated in their responses than has sometimes been the case in provincial towns and villages. Unfounded rumours of violence at a mixed Buddhist-Muslim school in Mandalay that drew a large crowd of concerned parents and residents from both communities, which had the clear potential to turn violent, was effectively resolved by police, who arrived very quickly at the scene.[136]

[136] Ibid. For a news report on the incident, see "Mandalay parents pull children from school amid rumors of religious violence", *The Irrawaddy*, 5 June 2013.

VI. Conclusion

Anti-Indian and anti-Muslim sentiments and violence are not a new phenomenon in Myanmar, with riots and killings having occurred regularly since the British colonial period. At this delicate moment of transition, the risks of these old enmities resurfacing is serious. Both legitimate grievances and bigoted intolerance can now be expressed more openly using modern technology and this allows extremist views, including by some in the Buddhist clergy, to be spread more rapidly and widely. Following intercommunal clashes in Rakhine State in 2012, Myanmar has seen anti-Muslim violence in several towns and villages in the central part of the country, leaving dozens dead and thousands displaced.

The response from the authorities has been far from adequate, but there are indications that government leaders and the police recognise the seriousness of the situation and are taking steps to tackle it. President Thein Sein has condemned the violence and stated that he has a "zero-tolerance" policy, but problems remain in translating these words into reality on the ground. In the most recent incidents, police appear to have been responding more quickly and more assertively, minimising destruction and casualties. Buddhist perpetrators are being prosecuted and imprisoned more quickly and in greater numbers.

A security response is not sufficient, however. In order to effectively address the problem, political, religious and community leaders need to condemn extremist rhetoric. Those who are spreading messages of intolerance and hatred must not go unchallenged. Otherwise, this issue could come to define the new Myanmar, tarnishing its international image and threatening the success of its transition away from decades of authoritarianism.

Yangon/Jakarta/Brussels, 1 October 2013

Appendix A: Map of Myanmar

Map No. 4168 Rev. 3 UNITED NATIONS
June 2012

Department of Field Support
Cartographic Section

Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on the website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former U.S. Undersecretary of State and Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Its President and Chief Executive since July 2009 has been Louise Arbour, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices or representation in 34 locations: Abuja, Bangkok, Beijing, Beirut, Bishkek, Bogotá, Bujumbura, Cairo, Dakar, Damascus, Dubai, Gaza, Guatemala City, Islamabad, Istanbul, Jakarta, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Kabul, Kathmandu, London, Moscow, Nairobi, New York, Pristina, Rabat, Sanaa, Sarajevo, Seoul, Tbilisi, Tripoli, Tunis and Washington DC. Crisis Group currently covers some 70 areas of actual or potential conflict across four continents. In Africa, this includes, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe; in Asia, Afghanistan, Burma/Myanmar, Indonesia, Kashmir, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan Strait, Tajikistan, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; in Europe, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Georgia, Kosovo, Macedonia, North Caucasus, Serbia and Turkey; in the Middle East and North Africa, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Western Sahara and Yemen; and in Latin America and the Caribbean, Colombia, Guatemala and Venezuela.

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October 2013

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North East Asia

The Iran Nuclear Issue: The View from Beijing, Asia Briefing N°100, 17 February 2010 (also available in Chinese).

North Korea under Tightening Sanctions, Asia Briefing N°101, 15 March 2010.

China's Myanmar Strategy: Elections, Ethnic Politics and Economics, Asia Briefing N°112, 21 September 2010 (also available in Chinese).

North Korea: The Risks of War in the Yellow Sea, Asia Report N°198, 23 December 2010.

China and Inter-Korean Clashes in the Yellow Sea, Asia Report N°200, 27 January 2011 (also available in Chinese).

Strangers at Home: North Koreans in the South, Asia Report N°208, 14 July 2011 (also available in Korean).

South Korea: The Shifting Sands of Security Policy, Asia Briefing N°130, 1 December 2011.

Stirring up the South China Sea (I), Asia Report N°223, 23 April 2012 (also available in Chinese).

Stirring up the South China Sea (II): Regional Responses, Asia Report N°229, 24 July 2012 (also available in Chinese).

North Korean Succession and the Risks of Instability, Asia Report N°230, 25 July 2012 (also available in Chinese and Korean).

China's Central Asia Problem, Asia Report N°244, 27 February 2013 (also available in Chinese).

Dangerous Waters: China-Japan Relations on the Rocks, Asia Report N°245, 8 April 2013 (also available in Chinese).

South Asia

Sri Lanka: A Bitter Peace, Asia Briefing N°99, 11 January 2010.

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