

**Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale**

<b>Bilagsnr.:</b>	<b>121</b>
Land:	Burma
Kilde:	Minority Rights Group International
Titel:	State of the Worlds Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 – Burma
Udgivet:	2. juli 2015
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	15. november 2016



## State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 - Burma

Publisher [Minority Rights Group International](#)

Publication Date 2 July 2015

Cite as Minority Rights Group International, *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 - Burma*, 2 July 2015, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/55a4fa6415.html> [accessed 16 November 2015]

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Burma's democratic transition appeared to stall in 2014, with deadly consequences for its ethnic and religious minorities. The Burmese army escalated its offensive in northern Kachin state, rupturing trust in the ongoing peace negotiations and culminating in the deadliest single attack against ethnic minority rebels since the start of the conflict. Meanwhile, a tide of intolerance towards the country's Muslim minority surged as the government pushed for greater legal restrictions on religious freedom.

The Burmese government has struggled to secure a nationwide ceasefire with a myriad of armed ethnic groups fighting for greater autonomy. Unfortunately, 2014 witnessed a return to hostilities in several parts of the country, including eastern and northern Burma. More than 2,000 civilians were forced from their homes in October following clashes near the Salween River between the army, known locally as the Tatmadaw, and the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA) – ending a two-year period of relative calm in Karen state. A report by Karen Rivers Watch accused the army of conducting a coordinated campaign to gain control of territory near the Salween River, where a controversial hydropower dam is being developed. The following month, the military shelled a rebel cadet training school near the Kachin independence movement headquarters, killing 23 ethnic fighters and casting a heavy shadow over peace talks. The army later claimed it was intended as a 'warning'. In February 2015, fresh conflict flared in northern Shan state between the army and ethnic Chinese rebels known as the Kokang.

Multiple human rights violations were reported in ethnic minority areas, where the Tatmadaw enjoys broad impunity for its crimes. In November, the Women's League of Burma (WLB) reported that it had documented 118 cases of sexual violence and rape carried out by Burmese soldiers since the former military government ostensibly ceded power in the 2010 election. In January 2015, two Kachin teachers were found brutally raped and murdered in northern Burma – shining a fresh spotlight on wartime sexual violence in the country. The army has reportedly since offered money to the families of the victims. WLB has called for more women to be included in the peace process to boost dialogue on sexual violence and other gendered impacts of conflict.

There is growing concern that Burma's reform process is backsliding as the country prepares for its first general election in over half a century in 2015. A crucial sticking point is the undemocratic 2008 Constitution, which guarantees 25 per cent of parliamentary seats to the military and deprives ethnic nationalities of their right to self-determination. The president may also hand over

executive and judicial powers to the military in the event of a national 'emergency' – potentially legitimizing a coup. The government has also been reluctant to discuss political grievances with armed ethnic groups, fuelling scepticism about the future of the peace process.

For decades the Burmese military regime imposed a policy of 'Burmanization' on ethnic minorities, an estimated 40 per cent of the population, which continues to be felt today. For example Muslims and ethnic Chinese and Indian citizens struggle to obtain or renew their national identity cards, which are needed to travel freely, attend government schools and obtain jobs. Some report being overlooked for scholarships or professional opportunities in urban centres such as Yangon, because they are not Buddhist. Ethnic minorities are still prevented from studying in their own languages, although extracurricular classes have been made available in some areas. In general, the lack of instruction in their native language has meant that a disproportionate number of minority children drop out of school due to language barriers. However, the government appeared to have relaxed these restrictions during the year with the announcement that instruction of minority languages would be reintroduced to the classroom. In April, the Mon state parliament authorized the teaching of Mon language among primary school students – the first time a minority language has been taught in government schools for decades.

Since the end of formal military rule, Burma has witnessed the rise of a Buddhist nationalist movement, resulting in intermittent bouts of communal violence since 2012 – mostly targeting the beleaguered Rohingya Muslim minority in Arakan state. This violence has spread to a number of Burma's cities, resulting in religious segregation and increased marginalization of non-Buddhists around the country. Over 140,000 Muslims have been expelled from cities in Arakan state, while thousands more are in isolated ghetto-like camps outside Sittwe, Rakhine's capital. A fraction of Sittwe's Muslims – who until the violence comprised almost half of its population – remain in Aung Mingalar, now the city's only Muslim neighbourhood, which they are not allowed to leave. Many shops and businesses belonging to Rohingya Muslims in Sittwe have reportedly been destroyed or taken over by Buddhists.

Burma's Muslim population has also been targeted in Mandalay, Burma's second largest city, where an estimated 200,000 Muslims reside. In July, violence erupted following allegations that a Buddhist woman had been raped by two Muslim teashop owners, leading to the deaths of two men and many more injured in apparent riots by Buddhist gangs. However, unlike previous riots that have escalated into large-scale communal violence, most Mandalay residents refused to participate and locals tried to defuse the situation. Nonetheless, the riots had a crippling impact on the economic lives of the city's Muslims, many of whom run family shops and businesses.

Mandalay is home to the most prominent leader of Burma's anti-Muslim movement, a monk named Wirathu, who continues to call on Buddhists to boycott Muslim businesses. Unfortunately the government has lent political support to his activities by tabling a set of divisive 'race protection' laws to parliament, which seek to restrict inter-faith marriages and conversions to minority faiths. In January 2015, 180 women's and minority rights organizations signed a statement urging the government to withdraw the legislation. However, by March 2015 the bills on religious conversions and population control were pushed through both houses of parliament.

Other government policies have also been a cause for concern. In April, the government reneged on a promise to allow minorities the right to self-identify in the country's first census in over 30 years. Instead, some 1 million Rohingya were told to register as 'Bengalis', indicating that they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, or be excluded. A government scheme to grant citizenship to Rohingya Muslims has similarly demanded that they accept the government's designated ethnic term. In early 2015, some half a million Rohingya Muslims were stripped of their temporary identification cards and remaining voting rights, spelling disaster for the largely stateless community.

Many analysts suspect the government wants to capitalize on religious tensions ahead of the 2015 poll – a tactic commonly used by the former military regime. This view gained support in November when the US government slapped fresh sanctions on former regime hardliner and ruling party MP Aung Thaung for undermining recent economic and political reforms in the country. He is widely suspected of supporting Burma's anti-Muslim movement. Wirathu has publicly backed the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party in the upcoming elections and cautioned against amending the Constitution to allow opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to run. Indeed, Buddhist nationalists appear to have growing influence over public policy. In December, opposition member Htin Lin Oo was charged with 'insulting' religion for delivering a speech condemning the misuse of Buddhism. Even his party, the National League for Democracy, subsequently removed him from his position as information officer for the party. In another worrying case, New Zealander Philip Blackwood was sentenced to two and half years in prison for defamation of religion after using an image of the Buddha in headphones to promote an event at his bar in Rangoon.

Burma is one of the least urbanized countries in Southeast Asia, with just over a third of the population based in cities. This is largely due to the fact that Burma's economy was crippled by decades of military misrule and international sanctions. However, the rate of urbanization is expected to increase substantially over the next few years, spurred on by the country's reform process and an influx of foreign investment. In particular, Rangoon's population of over 7 million is expected to double by 2040, with many migrants from Burma's rural and ethnic minority populations likely to relocate.

In this context of rapid growth, the city's property development is being driven by wealthy land-owners who have links to the former Burman-dominated military regime and is likely to involve unsustainable development plans. Urban slums are already sprouting at a disturbing pace as Rangoon's impoverished workers are squeezed further from the city centre. The Rangoon authorities have come under fire for pushing through a large-scale development plan that will consume thousands of acres of farmlands west of the city. At least 40 per cent of Rangoon's residents are either 'poor or very poor', according to the UN, while a revised analysis by the World Bank suggests that urban poverty is much higher than previously thought – only four percentage points lower than in rural areas. If left unchecked, Burma's current urbanization trends could exacerbate existing inequalities, including between majority Burmans and ethnic minorities, unless broader issues of discrimination are addressed.

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