

## Human Rights Watch

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# Crackdown on Burmese Muslims July 2002

## Summary

As United Nations special envoy Razali Ismail prepares to visit Burma in early August, pressure is growing from the international community and Burmese ethnic minority leaders to broaden the ongoing dialogue between the democratic opposition and the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) to include the concerns of Burma's minority populations. The concerns of Burma's Muslims should be part of that agenda.

During much of 2001, there was increased tension between Buddhist and Muslim communities in Burma, at times erupting into violence. News of the violence was quickly suppressed, however, and little detailed information about what took place reached the outside world. The government has failed to take effective action to protect Muslims in Burma, imposed restrictions on Muslim religious activities and travel both inside the country and abroad, and taken no action to punish those responsible for destroying Muslim homes and mosques.

A combination of factors seems to have precipitated last year's confrontations. Destruction of Buddhist images in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, in March 2001, and the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., appear to have fueled increased Buddhist resentment against local Muslims.

Like previous attacks on Muslims by members of the majority Buddhist population, economic factors also played a role. The worst violence in eastern Burma, for example, took place in May and September 2001, at times when the country's economic crisis was particularly severe. During this period the black-market rate for kyat was well over 800 to the U.S. dollar, roughly 100 times the official rate. The fact that many Muslims are businessmen, shopkeepers and small-scale money changers means that they are often targeted during times of economic hardship.

Outbreaks of violence between Buddhist and Muslim communities took place in Taungoo, just over 150 kilometers north of Rangoon, in May 2001, when more than a thousand people led by robed Buddhist monks attacked Muslims shops, homes, and mosques. Many Muslims were reportedly beaten and there were credible reports of at least nine deaths. Violence spread to nearby townships and villages. The ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) did little or nothing to intervene to stop and prevent the attacks.

Even more serious violence erupted in Prome, northwest of Rangoon, in early October 2001, leading authorities to impose a curfew to prevent the unrest from spreading to nearby areas. Further outbreaks took place in Pegu, northeast of Rangoon, though on a smaller scale.

In Arakan State, a predominantly Muslim area, human rights violations, including forced labor, restrictions on the freedom of movement, and the destruction of mosques, have been commonplace.<sup>1</sup> In February 2001, in the state capital Sittwe, a major frontier and commercial

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<sup>1</sup> For background on Arakan State and persecution of Muslims, see Human Rights Watch, "Burma: The Rohingya Muslims: Ending a Cycle of Exodus?" *A Human Rights Watch Report*, vol. 8, no. 9 (c), September 1996; Human Rights Watch/Asia and Refugees International, "Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: The Search for a Lasting

area with sizeable Muslim and Buddhist populations, full-scale riots broke out, resulting in deaths, destruction of Muslim homes, and the imposition of a curfew and travel restrictions.

This briefing is based on Human Rights Watch research conducted in late 2001 and early 2002, including over thirty interviews with Burmese Muslims and other religious leaders inside Burma and in nearby countries. To protect the safety of those we spoke to inside Burma, individuals' names and the times and places of interviews are not included. By combining this information with interviews with Rohingya (Muslim) refugees in camps in Bangladesh conducted by Forum Asia from May-December 2001, and published media accounts, Human Rights Watch has compiled a still incomplete but telling picture of what caused the violence, how the authorities responded, and some of the lingering abuses of religious freedom and other fundamental human rights that continue to affect Burma's Muslim population.

### **Recommendations**

Burma is obligated under international human rights law to protect the fundamental rights of all persons within its territory, including religious minority populations. The government must respect all rights and freedoms without distinction of any kind such as race, language, religion, and national or social origin. This includes the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; and to manifest one's beliefs in practice, worship, and observance.

The SPDC should take immediate steps to end continuing harassment and persecution of Muslim communities. It should immediately lift all official restrictions on the freedom of Muslims to congregate in mosques, as well as restrictions on their ability to gather in groups for prayers in private homes. The government should eliminate requirements for special identity papers and lift travel restrictions on Muslims, both of which were rigidly enforced last year in order to keep Muslim communities in check.

The SPDC should also take effective action against those responsible for violence against Burmese Muslims. The authorities should fully investigate last year's attacks on Muslim shops and mosques and prosecute those responsible for such crimes as assault, arson, and looting. They should take steps to ensure that property, including mosques, destroyed during last year's violence is restored and losses fairly compensated. In locations such as Arakan State, where local army commanders reportedly ordered the destruction of mosques, those implicated should be prosecuted or otherwise disciplined. In instances when force is used by authorities against civilians, including lethal force, in the course of crowd control, the government should ensure that international standards and guidelines, including the Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials and the Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, are fully respected.

The international community should call on the Burmese government to allow Ambassador Razali and the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Burma, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, unrestricted access to all Muslims areas, including the sites of last year's violence, so that they can meet with local Muslim residents and community leaders and make recommendations for specific steps to protect the basic human rights of the country's Muslim population.

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Solution," *A Human Rights Watch Report*, vol. 9, no. 7 (c), August 1997; Human Rights Watch/Asia, "Burmese Refugees in Bangladesh: Still No Durable Solution," *A Human Rights Wash Report*, vol. 12, no. 3 (c), May 2000.

## **Background on Muslims in Burma**

Burma has been ruled by successive repressive, authoritarian regimes since 1962, when General Ne Win seized power. In 1988, the armed forces brutally suppressed massive pro-democracy demonstrations and since then a junta of senior military officers has ruled by decree, claiming only to be a transitional government. During the last fourteen years the military's human rights record has been appalling. The suppression of political and religious activities has been endemic through the whole of this period.<sup>2</sup>

The latest Burmese Constitution, adopted in 1974, restricts religious freedom and stresses the paramount supremacy of the State. It states that "the national races shall enjoy the freedom to profess their religion...provided that the enjoyment of any such freedom does not offend the laws or the public interest."<sup>3</sup> But violence and discrimination against Burma's Muslim minority has been commonplace over the last four decades. Islamic leaders in Rangoon believe that attitudes among the predominantly Buddhist Burmese population began to change from tolerance to persecution after General Ne Win seized power in a military coup in 1962. Since then, Muslims have been deliberately and systematically excluded from official positions in the government and the army.

The Burmese government estimates that some four percent of the population are Muslims. However, Islamic leaders believe that Muslims make up nearly ten percent of the population. There has been no official census since Burma gained its independence from Great Britain in 1948. Apart from Arakan, the western Burmese state that borders Bangladesh and is home to the Muslim Rohingyas, Burma's Muslims live predominantly in urban areas throughout the country. According to a senior Muslim leader in Rangoon, most Muslims are indistinguishable in appearance and behavior from the country's Buddhists: they dress the same, wear longyis, speak Burmese, and understand Burmese culture and history.

During the British colonial period and the early years of independence, Muslims played an important role. They held high positions in government and civil society. They were also in the forefront of the fight for independence from the British. After independence, Muslims continued to play a prominent role in the country's business, industrial, and cultural activities. Many Muslims were public servants, soldiers, and even officers. At the time of the last democratically elected parliament in the 1960s, there was at least one Muslim minister and several Muslim members of parliament.

This all changed after General Ne Win seized power in 1962. He initiated the systematic expulsion of Muslims from government and the army. There is no written directive that bars Muslims from entry or promotion in the government, according to Muslim leaders in Burma, but in practice that is what happens.

Although there is no official state religion, the Burmese military government actively endorses Theravada Buddhism in practice, as have previous governments – both civilian and military. The

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<sup>2</sup> See Human Rights Watch World Reports, chapters on Burma, 1990-2002.

<sup>3</sup> Article 21 (b) of the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma, 1974.

government is increasingly seen identifying itself with Buddhism. The state-controlled media often shows military leaders and government ministers paying homage to Buddhist monks; making donations to pagodas throughout the country; officiating at ceremonies to open, improve, or restore pagodas; and organizing forced donations of money, food, and labor to build or refurbish Buddhist shrines throughout the country. State-owned newspapers regularly feature slogans and quotations from Buddhist scriptures. While undoubtedly motivated in part by religious conviction, this close identification is also seen by many observers as part of the military's strategy to find some form of legitimacy for its rule.

Muslims and Christians have major difficulties in obtaining permission to build places of worship and in importing indigenous-language translations of traditional sacred texts. In fact, over the last ten years there have been numerous reports of mosques being destroyed, in some cases with Buddhist stupas being built in their place.

Muslims in Burma have long suffered from ethnic and religious discrimination. Historical sources suggest that the majority Buddhist population has viewed Muslims with suspicion almost from the time they began to become a significant minority in Burma twelve hundred years ago. While there are no written regulations or laws that mandate any of the customary discriminatory practices which have emerged in Burma today, mistrust and antipathy toward Muslims is deeply rooted.

The Burmese<sup>4</sup> have had a long tradition of intermarriage, especially between Burmans and members of ethnic groups found in eastern Burma -- Karens, Mons and Shans – which are predominantly Buddhist. In recent years there has also been substantial intermarriage with members of the Chinese community, also made easier by shared religious beliefs. But this occurs far less often in the case of Muslims; normally, marrying into a Muslim family entails conversion to Islam.

Over the decades, many anti-Muslim pamphlets have circulated in Burma claiming that the Muslim community wants to establish supremacy through intermarriage. One of these, *Myo Pyauk Hmar Soe Kyauk Hla Tai* (or *The Fear of Losing One's Race*) was widely distributed in 2001, often by monks, and many Muslims feel that this exacerbated the anti-Islam feelings that had been provoked by the destruction in Bamiyan, Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup>

Local Buddhist monks have often been at the center of these campaigns. According to Burmese Muslim leaders, distribution of pamphlets in 2001 was also supported by the Union of Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a government-sponsored mass organization that fulfils a social and political function for the military.

Officially sanctioned action against the Muslim community has varied over the last two decades. In the mid-nineties there were several attempts to eliminate mosques in different parts of the country, including in Rangoon. But it is more than two years now since any mosques in Rangoon

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<sup>4</sup> The term Burmese is generally used for citizenship and Burman for the ethnic group.

<sup>5</sup> "Giant Buddha statues 'blown up,'" BBC, March 11, 2001, available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/south\\_asia/newsid\\_1214000/1214384.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/south_asia/newsid_1214000/1214384.stm) (July 12, 2002).

were forcibly closed or razed, according to the president of Burma's Islamic Affairs Council. These previous efforts in Buddhist areas of Burma often had official backing, unlike most of the attacks on the mosques in 2001.

It is difficult to estimate the extent of damage done to mosques in eastern Burma during the violence last year. Many still remain closed, especially in Taungoo where the worst violence occurred. Even in many of the mosques that have reopened, the damage is still clearly visible, as in Pegu.

Special identity papers and travel restrictions on Muslims have also long been in force. Burma denies citizenship status to most Muslim Rohingyas, for example, on the grounds that their ancestors did not reside in the country at the start of British colonial rule in 1824.<sup>6</sup> The U.N. special rapporteur on Burma in 1993 urged the government to "abolish its over-burdensome requirements for citizens in a manner which has discriminatory effects on racial or ethnic minorities."<sup>7</sup>

Restrictions seem to have been far more rigidly enforced last year because of heightened concerns about the Muslim community. There are many credible reports of Muslims being taken off buses and trains when they were not able to produce their travel papers, and in some cases even when they did. For instance, in February 2001, eight Muslim men traveling to Rangoon were arrested despite having identity papers because they were traveling outside Arakan State without permission from the local police. They were sentenced to seven years imprisonment.<sup>8</sup> In October, a Muslim man was taken off a plane in Kawthaung airport in southern Burma, bound for Rangoon without apparent reason; his ticket was cancelled.<sup>9</sup>

One Muslim woman, a resident of Rangoon, told Human Rights Watch she was unable to return home after traveling to the Andaman Sea on holiday because, she said, the local authorities insisted that she needed a visa to return. She was allowed to travel back to Rangoon two weeks later.

Muslims wanting to perform the Haj in 2002 also faced especially tight restrictions this past year. In most years several thousand Muslims travel to Mecca for the Haj. Senior Islamic leaders in Rangoon estimate that more than five thousand pilgrims travel to Mecca in a typical year by their own means. This is on top of the two hundred Muslims who go as part of the official Burmese delegation, arranged by the military government. In 2002, only the two hundred pilgrims on the officially organized visit to Mecca were allowed to make the trip.

The government insists there was no prohibition on travel. In theory Muslims were allowed to go on the Haj, Muslims leaders say, but no one was able to get a passport to travel. The number of passports granted to Burmese citizens has been drastically cut, according to official sources in

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<sup>6</sup> For details on Burma's highly restrictive citizenship law see Human Rights Watch/Asia, "Burmese Refugees in Bangladesh: Still No Durable Solution," May 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Mizzama News February 13, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Irradawaddy Magazine Online October 10, 2001.

Rangoon. Before last November, more than a thousand passports were issued a month; this has been reduced. Although all Burmese reportedly now have to wait longer for a passport and pay more in bribes for it, Muslims claim that they have had to endure even more than other groups due to prejudice. The president of the Burmese Islamic Council says the percentage of Muslims applicants getting passports has now fallen from 20 percent to 5 percent. This not only makes performing the Haj more difficult, but also restricts Muslim businessmen's commercial activities.

Although Buddhism is not officially enshrined as the national religion, the Burmese military government often uses Buddhism as a means of laying claim to a form of national legitimacy. The senior generals use Buddhism to bolster their authority, frequently visiting pagodas and paying tribute. Intelligence chief Lt. General Khin Nyunt has even built a new pagoda near the Rangoon Mingaladon airport.

However, in 2001, the SPDC was far more pragmatic in its approach, partly because their new policy of actively engaging the international community meant that they needed a more measured approach to religious tolerance. The SPDC was anxious to maintain strong relations with Malaysia's Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, leader of the largest Muslim country in mainland Southeast Asia.

But the Burmese government's approach during much of 2001, at least in areas outside Arakan State, also reflected the belief that to prevent major outbreaks of social unrest they would need to contain Muslim sentiment. Military leaders apparently feared that young hotheads amongst the Muslim community might be provoked into violent action.

Such unrest is something the military regime wants to avoid at all costs. In a rapidly deteriorating economy, with the price of staple goods like edible oil and rice increasing sharply, the possibility of social disturbances developing into a food riot has haunted government leaders. Something similar happened in 1988 and helped spark the massive pro-democracy movement. It paralyzed the government for several months before the military coup on September 18 brutally crushed the demonstrations and established military rule throughout the country.

The Burmese government's reaction to the Taliban's destruction of the Buddhist images at Bamiyan in March 2001 was mixed from the start. Government sources say the military regime sent a formal letter of protest to the Taliban authorities in Kabul but never made its action public. Pictures and videos of the event, pirated and copied from foreign publications and foreign broadcasters, were confiscated by the military authorities for fear they would enflame the country's Buddhist population. The SPDC's failure to publicly condemn the destruction of Buddhist images angered many monks, residents of Rangoon told Human Rights Watch. The government quickly imposed curfews in those towns where violence erupted and in some towns even cut communications, as in Taungoo, Taunggi, and Pegu. Senior Buddhist monks were told to instruct the heads of local monasteries to keep their young monks in their compounds, according to one Rangoon-based monk. "Many monks in Rangoon have also been told not to travel outside the city at present," he said. "They were told there was a nation-wide ban on all religious ceremonies."

The government was also nervous about the Burmese population seeing footage of the destruction of the World Trade Center. Some footage was shown on television and newspapers carried minimal coverage of the events of September 11, but with few photos. In many parts of the country, including Rangoon, military authorities closed the mosques and banned mass gatherings, including meetings for worship. Plainclothes military intelligence officers and police were stationed near mosques in most cities, according to Islamic leaders in Rangoon.

Military authorities again imposed curfews in places where violence erupted in October, describing the curfews as precautionary and intended to prevent individuals from spreading rumors with the intention of creating inter-religious conflict. A government press release announced: "The Government will not condone hate crimes or harassments targeted not only to Muslims but other religions."<sup>10</sup> As a result, security measures, travel restrictions, and measures against illegal immigration were "beefed up."

While there are credible reports that military intelligence officers were involved in stirring up anti-Muslim violence in some cities outside Rangoon, other officials seemed to have been concerned that religious riots not get out of control.

### **Taungoo Violence (May 2001)**

There was mounting tension between the Buddhist and Muslim communities in Taungoo for weeks before it erupted into violence in the middle of May 2001. The destruction of the Buddhist images in Bamiyan seem to have been one of the main triggers. Buddhist monks demanded that the ancient Hantha Mosque in Taungoo be destroyed in retaliation for the destruction in Bamiyan, according to Muslim leaders.

Eyewitnesses blame the violence on a crowd of more than a thousand people, led by monks. The violence started when a group of Burmese Buddhists attacked shops and restaurants owned by Muslims in the central town area. The Muslim owners retaliated angrily, defending themselves and fighting back, and then the violence escalated. In the next two days, Muslim homes, shops, and mosques were damaged or burned. Many Muslims were beaten and required medical treatment. During the violence, many Muslims sought and were given sanctuary both in Christian and Buddhist religious places of worship. Medical treatment at the government hospital was denied or delayed for a number of victims, said a local resident, and private doctors provided care for them but at their own risk.

Nine Muslims reportedly died during the riots, including three children. In one incident, a family of four, including two young children, perished when their house was set on fire by angry crowds allegedly whipped up by Buddhist monks. The house was burned to the ground, allegedly after being ignored by fire-fighters who devoted all their efforts to saving a Buddhist home next door.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Myanmar Information Sheet, 17th October 2001.

<sup>11</sup> The U.S. State Department's Annual Report for International Religious Freedom issued in October, 2001, estimates that ten Muslims and ten Buddhists were killed, and notes "...there were credible reports that the monks that appeared to be inciting at least some of the violence were USDA or military personnel dressed as monks. After two days of violence the military stepped in and the violence immediately ended."

More than sixty Muslim homes were destroyed and virtually all the Muslim-owned shops were looted and demolished, according to a local Muslim leader. Six mosques were destroyed, according to Muslim residents, including the famous 200-year-old Hantha Mosque. The mosque was initially defended by volunteer Muslim guards, but the local authorities prevailed on the committee to allow the town council to take responsibility for the mosque's safety. Muslim leaders emphasize that the Mosque was demolished during curfew hours and believe that local authorities were at least in part responsible for its destruction.

There are also credible reports that the violence against Muslims in Taungoo spread to nearby townships and villages, including Myo Hla and Kywe Pway. In Taungdwin Gyi several days after the violence in Taungoo, Muslim-owned cars, houses, shops, and properties were burned and destroyed, said a Muslim eyewitness. The conflict between Muslims and Buddhists also spread to Taunggyi in Shan state. There are also unconfirmed claims that several mosques in parts of Karen State to the south of Taungoo were destroyed in Buddhist-Muslim violence that followed the disturbances in Taungoo.

There are also reports of problems in Prome and Mandalay around May, but here Buddhist monks seem to have taken an active role in protecting the local mosques from destruction. The tension was so high in Mandalay that authorities were forced to close the Zay Cho market (in central Mandalay near the main railway station) for three days. A curfew was declared as soon as anti-Muslim clashes broke out in Pegu – a little more than eighty kilometers northeast of Rangoon. Curfews were imposed in many areas and towns in the second half of May because of the Muslim-Buddhist tension, according to a Rangoon-based diplomat, including in Pegu, Prome, Taungoo, and Taunggyi.

Many of the monks in Taungoo were carrying hand-phones, according to a highly credible eyewitness. Mobile phones are not readily available to the Burmese population -- they simply cannot afford them. This seems to suggest that they were not monks, and may have been military intelligence operatives masquerading as monks. In general, there was clearly a split among the monks in their attitude towards the violence against Muslims.

The scars of last May's violence remain. Recent visitors to Taungoo say there are empty lots where former homes and businesses once stood. They have all been cleaned up and left empty. The mosques in Taungoo remained closed as of May 2002. Muslims have been forced to worship in their homes. Local Muslim leaders complain that they are still harassed, and told that not more than five people can pray together even in the privacy of their own homes. After the violence, many local Muslims moved away from Taungoo to other nearby towns and as far away as Rangoon. But local residents say that some of them have now returned to Taungoo because they could not find work in Rangoon.

### **Violence in Prome (September/October 2001)**

Even more intense violence against Muslims occurred in early October in Prome, located roughly 300 kilometers northwest of Rangoon. Eyewitnesses say a crowd of more than a thousand Burmese Buddhists, led by two hundred visiting monks, went on a rampage attacking Muslim homes and shops. A local Islamic leader who witnessed the event said that residents

pointed out to the monks those shops which were owned by Muslims, who had gathered in Prome for a religious ceremony that intelligence chief Lt General Khin Nyunt was due to attend.

Many Muslim shop-owners had their properties destroyed. “The military did indeed intervene, but not before forty shops owned by Muslims were destroyed,” said a senior Muslim leader. “And the violence flared up again two hours later after the police and troops had gone.”

There are conflicting accounts of what provoked this outbreak of violence. Many Prome residents believe the clash was sparked off when a young Burmese girl eloped with a Muslim boy and was forced to convert to Islam. The girl’s parents protested to the boy’s parents at the local Mosque. Some local residents, however, claim the violence was engineered by pro-opposition forces who wanted to embarrass the government.

The government immediately cut off communication links with Prome and imposed a curfew in an effort to prevent the unrest from spreading to other towns. But, in fact, violence against Muslims did erupt elsewhere, including in Hinthada in Irrawaddy and Pegu.

### **Pegu (October 2001)**

Tension between Muslims and Buddhists reportedly was high in October 2001. Local residents say violence erupted after a quarrel broke out between some monks and a Muslim drug store owner. Several Muslim shops were reportedly ransacked, though Islamic leaders have played down the violence. There were some scuffles, with monks and Muslim youths shouting insults at each other, but the confrontations reportedly were quickly stopped by local authorities before they got out of hand.

Although the violence in Pegu was far more limited than in Prome, at least one mosque in the city was badly damaged. Although the mosque is now open for worship, the damage done to it is still very noticeable. For months after the violence, Muslim congregations, particularly after Friday prayers, continued to disperse quickly for fear of attracting the wrath of local military authorities. “The military are watching us very closely all the time,” a local Muslim leader told Human Rights Watch. Tension in Pegu was still evident in early 2002. The fear is palpable. “There is no freedom for anyone here,” said another Muslim worshipper, “but for Muslims it’s even worse.”

Muslims in Pegu are at great pains to insist that the situation in the town is now back to normal and that there are no problems with the local Buddhist community. But curfews, travel restrictions, and tighter police and military surveillance remain in effect, suggesting that tensions remain high.

### **Arakan/Sittwe (February)**

Violence against Rohingya Muslims in Arakan is a way of life, according to U.N. staff based in camps for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. As opposed to other parts of Burma, however, in Arakan the violence against Muslims is carried out systematically by the Burmese army.

The persistent abuse of human rights in Arakan, including institutionalized discrimination and forced labor has been documented by Human Rights Watch and others. Half a million

Rohingyas fled into Bangladesh a decade ago because of this persecution.<sup>12</sup> While the exodus of refugees has slowed since the worse repression ten years ago (the majority of the more than 250,000 who fled at the time have returned under the auspices of the UNHCR), conditions remain oppressive and Rohingyas continue to try to cross the border.

There was sporadic violence against Muslims in Arakan throughout 2001, with particular violent incidents in Sittwe and in and around Maungdaw township.

The worst incident occurred in February in the border town of Sittwe, Arakan State's capital, located on the Naf river, a major border crossing-point and a center of commercial activity for the region. Both Muslims and Buddhists live in the town.<sup>13</sup>

Burmese interviewed by Human Rights Watch report that there is constant tension between Buddhists and Muslims in Sittwe. The resentments are deeply rooted, and result from both communities feeling that they are under siege from the other. The violence in February 2001 flared up after an incident in which seven young monks refused to pay a Muslim stall holder for cakes they had just eaten. The Muslim seller, a woman, retaliated by beating one of the novices, said a Muslim eyewitness. Several more senior monks then came to protest and a brawl ensued, he said. One of the monks was hit over the head by the Muslim seller's husband and started to bleed.

Riots then broke out. The abbots at the local Monastery began to ring the bells sounding an emergency, bringing many of the town's Buddhists onto the streets to defend the monks. They were armed with knives, sticks, swords, and guns, said a local Muslim eyewitness. The Imam in the nearest mosque used a loudspeaker to call on local Muslims to defend themselves, calling for a jihad to protect women and children.

Eyewitnesses vary in their view of what happened next. Muslims insist that it was monks, armed with knives (or Soe in Burmese) who started the fighting. Buddhist sources deny it. What is clear is that a full-scale riot erupted after dusk and carried on for several hours. Buddhists poured gasoline on Muslim homes and properties and set them alight. More than thirty homes and a Muslim guesthouse were burned down, according to local residents. The fighting took place in the predominantly Muslim part of town and so it was predominantly Muslim property that was damaged.

Police and soldiers reportedly stood by and did nothing to stop the violence initially. It was several hours before they intervened. According to a local Muslim resident, it was only when the

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<sup>12</sup> Burma denies citizenship status to most Rohingyas on the grounds that their ancestors did not reside in the country at the start of British colonial rule in 1824. For details on Burma's highly restrictive citizenship law see Human Rights Watch, "Burmese Refugees in Bangladesh: Still No Durable Solution," May 2000. The U.N. special rapporteur on Burma in 1993 urged the government to "abolish its over-burdensome requirements for citizens in a manner which has discriminatory effects on racial or ethnic minorities."

<sup>13</sup> The U.S. State Department's Annual Report for International Religious Freedom, 2001, said "there were various, often conflicting, accounts of how the riots began, but reports consistently stated that government security and fire fighting forces did little to prevent attacks on Muslim mosques, businesses and residences...There are estimates that over 50 Muslim homes burned to the ground and that both Muslims and Buddhists were killed and injured."

police realized that the Muslims were fighting back and killing Buddhists that police acted, shooting their weapons into the air. When this did not disperse the crowds, another sixty police reinforcements arrived in a truck and began to shoot directly at the Muslims, according to other local residents. “There were several dead bodies in the streets,” said one eyewitness, “both Muslims and Buddhists, but I don’t know how many.” There are no reliable estimates of the death toll or the number of injuries. More than twenty died according to some Muslim activists. The army arrived around 2:00 in the morning and finally restored order.

A curfew was imposed in Sittwe immediately after the February riots, which stayed in force for more than two months. It was relaxed during the Water Festival (the celebration leading up to the Buddhist New Year) in April, but re-imposed afterwards. Muslims from nearby townships – including Maungdaw, Buthidaung, and Rathedaung – were not allowed to travel to Sittwe. Travel permits were revoked and, as of May 2002, few Muslims were being allowed to travel freely out of northern Arakan.

There was also violence in and around Maungdaw township in Arakan, with eyewitness accounts suggesting that at least 28 mosques and madrassah (Muslim schools) were destroyed in May 2001

The crackdown, according to one refugee who had been a businessman in Maungdaw town, began when the local NaSaKa<sup>14</sup> military officer instructed the leaders of the Muslim community to draw up a list of the mosques in the area and the names of those who were on the respective mosque committees. He then ordered the closure of some of the mosques and reportedly told the committee members that if they did not comply with his order he would do it himself, saying: “Don’t think this order comes from me. It comes from the higher authorities.”

This account was confirmed by a number of other refugees from the Maungdaw area recently arrived in Bangladesh, who also reported that local mosques had been destroyed in May 2001 on the local military commanders’ orders. Most of the mosques that were destroyed seem to have been built without official permission. According to the refugees, implementation of the policy requiring permission varied depending on how rigorous the military were. In some cases, the committee reportedly was able to save its mosque by paying substantial bribes. One mosque near Stapurika, close to Maungdaw, was saved at the cost of 100,000 kyat which was paid to the local military camp commander, according a former resident of the area.

The destruction of mosques seems to have been halted in the middle of 2001. Some mosques were permitted to be rebuilt after Muslim leaders met senior government officials in Rangoon to complain about the military’s orders to destroy all unauthorized mosques in Arakan. According to a former madrassah teacher from Buthidaung, the government officials said: “In Afghanistan, Talibans have destroyed statues of our Lord Buddha, so that is why we were destroying your mosques here.” Most of the mosques destroyed were thatch huts put up without permission.

For much of 2001, the use of unpaid labor for building military camps and acting as porters for the army in Arakan had been on the decline. But after the start of the U.S. air

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<sup>14</sup> A special border security unit that has been accused by Muslim groups and NGOs of excessive brutality and abuses of human rights.

strikes in Afghanistan in October, authorities built new police and military camps and mounted twenty-four hour sentry duty. This entailed an increase in the use of use of forced labor to construct these new camps and the houses in them.

“There are four sentry posts in my village and in every post four men do a whole night of [unpaid] sentry duty,” said a Muslim teacher from Buthidaung. This is a pattern that is being repeated in many places in Arakan. The authorities say it is necessary because they fear an increase in terrorist activity by Muslim-based insurgents like the Arakan Rohingya National Organization and the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), whom they accuse of connections with the Taliban or international Mujahid groups in Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Last November, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Burma, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, in his remarks to the U.N. General Assembly, expressed concern about reports of violence against Muslim communities, and said, “Inter-ethnic/religious tensions are a matter of prime concern to me in a country whose extremely rich human, historical, political, linguistic and cultural diversity pose the constant political challenge of making these differences co-exist in a peaceful, dynamic and constructive manner.”<sup>16</sup> The Burmese government must take effective action to address the concerns of the country’s Muslim population, and to safeguard and protect their basic human rights.

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<sup>15</sup> Some “Burmese” were reportedly captured in the recent war in Afghanistan, though it isn’t clear what this actually means. They were assumed to be from Rohingya groups who have in fact sent people there in the past for training. However they have never shown the same fundamentalism or militarism associated with the Taliban.

<sup>16</sup> From the Special Rapporteur’s speech presenting his interim report on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, A/56/112, Fifty Sixth Session of the General Assembly, November 7, 2001.