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Myanmar residents live in fear amid anti-Muslim violence



Fear courses through the streets of Yangon, Myanmar's biggest city, especially among its Muslim minority. They have watched the country's spreading religious violence, which threatens to destabilize its fragile democracy, creep closer to home. With little faith in the government's ability to protect them and a growing movement of Buddhist extremism, some feel they have little choice but to try to defend themselves.

They have seen how the troubles start from the smallest things. They have seen the police powerless before mobs fired with religious zeal and armed with bricks and swords. They have seen on TV and in newspapers the burning homes of people just like them light up the night. And so they have erected rusted barbed-wire barricades and volunteered to sit on street corners, 10 men at time, watching for signs of trouble through the night.

Residents in some neighborhoods have started their own patrols. They have shuttered Muslim schools, which have been the target of attacks elsewhere. A few lucky enough to get tourist visas to Muslim-majority Malaysia have simply left.

Rioters attacked a mosque and Muslim businesses in central Myanmar on Tuesday, police said, the closest a series of sectarian clashes pitting Muslims against majority Buddhists has come to the commercial capital Yangon.

The once-bustling streets of Mingalar Taung Nyunt, a Yangon township where Buddhists and Muslims live side by side, grow quiet around 10 p.m. An occasional cycle rickshaw passes beneath the few functioning streetlights. Jury-rigged roadblocks of desks, street carts and barbed wire barricades dot the corners. The neighborhood watch volunteers, who man the corners from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m., are armed only with mobile phones. Some 50 block leaders have pledged to call each other at the first sign of trouble. Others patrol the streets in a van and a ramshackle truck plastered with peace stickers. "This group is not just for Buddhists or Muslims, it's for everybody who lives in this township," says Khin Maryar Htwee, a 36-year-old Muslim woman who helped organize the group. "We have lived in this community forever. We are afraid this relationship will break up. That's why all religions are volunteering."

The beginning of the violence

The religious violence started last year in remote Rakhine state, where at least 192 people died in two outbreaks of violence. Then in March an altercation in a gold shop in Meikhtila in central Myanmar sparked three days of rioting that killed at least 43 while police stood idly by. The chaos reached Okkan, roughly 80 kilometers north of Yangon, this week. On Tuesday, a Muslim woman and Buddhist monk bumped into each other at a crowded market, knocking the monk's alms bowl to the ground. By Wednesday, one man was dead, and nearly 160 mosques, homes and shops had been destroyed. Stunned women and children sat staring at wisps of smoke rising from a field of charred beams and ash where they used to live. Okkan had a neighborhood watch, but it was unable to stop the attack. "This country is like a lawless country," says Ko Aye Thaug a thickset 48-year-old from one of the Muslim villages in Okkan that were destroyed. "The whole village was burned down, it was like nothing happened." Mingalar Taung Nyunt organized its neighborhood watch after the March Meikhtila riots. Tun Kyi, a 45-year-old Muslim activist who helped form the group, says that if trouble comes, he will call in the monks from one of the township's Buddhist monasteries to restore peace. He does not mention the police.

A warning

A few weeks ago, a car sped through, driving crazily, packed with boys shouting insults. People took it as a warning. "We chased them, and they ran away," says Thant Zaw, a 26-year-old Muslim shopkeeper who naps two hours to make up for the sleep he loses manning one of five informal checkpoints on his street overnight. Next to him, Thura Than, a 25-year-old shopkeeper, gestures to a young man with tattoos running down his muscled arms. "I'm Muslim and he's Buddhist," he says. "We don't worry about people here. We worry about outsiders."

A radical Buddhist movement

Adding to the unease is the growth of a radical Buddhist movement called 969, which was founded late last year. It urges Buddhists to shop only at Buddhist stores and not to marry, sell property to or hire Muslims. Though 969 professes to be peaceful, some residents of Okkan believe this week's violence is related to the 969 stickers that now adorn most motorbikes in town, and local politician Myint Thein says 969 supporters were involved in the riots. Tun Kyi, of Mingalar Taung Nyunt township's neighborhood watch program, says harassment of Muslims has worsened with the spread of 969 in Yangon. "It's because of the 969 effect," he says. The movement has caught on in Kyauk Myaung, a nearby Buddhist-only neighborhood. Even before 969, residents wouldn't sell or rent their homes to Muslims. Around 10 Islamic religious schools in Mingalar Taung Nyunt township have been closed, as a precautionary measure, since late March. In Kyauk Myaung, 969 followers have been opening religious schools for Buddhist children. The schools are run by the Hitataya Foundation, which was founded by Wimalar Biwuntha, one of the monks who started the 969 movement. He is part of a network of monks in southern Mon state whose motto is: "We will make fences of our bones if we must." "It means it is noble and great to die for the religion," says 969 supporter Swe Aung. "We don't teach the children to hate," adds Swe Aung. Swe Aung is also scared, of religious violence and Muslim world domination. A map purporting to show that 64 percent of the world's population is Muslim hangs at the front of the class. "I'm afraid of the Muslim people, so I want to build a fence," Swe Aung says. "In Islam, they have the right to kill according to their religion and they can go to heaven. If the Muslim community can guarantee that they will not kill Buddhist people, we will shop and eat in their shops and let them live in our homes."