

Executive
Summary

May 2013

Massacre in Central Burma: Muslim Students Terrorized and Killed in Meiktila

PHR

Physicians for
Human Rights



Burmese boys stand near a destroyed home on April 5, 2013, in Meiktila, Burma.
Photo: Paula Bronstein/Getty Images

Executive Summary

Anti-Muslim violence swept through central Burma (officially the Union of Myanmar) in spring 2013, reportedly sparked by an argument at a gold shop and the killing of a Buddhist monk in the town of Meiktila on March 20, 2013.¹ During the next three days, armed groups of men from the majority Buddhist population reportedly set fire to more than 1,500 homes,² destroyed more than a dozen mosques and three madrassas, and killed more than 100 people³ among the minority Muslim population in Meiktila and surrounding townships.

That anti-Muslim violence provoked an international outcry, and local prosecutors initiated legal proceedings. Three Muslims were quickly convicted of theft and assault in April in connection with the dispute at the gold shop, and six Muslim men were arrested in May on charges related to the killing of the Buddhist monk. As of mid-May,

however, no one else had reportedly been charged or convicted for assault, murder, or arson in a massacre that left dozens of people dead, thousands displaced, and many of Meiktila's Muslim homes, mosques, schools, and businesses destroyed.

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) conducted field investigations in Burma from March 26 to 28 and from April 20 to May 2, 2013. The PHR team comprised Richard Sollom, MA, MPH, director of emergencies at PHR; Holly Atkinson, MD, FACP, director of the Human Rights Program, Mount Sinai Global Health, assistant professor, Department of Medicine, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, and volunteer medical advisor and past president at PHR; and Bill Davis, MPH, former Burma project director at PHR. The team conducted 33 interviews with students and teachers of the Mingalar Zayyone madrasa in Meiktila, as well as with religious leaders, civil society

representatives, and government authorities. Among the respondents whose accounts informed this report were 14 eyewitnesses to the Meiktila massacre. Based on their testimonies and PHR's analysis of the physical destruction at the scene, PHR investigators established a nuanced sequence of events that constitute a composite narrative.

At a time when the United States and European Union have been lifting sanctions against Burma and strengthening economic ties, PHR hopes this report will refocus attention on a horrific example of religious violence that has become far too common in Burma in the past several years, as PHR has documented. Unless more of that country's political and religious leaders firmly denounce such attacks and take concrete steps to hold perpetrators accountable and promote reconciliation, Burma's recent slow progress toward greater freedom, openness, and peace could be derailed.

Armed riot police at the scene did little or nothing to intervene to prevent or halt the attacks.



Property destroyed during the violence in Meiktila, Burma, from March 20 to 24, 2013. Photo: Hein Aung

Composite Narrative of Mingalar Zayyone Massacre



Physicians for Human Rights investigators assembled a chronological account of the massacre of dozens of people in Meiktila on March 20-21, 2013, based on the separate accounts of the 14 eyewitnesses, including eight students, five residents of the Mingalar Zayyone quarter, and one member of Parliament, who experienced the violence from a variety of locations and perspectives. The resulting narrative is a composite constructed from their interview accounts and verified to the extent possible by the PHR field team using corroborative evidence described below.

The narrative recounts how students and teachers at Mingalar Zayyone Islamic boarding school for boys continued with afternoon classes and evening dinner even after learning of violence in the city center; remained in the school compound as it was surrounded by armed men; fled to a boggy field to hide during the night; were flushed out and sought refuge in a nearby walled residential compound, parts of which were then set on fire; were forced to march the next morning through a gauntlet of armed assailants to a convoy of military trucks; and eventually were transported to a police station, from which their families eventually retrieved them. It also recounts the experiences of Muslim neighbors caught up in the violence, and of a national politician who observed the event.

The narrative includes eyewitness accounts of Muslims being intimidated and terrorized; forced to eat pork and pray in the Buddhist manner; assaulted with sticks, pipes, bricks, stones, slingshots, knives, and swords; and murdered, including by being burned



Residents look at the charred remains of burnt bodies in Meiktila, Burma, on March 23, 2013. Photo: Soe Than WIN/AFP/Getty Images

alive. Meanwhile, armed riot police at the scene did little or nothing to intervene to prevent or halt the attacks.

The complete composite narrative of events, as recounted by eyewitnesses, is available in the full report here: physiciansforhumanrights.org/meiktila-report-2013.

In addition to interviewing eyewitnesses, PHR investigators corroborated their accounts with other forms of documentation, including visual verification of actual locations of reported human rights violations; review of photographic, video, and satellite evidence; physical evaluation of one survivor; observation of psychological distress among survivors; comparison of the community's list of the missing (and presumed dead) with eyewitness accounts; and corroboration of data with concurrent events reported in several news media accounts.

The eyewitness accounts presented in this report, corroborated by photographic and medical data, provide compelling evidence that police officers were complicit in violent crimes against civilians. Such acts on the part of law enforcement officers blatantly violate even the most rudimentary provisions of Burma's own penal code⁴ as well as international norms. The majority of police officers present during the violence in Meiktila fell far short of this professional standard, not only by failing to protect vulnerable children and others at risk but by failing to apprehend the perpetrators. The crimes in Meiktila indicate a failure of leadership within the Burmese police force that must be addressed through effective accountability mechanisms and security-sector reform.



Based on the evidence compiled for this report, PHR urges senior officials, pro-democracy advocates, and religious leaders to publicly and repeatedly condemn all ethnic and religious violence and intimidation, and to demonstrate by their words and actions that such discrimination and hateful rhetoric will not be tolerated. Other policy recommendations include:

To the Government of Burma:

- Immediately allow unfettered access by human rights investigators, journalists, and humanitarian aid workers to Meiktila, areas of Rakhine State, and other places where acts of anti-Muslim violence have occurred.
- Institutionalize protections for ethnic and religious minority groups by: (1) completely revising Burma's citizenship law so that it reflects international norms; (2) reforming the structure of the military and police to establish accountability mechanisms; (3) bringing an end to ethnic discrimination in all sectors; and (4) encouraging full civil participation by minority groups.
- Provide mental health counseling and other appropriate health care for those affected by the violence, with a special focus on the particular needs of children.
- Collaborate with international humanitarian agencies, including the International Committee of the Red Cross and UNICEF, to trace missing children and reunite families separated by the violence.

- Promote the protection of children by adhering to the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, promulgated by the Child Protection Working Group.

To the international community:

- Immediately establish an international, independent investigation of the massacre in Meiktila as well as other sites of anti-Muslim violence. Members of the United Nations Human Rights Council should direct the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to conduct this necessary investigation. The Government of Burma should cooperate with any investigation and assist in implementing any recommendations from the investigators.
- Tie economic aid to and investment in Burma to the Burmese government's allowing unfettered access to areas of violence to human rights investigators, journalists, and humanitarian aid workers and to the government's progress in investigating and prosecuting perpetrators of the violence. Until the Burmese government has established full accountability for security forces and has undertaken significant steps toward structural reforms as outlined above, no security assistance should be provided.

The full report can be found at:
physiciansforhumanrights.org/meiktila-report-2013.

Physicians for Human Rights was founded in 1986 on the idea that health professionals, with their specialized skills, ethical duties, and credible voices, are uniquely positioned to stop human rights violations. Today, our expertise is sought by governments, United Nations agencies, international and local courts, and other human rights organizations. The power of our investigations allows us to raise awareness and press for change to put an end to the most severe human rights violations of our time.

References

1. AFP, *Mosques torched in deadly Myanmar riots*, Al-Jazeera, 22 Mar. 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2013/03/201332125352108140.html>.
2. "The official Government figures on the number of houses destroyed by arson sits at 1,594." UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Myanmar: Meiktila inter-communal violence Situation Report No. 4, 9 Apr. 2013, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Sitrep_Meiktila_inter-communal_violence_No-4_09_Apr_2013.pdf.
3. "Islamic religious council from Rangoon head office confirmed that the death toll exceeding 100 from the Muslims side." Burmese Muslim Association, records of incidents of violence in Meiktila and other areas from 20 to 28 Mar. 2013, on file with PHR. Association website <http://www.b-m-a.org/>.
4. Burma's penal code includes provisions that address abetment of crimes. The Penal Code [Union of Burma], 1860, Ch. V. available at http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs6/MYANMAR_PENAL_CODE-corr.1.pdf. The Code also addresses acts of omission in a general manner. *Id.* Ch. II, art. 32. Note, however, that Burmese authorities have used the substance and application of national laws in a political manner to target political activists and humanitarian aid workers. See Burma Lawyers' Council, List of the Most Problematic Provisions in the 2008 constitution and Burmese laws (2012), available at <http://www.burmapartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Top-Laws-and-Constitutional-Provisions-to-Be-Repealed-or-Amended.pdf>.; Nyein Nyein and Khin Oo Thar, *UN Calls on Govt to Release Aid Workers Still in Detention*, Irrawaddy, 20 Aug. 2012, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/archives/11914>.