

Commentary by Burma Campaign UK

Tensions are again rising in Rakhine State. Organisations and individuals are actively stirring up anti-Rohingya hatred, and there are fears that large scale violence could erupt again. The violence in Rangoon, and in Meiktila and surrounding areas in March 2013, has increased those fears.

The government of Burma has not only failed to provide safety and security for the Rohingya, by validating their prejudice, it has also given encouragement to those committing acts of violence. Government ministers have spoken of the Rohingya being foreigners and President Thein Sein has asked for international assistance in deporting all Rohingya to third countries. During his visit to Europe in early 2013, President Thein Sein said he had 'no plans' to revise the 1982 Citizenship Law, stating 'the law intends to protect the nation'. No significant efforts are being made to try to enable Rohingya displaced by attacks to return to their homes and villages and a policy of effective apartheid seems to be developing. At the same time international humanitarian assistance faces restrictions which are leading to preventable deaths among internally displaced Rohingya. This is a violation of international law.

Despite this, Western governments are moving closer to Burma's military-backed government. They have been slow to speak out about the Rohingya situation, and have actively relaxed international pressure despite on-going human rights abuses against the Rohingya and others.

In the absence of support from countries which purport to prioritise human rights, the Rohingya are

increasingly attracting a rag-tag group of supporters who are causing them more harm than good.

Burma's ethnic Rohingya minority have been described by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights in Burma as "the most vulnerable and marginalised group in Myanmar." Until June 2012 they could also have been described as amongst the most friendless. Not only did they face persecution at the hands of the dictatorship in Burma, they also faced it in many of the countries they fled to.

Bangladesh has repeatedly tried to force all Rohingya back to Burma, and doesn't allow decent refugee camps and support to the hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees who have fled there. Farther away in countries like Saudi Arabia and Malaysia, Rohingya were not given legal sanctuary and instead many faced arrest and even canings.

At the same time, the Rohingya were shunned by Burma's democracy movement, and refused entry into coalitions of pro-democracy organisations and ethnic alliances. Most of Burma's democracy movement in exile stayed silent about the Rohingya, and now some democracy leaders in the country have even spoken against their having equal human rights.

In the past, as Muslims, some Rohingya had looked to Muslim countries for support, but found little or none. Indeed, the opposite was the case, with some Muslim countries being the most outspoken in defence of the dictatorship at meetings of various United Nations bodies.

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However, since violence erupted in Rakhine state last June, that has changed. Communal violence evolved swiftly into state sponsored abuses against the Rohingya, and these abuses have grabbed the attention of the Muslim world.

Muslim countries and organisations have expressed their concern, offered aid, and the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation has been outspoken. Other individuals and organisations have also taken up the cause of the Rohingya.

However, unless they are careful, some of these newfound friends of the Rohingya may inadvertently cause more harm than good.

The case of fake pictures circulated on social networks is one example of how unknown individuals who may have been trying to help the Rohingya ended up causing them more harm than good. The abuses against the Rohingya are horrific, rape, torture, execution, arson, forced labour and many more abuses.

The Rohingya don't need fake photographs to help make their case. But the fake pictures allowed those opposed to the Rohingya, those who want to deny their basic human rights, to cast doubt on the truth about the human rights abuses taking place. They exploited the fake pictures to the full in their efforts trying to portray the Rohingya as the sole aggressors. The truth, that at the start of the violence there were aggressors and victims on both sides, that more Rohingya than Rakhine were forced to flee their homes, and that government forces quickly became involved in abuses against the Rohingya, barely got an airing. Quality media which had already been struggling to find pictures became even more cautious about what they would publish, meaning less news reached the world. The people who circulated those fake pictures are 'friends' the Rohingya can do without.

Inaccurate reporting is spun against the Rohingya and used to say that everything said about the abuses they face is lies.

Another group which suddenly noticed the existence of the Rohingya was the Taliban. A spokesman made threats to Burma over the treatment of the

Rohingya, and an Al Qaeda spokesperson later did the same. Having these extreme terrorist organisations speaking up for the Rohingya delighted the racist nationalists in Burma who are busy stirring up anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya sentiments. Already from the beginning of the violence the nationalists had been calling Rohingya terrorists, playing on anti-Muslim prejudice and trying to link Rohingya with terrorists.

In other countries, such as Belgium, extremist Muslim organisations supporting the cause of the Rohingya has led some in that country to be cautious about supporting the Rohingya, for fear of being associated with this extremism.

On January 19th Iran's Press TV quoted an Iranian MP saying an agreement had been reached for Iran to set up a refugee camp in Burma for Rohingya people displaced by violence last year. It also reported that Iran was putting forward a proposal on the Rohingya situation. Help from an authoritarian regime like Iran's, a major violator of human rights of its own people, is an example of the kind of help the Rohingya could do without.

Those providing aid must also be careful in how it is done. There is extreme poverty in Rakhine State, affecting all communities. There had already been resentment and a false impression that international donors favour aid to Rohingya rather than the Rakhine population. Since June that resentment and perception has grown. It is a perception that has been deliberately stirred up by some Rakhine nationalists. The UN and aid agencies do their best to deliver aid on the basis of need. Indeed, those who have visited both Rakhine and Rohingya camps say that while conditions in camps for the displaced for both Rohingya and Rakhine are bad, they are worse in Rohingya camps. Indeed the head of the UN refugee agency has described them as the worst she has ever seen.

However, there is a danger that some donors could inadvertently cause more tension between the communities. Some Muslim countries have pledged aid just for the Rohingya. How will local Rakhine people feel watching truck-loads of aid passing them on their way to Rohingya villages or camps? Aid delivered in the wrong way could exacerbate

tensions, hurting the Rohingya in the long term.

Rohingya leaders are aware of this, some have proposed ensuring that the way aid is delivered should bring communities closer together, not drive them further apart. They suggest that if done in consultation with both communities, aid could not only meet the immediate humanitarian need, but could also help contribute to longer term goals of reconciliation between the communities.

In contrast to this sensible approach, some Rohingya and their supporters have also used some of the same underhand tactics as some Rakhine nationalists and their supporters. They call all Rakhine, terrorists just as some have called all Rohingya, terrorists. What has taken place in Rakhine State is terrible, but it isn't terrorism. They have also resorted to personal abuse against some of the racists and nationalists who have been abusing them, and posting photo-shopped pictures and cartoons. Some have also made general anti-Buddhist comments. This tit-for-tat abuse and use of personal insults doesn't help the Rohingya, it increases tensions and a climate of intolerance and hatred.

In the current climate it is impossible to say anything in support of human rights for the Rohingya without being accused of a pro-Rohingya bias, and anti-Rakhine bias. It is important that organisations and individuals are not intimidated and continue to advocate for human rights for the Rohingya. It is equally important that those supporting human rights for the Rohingya act in a responsible way. The Rohingya have responsibilities as well. It would

be painfully ironic if the lies and abuse levelled against the Rohingya about their being linked with radical Muslim regimes became a self-fulfilling prophecy as, faced with so little support from the rest of the international community and Burma's democracy movement, some Rohingya were to ally themselves with regimes like in Iran.

The Rohingya of Burma are entitled to human rights. They have been persecuted and discriminated against for decades. Even many governments around the world which have been reluctant to talk about human rights abuses in 'reforming' Burma now accept that the attacks against the Rohingya are planned and systematic. More than ninety-five percent of those displaced in the attacks that took place in October 2012 were Rohingya. The facts speak for themselves. There is no need for lies and exaggeration.

Those who support human rights but are silent due to the controversy over supporting Rohingya human rights, or because of some of the unattractive friends the Rohingya are drawing, are abandoning a people in desperate need, and ignoring the obligation that everyone who cares about human rights has to help the Rohingya.

Some of those who claim to be friends of the Rohingya are actually doing their cause more harm than good. If they genuinely want to help the Rohingya, they should remember the ultimate goal is that both communities can live side by side in peace.

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