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ANTI MUSLIM VIOLENCE IN THUYETHAMAIN VILLAGE ON 23RD JUNE 2016

An analysis on violent attacks in Thuyethamain

A series of violent attacks against the Muslim community took place in Thuyethamain village, in the Waw Township of Bago Region, on 23 June. A mosque, an Islamic school and a cemetery were destroyed in the incidents. A shop of construction materials owned by Ko Rashid, a Muslim from the village, was also destroyed. The mob acted on the allegation that a warehouse, which is under construction in the village, would be used as an Islamic school.

Brief report on the incident

A group of 11 people from Thuyethamain village sent a complaint letter to the Township Development Committee on 6 June, stating that they suspected that a warehouse under construction in the village was actually projected to be used as an Islamic school. The warehouse was being built on a plot of land owned by U Rashid, situated in the street no 2 of the village's ward no. 2. The township authorities visited the village on 17 June to verify the complaint. The tension between the two communities increased as a result of an argument between U Rashid and one of his Buddhist neighbors, Daw Khin Aye Nu. An argument broke out on 23rd June, when U Rashid verbally attack at the people who had made the complaint over the construction of his warehouse, and soon about 200 members of the Buddhist community gathered near U Rashid's home. When the police, led by the superintendent of the village police station, arrived to arrest U Rashid, he had sustained injuries on his head by a mob. After the arrests were made, the police questioned people on both sides. While the interrogations were going on, a group of 500 people destroyed the warehouse under construction owned by U Rashid, the mosque, the Madrasa (Islamic school) and the Muslim cemetery of the village. The attackers were divided into smaller groups in a systematic manner to carry out simultaneously the destruction of the sites.

Thuyethamain village has a total of 1500 homes and out of which 49 are Muslim households. It has a Muslim population of 268 people, out of which more than 200 fled the village overnight after the incidents. Of the 68 people who remained in the village, were sent by the police to Waw town on 25 June. The Bago Region police chief supervised the evacuation of the Muslims by boat; the evacuated Muslim families were provided with shelters.

The warehouse of U Rasihd

Haji U Rashid is a businessman who trades on furniture and construction material. He was building a warehouse to store his construction materials on a plot of land of his property. The plot is land a freehold land with an extension of 70 for 40 feet. The village administrator granted permission to build the warehouse on 30 April, after U Rashid had applied for it on 19 April. The permission was granted after he and a group of trustees of the village's mosque had signed a letter of understanding in front of the village administrator, U Hla Sint, assuring that the new building would not be used for any religious purposes.

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However, a group of 11 villagers, some of whom are closely linked to the ruling party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) party, sent a letter of complaint on 6 June requesting the township authorities to investigate the alleged construction of an Islamic school in the village. The complaint letter included the signatures of about one thousand local Buddhists. They also posted the pictures of the construction site on Facebook with captions stating that an Islamic school was under construction in their village.

The township authorities visited the village on 17 June to make inquiries on the complaint. The wife of U Rashiid was summoned to the police station for questioning. She explained to the investigation authorities that U Rashid bought the land from U Ibrahim, who has rights of administration on the land, at a price of Kyat 3 million. She supported her explanations with evidence, and reaffirmed that the building was not going to be used for any religious purpose, but for residential and commercial purposes.

According to Daw Khin Aye Nu, a neighbor of U Rashid, he had verbally attacked the people who had posted on Facebook about his warehouse. She stated that he had done so around 1:30 p.m. on 23 June. Daw Khin Aye Nu and her sister-in-law Daw Khin Thida Htwe were among the 11 people who posted on Facebook; they responded with abusive language, and an argument ensued between both sides. Daw Khin Aye Nu's husband, U Maung Pyone, intervened in the argument and tried to provoke U Rashid. Then the Buddhist couple left on a motorbike. They returned later on, this time accompanied by about 200 people holding sticks.

The superintendent of the village police station and a monk from Mingla Rama monastery, U Pandita, a member of the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion (Ma Ba Tha), arrived to the scene to try and control the situation. However, the situation had gone out of hand and the crowd had swollen to 300 people. U Pandita left shortly afterward, saying that the situation was beyond his control. U Rashid was later taken to the police station by the superintendent, deputy inceptor Win Naing. While he sat on the police motorbike on the way to the police station, he was attacked by one person from the crowd and was injured in the head as a result. According to a member of the village authorities, U Khin Oo, U Rashid was detained in the police station along with Daw Khin Aye Nu and Daw Khin Thida Htwe.

However, the situation descended into further chaos when a group of 500 people marched to the northern part of the village. The destruction of U Rashid's warehouse by the mob begun around 4 p.m., when the school hours had finished and many students were on the streets. Another mob destroyed the mosque and the Islamic school. Meanwhile, a third group rampaged on the Muslim cemetery, situated at the entrance of the village.

The crowd marched across the village chanting "Killing Kulars (a derogatory term used in Myanmar to refer to Muslims and people of South Asian origins in general) is our course... our cause". According to an eyewitness, the crowd engaged in the destruction of Muslim houses as they marched along. The group broke into the house of U Rashid, destroyed his cupboard and looted 6.5 million Kyat as well as the jewelries they found inside. They also destroyed construction materials owned by U Rashiid, with a worth of about 40 million Kyat.

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People who led the violent attacks

The key leaders of the violent attacks were the 11 people, among them, who first posted on Facebook about construction of warehouse:

- U Tin Oo (USDP)
- U Win Hla (NLD)
- U Myo Win Thein
- U Kyaw Myo Han
- U Naing Linn (NLD)
- Ko Than Htite Soe
- U Hla Oo
- U Htoo Myat Aung (NLD)
- U Soe Win
- U Naing Linn Aung
- U MYint Naing Win

The people leading the attack against U Rashid's home were four people, including a business rival, Naing Linn. The problem started when a NLD member posted in Facebook the pictures of the construction site. According to the trustee of the mosque, the main responsible in the attacks was U Tin Oo, a member of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). He is a well-connected man who has been persistently inciting hatred against Muslims.

An executive committee member of the Waw Township branch of the NLD, Daw Kaythi Linn, and her nephew, Htoo Myat Aung, the owner of a photo studio and himself a NLD member, posted in Facebook pictures of the destruction caused during the attacks. Htoo Myat Aung took the lead in filing the complaint and in the destruction of the cemetery. Naing Lin, a business rival of U Rashid, also a member of NLD, also played a leading role in filing the complaint and the destruction of property.

According to U Rashid and U Khin Oo, U Maung Pyone, the husband of Daw Khin Aye Nu was also a key player in inciting the violence by gathering the crowd. U Maung Pyone also provoked U Rashid to an altercation. According to some members of the village authorities, U Khin Oo (a.k.a. Hauk Ka Lay) and the two ringleaders of the attacks, Ko Hteik and San Naing Win, have fled the village.

Background of religious tensions in the village

A member of the local authorities of Thuyethamain village has said that, in 2014, U Khin Oo (a.k.a Hauk Ka Lay) (a Muslim man) was asked to remove a hut he had built inside his farm, as it was obstructing the road. He refused to remove the hut, and some villagers filed in 2015 a petition addressed to the Township Development Committee to remove it. Although a number of people were questioned by the authorities, U Khin Oo's hut was not removed, as it was found to be built on land of his property. According to U Khin Oo, those who lodged the complaint were not satisfied with the investigation.

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On the last summer, a monk who belongs to Ma Ba Tha warned the warehouse of U Rashid is to be used as an Islamic school. He also denounced that the cemetery and the mosque of the village had been built illegally. He stated that only the mosques in Waw and the nearby village of Myitkyo had been built with official permission. U Khin Oo claimed that he had intervened to resolve the matter. According to him, he explained the monk that the mosque in Thuyethamain village was built in 1960 on a freehold land. Despite lacking a land lease agreement, generations of Muslims in the village have looked after the mosque.

At that time, the monk said the Buddhism is the state religion and he used words, which were discriminatory against Muslims.

The Muslim cemetery is situated at the entrance of the village. When U Htun Naing was the head of the village administration, he asked the owner of the land where the cemetery lies, U Saman (a.k.a. U Osman) to donate the land with the purpose of building a pagoda. U Saman instead sold the land to the village administration at a price of 1 million Kyat, but he took 900,000 Kyat and gave 100,000 Kyat as a donation for the pagoda. It is beyond any doubt that the cemetery has existed before the pagoda. U Khin Lay claimed he has the necessary documentations to prove the ownership of the land.

On the other hand, the plot where U Rashid was building his warehouse was a freehold land, which he bought from its previous owner, U Ibrahim, at the price of 3 million Kyat.

The attacks were pre-planned

The Monk from Mingalar Rama monastery denied the accusations that the attacks had been planned in advance, but there is ample evidence to prove that this was the case. It is worthy to remember that the monk, U Pandita, is a member of Ma Ba Tha.

The first point is that there is some people spread deliberate misinformation about the warehouse. Misleading information about the warehouse construction was posted in Facebook. The posts said that the building was designed as a mosque or an Islamic school. Afterwards, complaints were lodged to the head of the village administration. As a result, U Rashid was forced to sign on 30 May a document in front of the head of the village administration guaranteeing that the building would be used only for residential and commercial purposes. Still, there were people in the village who were dissatisfied with the permission to continue the construction of the warehouse. These people (the 11 people), who mounted a campaign to persuade the villagers to sign a petition, was arguing that if the construction of an Islamic school were permitted, the whole village would become a Kular village. They secured a total of 969 signatures for the petition and it was sent to the Township administration department. The copies of the petition were also sent to the Chairs of the Ma Ba Tha chapters for Bago Region and Waw Township.

As a response to the complaint, U Rashid and his wife were summoned to the police station on 17 June for questioning. U Rashid was able to provide sufficient evidence of his intention. His wife, Daw Min Min, asked if they could file a lawsuit against those who had filed complaint, and those who were spreading misinformation about them in Facebook, and the police told her that

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she could do so. However, the investigation team left without having made any clear decision on whether the construction of the warehouse could continue or not.

According to U Khin Oo (a.k.a. Hauk La), the people involved in the complaint has required the mosque built on the land, which has no lease agreement, to be sealed off. They also called for resolving the dispute over the hut built by U Khin Lay on his land.

U Khin Oo said that U Naing Linn, who is a NLD member and a business rival of U Rashid, had provoked Muslims on 20 June. According to him, that day he urinated and defecated in front of the Mosque compound after getting drunk.

On the day of the incident, 23 June, after having an argument with U Rashid, his neighbors Ma Khin Aye Nu and Maung Pyone went on a motorbike to bring a mob carrying sticks. The mob seems to have come from No. 7 ward. U Rashid and U Khin Oo stated their firm belief that the attacks against the Muslim homes, the mosque and the cemetery had been planned in advance. They stated the following facts to prove their point:

The mob went on a rampage around the same time, at a fixed hour, and, after that, they systematically dispersed. The mob started its path of destruction three hours after the argument between U Rashid and his neighbors.

Images of the incident were recorded by Htoo Myat Aung. Fifty photographs were posted on three separate Facebook accounts and the accounts were deactivated before the end of the day.

Background facts on incitement

Even though this incident was triggered by a local dispute, outside influences played a role in it, as some people arguably seem to be interested in making the simmering intercommunal tensions to explode at a particularly sensitive time, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. The violent incidents in Thuyethamain took place three weeks after a speech by the famous monk Zwe Ka Bin. He told his followers that they should have the courage to destroy the homes of Muslims and Mosques if that was required. The monk made the comment at a conference held to mark the three years anniversary of the ultranationalist organization Ma Ba Tha.

The incident also took place three days after the Commander-in-Chief said that the defense of nation could not be done through military means alone, but required a comprehensive mobilization of the nation in which people would need to take part in the protection of race and religion.

The Police Chief from Pegu Division, Col. Myo Min Htike, said that the authorities would not take any action to punish the perpetrators, unless the Muslims filed the case against them. According to a local Muslim, they do not dare to complain against the Buddhist for fear of retaliation. It must be noted that, from a legal point of view, the authorities have the obligation to take action against the perpetrators of such kind of crimes, regardless of whether members of the public file a complaint or not.

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The Chief Minister of Bago Division appointed by the NLD, U Win Thein, told The Myanmar Times that the authorities in the Division wouldn't held perpetrators accountable, arguing that taking legal measures could trigger more incidents similar to the violence that flared in Thuyethamain village. "If we take action on people, the situation will be bad," he said, dangerously fostering a sense of impunity on those who commit acts of vandalism against the Burmese Muslim community. However, it is signaling the perpetrators that they can go away without being accountable for the crime they have committed.

Background on the Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN)

Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) works for human rights, minority rights and religious freedom in Burma. BHRN has played a crucial role advocating for human rights and religious freedom with politicians and world leaders.

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