

Tuesday, June 12th, 2012 |

Bangladesh bars Burmese boat people

Bangladesh border guards have turned back three more boats carrying more than 100 Rohingya Muslims who have fled religious violence in Burma.



Rohingya Muslims fleeing sectarian violence receive food and water from Bangladeshis during their attempt to cross the Naf river into Bangladesh on June 11. (Munir uz Zaman, AFP)

Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) teams intercepted the boats carrying Rohingya people as they tried to enter Bangladesh on Monday night over the Naf river that separates the nations, BGB Major Shafiqur Rahman said on Tuesday.

“The three boats were carrying 103 Rohingya, including 81 women and children, who were coming from Akyab,” he said.

The boats were detained and later returned to Burma territory, he said, adding the BGB had turned away 11 boats carrying more than 400 Rohingya since Monday.

Akyab, also known as Sittwe, is the capital of Burma’s Rakhine state, where violence between majority Buddhists and Rohingya left at least 17 people dead last week, prompting the authorities to declare a state of emergency.

Security has been stepped up along Bangladesh's 200km border with Burma to prevent an influx of Rohingya refugees.

"We got a reinforcement of 120 soldiers on Monday to beef up border patrols," Rahman said.

Bangladeshi officials estimate that a total of 300 000 Rohingya people live in the country, with only about a tenth of them in two official refugee camps in the southern district of Cox's Bazaar.

Rohingya are a stateless people described by the United Nations as one of the world's most persecuted minorities.

The Burma government considers the Rohingya to be foreigners, while many citizens see them as illegal immigrants and view them with hostility, describing them as "Bengalis".

Growing international pressure

International pressure mounted for an end to the religious violence raging in western Burma, where armed police on Tuesday patrolled a flashpoint region devastated by rioting and arson.

The United States urged an immediate end to the deadly sectarian unrest, which has forced the United Nations to evacuate foreign workers from Rakhine state.

At least seven people have died since Friday, according to officials, in a cycle of apparent revenge attacks between Buddhists and Muslim Rohingya that presents a major test of fragile reforms since army rule ended last year.

Rights organisations fear the real toll could be much higher with one advocacy group which works with the Rohingya, The Arakan Project, saying dozens of people had been killed.

Agence France-Presse (AFP) could not verify that information and its team of reporters has been unable to visit many of the affected areas for security reasons.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Monday called for "all parties to exercise restraint", adding the "the United States continues to be deeply concerned" about the situation.

The United Nations has begun pulling out more than 40 workers – including foreigners – and their families from a base in Maungdaw, an area home to large numbers of Rohingya where clashes have also been reported.

'Out of control'

Warning that the violence is running "out of control", New York-based Human Rights Watch called for international observers to be deployed in Rakhine to "put all sides on notice that they were being closely watched".

"The government needs to be protecting threatened communities, but without any international presence there, there's a real fear that won't happen," said Elaine Pearson, HRW's deputy director.

Gunfire echoed across the outskirts of the state capital Akyab on Monday as groups of men, who appeared to be ethnic Rakhine Buddhists, roamed the streets wielding sticks and knives. A dusk-to-dawn curfew has been imposed.

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An AFP reporter witnessed heavy security overnight in Akyab, as rumours swirled among nervous residents that groups of Rohingyas were approaching the heart of the city, despite the security lockdown.

Rioting has seen hundreds of homes torched across the state, forcing both Buddhists and Rohingya to flee seeking safety.

Tensions erupted following the recent rape and murder of a Rakhine woman, allegedly by three Muslims.

In response an angry Buddhist mob beat 10 Muslims to death earlier this month.

The violence poses a serious challenge to Burma’s reformist President Thein Sein, as the nation takes tentative steps towards democracy after decades of authoritarian rule.

‘A single spark may well set the whole hillside on fire’

A commentary published on Tuesday in government mouthpiece the *New Light of Burma* warned continued ethnic strife could also put the unity of the country in jeopardy.

Under the headline “A single spark may well set the whole hillside on fire”, the piece urged unity across Burma’s dozens of ethnic groups.

Animosity between local Buddhists and the Rohingya appears increasingly intractable with both sides trading angry accusations over the surge in violence, much of it playing out over social networking websites.

Burma’s Muslims – of Indian, Chinese and Bangladeshi descent – account for an estimated 4% of the roughly 60-million population in a country where for many people Buddhism forms an intrinsic part of national identity.

According to the UN, there are nearly 800 000 Rohingya living in Burma, mostly in Rakhine. Another one million or more are thought to live in other countries.

Around 600 Rohingya on Tuesday demonstrated in the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur against the raging unrest in Burma, demanding UN intervention to restore peace. – AFP