

Some 30,000 without food, shelter in Myanmar clashes

By Reuters

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Tens of thousands of displaced Muslim Rohingyas and ethnic Rakhine Buddhists were in need of food, water and shelter in northwestern Myanmar on Thursday after fleeing the country's worst sectarian clashes in years.

Houses were burnt down late on Wednesday in two villages near the Bangladesh border, but there were no reports of further deaths. Scores of people are feared to have been killed in the rioting that broke out in Rakhine state on June 8.

Places that were flashpoints earlier in the week, including the state capital Sittwe, were quiet as violence started to subside after days of arson attacks and killings that have presented reformist President Thein Sein with one of his biggest challenges since taking office last year.

The violence had killed 29 people as of Thursday and displaced more than 30,000, said Htein Lin, secretary of the Ministry for Border Affairs. Around 2,500 houses have been burnt down.

"Tensions between the two groups have eased. There are around 20,000 refugees in Sittwe. Most of them are from the villages where people fled in fear of the violence," Aung Myat Kyaw, a senator for Rakhine state, told Reuters.

"They are in need of food and, because of the heavy rain, there are concerns about the refugees' health and whether they have enough shelter," he added.

The army has taken hundreds of Rohingyas to Muslim villages outside Sittwe to ensure their safety.

"They are worried for their lives. The army is there so their life is secure," said Shwe Maung, a Muslim member of parliament for the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party. "There are still so many Rohingyas in downtown Sittwe and they are afraid of being attacked."

The United Nations and a medical aid group said this week they were pulling staff out of the area because of the violence. U.N. special envoy for Myanmar, Vijay Nambiar, travelled to the area on Wednesday.

DELICATE SITUATION

Speaking at an International Labour Organization conference in Geneva, the first stop on a five-nation European tour, Myanmar Nobel laureate and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi expressed concern about the unrest and said laws needed to be enforced to prevent such conflicts from taking place.

"Without the rule of law, such communal strife will only continue," she told a news conference.

"The present situation will have to be handled with delicacy and sensitivity and we need the cooperation of all people concerned to rebuild the peace that we want for our country."

Food shortages could last three to four days as poor roads and infrastructure delayed supplies from aid organizations, said Htun Myit Thein of the Wan Latt Foundation, which is managing three camps that together hold about 12,000 people in Sittwe.

"The camps aren't clean enough and some of the men are getting ill," he said. "So far there is no support from the government or international groups."

It is unclear what sparked the rioting. Relations between the two communities have been uneasy for generations and tension flared last month after the gang rape and murder of a Buddhist woman that was blamed on Muslims.

That led to the killing of 10 Muslims in reprisal on June 3, when a Buddhist mob stopped a bus they were travelling on. The passengers had no connection to the murdered woman. State media said three Muslims are on trial for the woman's death.

The violence follows a year of dramatic political change after nearly 50 years of repressive military rule, which includes the release of hundreds of political prisoners and truces with ethnic minority rebels.

The government has also allowed trade unions and promised to get rid of forced labour. Recognizing this progress, the International Labour Organization lifted restrictions on Myanmar on Wednesday.

The communal violence in Rakhine state and the international reaction may prompt further change: the Rohingyas are not included among the officially recognized ethnic groups of Myanmar but Their Sein may be forced to improve their plight.

Up to 800,000 Rohingyas live along Myanmar's border with Bangladesh in abject conditions. Neither country recognizes them as citizens and the Bangladeshi authorities have turned away boats of Rohingyas fleeing the violence this week.

(Reporting by Reuters staff reporters; Writing by Alan Raybould; Editing by Martin Petty, Robert Birsell and Roger Atwood)

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