

Western Myanmar Faces Religious Violence, Emergency Declared
By Korva Coleman, NPR
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Fighting has escalated in western Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, between stateless Rohingya Muslims and ethnic Rakhine Buddhists, who are the country's predominant religious group. President Thein Sein has declared a state of emergency and sent in army troops.

Reports from Myanmar say the troops are in Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine state. The AP says Rohingya Muslims were seen burning homes in one neighborhood as people ran away to safety. Homes were burning in other parts of the city. Reuters reports Rakhine Buddhists are burning houses, too.

The violence reportedly started last month following the rape and murder of a Buddhist girl, allegedly by a Muslim. Ten Muslims were then hanged in what appears to be retaliation. As MSNBC notes, the Rohingya Muslims live in poverty, despised by ethnic Rakhines; there's a long history of tension between the groups that has now flared into violence.

Human Rights Watch says in addition to the state of emergency, the Myanmar government promised an investigation into the unrest. While the Muslims have faced murders, land confiscation and restricted movement, the ethnic Rakhines have also suffered human rights abuses by troops. "Using the army to restore order risks arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances and torture," the organization said.

The United Nations estimates Rohingya Muslims make up 90 percent of the northern part of Rakhine State but are not legally recognized in Myanmar, so they can't get adequate food, schooling or housing. Many flee into neighboring Bangladesh, where some 30,000 people live in two huge refugee camps, while the UN believes hundreds of thousands more are undocumented and close by.

The UN's refugee agency is urging Bangladesh to admit fleeing Muslim Rohingyas; Bloomberg reports many may have been blocked by Bangladeshi border guards.

Myanmar's president warns the new violence could threaten the country's fledgling steps toward democracy, while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has expressed deep concern about the violence, says the Guardian.

Democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi is calling for a halt to violence and urged fellow citizens to show tolerance toward religious minorities, according to the Irrawaddy, a media outlet run by Burmese exiles in Thailand.

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