

'Dozens dead' in wave of violence
By Associated Free Press
12 June 2012

DOZENS of people have been killed in a surge in sectarian violence in Burma, as pressure to end the bloodshed grew.

A state of emergency has been declared in western Rakhine state, which has been rocked by a wave of rioting and arson, posing a major test for the reformist government which took power last year.

"About 25 people have been killed during the unrest," a senior government official said yesterday, requesting anonymity. He did not give details of how they died or whether they were Buddhists or Muslims.

A further 41 people were wounded in five days of unrest, he said.

The death toll does not include 10 Muslims who were killed on June 3 by a Buddhist mob in apparent revenge for the rape and murder of a woman, which sparked the violence in Rakhine. Rights organisations fear the number of people killed could be much higher than the official figure. Reporters have been unable to visit many of the affected areas for security reasons. Gunfire rattled the state capital Sittwe yesterday and there was a heavy security presence. Plumes of smoke rose from fires dotted around the area.

Separately, police in neighbouring Bangladesh said a Muslim died in a hospital there yesterday after he was allegedly shot by Burmese security forces before escaping across the border.

The US urged an immediate halt to the deadly sectarian unrest, which has prompted the United Nations to evacuate foreign workers from Rakhine state.

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

The United Nations has started to pull out more than 40 workers - including foreigners - and their families from the area.

The humanitarian group Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders), one of the few international aid groups with a presence in the area, said that it had suspended its activities there, disrupting essential treatment.

"MSF is concerned about the safety of all its patients and staff and hopes to resume medical activities as soon as possible in order to avoid unnecessary lives being lost," it said in a statement.

Warning that the violence is running "out of control", New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) called for international observers to be deployed in Rakhine.

"Why is the international community pulling out at this time? Is the threat at a level that warrants it?" said Phil Robertson, deputy director of HRW's Asia division

"The government of Burma has thrown a black veil over the situation in Rakhine state," he said. Rakhine, a predominantly Buddhist state bordering Bangladesh, is home to a large number of Muslims including the Rohingya, described by the United Nations as one of the world's most persecuted minorities.

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

Rioting has seen hundreds of homes set on fire across the state.

An ethnic Rakhine fireman said some Rohingya villagers had been injured as they escaped burning homes near Sittwe.

"We all have sympathy for them (the Rohingya). We saw women and children running for their lives. We are all humans," he added, but asked not to be named.

About 100 other Rohingya attempting to escape over the frontier were turned back as they tried to cross a river, Bangladesh border forces said, on the second day boats had been repelled from landing on its territory.

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.

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

Experts say radical elements on both sides may be trying to benefit from the unrest. "Some Buddhist hardliners probably want to see the Rohingya purged from Burmese soil," said Nicholas Farrelly, a southeast Asia expert at the Australian National University. "On the other side there are Rohingya who want the world to pay much more consistent attention to their plight." According to the UN, there are nearly 800,000 Rohingya in Burma, mostly in Rakhine. Another one million or more are thought to live in other countries.

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