

Sectarian violence continues in Myanmar

Security forces have been unable to stop clashes between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in the country's west.

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Most Rohingya are stateless, not recognised as citizens by either Myanmar or neighbouring Bangladesh [Reuters]

Violence continued in western Myanmar on Tuesday with security forces struggling to contain sectarian and ethnic clashes that have displaced thousands of people.

The conflict between ethnic Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims has left about 25 people dead and dozens wounded in five days of sectarian violence in the coastal Rakhine state.

"About 25 people have been killed during the unrest," a senior government official told AFP news agency on Tuesday, without providing details of how they died or whether they were Buddhists or Muslims.

Recent violence in Rakhine state is a stark and brutal reminder of the challenges Myanmar faces.

At least 17 people have been killed in the past week in attacks between Muslim and Buddhist communities. At the heart of the issue are the minority Muslim Rohingya who are given few rights in Myanmar and are not afforded the status of an official ethnic minority group.

There are many other areas of ethnic, religious and social tension in Myanmar. The situation in Rakhine state may be isolated for now, but it shows just how fragile many parts of Myanmar are.

There may also be hardliners within the country who would jump on any instability to try to prove that Myanmar is not quite ready for the democratic path it has embarked on.

President Thein Sein has declared a state of emergency and deployed army troops to restore stability, warning that the unrest could threaten the fragile nation's recent democratic reforms as it emerges from half a century of military rule.

On Tuesday in the regional capital, Sittwe, police fired live rounds into the air to disperse a group of

Rohingya who could be seen burning homes in one neighbourhood.

Much of the port city remained calm, however, including the main street. Schools, banks and most shops were closed, though some opened briefly to sell fish and vegetables early in the morning to residents who braved the tense streets.

"Tensions are still very high and it is very dangerous," said Tha Zan Hla, an ethnic Rakhine.

The unrest was triggered by the rape and murder last month of a Buddhist girl, allegedly by three Muslims, and the June 3 lynching of 10 Muslims in apparent retaliation. There are long-standing tensions between the two groups.

The government regards the Rohingya as illegal migrants from Bangladesh and has rendered them stateless by denying them citizenship. Although some are recent settlers, many have lived in Myanmar for generations and rights groups say they suffer severe discrimination.

The conflict poses one of the biggest tests yet for Myanmar's new government as it tries to reform the nation after the long-ruling army junta ceded power last year.

Bangladesh closes border

Also on Tuesday, Bangladesh border guards pushed back three more boats carrying about 100 Rohingya Muslims fleeing religious violence in Myanmar, officials said on Tuesday.

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.

"The three boats were carrying 103 Rohingya, including 81 women and children, who were coming from Akyab [Sittwe]," he told AFP.

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

Security has been stepped up along Bangladesh's 200-kilometre border with Myanmar 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 Myanmar government considers the Rohingya to be foreigners, while many citizens see them as illegal immigrants from Muslim-majority Bangladesh and view them with hostility.