

Toll Rises as Sectarian Violence in Myanmar Spreads to Nearby Villages
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BANGKOK — Rioting and arson attacks spread on Friday to villages outside a city in central Myanmar where clashes between Buddhists and Muslims have left at least 20 people dead, according to residents, a member of Parliament and local journalists. A picture of chaos and anarchy emerged from the city of Meiktila, where mobs of Buddhists, some of them led by monks, have ransacked and burned Muslim neighborhoods since Wednesday.

U Aung Soe, a reporter for a local weekly journal, said he saw 15 charred bodies on the streets Friday morning. He estimated the death toll at more than 40.

Mobs of rioters attacked Muslims' houses in villages outside Meiktila on Friday, Mr. Aung Soe said. Security forces, which during decades of military rule brutally suppressed any signs of unrest, seemed unable or unwilling to stop the rioting, according to witnesses.

Nyan Lin, a former political prisoner, told the Mizzima news agency that the police "just stood watching the rioters, and did not take any action."

Video footage from Meiktila posted on Friday showed harrowing scenes of what appeared to be Muslim women and men cowering as they fled the violence.

The Associated Press quoted a member of Parliament from Meiktila, U Win Htein, as saying that at least five mosques had been burned since the violence started Wednesday. Mr. Win Htein said the death toll was at least 20. Local residents were preventing authorities from putting out fires in the city, he told The A.P.

Journalists said they feared for their safety after Buddhist monks, one of them wielding a sword, forced them to hand over the memory cards in their cameras.

On Thursday, Buddhists, including monks from nearby monasteries, led a rampage through the Muslim quarter of the city of Meiktila seeking to avenge the death of a monk the day before, according to a news photographer who witnessed the fighting.

"The area was like a killing field," said the photographer, Wunna Naing. "Even the police told me that they could not handle what they witnessed. Children were among the victims."

Muslims and Buddhists have clashed several times in western Myanmar over the past year, but the fighting in Meiktila has raised fears that religious strife is reaching into the heartland of the country.

News agency photographs showed gruesome scenes of devastation, with homes burned to the ground, thick black clouds rising above a mosque that residents say was attacked, and a charred corpse.

Muslims residents have fled the city and gathered in a sports stadium, according to Reuters.

The clashes on Wednesday appeared to have started with a disagreement in a gold shop owned by a Muslim family.

Religious violence has shaken the government of President Thein Sein over the past year as the gradual rollback of five decades of authoritarian rule has coincided with a rise in nationalism and racial and religious hatred.

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, is about 90 percent Buddhist, with the rest of the population Christian, Muslim and animist.

More than 150 people, most of them Muslims, have been killed since June in Buddhist-Muslim clashes in Rakhine State, a sliver of land in western Myanmar where religious hatred runs high. Some vocal Buddhist monks have been stridently anti-Muslim after those communal clashes, which pitted Buddhists against a group of Muslims who call themselves Rohingya and are not recognized as citizens of the country.

On Thursday, a leading monk in the country, Ashin Nyanissara, called for restraint in Meiktila, saying in an interview with the Democratic Voice of Burma that "all religions should live peacefully with loving kindness and tolerance."

Until this week, there were hopes that religious conflicts would be contained to the Rakhine region.

But the clashes in Meiktila are renewing concerns that religious strife will surface in other cities in Myanmar, which are typically multiethnic, a legacy of British colonial rule.

There have been signs of rising tensions. Last month in a township on the outskirts of Yangon, the commercial capital, Buddhists attacked what they said was a mosque being built without permission.

Meiktila, a garrison city with a strong military presence, is halfway between the new capital, Naypyidaw, and the old royal city of Mandalay. Reports from residents indicated that the military units based in the city had not yet joined the police in helping to quell the violence.

The police in Meiktila, reached by telephone, declined to comment on the violence.

Two mosques and a Muslim school were burned, residents said, and many houses in the Muslim quarter were destroyed.

The authorities declared a curfew on Thursday for the second consecutive night.