

Communal clashes in Burma

By John Roberts
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An outbreak of communal violence that began in Burma's western state of Rakhine on June 8 is threatening the fragile political accommodation worked between the military-backed government of President Thein Sein and the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi.

Clashes between Rohingya Muslim and Buddhist communities have cost the lives of at least 16 Muslims and 13 Buddhists, seen 2,600 homes torched and forced 32,000 people to seek refuge in 37 camps across the state. Authorities in bordering Bangladesh have turned back terrified Rohingyas trying to flee the violence by crossing the border. Bangladesh coast guard boats have repelled large numbers of boats filled with women and children.

President Thein Sein sent troops into Rakhine last week and claimed to have imposed order. He warned that the communal violence might derail his government's "reform" program. His regime has used the NLD's participation in by-elections during April to good effect, with both the European Union and the US suspending economic sanctions on Burma, opening up the possibility of Western investment.

The Obama administration has been central to this developing rapprochement. Washington is seeking to re-engage with Burma as part of its aggressive campaign to curtail Chinese political and economic influence in Asia. The Burmese regime wants to decrease its heavy reliance on China by attracting American and European investment—a plan fully backed by Suu Kyi and her NLD.

One of the US demands for "reform" has been to end the country's ethnic conflicts, which in many cases are in economically important areas of the country. The ongoing conflict in the northern Kachin state affects a resource-rich region, while the Karen rebellion near the Thai border in the south has the potential to block the development of the \$US50 billion Dawai industrial

zone.

Among the areas affected by the Rakhine conflict in the west are Thandwe, the site of the country's tourist beaches on the Bay of Bengal coast, and Kyaukphyu where China is constructing a major port to connect via rail and road links to southern China. Already risk assessment analysts are warning that the Rakhine conflict heightens dangers for potential investors.

The immediate trigger for the current violence was reportedly the murder of 10 Muslim men on June 3 by a 300-strong mob of Rakhine Buddhists. The attack was supposedly in retaliation for the rape and murder of a Buddhist in May—despite the fact that three men had already been charged over that crime. The June 3 incident set off revenge attacks and the violence soon escalated, beginning in Maungdaw but quickly spreading to the state capital Sittwe and nearby areas.

The underlying cause of the conflict is the decades-long oppression of the Rohingya Muslim population of Rakhine state by Burma's military rulers, who have whipped up Burmese Buddhist supremacism as a means of dividing working people.

The 800,000 Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state are a small minority in the country's predominantly Buddhist population of 64 million. Another 250,000 Rohingya live in Bangladesh, where many are refugees. The population is denied citizenship in both countries, rendering most of them stateless.

The Burmese military has formally denied citizenship to the Rohingya since 1982, declaring them illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. The Rohingya are not included among the country's designated 135 ethnic groups. They are not permitted to travel outside Rakhine, or own land, and often suffer extreme poverty.

Even before the military took power in 1962, the U Nu government in the 1950s made Buddhism the state religion and expelled the Burma Muslim Congress, as

part of a chauvinist campaign to drive Indians out of Burma.

In 1978 and again in 1991-1992, the army attempted to drive large numbers of Rohingya into Bangladesh. Human rights groups estimate that 10,000 died in appalling conditions in Bangladesh after the 1978 campaign. Most of the 200,000 driven out have since returned to Burma.

Anti-Rohingya chauvinism is not confined to the military. A *New York Times* article cited opposition figure Ko ko Gyi, who insisted that Rohingya statelessness was not Burma's problem but had to be solved by the "international community." "Anybody who wants Myanmar (Burmese) citizenship will have to learn one of Myanmar's languages and learn about our culture," he said.

Some commentators have suggested that the military might have instigated the current violence as a means of forcing opposition leader Suu Kyi to issue a statement in support of Rohingya citizenship that could open up divisions in NLD. While military involvement cannot be ruled out, the government is unlikely to encourage ethnic and communal violence, as it is seeking to ease tensions with the West.

The NLD has ruled out a making statement on the Rakhine conflict, saying it did not want to inflame the situation. Asked about the issue after addressing the International Labour Organisation in Geneva, Suu Kyi was evasive, but implied that the Rohingya were illegal immigrants and urged tougher border measures.

"We need very clear and precise laws with regard to citizenship to begin with... I think one of the greatest problems comes from the fear on both sides of the border—that is Bangladesh and Burma—that there will be illegal immigrants crossing all the time and this is due to the porous border. I think we need more responsible, incorrupt border vigilance," she said.

By refusing to take a stand in favour of granting citizenship rights and focussing on "illegal immigrants," Suu Kyi is helping to fuel anti-Rohingya prejudice. Her attitude to this oppressed minority underscores the fact that Suu Kyi and the NLD represent the interests of a dissident section of the Burmese ruling elite, not those of working people.