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Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Sat, 03/23/2013 - 14:14

Paper No. 5434

Dated 23-Mar-2013

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Between 20 and 26 persons are reported to have been killed in three days of violent clashes between Buddhists and Burman Muslims (not Rohingyas) in the central Myanmar cantonment town of Meikhtila since March 20, 2013. Official figures have, however, given the death toll as five only till the evening of March 22.

2. The town has a population of about 100,000 of whom one-third are estimated to be Muslims. The violence reportedly broke out following a quarrel between the Muslim owner of a jewellery shop and some of his Buddhist customers.
3. Five mosques, including the main mosque of the town, are reported to have been burnt down by Buddhist mobs. Armed Buddhist monks prevented journalists from taking photographs of the damages caused to the mosques.
4. Finding the local police unable to bring the violence under control, the Government imposed a State of Emergency in Meikhtilla and neighbouring townships and villages on March 22 to enable the deployment of the Army.

5. A reporter of the privately-owned Irrawaddy Journal has reported as follows: “Photo evidence of widespread carnage is also emerging, with news media websites and social media sites such as Facebook posting pictures that show numerous charred bodies and whole neighborhoods on fire. Some local residents told The Irrawaddy that militant Buddhist monks and laymen went on a rampage through the city in Mandalay Division on Friday morning, destroying mosques and what they believed were Muslim-owned properties. “It’s as if they are destroying the town. The situation is now out of control,” said a Pauk Chaung quarter resident, who wanted to remain anonymous for fear of his safety.”

6. He said Muslim residents were seeking shelter at sites in Meikhtila where police could offer them some form of protection. “They [police] are standing guard over 800 Muslim people taking refuge at a football ground. Now I’ve heard that the ministers for internal affairs and religious affairs and the chief minister for Mandalay Division are here,” the Buddhist man said. However, police had little control over events, according to the resident. “Now we have nearly 30 truckloads of riot police here, but they can’t control the mob,” he said. “Instead they are trying to put out the fires.”

7. The Irrawaddy Journal reporter added: “Thousands of Muslims, who are believed to make up as much as a third of the city’s population, have reportedly fled since Wednesday out of fear that they might be killed. On Friday evening, The Irrawaddy’s reporter in Meikhtila observed police evacuating about 1,500 residents, mostly women and children, out of the city’s Chan Aye quarter to a makeshift refugee camp on the town’s outskirts. More than 2,000 Muslim refugees were gathered at the site.”

8. Meikhtila is a garrison city (Cantonment) with a heavy military presence, located halfway between Mandalay and Naypyidaw.

9. The Journal has quoted Kay OO May, a representative of a local NGO, as saying that 12 Muslims and eight Buddhists are dead. “I myself witnessed two dead bodies,” she said. “Five mosques, including the biggest one, were destroyed. The Muslim quarter of Chan Aye was the most hard-hit.”

10. Members of the 88 Generation Students organization have criticized President Thein Sein for his allegedly inadequate response to the violence. Islamic Organizations have sent a letter to the President urging him to urgently provide Muslim people in the country with lawful protection.

11. The Irrawaddy Journal has commented as follows:’ “The clashes in Meikhtila are the latest flare-up in ongoing Buddhist and Muslim inter-communal violence in Burma. Since June 2012 there have been recurrent waves of violence between Buddhist Arakanese and Muslim Rohingya in western Burma’s Arakan State, which have killed 180 people and displaced 110,000 villagers, mostly Rohingyas. In recent months there have been several reports of inter-communal clashes in other parts of Burma, but no one was reportedly killed in these incidents.”

(The writer is Additional Secretary (retd), Cabinet Secretariat, Govt of India, New Delhi, and, presently, Director, Institute For Topical Studies, Chennai, and Associate of the Chennai Centre For China Studies. Twitter @SORBONNE75)

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