



## **Press Release: Continuing Tensions around Tharkayta Islamic Schools**

3<sup>rd</sup> May 2017, London, UK – On April 28<sup>th</sup> two Islamic schools in the Township of Tharkayta, an eastern suburb of Yangon where approximately 50,000 Muslims live, were sealed off and closed by a group of Buddhist Ultra-Nationalists. The group was upset that the schools were being used to host prayers, which they claimed were in defiance of restrictions previously imposed by authorities against the schools. Witnesses told BHRN that the mob was as large as 150 ultra-nationalists, and [The Irrawaddy](#) reported a brawl taking place at the scene. The incident took place on a Friday, which is a holy day for prayer for Muslims. The Irrawaddy also said their reporter on the scene was threatened by the nationalists when he approached them for comment, then forced to leave the scene. The schools are located on Anawmar 11 and 12 streets.

“Authorities have failed to protect the country’s minority Muslim population and have consistently complied with the demands of Buddhist-nationalist extremist groups. The actions of the extremist groups have clearly undermined the rule of law and are part of an increasing trend of groups targeting Muslims. Due to the failure of the authorities to take action against Buddhist extremists, Muslims in Burma are vulnerable to vigilante attacks, civilian level persecution and denial of access to fundamental human rights. Worse still is that the failure by the authorities to take any action against the extremist groups will encourage them to commit further attacks,” said Executive Director Kyaw Win of BHRN.

The scene apparently lasted for hours, where a mob gathered at the schools protesting their use for Friday prayer. Police reportedly stood by as the protests occurred and finally allowed the protesters to chain the entrances to the schools. As of now there is no indication by authorities when the schools will be allowed to reopen.

Taung Thar Lay Sayadaw from Meihkhtilar (a close ally of the notorious nationalist monk and hate preacher Wirathu) and U Thu Sitta, from the Patriotic Myanmar Buddhist Monk Association, led the mob surrounding the Islamic schools. Members of Buddhist extremist groups in these incidents were also from the Patriotic Blood Dhamma Network and members of local ultra-nationalist alliances. Other ultra-nationalist from areas surrounding Yangon, Mandalay, Meikhtilar, Maubin and Pathein were said to have travelled to join the mob protest as well.

Prior to the event, supporters of the ultra-nationalists groups and members of the Patriotic Blood Dhamma Network spread information on their Facebook pages, stating that the authorities have prohibited mass prayers in Islamic schools since October 2015. Under pressure from these groups, the authorities asked trustees from the eight Islamic schools in Tharkayta Township not to allow mass prayers in the schools. The trustees signed an undertaking specifying this on 20 October 2015.

An early manifestation of these tensions was witnessed when Buddhist ultra-nationalists disrupted a mass prayer by Muslims at an Islamic school in Tharkayta Township at around 1 pm on the 21<sup>st</sup> of

April 2017. The Muslims praying were gathered in a prayer room on Anawmar 12 Road for Friday prayer (Jumma). The nationalists also visited the local administration office to ask the authorities to take action against the trustees of the Islamic school. After this incident, the Patriotic Blood Dhamma Network asked the authorities to close the Islamic school for breach of the undertaking. Subsequently, the trustees of the school were summoned by the Tharkayta Township General Administration Department at 3 p.m. on 21 April and told not to organise mass prayers in future, according to a trustee who attended the meeting.

The Islamic school on Anawmar 11 Street had previously received official permission to host prayers according to documents received by BHRN. The Document, dated 29<sup>th</sup> August 1990 stated that authorities have granted permission to teach religious studies and to worship at the madrassah (Islamic school) in Tharkayta Township, which was given in 1959 as a substitute for a madrassah and a mosque that authorities demolished in Lower Pazundaung Township.

This order, which references events in the year after Tharkayta was established in 1958, contradicts the complaints of the ultra-Nationalists who claim the worshippers are holding prayers in defiance of orders not to do so. Further, any order barring a religious group from participation in religious practice is plainly discriminatory on its face. While Muslims are widely restricted in how and where they can practice their religion there are no such restrictions on Buddhists in the country who worship freely in the country and are even allotted time for prayer in public schools. As a striving democratic society Burma must ensure equal treatment for all under the law.

Further evidence of these tensions was witnessed when the Patriotic Blood Dhamma Network previously forced Muslims to cancel an event to mark the birth of the Prophet of Islam last January. The event was supposed to be held at the New Light hall in Tharkayta Township. The group has also interfered in legal cases between Buddhists and members of other religions, where the group was witnessed using racist words while pressuring the judges to favour Buddhists.

Muslims in Tharkayta Township are now left without a place of worship while the Islamic holy month Ramadan is scheduled to begin at the end of May. The authorities have said they can not take responsibility if any violence breaks out due to protests by the ultra-nationalist group.

## Notes for Editors

**Background on current situation:** Religious tensions in Myanmar have increased drastically over the past decade, where anti-Muslim sentiment has spread dramatically along with the rise of Buddhist Ultra-Nationalism. Anti-Muslim riots broke out in 2012 against the ethnic Rohingya in Rakhine State who are a stateless Muslim minority in the country. Similarly anti-Muslim riots broke out again in 2013 in several townships across the country. Several prominent anti-Muslim groups have gained disproportionate attention within the society, most notably the Ultra-Nationalist Buddhist organization Ma Ba Tha. Ma Ba Tha has managed to help push overtly anti-Muslim legislation through parliament and into law. There are several new Buddhist extremist groups that have recently emerged as well.

### Background on the Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN)

Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) works for human rights, minority rights and religious freedom in Burma. BHRN has played a crucial role advocating for human rights and religious freedom with politicians and world leaders.

### **Media Enquiries**

Members of The Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) are available for comment and interview.

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