

Separated by violence, Muslims and Buddhists seek to be reunited in Myanmar

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YANGON, Myanmar (RNS) Buddhists and Muslims in the central city of Meiktila were separated along faith lines after interreligious violence destroyed roughly 800 homes in 2013. Now residents have petitioned the government to allow them to reintegrate, but some remain skeptical about the neighbors' prospects for peace.

Affected residents submitted letters to President Thein Sein, Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, and parliament speaker Thura Shwe Mann outlining their request but say they are still awaiting a response.

The latest trouble began nearly two years ago, when riots broke out between Muslims and Buddhists in Meiktila, leaving at least 40 people dead, more than 60 wounded and thousands displaced. At the time, many residents sought safety in a nearby forest.

"We stayed together in the forest and slept for two nights," said Hla May, a Buddhist woman who now lives in one of Meiktila's internally displaced person camps. "We've now cried together, looking at our burned houses."

These Muslim and Buddhist residents, whom the government classified as IDPs, were initially placed in shared temporary housing after the riots. Later, the government segregated the homeless residents by religion and sent them to different camps.

Ko Aung Htay, who is in charge of Meiktila's camp for Muslim residents, said an officer from the local administration told him that if IDPs from both faiths live together in one place, they might cause trouble. To avoid problems, they were separated, a solution many residents deemed undesirable and unnecessary.

"We have been living together for a long time with no problems," said U Myint Lwin, who is in charge of the local transportation training center.

Aye Maung Win, who runs the city's camp for Buddhist IDPs at Inn Kone Sarsana Rakhita Monastery, said that although there have not yet been problems, trouble could still emerge if the camps were to be reintegrated. He added that residents of all faiths still mingle in Meiktila.

"We spend time together in teashops, though we live in different areas separated by a 30-foot-wide road now," he said.

Ko Khin Nan, who oversees Meiktila's redevelopment committee, said that the local government has provided 100 million kyats (about \$100,000) for reconstruction projects and that Muslim donors from Taunggyi and Yangon have supported the rebuilding of houses for IDPs in this predominantly Buddhist country.

The 350 households that were able to prove ownership of houses destroyed in the riots now live in new ones. About 3,000 people remain in camps. Additional apartments are being built this year for those who used to share land, said U Myint Lwin.

In the meantime, Meiktila residents continue to wait for a response.

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