A buddhist perspective On seeking solution to a difficult situation

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Throughout the history of mankind, at one time or another, at one place or another, there have been arguments, fights, conflicts, wars, with each side, with the exception of a few, thinking that their cause is just and right. There have been disagreements and conflicts as a result of ideology, as a result of boundaries; there have been conflicts between ethnic groups, and many times conflicts arise merely because of fanatical leaders, with erratic extremist views. Those who had once been friends could become enemies; countries that once had been at peace could engage in war.

At times conflicts would go on as the world watches helplessly, pondering how best to intervene and solve these, and at times bystanders would differ in their views as they take sides with those of the same religious faith, or of the same political views, etc. Amidst all this, defenseless and innocent victims suffer. It often takes force, power, and military intervention to stop this tragedy, and bring about peace and rebuild lives.

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This paper will focus on incidences at Burma's Rakhine (formerly Arakan) area where recent clashes caught the world's attention. It is also to highlight the truths hidden under strong, often biased and distorted media reports. This paper could also be a plea to fellow Buddhists to hear the plight of a small group of powerless Buddhists in a land behind Myanmar's Rakhine mountain ranges. Only fellow Buddhists would understand. Recent incidences in Myanmar, primarily rooted in religious and racial differences, were made all the more complicated with misinterpretations, and propaganda of some International community, organizations, and media presentations.

Myanmar is blessed with a land that produces oil, gas, rubies, sapphires, jades, gold, copper, and some other minerals. Half a century ago, it was the world's top producer of rice, and of the most valuable of hard wood – teak, along with some other agricultural produce. Its waters produce pearl and fisheries. But then it also became a land much mismanaged, misused, and infiltrated by advantage-seekers. Myanmar, like many countries and with its geographical situation, has had citizens who are descendants of settlers from neighboring countries. It has also had descendants of people from some European countries and the Middle East, who came to Myanmar during the British colonial days. Throughout the centuries, some descendants of these people, like those elsewhere, eventually lost contact with their roots and came to have only Myanmar to call 'home'.

Therefore like many other countries in the world, Myanmar has had citizens who follow faiths of their ancestors. Then, with British invasion, there also came Christianity. In Upper Myanmar's Muu River area, midst pure Upper-Burmans there still exist specks of Portuguese villages where many are still pure-blooded, with distinct sharp features, height, and complexion, and still very Christian, though the only language they know and speak is Myanmar. And there were Burmese citizens who followed the faith of their Jewish ancestors, though the number has now dwindled.

Knowing and accepting the fact that the majority of Myanmar's citizens were Buddhists, followers of other faiths blended well with Myanmar's Buddhists while still cherishing and practicing their own. It is a common sight in Myanmar's Hindu temples to have (sometimes

huge) Buddha statues at the center, flanked by statues of Hindu gods. It is worth mentioning that most, almost all, of Myanmar's Hindus call themselves Hindu-Buddhists. All Hindu homes have Buddha statues, along with framed pictures of Hindu gods. Food, water, light, flowers are offered to both the Buddha and Hindu gods. Hindu-Buddhists carry out Buddhist monastic practices as well as Hindu rituals.

Friends and neighbors of other faiths join their Christian friends at Christmas. Myanmar's Muslims, having been used to living for generations among Buddhists, also know life well acquainted with Buddhist festivals and customs. Myanmar's Rakhine, due to its proximity with what was formally India, and later West Pakistan, has had Muslim settlers who came over, looking for better lives in a land more versatile and fertile. And over the decades, they have lived symbiotic lives with native Rakhines, as farmers, fishermen, etc. and generations of them have known only Burma, especially Rakhine, as their homeland. The Rakhines were never hostile but accepted those illegal immigrants and understood their plight, and accepted them.

As the Bengali population expanded throughout Akyab (Sittway) District, Commissioner Mr. James Baxter, after an enquiry, submitted in 1939, a report clearly stating that the 'influx of Bengalis from Chittagong area into Arakan border areas and Akyab district is frighteningly increasing and he warned that if this influx was kept unchecked, it might amount to racial conflicts'.1

Commissioner Baxter's foresight proved very true as the illegal Bangladeshi population explosion ensued. Bangladesh with a 'land area of 55126 square miles holds a population of 170 million people and is increasing rapidly. This is due to the frighteningly high birth rates among Bengali population in Bangladesh'2. Arakan's land area is '14200 square miles, with a population of approximately four million people. Its population density is a little more than 220 people per square mile making an ideal place for Bengalis to infiltrate illegally and stay on'3.

^{1.} Statement of Condemnation-cum-Protest, Republic of the Union of Myanmar Rakhine Literature and Cultural Association, p 5.

^{2.} Ibid p 7

^{3.} Ibid p 8

A report in 1930-31 by the British government's Directorate of Health stated that '40,000 Muslims newly arrived at Maung Daw district'. Brigadier C. E. Lucas of 14th Infantry Division said, 'the root of Muslims is Chittagong district in the state of Bengal, in British India. Whether they have been in Rakhine for generations, or have newly migrated into Rakhine, they are known as Chittagonians'.⁴

The British noticed that by 1930 Muslim population had rapidly grown to 220,000 and so assigned a Commission in 1939 to investigate the rapid growth of Bengali Muslim population in Arakan (Rakhine). Commissioner R. B. Smart reported that 'groups of Chittagonians moving like tidal waves from the west into Arakan (Rakhine) is plainly pushing native Arakans out. While Muslims from Chittagong continuously enter Arakan in masses, it is like pushing native Arakans toward the east. Maung Daw township is overrun by invaders from Chittagong, and before long this will happen to Bu Thee Toung township. Everywhere in Akyab (Sittway) district new faces of invaders will be seen.'5

As the illegal immigrant groups became stronger due to accommodating behavior of the country's administration and the mainlanders, and as they gained firmer grounds, their demands grew; and they wanted to change their status from being mere immigrants to inhabitants of a Muslim state inside what was then Burma. Their demands are different from Myanmar's natives who followed other faiths. Myanmar's natives from mountain ranges in the country's north and northwest who have converted to Christianity are people belonging to Myanmar's ethnic tribes while Bangladeshi Muslims are immigrants and descendants of those immigrants most of whom entered the country illegally. And then there are the Hindus, also descendants of illegal immigrants from India, and there are descendants of Nepali from the colonial British army; but both groups have become homogenous with the country's Buddhists, and have never posed problems, religious or otherwise.

^{4.} Yakhine Pati pakkha hnint a kyann phet hmu,p. 68; AHRDO – Arakan Human Rights and Development Organization; http://www.arakanhrdo.org

^{5.} Ibid p 68

Of course there are the silent Muslims who were never demanding or problematic, and they too suffer the backlash by Myanmar's Buddhists when their aggressive fellow Muslims started the flames of hatred.

There are Kaman Muslims who had been in Rakhine earlier than Bengali Muslims, who some people now call Rohingya. Bengalis have great dislike for Kamans, and vice-versa. Kaman Muslims have lived in peace and in line with Rakhine and Myanmar cultures, and are accepted by Rakhines. A Kaman girl says she fled 'after witnessing Bengalis' murderous spree, knowing she too would be murdered had she remained among them'.6

The Bengali Infiltration into Arakan (Rakhine)

Thus in post-Independence Burma (Myanmar) some Bengali groups began to rebel against the government under the name 'Mujahid'; and this lasted more than a decade. Then insurgent leaders issued an open letter to the government, and 'in July 1951, the so-called Mujahid groups' 'for the very first time, demanded the formation of a 'Muslim State',7

'In August 1951, Buthidaung Parliamentarian Abdul Gaffa used the term Rohonya (which later became Rohingya) in the Guardian, a daily English newspaper'. On 21 May 1992, the then government 'declared that Rohingya is not Myanmar national and is not included in the 135 officially-recognized ethnic groups who inhabited within the Union. 'On 31 January 2009, Myanma Ahlin, a Myanmar daily reiterated that there is no such race as 'Rohingya' within the Union of Myanmar'; 'the present government, at its Second Ordinary Meeting of the First Session of Pyithu Hluttaw (Parliament), officially announced that these groups are no other than Bengalis.' Those 'ethnic minorities that have resided in one of the territories inside the country before the year 1185 of the Buddhist calendar (year 1823 of the Christian calendar)

^{6.} Ibid p 229

http://youtube.com/watch?v=FspYrhXTegE&feature=endscreen

^{7.} Statement of Condemnation-cum-Protest, p 5

as their primary country of residence are nationals of Myanmar'.8

By this time rumors emerged of assistance to Bengalis in Myanmar from some rich Muslim states. News of extremist Muslims' attacks around the world and in neighboring countries also has alarmed non-Muslims, and Buddhists in Myanmar. 'Some Bengali groups under the guise of insurgents, have seized and burnt villages in order to drive away locals and some are deliberately creating misunderstanding between law-abiding Bengalis and local Arakans', Bengali 'Mujahid rebels' commit 'terrorist acts including murder, robbery and rape', 'burning down villages, use of arms, use of force', 'created unbearable living conditions for local Arakans and thus, (locals) have to flee their homes leaving a very small number of Arakanese (Rakhine) villages in these areas'9.

'195 Arakanese villages in Maung Daw and surrounding areas along the border of Myanmar and Bengal before 1942 has decreased to 46 villages in 1995'10.

But then Rakhine is not the only place where Muslims have invaded. There have been reports of newcomers who do not differ in appearance from Myanmar's Myeik natives in the country's south. After settling in towns in the country's south, it frequently turns out that these are Muslims known as Pa-tshu (in Myanmar). Fair-skinned and good-looking, many of them succeed in converting a number of natives into Islam through wedlock. In Myanmar's Karen states, people talk of sudden presence of Muslims bringing large amounts of cash and buying land and houses in town-centers which natives previously refused to sell to Muslims. And of course marriage with Muslim men increases in number with an increase in number of Karen women converting to Islam, and subsequent childbirths in which the children naturally become Muslims. This in a large part is due to the irresponsible work of Myanmar's corrupt Immigration officials who are selfish and foolish enough not to have understood the dangers of the scheme and influx of immigrants.

^{8.} Ibid p 6

^{9.} Ibid p 8

^{10.} Ibid. p 8.

While all these had been taking place, mainlanders for decades did not have the slightest idea that native Rakhines were pushed out of their villages, many of which had become Muslim villages. U Hla Oo, who had been an official in Rakhine as recently as 1999, says: 'There were so many Bengalis in Maungdaw, originally a Yakhine majority town just a few years before', 'a demographic change from Yakhine majority to Bengali majority within a few years'. 11

Being poor illiterate peasants, the natives had no idea their plight was to be made known to mainlanders and to the world. Struggling with their daily lives, in remote villages behind the Rakhine mountain ranges, media access was almost non-existent, until the rape and murder of the girl that ignited it all pushed the land into the conflict that brought the people into the spotlight of international attention, biased aid groups, and distorted media reports. Along with news of Rakhine incidences, Myanmar's mainlanders also come to hear of a new wave of schematic invasions of Muslims into Myanmar.

'Although it is widely assumed that the rape-murder of the girl in Kyauk ni maw village, Ram bye township, sparked the retaliatory murder of 10 Muslims in Taung Goke, it is only an incidence among many. There are many cases of Buddhist girls being raped in Maung Daw, Bu thee Toung, Ya thay Toung townships. There have been continuous reports of attacks on Buddhists and non-Muslims, lootings, murders'.

'The situation in Maung Daw, a large town nearest to the border with Bangladesh, reversed within sixty years, from having (Rakhine) Buddhists as the majority of the population, to having Muslims as 96% of its population'.

'On 8th June 2012 about a thousand Muslims came out of the town's central mosque holding various kinds of swords, knives, iron rods, and heavy sticks, which had obviously been stored inside. Shouts to kill Buddhists were heard, then homes, buildings, monasteries were set on fire. Monks, the aged, the young, were killed, or trapped in burning houses. A police station with only five policemen tried to

^{11.} hlaoo1980.blogspot.com/p/Islamic-genocide-of-native-buddhists.html

stop the mob, but finally they also had to flee'. Shouts of Islamic slogans scared villagers. And when Buddhist villages were burned down, one after another, native Buddhists finally fought back.

Then in March 2013 'a report came out saying Buddhists led by Buddhist monks attacked Muslims. But what actually happened was that a Buddhist monk from a nearby village had come to Meiktila as a passenger on a motorbike. When the motorbike passed through a quarter with dense Muslim population, Muslims struck the monk's head with a sword, leaving a gaping cut, and the monk fell from the motorbike. The mob pulled off the monk's robe, and as the monk pleaded for mercy, the mob pulled him into the nearby Myoma mosque. Inside, they encouraged some children to pour acid and gasoline onto the monk. One or two of them cut off the monk's genitals while he was still alive, then burned him live`.¹⁴ And Meiktila's Buddhists rioted.

'Muslims were almost non-existent in Meiktila during the seventies. But today thirty percent of Meiktila's population are Muslims. Then they become gold-shop owners; and new mosques and Islamic schools suddenly appeared in Meiktila, with Islamic prayers blaring from loudspeakers annoying Buddhist townfolks.'15 'Bangladesh's Chittagong in the distant past was the land of Jumma people who were different from Bengalis in culture, history, religion, and other things. Almost all were Buddhists. When India gained independence from the British, Chittagong was put within the boundaries of what is now Bangladesh. Jummas knew that they would be better off within Myanmar, and strongly voiced their concern, but to no avail. Gradually a movement started to take shape for Jummas to lose their land to Bengalis'. There are first person accounts by Jummas of Muslims 'burning Jumma villages (in 1986 in Panchari and Kala states), taking Jumma's land, murders, destruction of monasteries, rapes (in one account in front of parents-in-law).' Jummas are constantly threatened 'that they would be murdered if they did not convert to

^{12.} Ya khine Pati pakkha hnint a kyann phet hmu, p 26-28

^{13.} Ibid p 137-138

^{14.} Ibid p 140-141

^{15.} Ibid p 143

Islam'; 'many Jumma girls are raped, forced into marriage, forced to convert to Islam', 16

Most of these go unheard by the outside world, and worse, these victims almost never had the idea to fabricate the incidences while Muslims and their allies had every advantage to invent stories. In many cases, with the help of wealthy supporters, unsuspecting internet web page uploaders, and through media that fail to go to crime-scenes in remote places to verify what they have heard, false reports against Buddhists go round.

The Media and International Organizations

TIME Magazine's July 01, 2013 publication¹⁷ surprised Myanmar's Buddhists with its article condemning venerable Wirathu as a terrorist preaching hate speech urging Buddhists to "make your blood boil", that 'plenty of Muslim blood is being spilled', that scores of Muslims have been killed. The venerable, like all others who had been alarmed at the rapid increase in number of mosques, at the sudden appearance of new faces of Muslims in many parts of the country, also been alarmed at the number of country girls converting to Islam through marriage, had merely warned Buddhists to be cautious of infiltrating Muslims, and to protect Buddhism. There had certainly been no mention of killing Muslims, and when riots broke out, the venerable Wirathu, like many other venerables, had protected and given support to them.

Natives who have been forced out of their land are saddened when outsiders and international organizations personnel visit, only to meet with Muslims who often would give false information. These outsiders would then take false information to the world, to world's powers, and to the world's strongest organizations.

A presentation was made to the United States Commission on

^{16.} Ibid p 172-183

^{17.} https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/full-text-of-the-banned-timestory-the-face-of-buddhist- terror

International Religious Freedom by Chris Lewa¹⁸ who reported, among others, of 'forcible closure of mosques and madrasahs', that 'Muslims are forced to build pagodas and monasteries', that 'Muslim men must shave their beard to obtain a permission to marry and, if they marry unofficially they are at risk of being arrested and jailed'.

Native Rakhines seldom go near Muslim dominated places which used to be the natives' home, and many times cases of rape, murder, house-burning went unreported. And Muslim accomplices spread news that (illegal immigrant Bangladeshi) Muslims are the suppressed groups. When the world came to take notice of the conflicts, they invented and circulated more lies. When three policemen on duty approached a Muslim village, men came out of the village shouting and carrying weapons. The policemen, outnumbered, fled; but only two escaped. When officials searched for the missing policeman in and around the now-Muslim-occupied village, the policeman's bloodstained shirt, boots, gun, were found around the village. The Muslims hastily spread false news reporting that 'Muslims had been killed'. 19 Whenever riots take place, it is Muslims igniting the incidence, for instance, rape-murder of a girl in Maung Daw, gold shopkeepers beating customers in Meiktila, a Muslim beating a Buddhist in Lashio; but only Buddhist mobs get on world news.

When 'fake photos'²⁰ and 'Muslim killing lies'²¹ against Burma were released 'Mr. Faraz Ahmed Siddiqui the famous blogger from Karachi and a fair-minded Muslim' 'exposed the conspiracy of his fellow Muslims'²² Still Myanmar and the world have Muslims who do not have any idea about these schemes; they are merely good human beings who are good innocent followers of their faith, and good and harmless to country and society. When plans like invading and

^{18.} www.uscirf.gov/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id='s land. 2147&Itemid=1

^{19.} news.yahoo.com/myanmar-16-rohingya-muslims-killed-rakhine-state-15

^{20.} blogs.tribune.com.pk/story/12687/social-media-is-lying-to-you-about-burmas-muslim-cleansing/comment-page-3/

^{21.} www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPyaEyzPznY

 $^{22.\} hlaoo 1980. blog spot. com/2012/08/fake-photos-lies-and-muslim-killing sin. htm$

overrunning Myanmar's helpless Rakhines reach the outside world, and Buddhists retaliate, these good people also suffer. Mainlanders and Buddhists only now clearly hear about Bu thee doung and Maung Daw, originally places of native Rakhines; these places now have almost no native at all, and are almost like Bengali towns. It is here that Myanmar's recent conflicts started, and religious leaders, alongside government, international organizations, and NGOs, are trying how peace-building processes could best be carried out.

Efforts at Peace-building

It is a difficult situation that resulted from Bengalis illegally coming in like tidal waves, when Myanmar's leaders were not aware of it, and Myanmar's immigration personnel for years did what should not have been done. After gaining roots in a friendly land they say this corner of land is wholly theirs, and drive away its rightful owners committing murders, raping their women, and burning their villages. Now these invaders want to turn this corner of land into a Muslim state, and with the help of their accomplices, make up stories and propaganda go round. Now beyond Rakhine, hordes of Muslims are settling in Myanmar's big towns, building mosques, marrying unsuspecting locals and converting them. Even the UN and some NGOs are drawn into believing that these Bengalis are the suppressed, the bullied, the stateless.

Awakened by the eye-opening crises, leaders of various religious groups in Myanmar and community aid groups initiated and held interfaith meetings and seminars. There are some international groups that like to work discreetly but are very effectively helping people in need. Then there are those who work in their own ways within their means, but whose good deeds remain unknown outside their communities. Still there are some well-meaning international groups who are closely studying the situation, not yet giving comments or decisions, and not knowing what to do actually. It often takes force, power, and military and international intervention to stop the tragedies and rebuild lives. The role of governments is therefore crucial as they are those with the greatest means and resources. Leaders of Asia-Pacific region have been holding Regional Interfaith Dialogues annually for nearly a decade. These dialogues

give participants a great chance to meet and make friends with representatives of various faiths from other countries in the region though at present these dialogues do not have much to deal with the recent Myanmar conflicts. Myanmar's YMCA - Young Men's Christian Association – very well organized, and with experienced, fair-minded leadership, has been organizing interfaith activities in Yangon long before the Rakhine conflicts surfaced. Here group leaders of various faiths bring young people to the gathering where collective communal works are carried out. It has to be said that the work done cannot be said to be much country-wise, but making young people to meet is a small but effective step in the country's interfaith peace-building.

Myanmar's renowned venerable Sitagu Sayadaw took prompt action, and met with Muslim leaders, visited Rakhine, and supported victims indiscriminately. The venerable is much respected by religious leaders of all faiths in Myanmar, and Interfaith seminar arranged by the Sitagu Sayadaw included representatives from many parts of the world. This gave the participants a great chance to meet and hear one another. Of course there were a few with harsh discussions, otherwise it was full of friendship and understanding. The venerable however lightly pointed out that Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Kazakhstan, and countries as far west as Greece all used to be Buddhist countries.

Myanmar's leaders, no matter what their personal views and feelings may be, made great effort to bring peace to the region. Despite the hostility of some people, and the seriousness of the situation, the county's leaders were tolerant and calm. But at one point Myanmar's President politely but firmly stated that Bengali Muslims were not Myanmar citizens, and any third country was welcome to accept them, but no one came forward. Myanmar has to thank its regional leaders for being very patient and non-committal about the crisis, especially Indonesia, a Muslim country.

Though grassroot activities do not bring about much improvement to the overall situation, it makes Muslims in other places in Myanmar happier and feel at ease. Besides interfaith activities led by Christian leaders, some monks hold gatherings for Muslims and Buddhists at their monasteries, and one, the venerable Myawady Sayadaw in

Mandalay was invited to give some talks on Buddhism at a mosque. Monks in Meiktila gave shelter to Muslims during Meiktila's riots, and venerables from nearby towns, including the much criticized venerable Sayadaw Wirathu joined in saying words of kindness, donating food and other aids.

Myanmar's people will be happy to be helped by the UN and other organizations if they could be unbiased and understand the plight of Myanmar's Rakhines.

Some local and international groups understand that education and financial security play a significant role in helping locals out of their woes. Thus a number of international NGOs as well as local financiers help locals in agriculture. Some help locals with learning programs.

Those who have been lifelong friends with Muslims understand that most Muslims are innocent, and are not to be blamed and thus friendships are maintained, help given when needed. Muslims who have been teachers, medical professionals, and have worked in other fields still have the trust and love of their co-workers, former students and friends. They know that the friendship that has been there still exists.

Rakhines have one wishful thought which does not look very easy to accomplish, but would clearly be the best if it could be done. 'To solve this prolonged entangled problem... it is to bring Bangladesh's approximately one million Buddhists to settle in Myanmar, and to send the roughly 800.000 Bengalis who call themselves Rohingyas back to Bangladesh... Bangladesh stood for centuries as a Buddhist dominant country but now has less than 1% Buddhists due to accelerating Muslim attacks. Muslims are not keen about peaceful coexistence and are anxious to invade northern Rakhine using force. Rakhine Buddhists will gladly welcome Buddhists from Bangladesh who share the same language, the same faith, and the same history. Only the boundaries of modern day maps divide them. Bengalis in Rakhine also share the same religious faith, speak the same language, and also share the same tradition and food. Then there will be no more burning of villages and insurgencies. Rakhines also will no

more have to live in fear, will no more have to live with unforeseeable rebellions. Bangladeshi Muslims will no more have to live feeling frustrated to be with Buddhists'²³

And finally as a Buddhist one contemplates the Lord Buddha's Teachings and thinks of the Teachings in relation to the frustrations that arise on account of the recent crisis. The Buddha says tolerance is noble, so tolerance is remembered even if not practiced on this occasion. Then one of the most significant of the Lord's Teachings – kamma – is also thought of. Then it is thought that this must be the natives' past kamma bringing back results; this past kamma is hitting the natives hard so that in spite of their faith in Buddhism, they had to flee and become homeless.

Applying insight knowledge to all that has been heard, it can be contemplated that this is sound coming into contact with ear-base bringing about the arising of the ear-consciousness. Sound and ear-base are matter, the arisen ear-consciousness is mind. It is the arising of mind and matter. Sound and ear-base are causes; the arisen ear consciousness is the result Sound is the ultimate reality, perceiving it as words attacking Rakhines is concepts. There will be anger when attention is turned toward concepts. Being ordinary, being human, most of the time there will be anger on hearing about conflicts. There will be forgetfulness and the ultimate realities will not be contemplated. Then there will be thoughts on how best to protect Rakhine from losing Buddhism. It can be contemplated that sound arises and passes away, that anger arises and passes away. This is contemplating the nature of mind and matter which is impermanence. Following this nature, there will come a day when one yields to this impermanence, and all the anger one has felt for Buddhism and Rakhine will be no more. Following the nature of impermanence there will come a time when even the Lord Buddha's great Teachings will be no more. Then one comes to realize that all the anger and frustration will be subject to impermanence. Then for this brief moment there will be peace and calm.

^{23.} yakhine pati pakkha hnint a kyann phet hmu, p 224-225

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