

Burmese Christians Face Deadly Attacks

As U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arrived in Burma's capital, Naypyidaw, last week in a show of support for authorities' ostensible reforms and to discuss minority rights, government troops killed civilians and burned houses in a Christian-majority state about 450 miles away.

On Wednesday, Nov. 30, the day Clinton arrived, Burmese soldiers killed a woman and injured six other villagers as they fired four rounds of mortar shells at civilians in the Tarlawgyi area of Kachin state's Waingmaw Township, Kachin News Group reported.

Another battalion burned down 10 homes in Nam Wai village and five more in neighboring Hpa Ke village, both in Dawhpumyang sub-township in Bhamo district, the Thailand-based news agency added. The killing and arson followed two explosions that killed a student and injured another the previous night in the state's capital, Myitkyina. Local residents suspected government agents planted the bombs, a Kachin journalist told Compass by phone on condition of anonymity.

The twin blasts rocked the state capital days after a powerful explosion killed seven children and three internally displaced Kachin people and injured 16 other children at an orphanage on Nov. 13 in Myitkyina's Thida Ward. Two sons and a grandson of a Christian couple who run the orphanage in their home were among those killed, but police arrested the family, alleging they had detonated it, the news agency reported.

The attacks left civilians in Kachin, where an estimated 90 percent of the 1.2 million people are Christians, "terrified," the journalist said. About 90 percent of the roughly 56 million people in Burma (also known as Myanmar) are Buddhist,

mostly from the Burman ethnic group.

Ethnic Kachins and six other ethnic minorities in Burma have armed and unarmed groups that are fighting for independence or autonomy from the country's successive military-led regimes for decades.

"But the residents of Kachin are not afraid of the Kachin Independence Army [KIA, an insurgent group]," the source said. "It is the Burma Army they fear."

During Clinton's visit, which ended on Friday (Dec. 2), her agenda included talking to the military-led government of Burma about the long-time violent repression of ethnic minority groups that make up roughly 40 percent of the country's population. But Clinton's visit – first by a U.S. secretary of state since 1955 – was also seen as endorsement of measures the regime touts as reforms.

From last year's general election to the release of Burma's pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest, the Burmese government has showcased several reforms in order to end economic sanctions imposed on the country for over two decades. But the regime's hostilities toward ethnic minority groups have worsened in recent months, and tens of thousands of exiled pro-democracy activists have not been able to return home.

Kachin civilians have faced numerous attacks by the Burma Army since June, when the government ended a 17-year long cease-fire agreement with the KIA, the journalist said. The bomb explosions, he added, were an attempt to brand the insurgents as a terrorist group in the wake of Clinton's visit. Local residents suspected "government agents" exploded the bombs, as "the KIA never attacks civilians," he said.

Before the Nov. 13 blast, some residents saw two men riding a motorcycle throwing a parcel into the orphanage compound, New Delhi-based *Mizzima News* reported. The government-backed

Myanmar Ahlin daily suggested, however, that orphanage owner Dayawng Tang Gun, who is also a martial arts and music teacher, was making a bomb in his house that accidentally exploded and held him responsible also for previous bombings in the city.

Authorities also arrested Gun's wife, Ja Dim, and their son-in-law, Maung Maung. Police interrogated some of the orphanage's children and jailed the Christian family. For a few days they were not allowed contact with anyone, but now people can give food to them, the source said.

Five of the 16 children who were injured were still in hospital at press time. The 10 deceased were given a funeral by a local friend of the Christian couple, the source added.

The blast took place at about 8:30 p.m., soon after the orphanage's residents held their evening prayer. Gun was away on a work-related trip.

The body of an infant was thrown to the back of the house, and some people saw the hands and legs of children on the street, the source said of the scene at the orphanage. Gun's wife couldn't find her way out because the house had caught fire, so she climbed upstairs and jumped down, injuring her legs. After their discharge from the hospital, the children were moved to another nearby Christian orphanage.

The two bombs on Nov. 29 exploded in a span of five minutes in front of the Kachin National Makau Park in Shatapru Quarter. The first explosion killed Abraham, a Class IX student. The second blast injured a girl who was admitted to Myitkyina Public Hospital.

"Local people from households near the blast site were arrested by Burmese authorities," Kachin News Group reported. Authorities claim that almost all local residents are directly or indirectly part of the KIA.

"Kachin people realize that the majority Burman-led government is not only fighting the KIA but also Kachin people now," the news agency reported.

group Partners World recently released a report entitled, "Crimes in Northern Burma: Results from a Fact-Finding Mission to Kachin State," after collecting information through its local coordinators and eyewitness interviews of at least 200 people affected by the conflict in Kachin State. The report documented torture, extra-judicial killing, civilian casualties, human shielding, unlawful arrest, forced labor, forced relocation, displacement, property theft and destruction allegedly by Burmese soldiers.

Palai Nan Naw, an 8-year-old elementary school student and member of a Baptist church from the Nam Lim Pa area, was killed outside of his house on Oct. 8 when soldiers from battalions 74 and 276 opened fire among the civilian population, according to one of the case studies in the report. Pausa Naw Din, 19, a farmer who attended a Catholic church, was also killed the same day in that village. He was running to the street outside of his house to flee from fighting on Oct. 8 when the Burma Army fired at him.

The report says the incidents show how the Burma Army "is in contravention of its legal obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law."

"Considering the nature and scale of these acts in combination with documented abuses in the broader civil war in Kachin state, the actions of the Burma government and the Burma Army may also amount to other serious violations, including crimes against humanity," it concludes.