



BHRN Urges Burmese Government to Enact a Law to Stop Hate Crimes Against Muslims



25 June 2020 – Yangon/London – Burma Human Rights Network calls on the Burmese Government to enact a law specifically regarding hate crimes, increasing prison sentences for violent crimes accompanied with bigotted language or intent, after a Muslim youth was brutally murdered by a Buddhist monk, who is also an ex-soldier. On 18 June, 16-year-old Ko Ko Zaw was stabbed to death by U Nanda Biwuntha, who is also known by his layperson name, Tun Naing Win. Tun Naing Win is 42 years old and is from Aung Myay Gone Village monastery.

“Currently Burma has no law regarding hate crimes even as anti-Muslim violence has plagued the country for years. It is an important measure to offer some protection or avenue for justice to minorities who come under attack because of their religion or ethnicity. With elections only months away, civil society organizations in Burma must take the lead to denounce these horrible crimes and push for legislation to address them at a time when Muslims will be most vulnerable to violence and scapegoating,” said BHRN’s Executive Director, Kyaw Win.

The incident took place in Sakhan Gyi village in Aunglan Township in Magwe Region. Ko Ko Zaw, who was with his three siblings, was attacked by the monk with a sword, without any provocations. According to eyewitnesses of the incident, the monk started using abusive language

against the four Muslim youths, including a racial slur, as they were trying to help a coach trapped in sand.

An eyewitness said U Nanda Biwuntha, first asked the four brothers if they were Burmese or Kalar, a derogatory term used in Burma referring, Muslims and the people of South Asian origins. When the four replied that they were Muslims, he told other Buddhists standing around the coach not to help in pushing out the coach but to “let these Kalar work for us.” He then threatened that the brothers would be killed if they did not follow his orders.

When the youths asked for help from the bystanders, they were told that the monk must be out of his senses and advised them to just ignore him. However, the monk followed them and threatened to kill them with the sword he was holding. The monk followed them and shouted “This is not your country. You cannot move around as you wish. Do you want a Muslim-Buddhist riot?”

The monk first attacked Ko Ko Zaw while shouting the racial slur “Kalar” and stabbed his neck from behind. He then stabbed him in his back. When he was about to attack the other sibling of Ko Ko Zaw, the monk was overpowered by the people. Ko Ko Zaw died of his injuries when he was brought to a nearby hospital.

The youth was brutally murdered in front of 30 people in broad daylight. Not only did the bystanders fail to help the youths, but they instead told the three siblings of Ko Ko Zaw not to retaliate against the monk. The siblings were afraid that their self-defence could trigger anti-Muslim riots, as has happened many times before in Burma. The monk was later arrested by Shwe Pantaw Station Police and was charged under section 302 of the Penal Code for murder.

U Nanda Biwuntha has a history of anti-Muslim violence, and in one incident he slapped a Muslim man for having a beard. In another incident he showed a membership card of the ultranationalist Buddhist 969 Movement after assaulting a Muslim youth. The monk used to antagonize and threaten Muslims as they gathered on Friday, a holy day for Muslims. Despite his violent behaviour, local authorities never intervened.

U Nanda Biwuntha was defrocked, and he is held in Thayet Prison. The authorities are not releasing details of the cause of the incident to the media. A police officer handling the murder, Captain Khin Soe, gave *Irrawaddy* news agency inaccurate information on the age of the victim, saying he was 19 years old, and he denied that it was an anti-Muslim hate crime, despite eyewitness stating that the monk used racial slurs while he was stabbing Ko Ko Zaw.

In the past, when a political deadlock occurs, Muslims are used as political scapegoats, and violence against them erupts. With the next general elections drawing closer, Muslims in the country are rightfully afraid they will again be met with violence as a political tool of those aligned with the military. Similarly, there is also concern that pro-military monks and military members will not be held accountable for their crimes since members of the military are so infrequently faced with consequences for violence against minorities.

This latest killing of a Muslim youth is a clear testament to the fact that hate crimes against Muslims remain a serious threat in Burma. Burma must enact laws against hate crimes, adding additional penalties to those using bigoted terms while committing acts of violence. Burma must also create laws prohibiting the use of derogatory language, such as the term ‘Kalar’, as they have been used as a tool by ultranationalists to dehumanize minorities and spread violence against them. BHRN encourages civil society organisations and human rights activists to initiate a civil rights movement, without fail, to stop the acts of discrimination against members of minority communities in Burma.

Organisation’s Background

BHRN is based in London, operates across Burma and 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.

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