



# The persecution of Myanmar's minority Muslims

BY **JASON SZEP AND ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL**

**April 8 – December 5, 2013** Yangon and Meikhtila, Myanmar and Ranong, Thailand

# Buddhist monks incite Muslim killings in Myanmar

Monks incited a deadly four-day rampage against minority Muslims in central Myanmar, Reuters found. The killings come amid the rapid spread of an apartheid-like movement known as 969

BY JASON SZEP

April 8 Meikhtila, Myanmar

**T**he Buddhist monk grabbed a young Muslim girl and put a knife to her neck.

“If you follow us, I’ll kill her,” the monk taunted police, according to a witness, as a Buddhist mob armed with machetes and swords chased nearly 100 Muslims in this city in central Myanmar.

It was Thursday, March 21. Within hours, up to 25 Muslims had been killed. The Buddhist mob dragged their bloodied bodies up a hill in a neighborhood called Mingalarzay Yone and set the corpses on fire. Some were found butchered in a reedy swamp. A Reuters cameraman saw the charred remains of two children, aged 10 or younger.

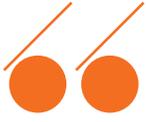
Ethnic hatred has been unleashed in Myanmar since 49 years of military rule ended in March 2011. And it is spreading, threatening the country’s historic democratic transition. Signs have emerged of ethnic cleansing, and of impunity for those inciting it.

Over four days, at least 43 people were killed in this dusty city of 100,000, just 80 miles (130 km) north of the capital of Naypyitaw. Nearly 13,000 people, mostly Muslims, were driven from their homes and businesses. The bloodshed here was followed by Buddhist-led mob violence in at least 14 other villages in Myanmar’s central heartlands and put the Muslim minority on edge across one of Asia’s most ethnically diverse countries.

An examination of the riots, based on interviews with more than 30 witnesses, reveals the dawn massacre of 25 Muslims in Meikhtila was led by Buddhist monks — often held up as icons of democracy in Myanmar. The killings took place in plain view of police, with no intervention by the local or central government. Graffiti scrawled on one wall called for a “Muslim extermination.”

Unrest that ensued in other towns, just a few hours’ drive from the commercial capital of Yangon, was well-organized, abetted at times by police turning a blind eye. Even after the March 21 killings, the chief minister for the region did little to stop rioting that raged three more days. He effectively ceded control of the city to radical Buddhist monks who blocked fire trucks, intimidated rescue workers and led rampages that gutted whole neighborhoods.

Not all of the culprits were Buddhists. They may have started the riots, but the first man to die was a monk slain by Muslims.



Suu Kyi, a devout Buddhist, has said little, beyond warning that the violence could spread if not dealt with by rule of law.



Still, the Meikhtila massacre fits a pattern of Buddhist-organized violence and government inaction detailed by Reuters in western Myanmar last year. This time, the bloodshed struck a strategic city in the very heart of the country, raising questions over whether reformist President Thein Sein has full control over security forces as Myanmar undergoes its most dramatic changes since a coup in 1962.

In a majority-Buddhist country known as the “Golden Land” for its glittering pagodas, the unrest lays bare an often hidden truth: Monks have played a central role in anti-Muslim unrest over the past decade. Although 42 people have been arrested in connection to the violence, monks continue to preach a fast-growing Buddhist nationalist movement known as “969” that is fueling much of the trouble.

The examination also suggests motives that are as much economic as religious. In one of Asia’s poorest countries, the Muslims of Meikhtila and other parts of central Myanmar are generally more prosperous than their Buddhist neighbors. In Myanmar as a whole, Muslims account for 5 percent of the populace. In Meikhtila, they comprise a third. They own prime real estate, electronics shops, clothing outlets, restaurants and motorbike dealerships, earning conspicuously more than the city’s Buddhist majority, who toil mostly as laborers and street vendors.

As Myanmar, also known as Burma, emerges from nearly half a century of isolation and military misrule, powerful business interests are jockeying for position in one of Asia’s last frontier markets. The recent violence threatens to knock long-established Muslim communities out of that equation, stoking speculation the unrest is part of a bigger struggle for influence in reform-era Myanmar.

The failure of Nobel Peace Prize-winner Aung San Suu Kyi, now opposition leader in parliament, to defuse the tension further undermines her image as a unifying moral force. Suu Kyi, a devout Buddhist, has said little, beyond warning that the violence could spread if not

dealt with by rule of law.

Suu Kyi declined to be interviewed for this story.

## GOLD HAIR CLIP

**The spark was simple enough.**

Aye Aye Naing, a 45-year-old Buddhist woman, wanted to make an offering of food to local monks. But she needed money, she recalled, sitting in her home in Pyon Kout village. At about 9 a.m. on March 20, a day before the massacre, she brought a gold hair clip to town. She had it appraised at 140,000 kyat (\$160). With her husband and sister, she entered New Waint Sein, a Muslim-owned gold shop, which offered her 108,000 kyat. She wanted at least 110,000.

Shop workers studied the gold, but the clip came back damaged, she said. The shop owner, a young woman in her 20s, now offered just 50,000. The stout mother of five protested, calling the owner unreasonable. The owner slapped her, witnesses said. Aye Aye Naing’s husband shouted and was pulled outside, held down and beaten by three of the store’s staff, according to the couple and two witnesses.

Onlookers gathered. Police arrived, detaining Aye Aye Naing and the owner. The mostly Buddhist mob turned violent, hurling stones, shouting anti-Muslim slurs and breaking down the shop’s doors, according to several witnesses. No one was killed or injured, but the Muslim-owned building housing the gold shop and several others were nearly destroyed.

“This shop has a bad reputation in the neighborhood,” said Khin San, who says she watched the violence from her general store across the street. “They don’t let people park their cars in front. They are quarrelsome. They have some hatred from the crowd.”

That hatred had been further stoked by a leaflet signed by a group calling itself “Buddhists who feel helpless” and handed out a few weeks before. It suggested Muslims in Meikhtila were conspiring against Buddhists, assisted by money



“We don’t want to attack you,” one monk shouted at the police. “We just want the Muslims.”



from Saudi Arabia, and holding shady meetings in mosques. It was addressed to the area’s monks.

Tensions escalated. By about 5:30 p.m., four Muslim men were waiting at an intersection. As a monk passed on the back of a motorbike, they attacked. One hit the driver with a sword, causing him to crash, witnesses said. A second blow sliced the back of the monk’s head. One of the men doused him in fuel and set him on fire, said Soe Thein, a mechanic who saw the attack. The monk died in hospital.

Soe Thein, a Buddhist, ran to the market. “A monk has been killed! A monk has been killed!” he cried. As he ran back, a mob followed and the riots began. Muslim homes and shops went up in flames.

Soe Thein identified the attackers by name and said he saw several in the village days after the monk was murdered. Police declined to say whether they were among 13 people arrested and under investigation related to the Meikhtila violence.

### “WE JUST WANT THE MUSLIMS”

**That evening, flames devoured much of** Mingalarzay Yone, a mostly Muslim ward in east Meikhtila. The fire razed a mosque, an orphanage and several homes. Hundreds fled. Some hid in Buddhist friends’ houses, witnesses said. About 100 packed into the thatched wooden home of Maung Maung, a Muslim elder.

As the mob swelled in size, Win Htein, a lawmaker in Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy party, tried to restrain the crowd but was held back. “Someone took my arm and said be careful or you will become a victim,” he said.

About 200 police officers watched the riots in the neighborhood before leaving around midnight, he said.

By about 4 a.m., the Muslim men inside Maung Maung’s house were braced for battle, chanting in Arabic and then shouting in Burmese, “We’ll wash our feet in Burman blood.” (The Burmans, or Bamah, are

Myanmar’s ethnic majority.) Nearly a thousand Buddhists were outside.

When dawn broke, at about 6 a.m., the only police presence in the area was a detail of about 10 officers. They slowly backed away, allowing the mob to attack, said Hla Thein, 48, a neighborhood Buddhist elder.

The Muslims fled through the side of the house, chased by men with swords, sticks, iron rods and machetes. Some were butchered in a nearby swamp, said Hla Thein, who recounted the events along with four other witnesses, both Buddhist and Muslim.

Others were cut down as they ran toward a hilltop road. “They chased them like they were hunting rabbits,” said NLD lawmaker Win Htein.

Police saved 47 of the Muslims, mostly women and children, by encircling them with their shields and firing warning shots in the air, Hla Thein said. “We don’t want to attack you,” one monk shouted at the police, according to a policeman. “We just want the Muslims.”

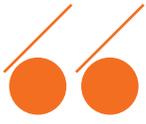
Ye Myint, the chief minister of Mandalay region that includes Meikhtila, told reporters later that day that the situation was “stabilizing.” In fact, it was getting worse. Armed monks and Buddhist mobs terrorized the streets for the next three days, witnesses said.

They threatened Thein Zaw, a fireman trying to douse a burning mosque. “How dare you extinguish this fire,” he recalls one monk shouting. “We are going to kill you.” A group of about 30 monks smashed the sign hanging outside his fire station and tried to block his truck. He drove through a hail of stones, one striking below his eye, and crashed, he said, showing his wound.

“A monk with a knife at one point swung at me,” said Kyaw Ye Aung, a junior firefighter who, like Thein Zaw, is Buddhist.

Three days later, on the hill where Muslim bodies were burned, this reporter found the remains of a mix of adults and children: pieces of human skull, vertebrae and other bones, and a singed child’s backpack.

Nearby, municipal trucks dumped bodies



Rioters were allowed 30 minutes to ransack a mosque before police would disperse the crowd.



in a field next to a crematorium in Meikhtila's outskirts. They were burned with old tires.

## MURKY POLITICAL FORCES

**Knife-wielding monks jar with Buddhism's** better-known image of meditative pacifism.

Grounded in a philosophy of enlightenment, nonviolence, rebirth and the vanquishing of human desires, Buddhism eschews crusades or jihads. It traditionally embraces peace, clarity and wisdom — attributes of the Buddha who lived some 2,500 years ago.

About 90 percent of Myanmar's 60 million people are practicing Buddhists, among the world's largest proportion. Sheathed in iconic burgundy robes, Buddhist monks were at the forefront of Myanmar's struggle for democracy and, before that, independence.

Many Burmese find it easier to assume a cherished institution has been infiltrated by thugs and provocateurs than to admit the monkhood's central role in anti-Muslim violence in recent years.

On the streets of Meikhtila, witnesses saw monks from well-known local monasteries. They also saw monks from Mandalay, the country's second-largest city and a center of Burmese culture about 100 miles (160 km) to the north. One such visitor was the nationalistic monk Wirathu.

Wirathu was freed last year from nine years in jail during an amnesty for hundreds of political prisoners, among the most celebrated reforms of Myanmar's post-military rule. He had been locked up for helping to incite deadly anti-Muslim riots in 2003.

Today, the charismatic 45-year-old with a boyish smile is an abbot in Mandalay's Masoeyein Monastery, a sprawling complex where he leads about 60 monks and has influence over more than 2,500 residing there. From that power base, he is leading a fast-growing movement known as "969," which encourages Buddhists to shun Muslim businesses and communities.

The three numbers refer to various attributes of the Buddha, his teachings and the monkhood. In practice, the numbers have become the brand of a radical form of anti-Islamic nationalism that seeks to transform Myanmar into an apartheid-like state.

"We have a slogan: When you eat, eat 969; when you go, go 969; when you buy, buy 969," Wirathu said in an interview at his monastery in Mandalay. Translation: If you're eating, traveling or buying anything, do it with a Buddhist. Relishing his extremist reputation, Wirathu describes himself as the "Burmese bin Laden."

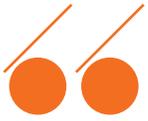
He began giving a series of controversial 969 speeches about four months ago. "My duty is to spread this mission," he said. It's working: 969 stickers and signs are proliferating — often accompanied by violence.

Rioters spray-painted "969" on destroyed businesses in Meikhtila. Anti-Muslim mobs in Bago Region, close to Yangon, erupted after traveling monks preached about the 969 movement. Stickers bearing pastel hues overlaid with the numerals 969 are appearing on street stalls, motorbikes, posters and cars across the central heartlands.

In Minhla, a town of about 100,000 people a few hours' drive from Yangon, 2,000 Buddhists crammed into a community center on February 26 and 27 to listen to Wimalar Biwuntha, an abbot from Mon State. He explained how monks in his state began using 969 to boycott a popular Muslim-owned bus company, according to Win Myint, 59, chairman of the center that hosted the abbot.

After the speeches, the mood in Minhla turned ugly, said Tun Tun, 26, a Muslim tea-shop owner. Muslims were jeered, he said. A month later, about 800 Buddhists armed with metal pipes and hammers destroyed three mosques and 17 Muslim homes and businesses, according to police. No one was killed, but two-thirds of Minhla's Muslims fled and haven't returned, police said.

"Since that speech, people in our village became more aggressive. They would swear at



They're like enemy base stations for us. More mosques mean more enemy bases, so that is why we must prevent this.



us. We lost customers," said Tun Tun, whose tea shop and home were nearly destroyed by Buddhists on March 27. One attacker was armed with a chainsaw, he said.

A local police official made a deal with the mob: Rioters were allowed 30 minutes to ransack a mosque before police would disperse the crowd, according to two witnesses. They tore it apart for the next half hour, the witnesses said. A hollowed-out structure remains. Local police denied having made any such an agreement when asked by Reuters.

Two days earlier in Gyobingauk, a town of 110,000 people just north of Minhla, a mob destroyed a mosque and 23 houses after three days of speeches by a monk preaching 969. Witnesses said they appeared well organized, razing some buildings with a bulldozer.

### "ENEMY BASES"

**Wirathu denied directing the monks in Meikhtila and elsewhere.**

"You have the right to defend yourselves. But you don't have the right to kill or destroy," he said in the interview.

Wirathu said he was in Meikhtila to persuade monks not to fight. At one point, he delivered a speech on a car roof. A first-hand account of what he said was not available.

He acknowledged spreading 969 and warned that Muslims were diluting the country's Buddhist identity. That is a comment he has made repeatedly in speeches and social media and by telephone in recent weeks to a large and growing following.

"With money, they become rich and marry Buddhist Burmese woman who convert to Islam, spreading their religion. Their businesses become bigger and they buy more land and houses, and that means fewer Buddhist shrines," he said.

"And when they become rich, they build more mosques which, unlike our pagodas and monasteries, are not transparent," he added. "They're like enemy base stations for us. More

mosques mean more enemy bases, so that is why we must prevent this."

Wirathu fears Myanmar will follow the path of Indonesia after Islam entered the archipelago in the 13th century. By the end of the 16th century, Islam had replaced Hinduism and Buddhism as the dominant religion on Indonesia's main islands.

Wirathu began preaching the apartheid-like 969 creed himself in 2001, when the U.S. State Department reported "a sharp increase in anti-Muslim violence" in Myanmar. Anti-Muslim sentiment was fueled in March that year by the Taliban's destruction of Buddhist images in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, and in September by al Qaeda's attacks in the United States.

The monk continued until he was arrested in 2003 and sentenced to 25 years in prison for distributing anti-Muslim pamphlets that incited communal riots in his birthplace of Kyaukse, a town near Meikhtila. At least 10 Muslims were killed in Kyaukse by a Buddhist mob, according to a U.S. State Department report.

Wirathu has a quick answer to the question of who caused Meikhtila's unrest: the Buddhist woman who tried to sell the hair clip. "She shouldn't have done business with Muslims."

### "STATE INVOLVEMENT"

**Wirathu should be arrested, said Nyi Nyi Lwin,** a former monk better known by his holy name U Gambira who led the "Saffron Revolution" democracy uprising in 2007 that was crushed by the military. "What he preaches deviates from Buddha's teachings," he said. "He is a monk. He is an abbot. And he is dangerous. He is becoming very scary and pitiful."

But Gambira said only the government can stop the anti-Muslim mood.

"In the past, they prevented monks from giving speeches about democracy and politics. This time they don't stop these incendiary speeches. They are supporting them," he said. "Because Wirathu is an abbot at a big monastery of about 2,500 monks, no one dares to speak



Cell phones in hand, monks inspected cars leaving town. A bulldozer was used to destroy some buildings.



back to him. The government needs to take action against him.”

Hla Thein, a witness to the massacre in Meikhtila, said authorities did surprisingly little to stop the violence. “It was like they were waiting for an order that never came,” he said.

One senior policeman told Reuters he expected to be ordered to forcibly restrain the riotous mob, but was told not even to use truncheons.

That pattern echoes what Reuters reporters found last year in an examination of October’s anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar’s western Rakhine State. There, a wave of deadly attacks was organized, according to central-government military sources. They were led by Rakhine Buddhist nationalists tied to a powerful political party in the state, incited by Buddhist monks, and, some witnesses said, abetted at times by local security forces.

The latest bloodshed could have been nipped in the bud, said NLD lawmaker Win Htein, a former army captain who spent 20 years as a political prisoner. He said the region’s military commander, Aung Kyaw Moe, could have stopped the riots with a few stern orders — especially given that thousands of soldiers are permanently stationed in Meikhtila and nearby.

Aung Kyaw Moe insisted authorities did their job. “It is like a battle. When it first starts you can’t really guess the manpower needed or how big it is going to be. But there was protection.”

Min Ko Naing, a former political prisoner revered by Burmese nearly as much as Suu Kyi, was in Meikhtila as the violence began. After the massacre, he said, the mob looked well organized. Cell phones in hand, monks inspected cars leaving town, he said. A bulldozer was used to destroy some buildings. “The ordinary public doesn’t know how to use a bulldozer,” he said.

The U.N. special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar said he had received reports of “state involvement” in the violence. Soldiers and police sometimes stood by “while atrocities have been committed before their very eyes, including by well-organized ultra-nationalist Buddhist

mobs,” said the rapporteur, Tomas Ojea Quintana. “This may indicate direct involvement by some sections of the state or implicit collusion and support for such actions.”

Ye Htut, a presidential spokesman and deputy minister of information, called those accusations groundless. “In fact, the military and the government could not be concerned more about this situation,” he said.

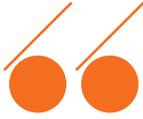
Authorities imposed martial law on the afternoon of March 22, the third day of violence. By then, only three people had been arrested, all of them for carrying weapons, a police official said. As they began to make more arrests, the unrest ended the next day. A total of 1,594 buildings were destroyed, the regional government said.

It started up a day later in Tatkon on the outskirts of the capital Naypyitaw. The riots then swept south to Bago Region, erupting along a highway just north of Yangon. By March 29, at least 15 towns and villages in central Myanmar had suffered anti-Muslims riots. In Yangon, some Muslims prepared for violence by Buddhists, shuttering shops and leaving to stay with relatives elsewhere.

On April 2, 13 Muslim boys died in a fire at a Yangon religious school. Many grieving relatives say they believe the blaze was deliberately set. The floors were surprisingly slick with oil during the blaze, they said. Yangon officials say it was caused by an electrical short circuit.

Some speculate the violence may be orchestrated by conservative forces pushing back at reformers. Or that crony businessmen linked to the former junta hope to knock Muslims out of business and create an economic vacuum in the heartlands that only they can fill. This last theory resonated with some Muslim businessmen such as Ohn Thwin, 67.

“This is both religious anger and economics,” he said, surveying the remnants of his 30-year-old metalworking shop at a popular corner of Meikhtila, a strategic city where three highways intersect. Like many Muslims, he can trace his ancestry back several generations. And like many, he runs a profitable business and has



I can't  
sleep at  
night. I  
keep  
thinking  
there will  
be another  
attack.



dozens of Buddhist friends, including one who helped him escape the violence.

### MAKESHIFT REFUGEE CAMPS

**Across town, about 2,000 people cram into a two-story high school, one of several makeshift refugee camps housing about 11,000 of the town's Muslims, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Many more squeezed into a nearby stadium.**

It's unclear if the Muslims whose businesses were destroyed will be able to reclaim their prime real estate. Ye Myint, the region's chief, said they may be moved to new areas — a policy that backfired in Rakhine State, where segregation has only led to further communal violence.

"Once we have achieved a time when there is peace, stability and the rule of law, then we look into resettlement," said Ye Myint.

The high school feels like a jail. Muslims inside cannot leave at will. Friends and relatives are kept waiting outside. Police block journalists from speaking with Muslims — even through a gate.

"I can't sleep at night. I keep thinking there will be another attack," said Kyaw Soe Myint, 40, who was waiting to see his 10 cousins inside

before a guard shooed him away. "We're living with fear."

The identity of those arrested is unclear. But according to police, among those detained was the gold shop owner.

Aye Aye Naing, owner of the hair clip, remained shocked by the violence. "I feel sad for the Muslims who have been killed," she said. "All humans are the same; it's just the skin color that is different. We have friends who are Muslims." She said she doesn't know what became of her hair clip. 

Cover photograph by **Damir Sagolj**

Additional reporting by **Min Zayer Oo**

Editing by **Andrew R.C. Marshall, Michael Williams and Bill Tarrant**



# Myanmar's official embrace of extreme Buddhism

Over the past year, radical monks have preached an anti-Muslim creed. The minister of religion, among others, approves

BY ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL

June 27 Yangon

**T**he Buddhist extremist movement in Myanmar, known as 969, portrays itself as a grassroots creed.

Its chief proponent, a monk named Wirathu, was once jailed by the former military junta for anti-Muslim violence and once called himself the “Burmese bin Laden.”

But a Reuters examination traces 969's

origins to an official in the dictatorship that once ran Myanmar, and which is the direct predecessor of today's reformist government. The 969 movement now enjoys support from senior government officials, establishment monks and even some members of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), the political party of Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

Wirathu urges Buddhists to boycott Muslim shops and shun interfaith marriages. He calls mosques “enemy bases.”

Among his admirers: Myanmar's minister of religious affairs.

“Wirathu's sermons are about promoting love and understanding between religions,” Sann Sint, minister of religious affairs, told Reuters in his first interview with the international media. “It is impossible he is inciting religious violence.”

Sann Sint, a former lieutenant general in Myanmar's army, also sees nothing wrong with the boycott of Muslim businesses being led by the 969 monks. “We are now practicing market economics,” he said. “Nobody can stop that. It is up to the consumers.”

President Thein Sein is signaling a benign view of 969, too. His office declined to comment for this story. But in response to growing controversy over the movement, it issued a statement Sunday, saying 969 “is just a symbol of peace” and Wirathu is “a son of Lord Buddha.”

Wirathu and other monks have been closely linked to the sectarian violence spreading across Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. Anti-Muslim unrest simmered under the junta that ran the country for nearly half a century. But the worst fighting has occurred since the quasi-civilian government took power in March 2011.

Two outbursts in Rakhine State last year killed at least 192 people and left 140,000 homeless, mostly stateless Rohingya Muslims. A Reuters investigation found that organized attacks on Muslims last October were led by Rakhine nationalists incited by Buddhist monks and sometimes abetted by local security forces.

In March this year, at least 44 people died and 13,000 were displaced — again, mostly



Wirathu's sermons are about promoting love and understanding between religions.

Muslims – during riots in Meikhtila, a city in central Myanmar. Reuters documented in April that the killings happened after monks led Buddhist mobs on a rampage. In May, Buddhists mobs burned and terrorized Muslim neighborhoods in the northern city of Lashio. Reports of unrest have since spread nationwide.

The numbers 969, innocuous in themselves, refer to attributes of the Buddha, his teachings and the monkhood. But 969 monks have been providing the moral justification for a wave of anti-Muslim bloodshed that could scuttle Myanmar's nascent reform program. Another prominent 969 monk, Wimala Biwuntha, likens Muslims to a tiger who enters an ill-defended house to snatch away its occupants.

“Without discipline, we'll lose our religion and our race,” he said in a recent sermon. “We might even lose our country.”

Officially, Myanmar has no state religion, but its rulers have long put Buddhism first. Muslims make up an estimated 4 percent of the populace. Buddhism is followed by 90 percent of the country's 60 million people and is promoted by a special department within the ministry of religion created during the junta.

### **EASY SCAPEGOATS**

**Monks play a complex part in Burmese politics.** They took a central role in pro-democracy “Saffron Revolution” uprisings against military rule in 2007. The generals — who included current President Thein Sein and most senior members of his government — suppressed them. Now, Thein Sein's ambitious program of reforms has ushered in new freedoms of speech and assembly, liberating the country's roughly 500,000 monks. They can travel at will to spread Buddhist teachings, including 969 doctrine.

In Burma's nascent democracy, the monks have emerged as a political force in the run-up to a general election scheduled for 2015. Their new potency has given rise to a conspiracy theory here: The 969 movement is controlled by disgruntled hardliners from the previous junta,

who are fomenting unrest to derail the reforms and foil an election landslide by Suu Kyi's NLD.

No evidence has emerged to support this belief. But some in the government say there is possibly truth to it.

“Some people are very eager to reform, some people don't want to reform,” Soe Thein, one of President Thein Sein's two closest advisors, told Reuters. “So, regarding the sectarian violence, some people may be that side — the anti-reform side.”

Even if 969 isn't controlled by powerful hardliners, it has broad support, both in high places and at the grass roots, where it is a genuine and growing movement.

Officials offer tacit backing, said Wimala, the 969 monk. “By letting us give speeches to protect our religion and race, I assume they are supporting us,” he said.

The Yangon representative of the Burmese Muslim Association agreed. “The anti-Muslim movement is growing and the government isn't stopping it,” said Myo Win, a Muslim teacher. Myo Win likened 969 to the Ku Klux Klan.

The religion minister, Sann Sint, said the movement doesn't have official state backing. But he defended Wirathu and other monks espousing the creed.

“I don't think they are preaching to make problems,” he said.

Local authorities, too, have lent the movement some backing.

Its logo — now one of Myanmar's most recognizable — bears the Burmese numerals 969, a chakra wheel and four Asiatic lions representing the ancient Buddhist emperor Ashoka. Stickers with the logo are handed out free at speeches. They adorn shops, homes, taxis and souvenir stalls at the nation's most revered Buddhist pagoda, the Shwedagon. They are a common sight in areas plagued by unrest.

Some authorities treat the symbol with reverence. A court in Bago, a region near Yangon hit by anti-Muslim violence this year, jailed a Muslim man for two years in April after he removed a 969 sticker from a betel-nut shop. He was sentenced



It's like building a fence to protect our religion.

under a section of Burma's colonial-era Penal Code, which outlaws "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings".

### QUASI-OFFICIAL ORIGINS

The 969 movement's ties to the state date back to the creed's origins. Wimala, Wirathu and other 969 preachers credit its creation to the late Kyaw Lwin, an ex-monk, government official and prolific writer, now largely forgotten outside religious circles.

Myanmar's former dictators handpicked Kyaw Lwin to promote Buddhism after the brutal suppression of the 1988 democracy uprising. Thousands were killed or injured after soldiers opened fire on unarmed protesters, including monks. Later, to signal their disgust, monks refused to accept alms from military families for three months, a potent gesture in devoutly Buddhist Myanmar.

Afterwards, the military set about co-opting Buddhism in an effort to tame rebellious monks and repair its image. Monks were registered and their movements restricted. State-run media ran almost daily reports of generals overseeing temple renovations or donating alms to abbots.

In 1991, the junta created a Department for the Promotion and Propagation of the Sasana (DPPS), a unit within the Religion Ministry, and appointed Kyaw Lwin as its head. Sasana means "religion" in Pali, the liturgical language of Theravada Buddhism; in Burma, the word is synonymous with Buddhism itself.

The following year, the DPPS published "How To Live As A Good Buddhist," a distillation of Kyaw Lwin's writings. It was republished in 2000 as "The Best Buddhist," its cover bearing an early version of the 969 logo.

Kyaw Lwin stepped down in 1992. The current head is Khine Aung, a former military officer.

Kyaw Lwin's widow and son still live in his modest home in central Yangon. Its living room walls are lined with shelves of Kyaw Lwin's

books and framed photos of him as a monk and meditation master.

Another photo shows Kyaw Lwin sharing a joke with Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt, then chief of military intelligence and one of Myanmar's most feared men. Kyaw Lwin enjoyed close relations with other junta leaders, said his son, Aung Lwin Tun, 38, a car importer. He was personally instructed to write "The Best Buddhist" by the late Saw Maung, then Myanmar's senior-most general. He met "often" to discuss religion with ex-dictator Than Shwe, who retired in March 2011 and has been out of the public eye since then.

"The Best Buddhist" is out of print, but Aung Lwin Tun plans to republish it. "Many people are asking for it now," he said. He supports today's 969 movement, including its anti-Muslim boycott. "It's like building a fence to protect our religion," he said.

Also supporting 969 is Kyaw Lwin's widow, 65, whose name was withheld at the family's request. She claimed that Buddhists who marry Muslims are forced at their weddings to tread on an image of Buddha, and that the ritual slaughter of animals by Shi'ite Muslims makes it easier for them to kill humans.

Among the monks Kyaw Lwin met during his time as DPPS chief was Wiseitta Biwuntha, who hailed from the town of Kyaukse, near the northern cultural capital of Mandalay. Better known as Wirathu, he is today one of the 969's most incendiary leaders.

Wirathu and Kyaw Lwin stayed in touch after their 1992 meeting, said Aung Lwin Tun, who believed his father would admire Wirathu's teachings. "He is doing what other people won't - protecting and promoting the religion."

Kyaw Lwin died in 2001, aged 70. That same year, Wirathu began preaching about 969, and the U.S. State Department reported "a sharp increase in anti-Muslim violence" in Myanmar. Anti-Muslim sentiment was stoked in March 2001 by the Taliban's destruction of Buddhist statues in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, and in September by al Qaeda's attacks in the United States.



We didn't start the boycott — they did. We're just using their methods.



Two years later, Wirathu was arrested and sentenced to 25 years in jail for distributing anti-Muslim pamphlets that incited communal riots in his hometown. At least 10 Muslims were killed by a Buddhist mob, according to a State Department report. The 969 movement had spilled its first blood.

### 969 VERSUS 786

**Wirathu was freed in 2011 during an amnesty** for political prisoners. While the self-styled “Burmese bin Laden” has become the militant face of 969, the movement derives evangelical energy from monks in Mon, a coastal state where people pride themselves on being Myanmar’s first Buddhists. Since last year’s violence they have organized a network across the nation. They led a boycott last year of a Muslim-owned bus company in Moulmein, Mon’s capital. Extending that boycott nationwide has become a central 969 goal.

Muslims held many senior government positions after Myanmar gained independence from Britain in 1948. That changed in 1962, when the military seized power and stymied the hiring and promoting of Muslim officials. The military drew on popular prejudices that Muslims dominated business and used their profits to build mosques, buy Buddhist wives and spread Islamic teachings.

All this justified the current boycott of Muslim businesses, said Zarni Win Tun, a 31-year-old lawyer and 969 devotee, who said Muslims had long shunned Buddhist businesses. “We didn’t start the boycott — they did,” she said. “We’re just using their methods.”

By that she means the number 786, which Muslims of South Asian origin often display on their homes and businesses. It is a numerical representation of the Islamic blessing, “In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate and Merciful”. But Buddhists in Myanmar — a country obsessed by numerology — claim the sum of the three numbers signifies a Muslim plan for world domination in the 21st century.

It is possible to understand why some Buddhists might believe this. Religious and dietary customs prohibit Muslims from frequenting Buddhist restaurants, for example. Muslims also dominate some small- and medium-sized business sectors. The names of Muslim-owned construction companies — Naing Group, Motherland, Fatherland — are winning extra prominence now that Yangon is experiencing a reform-era building boom.

However, the biggest construction firms — those involved in multi-billion-dollar infrastructure projects — are run by tycoons linked to members of the former dictatorship. They are Buddhists.

Buddhist clients have canceled contracts with Muslim-owned construction companies in northern Yangon, fearing attacks by 969 followers on the finished buildings, said Shwe Muang, a Muslim MP with the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party. “I worry that if this starts in one township it will infect others,” he said.

### “OUR LIVES ARE NOT SAFE”

**For Zarni Win Tun, the 969 devotee, shunning Muslims** is a means of ensuring sectarian peace. She points to the Meikhtila violence, which was sparked by an argument between Buddhist customers and a Muslim gold-shop owner. “If they’d bought from their own people, the problem wouldn’t have happened,” she said.

Her conviction that segregation is the solution to sectarian strife is echoed in national policy. A total of at least 153,000 Muslims have been displaced in the past year after the violence in Rakhine and in central Myanmar. Most are concentrated in camps guarded by the security forces with little hope of returning to their old lives.

A few prominent monks have publicly criticized the 969 movement, and some Facebook users have launched a campaign to boycott taxis displaying its stickers. Some Yangon street stalls have started selling 969 CDs more discreetly



Suu Kyi's reticence on sectarian violence has also angered Muslims.



since the Meikhtila bloodbath. The backlash has otherwise been muted.

Wimala, the Mon monk, shrugged off criticism from fellow monks. "They shouldn't try to stop us from doing good things," he said.

In mid-June, he and Wirathu attended a hundreds-strong monastic convention near Yangon, where Wirathu presented a proposal to restrict Buddhist women from marrying Muslim men.

In another sign 969 is going mainstream, Wirathu's bid was supported by Dhammapiya, a U.S.-educated professor at the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Yangon, a respected institution with links to other Buddhist universities in Asia.

Dhammapiya described 969 as a peaceful movement that is helping Myanmar through a potentially turbulent transition. "The 969 issue for us is no issue," Dhammapiya told Reuters. "Buddhists always long to live in peace and harmony."

### NO MOSQUES HERE

The only mass movement to rival 969 is the National League for Democracy. Their relationship is both antagonistic and complementary.

In a speech posted on YouTube in late March, Wirathu said the party and Suu Kyi's inner circle were dominated by Muslims. "If you look at NLD offices in any town, you will see bearded people," he said. Followers of Wimala told Reuters they had removed photos of Suu Kyi — a devout Buddhist — from their homes to protest her apparent reluctance to speak up for Buddhists affected by last year's violence in Rakhine. Suu Kyi's reticence on sectarian violence has also angered Muslims.

The Burmese Muslim Association has accused NLD members of handing out 969 materials in Yangon.

Party spokesman Nyan Win said "some NLD members" were involved in the movement. "But the NLD cannot interfere with the freedoms or rights of members," he said. "They all have the

right to do what they want in terms of social affairs."

Min Thet Lin, 36, a taxi driver, is exercising that right. The front and back windows of his car are plastered with 969 stickers. He is also an NLD leader in Thaketa, a working-class Yangon township known for anti-Muslim sentiment.

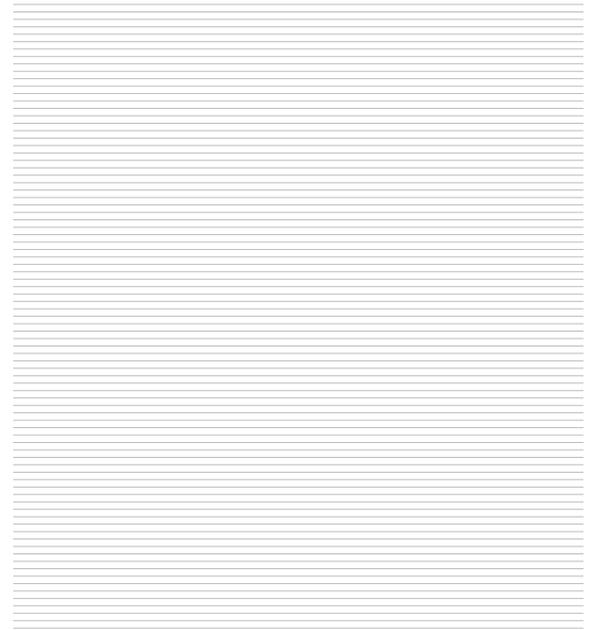
In February, Buddhist residents of Thaketa descended upon an Islamic school in Min Thet Lin's neighborhood which they claimed was being secretly converted into a mosque. Riot police were deployed while the structure was demolished.

A month later, Wimala and two other Mon monks visited Thaketa to give Buddhists what a promotional leaflet called "dhamma medicine" — that is, three days of 969 sermons. "Don't give up the fight," urged the leaflet.

Today, the property is sealed off and guarded by police. "People don't want a mosque here," said Min Thet Lin.

As he spoke, 969's pop anthem, "Song to Whip Up Religious Blood," rang over the rooftops. A nearby monastic school was playing the song for enrolling pupils. 

Additional reporting by **Min Zayar Oo**  
Editing by **Bill Tarrant and Michael Williams**



# Thailand secretly dumps Myanmar refugees into trafficking rings

BY JASON SZEP AND ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL

December 5 Ranong, Thailand

**O**ne afternoon in October, in the watery no-man's land between Thailand and Myanmar, Muhammad Ismail vanished.

Thai immigration officials said he was being deported to Myanmar. In fact, they sold Ismail, 23, and hundreds of other Rohingya Muslims to human traffickers, who then spirited them into brutal jungle camps.

As thousands of Rohingya flee Myanmar to escape religious persecution, a Reuters investigation in three countries has uncovered a clandestine policy to remove Rohingya refugees from Thailand's immigration detention centers and deliver them to human traffickers waiting at sea.

The Rohingya are then transported across southern Thailand and held hostage in a series of camps hidden near the border with Malaysia until relatives pay thousands of dollars to release them. Reporters located three such camps – two based on the testimony of Rohingya held there, and a third by trekking to the site, heavily guarded, near a village called Baan Klong Tor.

Thousands of Rohingya have passed through this tropical gulag. An untold number have died there. Some have been murdered by camp guards or have perished from dehydration or disease, survivors said in interviews.

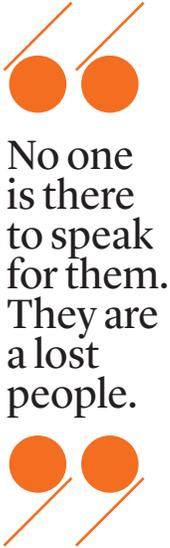
The Thai authorities say the movement of Rohingya through their country doesn't amount to human trafficking. But in interviews for this story, the Thai Royal Police acknowledged, for the first time, a covert policy called "option two" that relies upon established human-smuggling networks to rid Thailand of Rohingya detainees.

Ismail was one of five Rohingya who said that Thai immigration officials had sold him outright or aided in their sale to human traffickers. "It seemed so official at first," said Ismail, a wiry farmer with a long narrow face and tight curly hair. "They took our photographs. They took our fingerprints. And then once in the boats, about 20 minutes out at sea, we were told we had been sold."

Ismail said he ended up in a camp in southern Thailand. So did Bozor Mohamed, a Rohingya whose frail body makes him seem younger than his 21 years. The camp was guarded by men with guns and clubs, said Mohamed, and at least one person died every day due to dehydration or disease.

"I used to be a strong man," the former rice farmer said in an interview, as he massaged his withered legs.

Mohamed and others say they endured hunger, filth and multiple beatings. Mohamed's



No one  
is there  
to speak  
for them.  
They are  
a lost  
people.



elbow and back are scarred from what he said were beatings administered by his captors in Thailand while he telephoned his brother-in-law in Malaysia, begging him to pay the \$2,000 ransom they demanded. Some men failed to find a benefactor in Malaysia to pay their ransom. The camp became their home. “They had long beards and their hair was so long, down to the middle of their backs, that they looked liked women,” said Mohamed.

### “HOLDING BAYS”

What ultimately happens to Rohingya who can’t buy their freedom remains unclear. A Thai-based smuggler said some are sold to shipping companies and farms as manual laborers for 5,000 to 50,000 baht each, or \$155 to \$1,550.

“Prices vary according to their skills,” said the smuggler, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The Arakan Project, a Rohingya advocacy group based in Thailand, says it has interviewed scores of Rohingya who have passed through the Thai camps and into Malaysia. Many Rohingya who can’t pay end up as cooks or guards at the camps, said Chris Lewa, Arakan Project’s director.

Presented with the findings of this report, Thailand’s second-highest-ranking policeman made some startling admissions. Thai officials might have profited from Rohingya smuggling in the past, said Police Maj-Gen Chatchawal Suksomjit, Deputy Commissioner General of the Royal Thai Police. He also confirmed the existence of illegal camps in southern Thailand, which he called “holding bays”.

Tarit Pengdith, chief of the Department of Special Investigation, Thailand’s equivalent of the U.S. FBI, was also asked about the camps Reuters discovered. “We have heard about these camps in southern Thailand,” he said, “but we are not investigating this issue.”

Besieged by a political crisis and violent street protests this week, Thailand faces difficult questions about its future and global status. Among those is whether it will join North Korea,

the Central African Republic and Iran among the world’s worst offenders in fighting human trafficking.

The signs are not good.

The U.S. State Department’s annual Trafficking In Persons (TIP) report ranks countries on their record for combating the crime. For the past four years, Thailand has sat on the TIP Report’s so-called Tier 2 Watch List, the second-lowest rank. It will be automatically downgraded to Tier 3 next year unless it makes what the State Department calls “significant efforts” to eliminate human trafficking.

Dropping to Tier 3 status theoretically carries the threat of U.S. sanctions. In practice, the United States is unlikely to sanction Thailand, one of its oldest treaty allies in Asia. But to be downgraded would be a major embarrassment to Thailand, which is now lobbying hard for a non-permanent position on the United Nations Security Council.

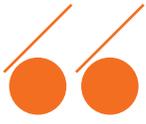
### THE ROHINGYA EXODUS

Rohingya are Muslims from Myanmar and Bangladesh, where they are usually stateless and despised as illegal immigrants. In 2012, two eruptions of violence between Rohingyas and majority Buddhists in Rakhine State in western Myanmar killed at least 192 people and made 140,000 homeless. Most were Rohingya, who live in wretched camps or under apartheid-like segregation with little access to healthcare, schools or jobs.

And so they have fled Myanmar by sea in unprecedented numbers over the past year. Ismail and Mohamed joined tens of thousands of Rohingya in one of the biggest movements of boat people since the end of the Vietnam War.

Widespread bias against the Rohingya in the region, however, makes it difficult for them to find safe haven — and easy to fall into the hands of traffickers. “No one is there to speak for them,” says Phil Robertson, deputy director for Asia at Human Rights Watch. “They are a lost people.”

Rohingya men, women and children squeeze



Men and teenage boys languished for months in cramped, cage-like cells, often with barely enough room to sit or stand, much less walk.



aboard overloaded fishing boats and cargo ships to cross the Bay of Bengal. Their desired destination is Malaysia, a Muslim-majority country where at least 31,000 Rohingya already live. As Reuters reported in July, many of these refugees were waylaid in Thailand, where the Thai navy and marine police worked with smugglers to extract money for their onward trip to Malaysia.

Hundreds of Rohingyas were arrested in two headline-grabbing raids by the Thai authorities on Jan. 9 in the towns of Padang Besar and Sadao, both near the Malaysia border. At the time, Colonel Krissakorn Paleetunyawong, deputy commander of police in the area, declared the Rohingya would be deported back to Myanmar. That never happened.

Ismail and Mohamed were among the 393 Rohingya that Thai police say were arrested that day in Padang Besar. So was Ismail's friend Ediris, 22. The three young men all hailed from Buthedaung, a poor township in northern Rakhine State.

Their story reveals how Thailand, a rapidly developing country in the heart of Southeast Asia, shifted from cracking down on human trafficking camps to facilitating them.

### A SECRET POLICY

**After their arrest, Ediris and Ismail were brought** to an immigration detention center (IDC) in Sadao, where they joined another 300 Rohingya rounded up from a nearby smuggler's house. The two-story IDC, designed for a few dozen inmates, was overflowing. Women and children were moved to sheltered housing, while some men were sent to other IDCs across Thailand.

With about 1,700 Rohingya locked up nationwide, the Thai government set a July deadline to deport them all and opened talks with Myanmar on how to do it. The talks went nowhere, because the Myanmar government refused to take responsibility for what it regards as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

Men and teenage boys languished for months in cramped, cage-like cells, often with barely

enough room to sit or stand, much less walk. In June, Reuters journalists visited an IDC in Phang Nga, near the tourist Mecca of Phuket. There were 269 men and boys crammed into a space built for no more than 100. It reeked of urine and sweat. Some detainees used crutches because their muscles had atrophied.

A doctor who inspected Sadao's IDC in July said he found five emaciated Rohingya clinging to life. Two died on their way to hospital, said the doctor, Anatachai Thaipratan, an advisor of the Thai Islamic Medical Association.

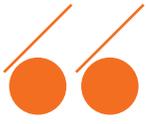
As the plight of Rohingya detainees made world headlines, pressure mounted on Thailand. But Myanmar wouldn't take them, nor would Malaysia. With thousands more arriving, the U.N.'s refugee agency issued an urgent appeal for alternative housing. The government proposed building a "mega camp" in Nakhon Sri Thammarat, another province in southern Thailand. It was rejected after an outcry from local people.

In early August, 270 Rohingya rioted at the IDC in Phang Nga. Men tore off doors separating cells, demanding to be let outside to pray at the close of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Over the last three weeks of August, more than 300 Rohingya fled from five detention centers.

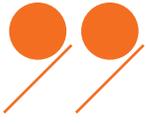
By this time, Mohamed, the 21-year-old refugee, could no longer walk, let alone escape. His leg muscles had wasted away from months in detention in a cell shared by 95 Rohingya men. Ismail and Ediris were shuttled between various IDCs, ending up in Nong Khai, a city on Thailand's northern border with Laos.

Thailand saw its options rapidly dwindling, a senior government official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. It couldn't protest to Myanmar's government to improve the lives of Rohingya and stem the exodus, the official said. That could ruffle diplomatic feathers and even jeopardize the access of Thai companies hoping to invest in Myanmar, one of the world's hottest frontier markets.

Nor could Thailand arrest, prosecute and jail the Rohingya for breaking Thai immigration law



Rohingya were fast disappearing from Thailand's IDCs, and nobody knew where they were going.



— there were simply too many of them. “There would be no room in our prison cells,” Police Maj-Gen Chatchawal said.

That growing problem gave birth to “option two” in October, a secret policy to deport the refugees back to Myanmar that led to Rohingyas being sold to human trafficking networks.

A hint of the policy shift came weeks earlier, on Sept. 13, when Police Lt. Gen. Panu Kerdlarppol, chief of the Immigration Bureau, met with officials from other agencies on the resort island of Koh Samui to decide what to do with the Rohingya. Afterwards, Kerdlarppol announced that immigration authorities would take statements from the Rohingya “to arrange their deportation” and see if any want to go home. Arrangements would be made for those who did.

By early October, 2,058 Rohingya were held in 14 IDCs across Thailand, according to the Internal Security Operations Command, a national security agency run by the Thai military. A month later, that number stood at about 600, according to non-governmental organizations and Muslim aid workers. By the first week of December, it was 154, Thailand’s immigration department said.

Rohingya were fast disappearing from Thailand’s IDCs, and nobody knew where they were going.

### “WE NOW BELONGED TO THEM”

**Central to the policy was Ranong, a sparsely populated Thai province whose geography has always made it a smugglers’ paradise.** Ranong shares a long, ill-policed land and sea border with Myanmar. Its coastline is blanketed in dense mangrove forest and dotted with small, often uninhabited islands.

The provincial capital, also called Ranong, was built on tin mining but now lives off fishing and tourism. Rust-streaked trawlers from Thailand and Burma ply the same waters as dive boats and yachts. So do wooden “long-tail” boats, named after their extended drive-shafts, which ferry Burmese migrant workers to the

Myanmar port of Kawthaung, only a 30-minute voyage away.

By late October, hundreds of Rohingya were being packed onto immigration trucks and driven to Ranong for processing and deportation. Among them were Ismail and Ediris, who arrived in the port city after a grueling, standing room-only journey of 1,200 km (746 miles) from Nong Khai.

At Ranong’s IDC, they were photographed and told by Thai immigration officers they were being sent back to Myanmar. “They said no other countries were accepting Rohingya, and Myanmar had become peaceful,” said Ismail.

Then they were driven to a Ranong pier and herded onto four long-tail boats, each with a three-man crew of Thais and Burmese. Once at sea, the Rohingya asked the boat driver to help them. The Burmese-speaking driver shook his head and told the Rohingya they had been sold by Thai immigration officials for 11,000 baht (\$350) each.

“They told us we now belonged to them,” said Ismail.

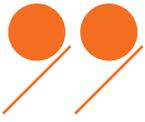
After about 30 minutes at sea, the boats stopped. It was early afternoon on Oct. 23. The vessels waited until about 6 p.m., when a large fishing boat arrived. They were loaded aboard and sailed through the night until they reached a jungle island, separated from the mainland by a narrow river. It was about 4 a.m.

Ismail said he saw about 200 other Rohingya in that camp, mostly sleeping and guarded by men with guns. The guards shoved Ismail and the others into a muddy clearing. There was no water or food. He was told he must pay 60,000 Thai baht (\$1,850). Did he have family who could send the money? If he did, he could go wherever he wanted, Ismail said he was told. “If you don’t, we’ll use this,” one guard said, showing an iron rod.

Ismail had some cash but not enough. “We need to escape,” he whispered to Ediris. After an hour at the camp, just before dawn, the two men made their move. A guard fired shots in the air as they ran through the jungle and waded through a river to reach the mainland.



When I cried they beat me. I had already decided that I would die there.



For the next 24 hours, they survived by drinking stream-water and eating the bark of banana trees. They emerged onto a rubber plantation, their feet lacerated from the bare-foot jungle trek, and met a Burmese man who promised to spirit them into Malaysia for 8,000 baht, or \$250, each.

They agreed and were driven to a house in southern Thailand, where Reuters interviewed them hours before they were smuggled by pick-up across the Malaysian border.

### THE JUNGLE CAMPS

**Bozor Mohamed, the third young Rohingya from Buthedaung,** said he was held for 10 days at a jungle camp in Padang Besar.

He, too, said he had been delivered by Thai officials to trafficking boats along the maritime border with Myanmar. Afterwards, in torrential rain and under cover of darkness, along with perhaps 200 other Rohingya, Mohamed said he was ferried back across the strait to Thailand, where a new ordeal began.

The men were taken on a two-day journey by van, motor-bike, and foot to a smuggler's camp on the border with Malaysia. On the final hike, men with canes beat the young Rohingya and the others, many of them hobbled by months of detention. They stumbled and dragged themselves up steep forested hills.

Making the same trek was Mohamed Hassan, a fourth Rohingya to escape Thailand's trafficking network. Hassan is a baby-faced 19-year-old from the Rakhine capital of Sittwe.

He said he arrived at the camp in September after an overnight journey in a pick-up truck, followed by a two-hour walk into the hills with dozens of other Rohingya. Their captors ordered them to carry supplies, he said. Already giddy with fatigue and hunger after eight days at sea, the 19-year-old shouldered a sack of rice. "If we stopped, the men beat us with sticks," he said.

The camp was partially skirted by a barbed-wire fence, he said, and guarded by about 25 men with guns, knives and clubs. Hassan reckoned it

held about 300 Rohingya. They slept on plastic sheets, unprotected from the sun and rain, and were allowed only one meal a day, of rice and dried fish. He said he was constantly hungry.

One night, two Rohingya men tried to escape. The guards tracked them down, bound their hands and dragged them back to camp. Then, the guards beat the two men with clubs, rods and lengths of rubber. "Everybody watched," said Hassan. "We said nothing. Some people were crying."

The beating lasted some 30 minutes, he said. Then a guard drew a small knife and slit the throat of one of the fugitives.

The prisoners were ordered to dispose of his corpse in the forest. The other victim was dumped in a stream. Afterwards, Hassan vomited with fear and exhaustion, but tried not to cry. "When I cried they beat me. I had already decided that I would die there."

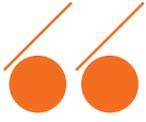
His only hope of release was his older brother, 42, a long-time resident of Thailand. Hassan said he had his brother's telephone number with him, but at first his captors wouldn't let him call it. (Traffickers are reluctant to deal with relatives in Thailand, in case they have contacts with the Thai authorities that could jeopardize operations.)

Eventually, Hassan reached his brother, who said he sold his motorbike to help raise the equivalent of about \$3,000 to secure Hassan's freedom, after 20 days in the camp.

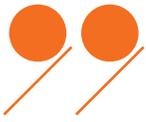
Reporters were able to trace the location of three trafficking camps, based on the testimony of Rohingya who previously were held in them.

Three journalists traveled on motor-bikes and then hiked through rubber plantations and dense jungle to directly confirm the existence of a major camp near Baan Klong Tor.

Concealed by a blue tarpaulin tent, the Rohingya were split into groups of men and women. Some prayed. The encampment was patrolled by armed guards and protected by villagers and police. The reporters didn't attempt to enter. Villagers who have visited the camp said the number of people held inside ranged



The captain told us we could not go back to Myanmar, that we had been sold by the immigration and police.



from an estimated 500 to a thousand or more, depending on the number of people arriving, departing or escaping.

Interviews with about a dozen villagers also confirmed two other large camps: one less than a mile away, and another in Padang Besar, near the Malaysia border.

### “THAT RED LINE IN THE SEA”

**Major General Chatchawal of the Royal Thai Police** in Bangkok admitted there was an unofficial policy to deport the Rohingya to Myanmar. He called this “a natural way or option two.” But he said the Rohingya went voluntarily.

“Some Rohingya in our IDCs can’t stand being in limbo, so they ask to return to where they came from,” said Chatchawal. “This means going back to Myanmar.” Rohingya at the IDCs, for instance, sign statements in the presence of a local Islamic leader, in which they agree they want to return to Myanmar.

These statements, however, were at times produced in the absence of a Rohingya language translator. When reporters visited the Sadao IDC for this story, the translator was a Muslim from Myanmar who spoke only Thai and Burmese, and thus unable to explain what the detainees were signing.

Chatchawal was also presented with recent testimony from Rohingya who said they weren’t taken to back to Myanmar. Instead, they were put in boats by Thai immigration officials, told they had been sold and taken under duress to Thailand’s camps. Reporters interviewed four Rohingya for this story who said they fell prey to trafficking with official complicity.

At the house where Ediris and Ismail were interviewed were two other survivors of the trafficking camps: Abdul Basser, 24, and Fir Mohamed, 28. They told similar stories. Both were arrested after arriving in Thailand on Jan. 25, and held at the overcrowded Phang Nga IDC for about eight months. On Oct. 17, the two men, along with dozens of other Rohingya, were driven overnight to Ranong.

“We were told we could go back to Myanmar,” said Mohamed.

That day, 48 Rohingya and five Buddhist Burmese were loaded into trucks and driven to a pier. The five Burmese were put on one boat; the Rohingya were put on another. After about a half hour at sea, the captain cut the engine. “We thought the engine had stalled or broke down,” said Basser. “The captain told us we could not go back to Myanmar, that we had been sold by the immigration and police,” he added.

Mohamed and Basser, too, escaped after being brought to an island near mainland Thailand.

Until now, the Thai government has denied official complicity in the smuggling or trafficking of Rohingya. But in a break with that position, Chatchawal said Thai officials might have received money previously in exchange for Rohingya, but not anymore. “In the past, and I stress in the past, there may have been cases of officials taking payments for handing over migrants to boats,” he said. “I am not ruling it out, but I don’t know of any specific cases recently.”

He said it was possible the Rohingya were intercepted by brokers and never made it to Myanmar. “Once they’ve crossed that border, that red line in the sea, they are Myanmar’s responsibility,” he said.

He also admitted the camps uncovered by Reuters exist in breach of Thai laws. He referred to them as “temporary shelters” for a people who ultimately want to reach Malaysia. The smugglers who run the camps “extort money from Rohingya” but police don’t accept bribes from them, he said.

As for the trafficking way stations in Padang Besar and Sadao, Chatchawal said: “I do believe there could be more camps like these. They could be hidden deep in the jungle.” 

Additional reporting by **Jutareet Skulpichetrat** and **Amy Sawitta Lefevre** in Bangkok, and **Stuart Grudgings** in Kuala Lumpur  
Editing by **Michael Williams** and **Bill Tarrant**

