

# This is Not Who We Are

Listening to Communities Affected by  
Communal Violence in Myanmar



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# **This is Not Who We Are**

Listening to Communities Affected by  
Communal Violence in Myanmar

This book is dedicated to those who died in Myanmar's communal violence and to those committed to ensuring it does not happen again.

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## Map of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar showing areas where communities were listened to



Highlighted areas are in Mandalay Region, Shan State, Sagaing Region, West Bago Region, and Rakhine State.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In mid-2012 incidents of communal violence began to occur in various locations across Myanmar. Communal violence had occurred previously in Rakhine State but had not transpired to this scale in other states and divisions across the country. Both inside and outside of Myanmar communal violence was framed as ‘inter-religious’ and dominant narratives emerged describing Buddhist groups attacking Muslim communities or as Buddhist as the victims of Muslim aggression. These narratives work to reinforce animosity between Buddhist and Muslim groups and fail to provide enough information to adequately understand the dynamics surrounding this violence.

This publication elevates voices of communities from six locations that experienced communal violence and paints a broader and more informed picture of the situation. Using CPCS’s *listening methodology*, conversations were held in November 2014 with 220 community members from Meiktila, Mandalay Region; Lashio, Shan State; Mandalay, Mandalay Region; Shwebo district, Sagaing Region; West Bago, Bago Region; and Sittwe, Rakhine State. Community members discussed their experiences and opinions in light of their experience of communal violence and their hopes and desires for peaceful co-existence in the future.

### Main Themes

Key topics and themes that represent the collective voice of 220 community members across six locations in Myanmar were identified. These topics and themes were catalogued and prioritised by the listening teams who spoke with the communities.

**External actors played a central role in the conflict:** All community members believed that violence was planned, noting the presence of outsiders who incited violence or rallied mobs. Community members commonly saw “strangers” or “new faces” in the riots and in the crowds that burned religious buildings or markets. Strangers or outsiders were observed in communities, rallying people and asking Buddhists to join mobs that were attacking Muslim neighbourhoods, shops, and religious buildings. In some affected locations, people noticed the presence of police and military in shops and areas in days prior to the incidence of violence.

Participants also identified institutional involvement in inciting communal violence. Many believed that this involvement came from either state actors, in the form of the Myanmar military and government, or from non-state actors such as political parties and extremist religious groups. In most areas, there was an increase in the level of hate speech sermons delivered by religious fundamentalist groups, singing of anti-Muslim songs, and distribution of anti-Muslim pamphlets and CDs. An intensification of rumours was also observed in the days leading to each incident of communal violence.

Some communities reported that Muslims were pressured into undertaking provocative criminal acts. These were thought to be incitement tactics. One example is that of a mentally disabled boy (17 years old) who was coerced into raping a woman to instigate violence. In another place, a Muslim man known to be an alcoholic was given alcohol for five days and then coerced into destroying a Buddhist monastery. Two Muslim women were observed visiting one location and asking many people in the community where the “famous pagoda” was a couple of days before the pagoda was destroyed. This was thought to be a ploy to arouse suspicion against Muslims.

**Inefficient response from security groups:** Community members felt authorities did not respond adequately during episodes of violence, or in the periods before and after the violence occurred. In several locations, police were present but they were unwilling to act to disperse crowds and prevent violence. Police were observed stepping aside at scenes of violence, which enabled the violence to occur. Community members made references to the emergence of a “state of anarchy” during riots.

**The incidents affect all aspects of peoples’ lives (housing, property, social services, health, security, education):** People from all groups noted that incidents of communal violence have affected them deeply. In some cases, they have lost their houses and property. Access to health care has been compromised, with some individuals reporting mental health problems and on-going trauma following the loss of family members. Security concerns increased among the communities following episodes of communal violence. Many people experienced discrimination in the aftermath, including students who faced threats and felt that they were being treated differently at their schools.

This violence has also had an impact on the economic life of the communities. In particular, Muslims reported boycotts of Muslim-owned businesses by non-Muslims in some locations. Vendors and traders have also had to adjust to curfews, which prevented them from setting up early at markets.

**Fear and personal security concerns:** Experiences during incidents of violence continued to affect the daily lives of community members as they managed on-going trauma. Communities continued to feel fear, particularly triggered by the continuing instances of hate speech and discrimination.

**Role of anti-Muslim propaganda in lead up to violence:** Muslim community members were particularly affected by anti-Muslim sentiments. Communities believed that rumours and hate speech played a strong role in causing distrust and fear of Muslims, which created an atmosphere conducive to violence. Anti-Muslim hate speech and propaganda songs spread by fundamentalist groups are an on-going concern for their personal security. Rumours about Muslims spread on social media, printed pamphlets, CDs, and public sermons also worried the Muslim community members.

**Communities in IDP camps have difficulty meeting their basic needs:** People who had to live in rehabilitation camps after the communal violence faced extremely challenging situations. For internally displaced people (IDPs), access to food, poor infrastructure, need for adequate healthcare, and theft were their main concerns. Additionally, displaced community members were concerned about the lack of resettlement plans, and the lack of land titles/proof of ownership for land that they had previously lived on. Others were concerned about the lack of gender segregation in camps, where men and women had to live together in large, undivided halls. These concerns were most prevalent in Meiktilla, where all the conversations were conducted in IDP camps.

**Violence has had dire effects on family life:** Communal violence has made orphans of some children. Families composed of members with different religious affiliations have also suffered a great deal. Some families have been separated and are living in different rehabilitation camps.

**Communities feel that they are not allowed to rebuild their religious infrastructure:** Participants spoke in detail about destroyed religious buildings. Muslim community members noted that they were denied permission to rebuild due to their religious affiliation. In one community, people spoke about restrictions being put in place against the construction of an orphanage for

Muslim children. In another area, people said that they were not allowed to rebuild destroyed mosques.

**Communities previously lived in harmony and feel strongly disappointed about the communal violence:** In all locations, communities reported that they had co-existed together in harmony prior to these incidents. Some communities had heard about violence happening elsewhere, but did not believe it would happen in their area due to a history of peace and coexistence. Communities expressed sadness for the destroyed buildings and the violence that ensued, and felt that the incidents of communal violence had challenged their values.

**Communities continued to maintain their harmonious relationships, even during communal violence:** Community members said that various religious groups lived together as friends and good neighbours prior to the emergence of communal violence. There were numerous accounts of Muslim and Buddhist neighbours and friends providing safe shelter to the other during the violence. Reports of individuals putting themselves in danger to help those belonging to another religion were also shared by the communities. Many people felt strongly that this violence was misplaced in their community. They were shocked and ashamed that this had happened when they had lived together harmoniously for so long. Others believed that the violence had to be externally instigated, as it could have never come from within the community.

These sentiments were expressed in Sittwe, but were accompanied by a strong feeling that the only solution now was to keep religious groups segregated. In all other locations, communities demonstrated resilience in their aspiration to maintain inter-religious relationships in the aftermath of the violence. Some have looked to interfaith dialogue or participation in diverse traditional activities as a means to overcome divisions.

**Communities feel guilt seeing the destruction of religious buildings and for the physical harm that Muslims endured:** Conversations showed that many Buddhists felt guilty about the burning of mosques in their communities. People from all sides empathised with stories of the tragedy suffered by those from other religious groups, and felt remorse for the violence and destruction.

**Communication is more difficult after incidents of communal violence:** Although communities continue to strive for unity, many acknowledged that communication between different religious groups had become more challenging. Communal violence has made former friends feel like strangers. Violence has caused individuals to be more careful when socialising or speaking with individuals from other religions in their communities as they are wary of being misconstrued or of misspeaking.

**Communities want to strengthen unity and mutual understanding:** Regardless of religious or ethnic backgrounds, community members conveyed a strong desire to understand each other. Communities believed that if they were united, they would not be divided by external influences. To promote better inter-religious understanding, they suggested meetings between religious leaders and community members, improving opportunities to share information, and providing education about the beliefs and practices of all religions.

In all locations, participants spoke about how they previously co-exist peacefully in mixed religious communities. They expressed a desire to participate in activities that would help to restore harmony and foster unity in their communities. Community members believed that they particularly needed the following inter-faith activities:

- Trust-building and exposure activities,
- Civil, human rights, and conflict transformation education,

- Opportunities for people from different religions to work together on common issues,
- Promotion of inter-faith learning and,
- Inter-faith education in schools.

**External humanitarian actors have limited understanding of the real situation:** Many people in Sittwe were not happy with international humanitarian actors and media narratives on communal violence in Rakhine State. Communities in Sittwe felt that there was little in-depth knowledge of the situation in Rakhine State, with outsiders relying solely on NGO reports, which they believe were often incorrect or incomplete.

In Meiktila, people felt there was limited understanding of the situation in the IDP camps and the on-going hardships that people there are facing.

**Participation in religious celebrations of other faiths facilitated community harmony:** Communities noted participation in ceremonies of other religious groups as an effective way of prompting communal harmony. Previously, Muslim community members offered food to monks daily and also at Buddhist religious ceremonies. Buddhists made offerings at mosques as well. These actions promoted understanding and good feelings within the communities.

**Community members can help prevent communal violence:** Individuals from each community identified ways that people could help to neutralise rumours and prevent violence. These were identified as:

- **Awareness and education on how to deal with rumours:** Participants highlighted the need for critical analysis skills for all community members. The community should be

equipped with mechanisms to critically analyse rumours and to verify information before it is passed on to others. They also identified the organisation of inter-religious community activities as a means to foster better understanding of other religious groups and to create more opportunities for community members to interact with one another. These would make it harder for people to believe misinformation about other religious groups and help to prevent the spread of rumours.

- **Creating co-ordination teams to respond to misunderstandings:** Participants stressed the conflict-prevention role of community leaders. They believed that groups of inter-religious community leaders could work together to prevent rumours from spreading and to calm escalating situations. Community members also said that they were open to the idea of being part of prevention teams.

## Insights from Listeners

Listeners from various religions, ethnic groups, and regions across Myanmar were all working on issues related to communal violence and inter-religious co-existence in their own areas. Buddhist, Muslim and Christian listeners showed empathy for each other as they formed listening teams, most of which were inter-religious. The listeners shared their findings, experiences, and insights, which are summarised as follows:

- We really need to understand the local context and everyone needs to listen to people from other situations. We need to listen to them, even people involved in the riots, as they can provide different perspectives on the situation.
- I have experience helping these people in my community because I helped journalists conduct interviews. This time it was quite different. It is very difficult not to be biased when

writing. When I listened to them, I also needed to concentrate so I did not miss anything.

- We can solve a problem by listening to both sides. We can identify the source of the problem and begin to solve it, even while listening.
- Before conducting the conversations, I thought I knew what was happening and about their suffering. But when we visited them and listened to them, I realised that [their ideas, opinions and perspectives are] quite different from what we had thought.
- I had experience working on these issues since the riots started. I thought I already understood these things and what people would say. But when we listened, we realised there is a lot we do not understand and know.

In a concluding exercise, listeners were asked to put themselves in the mindset of those from 'another' religion and to share what they would do to create inter-religious co-existence and understanding. The answers from all listeners were overwhelmingly similar and everyone expressed a strong desire to live in peace. Some suggestions were:

- As a Muslim, I would invite other groups to the mosque during our festivals to eat.
- As a Buddhist, I would share Buddhist teachings with my Muslim friends in my community.
- As a Muslim, I would talk with other people in my community and from different religions to share knowledge about being Muslim (our beliefs, traditions).
- As a Buddhist, I would try to neutralise hate speech and rumours, and explain to others that this is not according to our Buddhist teachings.
- As a Muslim, I would try to find common points and work together with other friends.

- As a Buddhist, I would try not to blame or harass Muslims or other religions before I understand their teachings.
- As a Muslim, I would try to learn more about the essence of my religion and would advocate to family and friends that every god is about peace in the world.
- As a Buddhist, I would try to promote love, kindness, and empathy to all people.
- As a Muslim, I would try to organise the youth in my community to work on philanthropic causes.
- As a Buddhist, I would try to form friendships with others without discrimination.

During workshops and the conversation process, the 24 listeners worked together and shared their own perceptions and experiences of working with, or being affected by, communal violence. Although these individuals came from diverse religious backgrounds, they were able to transcend their differences and show mutual understanding and respect by giving each other the space to share their own beliefs and different perceptions of incidents that took place.

At the conclusion of the workshop, listeners took ownership of the space and initiated their own session on how to maintain their newly formed relationships and find ways to collaborate further. They found working together to monitor online hate speech and working with their communities to build inter-religious understanding were important next steps. Their exploration of communal violence as a group created the foundation for more collaboration and partnerships on this and other issues that cross ethnicities, religions, and regions in Myanmar. As they look towards solidifying their collaboration and expanding their network, the listeners demonstrate initiative that has emerged from within communities to respond to communal violence and show commitment to implement prevention strategies.

## Analysis

Listening to the voices of communities who experienced communal violence brings to light a strong alternative narrative to the one commonly heard in Myanmar. Community members felt that communal violence was misplaced in their communities and the strongest collective theme that emerged was ***“this is not who we are”***. Participants shared their surprise and disappointment that conflict occurred in their communities, while also acknowledging that some community members participated in the violence. They struggled to come to terms with actions that “misrepresented” their perception of their own community and weakened the harmonious inter-religious relationships they have held individually, and also observed more widely in their communities.

People highlighted previous co-existence and instances of community members indiscriminately helping each other during the violence to demonstrate this sentiment. Additionally, during conversations participants expressed empathy for community members from other religions who had experienced violence. They also voiced sadness over their communities’ loss of unity due to this violence. Communities emphasised the impact that incidents of violence have had, and continue to have, on their lives, and expressed their resolve to make sure that such violence never happens again.

Community members in Shwebo district expressed a strong sense of pride from their ability to prevent violent conflict. Shwebo residents have taken a leading role in ensuring that violence does not occur.

The violence that occurred was not motivated by inter-religion animosity in communities. Although listeners did not ask what caused violence or why it happened, these points emerged as some of the most important subjects that communities wanted

to discuss, and also as robust themes across all conversations in all locations. Community members differentiated between those who belong to *religious groups* and those who belong to *extremist religious groups*. They recognised that most community members had no affiliation with extremist religious groups and further reinforced feelings of harmonious inter-religious coexistence.

Communities emphasised political, government or military involvement in the violence but had limited information about who or which institution, whether government, military or a particular political party, were involved. Communities felt strongly that the violence was instigated from outside of their communities, and was unrelated to feelings of religious animosity in the communities. This sentiment was based on witnessing strangers who were inciting violence by rallying mobs or spreading hate speech, as well as on the inability or unwillingness of security forces to manage the violence, or to address criminal activities using the legal system.

Although violence occurred within communities, the majority of the community members did not support the violence, and are thinking of ways to prevent the situation from happening again. Communities suggested inter-religious education and awareness activities to help build trust and unity, and as a means to counteract rumours and hate speech being spread by extremist groups. Additionally, in one township in Shwebo, communities shared their comprehensive strategy of having religious leaders come together to neutralise rumours and thwart potential conflict instigators.

Many communities have taken the initiative of forming groups that come up with activities to encourage inter-religious awareness and promote peaceful co-existence. These activities bolster the findings that the violent occurrences were not religiously motivated as a natural result of community interactions. A firm conclusion emerged that this form of communal violence had no place or roots in these communities.

These actions are largely unknown and unreported outside of these communities. It is important that more media attention be given to stories of community members working together to prevent conflict, and to counteract the typical Buddhist vs. Muslim narrative observed in most coverage. In this way, audiences, both within and outside of Myanmar, can recognise that the violence that occurred was not intrinsic to these communities or produced by long-simmering tensions. This lays the groundwork for communities to find ways to move forward together.

The processes and means to transform relationships and successfully prevent communal violence must come from within communities themselves. Community voices show that this is already happening. Communities taking ownership of their own prevention strategies is a positive indication for the future.

## Recommendations

### CPCS Recommendations for Myanmar Government

1. Review security force protocol and response strategies to effectively manage instances of communal violence.
2. Consult with religious leaders to establish communal violence prevention strategies and strengthen inter-religious collaboration.
3. Formulate comprehensive government policies that address the problem of hate speech and violence-inducing propaganda.
4. Ensure that criminal activities are dealt with using rule of law and appropriate legal channels in a timely way.
5. Ensure that all government-backed media uses conflict sensitive reporting in its news coverage.
6. Ensure that IDP camps have basic services.
7. Implement a long-term resettlement strategy for IDPs.

## CPCS Recommendations for Myanmar NGOs, CSOs and INGOs

1. Neutralise hate-speech and rumour by organising, or supporting, community education programmes to increase awareness on inter-religious learning.
2. Organise or support media training, focused on the constructive role media can have in conflict framing and its responsibility to elevate more diverse narratives.
3. Support the formation of inter-religious community groups to address collective issues such as environmental concerns, and to foster joint religious problem solving.
4. Organise activities that promote inter-religious awareness building, focusing on children's learning through arts, sports, and computer-based learning.
5. Provide conflict transformation training for community leaders, including religious and youth leaders.

## INTRODUCTION

In June 2012, Myanmar experienced increased levels of communal violence in multiple locations across the country. While communal violence had previously occurred in Rakhine State, it had not been seen to this level in other states and regions across the country. The dominant narrative emerging explains this violence as a product of inter-religious discord. Both in and outside of Myanmar violence has been described as Buddhist aggression against Muslim victims, while some Buddhist voices counter this notion with strong rhetoric that Buddhists are the victims of Muslim aggression. These simplistic characterisations have reinforced divisions between Buddhist and Muslim groups.

There has been speculation on the causes and nature of the violence within the context of the current political transition, yet there is limited first-hand information.<sup>1</sup> It is not clear how communal violence occurred, how communities have been affected and how they have responded to it. Greater understanding of communal violence in Myanmar is needed to support effective violence prevention strategies and to enable communities to move forward together.

The Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS) takes a conflict transformation approach to peacebuilding. CPCS focuses on supporting the transformation of relationships between groups involved in violent conflict by conducting grounded analysis to elevate diverse narratives and build inclusivity.

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<sup>1</sup> One notable study looks more deeply into the dynamics of communal violence and investigates the role that narratives surrounding violence in Myanmar can play in causing and/or perpetuating communal violence. See the working paper titled *'Threat and virtuous defence: Listening to narratives of religious conflict in six Myanmar cities'*, authored by Matthew Schissler, Matthew J Walton, & PhyuPhyuThi, available at: [https://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/m.mas\\_working\\_paper\\_1.1\\_-\\_threat\\_and\\_virtuous\\_defence\\_-\\_july\\_2015.pdf](https://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/m.mas_working_paper_1.1_-_threat_and_virtuous_defence_-_july_2015.pdf)

Limitations of the single-dimension narrative that surrounds communal violence in Myanmar demonstrate a need to listen to the voices of those who were directly affected by this violence. Singular narratives entrench limited understanding of the situation, polarise groups living in Myanmar, and ignore the efforts of communities to respond to, and prevent, inter-religious violence. Some of these alternative stories were highlighted in CPCS *Portraits of Diversity*<sup>2</sup> film series, which emphasised the need to look further into this issue.

This project was developed to document a more holistic understanding of communal violence in Myanmar from the people who directly experienced it – from community members themselves. By engaging communities in conversations on communal violence that are solution-oriented, focus was laid on lessons learnt and to ask communities about ways they can move forward together.

When conceptualising this project, the biggest challenge was finding a way for communities to speak openly about communal violence. Tensions between some Muslim and Buddhist groups remain high in Myanmar. This was particularly prevalent in communities that experienced incidents of violent conflict, or where extremist groups from Buddhist and Muslim religions are present. The project aimed to begin a new conversation, where communities could share their insights and solutions to the most pressing problems that arose after the violence.

The CPCS team decided to use listening methodology as the preferred research method. Teams of ‘listeners’ from Myanmar conducted conversations, approaching community members informally and asking if they were willing to share their opinions. This was the best way to gain uncensored and candid insights.

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<sup>2</sup> Find more information at: <http://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/>, or watch the trailer films at: <https://vimeo.com/100566917>.

In November 2014, listening teams went to six different regions across Myanmar where communal violence occurred: Sittwe, Mandalay, Meiktilla, West Bago, Shwebo and Lashio. Most listeners had some connection to these communities and thus, they were trusted by the community members. Communities were happy to share their opinions and hopes for the future. In total, the project listened to 220 community members. Communities shared a range of opinions from which common themes were drawn and differences noted.

This project provides a diverse set of information based on the perspectives shared by these communities. It provides an alternative narrative on communal violence based on a more comprehensive understanding of the incidents of communal violence.

Notably, the most recurrent theme from conversations with the communities is 'this is not who we are'. Communities felt the violence that occurred was misplaced in their communities, and they were passionate to prevent it from ever happening again. They identified prevention strategies and suggested ways for their communities to regain inter-religious harmony and rebuild interfaith relationships.

## METHODOLOGY

*Listening methodology* was developed by CDA Collaborative Learning Projects<sup>3</sup> as a feedback mechanism for communities receiving humanitarian aid. CPCS adopted listening methodology for use in peace research in 2008. Through a cumulative learning process, CPCS has modified the methodology so it can be used as an intervention tool for conflict transformation.

As presently employed, listening methodology is a qualitative, subject-orientated approach that enables analysis based on the direct experience of the identified groups. The main objective of this methodology is to access and raise unheard voices, and to diversify narratives by speaking to people directly affected by violent conflict situations.

This project seeks to elevate the voices of communities that have experienced communal violence. It provides a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the ideas and insights of people who live in, or are affected by, a situation such as violent conflict. It also creates space for different narratives to emerge, as well as for identification of practical solutions to address the violence. In our use of listening methodology, CPCS has found that the best solutions often come from those who directly experience a situation by virtue of the fact that they have the best understanding of their contexts.

The methodology relies on open-ended conversations with a cross-section of people aimed at capturing, analysing and understanding their perspectives, experiences and recommendations. Through unscripted *listening conversations*, information is gathered from key informants who share their views based on their direct experience of a situation.

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<sup>3</sup> CDA Collaborative Learning Projects website: <http://www.cdacollaborative.org>

This research approach depends heavily on support of individuals who formed the listening teams. With the help of local partners, individuals from project areas were invited to assist as listeners who would conduct conversations. Listeners are chosen because of their familiarity with the context and their ability to conduct conversations in the local language, facilitating more flexible conversations.

One challenge to gathering information in a conflict setting is that people are usually reluctant to share information. Conducting informal conversations with listeners who are familiar with their context and speak their language creates a space where participants feel comfortable sharing concerns and messages that are most important to them. The use of conversations in the listening methodology aims to overcome this challenge by creating a more relaxed environment where conversations can flow organically. This is crucial when working in conflict contexts, as participants who are engaged in more formal interview-based research have a tendency to censor their views.

Instead of using scripted interview questions, listeners have a set of topic areas that need to be covered during the conversations. This ensures consistency and research reliability across conversations. Using conversations guided by a set of topics in lieu of structured interviews also allows for ideas and issues that are most important to a particular group of people to emerge naturally. The CPCS team then facilitated a synthesis and analysis process with the listeners to identify and prioritise broad themes and common issues from all the conversations.

In addition to identifying these descriptive categories, listening methodology also seeks to listen more deeply for the assumptions, expectations, changes, impacts, disagreements, feelings and attitudes of the participants, as well as of the listeners. These are also identified during the synthesis and analysis process.

Four tools are used to record data from the conversations: notebooks, logbooks, quote banks and, where possible, a photo diary. Listeners were discouraged from taking notes during conversations to ensure that participants feel comfortable. Instead, the details of each conversation were recorded in a **notebook** immediately after every conversation.

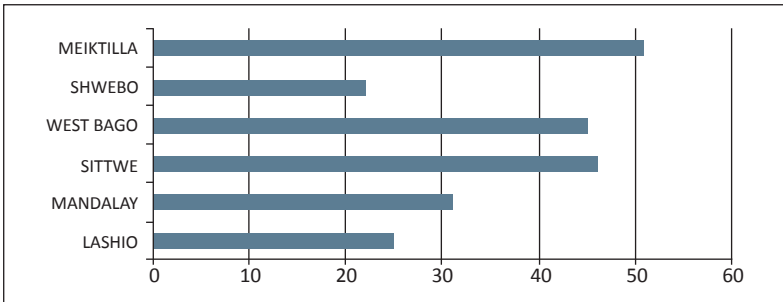
At the end of each day, listening teams sat together and discussed what they heard. They used a **logbook** to record what they *heard the most* from all conversations that day. The use of logbooks acted as a daily debriefing and processing exercise. They also recorded differences in the logbooks.

If listeners heard a phrase during the conversations that they felt captured the essence of a main point, they wrote it down in a quote bank during the conversation. A **quote bank** is a section of their notebooks reserved to record quotes. A **photo diary** was also used to capture images of the location where they conducted conversations and which have some relation to a topic discussed during a conversation, for example a road or housing infrastructure.

## Scope and limitations

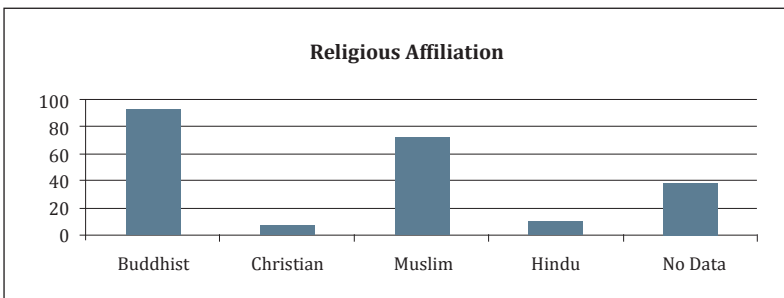
In November 2014, listening teams spoke with 220 community members in six locations across Myanmar. 51 people were listened to in Meiktilla, 46 in Sittwe, 45 in West Bago, 31 in Mandalay, 25 in Lashio and 22 in Shwebo. The bar graph below shows the number of participants from each state/region.

### Participant Location

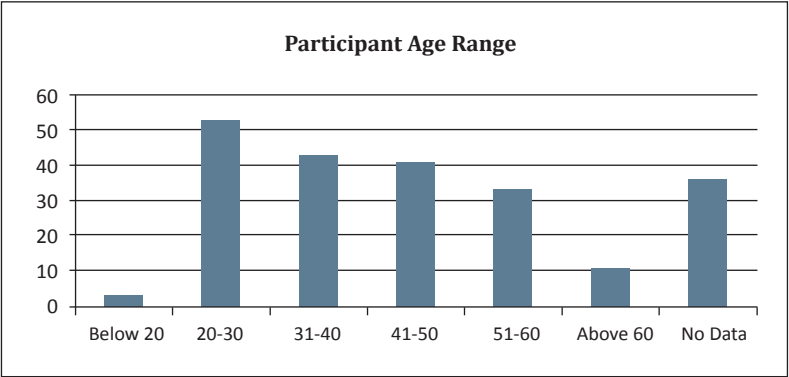


The project aimed to speak with a cross-section of community members to ensure fair representation and to gain balanced information. In total, the listening teams spoke to 77 (35%) women and 140 (65%) men, while 3 (1%) participants did not provide gender related data. 127 (58%) participants were married, 58 (24%) were single, and 39 (18%) did not provide data for this demographic category. 93 (42%) participants were Buddhist, 72 (33%) were Muslim, 10 (5%) were Hindu, 7 (3%) were Christian, and 38 (17%) did not specify their religious affiliation. Religious affiliation of the participants is shown in the graph below.

### Religious Affiliation



The largest percentage of participants was aged between 20-30 years (53 participants or 24%), followed by 31-40 year-olds (43 participants or 20%), and 41-50 year-olds (41 participants or 19%). 33 (15%) participants were between 51-60 years old and 11 (5%) participants were over 60 years old. 36 (16%) participants did not provide data on their age. This information is detailed in the graph below.



Listeners who volunteered for this project were from various religions, including Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. They were from various regions across Myanmar, and covered a wide age range.

CPCS conducted a two-day workshop with the listeners to provide the training and skills needed to engage in the listening conversations with the research subjects. Listeners were given a set of conversation guide questions with correlating key words (listed below), and asked to memorise key words and try to cover all topic areas in their conversations.

The following guide questions were used as an example of the types of questions listeners could ask related to the topic area, but they were not prescriptive.

No.	Guide Questions	Key Words
1	Did you see/experience communal violence?	Awareness, communal violence
2	How was the situation in the weeks before the violence? Can you share your impression?	Pre-violence situation
3	How did that violence affect you personally?	Personal impact
4	Is there any experience from before where people lived together in harmony?	Previous harmony
5	What enabled that?	Harmony, conditions
6	What can your community do to live in more harmony?	Creating harmony, community action
7	What can you do personally to achieve more harmony in your community?	Creating harmony, community action

In Shwebo, one listening team used different guide questions because the communities they visited was able to prevent communal violence. The guide questions used for this community are detailed below:

No.	Guide Questions	Key Words
1	Did you hear about communal violence in another place?	Awareness, communal violence
2	Why do you think it didn't happen here?	Preventing factors
3	What are the differences between that situation and your community?	Difference, your community and others
4	How do you think people here managed to prevent that from happening?	Preventing violence, actions
5	Do you have any other ideas to strengthen the capacity to be in harmony and uphold unity?	Initiatives, strengthen harmony
6	What do you think communities could do to live in more harmony?	Community initiatives, strengthen harmony
7	Are there any other ideas you want to share?	Extra ideas

After conducting conversations over a one-month time-period, listeners reconvened for a two-day processing workshop. They shared findings through a series of synthesis exercises based on the collective analysis of the conversations they had conducted.

CPCS staff led a final stage of analysis. The analysis drew on documentation from the processing workshop, as well as the notebooks, reflective logbooks, and quote banks recorded by listeners at the time of the conversations. The CPCS team identified and prioritised common themes, and noted any differences through these analyses processes.

This research is based on one-on-one discussions with community members who participated in the conversations. Community members were not given time to prepare before the conversations. Participants may have developed their thoughts about some of the topics discussed after the completion of the conversations. These opinions are not captured in this project.

The listening methodology is a subjective process. It relies on the listeners' capacity to record what they had heard from their memories. Several mechanisms were used to ensure reliability of the recorded results, such as using listening teams comprising of two listeners being present at the same conversation but recording data independently. Efforts were made to ensure that each listening team had members from different religions to further check for the presence of bias. CPCS facilitation also made use of additional techniques during processing workshops and in analysing all recorded data to triangulate results against findings across all listening teams. Even so, there is undeniably some subjectivity present in the results that are recorded.

Lastly, while this publication sheds light on some of the most important issues, opinions and ways forward for community members, it is not meant to be an exhaustive list of all opinions, concerns and suggestions. This publication only records and presents the most prevalent ones.

## MAIN THEMES EXPANDED

Across the six locations - Mandalay, Meiktila, West Bago, Lashio, Shwebo, and Sittwe – 220 community members shared similar ideas that fell under common themes. These main themes, previously listed in the Executive Summary, are expanded and explained below.

### Conflict Triggers

#### *Conflict was planned and incited*

*Groups of strangers, who were not from Meiktila, came into our village with three vehicles and torched all the houses. These people were so strange. They came with a map and only targeted Muslim houses.*

– A young Muslim male

Across all conversations, communities were of the opinion that the violence was planned. Several community members noted that buildings were destroyed systematically and skilfully. The instigators looted shops and houses first, taking with them valuable items and materials that were then loaded and transported on wagons standing by. They then set fire to the properties. Communities felt that this indicated planning and forethought on the part of the instigators.

Other community members recalled observable signals, such as ‘whistling twice’ to indicate to others in the mob that it was time to leave. One participant from Mandalay noted, “This act was systematically planned and handled. Someone was behind

it". Another participant stated, "We can clearly see that there is a big plan behind all these conflicts, as there is the same pattern of conflict and the same people are involved in all conflicts. They [the authorities] know who these people are, and who created these conflicts but no legal action is taken against them".

### ***Presence of outsiders***

*It was obvious that those who wanted this violence were not locals.*

– A 45 year-old Muslim school teacher in Mandalay

The presence and involvement of "strangers", or people who were not known to the community was reported across all conversations. Strangers were seen entering each location and being involved in various activities. Community members observed them inciting violence, rallying community members to take part in violent and criminal activities, and also in taking part in acts of violence and vandalism themselves. In some locations, visibly drunk crowds, or crowds who seemed to be on drugs, and those who were foreign to the community were seen entering the township on motorbikes and then inciting violence.

One Mandalay resident explained, "Before the dispute took place, a man was making contact with others using a phone to [those who were in] the conflict area. He did not seem to be from Mandalay as he didn't even know where he was". Another community member from Meiktilla said, "The conflict broke out at a gold jewellery shop at noon. The mosque near the market was attacked with stones. I [have] never seen these people in Meiktilla city. I don't know where this group came from."

*A group of strangers stopped me, yelling, 'Are you Bamar or Kalar'<sup>4</sup>? If you are Kalar, we will slaughter all of you!' I answered 'I am Bamar', and recited a Buddhist prayer so I was spared. Then I decided not to look around and went back home. On the way back home, I saw the crowd asking the same question to one of my Buddhist friends (who has Kalar facial features). Since my friend was drunk, he could not answer the question right away. I helped him answer that he was Bamar. I saw children being brutally butchered in the Mingalaw Zae Yon area.*

– A young Bamar Buddhist driver in Meiktila

Strangers were also seen singing anti-Muslim songs and spreading anti-Muslim hate speech. One Mandalay resident recalled, “People... who were not from Mandalay without a specific religious identity came to Mandalay. They incited people from Mandalay to be suspicious of each other”.

In all areas, communities were also involved in the violence, but outsiders were noted to have instigated the violence. In one location, residents explained that uneducated individuals from nearby villages were incited by strangers to take part in the conflict.

Outsiders involved in suspicious activities were also seen in the communities in the days preceding the violence and were thought to be involved in sparking the conflict. In Shwebo and West Bago, individuals unknown to the community persuaded Muslims to commit crimes that would spark Buddhist backlash. One community member from Mandalay explained, “There were some people who purposely manipulated some groups to start the conflict”.

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<sup>4</sup> Historically, the term ‘kalar’ referred to foreigners in Myanmar. The term later came to be associated with anyone who has a darker complexion and facial features of those of Indian/South Asian heritage.

Community members expressed their disappointment and indignation that their communities had fallen for such incitement and succumbed to violence. They also expressed sadness at the show of hatred in their community. They repeatedly maintained that the violence was misplaced in their communities as the different religious groups have coexisted harmoniously for years before this outbreak of violence. Many community members shared sentiments such as, “Why would we want to fight with our friends and neighbours?” After the conflict, community members felt that challenges remained with communication and discrimination between Muslim and Buddhist groups.

### ***Rumour and hate speech***

*This happened due to misunderstanding and propagation of hate speech among the people.*

– A young female student in Meiktila

In the weeks, days, and hours preceding violent conflict, rumour-mongering and anti-Muslim hate speech in the form of religious sermons, songs, pamphlets and CDs was prevalent. This was believed to be among the leading causes of inciting anti-Muslim violence.

*We must not spread false news or rumours, it is really important, and we also have to warn people [about the negative affects of rumours].*

– A 40 year-old Buddhist in Mandalay resident

Rumours that spread during the violence were also thought to have exacerbated events once they had begun. For example, a common rumour was that *Muslims were collecting weapons in the mosque, and marching towards Buddhist communities to attack, while Buddhists were attacking the mosques and destroying Muslim shops*. This caused community members to gather weapons, believing that they needed to protect themselves, their families, religious buildings, and their personal properties.

A community member from Mandalay stated, “The conflict got worse because some people believe things easily and people from both sides who should not have died were killed”. A Buddhist man from Mandalay shared his experience with rumours. He had suspected that the information being spread was not true, but he still felt afraid and worried about his safety. He recalled the challenge of overcoming the fear he felt, and told his family to avoid passing on information unless they could verify its authenticity.

*It won't be easy in the future because in the ate speech is propagated with loud speakers every day from morning to evening.*

— A young male driver in Meiktila

Rumours were spread via word of mouth, through telephone calls and through social media forums such as Facebook. In Mandalay, where there was a ban on television and print media, social media was especially influential as it became the only source of information. A Mandalay resident argued, “True information should be posted on social media. We need to be careful not to share false information.” There was a strong sentiment present that people needed to inquire about the information they see on social media and verify its credibility before they acted upon it.

*The conflict in Mandalay started and became bigger because of a post on Facebook. That's why people should not believe news as soon as they see or hear it. They must inquire first. They must check whether it is a real story or a rumour.*

– A Muslim school teacher

Many community members were aware that the information they received were rumours. One woman from Mandalay reflected, “I think the rape case was just a rumour. People just fell for the plan of a group of people”. In Sittwe, many community members were surprised when the violence began. They had heard rumours so frequently that they did not believe the warnings.

*I believe that the conflict was the result of hate speeches in Buddhist religious preaching ceremonies and audio CDs.*

– A 60 year-old Muslim male IDP camp leader in Meiktila

The distribution of anti-Muslim propaganda was thought to have caused tension and influenced many Buddhist people to feel animosity towards Muslim communities. Communities felt that hate-speech was responsible for destroying friendships between Muslim and Buddhist community members. One resident from Meiktila explained, “All this happened because everyday, people were hearing hate speech and it changed their minds”. Another elaborated, “More than a week before the conflict, troublesome preaching on CDs, online hate speeches and pamphlets were all causing many local residents to distrust each other”. One community member from West Bago stated, “Formerly, we enjoyed different kinds of religious festivals but due to the hate speeches,

there is a lot of distrust and suspicious attitude present now. . . I feel disturbed because of hate speech and fear it [violence] might happen again”.

Communities emphasised the need to prevent rumours from spreading and spoke about their efforts to do this. In West Bago, groups have given interfaith trainings, and have been distributing flyers asking people not to believe in false rumours.

### ***Not religious violence***

*There is no religion that teaches people to destroy pagodas.*

– A young Muslim female trader in Shwebo district

There was a strong belief among the community members that the violence was not caused by religious animosity. A resident from Mandalay stated, “This is not a religious conflict. This is just a conflict that people created to look like a religious conflict.” Another resident from Shwebo emphasised, “No religion teaches to take others’ properties unfairly”. One community member from Mandalay further explained, “As for me, it wasn’t about religion. We will live as before. I have already told them [Muslims] to come and hide at my house if something happens. They are also ready to help us.”

## ***Insufficient security force response***

*Despite the presence of soldiers and police, they did not control the crowd. They only dispersed the crowd by shooting rubber bullets into it after the destruction [of the Taingtayar mosque]. They should have dispersed the crowd as soon as a crowd started to form.*

– A 38 year-old Buddhist vendor in West Bago

Communities were dissatisfied with the responses of the security forces. There was a lack of security presence in some locations. In other areas although the police and military were present, they did not have orders to respond effectively and failed to act to stop the violence. People expressed resentment towards the security forces, believing that they had the capacity and responsibility to quell violence and disperse mobs. One West Bago resident retold, “The authorities and police with guns were just standing by and watching the incident unfold”. Another community member from Lashio said, “The authorities let the conflict happen rather than control it”.

In Meiktila, security forces were sent from Naypyidaw but they did not stop the violence. One resident recounted, “The worst thing was when the security forces from Naypyidaw arrived. There were around ten trucks. They didn’t stop the violence effectively. This is not how it should happen. The ones who are meant to protect the country were the ones watching the problem idly”. Another resident from Meiktila reiterated this sentiment, “This kind of thing happened due to the authorities’ lack of control, it seems like [they were] deliberately allowing acts of anarchy”.

Community members who had witnessed people being injured or killed while the police watched idly were especially angry at the

security forces. A resident from Lashio reported, “A man was hit and fell down on the road. The police just kicked him with their feet then dragged him like a dog. They pointed guns at my daughter who was holding the wounded man. I just wanted to tear up all those police officers”.

Communities questioned the motivation behind the lack of response from the security forces. One West Bago resident wondered, “[When the conflict occurred], personnel from the army and police were present and a 144 curfew<sup>5</sup> was in place, but the attack was still carried out in daylight. What does this mean?” Another community member from West Bago recalled that he had seen a member of the security forces who had been working as a night watchman taking part in the destruction during the day. He said, “They had red arm bands that read ‘duty’”.

In other instances, security forces were not present at all. Communities contacted the police but received no response. One West Bago resident stated, “When the mob was attacking and destroying its target, the police and soldiers pretended to be at another place. It’s just like a movie”. Another community member from Meiktila elaborated, “Everything became terribly bad and nobody came to control the situation. What I want to say is that there were no policemen present”. A resident from Mandalay explained, “Those people destroyed the car in front of my house. We called the police and the police remarked, ‘people aren’t getting hurt, right?’ We had to watch people destroy the car but the police did not come”.

Community members in Sittwe reported a different experience, where, on several occasions the police adequately responded to violent situations and maintained stability. For instance, the police

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<sup>5</sup> Under section 144 of Myanmar national law, a curfew can be enforced during times of widespread violence or instability.

fired shots to disperse a mob attempting to release a man suspected of having raped a Buddhist woman. Some community members also noted that police were stationed in town to maintain order.

### ***Institutionally motivated***

*It was a political trick created to look like religious conflict.*

– A 40 year-old Muslim woman in Mandalay

The presence of outsiders and their role in inciting violence was strongly linked to the view that violence in all locations was institutionally motivated. Community members did not have details about which institutions were involved, but alluded to the government, military, political parties and extremist religious groups. Rumours, hate speech, and anti-Muslim propaganda were spread immediately prior to, and during violent incidents. After these incidents of violence, communities were able to gain accurate information of what had happened and retrospectively reflected that rumours were purposely circulated, with some involvement from one or more of these institutions.

Many people thought the incitement to violence was being used by certain political parties in the run-up to the 2015 election. One resident from Lashio stated, “I think this is a political trick”, and another predicted, “Just see, it will happen again just before the 2015 election. This is politics”.

Most people shared their suspicion that the government or military was involved in spreading the rumours. A West Bago resident argued, “The government is responsible for this incident - it is politics”. One participant from Mandalay said, “The military and government will do anything to maintain their authority”, while

another took this sentiment further, explaining, “It is not about oppressing Muslim people. The government just used religious conflict as they are afraid of losing their seats.”

*The conflict in Mandalay was meant to divert people’s attention from the [move to amend] Article 436 of the constitution. The conflict in Meiktila was meant to divert people’s attention from the Letpadaung incident. The conflict in Rakhine was meant to divert people’s attention from the gas pipeline case. All the riots started because of rape cases. Why? Why weren’t all the cases seen as usual crimes? Why did they mix this with religion and try to start the conflict without recourse to the legal system? The government also sought to portray this crime as religiously motivated solely for the newspapers. For example, an article in a newspaper says that a girl in Rakhine State was raped by two Muslims. Why did they use the term ‘Muslim’? Why don’t they write two Buddhist thieves have been caught? These are some political tricks used since U Ne Win’s time. The most affected and the first affected are the people who are from the community level.*

– A 50 year-old Buddhist man in Mandalay

A community member from Sittwe expanded, “There are hints of [the] government’s hand in the course of this conflict”. This participant believed that the division and disintegration of relationships between Arakanese and Muslim groups in Rakhine State was being exaggerated by government departments such as the police and military.

In the West Bago region, the government, along with monks from Buddhist organisations, were suspected of involvement in orchestrating this conflict. One participant maintained, “The

violent incident was helped by some representatives from the Hluttaw<sup>6</sup> and some monks”.

The lack of security response (explained in full on page 37) further suggested the involvement of the government in the eyes of the communities. One participant observed, “The ones who attacked during the day were security guards at night”. A government-enforced media ban reinforced this sentiment in Mandalay. Communities thought the ban was intended to prevent communities from discovering the actual causes of violence, and from having an accurate understanding of what was happening.

## **On-going Challenges**

### ***On-going fear***

*I worried for my life. The situation is such that if I had made the slightest mistake, I could have lost my life. I worried for my family.*

– A young Buddhist male student in Meiktila

Communities spoke in depth about the extreme fear from the conflict continuing to affect their daily lives. One resident from Lashio said, “It was like hell”. Several Muslim community members explained that they thought they “were already dead”, as they had expected to die.

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<sup>6</sup> Hluttaw refers to the Myanmar government’s parliament structure.

*I was terrified because I saw the incident with my own eyes. I am haunted by thoughts that such incidents will happen again.*

– A middle-aged female Hindu seller in West Bago

Feelings of extreme fear were predominantly shared by Muslim community members. However, both Muslim and Buddhist residents spoke about being afraid and narrated their experiences of fleeing from their homes, or of waiting and hiding in the dark. One resident from Meiktilla recounted, “Due to the violence, not only my family but all my neighbours panicked and ran in all directions out of fear”. Another community member shared, “Due to the violence, we were so scared that we hid in the jungle outside the quarter”. Another Meiktilla resident recalled the fear he felt, “Finally I decided I just want to die with my family. I had to worry every moment and I will never forget this feeling. People lost their minds”.

In some areas, aggressive mobs compounded fear in communities by blocking roads and asking anyone who passed if they were Muslim or Buddhist. These mobs asked people who they suspected of being Muslim to recite a Buddhist prayer. Muslims, including women and children, who could not do so were brutally killed in public. Hindu community members, who were often thought to be Muslims because of their facial features, shared the fear of their Muslim neighbours.

Many Buddhists also felt this fear as they witnessed extreme violence. They were afraid they would be mistaken as Muslims. They were also concerned about the safety of their Muslim friends and neighbours. They were worried for the damage that could be done to their houses and properties. Community members with children or elderly relatives were especially concerned due to their limited mobility.

*I think the same incident will happen again. I am afraid of how people look at me and what they say.*

– A young Muslim internet shop owner in West Bago

Communities are still dealing with the fear and trauma caused by this communal violence. One resident from Meiktila expressed, “No one’s fear has faded away. Everyone is scared to death that the conflict might happen again”.

Community members also spoke of every day events that have become triggers for post-violence trauma. In Mandalay, the Myanmar national anthem was sung by mobs inciting violence. For several residents from Mandalay who previously sang the national anthem with pride, it is now a source of renewed trauma. “We feel afraid whenever we hear the national anthem and we have to be very careful now”.

In Meiktila, communal violence occurred at the time of the final high school examinations. Many students spoke about the dilemma they faced, choosing to attend or missing the exams after a year of preparation. Students who did attend saw mobs of people looking for Muslims. One student from Meiktila reflected, “We are traumatised because of this violence. I will always remember this at the time of the annual examinations”. Another student stated, “Now we are afraid anytime we see large crowds”.

*In my whole life I have never experienced such brutality. Every time I think of these events, I cannot even eat.*

– A young Bamar driver in Meiktila resident

Community members continue to grieve for lost family members and suffer depression due to the trauma and loss experienced. One man from Meiktilla said, “My one year old son, who I care for with all I have, passed away during this conflict. I am grieving. I want to die instead of my son. Now my wife and I are alone”. Another Meiktilla resident stated, “My family suffered a lot from depression and poverty”, while another further explained, “This kind of violence makes me very depressed and causes me not to want to live in this city”. While all community members suffered from incidents of violence, Meiktilla residents were exposed to more blatant physical violence. They saw men, women and children being burnt alive or slashed with swords.<sup>7</sup>

Muslim communities felt particularly scared whenever they heard hate speech and anti-Muslim propaganda. One resident from Meiktilla noted, “I think this incident is the result of widespread hate speech and until now, I still hear hate speech everywhere and feel unsafe.”

### ***Economic impact of the violence***

*During the conflict, we didn't have anything to eat. After the conflict, our livelihood is very difficult. Now much of my business is gone and I am trying to earn a living selling barbeque. Before the violence, wherever we worked was okay.*

– A middle-aged Muslim male in Meiktilla

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<sup>7</sup> All Meiktilla community members spoken to were living in IDP camps.

All communities spoke about the economic impact of the incidents of communal violence, often describing what they were going through as an “economic crisis”. Shops and homes were destroyed by the violence, and community members were forced to stop working for several days. One Sittwe resident explained, “Both sides are suffering from hardships in business and daily living. Shop stalls in the bazaars, businesses and motorbike taxi drivers have all had to stop working completely. The monasteries also stopped receiving alms”.

Many people have been unable to rebuild their homes and shops, and are struggling to find a way to earn money now. One resident stated, “I am sure in saying that the business and social life of my family, and of people of all religions who live in our city was ruined because of this incident. The worst thing is that we have lost security in our lives”. Another resident added, “Business was good before the conflict, but after the conflict, some people have had to face financial hardship and cannot afford to send their children to school. We are worried about our children’s education”.

*It also affected our businesses. For some, they do not even have rice in the rice container.*

– A 42 year-old Muslim female vendor in Lashio

Additionally, economic discrimination has increased in some communities. Many Buddhists have stopped buying from Muslim-owned shops, and vice versa. One community member stated, “I no longer shop at Muslim shops”.

*I can't stand and I suffer from discrimination. I go to the city to work as a watch repairman, sit the whole day, but I don't get any customers. There are many people who suffer like me. I have very few vocational skills so I am in trouble and don't know what to do now. My wife also tries selling something but her business is not going well at all. My wife collects vegetables to sell but it doesn't work well. I don't think anyone is getting benefits from this conflict. Now it is very difficult for me to go on with my life.*

– A 38 year-old Muslim IDP camp resident

### ***Less trust and communication difficulties***

*We are not friendly with each other [anymore], we have become distant.*

– A young Burmese Muslim male in Mandalay

One of the biggest on-going challenges post-violence is the breakdown in communication between individuals from different religions. In Lashio, residents explained their difficulty in talking to former friends. Communities expressed uncertainty on “what to say”, and hesitation in communicating with people from different religions because they were afraid they would “say the wrong thing”. Buddhist community members felt ashamed of the violence and found it difficult to speak to Muslim friends because they were sorry for what had happened. They did not want to be misunderstood and thought to be supporting the violence.

On the other hand, Muslim residents felt isolated from Buddhist community members and did not know how to approach former friends who were Buddhists. One Lashio resident stated, “After

this incident, we felt that we were so distant”. Some community members were able to maintain close friendships but felt that making new friends from different religions would be very difficult.

*My Muslim friend did not come to school for a whole week after the dispute. When he did return, we were a bit distant. I never talked about the dispute in front of him. The good thing was that many associations emerged after the dispute. Muslim youth attend the trainings together with us. Although we work together, we still feel distant. We talk at trainings but after that, there is no relationship between us.*

– A young Buddhist Mon-Burmese student in Lashio

In Shwebo, the previous communal violence in 2003 had strained relationships between Muslims and Buddhists and affected trust. The most recent violence further segregated religious groups and reinforced mistrust. Buddhist community members found it difficult to speak to former Muslim friends because they were ashamed of the violence. In Sittwe, communities worried that tensions caused by miscommunication could trigger renewed outbreaks of violence given the high level of mistrust between Muslim and Buddhist community members.

Although much less prevalent, some community members disagreed with the above sentiment and felt that Muslim and Buddhist communities continued to live peacefully together. One example was in the Meiktilla IDP camps, where Muslim and Buddhist community members lived together. One Meiktilla resident shared their experience, “In the camp, Muslims and Buddhists live peacefully”. Another supported this view, “There were three hundred and forty apartments that were built for us.

Ninety-five Buddhist households and more than two hundred and fifty Muslim households now live peacefully and harmoniously like before”.

## **Cohesion, Prevention and Ways Forward**

*I want to live peacefully. I will cooperate with the village to prevent such event [the violence] from happening ever again.*

– A Muslim farmer in West Bago

### ***Communities helping each other***

*After the disputes, our Buddhist friends gave us snacks, cooking oils and rice. They felt sorry for us.*

– A 50 year-old Muslim female vendor in Mandalay

In all locations, although less prevalent in Sittwe, communities helped each other across religious lines during episodes of violence. Muslim and Buddhist community members showed compassion and spoke about the various ways they worked together to help their neighbours avoid harm. One West Bago resident explained, “Think of it, while some Buddhists destroyed [homes and shops], other local Buddhists helped us Muslims”. Buddhists helped their Muslim neighbours and friends by inviting them into their homes to hide, cook and eat together. One West Bago resident explained that his neighbourhood was not burnt down because local Buddhist residents who also lived in the area protested against the mob that came to destroy Muslim houses.

Both Muslim and Buddhist community members explained that they continued to live in harmony and unity with their neighbours during incidents of communal violence. Residents of Meiktilla recalled, “We, Muslims and Buddhist, were all fleeing together in the midst of violence”. One Buddhist Meiktilla resident explained, “During the conflict, we fled and brought Muslims in our vehicle”. A Muslim woman narrated how her Buddhist friend phoned her, informing her about the movements of the mob so she could avoid being attacked.

Buddhist monks also helped Muslim community members by providing shelter in monastery compounds and pagodas. One Muslim woman from Meiktilla recounted, “Until now, a monk allows us to live in his monastery”. In some instances, monks and Muslim community leaders were active in trying to prevent violence and disperse mobs.

*The mob asked me whether I am Burmese or Kalar<sup>8</sup> but I was so afraid, I could not answer. The driver [who was Buddhist] answered for me, and he said I was a Buddhist. We were allowed to go [through]. He brought me to a Buddhist monastery, where many Muslims took refuge.*

– A 45 year-old Muslim female in Meiktilla

Buddhist community members expressed anger and empathy for Muslim residents who were affected by communal violence. One Meiktilla resident explained, “I am sorry that people who were my friends are now in relief camps”. Another stated, “I know a very friendly Muslim family. They are very helpful. Their two sons were killed and I admit it should not turn out like this”.

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<sup>8</sup> See Footnote 2.

## ***Previous harmony and social cohesion***

*There has always been social cohesion between the two religions. I know a lot of close friends from the other religion.*

– An elderly Arakanese Buddhist monk in Sittwe

Across all locations, communities narrated that they had previously lived in harmony and with inter-religious cohesion. This was fostered by various shared activities, which promoted understanding and acceptance. One Meiktila resident expressed, “Formerly in our quarter, people coexisted harmoniously. People from different religions were all living in the quarter and we all lived peacefully”. One community member from Mandalay explained, “We have been living peacefully for a hundred years. Nothing serious has happened”.

*Before the riot, we all lived in the same ward and under the same roof together. We talked at the same table.*

– A Burmese Buddhist man in Mandalay

Community members explained that Muslims and Buddhists were good neighbours to each other. They pointed to frequent inter-religious friendships, and the positive relationships between Muslims community members and Buddhist monks in many locations. A community member from Meiktila stated, “Before all this, everything was ok. My friends are from a different religion and we were happy”.

Muslim community members said that they often offered food to monks and participated in Buddhist religious festivals. Muslim community members also said that they felt understood and had

a good relationship with monks in their communities. A man from West Bago region explained, “My wife is from a different religion but she offers food to the monks and nuns everyday”.

Similarly, a Mandalay resident related, “There are some Muslims near our house. Although we know each other very well, we felt insecure [during communal violence]. It was fine before. They used to share their food with us on their special days and vice versa. We were really good neighbours. Anyway, I think we haven’t changed after this incident as we know each other well”.

*Muslims are also donating [to the monastery]. I wish this was known and that everyone was treated the same.*

– A middle-aged Christian Indian woman in West Bago

Community members did not feel hatred towards people belonging to other religions and did not want to insult any religions. One resident from West Bago recounted how monks often went inside the mosque because it was a cool place to sit to avoid the sun. Muslims also went inside the pagoda to chat with the monks.

In Shwebo district, unity between Buddhists and Muslims was seen as one of the factors that helped prevent violence. In Lashio, one resident explained that a monastic school offered free education to children, regardless of their religious affiliation.

*We lived here harmoniously since the beginning. We helped each other during all kinds of social occasions such as funerals or celebrations. Although we are members of different religions, we are all relatives.*

– A 53 year-old Muslim vendor in Meiktilla

There were a number of stories explaining inter-religious integration that existed within communities. A community member from Shwebo district explained that both Muslims and Buddhists attended social and religious ceremonies without discrimination, including weddings and alms-giving ceremonies. He also explained that previously, there was no religious discrimination in the market - community members could buy or sell to people outside of their religion. One resident from West Bago explained that the betel-nut seller outside the mosque was Buddhist and the cleaners in the mosque were also Buddhists. There was no hatred or insults and they lived together in harmony. A community member talked of the need to “treat humans as humans”, and look past religious affiliations within their communities. One Mandalay resident recalled that monks, Buddhist nuns, Muslims, Chinese and Bamar people all ate at his shop.

While some participants felt unity and community cohesion still existed, most community members were concerned that relationships had broken down because of the instances of communal violence. Participants overwhelmingly expressed a desire to live in peace again. A Meiktila resident related, “There are many people from different faiths. Before the conflict, everything was ok. People were good to each other. After the conflict, their feelings changed. Families don’t pay any visits to each other”. A community member from Sittwe expressed, “There was harmony before, but after this violence, cohesion is not possible anymore”. One resident from West Bago stressed, “We want to live peacefully with each other and in a safe environment as we did in the past”.

## ***Did not expect violence to happen***

*[I] never thought this would happen in Lashio. All religions dwell in peace in Lashio. We [have] all lived together with love and harmony. This is just because of incitement.*

– A 54 year-old Muslim female shop owner

People were shocked by the occurrence of communal violence on account of the previous history of harmony and co-existence within communities. Communities felt that the violence was misplaced and did not fit with their conception of the cohesion and communal life. One resident from Meiktilla stated, “I never imagined this kind of thing would happen. My mother-in-law and my wife are Buddhists. We live together with understanding. Everybody in my family speaks Burmese. Everyone lives and works together in diversity. This kind of conflict is meaningless”. Another resident lamented, “[The] recent conflict should never have happened. In the past, we lived together as brothers”. A community member from Lashio added, “This kind of conflict never happened before. I could not believe it happened!”

Participants recognised that some community members did take part in the communal violence, joining those who were destroying properties and attacking community members. Participants noted, however, that these community members did not instigate the violence and the majority of individuals who took part in the violence were from outside of the community.

In some locations, they made references to previous incidents of communal violence, but the participants explained that the scale of violence was unprecedented. A Sittwe resident expressed, “Sittwe used to have these problems in the past but never on this scale”.

## ***Need rule of law***

*If rule of law is instituted and people obey the law, it would not be like this. This was totally outside of the law and lacked order.*

– A 50 year-old Muslim male English teacher in Mandalay

Rule of law broke down during the periods of violence. Some participants described the situation as “complete anarchy” and compared it to a “lawless country”.

Communities expressed discontent with the authorities that had not held individuals accountable according to law. They demanded that perpetrators of criminal acts be charged under the legal system. One Mandalay resident said, “They didn’t solve the problem [using the] law and they related it to religion to start a conflict”. Another resident expressed the need to, “Punish those who committed the crime and not to beat around the bushes. If someone from our place has committed any crime, let us know and we will hand him over”. One community member from Shwebo district explained, “Rape cases are common in every police station. They should use legal action to deal with rape – charge the perpetrator formally. It should have nothing to do with religion. Whoever commits a crime gets punished within the law, be they Buddhist or Muslim”.

Communities explained that failure of law enforcement officials to charge criminals in the normal way led some groups to take the law into their own hands, resulting in more violent conflict and destruction. One community member from Meiktilla explained, “After I arrived at the camp, many senior officials came and interviewed the people who were involved in the riot, but no penalty has been given till now”.

In the Shwebo district, local religious leaders came together to act as mediators and enforced rule of law on members of their religion who had committed a crime. This was a highly successful way to prevent communal violence in these areas (explained in full on page 59).

Community members identified the need to use rule of law to prevent the escalation of violence in the future. In Mandalay, a lawyer from the community said, “If something happens, we won’t take action ourselves but turn the culprits over to the police”.

### ***Rebuilding unity and mutual understanding***

Participants emphasised the need to create cohesiveness and unity in communities again. Community members in Mandalay felt that the violence happened, “Because there was less unity among religions. If we can create a more united humane society, we can build peace. That’s why I actively participate in conferences and prayer services dedicated to peace meant for all religions”.

Community members in Meiktilla shared similar sentiments as they never want to experience such violence again. They said, “Being rich is not important, rather we must treat each other with respect and empathy.” Most felt that, “If people are united, nothing can incite them to break up”.

### ***Inter-religious leaders’ and elders’ role in prevention***

*Elders understand each other.*

– A 40 year-old Bamar male merchant

Community members identified the role that religious leaders could have to prevent conflict. They explained the need for “religious leaders and elders from different religions such as Buddhists, Islam, Hindus and Christians, to meet regularly and rebuild relationships”.

Communities felt elders and religious leaders could play an important role in teaching people about coexistence and peace by highlighting ways in which communities have lived together harmoniously in the past. One Muslim youth said, “Though I was angry and I wanted to retaliate, I controlled my temper due to the teachings of my elders. My elders told us not to react as such situations were created by ruthless people”. One person from West Bago suggested that, “Buddhist monks, Islam religious leaders, Christian priests and Hindu religious leaders should all be in the same rank in prayer meetings to encourage harmony in the communities”. This will encourage communities from both sides to live peacefully and be tolerant of each other.

Peace organisations and groups like the Interfaith Peace Group from Mandalay met with religious leaders to discuss ways to maintain peace. They advised people not to dress differently and to participate in community and social work.

### ***Inter-religious and peace focused education***

*We must teach our children to live peacefully and respect all religions.*

– A 53 year-old Muslim vendor in Meiktila

Communities identified the need for education, particularly for children, to build inter-religious awareness. A community member from Mandalay suggested, “The essence of all religions should be included in the curriculum right from the primary school levels”. Another community member added, “Though it might not be possible for the present generation to live in peace again, we need to try for the future generations”. Inter-religious education through poetry and art was also suggested.

## A Personal Experience of Communal Violence

*Listeners work hard as story and opinion gatherers in remote communities. They train to be unbiased and remain open-minded in their listening approach, and record conversations from the perspective of the people they speak with. Sometimes, listeners have their own stories to share that are just as relevant as the stories they are tasked to record.*

*One listener, an informal health practitioner, shared his experiences at the processing workshop. After communal violence occurred in his community, he observed increased animosity between Muslim and Buddhist community members. In response, he decided to take the initiative to bridge increased feelings of separation. He felt that unlike before, Buddhists were uncomfortable with him and other Muslim members in the community. He went to a nearby village to carry out his duties as a health worker, even though local authorities would not give him permission to stay overnight and could not guarantee his safety. He was met by the residents, who threw stones at him and chased him out of the village.*

*The listener persisted in trying to find a way to reconnect with these Buddhist community members. He returned and asked them to be open with him. He emphasised that he only wanted to continue helping the sick as an informal health practitioner. Recognising the sincerity of his intentions, the villagers apologised for throwing stones at him. They further acknowledged that a recent visit from a fundamental religious group had heightened worry and unease amongst residents, who reacted in haste against him. He listened to their concerns and assured them that he would keep coming back and that he was available to provide health consultations.*

*The listener expressed that he believes the youth are crucial in transforming relationships affected by communal violence in Myanmar. After participating in the listening process and interacting with many Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian youth, he said, "I am so happy to meet with these people through our work here. Now I have the chance to meet people working on these issues and I'm inspired".*

## SHWEBO: A CASE STUDY FOR PREVENTION

Community members from three townships in Shwebo shared their opinions and experiences. Two townships in Shwebo experienced communal violence, while one township was able to prevent violence. In the community that was able to prevent violence, members spoke about the same trigger events and incitement tactics detailed in the previous chapter. Through coordinated community prevention strategies, the community successfully contained the spread of violence. They achieved this by dispersing mobs or preventing them from mobilising. This township shows how communities can prevent and address communal violence.

*Both Buddhist and Muslims worked hand in hand to prevent violence in the community. Since we had heard about the violence in other towns, we had been devising ways to prevent attacks in our town. We heard students got killed and school buildings were set on fire during the violence in those towns. Therefore, we were very careful. The local people in the affected towns had lost unity and faith in each other. If not, they would have protected their towns. The people in our towns were also mobilised but they didn't give in.*

— A 45 year-old Muslim Bamar man

### ***Central role of religious leaders in conflict prevention***

Communities spoke about the influential role that religious leaders played in preventing violence. Buddhist and Muslim community leaders collaborated to form conflict prevention teams. Community members and local religious leaders identified and implemented a range of prevention strategies based on an understanding of their communities and on lessons from other conflicts.

### ***Inter-religious associations for problem solving and information sharing***

Religious leaders formed organisations to prevent violence. One Buddhist leader elaborated: “We can never let this kind of conflict happen in our area so we have already formed associations to be able to prevent violence in the future. On the day of the conflict, we informed the Muslims and the authorities that the crowd was coming into our village. These associations worked together in sharing information about conflict related activities, thus enabling fast responses to emerging situations.”

### ***Ensuring criminal activities are addressed through legal channels***

Religious leaders ensured that community members were held accountable for their criminal activities within the legal system. Information centres were established in every ward to settle disputes. If a community member broke the law, religious leaders would first meet with government officials/township administrators and then would take responsibility for ensuring the perpetrator was charged under the law. Teams of Muslim leaders would decide appropriate legal proceedings and fines for Muslim community members. Similarly, Buddhist leaders would decide for Buddhist community members. A Buddhist monk explained this process:

*Every ward has an information centre. An accused person is sent to the administrator to have [the dispute] settled [in a] negotiation. The accused person is punished under the law and is ordered to pay damages. Delays in solving problems may lead to communal conflict. When problems arise, the underlying factors are to be analysed before any decision is made. Problems are to be solved in teams. We learned from*

*past problems. If a Buddhist commits a crime, the Buddhist group will take action against him. Likewise, if a Muslim commits a crime, the action will be taken by the Muslim group.*

– A Bamar Buddhist monk

Ensuring that criminal activities are adequately addressed through formal channels ensures that conflict does not escalate and retaliation is avoided. One community leader recounted:

*We gave the villagers a thorough explanation, [explaining] that the problem was created to cause dissension between the two religious groups. The person who creates the problem would be held accountable under law. We would not retaliate against the Muslim man as there is a law present to solve this problem. I told them if they retaliate by beating him up and killing him, those who retaliate would be punished according to the law.*

– A young Buddhist village leader

### ***Develop community ability to critically analyse propaganda***

The role that propaganda and rumour played in communal violence in other locations across Myanmar was highlighted. Religious leaders focused on providing education and building the awareness of community members to help communities manage rumours. One community member, a Buddhist monk, shared his learning: “Don’t phone someone because you are feeling worried [about a rumour you heard]. Check if the rumour you have heard is true. [If you call others], it can lead to spreading it and you will become

the person to initiate the conflict. You must inquire thoroughly to know the [reality of the] situation.”

### ***Sending the accused far away when the conflict starts***

Community leaders recognised that many communal conflicts in Myanmar were triggered and escalated because of one incident of violence occurring between Muslim and Buddhist community members. Information of this incident would circulate on social media and through word of mouth, leading mobs to seek retribution for the crime. By sending the person who was accused of committing the initial incident of violence away from the community, community leaders aimed to avoid violent retribution and retaliation.

### ***Sustaining trust and unity***

*Unlike the other areas, we are very united so when the conflict started, we could handle it.*

– A young female Muslim student

Community leaders identified the importance of maintaining feelings of unity and trust among different religious groups in their communities. One community member described the feeling of unity he observed:

*We want our town to always be peaceful. We don't want to see anyone, either Buddhist or Islamic, to perish. Therefore, Islamic leaders and Buddhist elders, monks and department officials, worked together in taking turns to guard the town and the science school. Both Muslims and Buddhists took*

*responsibility for the security of the town and its people. We have had very few problems. We had a few problems in the market area at the beginning, but later on we settled them together. People of the community must be united to foster a peaceful atmosphere where you live. If we live together without religious discrimination and build stronger faith, we will not be separated no matter how much we are mobilised.*

– A middle-aged Muslim man

Success in preventing communal violence was attributed to their history of coexistence and their ability to remain united and work together effectively when tensions arose.

*We were difficult to mobilise [by the instigators]. We can't let that kind of conflict happen. The consequences would create social damage, loss of trust, and loss of business. People from different religions will work together to prevent conflict in our town. We have been living together for many years and have treated each other equally, so no one can separate us. Both Muslim and Buddhists are always unified [in our town].*

– Male, 50 years, Muslim

One community member detailed, “There was never a history of us giving trouble to others. We have a plan to coordinate and collaborate with organisations in the town in times of necessity. We also have collaboration with religious groups, peace groups, and social groups. Conflict prevention teams were also formed. There is an agreement with the Buddhist Ma Ba Tha association that they will inform the conflict prevention teams by telephone in times of necessity. They also discussed that anyone, either a

Buddhist or a Muslim, will get punished for his/her transgression. All the teams and associations are working together for the town to be peaceful”.

Community members attributed their strong unity to inter-religious integration opportunities available in the community. These opportunities encourage community members to participate in the religious ceremonies of other groups. One community member explained, “The Muslim people were born in Myanmar. They make donations to charities organised by Buddhists. They also communicate regularly with the monasteries. The Buddhists and the Muslims have the same economic status”.

Additionally, religious leaders gave sermons reinforcing community unity. One community member related, “Presiding monks from two monasteries in the eastern part of the town preached about living in unity”.

### ***Preventing mobs from mobilising***

Much of the prevention strategies detailed above are aimed at preventing mobs from forming. Religious leaders identified the role mobs play in escalating the violence. One community member explained, “When people gather, they act without consideration and no one dares to stop them. The most important thing is not to allow people to assemble”.

Preventing mobs from forming has not always been possible and a Buddhist monk shared his experience of dispersing a mob. He said, “If we had conflict in our community, there would be socio-economic loss. The community would lose unity. Therefore, to prevent such plight, we dispersed the crowd of 1000 people from our village and the nearby villages. We told them that the person who had destroyed our pagoda would be punished according to the law”.

## AREA SUMMARIES

This section acknowledges the differences between incidences in each location. A summary of the main themes in each location is provided.

### Meiktilla: Most Commonly Heard Themes

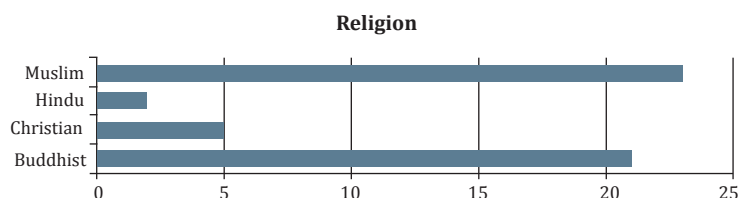
1. People's lives have been destroyed by communal violence. Many people had to flee their homes and are now living in IDP camps.
2. Hate speech and propaganda songs are widespread, which is a continuing cause for concern.
3. Muslims are subjected to discrimination.
4. People living in rehabilitation sites want to return to their own houses.
5. Communities feel fear and do not want the violence to happen again.
6. There is a lack of aid, particularly food and healthcare services, in the IDP camps.
7. People from different religious groups used to be friendly towards each other, and they had no history of conflict.
8. The violence caused is institutionally motivated.
9. Students continued to go to school when violence was occurring, and faced social and security problems.
10. People empathised with stories of loss and tragedy suffered by other religious groups.
11. Some people were killed when they were mistakenly identified as Muslim because of their facial features.

12. Families were traumatised or distressed by the death of family members, especially the loss of children, or because they were separated from loved ones.
13. The government authorities did not control the situation.
14. People felt sad because of the destruction of religious buildings and because they were not allowed to rebuild some of these buildings.
15. Everyone, regardless of gender, started carrying weapons to protect themselves.
16. All people living in the IDP camps find it difficult to earn income after the violence, especially Muslim community members due to discrimination.
17. Many children lost their parents because of the violence.
18. Poor planning of IDP camps has caused social problems.
19. Religious fundamentalism has not influenced everyone in Meiktila. The anti-Muslim propaganda songs that continued to spread in the township have shocked many people.
20. Strangers caused most of the riots and destruction of buildings in the town.

## Analysis

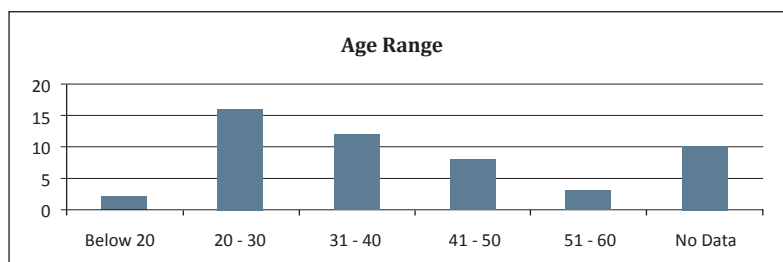
A significant factor to consider in Meiktila is that most of the people spoken to were living in IDP camps or in rehabilitation sites. The listeners went to four different IDP camps (two camps for only Muslims and two camps for only Buddhists) and one rehabilitation site where Muslims and Buddhists lived together. The listeners were able to speak to 51 people in total, most of whom were living in temporary shelters in the IDP camps.

23 (45%) participants were Muslim, 21 (41%) were Buddhist, 5 (10%) were Christian, and 2 (4%) were Hindu. This graph below depicts the religious affiliation of community members from Meiktilla.



25 (49%) community members were male and 24 (47%) were female. The gender of four participants was not recorded.

16 (31%) community members listened to were between 20-30 years old, 12 (23%) were between 31-40 years old, 8 (16%) were between 41-50 years old, 3(6%) were between 51-60 years old and no data was collected for 10 (20%) people. This data is shown in the graph below.



### ***We do not want violence to happen again***

Community members in Meiktila were greatly affected by the communal violence and they repeatedly emphasised that their lives had been destroyed by the violent events. People continue to live in fear, expressing a desire for their communities to never experience violence again. By and large, Muslims appeared to be the targets of the violence. However, individuals belonging to the Hindu faith were also killed after being misidentified as Muslims because of their facial features. Consequently, everyone, regardless of gender, started carrying weapons to protect themselves when tensions arose.

Many people were traumatised or distressed because of the death of family members, especially by the loss of children. Several children also lost their parents because of the violence and families suffered because they were separated from their loved ones.

Students continued to go to school while violence was occurring in their communities. This left young people exposed to different social and security problems. For example, “Muslim-looking” students faced threats.

*I joined in on the fighting [against the Muslim members of the community], but I stopped when I realised they were human beings who were afraid of dying. I don't want to see this violence again.*

– A young Bamar male vendor

### ***Violence was institutionally motivated***

Before the violence occurred, people from different religions were friends and had strong relationships. People from different religions conducted business with each other and attended each other's religious festivals. Interfaith marriages also occurred frequently and did not cause problems in the community. A strong theme that emerged in the conversations was of Buddhist community members stepping up to help secure targeted individuals. This included providing safe haven to keep Muslim friends, neighbours, and even strangers safe while the violence was occurring.

This is why many people believed that the violence was institutionally motivated (government, military, political parties or extremist religious groups), with strangers causing most of the riots and destruction of buildings. People also observed that the government authorities did not control conflict effectively.

### ***Violence has affected relationships***

In the past, people from different religious groups were friendly and there was no violent conflict between them. Hate messages and propaganda songs have now become more widespread in the communities. This is a continuing cause for concern.

At present, Muslims are subjected to obvious forms of discrimination. Many Muslims are not able to find work in towns. Trade between the different religious groups has also declined, with some people choosing not to buy from Muslim businesses. Local authorities have also disallowed the rebuilding of some religious buildings, like mosques.

### ***Challenges of living in IDP camps***

People fleeing their homes during violence have had to live in IDP camps. In most cases looting, theft and arson of houses accompanied violence. As a result, most IDPs lost all of their belongings. Although people want to go back to their homes and government authorities have asked them to do so, most find this difficult because they do not have any resources to rebuild their homes.

People living in the IDP camps have noticed the lack of available aid, particularly food. They were provided with aid and food in the camps for the first few months. However, now the IDPs must wait as the government has stopped providing aid to the camps.

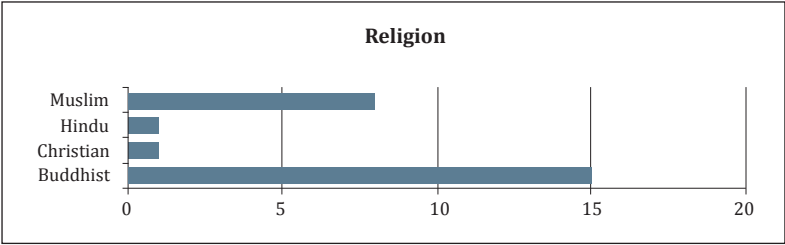
People living in IDP camps also have to deal with social problems that arise as a result of the poor planning of the camps. For instance, people in the relocation sites have to stay in hall-like buildings that have no partitions, making theft a considerable concern. This arrangement has also caused privacy issues as men and women are forced to live together in the same space. Lack of access to proper healthcare is another on-going concern.

## Lashio: Most commonly heard themes

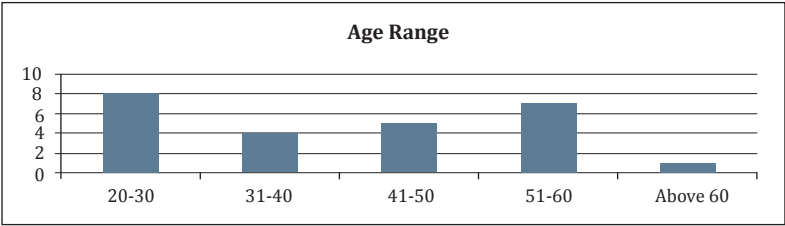
1. Government authorities could not control the violence because they were not given orders to intervene.
2. Communal violence affected economic relationships between the different religious groups.
3. The violence was institutionally motivated, and not religious in nature.
4. Muslim community members experience economic and social discrimination.
5. Conflict negatively affected relationships between community members of different religious groups.
6. Strangers destroyed the local mosque and attempted to destroy a pagoda.
7. Communal violence in Lashio was unexpected.
8. During the riots, people felt like it was the end of the world.
9. Authorities have not allowed the Muslim community to rebuild an orphanage school for children.

## Analysis

The listeners had conversations with 25 people from different religious backgrounds in Lashio. 15 (60%) participants were Buddhist, 8 (32%) were Muslim, 1 (4%) was Christian, and 1 (4%) was Hindu. This graph below depicts the religious affiliation of community members listened to.



16 (64%) community members listened to were male and 9 (36%) were female. 8 (32%) participants were 20-30 years old, 4 (16%) were between 31-40 years old, 5 (20%) were between 41-50 years old, 7 (28%) were between 51-60 years old, and 1 (4%) participant was over 60 years old. The age range of community members from Lashio is displayed in the graph below.



***Community harmony before violence***

Most people never thought that violence would occur in Lashio. Participants spoke of the different religious and ethnic communities living together in harmony. Most people shared that they have known each other since childhood. Although they heard about communal violence occurring in other communities, they did not believe it would happen in Lashio as it had no precedent. During the riots, people felt like it was the end of the world.

### ***Violence is institutionally motivated, not religious***

During the week that violence broke out, communities heard propaganda music and saw pamphlets promoting anti-Muslim sentiment. However, most people believed that violence was institutionally motivated by either the government, military, political parties or extremist religious groups. People observed strangers destroying the mosque and the market, and did not recognise any familiar faces among the rioters.

Notably, at the time that the conversations took place, several people expressed apprehension owing to a 10-day conference, which had recently been held by a fundamentalist Buddhist group. They were afraid that the violence would happen again.

### ***Violence affected relationships***

Before this episode of communal violence, community members from different religious groups were friends. The violence changed people's relationships, causing mistrust and making people feel as if they are strangers to each other. Some people felt guilty about the way Muslims were being treated. Some Muslims said that they had become afraid of Buddhists, even those that were previously friends. University students expressed their reluctance to form new friendships with students from other religions, feeling like they had to behave cautiously around them.

The communal violence also affected economic relations of all religious groups. Some people stopped shopping at Muslim-owned stores, while some Shan and Chinese traders stopped trading with Muslim business owners. The imposed curfews affected business owners, who had to close their stores before 6pm.

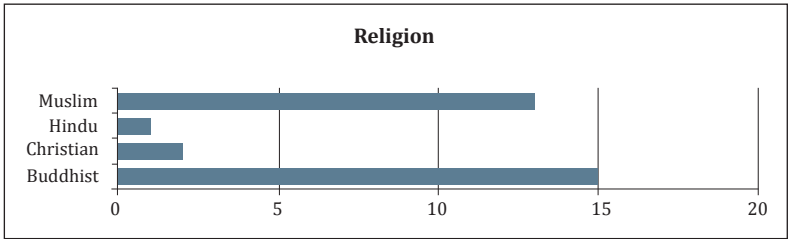
Most people noted that Muslims were subjected to discrimination, which had become apparent after the violence. For example, the Muslim community wanted to rebuild an orphanage school for their children, but the local authorities refused to allow this. The authorities did allow the rebuilding of the mosque, which was burned during the riots. Hindu people were also affected by the discrimination because they had similar facial features to Muslims.

## Mandalay: Most commonly heard theme

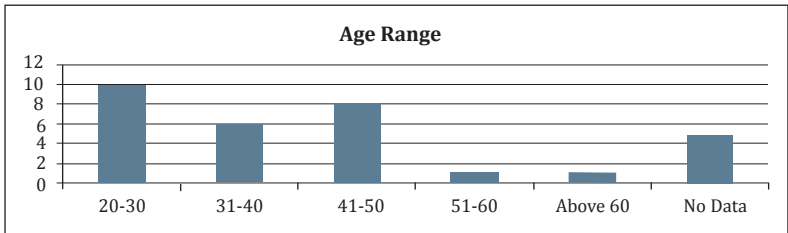
1. The riots involved institutions, i.e., the government, military and political parties.
2. Criminal activities were not addressed using legal channels. Instead, some people used communal violence to respond to the situation.
3. Communities continue to experience fear. No one wants the situation to reoccur.
4. During the riots and communal violence, it felt like anarchy.
5. Economic activity of people from all religious groups was affected by the violence.
6. Communities need mutual understanding between religions leaders and their followers about religious beliefs, practices, and traditional customs.
7. If people had knowledge of the political situation, then they would not have been manipulated to participate in the communal violence.
8. If the community was united, they would not be affected by incitement.
9. The riots were conducted by people from outside of the community. These people did not know the famous buildings or streets of Mandalay.
10. Communal violence affected every facet of society (economic and social).
11. Authorities and police knew the perpetrators but did not do anything to stop them. Instead, they imprisoned people who used weapons to defend themselves.

# Analysis

Listeners spoke with 31 people from different religious groups in Mandalay. 15 (48%) community members were Buddhist, 13 (42%) were Muslim, 2 (7%) were Christian, and 1 (3%) was Hindu. This graph below depicts the religious affiliation of community members listened to.



18 (58%) community members were male, and 13 (42%) were female. 10 (32%) individuals were between 20-30 years old, 6 (19%) were between 31-40 years old, 8 (26%) were between 41-50 years old, 1 (3%) was between 51-60, 1 (3%) was over 60 years old, and the age of 5 (16%) participants was not recorded. The age range of community members from Mandalay is displayed in the graph below.



## ***Violence is institutionally motivated, not a religious issue***

Most community members said that the violence was manipulated by institutions. Community members were not sure which institutions were involved, but thought it could be the government, military, political parties and extremist religious groups. Some observed that before the violence broke out, people in Mandalay were supporting calls to amend Article 436 of the Constitution (which essentially grants the military MPs in Parliament the power to veto any constitutional amendments). These people saw the riots as being instigated by the central government, using religious issues as a political tool to distract people from a constitutional amendment petition. A common observation was that people from outside the community were organising and mobilising the riots. This observation was based on the fact the instigators did not know the famous buildings or streets of Mandalay.

Communities also noted that violence broke out after a rumour was spread that Muslim men had raped a Buddhist woman. The incident was not addressed through the appropriate legal channels and instead, it was used to provoke communal violence. The local authorities knew which individuals were involved in the riots but did not try to stop them. Instead, they imprisoned those people who decided to use weapons to defend themselves.

## ***Violence affected everyone***

During the riots, it felt like anarchy prevailed as no rule of law existed. Although there was police presence, people felt that they did not do anything to stop the violence because they did not have the orders to act. Even after the violence, communities are still afraid. Communities were traumatised by the violence and no one wished for it to happen again.

Violence affected every aspect of life in Mandalay, economic and social, of all religious groups. The imposition of a section 144 curfew meant that no one was allowed to go out between 9pm and 6am, so those working in the market selling fresh produce could not conduct their business early in the morning.

***Communities need mutual understanding between religious groups***

People said that their communities needed to promote mutual understanding between religious leaders and their followers. One suggestion was to include religious education at the primary school level to promote the learning of all religions and their traditional customs and beliefs. Another suggestion was to promote interfaith activities that would encourage all religious groups to live in harmony together.

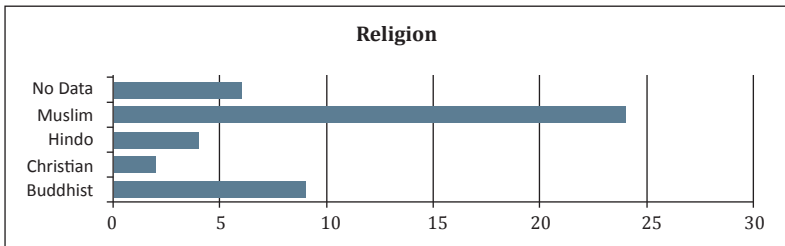
Communities also recognised the role that rumours played in instigating violence. They felt they could not counteract violence they believed to be promoted by political institutions (i.e., military, government, political parties). But they did believe that if the spread of rumours could be curtailed, it would prevent riots in the future. Some also noted that communities needed to know more about the political situation and develop more unity so they would not be fooled by the political tricks used to instigate violence.

## West Bago: Most commonly heard themes

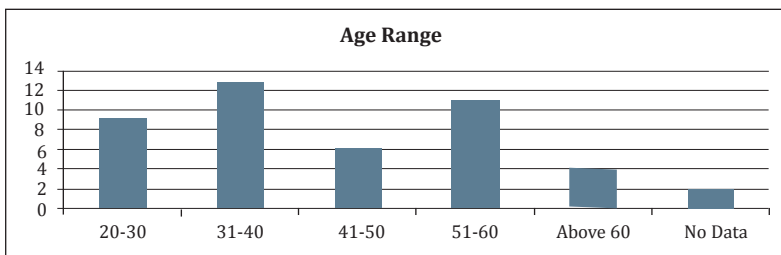
1. All communal violence that happened is institutionally motivated.
2. The authorities did not control the situation well.
3. There is a lack of rule of law.
4. There is a lot of discrimination against Muslims in schools, especially in primary schools.
5. People were not allowed to rebuild the mosques destroyed in previous riots.

## Analysis

In West Bago, listeners talked to 45 participants. 24 (53%) people were Muslim, 9 (20%) were Buddhist, 4 (9%) were Hindu, 2 (5%) were Christian, and 6 people did not provide information on their religious affiliation. The graph below shows the religious affiliation of community members from West Bago.



35 (78%) participants were male and 10 (22%) were female. 9 (20%) participants were between 20-30 years old, 13 (29%) were between 31-40 years old, 6 (13%) were between 41-50 years old, 11 (25%) were between 51-60 years old, 4 (9%) were over 60 years old, and 2 people did not share their age. The age range of these community members is detailed in the following graph.



### ***People trusted each other***

Before the violence, people lived peacefully with those from other religions. Trust prevailed in the communities. Farmers and traders from different religions often gave cash advances because they trusted each other. People were not afraid of anything in their daily lives.

### ***Hate speech observed before the riots***

There were many signs of trouble before the riots occurred. Hate speech was common, with statements like “Muslims are going to conquer the world” spreading. Anti-Muslim songs were also heard, causing Muslims to feel angry and scared.

### ***Violence was institutionally motivated***

Many people felt that there had been a systematic effort to initiate the riots. Community members believed that the government or political parties were to blame since the riots could not have happened if they were not involved. Some people also believed that some members of parliament and regional level authorities were involved.

### ***Violence was not religious***

Buddhist monks played a dual role during the incidence of this conflict. In some townships, they participated, and sometimes, even led the riots. But in other cities of West Bago, Buddhist monks and communities helped to keep Muslims safe.

### ***Lack of rule of law***

People noted that the local authorities in the cities could not contain the violence well. In some cases, police or guards were assigned to protect houses, but when the crowds showed up, they stepped aside and allowed them to destroy Muslim houses. Some witnesses saw familiar faces in the rioting crowds during the day who were then seen wearing the uniform of security personnel at night.

### ***Muslims are discriminated against***

Muslims experienced discrimination in different ways in West Bago. Muslims talked about not being sure if they should participate in Buddhist activities. When they participate in Buddhist activities, they feel fearful upon hearing anti-Muslim rhetoric.

People also talked about the discrimination against Muslim children in schools, particularly in primary schools. One Christian teacher went to school to bring supplies and witnessed a teacher push aside Muslim children and say, “This is not for you”.

Communities were also not allowed to rebuild the mosques destroyed in previous riots. In one town, residents were not allowed to rebuild the destroyed mosque and Muslims have to travel 20 km for Friday prayer. Some community members believe this is a government strategy to create hatred in the community.

### ***Communities need to live in harmony***

Several people identified education as one of the important needs of the communities. Community members need to learn about civil and human rights. People also need religion awareness programs such as inter-religious prayer meetings to promote harmonious coexistence and encourage mutual respect for others.

Community members also identified the need for people to be aware of the dangers of spreading unverified rumours.

## Sittwe: Most commonly heard themes

1. Communities were traumatised by the violence. People now live in fear and feel insecure everyday.
2. News media used biased language to incite violence.
3. There is a lack of rule of law. Community members should obey the law, regardless of their religious beliefs.
4. People did not expect riots to be so widespread.
5. The government created the riots and communal violence to cause instability.
6. Communal violence impacted many aspects of daily life. Prime amongst these were increased livelihood problems and lack of access to healthcare services and education.
7. Imposition of curfew caused livelihood problems and inhibited other daily activities for the communities.
8. Centralisation of power in the state government caused delay in addressing the violence.
9. There is an increase in the mistrust among communities, including those outside of the conflict areas.
10. Outsiders influenced people from the communities to take part in the violence.
11. Violence happened to distract people from issues relating to the use of Rakhine State's natural resources and land.
12. Religious fundamentalists caused the violence.
13. International actors such as the UN do not have enough knowledge about the situation in Rakhine State.
14. The education system in Rakhine State needs to be improved.
15. Pre-existing hatred and grievances against the Muslim community due to lack of information made it easier for people to believe rumours and misinformation.

16. It is not possible to live together; separation is the only option now. It will take time for communities to live together again because of the mistrust that has developed between different groups.
17. Communities need more awareness about human rights and other religions so that they understand the reasons behind the conflict.
18. There is discrimination against different minority groups (Hindu, Maramagyi, Miou and others, not only Bengali<sup>9</sup>) in Rakhine State.
19. Many family members have been separated due to communal violence.

## Analysis

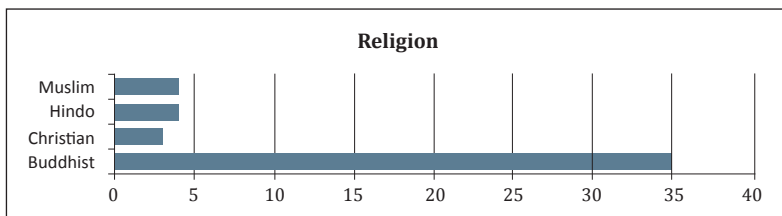
Listeners in Sittwe had conversations with 48 people. The conversations were held with people coming from 9 different areas, including areas directly affected by the violent conflict and from the 2 IDP camps outside of Sittwe.

35 (76%) community members were Buddhist, 4 (8.5%) were Muslim, 4 (8.5%) were Hindu, and 3 (7%) were Christian. The chart below depicts the participants' religious affiliations.

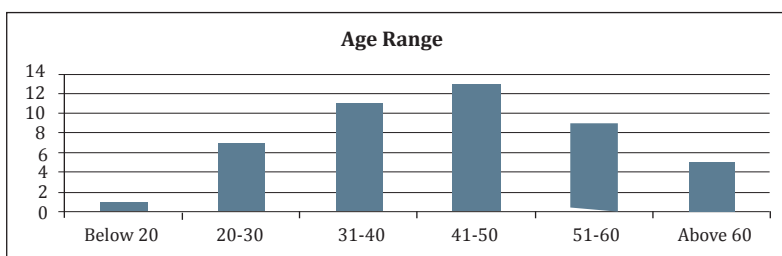
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<sup>9</sup> Debate surrounds the use of the terms 'Bengali' and 'Rohingya' to refer to Muslims who live in Rakhine State. The term 'Bengali' to refer to people in Rakhine State is often associated with a position that these people are recent immigrants from Bangladesh and are not from Myanmar. The term 'Rohingya' is often tied to wider debate surrounding secession and citizenship.

In this publication we use the terms as presented by participants, the majority of whom are Arakanese and used the term 'Bengali' to refer to Muslim communities in Rakhine State. The four Muslim participants in Rakhine State all self-identified as 'Rohingya'. The use of these terms does not reflect CPCS's position on the current debate.



28 (61 %) participants were male, and 18 (39%) were female. 1 (2%) participant was under 20 years old, 7 (15%) participants were aged between 20-30 years old, 11 (24%) were between 31-40 years old, 13 (28%) were between 41-50 years old, 9 (20%) were between 51-60 years old, and 5 (11%) were above 60 years old. The graph below shows the age range of the participants from Sittwe.



### ***Provocative actions incited violence***

People believed that media bias, as reflected in the framing of the reporting of the rape case (i.e., Arakanese woman raped by Bengali men), was a factor in inciting violence. People also said that the lack of rule of law, or the sense that the authorities would not do anything to punish those responsible, provoked people to take the law into their own hands.

Other community members said that having Muslims gather to pray for the 10 Muslims who were killed by a crowd of Arakanese was seen as a provocation and became the starting point for the

Sittwe riots. People also said that religious fundamentalists and extremists caused the violence.

### ***Violent conflict has far-reaching effects***

Communities did not expect the riots to spread as widely as they did. People lack security in their communities and continue to live in fear.

People's lives were affected by the conflict. Daily income generation, education and social services are still affected by the communal violence. Communities suffered significant economic loss. Some Muslim companies gave income advances to their employees. When these people left because of the violence, this income was lost. Curfew has also caused livelihood problems and inhibited other daily activities.

Family life has also been affected. Some families have had to separate when their houses burned down because parents could not live with their adult children and their families in the same house in the rehabilitation centres. Additionally, the violence convinced some young people to leave Sittwe. These people moved to other states in Myanmar, and to other countries like Thailand and Malaysia.

### ***The international community does not understand***

Communities felt the international community, such as the United Nations and international NGOs, did not have accurate information about the situation in Rakhine State. These international actors relied only on the reports of some international NGOs, and did not listen to all other actors (i.e. communities) involved. The presence of outsiders was seen to be causing mistrust among the communities. This refers to anyone who is not from Rakhine State and includes government agents, and religious leaders.

### ***Centralised government caused delay in response to violence***

Communities observed that the lack of power sharing between the central government and the state governments was one of the reasons why there was a delay in controlling the violence. The violence spread because the local authorities had to wait for direct orders from the central government on how to respond to the situation.

### ***Violence as a diversionary tactic***

Before this incidence of violence broke out, Rakhine State was experiencing tensions. Some people mentioned that prior to the riots, people had been protesting in front of the police station in relation to a tender for the marketplace. People also mentioned local campaigns lobbying for the equitable sharing of profits earned from the extraction of Rakhine State's natural resource wealth between the central government and the state government. There were also issues related to land.

Some people believed the government incited the riots to promote anarchy and divert the attention of the communities and civil society organisations/community-based organisations in Rakhine State from the issues detailed above.

### ***Pre-existing discrimination***

People also talked about discrimination directed towards 'Bengali',<sup>10</sup> Hindi, Maramagi, Miou and other community members. Pre-existing 'hatred' and grievances, combined with a lack of understanding and knowledge about other religions, allowed rumour and misinformation to spread.

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<sup>10</sup> See Footnote 9.

### ***Need for education to understand conflict***

Communities recognised the need for peacebuilding activities, with particular focus on civil and human rights, and trust-building programs. These programs should aim to assist communities to understand the reasons behind communal conflict.

### ***Communities need to be segregated***

The most striking difference between Sittwe and the other locations is the insistence of most people in Sittwe of the need for Muslim and Buddhist communities to remain separate. Communities felt it was not possible to live together at present because of the high level of mistrust between the communities. Only when trust has been rebuilt can they all live together.

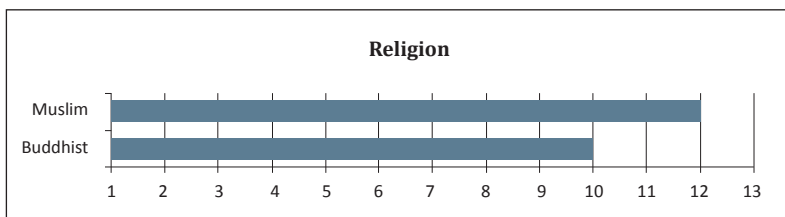
Notably, it was only in Sittwe that people with different religious backgrounds lived in mixed communities. In other locations in Rakhine State, Muslims and Buddhists lived in separate areas.

## Shwebo: Most commonly heard themes

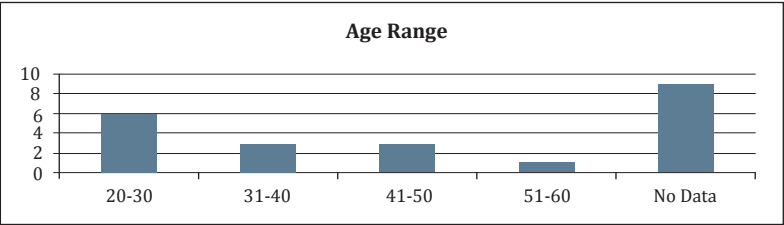
1. Violence will not happen without the presence of strangers.
2. Community members participated in the traditional and religious activities of other religious groups.
3. Most people had good relations with each other, regardless of religious affiliation.
4. Local people set up interfaith dialogues that worked to prevent riots from breaking out.
5. People do not want communal violence to happen in their communities and they believe they can work together to prevent it.
6. Communities need organisations to help solve the problems of their conflicts.
7. Young people need to learn about other religions.

## Analysis

Listeners spoke with 22 people from different locations in Shwebo. Notably, in one village in Shwebo, communities, particularly religious leaders, were able to prevent tensions from escalating into violence. 12 (55%) community members listened to were Muslim and 10 (45%) were Buddhist. The graph below shows the religious affiliation of these participants.



18 (82%) people were male and 4 (18%) were female. 6 (27%) participants were between 20-30 years old, 3 (14%) were between 31-40 years old, 3 (14%) were between 41-50 years old, 1 (4%) was between 51-60 years old, and 9 (41%) people did not share their age. The age range of participants from Shwebo is detailed in the graph below.



***Outsiders are instrumental in inciting violence***

Most people said that outsiders were involved in trying to incite violence. In one village, community members related how one or two weeks before the violence, anti-Muslim propaganda on websites or in the form of videos and audio CDs began spreading in their communities.

***Strong interfaith relationships helped prevent violence***

Before the violence, people attended traditional and religious activities of other religious groups. This fostered strong relationships between the different groups, with many saying that they were friends with those from other religions. In one village, the leaders of different religious groups were childhood friends so they worked together to protect each other’s communities. This allowed them to organise interfaith dialogues that were instrumental in promoting communication, dispelling rumours, and preventing riots.

In two locations, the Venerable Tayzar Dipati was influential in helping to quell violence. He worked together with Muslim religious leaders, with these leaders talking to the members of their own communities to help calm tense situations and convince people not to participate in riots.

Significantly, Ma Ba Tha monks in these communities were also active in preventing violence by sharing information with other leaders and talking to resolve conflicts that arose.

### ***People feel empowered to prevent violence***

People do not want violence to occur in their area. Community members recognised that there were outsiders who wanted to incite violence by spreading rumours but resolved that they would not let this happen. They believe they can prevent violence by having organisations or interfaith dialogue groups that can prevent miscommunication between religious groups.

While hearing rumours and stories of violence from other places shocked community members, they were able to prevent violence from happening in their communities because they knew, and trusted each other.

In one incident, after strangers convinced a known drug addict who is Muslim to destroy a Buddhist building, communities were able to prevent the situation from escalating into a riot by talking to each other to calm the situation.

### ***Interfaith education is needed***

Some monks talked about the need to change the education system so young people could learn about other religions. They believed that this would help foster greater understanding between people

from different religions. Other people were of the opinion that more education was needed to prevent violence from breaking out.

### ***Lack of rule of law is a factor in the violence***

In one of the areas where violence broke out, people observed that although the Minister of Defence and Border Affairs was present, he could not control the violence. They thus attributed the violence to the lack of rule of law in their area.

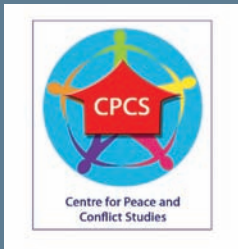
### ***People want to rebuild and strengthen interfaith relationships***

In a community where violence broke out, community members observed that it would take a long time to rebuild relationships so they could return to their previous harmonious state. Residents in this community wanted to rebuild their relationships with those from other religious groups. They said they needed organisations to support them so they could strengthen communication between the different religious groups since tension still existed between them. They also worried about the presence of fundamentalist groups.

### ***Institutions played a role in the violence***

Some people believed that political parties were responsible for trying to create tensions between religious groups. In one village, people were of the opinion that constitutional amendment could help to prevent communal violence, particularly if there was a change in the government's ruling style.





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