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Controversial religion bills submitted to parliament

Myanmar Times (01.12.2014) - Four controversial "protection of religion" bills were forwarded to parliament at the end of November, the president's office announced last week.

The decision to draft laws that would restrict religious conversion and inter-faith marriage, and enforce monogamy and population control measures, has been strongly criticised by local and international human rights groups.

The draft text of the religious conversion bill, which was publicised in May, was particularly criticised by rights groups because it would require people who want to change their faith to get approval from a specially-created local authority.

The bills are based on drafts written by the Committee for the Protection of Nationality and Religion, a monk-led organisation better known as Ma Ba Tha. They are likely to be considered during the next session of parliament, which will begin in early January.

While the text of the draft interfaith marriage bill has not yet been released, an earlier version proposed a ban on marriage between Buddhist women and men of other faiths.

Ma Ba Tha members say an existing marriage law introduced in 1954 is not strong and the new draft law would protect women from being forced to convert to their husband's religion.

The President's Office said the full text of the draft bills would be published in state newspapers soon to get public feedback.

The bills were sent to the government in 2013 and in February President U Thein Sein submitted them to parliament. However, speaker Thura U Shwe Mann said they were not in the right format to be considered by MPs and sent them back to the government to be rewritten.

In March, President U Thein Sein set up a 12-member commission headed by Deputy Attorney General U Tun Tun Oo, to draft two of the laws, while two others were sent directly to government ministries.

Name of Muslim group in Myanmar goes unspoken

AP (18.08.2014) - Myanmar's downtrodden Rohingya Muslims have been denied citizenship, targeted in deadly sectarian violence and corralled into dirty camps without aid. To heap on the indignity, Myanmar's government is pressuring foreign officials not to speak the group's name, and the tactic appears to be working.

U.N. officials say they avoid the term in public to avoid stirring tensions between the country's Buddhists and Muslims. And after Secretary of State John Kerry recently met with Myanmar leaders, a senior State Department official told reporters the U.S. thinks the name issue should be "set aside."

That disappoints Tun Khin, president of the activist group Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK. He said by not using it, governments are co-operating with a policy of repression.

"How will the rights of the Rohingya be protected by people who won't even use the word 'Rohingya'?" he said.

Myanmar authorities view the Rohingya (pronounced ROH'-hin-gah) as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, not one of the 135 officially recognized ethnic groups. Longstanding discrimination against this stateless minority, estimated to number 1.3 million, has intensified as Myanmar has opened up after decades of military rule. More than 140,000 Rohingya have been trapped in crowded camps since extremist mobs from the Buddhist majority began chasing them from their homes two years ago, killing up to 280 people.

Racism against the Rohingya is widespread, and some see in the communal violence the warning signs of genocide.

The United States has called on the government to protect them. When President Barack Obama visited Myanmar less than two years ago, he told students at Yangon University: "There is no excuse for violence against innocent people. And the Rohingya hold themselves — hold within themselves the same dignity as you do, and I do."

Yet neither Kerry this month, nor top human rights envoy Tom Malinowski during a June visit, uttered the term at their news conferences when they talked with concern about the situation in Rakhine state, where sectarian violence is perhaps worst. Buddhist mob attacks against Rohingya and other Muslims have spread from the western state to other parts of the country, sparking fears that nascent democratic reforms in the nation could be undermined by growing religious intolerance.

The State Department official, speaking on condition of anonymity because the official was not authorized to speak publicly, said the U.S. position is that to force either community to accept a name that they consider offensive — including the term "Bengali" that the government uses to describe Rohingya — is to "invite conflict." The department says its policy on using "Rohingya," however, hasn't changed.

Foreign aid workers have been caught up in the tensions. Buddhist hardliners have attacked homes and offices of aid workers it accuses of helping Muslims and not the smaller number of Buddhists also displaced by the violence. Doctors Without Borders was expelled by the government in February and is still waiting to be allowed back.

The humanitarian situation has worsened. The U.N. said the number of severe malnutrition cases more than doubled between March and June, and the world body's top human rights envoy for Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, last month called the situation "deplorable."

She said she'd been repeatedly told by the government not to use the name "Rohingya," although she noted under international law that minorities have to the right to self-identify on the basis of their national, ethnic, religious and linguistic characteristics.

Myanmar Information Minister Ye Htut said in an email to The Associated Press that the name had never been accepted by Myanmar citizens. He said it was created by a separatist movement in the 1950s and then used by exile activists to pressure Myanmar's former military government at the United Nations in the 1990s.

While there is a reference to "Rohingya" by a British writer published in 1799, use of the term by the Muslim community in Rakhine to identify themselves is fairly recent, according to Jacques Leider, an expert on the region's history.

Rohingya leaders claim their people are descendants of Muslims who settled in Rakhine before British colonial rule, which began after a war in 1823. The British occupation opened the doors to much more migration of Muslims from Bengal. Current Myanmar law denies full citizenship to those whose descendants arrived after 1823.

The name debate is reminiscent of whether to call the country by its old name, Burma, or Myanmar — the title adopted by the then-ruling military junta in 1989. Washington still officially uses "Burma," although U.S. officials also refer to "Myanmar" — a sign of the improved ties with the former pariah state.

But in this contest over semantics, the stakes are higher.

Rohingya were excluded from a U.N.-supported national census this spring if they identified themselves as Rohingya. They face stiff restrictions on travel, jobs, education and how many children they can have. They are also unwelcome in Bangladesh, where they have fled during crackdowns inside Myanmar since the 1970s.

Either because of government prodding or a desire to avoid confrontation, staff of foreign embassies and aid agencies in Myanmar rarely say "Rohingya" in public these days, and may simply say "Muslims." In June, the U.N. children's agency even apologized for using the term "Rohingya" at a presentation in Rakhine, an incident which drew criticism from rights activists.

"Any humanitarian agency or donor who refuses to use the term is not just betraying fundamental tenants of human rights law, but displaying cowardice that has no place in any modern humanitarian project," said David Mathieson, senior researcher on Myanmar for Human Rights Watch.

Rohingya children in Myanmar camps going hungry

AP (08.08.2014) - Born just over a year ago, Dosmeda Bibi has spent her entire short life confined to a camp for one of the world's most persecuted religious minorities. And like a growing number of other Muslim Rohingya children who are going hungry, she's showing the first signs of severe malnutrition.

Her stomach is bloated and her skin clings tightly to the bones of her tiny arms and legs. While others her age are sitting or standing, the baby girl cannot flip from her back to her stomach without a gentle nudge from her mom.

"I'm scared she won't live much longer," whispers Hameda Begum as she gazes into her daughter's dark, sunken eyes. "We barely have any food. On some days I can only scrape together a few bites of rice for her to eat."

Myanmar's child malnutrition rate was already among the region's highest, but it's an increasingly familiar sight in the country's westernmost state of Rakhine, which is home to almost all of the country's 1.3 million Rohingya Muslims.

More than 140,000 have been trapped in crowded, dirty camps since extremist Buddhist mobs began chasing them from their homes two years ago, killing up to 280 people. The others are stuck in villages isolated by systematic discrimination, with restrictions on their movement and limited access to food, clean water, education and health care.

Even before the violence, the European Community Humanitarian Office reported parts of the country's second-poorest state had acute malnutrition rates hitting 23 percent — far beyond the 15 percent emergency level set by the World Health Organization.

With seasonal rains now beating down on the plastic tents and bamboo shacks inside Rohingya camps, the situation has become even more miserable and dangerous for kids like Dosmeda.

Naked boys and girls run barefoot on the muddy, narrow pathways, or play in pools of raw sewage, exposing them to potential waterborne diseases that kill. Some have black hair tinged with patches of red or blond, a tell-tale sign of nutrient deficiency commonly seen in places experiencing famine.

After a 10-day visit to the area last month, Yanghee Lee, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, summed up what she saw.

"The situation is deplorable," she said.

Myanmar, a predominantly Buddhist nation, only recently emerged from a half-century of repressive military rule and self-imposed isolation. Despite occasional expressions of concern, the U.S., Britain and others in the international community have largely stood by as conditions for the Rohingya deteriorated.

Some ambassadors and donor countries say privately that coming down too hard on the new, nominally civilian government will undermine efforts to implement sweeping reforms and note there has already been a dramatic backslide. Others don't want to jeopardize much-needed multi-billion dollar development projects in the country.

But their hesitancy to act has emboldened Buddhist extremists, now dictating the terms of aid distribution in Rakhine.

Last month, even Bertrand Bainvel, country representative for the U.N.'s children's agency — which says the number of severe malnutrition cases has more than doubled between March and June to reach nearly 1,000 cases — apologized for the use of the word "Rohingya." It was uttered during a presentation about projects for kids in Rakhine, rather than the government-insisted term "Bengali."

He promised that UNICEF would not use the word again, those present at the meeting said, though he sidestepped repeated queries from The Associated Press about the incident.

The government claims ethnic Rohingya are illegal migrants from neighboring Bangladesh and denies them citizenship, even though many of their families arrived generations ago. With their dark South Asian features, they are looked upon with disdain by the vast majority of the nation's 60 million people. Even Nobel Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, whether for reasons personal or political, has remained largely silent as members of the religious minority have been chased down by knife-wielding mobs.

Conditions in the camps — and elsewhere in Rakhine — went from bad to worse in February after the government expelled their main health lifeline, the Nobel-prize winning Doctors Without Borders.

A month later, other humanitarian groups were temporarily evacuated after extremist Buddhists stormed their residences and offices, saying they were giving Muslims preferential treatment. Many have since returned, but their operations have been severely restricted.

Doctors Without Borders has remained barred. In a move apparently timed to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's arrival in Myanmar on Friday, the government said the aid group could get back to work, though it remains unclear when that will happen and what conditions will apply.

Reshma Adatia, Holland-based Doctors Without Borders operational adviser, said Kerry and other foreign ministers attending a regional meeting in Myanmar this weekend should pressure the government to allow all aid groups to return immediately without restrictions.

"It's important for foreign governments and international actors to really push that access to essential humanitarian assistance is required, and it's required today," she said. "We're talking about hundreds of thousands that are at risk right now."

The father of Dosmeda, the malnourished baby, died at sea while working as a fisherman just before she was born.

After Buddhist mobs attacked the family's home, her pregnant mother, Hameda Begum, moved into the Ohn Taw Gyi camp outside Sittwe.

Unable to work, and without a husband to help, she had a hard time finding enough to eat in the months leading up to her due date. When the baby was born, the 18-year-old mother was unable to produce milk.

"I could only give her what adults ate — rice or ground-up fish," Hameda said of her first child. "But the food rations we got were small. Sometimes we didn't get any at all."

She knew her baby was sick, but she didn't understand malnutrition was to blame.

"She just kept getting skinnier and skinnier," she said.

The first two years of a child's life — when the brain and body are developing — are critical for physical and mental development. Without adequate nutrition, little girls like Dosmeda are prone to stunting, a condition that will shape the rest of their lives. As adults, they are weaker, prone to illnesses and have limited cognitive capacity. They are

also likely to be less productive on the job, studies show, earning lower wages that keep them stuck in poverty.

Dosmeda is now getting help from France-based Action Against Hunger, one of the only foreign aid organizations that has been allowed to continue operating in the camps. But she continues to wither, looking worse by the day. The baby is the only family the young mother has in the camp, and she's desperate to save her.

"All I can think about all day is my daughter. How can I help her? How can I make her healthy, give her a longer life?" Hameda said. "If something happens, I don't know what I'll do. I don't think I can live without her."

Myanmar seeks views on religious conversion bill

AP (27.05.2014) - Myanmar's government is trying to measure public support for a religious conversion bill put forward by nationalist Buddhist monks that would require anyone who wants to convert to another faith to get permission from local authorities.

If passed, anyone found guilty of proselytizing could face up to a year in prison.

Myanmar, a predominantly Buddhist nation of 60 million, has been grappling with sectarian violence in the western state of Rakhine since it began its transition to a half-century of military rule to democracy just three years ago.

Up to 280 people have been killed, and another 140,000 left homeless, most of them Muslims attacked by extremist Buddhists.

The draft bill, published Tuesday in state-run newspapers, does not mention any specific religion.

But because it was proposed by the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion led by nationalist Buddhist monks accused of inflaming tensions, it is widely interpreted at being aimed at preventing Muslims from trying to coerce Buddhist women into abandoning their faith, for marriage or otherwise.

The bill would require anyone seeking to change their faith to get permission from the Religious Conversion Registration body, which is comprised of local religious and immigration officials, a local administrator, women's affairs chairman and a local education officer.

It does not say if any action would be taken against someone who did not obtain permission to convert.

Ma Thida, a well-known journalist, writer and former political prisoner, opposed the move.

"Having to get permission from authorities for religious conversion restricts freedom of choice," she said. "Any grown-up person has the right to convert to any religion of their choice without administrative interference."

The Organization for the Protection of Race, Religion and Belief — a coalition of monks and lay people — last year collected 1.3 million signatures in support of a religious conversion law.

The government sees it as politically sensitive and is now trying to measure the level of public support.
