

SPECIAL REPORT - With official help, Myanmar's radical Buddhists target Muslim- owned businesses

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Calling for donations to save cattle, a roadside poster in the Ayeyarwady Delta town of Kyaungon depicts an image of a cow and a verse glorifying the animal's mythical role as "mother" to mankind. (Photo: Myanmar Now)

By Swe Win / Myanmar Now

ATHOKE, Ayeyarwady Delta (Myanmar Now) – Last year a Muslim businessman called Lwin Tun set up a factory in Labutta, a town in Myanmar's Ayeyarwady Delta. He spent \$330,000 on buildings and cooling systems, but couldn't buy the product his factory was meant to process: meat.

That's because Labutta's seven cattle slaughterhouses, also Muslim-owned, had suddenly gone out of business. In January 2014 they had tried to renew their licenses, but local authorities had already sold them to an association led by members of the radical Buddhist group Ma Ba Tha.

The Muslim slaughterhouses went bust - and so, after just three months, did Lwin Tun's meat-processing factory.

Myanmar's Muslim minority make up about 5 percent of the country's predominantly Buddhist population and Muslims living in the delta rely heavily on the slaughterhouse business and the beef trade.

Religious tensions simmered in Myanmar for almost half a century of military rule, boiling over in 2012, just a year after a semi-civilian government took power.

Now Muslim businesses have become the target of anti-Islamic sentiment propagated by radical Buddhists who have found a powerful voice in Myanmar's more open political landscape.

Since late 2013, a campaign supported by Ma Ba Tha has forced dozens of Muslim-owned slaughterhouses and beef-processing facilities across the Ayeyarwady Region to shut down, with thousands of cows seized from their Muslim owners, a Myanmar Now investigation has found.

Other Muslims whose businesses have survived have watched their incomes plummet.

Government documents obtained by Myanmar Now and interviews with officials show that Ayeyarwady Region's top officials supported the campaign against Muslim slaughterhouses.

Radical Buddhist activists also received government permission to transport hundreds of seized cows to Rakhine State in western Myanmar, the scene of violence between Rakhine Buddhists and mostly stateless Rohingya Muslims.

There, they donated the animals to Buddhists who have resettled from eastern Bangladesh.

Lwin Tun, 49, also has interests in construction, real estate and hotels in the delta and in the commercial capital Yangon. But thanks to Ma Ba Tha, he said, his business prospects in Labutta look bleak.

"Campaign activities calling for a boycott of Muslim-owned businesses have been going on in the town," he said. "Pamphlets are being handed out. Police know about it, but they don't take action."

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The campaign against the slaughterhouses and beef trade threatens both livelihoods and religious freedoms, Muslims told Myanmar Now. The shortage of cattle and tightening of government restrictions prevented Muslim communities in the delta from celebrating last year's Eid al-Adha festival, where cows are slaughtered in accordance with Islamic tradition.

"This activity constitutes a direct violation of our fundamental religious rights," said Al Haji Aye Lwin, chief convener of Yangon's Islamic Centre. "I estimate (Muslim) businesses in general are losing about 30 percent of their profits."

Kyaw Sein Win, a spokesman for Ma Ba Tha at its Yangon headquarters, said saving lives was central to Buddhist philosophy.

"We are not deliberately targeting (Muslim) businesses. They would kill animals as they believe this is how they gain merit. That's the main difference between us and them," he told Myanmar Now in a phone interview.

Myanmar has seen a rise in sectarian tension and anti-Muslim rhetoric led by nationalist Buddhist movements since 2011, when the military handed power to a nominally civilian government made up of former generals. The country's faltering democratic transition will take its next step with elections on November 8, the first in decades to be contested by all main opposition parties.

Ma Ba Tha, or the Patriotic Association of Myanmar, an association born out of the Buddhist extremist movement known as 969, has gained prominence in Myanmar's nascent democracy. It was founded in June 2013, following outbreaks of violence between Buddhists and Muslims in 2012.

The group says Myanmar and Buddhism are under threat from Islam and has managed to get four so-called "Race and Religion" bills - seemingly designed to discriminate against Muslims - supported by parliament. On September 14, the group began a series of celebrations in Yangon and a number of towns to mark the success of their campaign.

At the closing of its second convention in June, which the group said was attended by 6,800 monks and laymen, Ma Ba Tha released a [statement](#) saying it would call on the government to ban Muslims from slaughtering animals during religious events.

Critics of Ma Ba Tha say their activities are not representative of all Buddhist clergy in Myanmar, which is [250,000 strong](#) according to government data. Within the monks' order, known as the Sangha, concern has been raised that Ma Ba Tha's policies do not reflect the essence of Buddhism.

"PRACTISING TO CUT OUR THROATS"

Supporters of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi say the nationalist campaign is being used by the military-linked elite to attack her and her National League for Democracy party during a crucial election year. Monks associated with Ma Ba Tha have publicly accused the NLD of failing to protect Buddhism.

While [calls](#) for a [boycott](#) of Muslim-owned businesses have been less effective in big cities, the anti-slaughtering campaign, drawing on a traditional Buddhist abhorrence of killing cows, has resonated with Buddhists in the Ayeyarwady Delta.

Here, among an expanse of paddies and waterways where most of Myanmar's rice is grown, tens of thousands of Muslims, mostly town-based traders, live among some six million rice farmers - most of them Buddhists.

Myanmar farmers traditionally keep cows and bullocks as draft animals and only sell them to slaughterhouses to raise quick cash to pay for a wedding or medical treatment. The Ma Ba Tha-backed campaign has not called on farmers to stop selling their cattle, but instead has taken over slaughterhouse licenses.

In 2014, Ma Ba Tha monks in the Ayeyarwady delta formed Jividadana Thetkal ("Save and Rescue Lives"), appealing to monasteries in the Ayeyarwady Region to each raise about \$100 from their congregation and donate it to buying up licenses.

Ma Ba Tha's spokesman Kyaw Sein Win said: "We support this campaign by Jividadana Thetkal... Most of the monks in the Jividadana Thetkal campaign are members of Ma Ba Tha but we don't give any direct instructions from the headquarters."

Radical Buddhist monks have delivered fiery sermons in delta villages to spread the idea that cattle-slaughtering was an affront to Buddhism and part of an Islamic plot to exterminate cattle.

"It's time to be alert," warn the lyrics of a song played at such events. "Buddhist monks and lay people, be no longer passive. If you are, our race and religion will cease to exist."

Pyinyeinda, 65, is one of dozens of abbots in the Ayeyarwady Region who has come out in support of the campaign.

"Our region is faced with the risk of losing all its cattle. The kalars have killed thousands of them," said Pyinyeinda, a monk in Athoke, using a derogatory term for people of Indian heritage. "Do you know why? They are practising how to cut our throats."

GOVERNMENT COOPERATION

Ma Ba Tha representatives said they have raised enough funds to buy up licenses across all 26 townships in Ayeyarwady Region, and they sometimes received government support for their plan.

Sitting at a desk piled with books for teaching children about Ma Ba Tha, Ayeyarwady Region Chief Minister Thein Aung told Myanmar Now he had approved a 50 percent discount on licenses sold to the group, and supported their raids.

"As a Buddhist, I don't approve of cattle slaughtering. Therefore, I complied with the requests of the monks leading this campaign. I have favoured them to get the slaughter licenses," said the former general who was appointed as chief minister by President Thein Sein in 2011.

He said his office sends "special teams" to make arrests if campaigners provide tip-offs about supposed violations of slaughterhouse licenses by business owners.

In several delta townships, such as in Labutta, Ma Ba Tha members said they managed to buy up all licenses and put local Muslim-owned slaughterhouses out of business.

In Pantanaw Township, campaigners raised about \$15,000 in donations to obtain all four slaughter licenses in 2013 at a 50 percent discount, according to Kumara, a high-profile nationalist monk from Pantanaw who is a Ma Ba Tha central committee member.

Kumara said some 80 cows were saved as a result. He said his group continued to receive discounts - this time 30 percent - for their successful bids on licenses in 2014 and 2015.

A government document obtained by Myanmar Now, marked "secret" and signed by Ayeyarwady Region Secretary Aye Kyaw on behalf of Thein Aung in November 2014, mentions that Ma Ba Tha successfully "bid on slaughter licenses in 15 townships."

In other areas, Ma Ba Tha members began to monitor and raid Muslim-owned slaughterhouses and cattle transport, claiming violations of license terms that limit how many animals can be killed.

The 2014 government document instructs administrative officials in all 26 townships to cooperate with Ma Ba Tha members who monitor slaughterhouses. The letter urges monks to refrain from getting directly involved in these activities.

NIGHT-TIME RAIDS

In small towns and villages dotted around the Ayeyarwady delta, few people venture out when darkness falls over the vast expanse of paddy fields and zigzagging waterways. But in Kyonpyaw Township, some 150 km west of Yangon, Win Shwe, a local Ma Ba Tha secretary, and a group of monks and laymen have been active at night.

In 2014, the group raised about \$25,000 through public donations to buy up six slaughter licenses, but the most expensive license in the town remained out of their reach. So they decided to establish that the slaughterhouse was violating its license conditions.

"That slaughter house was allowed to butcher only a single cow a day. If we saw some suspicious signs such as more cows being dragged inside, then we would run into the building from our hiding place and check what was going on," he said during an interview at a local cafe.

"In our first two raids we found that more cows than legally permitted were being killed. So we pressured the municipal department to blacklist the Muslim owner. He was finally blacklisted and ordered to close down his slaughterhouse," Win Shwe said proudly.

Campaigners such as Win Shwe appeared motivated by a mix of Buddhist beliefs, traditional veneration of cows, prejudice against Muslims, and a desire to fight government corruption.

The vigilante raids highlight the complex relationship between Myanmar authorities and Buddhist nationalist groups, which sometimes appear to have support from the government, while at other times are at odds with it.

PROTECTING THE "WESTERN GATE"

Win Shwe and his colleagues claimed that more than 4,000 live cattle had been seized in the delta since early 2014. Many were subsequently donated as draft animals to poor Ayeyarwady farmers on condition they would not be killed or sold.

But in mid-2014, according to documents obtained by Myanmar Now, campaigners received government approval for a new plan that involved sending cattle seized in the delta to Buddhist communities in Maungdaw Township, around 500 km away.

Impoverished Maungdaw, the westernmost town of Myanmar, is situated on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border in northern Rakhine State, where Muslims outnumber Buddhist Rakhines.

The border, which Ma Ba Tha likes to call the country's 'Western Gate', has been under strict government control.

In the past couple of years, hundreds of ethnic Rakhines who were living in eastern Bangladesh have resettled on the Myanmar side of the border, [according to media reports](#). Meanwhile, the authorities use the term Bengali to refer to the Rohingya, implying they are illegal immigrants from [Bangladesh](#).

Authorities have sent these Buddhists to live in "model villages" in Maungdaw, in what appears to be an attempt to increase the Buddhist population.

In a letter dated August 26, 2014, Ayeyarwady Region authorities notified various townships that they had approved a request by the Young Men's Buddhist Association in Yangon to gather 100 bovines and ship them from the delta's Maubin port to Maungdaw.

Win Shwe said this was "to protect the Western Gate against the influx of Muslims".

He provided Myanmar Now with photos and a video recording of a September 4 ceremony where monks, Rakhine State officials and senior military officers attended an event to donate the cattle to Buddhist villagers in Maungdaw.

Sein Aung, who said he is a Buddhist Rakhine and a former military intelligence officer, heads the Shwepyithar Township branch office of the Young Men's Buddhist Association in Yangon.

He said he helped to ship cattle seized by Win Shwe's Ma Ba Tha branch to Maungdaw using Thuriya Sandar Win shipping company in Yangon, adding that he had coordinated the plan with Rakhine State authorities and Zaw Aye Maung, the Yangon Region Minister for Rakhine ethnic affairs. In a phone interview, Zaw Aye Maung confirmed this.

"If we don't have the Western Gate the mainland will be flooded with Bengalis [Muslims from Bangladesh]," said Sein Aung, sitting in an office lavishly decorated with nationalist materials, including flags bearing Buddhist swastikas.

REPUTATION

Sean Turnell, an economics professor at Sydney's Macquarie University, said the Ma Ba Tha boycott affecting Muslim businesses harmed Myanmar's international image among potential investors who are concerned about political instability.

"On a smaller scale, it seems all sorts of businesses are being impacted, from small shops, transport operators, to moneylenders," he said.

A Muslim restaurant owner in the delta town of Kyaungon said his income had dropped from about \$100 to \$20 per day following the boycott, and a Muslim neighbour had closed his restaurant and left.

The man, who asked not to be named, said he could no longer supply halal beef to his customers.

"You can't buy beef in the whole Ayeyarwady Region. If you want to eat halal beef you have to ask someone to bring it down from Yangon," he said in a whisper.

In front of his restaurant hung a huge poster with an image of a cow and a verse glorifying the animal's mythical role as "mother" to mankind, presumably put there by Ma Ba Tha sympathisers.

Most Muslims living in the Ayeyarwady delta dare not speak out against the campaign for fear of provoking Ma Ba Tha's ire. Some said the Muslim community can only lie low, hoping the current wave of fervent Buddhist nationalism subsides.

"We have no other country to flee to," said Khin Maung, the leader of a mosque in Kyaungon. "We are all born and raised here."

(Editing by Paul Vrieze, Ros Russell and Thin Lei Win)