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Myanmar: Authorities must protect communities at risk of violence

Violence between Buddhist and Muslim communities in Myanmar that reportedly left several people dead demonstrates an urgent need for Myanmar authorities to protect people at risk, Amnesty International said.

On Wednesday 20 March, violent clashes broke out between Muslim and Buddhist communities in Meiktila, a town in Myanmar's Mandalay Division, following a dispute at a Muslim-owned gold shop.

According to local sources, several people have been killed. There was also widespread damage to property in the town, including the destruction of mosques and a government building.

Tensions between Muslim and Buddhists have been heightened in certain parts of Myanmar, such as in Rakhine state where violence erupted in June 2012.

"These latest reports of violence are very worrying, and show that tension between the two communities is spreading to other parts of the country. There is a real risk of further violence unless the authorities take immediate steps to protect those at risk," said Isabelle Arradon, Amnesty International's Deputy Asia Pacific Director.

"There should also be an immediate and impartial investigation into the recent violence so that those responsible can be held to account."

Police were deployed to Meiktila after the incident and a curfew has been put in place.

In June 2012, violence erupted between the Buddhist and Muslim communities in Rakhine state, leaving scores dead and injured, and leading to widespread destruction and displacement. Both communities have been affected by the violence, but the Muslim communities, including the Rohingya minority community, have been the primary victims.

"The Myanmar authorities are responsible for ensuring protection of people, their homes and livelihoods. While doing so, they must ensure protection of all communities without discrimination," said Arradon

"It is imperative that the cycle of violence is not repeated."

A government-appointed commission was established in August 2012 to investigate the violence between Buddhists and Muslim communities in Rakhine state. It is expected to submit its report to the president of Myanmar and release it publicly at the end of March.