

**Briefing by Union Minister for Foreign Affairs
U Wunna Maung Lwin to the diplomatic corps
on recent incidents
(Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nay Pyi Taw)
(3-4-2013)**

Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for coming to Nay Pyi Taw to attend this briefing session in such a short notice. It has come to the attention of the government that the recent incidents that occurred in Meikhtila and a few other townships need to be clarified and briefed to the international community through the diplomatic corps in order to have the true picture of the situation. That is why we have decided to invite you to Nay Pyi Taw to the matter. After my presentation, there will be a Question and Answer session. There are representatives from relevant ministries present here today, and they are ready to take up any questions that you might wish to raise during the Q& A session.

The unrest which broke out in Meikhtila on 20 March 2013 was sparked by a private dispute in the market. However, as the parties concerned happened to be from two different religious faiths, it turned into ugly communal violence. Unruly acts of violent clashes, burning of houses and religious building were taken place in Meikhtila.

The Government immediately imposed Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure to restore law and order and to maintain peace and security of the people. However, as the violence, instead of slowing down, began to spread to nearby townships. The President enacted Ordinance No. (1/2013) and declared a State of Emergency in Meikhtila District on 22 March 2013 to enable military assistance in safeguarding life and property of the people and assisting victims of the violence. The violence ceased the next day in Meikhtila. Temporary shelters, camps were opened and humanitarian assistance were immediately distributed. Responsible government officials, religious leaders of different Faiths as well as Special Advisor of the UN Secretary General Mr. Vijay Nambiar who was on his visit to Myanmar had visited to Meikhtila and met with people from both community.

On the other hand, the violence spread to some parts of Bago Region, namely, Kyo-Bin-Kauk, Oke-Hpo, Minhla and Zee Gone townships. The Bago Region government imposed sections 188 and 144 of the Code of Criminal procedure. Even though there was no fatality in those areas some houses and religious buildings were damaged.

On the 28th of March, President U Thein Sein made a televised speech to the nation regarding recent riots in Meikhtila District and Bago District. The President expressed his sadness to find that a simple private dispute could lead to such deadly violence and that those instigated the violence would be duly punished. The President explicitly mentioned that he generally did not endorse the use of force to solve problems but he would not hesitate to use force as a last resort to protect the lives and safeguard the property of the general public.

He warned all political opportunists and religious extremists whose efforts to plant hatred among people of different faiths for their own self interests must not be tolerated. He said that all perpetrators of violence would be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

On the 30th of March, the President's office mandated the formation of the State of Emergency Management Committee chaired by the Union Minister for Home Affairs. The duties and function of the central committee were to carry out efficient and effective cooperation among the Government's security organizations; to link the State Governments for rapid response for such conflict; to effectively protect against the reoccurrence of racial, religious conflicts; to be able to reveal main instigators behind the scene and take action according to the law; to form Townships/ Ward/ Village Protection groups with the collaboration of Myanmar Police Force and community-centered police system and to implement such duties through coordination with social organizations. Similarly, such committees will be formed in other States and Regions as well to prevent from occurrence of such unruly incidents.

It was found out that most of the incidents violated various sections of the existing laws of Criminal Code.

To date, 142 suspects relating to the current violence have been detained and are under investigation. Action is being taken to arrest 32 absconders.

The incidents resulted in 44 dead in Meikhtila (1 Buddhist monk, 2 Myanmar, 1 Hindu, 4 Muslims and 36 still unidentified). 8341 persons from both Buddhist and Islamic communities were displaced and now taking refuge in temporary shelters.

Mr. V.J. Nambiar, the UN Secretary General's Special Advisor on Myanmar attended an inter-faith meeting in Meikhtila on 24 March 2013 where the religious leaders of Islam, Buddhism and Christianity discussed ways and means to defuse the communal tensions.

Donations of cash and kind, both from the Government as well as NGOs and private individuals have been constantly pouring into the affected areas. Well wishers are allowed to travel freely into these areas and personally give their donation. The media are also allowed to travel to the affected places. The authorities concerned have been conducting the relief and resettlement, and law enforcement measures in a responsible, non-discriminatory and transparent manner. Progress report of the prevailing situation is regularly telecast as breaking news.

Myanmar is a nation where people of different faiths have lived together peacefully throughout history. In our Constitution, it has been specifically defined that citizens may freely practice the religion of their choice.

It is regrettable that the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Mr. Tomas Ojea Quintana, made some irresponsible comments accusing the Myanmar authorities to be directly involved in some of the act of violence or implicitly colluded or supported such actions. We categorically reject these allegations, and necessary response to Mr. Quintana's remarks has been communicated to Madame Navanethem Pillay, High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva.

The Government has never practiced any religious or racial discrimination against any particular groups of its citizen. Our national culture and tradition also do not tolerate any forms of violence in the society.

The recent communal violence in some parts of Mandalay and Bago Regions have tarnished the image of Myanmar, affected the country's democratic transition and reform process which have been gaining momentum. We will investigate and expose those who are responsible for instigating religious and racial violence, and bring to justice according to law.

Myanmar has always been a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-faith country. All people of different race and religions have been living side by side in peace and harmony for centuries. We are determined to keep up this tradition with pride. We shall rebuild mutual understanding and trust in the society.

We will give priority to peace and stability, rule of law of the country and will not let this kind of incidents hinder the momentum of the democratic transition.

Thank you.