

# LINGERING SHADOWS

## COMMUNAL TENSIONS IN WEST BAGO REGION



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## Acknowledgements:

As Myanmar's transition continues, an undercurrent of communal violence threatens the country's progress. Sporadic outbreaks of violence since 2012 have cast a shadow over swathes of Myanmar, including the West Bago Region, the focus of this report. In recognition of the challenge posed by this violence, the Center for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH) was established to coordinate stakeholders working on interfaith and communal issues throughout Myanmar and to conduct research on complex national issues. As part of its mission to share knowledge and stimulate discussion, CDNH also organizes trainings, workshops and conferences on conflict prevention, rule of law, interfaith dialogues, social and political tolerance and civic education.

The Early Warning and Early Response (EWER) Program of CDNH was established in an attempt to provide timely collection and analysis of information in order to mitigate the risk of violence. As part of this effort, the EWER team undertook an in-depth analysis of the West Bago Region in order to understand the root causes of 2013's communal violence from an EWER perspective. This report provides an analysis of the past designed to inform future efforts at conflict prevention in West Bago and elsewhere. It should serve as a situational analysis for all stakeholders working on West Bago, and those working on interfaith and communal issues across Myanmar.

A report such as this one could not have been successfully completed without the assistance of several organizations and individuals. We would like to thank the Bago Regional government, the Chief Minister, as well as the community leaders, CSOs and individuals who provided assistance to the CDNH team as they were conducting research. It is thanks to their generous accommodation, logistical support, and honest discussions that we were able to complete our work. Our special thanks go to the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) for their financial support for the CDNH EWER Program. Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to the members of CDNH who worked together on this report, and particularly to all members of the EWER Team.

Kyaw Yin Hlaing

Director

Center for Diversity and National Harmony

Yangon, Myanmar

## Acknowledging the Contributions of CDNH Staff Members :

This report is a collaborative effort between a number of CDNH staff members. Maude Morrison, Moe Win Aung and Thiri Tin travelled extensively in the region to conduct interviews and focus group discussions, while Min Nyan Shwe, Yazar Win, Nyunt Than, War War Khine and Pyae Phyo Kyaw provided invaluable research support to supplement field data. Maude Morrison then drafted and edited the report, while Kaung Htet Zaw and Chit Wai worked tirelessly on the design process. In addition to these members, the logistical and administrative support provided by CDNH's administrative department was second-to-none, ensuring the smooth undertaking of complex field research. Overall, this work is the outcome of the collective effort of all members of CDNH and I am grateful for their invaluable contributions to our work.

Kyaw Yin Hlaing  
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## Executive summary :

From the 25th to the 28th March 2013, West Bago Region experienced a cluster of outbreaks of communal violence, affecting the eight townships of Okpho, Gyobingauk, Nattalin, Zigon, Thegon, Monyo, Minhla, and Letpadan. Unlike incidents of communal violence elsewhere in Myanmar (with the exception of Rakhine State), where violence was largely isolated in a particular town, West Bago played host to a series of incidents in a short space of time, making it an interesting case study.

Despite remaining relatively peaceful since 2013, this report reveals a region characterised by underlying tensions and fraught intercommunal relations, although the extent of intercommunal hostility differs across Townships. Against this backdrop, this report serves to elevate the voices of a number of individuals working to improve communal relations in their region. By deliberately elevating the voices of the positive, we seek to inform future efforts at locally-led conflict prevention.

Among these individuals, there is a strong sense that relationships between religious communities have been damaged since 2013. While mistrust and suspicion were elements of intercommunal relations even before violence broke out, hardline views have since crystallised, as the pull of the negative movement represented by voices such as MaBaTha has grown stronger. This has had two effects – drawing those moderate individuals who may have been inclined to pursue intercommunal interactions more actively away from the centre ground, or coaxing them into silence in an environment in which they are afraid to speak up in defence of tolerance and diversity.

Looking back, a consensus has emerged regarding the causes of conflict in 2013. Above all, events are now perceived as an external force imposed on the region from outside. Communities are portrayed as innocent bystanders, provoked by so-called ‘outsiders’ who were responsible for the majority of the violence. Linked to this notion are the accusations levelled against the authorities, seen as displaying inadequate or even inappropriate responses to violence and thus being in part responsible for subsequent damages. This sense of external imposition is reflected in communities’ attitudes towards future outbreaks of violence, for which they hold the authorities ultimately responsible.

Despite this low sense of ownership, a number of enabling factors for violence were identified, not least a persistent misunderstanding between religions – cited as both a factor in past violence and a continuous concern for the future. Rumours played a role in the outbreak of violence in 2013, although communities were unable to identify particular ingredients that make one rumour more potentially provocative than another.

As 2013 brought violence to many parts of West Bago, there were also instances of impressive community-led conflict prevention. In both Pyay and Paungde, communities came together to form inclusive networks of the full range of stakeholders, working together to keep violence at bay. Their model can and should be used as an example for regions still suffering from communal tensions.

Today, a number of communities across West Bago Region live in a state of frozen communal relations and a number of challenges impede their prog-





ress. Interfaith groups remain restricted as hardline movements are vocal in their opposition to such work. Where groups have been successful it has been where they have operated under alternative names, such as in Zigon, where they escape the negative connotations of interfaith work.

In spite of these challenges, there is much potential for the West Bago Region to emerge from a post-conflict impasse and embrace the Paungde and Pyay models of community reconciliation. Although still nervous about the transition of power, our community representatives largely view the 2015 election result as a positive development for communal relations in Myanmar. The increased sense of security and positive expectations brought about by the elections provide us with an opportunity to strengthen the voices reflected in this report, to coax the silent majority into voice and bridge communal differences. In the West Bago Region, this opportunity cannot afford to be squandered.





## Introduction

In June and October 2012, communal violence between Buddhists and Muslims broke out in Myanmar's Rakhine State, resulting in 192 deaths, 265 injuries and the destruction of 8,614 houses, according to official sources.<sup>1</sup> In addition, violence in Rakhine State left 119,860 displaced, many of whom remain unable to return home to this day. In 2013, violence spread to other parts of the country, including Meiktila, Okkan, Lashio, Kanbalu and eight Townships in West Bago Region, the focus of this report. In July 2014, communal violence hit Myanmar's second largest city of Mandalay, resulting in two fatalities and more than twenty injuries. These sporadic outbreaks of violence pose a challenge to Myanmar's broader transition and threaten the stability of a country that is standing at a critical and fragile juncture. In recognition of this challenge, the Center for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH) seeks to promote tolerance, social harmony and peaceful coexistence in Myanmar through a range of activities, including fostering a better understanding of the underlying factors that have enabled such violence to occur. While a range of literature has focused on Rakhine State's violence and the issue more broadly, there have been few attempts to understand the localized dynamics of communal conflict in Myanmar. By focusing on conflict in West Bago Region, where a series of violent outbreaks occurred in March 2013, this report seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of localized perspectives on violence and community perceptions of conflict prevention.

The Bago Region, formerly known as Pegu division, is situated in Myanmar's Southern Central region. It is bordered by Magway and Mandalay Regions to the North, Kayin and Mon state to the East, Ayeyarwaddy Region and Rakhine State to the West and Yangon Region to the South. Bago Region is comprised of 28 Townships, 14 of which make up the West Bago Region, the focus of this report.

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<sup>1</sup> Final report of Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State, 8 July 2013, p. 20.

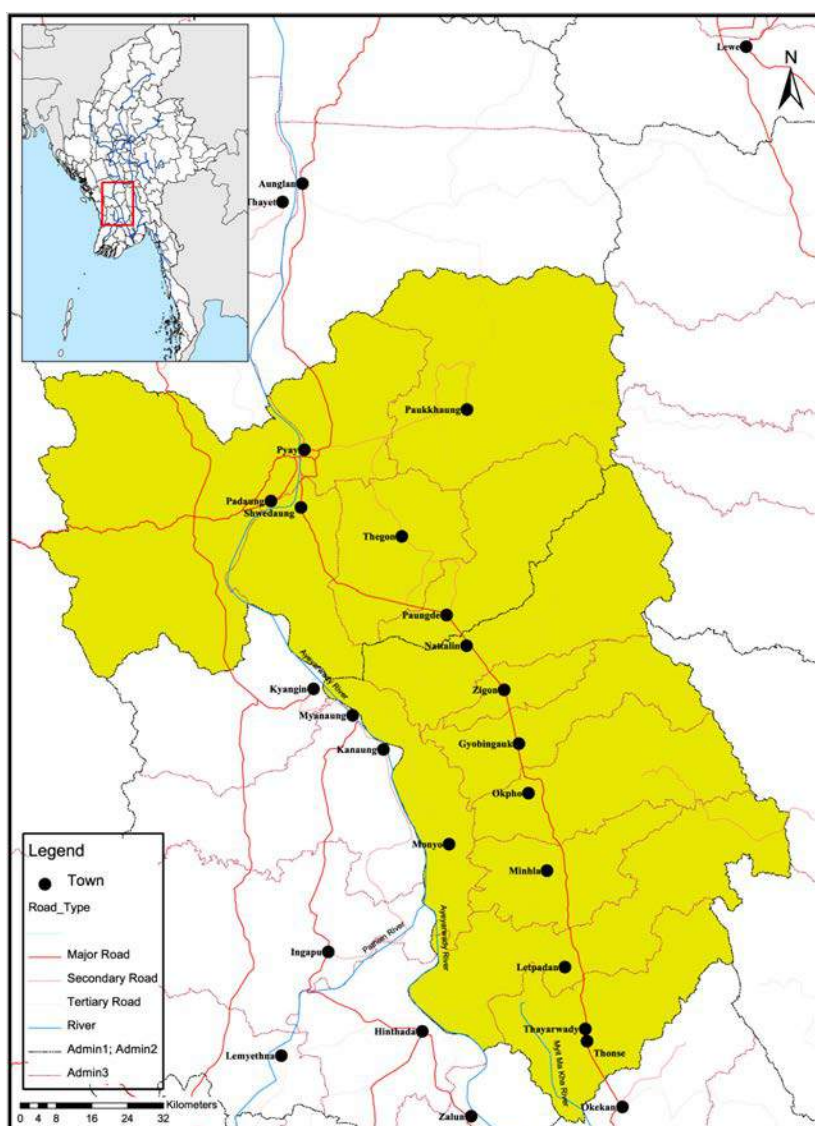


Figure 1: regional map of West Bago

From the 25<sup>th</sup> to the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 2013, West Bago experienced a cluster of outbreaks of communal violence, affecting the eight Townships of Okpho, Gyobingauk, Nattalin, Zigon, Thegon, Monyo, Minhla, and Letpadan. Beginning in Okpho and Gyobingauk Townships on March 25<sup>th</sup>, violence quickly spread between towns, resulting in the destruction of houses, mosques and marketplaces. The government response was to impose a curfew in Gyobingauk, Minhla, and Okpho Townships on March 26<sup>th</sup>, followed in Zigon and

Nattalin on March 27<sup>th</sup>. Compared to violence in other parts of Myanmar, West Bago's incidents resulted in relatively little destruction and no reported loss of human life. However, the West Bago case is interesting for the speed and linearity with which violence spread between towns, making it a unique case study despite the small scale of destruction. Whereas incidents in Meiktila, Mandalay and Lashio were all isolated within a particular town, West Bago played host to a series of incidents in a short space of time, making it an appropriate lens through which to study the triggers and escalation of Myanmar's communal violence.

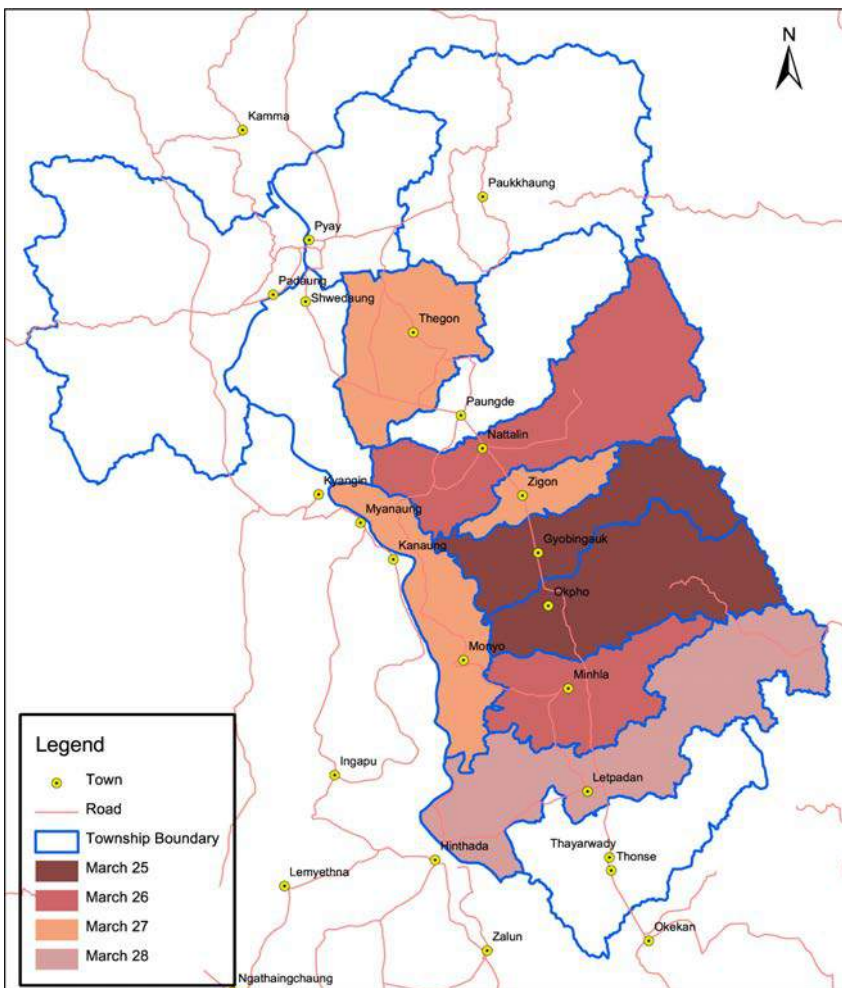


Figure 2: map of outbreaks of communal violence, West Bago, March 2013



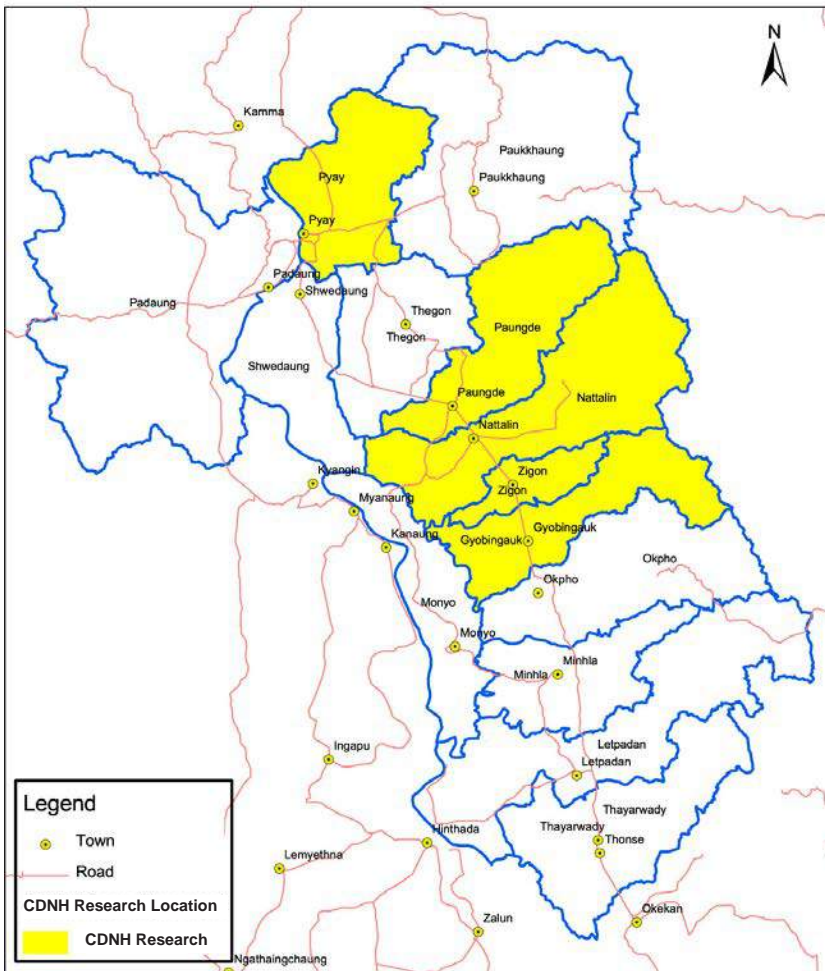
Although the region has remained largely peaceful since these outbreaks of violence, relationships between religious communities are still fraught and underlying tensions prevail. As the transition of power gets underway following elections on November 8<sup>th</sup>, it is important to revisit the events of 2013, to investigate the drivers and triggers that led to violence with a view to informing current efforts to prevent further outbreaks. With this in mind, CDNH's Early Warning and Early Response (EWER) Program undertook an in-depth study of the West Bago Region between September and December 2015, in order to gain a retrospective understanding of 2013's events framed in light of present day dynamics and the prospects for future violence.

This report seeks to fill a gap in existing research by providing a localized analysis of the past that is directly designed to inform the future. As Myanmar's transition progresses through an uncertain post-election period, learning such lessons should be increasingly prioritized and EWER efforts strengthened.

## Methodology:

In September 2015, CDNH's EWER Program conducted a field visit to five Townships in West Bago Region, interviewing 129 individuals in focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. We spoke with individuals from all religious communities (Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Christian) and with both women and men. Travelling not only to areas affected by 2013's violence (Gyobingauk, Zigon and Nattalin), but to Townships such as Paungde and Pyay that avoided violence, researchers were able to gather information from a range of communities. In addition, researchers conducted research in East Bago, Mandalay and Sagaing Regions, travelling to 17 Townships and speaking to an additional 98 individuals. Although not directly reflected in this paper, the information gathered through these discussions enabled researchers to place West Bago in a wider context of communal tensions in Myanmar. Following elections, CDNH's EWER Program followed up with nine individuals from West Bago to ensure that post-election dynamics are included in the analysis.

Map for Bago West



*Figure 3: CDNH research locations*

Based on qualitative data along with desk research conducted in Yangon, the report is structured in narrative form, beginning with an assessment of the past, followed by an overview of present day dynamics, leading to an analysis of the future from an EWER perspective. By doing so, the report serves to inform CDN's EWER Program as well as to provide a situational analysis for other stakeholders in West Bago and elsewhere.

The data collected for the purposes of this report is qualitative, based on the opinions and perspectives of community members. As such, the research

serves not to provide an objective overview of West Bago's dynamics, but rather to illustrate the narratives that have crystallized among local populations regarding the place of communal conflict in the past, present and future of their region.

Interviews were conducted largely with those individuals defined as having a stake in peace in their area. Speaking with community leaders, interfaith actors and moderate religious leaders inevitably provided us with selective responses. This research, then, reflects the views of those individuals that are willing and often able to play a role in intercommunal conflict prevention in their communities. While a selective and small sample, these individuals are crucial players from an EWER perspective. Their narrative serves to inform our understanding of what is achievable and draws our attention to problems among the most moderate communities. By virtue of their work in conflict prevention and their often politically active stance, the individuals we spoke with tended to have a more positive and moderate outlook than those that are politically inactive and less directly involved in community leadership. As a result, this report deliberately elevates the voices of the positive, while seeking to acknowledge the restricted reach of such views.



## Assessing the past : 2013's communal conflict from the perspective of communities

Despite significant differences in present day dynamics across communities in West Bago, the story told regarding previous conflict was similar in all violence-affected townships that CDNH visited. Narratives were consistent regarding the underlying drivers, triggers, and responsibility for violence.

Given that this research is based on qualitative data, gathered through interviews conducted eighteen months after 2013's violence, the following assessment of events leading up to 2013 can only be considered as subjective evidence of what happened. To provide an objective overview of facts would require an extensive and unbiased investigation into 2013's violence, which lies well beyond the scope and objectives of this report. In fact, this report seeks to identify not exactly what happened in 2013, but to shed light on which narratives have prevailed among a subset of the population regarding the causes of violence. It is these narratives that will enable us to assess the perceptions of the populace towards violence, intercommunal cooperation and the possibilities and opportunities for future conflict prevention.

### Positive relationships prior to 2013 :

There was a strong sense among interviewees that relations between religious communities prior to 2013 were largely positive, consisting of regular interactions and joint community engagement. In a number of townships, both Buddhist and Muslim interviewees insisted that the Muslim community had regularly donated to Buddhist monks and participated in Buddhist festivals, while intercommunal business interactions were regularly described as flourishing. In both Gyobingauk and Nattalin, for example, community members insisted that Muslims and Buddhists previously went to the monastery together. In Nattalin, a Buddhist community member stated that they had a good relationship with the Muslim community before 2013.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with community leader, Nattalin, 8<sup>th</sup> September 2015.



While the insistence on positive communal relations prior to 2013 was widespread, it should be appropriately qualified. Not only is it easy to look back on the past with an exaggeratedly positive view of history, but it may have become a socially desirable response on the part of interviewees, many of whom are now directly engaged in trying to improve relationships between religious groups through interfaith activities. Furthermore, the perception of positive relationships is in itself telling, revealing the nature of the power dynamic that was present between communities even before violence broke out. The notion of joint activities, when articulated through examples, was entirely one-sided, as the example of Muslims donating to monasteries was consistently cited as evidence of positive relationships, while the notion of Buddhists donating to mosques or attending Muslim religious festivals was not mentioned. This points to a one-directional interpretation of positive relationships on the part of *both* communities that will need to be addressed in any attempt to rebuild relationships.

In addition, a positive perception of relationships prior to 2013 should not be considered representative of the population at large in West Bago. In many instances and for many individuals, negative perceptions of other communities preceded 2013's violence and continue today. Particularly among those that are less politically active and lead a more traditional way of life, interactions prior to 2013 were already tinged with suspicion. Our research reflects the views of those who may be particularly inclined to perceive of relationships in a more positive light as well as to challenge stereotypes that may have inhibited the formation of positive relationships in the past.

This notion of positive relationships prior to 2013 can be understood against a spectrum of attitudes among the population. In West Bago and elsewhere in Myanmar, attitudes towards communal issues are not unilateral, but vary across a spectrum. At one end lies the negative movement fueled by hostility and fear, while at the other end lies the positive counter-movement which embodies interfaith cooperation, coexistence and a joint vision of the future. What our interviews reveal is not so much that relationships prior to 2013 were good across the board, but that our interviewees place themselves towards the positive end of the spectrum, stating a desire for community coexistence and interaction and presenting a drop in relationships as a negative development.

While this attitude is not surprising given the position of our interviewees, their responses also reveal who has been most affected by declining intercommunal engagement. While those at the positive end of the spectrum continue to engage with other communities and those at the hostile end continue to isolate themselves, those in the middle – the moderate and silent majority – have found it more difficult to interact with members of another religion. As hardline voices have become more vocal and trust has been eroded, those who were relatively willing to engage in intercommunal interaction before are now provided with dwindling opportunities to move towards the positive end of the spectrum and join the counter-movement that seeks to combat conflict and communal division.

Prior to 2013, neither the counter-movement nor the negative movement were particularly strong, leaving those in the middle to engage in positive relationships with members of other communities. Today, as those interactions have become less frequent, reducing the possibility of movement towards the positive end of the spectrum, the draw of the negative movement has been amplified through voices and pressure from groups such as 969. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for those in the middle to actively seek positive relationships in light of the strengthened and vocal nationalist movement that has been bolstered in the aftermath of 2013's violence.

While our interviewees have, in general, maintained a high level of interfaith interaction, they are deeply critical of this increasingly hostile environment. Although the drop in relations can be seen as a negative development, the fact that interviewees expressed disappointment at the drop in relationships between religious communities and spoke of the past with a sense of nostalgia for flourishing relationships places West Bago in contrast to Rakhine State, where a recent CDNHR needs assessment found a persistent lack of a desire to live peacefully and little memory of positive relationships prior to violence in 2012.<sup>3</sup> This may be a result of the ongoing segregation of communities in many parts of Rakhine State, which lies in contrast to West Bago, where both communities continue to live in close proximity to each other.

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<sup>3</sup> Rakhine State Needs Assessment, Center for Diversity and National Harmony, September 2015.

## Causes of conflict :

When asked to assess the underlying causes of 2013's conflict, a number of respondents expressed the view that violence was not widely expected or inevitable, but that it happened unexpectedly, at a speed and of a scale that communities were not prepared for. Even as violence was happening in nearby towns, many communities did not believe it would impact their own. This sense of unpreparedness reflects the assessment on the part of interviewees that communal relations prior to 2013 were more positive and also articulates a wider narrative that communities themselves were innocent bystanders in a wave of violence that was perceived as an external force inflicted on towns from the outside. This lack of a sense of responsibility poses a challenge for the prevention of future conflict, which will have to involve all stakeholders, including communities themselves.

Despite this sense of unexpected violence, individuals did point to a number of causal factors that enabled conflict in their communities to take root, including business competition and a widespread misunderstanding of religion on the part of each community. Business competition was widely cited as a cause of friction between Muslim and Buddhist communities, with Muslims being perceived as more successful in business than their Buddhist counterparts, provoking a sense of resentment among the Buddhist community and fostering an at times negative cycle of competition. Although this argument has become a popular narrative among local communities, it cannot be a sufficient explanation for conflict. Across West Bago, Chinese businesses are thriving, yet no interviewee cited business competition as being a potential point of contention with the Chinese community. This may reflect the nature of the conversation and the fact that the topic was communal violence, thus concerning primarily the Buddhist and Muslim communities, but it is a point worth considering for future assessments of potential underlying factors.

A widespread misunderstanding of others' religious practices was cited as a factor across West Bago, contributing to past outbreaks of violence and potential future ones. In Gyobingauk, religious understanding was identified as being dangerously low on both sides,<sup>4</sup> while in Nattalin it was suggested

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with community leader, Gyobingauk, 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

that although Muslim communities have a relatively strong understanding of Buddhism due to its prominence in public life, the Buddhist community has only a weak understanding of Islam, contributing to tensions between the two communities.<sup>5</sup> These misunderstandings foster an environment in which rumors regarding religious traditions, practices and intentions are spread. Most illustrative of this misunderstanding is the increasingly crystallized narrative among Buddhist communities that Islam is a negative religion in and of itself. Frequently, Islam is described as inherently expansive in nature, accompanied by the belief that Myanmar's Muslims view the creation of an Islamic Myanmar as the ultimate goal to be achieved through the conversion of Buddhist women. Misunderstandings have also resulted in a perception of Islam as a violent and abusive religion, particularly with regard to the treatment of women.

In addition to rumors concerning the nature of Islam as a religion, a number of rumors have led to a misunderstanding of Muslims as individual agents of religion. Consistent rumors paint a picture of individuals bent on the conversion of others, along with a view of them as only partially 'Burmese'. While the individuals spoken to during this research did not in general subscribe to these views, they alluded to the fact that such narratives are widespread, particularly among rural and uneducated populations. As a result, misunderstanding of religion and particularly Islam, perpetuated through the spread of rumors, contributes to an enabling environment in which communal violence can flourish.

Against the backdrop of this misunderstanding and negative competition, communities identified a number of immediate triggers of violence in 2013, isolated incidents that abruptly sparked a larger movement. Contradicting those who insisted that even as violence happened in the surrounding areas it would not reach their town, some interviewees suggested that in the days immediately prior to violence in 2013 there was a sense of impending but unavoidable conflict, as authorities and some members of the local community sought to break the flow of violence without success (except in Paungde and Pyay, as outlined below). In Gyobingauk, community members stated that they 'knew violence would break out from March 23rd (violence began on the 25<sup>th</sup>), but were unable to do anything to prevent it'.<sup>6</sup> The sense of impending violence suggests

<sup>5</sup> Interview with community leader, Nattalin, 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with community leader, Gyobingauk, 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.



that a window for early response was missed in 2013, making the identification of the immediate triggers important for future EWER efforts.

A rumor was identified in every township as a direct trigger of violence, although the content of the rumors differed. For example, in Gyobingauk a rumor spread that a Muslim businessman was moving furniture from his home to prepare to burn it down and spark violence. In fact, the Muslim in question was removing furniture from his home to move to another home. Although rumors were present in all areas where violence occurred, they played different roles in the sequence leading up to violence. In Nattalin, for example, the rumor spread just 2-3 days before violence, serving as a direct trigger, while in Zigon the rumor continued to spread for five days, by which time complacency had set in about the likelihood of violence occurring as a result of the rumor. There seemed to be no overriding factor that set these particular rumors apart from the wealth of rumors relating to religious tensions that circulate in West Bago and other parts of the country on a regular basis. This makes it challenging to identify the role of rumors, both on and offline, in present day early warning strategies. While understanding that rumors can play a direct and indirect role in triggering violence, there is no causal formula for what or why certain rumors take root at varying speeds and with diverse impacts. Identifying such patterns would require more systematic and focused research than this report is designed to provide.

Alongside rumors, direct actions were cited as triggers in a range of communities. For example, in Gyobingauk and a number of other places, promotional dvds from 969, the group of hardline Buddhist monks formed to protect Buddhism from a perceived threat from Islamic expansion in Myanmar, were said to have been freely distributed two weeks prior to violence, particularly in rural areas. Meanwhile, in Zigon young men were seen distributing 969 stickers in the lead up to violence and driving through the streets shouting hardline Buddhist slogans. At the same time, 969 dhamma talks were reportedly held in many affected townships, and were seen as particularly effective in persuading local populations of the Buddhist hardline cause. Interviewees highlighted the distribution of dvds and spread of dhamma talks in villages as important, citing the villages as areas of concern for future violence, claiming that villagers are more susceptible to rumors and rural areas more likely to be the locations

of future triggers of violence. Indeed, villages can act as a breeding ground for hardline views, not only due to generally lower education levels, but also due to the fact that villages are often made up exclusively of one religion. This provides less opportunity for interfaith interaction and fosters an environment in which rumors can take hold, unchallenged.

While in some instances, a single act of violence was identified as the immediate trigger of further conflict, in other areas, communities were unable to identify the first act of violence in the sequence of events. In Zigon, a group of five young men were said to have destroyed a Muslim owned shop, leading to retaliation and escalation.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, individual actors played a key role in triggering violence and loom large in the minds of interviewees when asked to identify causes of violence. Consistently, communities insisted that the key perpetrators of communal violence in their towns were so-called ‘outsiders’, individuals whom they did not recognize and who they claimed were not from their immediate area. These outsiders were said to have entered urban areas on light trucks, and while interviewees shied away from providing any detailed description on who they thought such outsiders were, they seemed to perceive them as having come from nearby villages. They were usually said to have come in, set off violence, and fled the town before being identified by authorities (or indeed by local community members). In Zigon, interviewees claimed that these outsiders came into the town at 2am on the night of the 26<sup>th</sup> March, only when assigned security guards left their positions on the edge of the town. Only after their entry into the town did violence begin.<sup>8</sup>

While it was generally agreed upon that outsiders set off violence in 2013, these outsiders were not identified as the only actors. In fact, the violence quickly began to snowball as local community members joined in. The story told by interviewees was one of passive observers being swept up in a wave of emotion to join the crowd and engage in violence they would not otherwise have considered. In Gyobingauk, for example, interviewees claimed that the first house was destroyed by between 20 to 50 people, while many stood watching, eventually joining the crowd to make up a mob of approximately 100 people. Joining the violence happened, according to interviewees, ‘un-

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with community leader, Zigon, 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

intentionally'.<sup>9</sup> Young people were cited as particularly vulnerable to this unintentional involvement, as lack of education and a low level of knowledge regarding the consequences of violence as well as a propensity to emotional persuasion were cited as factors. Indeed, a lack of education was widely viewed as a factor leading to the involvement of particular communities in violence, particularly when discussing the role of villages as the source of both rumors and the violent outsiders.

Linked to the narrative of 'outsiders' was the allegation that violence was meticulously planned and organized by, or with the implicit approval of, the authorities. Interviewees cited the systematic way in which mobs destroyed properties, targeting only those of wealthy Muslim businessmen, according to interviewees in Gyobingauk.<sup>10</sup> In Nattalin there was a sense that ordinary residents wouldn't have engaged in violence without some guarantee that they would not be punished, implicitly accusing powerful actors as having specifically recruited individuals for violence by providing them with safety guarantees.<sup>11</sup> This narrative was frequently heard, as individuals cited a possible incentive on the part of the government to cause chaos or use violence for political gain. Although this narrative has crystallized among interviewees, it should be noted that there is as yet no hard evidence to support these allegations. Arguments are purely anecdotal and should not be taken as proof of any official involvement. In addition, interviewees were often politically active individuals with some level of anti-government interests, making the narrative of institutionally organized violence a potential political victory on their part.

Regardless of authorities' involvement in orchestrating violence, their response was repeatedly criticized by interviewees, who cited an unwillingness or inability to sufficiently prevent violence. Specifics of the perceived weakness varied between township, with Gyobingauk residents citing a slow response,<sup>12</sup> Nattalin residents an unwillingness to respond,<sup>13</sup> in Okpho an inadequate response<sup>14</sup> and in Zigon an inappropriate response.<sup>15</sup> Across the board, individuals felt

<sup>9</sup> Interview with community leader, Gyobingauk, 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with community leader, Nattalin, 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with community leader, Gyobingauk, 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with community leader, Nattalin, 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with journalist from Okpho, Pyay, 10<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with community leader, Zigon, 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

the authorities could and should have done more to prevent and control the violence.

In Gyobingauk, local community leaders made efforts to inform the Special Branch of the spread of 969 materials in the immediate run-up to violence. However, these leaders claim to have received no response and police reportedly sent only two officers to control the crowd, leaving them unable to quell violence.

In Zigon, communities blamed the authorities for responding too slowly, while claiming the police force were left ‘paralyzed’<sup>16</sup> without orders from above on how to respond to violence. Zigon interviewees went further in their criticism, stating that ill-conceived actions from authorities actually contributed to violence rather than prevented it. A few days before conflict broke out, the military entered Zigon as part of a ‘show of prevention’. Designed to mitigate the possibility of violence by displaying a readiness to respond, a fully weaponised military presence in fact served to accelerate the sense of fear that violence was imminent on the part of communities, fostering insecurity and an increased likelihood of violence.

In Nattalin, community leaders sought to engage the authorities in conflict prevention immediately before violence broke out. Community leaders and police struck a deal whereby police assured them they would prevent anyone from ‘burn[ing], kill[ing], destroy[ing] properties’.<sup>17</sup> Yet as violence engulfed the town, community leaders found the authorities unwilling to hold to their promises. Despite having agreed to the deal, the authorities did not follow through with any concerted effort to prevent such activities, contributing to a lack of trust in authorities on the part of communities today.

In Okpho, the response of the authorities was reported as highly inappropriate. The military, fearing violence, came to protect the town hall. While violence targeted the mosques, officers were stationed at the town hall and by the time they reached the mosque, the violence had moved on to target Muslim homes. By the time the military personnel reached those homes, the crowds

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with community leader, Zigon, 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with community leader, Nattalin, 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

had dispersed altogether, leaving approximately sixty homes destroyed.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the police response to violence in Okpho was to shoot into the crowd, resulting in injuries to ten people. This almost farcical description of the authorities, as running around after the violence and shooting innocent bystanders, paints a cynical picture of community perceptions of the authorities' role in conflict prevention in 2013, regardless of whether such perceptions are founded.

This sense of a weak official response and alleged orchestration serves to bolster a wider narrative characterized by a low level of ownership of violence on the part of communities themselves. From the sense of violence as being 'un-

<sup>18</sup> ALTSEAN Burma, 'Anti-Muslim Violence in Central Burma', BN 2013/1095, April 17, 2013.





expected' in their towns, to the notion of inevitability in the immediate run-up to violence, the role of 'outsiders' and the 'unintentional' joining of crowds by locals, individuals perceive such violence as an external force that invaded their otherwise peaceful communities. This narrative, while an understandable reaction to a traumatic period of their history, poses a challenge to future conflict prevention that will inevitably involve communities taking ownership of their own ability to prevent conflict. In order for reconciliation to take root, communities will need to recognize their own role as agents for positive change, a process that should begin to be fostered.

## Conflict prevention - Paungde and Pyay case studies :

While violence affected swathes of West Bago in 2013, its reach was not universal and a number of cases illustrate the positive potential for conflict prevention among communities. To prevent conflict, individuals came together to form prevention networks that mobilized stakeholders to coordinate efforts – releasing statements against violence, informing authorities of the potential threat and reaching out directly to communities at risk of engaging in violence.

While conflict prevention efforts were made in a number of places, two areas in which CDNH conducted research illustrate the nature of these efforts. Both Paungde and Pyay stand out as positive examples of communities that were able to prevent the spread of violence through robust conflict prevention mechanisms that remain in place today. These examples can serve to inform strategies for the prevention of conflict elsewhere.

Following the outbreak of violence in Meiktila on March 20<sup>th</sup> 2013, a group of Paungde CSOs and interfaith leaders came together to form a network designed to prevent violence spreading to their township. The committee included leaders from all religions (including Hindus and Christians who often seemed reluctant to engage in such activities). A group of network representatives went to local authorities in a successful bid to gain their cooperation and buy-in. The same day, representatives of the network travelled to nearby villages, calling on community elders to discuss conflict prevention. Members

of the network then encouraged community elders to contact them in the event of any incidents and promised to do the same if any incidents occurred in Paungde town, opening a channel for direct and timely information sharing. Meanwhile, the network began spreading pamphlets against communal violence, reaching out to local villages as well as urban areas and released a statement condemning violence.

When communal violence broke out in parts of West Bago, posing a more direct threat to Paungde, network representatives returned to the authorities, who agreed to provide security at entry points to the town. They reached out to CSOs in the nearby town of Pyay, with whom they had existing relationships, in order to spread prevention efforts. Finally, they developed innovative methods to combat rumors through the creation of counter-rumors. As rumors circulated that had the potential to trigger violence, the committee began to circulate the rumor that ‘it is 100% sure that the army will shoot those that create violence’,<sup>19</sup> providing an apparently effective disincentive for violence. Although one can certainly criticize such a counter - rumor for fostering an environment of violence acceptance, the approach is at least innovative. Above all, the sense of ownership on the part of the Paungde community stands in contrast to the sense of inevitability and powerlessness articulated by a number of individuals elsewhere. Paungde residents are fiercely proud of what they achieved in 2013 and deeply committed to upholding their reputation as a community characterized by peace.

A number of underlying factors enabled Paungde’s conflict prevention. Crucial to their success was the highly inclusive nature of the network that was built between religious leaders, CSOs and authorities. Relationships in Paungde were, and are, strong between the full range of stakeholders. Whereas in other areas strong relationships may hold between religious leaders or between CSOs, the uniquely successful factor in Paungde is the network between actors at all levels. In particular, being able to include the authorities in the violence prevention committee enabled the committee to be more effective, as well as reducing perceptions on the part of the community that the authorities are untrustworthy and thus to be avoided when seeking a solution to local problems. The inclusive nature of the network enabled Paungde residents to respond

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with community leader, Paungde, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2015.



rapidly to violence and ensured that no community was left unreached by their efforts.

A strong network, such as that in Paungde, does not simply happen, but relies on the personalities of those involved. Indeed, Paungde residents cited individual personalities as a factor in conflict prevention a number of times. Specifically, one interviewee described the members of the group with a ‘wider view’ as being crucial to its success, as they were able to recognize the detrimental effect that violence would have on both communities. Another resident noted the importance of personality on the part of authorities, describing an influential official as ‘brave and intelligent’<sup>20</sup> when providing an explanation for the avoidance of violence. This view of personality as crucial to conflict prevention reflects the localized nature of prevention mechanisms in West Bago. As tensions are highly localized, individuals continue to play an important role in reconciliation. This contrasts with the situation in Rakhine State, where the notion of reconciliation has become so political that it has been elevated to state-level and now transcends the power of any single individual.

In Pyay, the largest town in West Bago Region, a similarly successful network enabled the community to avoid the spread of violence. Having experienced violence four times in recent years community leaders came together with religious leaders and youth groups to prevent further conflict. Before the outbreak

<sup>20</sup> Interview with community leader, Paungde, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2015.

of violence in Rakhine State in 2012, rumors circulated from Magway that violence may break out in West Bago. Cognizant of the dangers of communal conflict, a group of CSOs and political activists in Pyay swiftly released a statement condemning violence. Following the subsequent outbreak of violence in Rakhine State, the group released a further statement. On March 20<sup>th</sup> 2013, leading CSO members and activists formed an official group, the Network to Prevent Religious Conflict. Although they did not directly include authorities in this network, they reported the formation of the group to authorities at all levels, and received security support when violence threatened the region. Furthermore, the organization released additional statements against violence, visited the local monks association to discuss the possibility of violence and established an office to act as an information hub. The network began monitoring local tensions, collecting information and recording rumors spreading on and offline. They established community networks in ten quarters in Pyay who served to verify rumors, enabling the network to counter rumors where necessary.

What sets Paungde and Pyay apart as interesting case studies from an EWER perspective is the fact that both areas experienced similar potential triggers to other areas in West Bago (particularly rumors), but both were able to prevent the escalation of triggers into violence through localized conflict prevention mechanisms. In both cases, the presence of strong and proactive CSOs with robust links to religious leaders and authorities paved the way for successful early response. The Paungde and Pyay examples provide evidence that it is possible to prevent triggers from taking root and that eliminating those triggers altogether, although desirable, is not a necessary condition for conflict prevention. Where mitigating factors in the form of local and robust early response mechanisms are present, triggers don't necessarily lead to violence. Where those mitigating factors are not yet present, as seen in Gyobingauk and other areas of West Bago, those same triggers can lead to destructive and dangerous outbreaks of violence. Pyay provides a particularly interesting example of the way in which past instances of violence can lead things in a productive future direction, as previous violence was often cited as a reason for greater awareness of the dangers of violence and more proactive prevention methods. As such, both examples should be shared and upheld as evidence of the positive power of local communities to take ownership for effective EWER

that has a direct impact on conflict prevention at the local level. While not the only cases of community conflict prevention in West Bago or Myanmar more widely, CDNH was able to conduct an in-depth study of each area in order to provide two examples of the possibilities for community-based conflict prevention.

## Assessing the present : communal tensions today

Across West Bago, communal tensions remain fragile and are in need of carefully targeted rebuilding. That said, there is significant variance between townships as local communities have developed in different ways and at varying speeds since the violence. Whereas some have drawn strength from conflict to form robust intercommunal networks, others have remained frozen in a post-conflict situation, demonstrating varying levels of vulnerability to further violence.

Illustrative of this variance is the different role played by interfaith groups between townships. While interfaith groups are present in all townships visited, there is wide variation in their effectiveness and integration into the community. In response to violence, the government formed interfaith groups in a number of communities, but in all these cases, interviewees reported that such groups were present on paper but ineffective or inactive in practice. This has not only reinforced the vision of authorities as unwilling or unable to prevent the reoccurrence of violence, but has resulted in a further separation between subsequently formed community-centered interfaith groups and the authorities, hindering the development of all-inclusive groups such as that in Paungde. In reality, government-sponsored interfaith groups may have been weakened from the offset by an already hostile attitude on the part of those actors wishing to engage in interfaith activities at the community level. As a result, the lack of success of the government interfaith groups has been a self-fulfilling prophecy on the part of community-level actors, who through their own criticism and disdain for government-sanctioned interfaith groups, have ensured such groups do not enjoy success.



As communities quickly judged the ineffectiveness of government-mandated interfaith groups, they began to form their own interfaith networks, to varying degrees of success. In Gyobingauk, although a number of separate interfaith groups are said to exist, they are not active and claim little to no influence.<sup>21</sup> In Zigon, the government peace coordination team was considered as inactive as elsewhere, prompting community members to take actions into their own hands and form a robust network, which conducts activities designed to improve the standard of living for all Zigon's residents, regardless of religion.<sup>22</sup>

As interfaith groups have expanded in West Bago, they have done so against the backdrop of an increasingly vocal hardline Buddhist movement. While such hardline voices are not a new phenomenon in Myanmar, they take their latest incarnation in the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, otherwise known as MaBa'Tha. A group of monks who mobilized for the passing of four laws to protect race and religion (a thinly veiled attempt to protect Buddhism from encroachment by Islam), MaBa'Tha has expanded rapidly since 2013 and now plays a significant role in shaping Myanmar's political and religious landscape. Although the group came to the fore after the communal violence of 2013 and is thus not widely discussed as a contributing factor in that conflict, MaBa'Tha was often cited by interviewees as a key factor in communities' sense of their own ability to prevent conflict today. As with interfaith groups, MaBa'Tha has developed to varying degrees of strength and in different ways across West Bago.

In Zigon, where MaBa'Tha was identified as having a strong grasp on local people, MaBa'Tha monks consistently pressured members of a previous interfaith group to the extent that members gradually dropped out, forcing remaining members to regroup and form an alternative group under a name that does not include the term interfaith. This new organization, by distancing itself from the term 'interfaith group', does not open itself up to direct attack from hardliners who have sought to attach negative connotations to the term, freeing its members from some of the pressures imposed on them by MaBa'Tha.<sup>23</sup> Community members in Zigon were eager to suggest that many Zigon residents (reportedly 'two thirds' of the population) did not accept

<sup>21</sup> Interview with community leader, Gyobingauk, 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with community leader, Zigon, 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with members of Zigon interfaith Group, Zigon, 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

MaBaTha's ideas. Regardless of the accuracy of this statistic, their concern was echoed elsewhere – a significant proportion of the population do not agree with MaBaTha's values and goals, but they find themselves silenced into submission by the domineering presence of MaBaTha and their influence on the community. This indicates a need to coax the countermovement out of their silence, through activities such as the Zigon group that enable individuals to work as part of the countermovement, without subjecting themselves to direct pressure through association with an 'interfaith' group.

While in Zigon the community was able to find an innovative solution to circumvent MaBaTha's pressure so as to conduct interfaith and community reconciliation activities, in Gyobingauk MaBaTha's role remains restrictive. MaBaTha monks reportedly pressure more moderate monks who display a willingness to build relationships with Muslim community members, making it difficult for interfaith workers to engage with moderate Buddhist religious leaders. In addition, the only monastery in town (and the largest available space for communal gatherings) is headed by MaBaTha monks, making it difficult for CSOs or community leaders to find physical space in which to organize interfaith meetings.<sup>24</sup> In this case a physical restriction serves to exacerbate the social pressure from MaBaTha.

In Nattalin, MaBaTha activity was raised as a concern by community leaders, who noted the risks it poses to future generations who are directly targeted by such activities and more vulnerable to persuasion. 969 activities are widespread and play an active role in the community, intervening in cases such as one involving the elopement of a Buddhist girl and a Muslim boy and serving to stoke tensions further.<sup>25</sup>

However, community leaders in Nattalin also pointed out that MaBaTha should not be viewed as a homogenous body with a single ideology, suggesting that the group does not play a uniform role in each community in which it is present. In Paungde and Pyay, for example, MaBaTha leaders are relatively moderate, banning U Wirathu from giving dhamma talks in their towns and tolerating interfaith activities. According to community leaders, these monks remain in position, despite their differences with MaBaTha's central ideals,

<sup>24</sup> Interview with community leaders, Gyobingauk, 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with community leaders, Nattalin, 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

in recognition that if they abandoned their position a less moderate figure would fill the void. A moderate MaBaTha branch may in fact be an actor in conflict prevention, or at least a mitigating factor with regards to escalation and triggers. In Pyay and Paungde, the presence of moderate monks under the umbrella of MaBaTha contributes to a more favorable environment for interfaith activities and conflict prevention. In Gyobingauk, on the other hand, the presence of more hardline MaBaTha monks plays a direct role in fostering a hostile environment for interfaith cooperation, as members of groups face pressure from monks and physical barriers to meeting. These findings caution us against sweeping generalizations regarding MaBaTha and a recognition that they can in fact serve as a stakeholder in peace, suggesting that there is a role for voices previously considered extreme in conflict prevention.

Regardless of this variance, the growing strength of less moderate voices has had an effect on the state of intercommunal relations across West Bago. In all violence-affected areas visited, relationships between religious communities, namely Buddhist and Muslim communities, remain damaged and there has been no return to perceived pre-2013 levels of interaction. As an interviewee from Nattalin put it, there are ‘deep suspicions on each side’<sup>26</sup> as no community feels able to trust the other in the aftermath of violence. The relationships between communities, even in areas where interfaith groups have been actively engaged such as Zigon, seem to be frozen in a post-conflict situation, one of negative peace in which no community wishes to take the first step towards reconciliation.

The frozen relationship has been reinforced by a number of factors, not least the increasing influence of MaBaTha in the area and the role they have in promoting a sense of fear and insecurity on both sides. Furthermore, authorities in both Gyobingauk and Nattalin have not yet given permission for the mosques that were destroyed during the violence to be rebuilt, leaving the towns physically frozen in a post-conflict setting. This situation serves as a constant reminder of violence and hostility, hindering efforts at reconciliation, according to communities.

The notion that religious communities misunderstand each other, identified as an underlying cause of violence, was also identified as an ongoing concern

<sup>26</sup> Interview with community leader, Nattalin, 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

impacting intercommunal relationships. This lack of understanding fosters an environment in which rumors are easily spread and a sense of mistrust and insecurity is reinforced. While affecting all religious communities, Islam was cited as particularly vulnerable to misunderstanding. In Nattalin, for example, Muslims expressed a desire to share their religion with others but noted the difficulty of getting permission to host any kind of activity that would enable them to do so.<sup>27</sup>

Building on the perception of a negative role played by authorities in 2013, communities see the authorities as having a direct impact on communal relations today, albeit a largely negative one. The perception varies across townships, with interviewees in Paungde citing the role of authorities as a positive aspect of the violence prevention alliance, in recognition that without a strong relationship with authorities, an interfaith group can enjoy only limited influence.<sup>28</sup> This view, while somewhat recognized across West Bago, has not yet translated into action in all townships.

In Gyobingauk, interviewees displayed a significant lack of trust in the authorities, citing an unwillingness on their part to engage in conflict prevention activities. They pointed to a lack of accountability and a weak cooperation between CSOs and authorities. Interviewees perceive authorities as calling on CSOs only when they desire to speak with them, when instructed from above. They sense that the channel of complaint between CSOs and the authorities is entirely closed, painting a picture of a polarized relationship in which very little interaction takes place. Despite the weakness of this relationship, Gyobingauk citizens did cite Paungde as a positive example in which CSOs work together with the authorities, informing them of potential violence and coordinating activities. Their recognition of the Paungde example holds promise for a more fruitful future relationship in Gyobingauk, although a great deal needs to be done to establish the trust necessary for such a relationship. Furthermore, the negative perception of authorities and lack of trust on the part of CSOs in Gyobingauk can also be seen as reflective of the subsection of individuals interviewed by CDNH, namely those who are politically active, often in support of opposition politics.

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with community leader, Nattalin, 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with community leader, Paungde, 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

While in Gyobingauk, authority and CSO relationships are weak, in Zigon the community has developed a stronger relationship with local authorities. This relationship seems to be founded on a belief on the part of the local community that Zigon's authorities have a unique incentive to prevent conflict given the number of powerful actors stemming from Zigon, including Vice President U Nyan Htun. The Zigon group has fostered a strong relationship with the Township Administrator and opened the channel for alerts when tensions arise. As a result of this relationship, they feel confident in their ability to prevent conflict in a way that they did not prior to 2013.

It is clear that the relationships between religious communities in violence-affected areas need to be rebuilt and productive interactions reinstated. The development of relationships between CSOs and the authorities has not been linear across townships, and in many communities a lack of trust in the authorities continues to hinder the development of an inclusive interfaith network that not only builds a relationship with, but also includes authorities as an active part of the network. This relationship was crucial to a successful early response in Paungde and Pyay, and should be fostered elsewhere.

Although the situation in West Bago is one of negative peace, it has not yet reached an irreversible stage of segregation and intercommunal interactions continue to exist, albeit to a lesser degree and with an increased sense of mistrust on both sides. Business interactions in particular are said to have returned to a near normal level, largely out of necessity. These intercommunal ties and the lack of total segregation provide a window of opportunity for the rebuilding of intercommunal trust. When viewed in light of the situation in Rakhine State where entrenched segregation has become a barrier to progress, West Bago cannot afford to squander this window of opportunity and risk moving towards an increasingly segregated community.



## Elections :

Conducting initial interviews in September 2015, the elections were high on the agenda of interviewees. Following elections, CDNH conducted nine follow-up interviews with individuals from West Bago, to recalibrate our research to account for election results and post-election relations.

Prior to elections, individuals expressed a persistent sense of insecurity regarding the potential for religion to be used for political gain in the elections. They cited the rejection of Muslim candidates from their areas as evidence of this, as well as MaBaTha involvement in unofficial campaigns and feared that the phenomenon would grow stronger as voting day approached.

Interviewees also articulated concerns about the aftermath of elections. Specifically, they were concerned about a situation in which those that were unhappy with a new balance of power sought to trigger communal violence. Although this concern was consistently articulated, it was more strongly expressed in areas where NLD displayed a greater chance of winning, reflecting a lack of trust in the current administration or their supporters to give up power.

Asked to assess elections retrospectively, interviewees – a number of whom acted as election observers on the day - were broadly satisfied with the process of voting and did not report any major incidents. They considered the elections to have been well conducted and were generally positive about the outcome as related to communal tensions, feeling that the nationwide NLD victory would have a positive impact on communal relations. Even in Zigon, where USDP Vice-President U Nyan Htun retained his seat, interviewees expressed optimism at the overall change in government, suggesting that USDP victory in Zigon did not detract from the nationwide result. In particular, interviewees believe that improving rule of law would improve the state of communal tensions, by reducing impunity and increasing security for all communities.

Pre-election fears expressed in areas other than Zigon regarding spoiler reactions to an NLD victory seem to have been placated, likely due to the extent of the victory. Given the size of the win for NLD, there remains little ambiguity about the results, reducing the space for spoilers to contest the legitimacy of the outcome and reasonably push back against it.

Despite initial fears being placated by the results and process of elections, community fears have not been entirely dispersed. In the words of one interviewee in Gyobingauk ‘people feel more secure [since the elections] but it is not that they feel safe’.<sup>29</sup> A sense of insecurity remains, notably surrounding the handover of power, further illustrating the lack of trust in the current administration to follow through on their promises. Communities remain worried that triggers could occur between now and March in which religion used as a tool serves to derail the transition. However, individuals feel that the flow of information and international pressure simultaneously increase the likelihood of a successful transition.

With regard to local perceptions of MaBaTha following the elections, communities pointed out that the elections delivered a seeming blow to the organization following its increasingly clear links with USDP in the late stages of the campaign. However, there is a sense that the current reduction in local MaBaTha activities is more a period of regrouping rather than a permanent decline. They predict that the organization will re-emerge with a new agenda and will regain the support of the population for whom voting for NLD in the election did not necessarily signal a split with MaBaTha’s overall ideology.

## Assessing the future : communities’ perceptions of the potential for future conflict

When assessing the potential for future conflict, communities’ responses converge around a number of similar themes, while displaying varying degrees of confidence as to their ability to contain and prevent violence. Consistently, communities made an explicit link between the strength of interfaith groups in their areas and the ability of those communities to prevent conflict.

Interviewees in violence-affected areas were quick to claim that any future violence was unlikely to come from their own people, citing a fear of ‘outsiders’ over whom they have no control. This reflects their assessment of 2013’s violence as having been imposed on communities by outsiders. Adding to this, interviewees highlighted the potential for a domino effect of violence, consis-

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with community leader in Gyobingauk, 2<sup>nd</sup> December, 2015.

tently claiming that violence would not originate in their community, but that if it broke out in a nearby town, then as one interviewee put it, ‘who knows’ how far it would spread.<sup>30</sup> This fear of a spillover highlights the need for a holistic approach to conflict prevention across the entire region.

Prior to voting, interviewees pointed to elections as a potential trigger of violence, noting the use of religion for political gain and highlighting the post-election period as a particular area of concern, a view reiterated in follow-up interviews that revealed a skepticism regarding the period of transition. The role of authorities loomed large in communities’ visions of the potential for future violence, again reflecting the important role (or lack thereof) played by the authorities in their narrative of 2013’s violence, as well as the high expectations placed on the incoming government to be able to control such violence. As one Nattalin resident suggested, the government has the key responsibility for violence prevention because ‘they have access to information’.<sup>31</sup> Specifically, interviewees called for the government to take action against provocative dhamma talks such as those spread by 969 in the run-up to 2013’s violence, and to take legal action against those threatening violence or instigating rumors, citing rule of law as an important step in reducing the potential for communal conflict.

Although communities recognized the government as an important player in conflict prevention, they shared a sense that the government was not yet playing an active role in such efforts. This fails to reflect the efforts that authorities have in fact been making towards conflict prevention in West Bago and elsewhere. A senior government official from the Bago Regional government confirmed that authorities have been closely monitoring local communal dynamics with a view to preventing any further outbreaks of violence.<sup>32</sup> Particularly since 2014, it has become increasingly clear that authorities do have a stake in peace and are, at least behind the scenes, committed to the prevention of conflict. However, interviews provide a stark reflection of the failure of these actions to translate into any positive recognition on the part of local community leaders. To date, government actions to prevent conflict have been opaque, further eroding trust in authorities on the part of affected communities.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Nattalin community leader, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with senior government official from Bago Region government, October 2015.

Beyond authorities, religious communities were seen as having a strong role to play in the prevention of conflict, as religious leaders were identified as key influencers at the local level. In Nattalin, an interviewee stated that they had a key role to play because ‘criticism [of violence] has to come from within religious communities’<sup>33</sup> as those most likely to be moved to violence are unlikely to listen to those from outside their faith community. Religious groups can also help to tackle the underlying problem of misunderstanding between religions, widely cited as an underlying factor of 2013’s violence and one that has not been adequately addressed since then. In Gyobingauk, one interviewee noted that it is crucial that CSOs engage with influential monks, as it is these monks that influence the perceptions of the general public.<sup>34</sup> He highlighted the fear that if CSOs do not engage such monks in their cause, MaBaTha will engage them, reducing the space for interfaith activity even further.

CSOs and interfaith groups have a role to play in the promotion of peaceful voices and in building a robust information-sharing network that can help prevent conflict. Interviewees suggested that these groups should pay particular attention to youth and those from rural areas, identified as the demographic most likely to engage in violence. By encouraging interaction among young people and providing education to those at risk on the dangers of hate speech and violence and the virtues of tolerance and diversity, interfaith groups and CSOs can foster an environment of tolerance and build capacity to prevent future violence. In one instance, an interviewee cited the need to overcome a ‘culture of violence’, in which communities competed with each other to a degree, holding that ‘in Meiktila they beat [Muslims] so if we don’t beat them here people will think they are not brave’.<sup>35</sup>

Interviewees also cited the media, particularly social media, as an outlet for provocation of tensions and potential violence. In particular, they identified the readiness with which ordinary crimes are framed as religious as an underlying problem, one that fosters mistrust and anger on both sides. This supports the view among communities that rule of law will be a kind of catch-all solution to deal with communal tensions, a problem they see as inextricably linked to crime, impunity and insecurity. This perception has served to elevate

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Nattalin community leader, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with community leader, Gyobingauk, 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with community leader, Pyay, 10<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.

expectations for the incoming government to an extremely high level.

## Conclusion :

Despite consisting of relatively minor incidents in the wider context of Myanmar's communal violence, conflict in West Bago has had a major effect on local populations. Eighteen months on, the memory of conflict looms large in the minds of those we spoke to and the physical and mental scars of violence endure. Just as mosques remain destroyed in some areas, awaiting permission to be rebuilt, intercommunal relationships are fractured and in many places remain frozen in a post-conflict context of suspicion and mistrust. Without consistent and widespread efforts to strengthen preventive measures and interfaith efforts, West Bago will remain a fragile region in which the possibility of future outbreaks of violence cannot be overlooked.

Against this backdrop, there is a small number of impressive individuals, some of whose views are reflected in this report, who are committed to the development of a more tolerant and diverse society. These individuals have developed innovative methods to rebuild interfaith relationships and prevent conflict, illustrated here through Paungde and Pyay case studies. While these efforts are to be commended and supported, their survival and growth rely on the ability to convince those in the center of the spectrum of interfaith relations to





break their silence and shift towards the positive counter-movement. Creating an environment in which individuals feel comfortable engaging with themes of tolerance and diversity and free from pressure to remain in silence would enable communities to better counter the increasingly dominant voices of the Buddhist hardline movement.

As the post-election transition period gets underway and the new administration prepares to take office, an opportunity to strengthen the counter-movement presents itself. There is a sense that an NLD government will bring positive change to inter communal relations in West Bago, and stakeholders should capitalize on the increased sense of security that such expectations may bring. At the same time, overly high expectations of the government and rule of law to automatically bring about an improvement in relations should be tackled and communities encouraged to take ownership over early response measures in their area, in cooperation with the new government. Efforts should be made to share the experiences of Paungde and Pyay with communities across West Bago, in the hope of bringing other townships towards a more fruitful conflict prevention mechanism.



## Recommendations :

To build local capacity for conflict prevention and foster a stronger environment for EWER in West Bago:

### **To all stakeholders:**

- Establish strong networks founded on the Paungde and Pyay models which include representatives from CSOs, interfaith groups, religious leaders, youth networks, women's groups and authorities, tasked with conflict prevention through long and short term measures.
- Such networks should be encouraged to engage in information sharing with actors from all religions and between all stakeholders to ensure no community is unreached by their activities.

### **To CSOs and community leaders:**

- Interfaith activities should target rural areas where there is a traditional lack of counter-messaging.
- Engagement efforts should target young people, encouraging them to participate in interfaith activities and conflict prevention networks.
- Religious communities should be given the opportunity to share information about their practices with other faith communities to foster greater religious understanding between groups. In particular, the Muslim community should be given the opportunity to share their beliefs in a positive and open manner.
- The silent countermovement should be coaxed into voice by providing methods for engagement in interfaith activities without the negative connotations of the term 'interfaith', by forming groups such as the Zigon group.
- Networks should be fostered between townships, focusing on information-sharing with a view to combatting the potential spillover effects of any violent outbreak. In particular, efforts should be made to share success stories of conflict prevention such as those of Paungde or Pyay with other communities.
- Efforts should be made to increase community capacities for rumor management through training and awareness-raising. A focus should be placed on rural areas and villages.

- CSOs should engage with all stakeholders, including the authorities and influential monks.
- Further research should be undertaken into the role of rumors in EWER in an attempt to identify patterns regarding the propensity of certain rumors to have a greater impact than others.

### **To the government:**

- Civic education programs should be implemented at an early age through school curriculums to educate young people on the perils of violence and the virtues of tolerance.
- Authorities should facilitate interfaith networks by ensuring the physical space is provided for them to meet and engage in activities.
- Authorities should work to rebuild broken infrastructures in communities affected by violence in 2013. In particular, they should grant permission for the rebuilding of mosques where they were destroyed.
- Legal channels to address crimes should be strengthened, to avoid communities taking matters into their own hands and reduce the religious framing associated with criminal acts.
- The government should step up efforts to actively engage in conflict prevention efforts, reaching out to community leaders so as to build trust and increase the efficiency of both sides in conflict prevention.
- The government should work to ensure complete transparency regarding their conflict prevention efforts.
- Authorities should ensure they have a plan in place to effectively and calmly deal with any communal problems that might occur, to ensure the paralysis or misjudged responses that characterized 2013's violence do not reoccur.
- Every effort should be made to ensure that the handover of power in March is conducted calmly and transparently, in order to further appease fears among communities about the possible derailing of the transition.

### **To the international community:**

- International organizations should support the capacity of local CSOs and community leaders as they seek to build inclusive networks to prevent conflict at the local level.

