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New Research Report Documents That Hardliners In Myanmar Are Deliberately Instigating Communal Violence To Derail Democracy

Date/Venue: 11am, Monday, March 23, at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand

BANGKOK— Justice Trust is releasing a report, *Hidden Hands Behind Communal Violence in Myanmar: Case Study of the Mandalay Riots*, documenting the use of organized gangs of armed men to commit anti-Muslim riots under the guise of spontaneous mob violence.

“This report shows what most Burmese have known for a long time – that religious hatred between Buddhists and Muslims is being stoked by hidden hands and manipulated as a pretext for maintaining their grip on power,” said Thein Than Oo, a Mandalay lawyer who serves on Justice Trust’s steering committee. *“We have seen this script many times before – the deployment of plainclothes forces (Swah Ah Shin) rather than uniformed soldiers to commit national-scale political violence, and the scapegoating of minorities to divert public attention away from the country’s real needs.”*

Drawing on six months of research by a team of local and international lawyers, the report analyzes the riots that shook Mandalay in July 2014 – the latest in a series of communal attacks across the country – and places these riots in the context of previous waves of communal conflict carried out under past military regimes.

The report’s analysis of major outbreaks of communal violence reveals a common underlying pattern with a five-step sequence of events:

1. Misuse of social media by extremist forces to publicize allegations of rape or other honor crimes committed by Muslim men against Buddhist women.
2. Riots carried out by violent gangs – rumored to be outsiders – who incite locals to take revenge against Muslims.
3. Failure of law enforcement to take timely preventive or protective measures despite police deployment at the scene.
4. Failure of legal process to credibly investigate and punish perpetrators, deepening community mistrust of the justice system and fueling the cycle of impunity.
5. Suspicious timing of riots to divert attention and momentum from popular demands for justice and democracy.

The Mandalay riots closely followed every element of this pattern, starting with a false charge of rape spread on Facebook. But unlike in previous riots, where large mobs developed and the violence spun out of control, local people in Mandalay refused to participate despite the best efforts of outside agitators. In fact, local monks, activists and journalists arrived and tried to contain the situation. Without the protective cover of a sympathetic crowd, the outside agitators were exposed, the stage-managed nature of their violence was made visible to the public, and the overall damage was limited.

The report states that: *“The case of Mandalay therefore provides the clearest evidence yet of a deliberate political strategy to foment anti-Muslim violence, as well as the best example of countering this strategy through a local early warning system to mobilize an immediate on-the-ground response.”*

According to multiple corroborated eyewitnesses, the Mandalay riots were carried out over two straight nights by a small group of men on motorcycles who rampaged through Muslim neighborhoods. This took place in plain view of fully armed riot police, who followed the rioters and watched the mayhem unfold without taking action.

"I saw a group of maybe 25 people on motorbikes, yelling, singing the national anthem, throwing stones, and damaging parked cars. They were indiscriminately destroying whatever they could," said Mindin, Editor-in-Chief of the Mandalay Khit Journal. *"By then there were 200 or so riot police within view down the street, not more than 10 meters away, doing nothing as these rioters went on a rampage. I still can't believe the mob was allowed to continue what they were doing."*

The rioters visited two monasteries trying to recruit local monks, but were turned away empty-handed. *"A crowd of about 30 men came to our monastery around 12:30 a.m. on the first night of the riots. They had knives and sticks and their shouting frightened our young monks. I went down with 10-15 senior monks to meet with the mob. I noticed the men were quite drunk and out of control. I told them they needed to leave as they were disrupting our peace,"* said U Dama, a senior abbot at Moe Khaung Monastery. *"Isn't it strange that there were some 30 rioters going around Mandalay destroying things and killing people and there were several hundred police officers out there on the streets during the riots? How is it that these hundred something officers cannot arrest a handful of troublemakers?"*

The failure of police to act against the rioters is mirrored by the Government's failure to address the hostile environment created by the ultra-nationalist Buddhist 969 movement, which portrays all Muslims as foreigners plotting to subvert Myanmar's moral and religious character. The report notes that Wira Thu, the controversial leader of 969, has played a direct role inciting violence: *"Wira Thu personally engaged in anti-Muslim preaching events or social media campaigns just prior to major outbreaks of rioting against Muslim communities in Rakhine state, Meiktila, Lashio, and Mandalay. The close nexus between his speech and ensuing criminal violence in these specific events is prima facie evidence of incitement. Failure by the Government to conduct an impartial investigation and take appropriate legal action will further encourage extremists to break the law."*

However, while recognizing the dangers of rising religious intolerance, the report calls into question the standard international narrative that places primary blame for the violence on Buddhist chauvinism: *"Latent religious divisions certainly exist and are being exploited and exacerbated by hate-mongering nationalists and opportunistic politicians. But to make the leap from hate speech to wanton murder and destruction requires an additional factor – armed groups funded and trained to commit criminal violence for political ends."*

The report describes the political objectives of the hidden hands strategy as aimed at undermining progress towards democratic reform and maintaining the behind-the-scenes influence of hardliners linked to the former junta. Thus far, the trap set by hidden hands has been successful in widening communal divisions, fostering insecurity that threatens upcoming elections, and shifting the narrative of Myanmar's political opening from reform to reaction.

"The incitement of religious violence, from Rakhine state in 2012 to Mandalay in 2014, has revealed the power of former junta hardliners to control the script of Myanmar's political transition," says Roger Normand, Executive Director of Justice Trust. *"The Government must fulfill its public promises to protect all people and hold accountable those forces who are instigating communal conflict for political ends."*

The report concludes with recommendations for civil society to develop local responses to counter the strategy of instigating communal conflict, and for Government to fulfill its duties to uphold the rule of law and protect all people equally, regardless of race or religion.

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