

Myanmar risks spiraling anti-Muslim unrest: Watchdog
By AFP
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BANGKOK — Myanmar must address anti-Muslim propaganda and stamp out a culture of impunity for religious violence or risk “catastrophic” levels of conflict, a rights group warned Tuesday.

Physicians for Human Rights described attacks on Muslims, that have swept the country since fighting first broke out last year as “widespread and systematic,” in a report examining unrest that has killed around 250 people and left tens of thousands homeless.

The US-based group said that while the situation in the country currently appeared calm, a failure to properly investigate and deal with the causes of the tensions risks further clashes.

PHR reported that “the brazen nature of these crimes and the widespread culture of impunity in which these massacres occur form deeply troubling preconditions that make such crimes very likely to continue.”

“If these conditions go unaddressed, Burma may very well face countrywide violence on a catastrophic level, including potential crimes against humanity and/ or genocide,” it continued, using the country’s former name.

Myanmar has strongly denied previous accusations by watchdog Human Rights Watch of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya in Rakhine state.

Attacks against Muslims, who are thought to make up at least four percent of Myanmar’s population, have thrown the Buddhist-majority nation’s much-hailed emergence from military dictatorship into question.

Communal unrest between local Buddhist and Rohingya Muslims engulfed the country’s western Rakhine state in June and October 2012, with whole villages burned to the ground leaving some 140,000 homeless — mainly the Rohingya.

This year the conflict has widened to target Muslims in general, with several eruptions of violence spreading across the country.

After dozens of Muslims, including more than 20 students and teachers of an Islamic school, were killed in the central Myanmar town of Meiktila in March the United Nations human rights envoy for Myanmar, Tomas Ojea Quintana, said the reluctance of security forces to crack down on the unrest suggested a possible state link to the fighting.

The reformist government of President Thein Sein has rejected the statement from the United Nations envoy, who is currently in Myanmar on a visit that includes tours of some of the areas affected by religious conflict. PHR said there was little evidence of direct orders or funding for the violence, but said “patterns of abuse” seen during the conflict “may imply that police or military were following orders.”

The watchdog acknowledged that authorities were prosecuting both Buddhists and Muslims accused of crimes.

“But Muslims have been given much longer sentences than Buddhists and many more Muslims have been arrested,” PHR Burma director William Davis told reporters in Bangkok.

“The violence has stopped, but ... the structural violence is still there,” he said, alluding to a “culture of impunity” and lack of trust in the justice system as well as laws and practices that discriminate against ethnic minorities. — AFP