

COMMUNITY INFORMATION FLOWS TO REDUCE INTER-COMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN BURMA

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For further information, please

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ACRONYMS AND BURMESE REFERENCES

CSO: Civil Society Organization

CIM: Community Information Management

Daw ASSK/Daw Suu: Aung San Suu Kyi

FGD: Focus Group Discussion

IDP: Internally Displaced People

ISIS: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

Kalar: Myanmar term for 'foreigner', used often in a negative sense to refer to Muslims of Indian or South-East origin

KIA: Kachin Independence Army

KII: Key Informant Interview

LGBT: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual

MaBaTha: Buddhist nationalist organization

MMK: Myanmar Kyat

MuDaung: Negative wordplay that connotes the fighting peacock, which is the emblem of the National League for Democracy (NLD), as being Muslim.

Naypyitaw: Capital city of Myanmar

NLD: National League for Democracy, one of the main political parties

NRC: National Registration Card, an identity card that all citizens of Myanmar are required to carry

Parahitta organization: Voluntary organization that provides health care or education to those in need.

Bamar Pyi: Burmese state/heartland.

Pyithu Hluttaw: The People's House (House of Representatives) in Myanmar

Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces

Thadingyut: Buddhist Festival of the lights

Thingyan: Myanmar New Year Water Festival (a Buddhist holiday)

Sasana: Buddhist community

USDP: Union Solidarity and Development Party, the ruling political party between 2011 and 2016

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The current political transition in Myanmar has seen a spate of outbreaks of inter-communal violence, particularly between Buddhists and Muslims. Rumors, hate speech, and manipulated information have played a role in triggering the violence. However, the way in which this process works in contemporary Myanmar, and the underlying factors that contribute to inter-communal violence, are only just beginning to be understood.

The research presented in this report aims to contribute towards a better understanding of the way in which rumors, hate speech, and manipulated information contribute to inter-communal conflict and outbreaks of inter-communal violence in Myanmar. It focuses on Muslim-Buddhist inter-communal conflict in one urban and one peri-urban area: Lashio, the largest town in Shan state, and Amarapura, a former capital on the outskirts of Mandalay. The research serves as project inception research for an initiative being jointly implemented, in partnership, by Search for Common Ground (Search) and the Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO), entitled Community Information Management to Reduce Inter-Communal Violence in Burma (the CIM project).

1.1 METHODOLOGY

Fieldwork was undertaken in the two weeks leading up to, and two weeks immediately following Myanmar's general election, in November 2015. A total of 10 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and 20 Key Informant Interviews (KIs) were conducted in Amarapura/Mandalay and 9 FGDs and 17 KIs in Lashio, with a diverse range of male and female daily laborers, bus drivers, CSO activists, journalists, business people, and religious and other community leaders. The majority of interviewees were Bamar¹ Buddhists, however we also interviewed Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Bahai, as well as Buddhists of other ethnicities.

The research was conducted just before and after the Myanmar's national election, a politically sensitive time in the country. Inter-communal violence is already a particularly sensitive topic in Myanmar. Direct questions on inter-communal violence were therefore avoided; and this affected the extent to which the research was able to produce an in-depth conflict analysis.

The research starts from the premise that rumors – defined as 'unverified information' – can serve both positive and negative functions. We do not assume that rumors are necessarily negative or false, or inherently likely to contribute to violence. Indeed, rumors can play a valuable role in reducing collective anxiety. This is

¹ Dominant ethnic group in Myanmar, the majority of whom are Theravada Buddhists

especially the case in contexts such as Myanmar, where reliable sources of verifiable information have been scarce, especially prior to 2012.

1.2 INFORMATION SOURCES AND SHARING

People in Lashio and Amarapura draw upon a wide range of sources for information and news. They mainly obtain information by word of mouth from friends, colleagues, people who travel for their work, and figures of authority. They share this information by phone and online messaging services, and in markets, teashops and pagodas, as well as other places where people gather such as bus stations. Certain individuals in the community are regarded as trustworthy sources of information including religious leaders, teachers, bosses, government officials, and community leaders. Many people also have access to news applications on Facebook, and/or read journals and newspapers, listen to the radio, and watch TV in order to find out about news that affects them.

People report a high level of skepticism about the news that they hear, particularly from sources like Facebook and government newspapers. They analyze not only the information itself but also the source of that information, and check whether it is accurate with people who live in the affected area, or by going to see for themselves. Family members or trusted community members are also consulted to verify or analyze news and information. Respondents also claim to try to verify information by checking different news sources. The more they can cross-reference, the more confident they are that the information is accurate.

However, research findings suggest that people are not always as diligent as they say they are in the way that they check the information they receive, and it is certainly the case that when people feel threatened or frightened, they are less likely to check information before they share it on, or respond to it. People currently feel very insecure in Lashio and Amarapura, for a range of reasons. This has implications for the way in which rumors relate to conflict and violence.

1.3 INTER-COMMUNAL CONFLICT IN MYANMAR

The causes of inter-religious inter-communal conflict in Myanmar are not well understood. There is a long history of Muslim settlement in Myanmar, and of peaceful relations between Muslims and Buddhists. This changed with the arrival of the British, whose colonial policies brought an influx of Indians, including Muslims, to Myanmar. Specifically anti-Muslim (rather than anti-Indian) tensions first came to a head in 1938; however an inquiry into the anti-Muslim riots of that time found that while the riots had religious anti-Muslim undertones, the real causes were political, economic and social. There have been irregular outbreaks of anti-Muslim violence in subsequent decades, but unfortunately few detailed investigations or analyses of their causes, due to the difficulty of conducting research under the socialist and military governments, and to the sensitivity of the issue. This difficulty persists to the present. It was difficult for us to verify any of the Muslim-Buddhist incidents that we

were told about in Lashio or Amarapura, so for the purposes of this report we are also relying on unverified information.

Reports on the recent outbreaks of inter-communal violence in Myanmar since 2011 suggest that there are five main dynamics to this violence and wider inter-communal conflict:

1. The role of anti-Muslim rumors, hate speech and manipulated information, including a set of narratives stemming from perceived threats to Buddhism.
2. The role of new media in spreading this information.
3. A conviction that the violence was caused or instigated by outsiders.
4. State sanction of some aspects of the conflict.
5. Underlying grievances, which are the least understood of the dynamics.

There are active civil society efforts to improve inter-communal relations and monitor and counter the effects of hate speech, and many instances in which people have managed to prevent violence, although these have not been as comprehensively documented as the cases of violence.

1.4 CONFLICT SCANS OF LASHIO AND AMARAPURA

Both Lashio and Amarapura have experienced recent outbreaks of religious violence: Lashio in 2013, and Amarapura in 1997, and possibly also in 2010 (unconfirmed). In both places, there is a high level of distrust towards Muslims on the part of the Buddhist population. This is related to a fear that Muslims intend to take over the country, particularly by converting people to Islam, which has been exacerbated by high levels of hate speech since the start of the political transition in 2011. Muslims and Buddhists stay separate from each other, and no longer attend each other's religious festivals or, in the case of Lashio, buy from each other's shops. In both places, there is particular distrust of Muslims migrating to those areas for work, which is related to a general hostility towards migrant workers, and particularly to squatters in Amarapura. The economy and security are major concerns for inhabitants in both target areas, and any group that is perceived to negatively affect their livelihoods or safety is regarded with suspicion and worry.

Both Muslims and Buddhists are worried about religious violence, and the impact that it might have on the economy. However, most people in Lashio are probably more immediately worried about the fighting between the Tatmadaw and the ethnic armed groups that is taking place outside of Lashio, which has negative effect on the economy, on their livelihoods, and on their feelings of security, due to the numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who have sought safety in Lashio. Ethnic groups in Lashio are concerned that the religious conflict will also have an impact on ethnic relations, due to the different religions amongst the ethnic groups. In Lashio, there is also a high level of anti-Chinese sentiment on the part of the Bamar and other ethnic groups.

There are forces for peace in both Lashio and Amarapura, although these are stronger in Amarapura. In Amarapura, moderate religious leaders on both sides have tried to promote interfaith relations. Interfaith initiatives in Lashio have reportedly had less success, but there are still examples of people helping each other during the conflict, for example the chief monk at Mansu Pagoda allowing Muslims to shelter there. In Amarapura, people are conscious of the economic impact of religious violence on their lives, and even if they do not like Muslims, they do not want violence in their areas. This seems to be less the case in Lashio, perhaps because of the immediacy of some of the fighting between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups within close proximity to the city.

However, there are also forces contributing to the conflict. A history of government discrimination against Muslims, particularly (as far we could tell) in Amarapura, contributes to this conflict. It is difficult for Muslims to obtain national identity cards in either place, and in Amarapura there have been restrictions on Muslim re-building or renovation of mosques, and an ongoing dispute over land ownership related to a Muslim shrine and cemetery. The Buddhist nationalist organization MaBaTha has a strong presence in both places, and has been active in Amarapura in preventing Muslims from buying land or moving into certain villages, and in petitioning against interfaith activities. Both areas have seen a rise in hate speech in the years of the transition government while reduced contact between Muslims and Buddhists has increased mutual suspicion and lack of trust. In Lashio particularly, people feel insecure as a result of ongoing fighting in the area, crime and other concerns. This also serves to reduce trust and exacerbate fear of others.

1.5 ROLE OF RUMORS

People feel insecure in Lashio and Amarapura – whether as a result of their fears about crime, the economy, ethnic conflict, religious conflict, or political instability. This makes them more susceptible to sharing and believing rumors, and responding to these rumors, whether or not they are true. People are less likely to check rumors that they fear might affect their security, thereby increasing the likelihood that they might act on a perceived threat and escalate an already tense situation. They are more susceptible to manipulated information spread as rumors, with the intent of causing conflict.

The large amount of rumors about Muslims and about Muslim-Buddhist conflict that we heard in Lashio and Amarapura suggest that people are concerned about this conflict. Negative rumors contribute to the background levels of hatred and distrust of Muslims and serve to manifest tensions between the two communities. This kind of background hatred and distrust may not in itself result in violence. But it means that Buddhists and Muslims in these areas do not mix, and fosters an environment of suspicion and hostility, creating an enabling environment for violence.

However, on their own, rumors are not sufficient to trigger violence. For every example of a situation where (true or false) rumors have triggered violence, there is an example where rumors have not triggered violence. Other factors – harder to

identify – contribute to outbreaks of violence, and to the underlying conflict. It is essential that these factors be understood if the root causes of inter-communal conflict are to be addressed.

1.6 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

With this analysis in mind, the following recommendations are provided:

- Recognize the important role that word-of-mouth communication plays in the ways that rumors are spread
- Recognize and understand the nuances in each local context, in order to develop a deeper understanding of why people feel insecure, as well as to identify root causes of the conflict;
- Mitigate the background levels of anti-Muslim hate speech, by engaging with the genuine Buddhist concerns that are expressed through hate speech; and
- Strengthen community resilience to potential ‘trigger’ rumors – and recognize and strengthen existing efforts to combat these rumors.

The types of information that people share by word of mouth should be monitored, to identify when potential ‘trigger’ rumors are being shared, and also to understand more about the kinds of rumors that create an enabling environment for violence. In addition, deeper understanding of each context is needed. This can be developed through ongoing consultations and conversations undertaken during the course of project implementation; further commissioned research studies would also be beneficial. Some interviewees thought that community education on rumors would help to address the background levels of hate speech and the power of ‘trigger’ rumors. Some interviewees also requested support for interfaith activities, although others suggested that such activities were not effective. This is context-dependent. Finally, key community influencers, and relevant local and national actors can be supported to respond to potential ‘trigger’ rumors. If they are to play a positive role, they must be carefully selected and trained, using training developed in consultation with them.

2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

2.1 SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- The main way in which people share and receive information is by word of mouth, whether by phone or face-to-face.
- Religious leaders, teachers, bosses, government officials, bus drivers and community leaders are all viewed as particularly trusted sources of information.
- Places where people gather who are coming and going from different areas, such as markets, bus terminals and some teashops, are seen as sources of a wide variety of information.
- Facebook and other apps are important sources of information for many people, although there is some skepticism about the reliability of the information on Facebook.
- Journals, newspapers, TV and radio all continue to be important sources of information.

2.2 VERIFICATION OF INFORMATION

- People displayed a certain amount of distrust of some news sources. Many people said that they do not believe much of the news that they read on Facebook or government newspapers.
- The main way in which people report checking information is by thinking about it and analyzing whether people who spread the information had something to gain from it personally. If possible, they go to the place to check whether what they heard is happening, or they call people who are in that area to ask them.
- People reported consulting with their families about news, and also with the same people who they are likely to see as trusted sources of information mentioned above.
- People are more likely to believe that information is true if many people are saying it, if it gets repeated in different news sources, or if there is supporting evidence in the form of pictures or video. Some actively verify information in this way.
- Despite their expressed skepticism about the reliability of the news that they hear, when people feel that their security is at risk, they are less likely to check information before they respond to it, or share it.

2.3 CONFLICT ASSESSMENT – AMARAPURA

In Amarapura, people's main concerns are:

- The economy, and particularly the price of staple goods
- The political situation, and its potential impact on the local economy

- Natural disasters, including flooding and fire
- Religious conflict
- Land issues
- Land prices have been rising in Amarapura, as in many other parts of the country, leading to speculation and squatting. Corruption, poor land management and lack of the rule of law all play a role in perpetuating this conflict. Newly arrived squatters are often perceived as a threat to the livelihoods of local people. This unstable situation gives rise to a number of social tensions.
- Instances of Muslim-Buddhist tensions, heightened Muslim fear and memory of violence, MaBaTha activities against Muslims, and anti-Muslim discrimination by the government were all found to exist in Amarapura. And there are documented incidents of anti-Muslim violence in Amarapura. Relations and contact between the Muslim and Buddhist communities in Amarapura were reported to be minimal.
- Concerns were shared about Muslims moving into non-Muslim villages and upsetting a delicate demographic and social balance. People are also suspicious of Muslims teaching Arabic and preaching in villages.
- Both Muslims and Buddhists fear an outbreak of religious conflict, but the two Muslims we spoke to feel particularly vulnerable. Rumors about violence means that people feel a constant low level of threat – but they may also feel that they need this information for their own safety, which is why these rumors get shared.
- MaBaTha has acted as a spoiler of peace in some instances. It seems that MaBaTha has been active in preventing Muslims from buying land, and that Muslims feel unable to enter or pass through certain MaBaTha villages.
- Forces for Peace: There are relations between moderate Muslim and non-MaBaTha Buddhist religious leaders. Desire to protect the local economy from conflict is also a strong force for peace. Finally, we heard of a few instances where violence had been avoided, despite the potential that it could happen.
- Factors contributing to conflict: Occurrences of violence in other parts of the country cause heightened tensions in Amarapura. Rumors have also reinforced general underlying feelings of hatred and fear of Muslims on the part of Buddhists. There has been a rise in hate speech, and in the activities of the 969 and MaBaTha movements. Discrimination by government and the USDP against Muslims has legitimized the notion among Buddhists that Muslims are not deserving of the same rights as Buddhists.

2.4 CONFLICT ANALYSIS – LASHIO

- There are many ethnic Chinese living in Lashio. Many people in Lashio see the Chinese as encroaching on both legitimate and illegitimate business activity. The Chinese government's involvement in the Tatmadaw's conflict with ethnic armed groups in Shan state has also contributed to tensions. There are negative perceptions and suspicions about Chinese and a lack of integration or mixing between the Chinese and other communities.
- Since the violence in 2013, the situation has remained tense between Muslims and Buddhists, with very little mixing between the two groups. Hostility towards

Muslims is high on the part of Buddhists of different ethnicities. There are a number of rumors circulating about the threats posed by Muslims.

- The main spoiler of peace, MaBaTha, continued to be active in Lashio in the lead-up to the elections. Other ethnic and religious groups in Shan state are also concerned that the MaBaTha-associated Movement to Protect Race and Religion will cause disunity in Shan state. The role of the government in this conflict is unclear. As in Amarapura, there is some level of anti-Muslim discrimination.
- There are limited examples of forces for peace. While there are some social initiatives under way, they are struggling to make an impact in the context of a divided civil society and given the dominant theme of the ethnic conflict occurring outside Lashio. The level of hate speech has risen in the years of the transition government. There is distrust of outsiders who come to Lashio to work, especially Muslims.
- Overall, people in Lashio suffer from high levels of lack of trust and feelings of insecurity that are exacerbated by the multiple conflicts and crime that they experience, or hear about, in their daily lives.

2.5 HOW RUMORS CONTRIBUTE TO RELIGIOUS CONFLICT/VIOLENCE IN LASHIO AND AMARAPURA

- The prevalence in Lashio and Amarapura of rumors about Muslims, and about Muslim-Buddhist conflict, is an indicator that people are concerned about this conflict. Thus, rumors serve to manifest tensions. Rumors were considered to often pre-empt events. Unfortunately, this also has the potential to contribute to conflict and violence.
- The fact that people feel insecure in Lashio and Amarapura means that they are less likely to verify rumors before they share them and respond to them, and more susceptible to believing and spreading manipulated information.
- Yet people can – and do – choose to ignore rumors. In both Lashio and Amarapura, people reported hearing lots of rumors about how Muslims would take over the country if the NLD won. However, this did not prevent most of the population of Amarapura and a significant percentage of the population of Lashio from voting for the NLD.
- In both Lashio and Amarapura, rumors contribute to the background level of hatred and distrust of Muslims on the part of the Buddhist population. This kind of background hatred and distrust may not in itself result in outbreaks of violence, but it can create an enabling environment for violence.

2.6 RUMORS AS TRIGGERS?

- Rumors alone are not sufficient to trigger violence.
- Other factors – which are sometimes harder to identify – contribute to the underlying conflict and outbreaks of violence. It is essential that these factors be understood if the root causes of conflict are to be addressed.

3 INTRODUCTION

The current political transition in Myanmar has seen a spate of outbreaks of inter-communal violence, particularly between Buddhists and Muslims. Rumors, hate speech and manipulated information have played a role in fostering inter-communal conflict and triggering inter-communal violence. However, the way in which this process works in contemporary Myanmar, and the underlying factors that contribute to the conflict, are only just beginning to be understood.

Search for Common Ground (Search) and the Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO), with funds from the Kann Let program, are jointly piloting an initiative entitled Community Information Management to Reduce Inter-Communal Violence in Burma (the CIM project). The project will address one of the most significant threats to Burma's transition to democracy and sustainable peace: the role of rumors and manipulated information in outbreaks of inter-communal violence. This project will (i) provide research on the impact of rumors, analysis of information and communication channels, and related leverage points to prevent violence; (ii) identify and train key community influencers, who will play key roles in information management within their communities; and (iii) provide support to information management communities with fact-checking and dissemination of positive messaging from partners.

This report presents the findings of the research, conducted between 26 October and 27 November 2015 in Mandalay/Amarapura and Lashio. The main question that this research attempts to answer is: 'what is the impact of rumors and manipulated information on inter-communal conflict and outbreaks of inter-communal violence in Lashio and Amarapura?'² The project team, led by a research consultant, undertook research. The research served to inform potential project activities.

The research focuses on Muslim-Buddhist inter-communal conflict in Amarapura and Lashio, which is a recurring and worrying pattern in both areas, as across many parts of Myanmar. However, this is not the only inter-communal issue in either focus area. In order to build a fuller picture of the conflict dynamics in these areas, the research therefore also considers two other inter-communal issues identified by the research – land in Amarapura and local-Chinese conflict in Lashio – including how these issues relate to Muslim-Buddhist conflict.

² For the purposes of this report, 'violence' refers to outbreaks of violence and 'conflict' refers to the underlying disagreement or disaccord between groups that leads to outbreaks of violence, among other outcomes. While the project title uses the term 'violence', the research found that it was important to look at the conflict in its entirety, and develop interventions to address that, rather than simply the outbreaks of violence that are its manifestation. However, often these two terms are viewed interchangeably – including in the international and Myanmar-specific literature on inter-communal violence and conflict – and so some blurring between the two terms may be unavoidable. This is also evident in the Burmese. The main word that interviewees used to refer to both Muslim-Buddhist violence and Muslim-Buddhist conflict was ပဋိပက္ခ. If they were talking about violence more generally, they used the term အကြမ်းဖက်.

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 RESEARCH METHODS AND APPROACH

The research served to support project inception. This meant that the focus was not only on establishing a baseline understanding of the situation in target areas (identified through the research), but also on enabling the project team to build relationships in target areas, identify key community influencers, and start to conceptualize potential project activities. As such, the research was led by a research consultant but developed and undertaken by the project team (rather than a separate set of researchers).³

The research consisted of:

- A brief review of national and international literature related to inter-communal conflict/violence and rumors;
- Mapping of community information management networks and channels, through KIIs (Key Informant Interviews) and FGDs (Focus Group Discussions), and ethnographic observation;
- Mapping of community conflict history, through KIIs and FGDs;
- Debriefing and analysis workshops after each research trip; and
- A rapid conflict assessment, using Search for Common Ground's conflict analysis framework.

4.2 TARGET GROUPS

A total of 10 FGDs and 20 KIIs were conducted in Mandalay/Amarapura and 9 FGDs and 17 KIIs in Lashio, with a diverse range of male and female daily laborers, bus drivers, CSO workers, journalists, business people and religious and other community leaders. The majority of our interviewees were Bamar Buddhists. However we also interviewed Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Bahai, as well as Buddhists of other ethnicities. A list of interviewees, disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, religion and type of work, is provided in Annex 1.

4.3 TARGET AREAS

Both of the broad target areas, **Mandalay Division and Lashio, Shan State**, are vulnerable to outbreaks of inter-communal violence and were selected based on the following recognized factors of vulnerability:⁴

1. Multi-ethnic and religious dividing lines;
2. A history of violence;
3. Economic inequity among ethnic or religious communities;

³ Data collection tools were developed following a research design workshop. These tools are provided as an annex in the research inception report. They were: Information/briefing sheet for researcher and fixer; guiding questions for KIIs; Session plan for FGDs; Short note format for note-taking in interviews/FGDs; Data entry tool for data collation following interviews/FGDs.

⁴ Intercommunal Violence in Myanmar: Risks and Opportunities for Assistance, Mercy Corps by Adapt Research and Consulting, April 2014

4. High unemployment;
5. External spoilers with business interests;
6. Easy access of partners due to existing activities/networks on the ground; and
7. High political stakes related to the census, elections, and the peace process.

At the debriefing workshop after the first 10 days' research, specific focus areas were selected: Amarapura, in Mandalay region, and Wards 5, 7 and 8 in Lashio town.⁵ These were selected during the research phase after analysis of the conflict dynamics in Mandalay and Lashio, and in accordance with the above-identified criteria for areas susceptible to inter-communal conflict and violence.

We chose Amarapura as a focus area because a number of our interviewees in Mandalay had suggested that Amarapura was an area where conflict was likely to break out, or where conflict originated. For example, one youth activist in Mandalay said that Amarapura was under the influence of extreme Buddhist nationalist forces:

“There are lots of USDP and they've managed to make it a green area.⁶ There are lots of working class⁷ people. MaBaTha has entered and it has been easy for them to organize. The religious leaders decide whom people should vote for. People have to follow whatever they say.”

Wards 5, 7, and 8 were identified by a majority of our interviewees in Lashio as areas vulnerable to conflict, on the basis of their Muslim population (particularly in Ward 7) and because of perceived high levels of crime in those areas.

4.4 DATA COLLECTION

Data collection took place in Mandalay on 26-30 October and on 16-20 November, and in Lashio on 2-6 November and 23-27 November, the weeks immediately before and after Myanmar's general elections held on the 8 November. The research team decided that, rather than conducting 10 days' consecutive research in each target area, we would make return visits to the same target areas, pre- and post- the general election. This decision was made on the basis that the types of information that are being shared, and the means of sharing, might differ before and after the election, and that community tensions might rise and fall during this time. Where quotes are provided, whether they are from before or after the election is indicated by 'pre' and 'post'.

⁵ These differed from the original project site selection of Lashio (no specific ward) and Chan Aye Thar Si Township, Mandalay.

⁶ A 'green' area is one with lots of USDP supporters, as opposed to a 'red' area, which has lots of NLD supporters.

⁷ The word in Myanmar is 'အောက်ခြေလူတန်းစား', which translates directly as 'people from the lower classes'.

Interviews and FGDs are confidential. Where we have quoted people, we have given only a minimum of their biographical data, in order to protect the identity of the interviewees.

4.5 CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

The election period made for a particularly sensitive time to conduct research on the already sensitive topics of inter-communal conflict. We modified our approach accordingly: we were careful to avoid direct lines of questioning on topics that might prove sensitive, particularly bearing in mind the need to build up relationships for the project itself. This limited our ability to produce an in-depth conflict analysis.

10 days of research were undertaken in both Mandalay/Amarapura and Lashio. This provides a snapshot of the situation in both places, but not the full picture that might be gained from a longer, deeper period of research. Our ability to select the most diverse range of interviewees was limited (a common constraint in the Myanmar context), as we were dependent upon existing contacts provided through networks of local fixers. For example, we were unable to meet with any monks who are members of the religious nationalist organization MaBaTha in either Mandalay/Amarapura or Lashio. In Amarapura, we were able to conduct KIIs with only two Muslims. In Lashio, we were able to interview only one member of the Chinese community.

One of the guiding questions for the FGDs was: *How do people assess whether information that you hear is true or not?* In retrospect, we feel that this is too much of a leading question, and that it prompted people to describe how they might check information in circumstances where they may not normally check information. We modified this question for the second field trip, and received responses that we think more accurately reflect the extent to which people check information.

Finally, it was challenging for the researchers to verify information given in interviews – there are few official information sources and the sensitivity of information makes it difficult to approach government officials to interview them on these topics. Time was also a limiting factor. None of the information on which we have drawn our analysis was fact checked, although a lot of it was corroborated by different sources. This meant that we too were relying on unverified information – i.e. rumors – to build the picture of the conflict history in Amarapura and Lashio.

5 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research looks at the relationship between two main variables: rumors and manipulated information, and inter-communal conflict. The following section draws on international literature on rumors and inter-communal conflict, to set out the framework for analysis.⁸

5.1 DEFINITION OF RUMORS

Rumors, manipulated information and hate speech are closely related: they are essentially all forms of unverified information.⁹ Unverified information can spread as rumors, be planted deliberately as manipulated information, or turn into hate speech.¹⁰ This report defaults to rumors. This is due to the wider body of literature on rumors, under which manipulated information is often included when it is spread as rumor, and the fact that it is often difficult to ascertain whether information has been deliberately manipulated, meaning it falls back under the general category of unverified information.

An overriding conclusion of the rumor literature is that ‘ambiguous situations create a vacuum which rumor fills.’¹¹ Search for Common Ground’s own rumor management training manual for peacebuilding in Africa breaks this down into five conditions in which a (negative) rumor is likely to spread:¹²

1. Lack of education: an uneducated public will be more gullible and less likely to check the information (but rumors exist also in countries with higher education levels)
2. Lack of transparency: when explanations are not given, the public starts inventing, usually assuming the worst
3. Lack of credibility of the media: the community does not trust the information given through the official channels and so looks for other sources of information (although the media can also spread rumors)

⁸ This review of the literature is selective, not systematic. There is a vast literature on rumors, which goes back at least 100 years. There is also extensive literature on inter-communal violence (as a sub-category of collective violence), and the role that the spread of rumors and (mis)information play in contributing to outbreaks of collective violence, including inter-communal violence, worldwide. It was not possible to exhaustively review all of this literature within the timeframe and without access to academic resources.

⁹ The full definition is ‘unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger, or potential threat, and that function to help people make sense and manage risk.’ Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia (2007), Rumour, Gossip and Urban Legends, *Diogenes*, 213: 19-35.

¹⁰ Hate speech is defined as ‘words of incitement and hatred against individuals based upon their identification with a certain social or demographic group.’ Iginio Gagliardone, Alisha Patel and Matti Pohjonen (2014), *Mapping and analysing hate speech online: opportunities and challenges for Ethiopia*, University of Oxford and Addis Ababa University

¹¹ Donavan (2007), How Idle is Idle Talk?

¹² Search for Common Ground and Radio for Peacebuilding Africa (n.d.), *Rumour Management Manual: A Training Guide*.

4. Strong emotions: the rumor captures the mood and emotional needs of the community
5. Hidden agenda: an individual or group may take advantage of an incident to spread malicious rumors that advance their agenda and/or harm their competition

Despite negative associations of rumors with gullibility and hidden agendas, rumors are generally perceived to have a positive function in society, according to the wider literature on the topic. This literature identifies rumors as arising from situations ‘that are ambiguous, threatening or potentially threatening, and where people feel a psychological need for understanding or security’.¹³ In these types of situations rumors ‘function to make collective sense’, or to manage threat.¹⁴ Studies that look at rumor transmission but not at the potential links to conflict/violence, find that rumor transmission can be ‘a group explanation process for reducing collective anxiety in uncertain situations’.¹⁵ That is, rumors can have a potentially calming effect.

The rumor literature has found that people tend to perceive the rumors they pass on as helpful and credible. However, in times of heightened anxiety ‘people are less likely to monitor the logic or plausibility

How are rumors spread via the Internet?

It is widely agreed that the Internet has contributed to the rapid spread of rumors contributing to the potential for outbreaks of conflict. This has resulted in the proliferation of studies that look at how hate speech is spread online in particular countries. However, not all of these studies explore what the consequences of this hate speech might be, or whether there is actually a link to online hate speech and offline violence.

There also appears to be limited literature that comprehensively explores the different ways in which rumors and other types of information spread at a community level (including, but not limited to, sharing via the internet), for example whether the spread of rumors deviates from normal patterns of information sharing, or whether rumors were more or less likely to be believed if they were spread by people perceived to be influential in their community. The fact that communities share information – but not how they do so – seems to be taken as a given in the violence literature.

¹³ DiFonzo and Bordia (2007)

¹⁴ DiFonzo and Bordia (2007)

¹⁵ Qinying Yiao and Lei Shi, She Gets a Sports Car from Our Donation: Rumor Transmission in a Chinese Microblogging Community. See also Subin Sudhir and Anandakuttan B. Unnithan (2014), Measuring Consumer Motivations to Share Rumors: Scale Development, International Journal of Marketing, Volume 4, Issue 3. This literature review found anxiety management to one of four motivations for consumers to share rumors in the marketplace, the others being information sharing, relationship management and self enhancement

of what they pass on to others,'¹⁶ and this is also true when people feel psychologically threatened.¹⁷

5.2 DEFINITION OF INTER-COMMUNAL VIOLENCE

Inter-communal violence¹⁸ falls under the broader category of collective violence, i.e. 'the instrumental use of violence by people who identify themselves as members of a group – whether this group is transitory or has a more permanent identity – against another group or set of individuals, in order to achieve political, economic or social objectives'.¹⁹ Inter-communal violence or inter-communal conflict is specifically used to describe violence/conflict that takes place between different groups living in the same state, rather than across nation-state borders. In the literature, the terms 'violence' and 'conflict' are often used interchangeably. For the purposes of this research, these are separated in line with Search for Common Ground's definitions²⁰.

Inter-communal violence occurs due to a complex mixture of reasons, which are specific to each conflict. However, the literature has identified some general factors that trigger outbreaks of violence,²¹ namely:

- A hostile relationship between two identity groups, that provides the background setting for the conflict.
- A response to 'trigger' events that engage the emotions of one of those groups, for example outrage over a rape or killing of a member of one group by a member of the other group, or an election result that is perceived to have been fixed in favor of one group.
- A keenly felt sense of justification for killing – often including the feeling on the part of the aggressors that they are the victims.²²
- An assessment on the part of the aggressors that violence will not result in any punishment, for example if it seems the state will sanction the killing or it will go unreported.

¹⁶ Rosnow, cited in Ralph L. Rosnow and Eric K. Foster (2005), Rumor and Gossip Research, Psychological Science Agenda I April 2005, <http://www.apa.org/science/about/psa/2005/04/gossip.aspx>

¹⁷ DiFonzo and Bordia (2007). This has been corroborated by Ben Oppenheimer's forthcoming 2,000n and 1,500n study in active conflict areas in Southern Thailand and Mindanao, the Philippines.

¹⁸ Also referred to simply as 'communal violence'.

¹⁹ WHO (2002), World Report on Violence and Health, http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention.

²⁰ Search for Common Ground distinguishes between these terms, recognizing that conflict is neutral and inevitable and can be transformed into positive outcomes, and does not necessarily end in violence.

²¹ These factors, which are widely accepted, are from Donald Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (2001), as summarized in Joseph G Bock (2012), *The Technology of Nonviolence: Social Media and Violence Prevention*, MIT Press.

²² Veena Das, "Specificities: Official Narratives, Rumour, and the Social Production of Hate," *Social Identities* 4, no. 1 (February 1998)

These factors contribute to outbreaks of inter-communal violence over a period of time that is preceded by a precipitating, or ‘trigger’, event. For example, after the announcement of election results, during a brief lull of 1-3 days, militant leaders may facilitate a social-psychological process within an ‘in-group’ to build consensus to use violence.²³

Experts on inter-communal violence in South Asia have further shown that inter-communal violence is part of a wider political landscape, and that inter-communal conflict can be subject to strategic political manipulation over and above the facilitation of a social-psychological process during a lull.²⁴

5.3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RUMORS AND INTER-COMMUNAL VIOLENCE

A wide range of research has established that rumors, manipulated information and hate speech can contribute to triggering outbreaks of inter-communal violence, and can play a role at different stages in the outbreak of inter-communal violence.²⁵

Rumors, manipulated information and hate speech can:

1. Contribute to the generalizable factors that trigger outbreaks of conflict, particularly by reinforcing hostile relationships between different identity groups; ensuring that ‘trigger’ events becoming widely known; and contributing to the aggressors’ feeling of being under threat.²⁶
2. Be used to take advantage of the social-psychological process that takes place during the ‘lull’ immediately preceding an outbreak violence, whereby spoilers generate the impetus for outbreaks of violence.²⁷
3. Be used as part of longer processes of strategic political manipulation, for example as part of extended periods of mass mobilization for collective violence.²⁸

²³ Horowitz, *Deadly Ethnic Riot*, 2001.

²⁴ Veena Das and Tambiah, summarized in Rune Hjalmar Espeland (2007), *When Neighbours Become Killers: Ethnic Conflict and Communal Violence in Western Uganda*, CMI Working Paper

'Dangerous speech'

Susan Benesch argues that there is a difference between the types of rumor, hate speech or manipulated information that contribute directly to outbreaks of violence, and those types that contribute to a background atmosphere of distrust between different groups. She has developed a framework of five variables for identifying 'dangerous speech', i.e. speech that has the propensity to trigger violence. (Dangerous Speech: A Proposal to Prevent Group Violence, <http://dangerousspeech.org>.)

The UMATI project to monitor hate speech in Kenya started by using the 'dangerous speech' framework. However, they found that while the occurrence of hate speech online did not directly translate into violence on the ground, it was still important to monitor this speech. They therefore developed their own categories: 'offensive speech, moderately dangerous speech and extremely dangerous speech'. (iHub Research (2015) Umati: Building an Intelligent Umati Monitor)

That rumor can contribute to divisions and conflict within a population group, and therefore potentially contribute to violence, is substantiated by the wider literature on rumors. A definitive 1944 study of the psychology of rumors found that rumor is able to speak to hostile and divisive impulses for which there were few other outlets.²⁹ In addition, the fact that people are less likely to check rumors before they share them onwards in times of heightened anxiety (see above) increases the potential for rumors to be subject to manipulation, or to contribute to outbreaks of violence.³⁰

However, the wider rumor literature primarily identifies a positive role for rumors as a collective threat-managing function.³¹ There is thus a tension between the positive function of rumors in *reducing* collective anxiety, as established in the wider literature, and the negative role of rumors in *contributing* to collective conflict and violence. This tension is demonstrated in a study of rumors and collective violence in Kenya, which states that '*Rumors played a deeply ambiguous role in [inter-communal] violence, but the overwhelming sense is that they fuelled fear, induced panic, hastened attacks and evacuations, and exacerbated violence, displacement, and the destruction of property.*'³² At the same time, for the majority of Kenyans, contributing to the spread of rumors was 'a means of gathering and sharing information, as a way of making sense of inconceivable and indeterminate acts.'³³

²⁹ Robert Knapp (1944), *The Psychology of Rumor*, cited in Donovan (2007), *How Idle is Idle Talk?*

³⁰ The later rumor literature also finds that it is very difficult to identify and isolate rumor-mongers, because of the collective, instrumental nature of rumor-sharing. Pamela Donovan (2007), *How Idle is Idle Talk? One Hundred Years of Rumor Research*, *Diogenes* 213: 59–82

³¹ DiFonzo and Bordia (2007).

³² OSBORN (2008), *Fuelling the Flames*. In line with this, in her research on child-snatching rumors, Donovan found that it was difficult to identify rumor-mongers, due to the collective and instrumental nature of rumors. Pamela Donovan (2007), *How Idle is Idle Talk?*

³³ OSBORN (2008), *Fuelling the Flames*.

It is important to recognize this tension, because it raises the possibility that rumors could calm – as well as contribute to – situations of inter-communal tension, something that is not much explored in the rumor literature and the literature on hate speech.³⁴ It is important also to remember that rumors should not necessarily be always thought of as incorrect or false – even if they can trigger violent responses. Rumors are unverified information, and assessing them within a framework that first defines them as true or false can be misleading. Indeed, in understanding the role that rumor plays in collective violence/conflict, Osborn writes that ‘*Drawing a distinction between fact and fiction is less useful in this context than attempting to capture the way rumor, right or wrong, reflects and reinforces a collective lived reality.*’³⁵ That is, it is more important to recognize why certain rumors gain traction, and what are the underlying fears to which they speak.

This research therefore takes a **non-normative approach to rumors**. It recognizes that rumors can serve a positive as well as a negative function, and does not assume that rumors are necessarily negative or false, or inherently likely to contribute to conflict or violence. As such, we first asked how people share and check *information*, rather than specifically focusing on rumors. We also asked people what kind of information they shared. As people tend to share news that they perceive to affect them, we were able to develop a good picture of the key issues (both conflict-related and non-conflict related) that people perceive themselves to face in both areas.

We did not ask people directly if they thought rumors had contributed to violence, but rather asked them to talk in more general terms about what issues or events made them worried, how they had heard about these issues or events, and how they had responded, in order to track how information (including rumors) flows during critical time periods.

The main question that the research attempts to answer is ‘what is the impact of rumors and manipulated information on inter-communal conflict and outbreaks of inter-communal violence in Lashio and Amarapura?’ The TOR and the research workshop identified an extensive range of sub-questions, which can be condensed into the following main questions:

- What kind of news/information do people share?
- How do people share/receive this information? And with whom?
- How do people check information? What news sources do people trust, and what don’t they trust?
- What are the main conflicts and issues people are worried about? What are the main rumors and manipulated information?
- Are rumors/manipulated information and conflict related? How? What are triggers for violence?

³⁴ In a footnote, Donovan cites a study of rumor during the Nigerian civil war that identified a greater prevalence of ‘pipe-dream’ – i.e. positive – rumors than divisive rumors. Donovan (2007), How Idle is Idle Talk?, footnote 2.

³⁵ OSBORN (2008), Fuelling the Flames

- What are the consequences/impact of conflict for local people (the conflict's manifestations)?
- Are there any sources of peace in communities that are attempting to address these issues?
- Is anyone trying to mitigate the impact of conflict? Is anyone making the conflict worse?

6 RESEARCH FINDINGS

6.1 INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND RUMORS IN MYANMAR

This section maps the existing data and literature on how people share and check information and rumors in Myanmar. It is followed by a presentation of the relevant findings from the research in Amarapura and Lashio.

6.1.1 Literature review

“There is no news that ordinary Burmese can trust.”³⁶

Many observers of the outbreaks of violence between Buddhists and Muslims that have taken place since 2012 have noted that the changing ways information is shared and analyzed in Myanmar played a role in the violence and the underlying conflict. However, while there is an increasing amount of data on the ways in which people in Myanmar access information, there is scant research on the way in which information is checked and verified, and what kind of sources of information people trust.

Recent surveys have returned different results regarding the main sources from which people in Myanmar receive information. A 2013-2014 IRI survey of 3,000 people found that people were most likely to get news and information from radio (35%), friends and family (26%), and TV (23%).³⁷ Similar results were found six months later in a TAF survey, also of 3,000 people, which confirmed radio (35%), television (37%), and friends, family and neighbors (35%) as the main news sources of information about what is happening in the country, although for respondents in Myanmar's states, friends, family, and neighbors were more common sources of national news than television and

News, information or facts?

The Myanmar word for ‘news’ is ‘thadin’ သတင်း. This also means ‘information’. The other main word for ‘information’ is ‘a khyeq a leq’ အချက်အလက်, which can also mean facts. This complicates attempts to precisely define whether people are talking about verified news they have received, or unverified information.

³⁶ Dolan and Gray (2014).

³⁷ International Republican Institute (IRI), *Survey of Burma Public Opinion*, 2014. Survey of 3,000 people. Other sources were Newspapers (8%), Journal (2%), Village head (2%), Internet (1%), and Magazines (1%).

radio.³⁸ On the other hand, in a LIRNEasia 2015 survey of 8,400 households, 70% of respondents said friends/family were the main source of information, with neighbors being the next highest at 14%. Radio, TV, and newspaper came third highest, at just under 10%.³⁹

Mobile phones are an increasingly common means of sharing news and information, as SIM cards have become more readily available and the price of making calls has also dropped. The 2014 census found that 63.5% of households in urban areas and 21% of households in rural areas had a mobile phone,⁴⁰ while the 2015 survey of 8,400 households found that 27% of the rural and 65% of the urban population aged 15-65 owned a mobile phone and an active SIM card, and that 63% of all phone owners had smart phones, giving them access to the internet on their phone.⁴¹

None of the surveys reported above asked what kind of information people get from the information sources they use, whether people trust any of these sources, or how they check information.⁴² This is unfortunate, as it is hard to know how much faith Myanmar people place in the news sources they rely on, especially in such a rapidly changing environment, and given Myanmar's history.

People have traditionally placed very little trust in the print and broadcast media. Until recently all media was tightly controlled by the government, and therefore "trust in the government-run newspapers is scant, especially after decades of top-down control of the entire media environment."⁴³ During the years of socialist rule, as Anna Allott describes it, state media outlets were used "to explain official policies, to inform the people of only those facts it deemed important or beneficial for them to know, and to exhort them, ad nauseam, to work harder and to make do with less."⁴⁴ Despite the dissolution of the Press Scrutiny Board (the government media censorship body), press freedom remains low in Myanmar,⁴⁵ self-censorship has become the norm, and

³⁸ The Asia Foundation (TAF), *Myanmar 2014: Civic Knowledge and Values in a Changing Society*, 2014. Other sources were newspapers (13%), journals (11%), village leader (3%), and internet (3%). The survey also found that people were more likely to access state-run media sources than private media sources; neither the 2013-14 IRI survey nor the 2015 LIRNEasia asked about this

³⁹ Helanie Galpaya, Ayesha Zainudeen, Suthaharan P. (2015), A baseline survey of ICT and knowledge access in Myanmar, LIRNEasia

⁴⁰ Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2014), *The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census: Highlights of the Main Results*.

⁴¹ This survey further found that 24% of phone users use VOIP, 20% use Whatsapp and Facebook messenger, and 17% use Facebook. Galpaya et al (2015), A baseline survey of ICT.

⁴² The 2014 TAF survey found that levels of social trust are very low: 77% of respondents believed that generally, most people cannot be trusted. This could indicate that despite the fact that people use friends, family and neighbors as one of their main information sources, these sources are little trusted – but it might also indicate the opposite.

⁴³ Dolan and Gray (2014).

⁴⁴ Anna J. Allott (1993), *INKED OVER, RIPPED OUT: Burmese Storytellers and the Censors*, Pen American Center, available at <http://burmalibrary.org/docs/inked-over-ripped%20-out.htm>

⁴⁵ Freedom House, *Myanmar Country Report: Freedom of the Press*, 2015, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2015/myanmar>.

broadcast media continues to have far less freedom than the print sector.⁴⁶ There is a Myanmar joke that the most reliable news network in the country is the ant news network (for ants to spread information about sources of food).

In addition, the censorship of the former Press Scrutiny Board meant that any writing that contained political messages had to be deeply subtly allusive and leave conclusions unresolved, as is illustrated by Jennifer Leehey in her in-depth study of a Burmese short story from the 1990s.⁴⁷ This history of censorship of the news, government misinformation strategies, and the emergence of an allusive literature for conveying political messages, means that people have had to develop sophisticated strategies for identifying how to decipher the information they receive, and what news they trust.

This context gave rumor an important role: it was used as a way to convey information ‘word-of-mouth, outside of formal media or any organized authority’.⁴⁸ Rumor could also enable decision-making under difficult circumstances. Monique Skidmore noted the importance of rumors in this context, ‘because they are one of the few forms of mundane information that allow individuals and families to speculate on outcomes, to gamble on courses of action, to assess options, and to weigh probabilities’.⁴⁹ In their analysis of the role of rumor in collective violence, McCarthy and Menanger allude to its importance in everyday life when they argue that complex dynamics of information consumption, trust and grievances drive rumor sharing in Myanmar, rather than it simply serving the straightforward purpose of sharing information.⁵⁰

6.1.2 Field results

6.1.2.1 How do people share/receive information? And with whom?

This section provides an overview of the research findings on how people share and receive information (including, but not limited to, rumors) in both Mandalay/Amarapura and Lashio. The following conversation, which came from an FGD in Amarapura, is representative of the range of answers we got to this question:

“In my ward, I talk about [the news] in the teashop, the general store, the restaurant [beer station]”.

⁴⁶ Theo Dolan and Stephen Gray (2014), *MEDIA AND CONFLICT IN MYANMAR: OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEDIA TO ADVANCE PEACE*, United States Institute for Peace (USIP).

⁴⁷ Leehey, Jennifer (2012). “Reading ‘Saturn’: Interpretive Practice Under Censorship in Burma.” *Journal of Burma Studies* 16 (1): 1–25. doi:10.1353/jbs.2012.0002.

⁴⁸ Matt Schissler, *New Technologies, Established Practices: Developing Narratives of Muslim Threat in Myanmar*, in Melissa Crouch (ed) *Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging* (forthcoming Oxford University Press 2015).

⁴⁹ Monique Skidmore, *Karaoke Fascism*, 2003. The observation and citation come from Schissler (2015), *New Technologies, Established Practices*.

⁵⁰ However, they don’t provide illustrative examples of these dynamics of information consumption, trust and grievances, so it is hard to know exactly what they mean, other than that rumor sharing happens for multiple reasons. Gerard McCarthy and Jacqueline Menanger, *Viral Rumours and Political Identity, in Communal Violence in Myanmar* (2015), Myanmar Knowledge Society

“In the weaving workshop”.

“Facebook, newspapers, journals, at the bus stop where lots of people gather”.

“I use Facebook”.

“The people who post Eleven News on Facebook, I add them and we end up being friends. Sometimes I use phone applications, the applications that gather news, but I can't remember their names. I listen to the radio.”

“I listen to FM. I listen to MDY FM, Bagan FM, Thazin FM.”

“I watch TV. All channels. I don't read journals”.

“I watch Myawaddy, MRTV, that kind of thing.”

— Male and female daily wage laborers, Bamar Buddhist, FGD, Amarapura, *post*

The main way in which people share and receive information is by word of mouth, whether by phone (particularly women) or face-to-face. This includes sharing information with and receiving information from people they trust amongst their friends, colleagues and with social groups and networks. People in CSOs commonly get news from their CSO network, and people who work for political parties get their news from the party.

Religious leaders, teachers, bosses, government officials and community leaders are all viewed as particularly trusted sources of information. Interestingly, some older people say they turn to young people for news that they cannot access themselves, e.g. on Facebook, suggesting a partial change from the tradition of people deferring to their elders as authority figures (of which we also found evidence). Bus drivers are another important source of information, because they get to travel:

“People who go outside of the ward can go to areas where something has happened, and when they come back they tell about it. People coming into the ward come to the teashop. And then, they tell people in a group. Bus drivers, taxi drivers, People who go to Mandalay for work, when they come back we get to find out about it.” – Male teashop owner, Bamar Buddhist, 35+, Amarapura

Criteria for Key Community Influencers (persons particularly trusted as sources of information) as perceived by community members:

- Travels frequently
- Well connected with people in different areas
- Trusted, and has authority
- From the local area
- Holds shared values
- Shares truthful information
- Ability to assess information
- Have a good reputation
- Active in social work
- Holds a similar perspective (beq laiq hmu kin deh thu)
- Person who holds him/herself accountable

People also go to specific places to get news/information: markets, teashops, pagodas.⁵¹ Men are more likely to go to teashops and beer stations, while women may go to the market or the well. People who identify as LGBT in both Lashio and Mandalay told us that they share and receive information at the beauty salon, and that the beauty salon owners were important sources of information. Places where people gather who are coming and going from different areas, such as markets, bus terminals and some teashops, are seen as sources of a particularly wide variety of information:

Main ways that people share and receive information

- Word of mouth, including by phone, and with people who are particularly trusted sources of information
- Specific places: markets, teashops, pagodas, bus terminals
- Facebook, including Facebook groups and Facebook news pages, and some other messaging apps such as Viber, WeChat
- Journals and newspapers
- TV
- Radio

“I hear [news] in the market from people there. But now, if I want to spread it, the places where people gather in the market, if I share it there, I tell one person and another hears and goes spreading it. I get to hear lots of news that comes from people who come back from MDY.” – Male, U35, Christian, Bamar, works in

the market, Amarapura, *post*

Facebook is an important source of information for many people, although not all – some people have stopped using Facebook due to lack of trust (see below), while others have not started either due to cost and communications concerns, or lack of interest. For those people who do use Facebook, it often provides the entirety of the internet-based news services that people use, through Facebook groups, Facebook news pages e.g. Lashio News Online, Mandalay Kye Pone, or specific people’s Facebook accounts.⁵² People also use Viber groups and other messaging apps.

Many of the interviewees read journals and/or newspapers, or know people who read journals, who then share information from journals with them. The journals or newspapers most commonly mentioned were: The Voice, Eleven, Thuriya Ne Win (although this is not a trusted news source), Pyithu Khit, 7 Days, Mandalay Gazette and Mandalay Alinn. A number of interviewees also rely on BBC, Irrawaddy, DVB and RFA for news. Government newspapers were the most commonly read, although the news service they provide is rather specific:

⁵¹ We were told emphatically by one group of Muslims that their mosque is not a place where they go to share information, but where they go to pray – ‘despite what the SB [Special Bureau] thinks’. Other Muslims told us that they shared information before they went into their mosques.

⁵² This is in line with the finding of LIRNEasia’s 2015 survey of ICT and knowledge access, that very few people actually report using the internet, even if they use Facebook and other networking/messaging services on their smart phones and computers. Helanie Galpaya, Ayesha Zainudeen, Suthaharan P. (2015), A baseline survey of ICT and knowledge access in Myanmar, LIRNEasia

“I haven’t read a government newspaper for 20 years. Sometimes if I want to know the rules and the laws of the government I read it” – Male, 35+, Muslim elder, Mandalay, *pre*

Many people get news from TV or radio, including MRTV, Skynet, DVB, and MITV. Cherry, Shwe, and Thazin FM are popular in Lashio and particularly outside Lashio, where phone lines are not good. In Amarapura, people listen to Patamyar and Mandalay FM.

Since the start of the political transition in 2011, people’s ability to access telephones, specifically mobile phones, and the Internet has increased enormously, thereby increasing people’s access to information. Increased media freedom has made accessible a wider variety of news sources. Not many people actually spoke about this (except to observe that news moved ‘faster’), and unfortunately we did not ask them about their perceptions of whether this has affected the kinds of news they were likely to trust. However, the anecdotes about Facebook (see box below) suggest that people are going through fast learning curves in terms of how to use new media, and are becoming increasingly conscious of the fallibility of these sources. And at the same time, some ways of checking and sharing information seem to remain unchanged. This is discussed further below.

It is important to note that not all people are actively involved in sharing information and news. Many of our interviewees stressed that they were focused on earning enough to survive and feed themselves and their families, and they didn’t have time for paying attention to the news. Their main interest – if any – is in the economy, specifically price rises. This was a point that was also emphasized by those who are interested in the news.

“Currently one of the items of news that people are speaking about a lot is the election; but some don’t care who comes into power, they only talk about having work and being able to provide for themselves. Some people speak more about the price increases” – factory worker, U35, Mandalay, *pre*

6.1.2.2 How do people check information? What news sources do people trust, and do not trust?

As explained above in Section 2.5, we suspect that the way in which we asked this question led many respondents to embellish their responses to suggest a high degree of diligence in fact-checking on their part. Certainly, people told us many ‘facts’ or bits of ‘information’ that they had heard, which we suspect may be untrue, and that they did not seem to have attempted to verify. For example, it is unlikely that Muslim-owned food shops in Lashio are poisoning the food they serve.

Nonetheless we can draw some interesting conclusions from the answers that we did receive, particularly from the second round of field research, when we adapted the question.

People displayed a certain amount of distrust of some news sources. Many people said that they do not believe much of the news that they read on Facebook (it was common for people to provide a percentage for this, generally between 50% and 70%, and to suggest that the level of trust in Facebook had decreased), or that they read in government newspapers – although that does not stop most people from using Facebook (see text box below) or reading government newspapers.

The main way in which people report checking information is by thinking about it and analyzing whether people who spread the information had something to gain from it personally. If possible, they go to the place to check whether what they heard is happening, or they call people who are in that area to ask them:

“If something happens, I call [to the place where it happened] to ask about it.” – female, Bamar Buddhist, weaver, Amarapura, *pre*

“I call those it concerns. For example, when the events happened in Lashio, you couldn't even make a phone call any more. So in that case I went myself to the affected area, and spoke to the religious leaders.” – female, U35, Muslim civil society activist, *pre*

People reported consulting with their families about news, and also with the same people who they are likely to see as trusted sources of information mentioned above, i.e. teachers, elders (and in some cases young people), religious leaders or government employees, and also bus drivers.

“If it's happening in Shan state, I try and ask people who are on Facebook, people who know the region, people who know the law about it. And people who come from the market, and the gossips in

Mixed experiences of Facebook

Some people in both Mandalay and Lashio told us that they had completely lost trust in Facebook:

“I don't believe Facebook at all. There are so many kinds of names and accounts.” – LGBT beautician, 35+, Amarapura, *post*

“I don't use Facebook very much. Because I don't trust Facebook. Some news is put there indiscriminately. For that reason. I don't really believe it.” – Male, U35, Chinese, CSO, Lashio, *pre*

One civil society activist in Mandalay told us about an interfaith event that had backfired when youth at the event sang an anti-Christian song, and a video of this was posted on Facebook by a Christian attendee. Under the video, Muslims posted lots of anti-Christian comments. The activist told the Muslim community elders about the situation, and they stopped the young people from posting negative comments. For her, this was proof of the risks associated with Facebook, but also the need for elders to keep in touch with digital media: “For that reason, their elders opened a Facebook account, to know the updated situation. And they have kept [their account] open. It's important that people know about these kinds of things.” – Female, 35+, Bamar Buddhist, Civil society activist, Mandalay

On the other hand, one woman in Amarapura recounted an experience whereby the head teacher of the local school had been demanding 500MMK from every child for her retirement present. The woman had posted about this on Facebook, to check whether it was indeed policy for children to give teachers retirement presents, and when she found out that it wasn't, she was able to make the teacher repay the money.

some areas, people who know everything. I ask them. And clothes washers, they go to all areas. I invite them to tea, and ask them.” – Female, 35+ school teacher, Muslim, Lashio Ward 8, *post*

People also use multiple news sources to check information, e.g. if they read the news on Facebook first, they will subsequently see if the same news appears in journals. Government media outlets can also be a source of fact-checking for many people, although usually for very specific purposes related to government activity (see above).

People are more likely to believe that information is true if many people are saying it (and that it is not true if they only hear it once or twice and never again), if it gets repeated in different news sources, or if there is supporting evidence in the form of pictures or video:

“If one person says something, and then another 3 or 4 people come to say it I end up believing it. And people in the teashop show on their phone about what's going on with pictures from Facebook” – male teashop owner, Bamar Buddhist, 35+, Amarapura, *post*

“I check the photographs to see whether the news on Facebook is true or not. I have my own computer shop/photo printing shop. For that reason, I can tell whether photographs are real or have been photo shopped. If I'm not sure, I don't share onwards.” – Female Shan CSO activist, Lashio, *post*

Despite the skepticism about news expressed in the quotes above, and the ways that people describe checking news before they believe it, when people feel that their security is at risk, they are less likely to check information before they respond to the information, or share it.

“Once I heard 'run... run... run' because the river is flooding and so I also ran. Actually it wasn't true. Although it wasn't true, there is some news that you have to pay attention to” – female factory worker, U35, Mandalay

“Some people lack reasoning and analytical capacity; instead they just gather at the event. Most people do not analyze the news and mobilize quickly when hearing a rumor.” – Female, Buddhist, Lashio

This behavior pattern is corroborated by the international literature on rumors, which suggests that people are more likely to share rumors without questioning their validity, in contexts where they feel at risk.⁵³ This is explored at greater length in the conflict analysis.

⁵³ Ralph L. Rosnow, cited in Ralph L. Rosnow and Eric K. Foster (2005), Rumor and Gossip Research, Psychological Science Agenda | April 2005, <http://www.apa.org/science/about/psa/2005/04/gossip.aspx>

6.2 INTER-COMMUNAL CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE IN MYANMAR, AND THE ROLE OF RUMORS

This section provides a brief overview of the literature on the history and dynamics of inter-communal conflict and violence in Myanmar, including the role of rumors. It is followed by the conflict analyses of Amarapura and Lashio, which are based on the research findings. We provide analyses of two types of conflict in each area: in Amarapura, land conflict and religious conflict and in Lashio, Chinese-local conflict and religious conflict. There are other types of conflict in Lashio, and possibly Amarapura as well, and many of these conflicts are interrelated. However, the focus of this research is the role of rumors in inter-communal violence, and not on the general conflict situation in these areas. We made a conscious decision to narrow our focus in both areas, but to provide a (briefer) analysis of one other kind of conflict in each area, in order to provide a point of comparison.

6.2.1 Literature review⁵⁴

Muslims have lived in Myanmar since the ninth century and were subject to relative religious acceptance during the reign of the Burmese kings, with Muslims holding senior advisory positions within the court. This dynamic changed with the advent of British rule and the influx of large numbers of Indians into Burma to work under the colonial

administration, of which approximately half were Muslim. Yegar dates the emergence of tension in Burmese-Indian relations to after World War 1, as Indian dominance of economic and government positions became apparent, and led to Burmese perceptions that they were being dispossessed of their country. The first specifically anti-Muslim riots took place in 1938, and were triggered by both economic and religious-nationalist grievances.⁵⁵ There were

Efforts to prevent conflict/violence

While there have been many incidents of inter-communal violence in communities across Myanmar, there have been many positive examples where communities have managed to defuse tensions and prevent violence, including through public rebuttal of false rumors.

- In Shwebo religious leaders came together in order to successfully mitigate the impact of rumors and thwart potential conflict instigators. (CPCS, 2015)
- A number of actors have started to develop positive messaging, including the *panzagar* campaign against spreading hate speech, and attempts to develop positive messaging against anti-Muslim hate speech that draws upon and speaks to Buddhist values. (Walton and Hayward, 2014).
- The Centre for Diversity and National Harmony is developing an early warning system consisting of monitoring online hate speech and through a network of community informants. CDNH intends ultimately to be able to use these early warnings for early response, and has been able to share an example where this has already been successful.
- Many local CSOs are undertaking interfaith dialogue events and other activities.

⁵⁴ NB: This section does not look at the history of inter-communal violence in specific areas e.g. Lashio, Mandalay; these will be discussed in the report findings as relevant. It also does not discuss the situation in Rakhine state.

subsequent outbreaks of anti-Muslim violence throughout the socialist era and military rule. While a lot of these outbreaks have been documented, there are few, if any, detailed studies of this violence or the underlying conflict.⁵⁶

Since 2012, there have been outbreaks of inter-communal violence between Buddhists and Muslims in towns and villages across the country. A range of reports have documented these outbreaks of violence, and the role that rumors, hate speech and manipulated information have played in triggering the violence. However, as yet there are no in-depth studies on the underlying reasons for this violence, how they are related (or not) to previous outbreaks of violence.⁵⁷

Five main dynamics can be identified from the reports that document these outbreaks of violence and the wider conflict:

1. *The role of anti-Muslim rumors, hate speech and manipulated information, including a set of narratives around threats to Buddhism*

There are three interlinked ways in which the role of rumors, hate speech and manipulated information have contributed to inter-communal conflict and violence:

- a. Spreading information about an inciting incident.
- b. Rumors that demonize Muslim populations in Myanmar and elsewhere.
- c. Perceptions of Buddhist decline and threats to Buddhism.

Many of the outbreaks of violence have been instigated following a reported 'inciting incident,' word of which spreads widely, including through monastic networks.⁵⁸ These incidents include a reported sexual attack in Mandalay, an attack on a monk in Okkan, north of Yangon, and the setting on fire of a Buddhist woman by a Muslim man, in Lashio. A few of these incidents have subsequently been found to be untrue, or exaggerated.

The spread of rumors/hate speech that demonize Muslim populations in Myanmar

⁵⁵ This paragraph summarizes Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 1972. The conflict between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims is not discussed here. See also Robert Taylor, *The State in Myanmar*, 2009.

⁵⁶ For documentation of Muslim-Buddhist outbreaks of violence since the socialist era see Human Rights Watch, *Crackdown on Burmese Muslims*, 2002 http://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/asia/burmese_muslims.pdf; International Crisis Group, *Myanmar: the Dark Side of the Transition*, 2013; International Crisis Group, *Myanmar Background: Ethnic Minority Politics*, 7 May 2003; Images Asia, "Report on the situation for Muslims in Burma", 1997; Linter (1990), *Outrage*.

⁵⁷ The different risks for rural and urban areas is noted in two reports: DCA, EcoDev, LRC, Malteser, SFCG (2014) Shan State Rapid Conflict Analysis, and Adapt Research and Consulting and MercyCorps (2014), *Intercommunal Violence in Myanmar: Risks and Opportunities for International Assistance*.

⁵⁸ Physicians for Human Rights (2013), *Patterns of Anti-Muslim Violence*

and elsewhere has contributed to a hostile, anti-Muslim environment.⁵⁹ Some of these rumors have a long history in Myanmar, for example rumors relating to the exploitation and forced conversion to Islam upon marriage of Buddhist women to Muslim men. In both the present and during previous times of tension, these have resulted in the passing of specific laws to protect Buddhist women married to Muslim men, originally based on a legitimate concern for the rights of Buddhist women who had married Muslim men and whose rights were not recognized under Islamic law.⁶⁰ Another rumor with a long history is the fear that Muslims will take over the country, supposedly through marrying and forcibly converting Buddhist women, originally based on concerns regarding the economic and social dominance of Indians, including Indian Muslims in British colonial Myanmar.⁶¹ Other rumors are connected to current international discourses about extremist Islamism, in the context of the global war on terror, and draw from international reporting on the actions of radical Islamists in Syria and elsewhere.⁶²

These fears of the threat of Islam are reinforced by a perception of Buddhist decline, and the need for defense of the *sasana*,⁶³ in a time of political instability. Walton and Hayward note that 'the long-standing connection in Buddhist political thought between the integrity and strength of the state and the health of the religion suggests that many people view these conflicts through a religious lens'⁶⁴. International reporting on inter-communal conflict in Myanmar has contributed to the sense within Myanmar of Buddhism being under attack, as it is seen as negatively reporting on the Buddhist role and portraying the Muslims as victims.⁶⁵ However, perceptions of attack are not specific to Buddhists: during the outbreak of violence in Mandalay in 2014, both sides circulated photos of fatalities online with 'each side using them to convey a sense of being under attack'.⁶⁶

It is important to recognize that some of these fears and perceptions described above may be based on credible information or legitimate grievances. The M.MAS research undertaken by MIDO in collaboration with the University of Oxford contests

⁵⁹ Matthew Walton and Susan Hayward (2014), *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar*, East West Center. Matthew Schissler et al, *Threat and virtuous defence*; Gerard McCarthy and Jacqueline Menager, *Viral Rumours and Political Identity*, in *Communal Violence in Myanmar* (2015), Myanmar Knowledge Society

⁶⁰ See Yegar for a history of these laws up to the 1970s.

⁶¹ Walton and Hayward (2014), *Contesting Buddhist Narratives*

⁶² Walton and Hayward (2014), Schissler et al, *Threat and virtuous defence*

⁶³ Walton and Hayward (2014), *Contesting Buddhist Narratives*. Schissler et al, *Threat and virtuous defence*. *Sasana* is a Sanskrit word, which means Governance.

⁶⁴ Walton and Hayward (2014), *Contesting Buddhist Narratives*. Kyaw San Wai (2014), *Myanmar's Religious Violence: A Buddhist "Siege Mentality" at Work*, RSIS Commentaries: 'Among Burmese Buddhists, there is a widespread belief that Buddhism will disappear in the future. [...] This millenarianism can be traced to a scripturally unsupported but widely believed 'prophecy' that Buddhism will disappear 5000 years after the Buddha's passing. As 1956 is considered the halfway point, the belief is that Buddhism is now declining irreversibly'

⁶⁵ Dolan and Gray (2014). Schissler et al, *Threat and virtuous defence*

⁶⁶ Maude Morrison (2014), *The New Radicals: Social Media and Communal Violence in Myanmar*

the idea that rumors and misinformation alone, rather than credible sources of information, contribute to discourses of Buddhist threat and Muslim attack, and thus to triggering violence.⁶⁷

2. *The role of new media in spreading this information*

With the relaxing of controls on access to internet, the proliferation of mobile phones, particularly amongst urban populations, and increased (though not unlimited) media freedom, many observers have noted that the types of rumors, misinformation and hate speech described above can spread much more quickly. For example, one study argues that *'The opening of the information space has had important implications for conflict, notably in the contribution of information as a driver of communal violence in 2012 and 2013 that broke out between Buddhist and Muslim groups across the country.'*⁶⁸ The Justice Trust's investigation of the conflict in Mandalay identifies the *'misuse of social media by extremist forces to publicize rumors of rape or other honor crimes committed by Muslim men against Buddhist women'*⁶⁹ as a contributing factor in outbreaks of violence.

The relationship between online hate speech and violence is hard to pinpoint. The only systematic study of hate speech and social media found that the virtual hate speech community in Myanmar is relatively small when compared to overall online presence, and that the demographic airing and receiving hate speech is young (18-34) and predominantly male. Interestingly, it also found that of the three types of anti-Muslim networks in Buddhist Facebook: local Rakhine state networks, national level Buddhist networks and international anti-Islam networks, shared participation is low and these networks are using different anti-Muslim narratives,⁷⁰ which goes against assumptions of a common anti-Muslim dialogue nationwide.

Observers have also suggested that people's ability to process and analyze this information is limited by their lack of familiarity with it. One report offers the example of a Buddhist monk in Yangon who *'indicated that he was so well connected by social media that he saw no reason to verify the information he was receiving and disseminating in support of Rakhine Buddhists.'*⁷¹ Schissler identifies in writings of this kind about the role of rumors and social media a general *'assumption about society in Myanmar as credulous to the point of gullibility and thus ripe to be misled by rumors, spread with new technologies. There are certainly people in Myanmar who fit this description, as there are in any place,'* but he argues that deeper analysis of how people use new technologies might demonstrate that this assumption is false.⁷² As noted above, the spread of rumors in Myanmar does not necessarily

⁶⁷ Matthew Schissler et al, *Threat and virtuous defence*

⁶⁸ Dolan and Gray (2014)

⁶⁹ Justice Trust (2015), *Hidden Hands Behind Communal Violence in Myanmar: Case Study of the Mandalay Riots*

⁷⁰ Morrison (2014), *The New Radicals*

⁷¹ Dolan and Gray (2014), *MEDIA AND CONFLICT IN MYANMAR*.

⁷² Schissler, *New Technologies, Established Practices* (2015).

denote lack of sophisticated mechanisms for analysis of the reliability of these rumors and other sources of information – and of course, rumors are not necessarily untrue.

3. *A conviction that the conflict was caused or instigated by outsiders*

An in-depth study of community experiences of inter-communal violence in six areas of Myanmar found that ‘External actors played a central role in the conflict: All community members believed that violence was planned, noting the presence of outsiders who incited violence or rallied mobs.’⁷³ Other reports come to similar conclusions, for example a conflict assessment of Shan state found that the Buddhist-Muslim violence there was ‘*perceived as politically motivated by perpetrators from outside Lashio, to distract people from the government*’.⁷⁴ Equally, the Justice Trust argues that ‘*The Mandalay riots were designed to appear as a spontaneous outbreak of mob violence, but in fact were perpetrated by an organized gang of armed men brought in from outside Mandalay to enact a pre-determined script written and stage-managed by hidden hands for political ends.*’⁷⁵

However, other reports have questioned this conviction, and suggested that the reasons that community members might prefer to blame the attacks on outsiders is out of fear of being made to identify perpetrators, guilt and disbelief that this was possible, and genuinely not recognizing the people involved.⁷⁶ The International Crisis Group interviewed community leaders and other sources and witnesses from both communities in Meiktila and Lashio, who ‘*insisted that the mobs were made up overwhelmingly of locals, and they did not believe that outsiders had any significant role.*’⁷⁷

It is not clear who is behind the outbreaks of violence and ongoing tensions, if indeed there are specific instigators. Some well-known monks, particularly those associated with MaBaTha (a Buddhist nationalist religious organization), have been active in spreading rumors, misinformation and hate speech both online and offline against Muslims.⁷⁸ They have also been active at community level in creating a hostile environment for Muslims. However, there have been many monks who have participated in inter-faith dialogue and opposed the anti-Muslim activity of their peers, both online and offline.

4. *State sanction of some aspects of the conflict/violence*

The level of state involvement in the conflict/violence is hotly debated and the source

⁷³ Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPSC, 2015), *This is Not Who We Are: Listening to Communities Affected by Communal Violence in Myanmar*

⁷⁴ DCA, EcoDev, LRC, Malteser, SFCG (2014) *Shan State Rapid Conflict Analysis*

⁷⁵ Justice Trust (2015)

⁷⁶ ICG 2013, *The Dark Side of the Transition*; Adapt Research and Consulting and MercyCorps (2014), *Intercommunal Violence in Myanmar: Risks and Opportunities for International Assistance*

⁷⁷ ICG 2013, *The Dark Side of the Transition*

⁷⁸ See, for example, CPSC (2015), *This is Not Who We Are*, which suggests that monks within the *sangha* (the monastic community) were responsible for organizing some of the violence.

of many rumors itself – for example, it is rumored that the state/the ruling party has supported the activities of anti-Muslim monks. At a minimum, the state perpetrates institutional discrimination against Muslims,⁷⁹ which may contribute towards or corroborate extremist Buddhist sentiment that Muslims are second-class citizens. In addition, some outbreaks of violence have been met by state passivity,⁸⁰ including reports of police arriving very late to scenes of looting or standing back from mob activity,⁸¹ and in some – though not all – cases, a lack of subsequent investigations into the crimes.⁸² On the other hand, after the outbreak of violence in Mandalay in 2014, the police were deployed relatively quickly, in large numbers.⁸³

The state has not responded with positive messaging or a strong official line after outbreaks of inter-communal violence,⁸⁴ with the exception of the announcement by President Thein Sein, again after the violence in Mandalay, that “*Severe action will be taken against those who intentionally spread hate speech and caused the riots, regardless of their race or religion*”.⁸⁵ This announcement has not been followed through on; instead President Thein Sein was reportedly instrumental in ensuring that a batch of ‘Protection of Race Religion Laws’, promoted by the religious organization MaBaTha and perceived to be specifically discriminatory against religious minorities, were adopted by Parliament at an unprecedentedly efficient rate in 2015.⁸⁶ MPs have seemed unable to collectively intervene to stop the violence, and ‘*instead focused their attention on amending areas of policy or law that they believe to be contributing to the violence, although this involvement has been quite limited*’, although some MPs have intervened or made public statements outside of Parliament.⁸⁷

Some reports have also suggested that some arms of government have taken a role

⁷⁹ The SFCG 2015 conflict analysis describes some of this institutionalized discrimination well. See also ICG 2013, *The Dark Side of the Transition*.

⁸⁰ ‘Although violence in Burma is relatively locally situated, the pattern of violations indicates some form of official acquiescence (or at least ambivalence)’. Kjell Anderson (2014), *Lighting the Spark: The Mobilisation of Anti-Muslim Violence in Burma*, The Sentinel Project, <https://thesentinelproject.org/2014/10/24/lighting-the-spark-the-mobilization-of-anti-muslim-violence-in-burma/>

⁸¹ ICG 2013, *The Dark Side of the Transition*

⁸² Justice Trust (2015),

⁸³ “Central Mandalay Calm After Heavy Police Deployment”, *The Irrawaddy*, 4 July 2014, <http://www.irrawaddy.com/burma/central-mandalay-calm-heavy-police-deployment.html>

⁸⁴ SFCG 2015 conflict analysis

⁸⁵ Nyein Nyein, “Burmese President Warns Media After Mandalay Riots”, *The Irrawaddy*, 8 July 2014, <http://www.irrawaddy.com/burma/burmese-president-warns-media-mandalay-riots.html>

⁸⁶ See for example Radio Free Asia, “Civil Society Groups Urge Myanmar to Drop Bills to ‘Protect’ Religion, Race”, 29 January 2015, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/bills-01292015150834.html>; Human Rights Watch, *Burma: Discriminatory Laws Could Stoke Communal Tensions*, 23 August 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/08/23/burma-discriminatory-laws-could-stoke-communal-tensions>

⁸⁷ Thomas Kean, *Religious Conflict and Myanmar’s Parliament: The Silence in the House*, in *Communal Violence in Myanmar* (2015), Myanmar Knowledge Society

in fuelling the conflict and orchestrating the violence (as well as organized religion).⁸⁸ The proposition of direct government involvement is rejected by the International Crisis Group, on the basis that there is no evidence for it and that it should be understood in the context of previous times when the military has been blamed for instigating violence to distract from anti-regime sentiment. ICG instead suggests that *'The more likely, and in many ways more disturbing possibility, is that this violence is not driven by any master plan, but instead reflects deep societal divisions and hatred that were at least partially suppressed in the authoritarian past.'*⁸⁹

5. Underlying grievances

The possibility that violence has been triggered by underlying grievances that are only tangentially related to religious identity is perhaps the least explored of all of the dynamics that contribute to the underlying conflict and the outbreaks of violence. Some reports do note the influence of land and economic factors on inter-communal conflict, for example in Meikhtila.⁹⁰ This is a major gap in the current literature. The last in-depth inquiry into inter-communal violence in Myanmar was commissioned by the colonial government after the 1938 riots. It found that while the riots had religious anti-Muslim undertones, the real causes were political, economic and social and not religious.⁹¹ While it is possible that this report did not sufficiently address the extent to which the riots had an anti-colonial element (given the identity of the report's commissioner), this insight suggests the huge importance of such in-depth study of inter-communal violence/conflict, which has not been possible in Myanmar since.⁹² This report is unable to address this gap in the literature, only to draw attention to it.

6.2.2 Conflict analysis – Amarapura

6.2.2.1 Background

Amarapura was the royal capital during the Konbaung dynasty (starting in the 18th century), before the capital moved to Mandalay in 1859. As well as being a core area for cultivation settlement along the Irrawaddy, it has a history of Muslim settlement, and one of the governors of Amarapura was Muslim during King Pagan Min's time (1846-1853).⁹³ The township of Amarapura extends south from Mandalay, with Taungthaman Lake at its center. There are 50 wards/villages in Amarapura; all but three of which voted for NLD in the 2015 election.

Interviewees told us that the main industries in Amarapura are farming, textiles, and fishing. In addition, many people, particularly men, travel daily from Amarapura to work in Mandalay, or work as bus drivers or motorcycle taxi drivers, ferrying their

⁸⁸ CPCS (2015), *This is Not Who We Are*; Justice Trust (2015).

⁸⁹ ICG 2013, *The Dark Side of the Transition*.

⁹⁰ Adapt Research and Consulting and MercyCorps (2014), *Inter-communal Violence in Myanmar: Risks and Opportunities for International Assistance*

⁹¹ Yegar (1972), *The Muslims of Burma*.

⁹² In-depth studies of the conflict in Rakhine state being a possible exception; it is also possible that some in-depth but unpublished reports exist.

⁹³ Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 1972.

neighbors. Tourism is also a source of income, and there is some small industry e.g. tobacco. The railway line runs through Amarapura, as does the main Mandalay-Sagaing road. There are a considerable number of squatters along the railway line. There are a large number of monks in Amarapura: the biggest monastery, Maha Gandar Yong, has 1400 monks.

Most of our interviews took place in Kyandan, a weavers' settlement to the west of the railway line. Most weaving and textile painting enterprises are home-based, on average employing 20-30 people, mostly women, and there is also a large government weaving factory. We were told that the main Muslims villages were Bone Oh (Sunni, the largest village with about 1,500 households and 8 mosques), Sa Kyin Wa, Oo Yin (Sufi), KyiMyinDaing (Sunni) and Tha Liswar. There are also Buddhists in Sa Kyin Wa and KyiMyinDaing, but not many. As well as working in weaving, farming, and bus driving, the Muslims also butcher and sell meat at the market. There is also a small Christian population, and reportedly a large Chinese population in Amarapura, but we did not hear about them in the interviews, or meet with them.⁹⁴ There are several villages in Amarapura that are reportedly MaBaTha strongholds, according to interviewees.

In Amarapura, from asking people about what kind of news they share, and what they were worried about, we established that people's main concerns are:

- The economy, and particularly the price of rice, oil and onions:

“The price of rice is going up, that kind of news [we share]... we want it to fall. One pyi of rice has gone up to 2,000 MMK, we get this news about rice from the rice shop.” – Female Bamar, Buddhist, Laborer and squatter, Amarapura, *post*

- The political situation, particularly as it relates to the economy. People fear that an unstable political situation – for example, people contesting the election results, or contesting the transition to a new government – will negatively affect the economy. The rumors that they share reflect these fears:

“In my mind, I want the NLD to win. I am praying for that. But some people say that if NLD wins, the price of rice and oil will rise.” – Female, Bamar Buddhist, Laborer, Amarapura, *pre*

“From my family side, I'm worried about religious conflict. Also that there won't be a transition [to the new government]. If that happens, people will be out on the streets again. And we will lose money” – Male, 35+ Buddhist Bamar, Weaving workshop owner, Amarapura, *pre*

- A perception that crime levels are rising, particularly motorbike crime and abduction of children. There is also some concern about political manipulation of crime – people talked about criminals being released from prison in an

⁹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_people_in_Myanmar – statement unreferenced

amnesty before the election and before Thadingyut, who could cause trouble.⁹⁵

- Natural disasters, including flooding and fire.
- Religious conflict (explored further below).
- Land issues (explored further below).

Despite these concerns, when we interviewed people in Amarapura, many told us that there were no problems in Amarapura, and that the situation was peaceful. However, as we ventured further into discussion, and started asking people what were the issues they were worried about, two main conflict issues came up: land and religious conflict. There are connections between the two, which are explained below.

6.2.2.2 Land in Amarapura

Land prices have been rising in Amarapura, as in many other parts of the country. This seems to have led to land speculation, and a related growth in the number of squatters, which has in turn contributed to tensions between squatters and non-squatters. These tensions are evident in the fact that in the lead-up to the elections, a common rumor was that if the NLD won, the squatters would be evicted – or conversely, that they would be given legal land rights.

The weak administration of land, the lack of rule of law, and the potential for officials to profit from land-related corruption, all play a role in perpetuating this conflict. In addition, more people seem to be moving to Amarapura to seek work (often starting out by squatting) that is seen to threaten the livelihoods of local people.

Some people have been squatting in Amarapura for as long as 25 years. They have no access to legal land title, and while many have invested in building houses on the land they are occupying, they are vulnerable to these houses being seized or cleared at any time. Interviewees told us there were four types of squatters in Amarapura: 1) people who have been displaced from their original land due to natural disasters, land seizures or government construction projects, 2) people who move to Amarapura for work, and either end up squatting intentionally or unintentionally, because they illegally built houses; 3) people who get married and have nowhere else to live; and 4) people who sell land because they can get a good price for it, and then squat elsewhere.

One NLD party member who has been involved in advocating for squatter rights, told us about a situation whereby the construction of a new road (6th Street) 8 or 9 years ago displaced people in the area the road would cut through. The displaced were

⁹⁵ This rumor commonly surfaces in Myanmar in times of political instability. It may have its roots in the government releasing criminals from prison during the 1988 uprising, for an account of which see Bertil Lintner, *Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy*, London and Bangkok: White Lotus (1990).

forced to settle on a piece of swampy farmland that floods 6 months of every year. They have not been allowed to register their new land. A weaving workshop owner remembered that when a river bank burst in 1995, the affected people were given some land near another village, but the land registry office did not keep exact records and so these people remain without legal title. In the case of Kyauk Sein Pagoda, land was cleared by a USDP MP and cronies in order to build the pagoda and a new jade market, and there have been additional land seizures recently in a nearby area.

People we interviewed accused the government of having been inactive in addressing land ownership and registry issues on anything other than a short-term basis:

“You can pay money and get a solution from the ward office, but that's not a true method [for solving this problem].” (Male, 35+, senior NLD party member, Amarapura, *post*).

As well as the NLD, which provides support to some – but not all – types of squatters, there are a number of activist organizations that work with the squatters to inform them about their rights.

This unstable situation gives rise to a number of social tensions. As well as the squatters' own concerns about their vulnerability to being evicted, and the lack of any means for them to rectify their precarious legal situation, the wider community is also concerned about the impact of increasingly crowded informal housing on the urban environment, including the fire and environmental health risks. They are also concerned about their own safety.

“There are more and more squatters than there were before. And there are more houses. When squatters are evicted, I am worried that we will also be driven away. There are more people who are moving in search of work. Near my house, there are more and more bus conductors” – Female, Bamar Buddhist, weaver, Amarapura, *pre*

Community concerns about squatters also seem to be connected to a wider community hostility towards, and fear of, internal migrants who have moved to Amarapura to find work.

“Now in this ward, there are lots of migrant workers renting houses. When they commit crimes, or there are any crimes, they can only give their current address. Our ward is our area and that gives it a bad name. Where they come from, I don't know. I want the ward administrator to find out where they have come from.” – Female, Bamar Buddhist, weaver, Amarapura, *pre*

There seems to be some connection between land, tensions about internal migrants, and religious conflict in Amarapura. For example, we heard specific cases of Muslims

not being allowed to buy or sell land. We also heard that there was a link between the land seizures at Kyauk Sein Pagoda and Muslims, although we were unable to establish exactly what this link was:

“With the Kyauk Sein pagoda construction ... there are lots of Muslims... there are Buddhist villages are wrapped around them... it's encircled. There, problems happen a lot.” – Youth activist, Mandalay, *pre*

6.2.2.3 Religious conflict in Amarapura

The outbreak of violence in Mandalay in 2014 did not spread to Amarapura, and we were told by a number of Bamar Buddhists that the situation was peaceful:

“I don't hear [any rumors] about religion. It's peaceful. In Amarapura nothing's happening.” – Male, Buddhist Bamar, painting workshop/parahitta volunteer, *post*

However, we found many instances of Muslim-Buddhist tensions, heightened Muslim fear and memory of violence, MaBaTha activities directed against Muslims, and a long history of anti-Muslim discrimination on the part of the government. And there are documented incidents of anti-Muslim violence in Amarapura: two mosques were reportedly destroyed in Amarapura during the outbreaks of anti-Muslim violence that occurred across the country in 1997, following a case of alleged sexual harassment of a Buddhist woman by a Muslim man.⁹⁶

Relations between the Muslim and Buddhist communities in Amarapura were reported to be minimal, and both groups seem to avoid each other:⁹⁷

“The situation in our township is that we don't mix with people from the kalar⁹⁸ side. People care for their own people.” – Male, NLD party member and motorcycle taxi driver, *post*.

For example, monks apparently don't go through Muslim villages when they are collecting alms, but around them. How this separation/tension plays out in different villages is captured well by this quote:

⁹⁶ Images Asia, “Report on the situation for Muslims in Burma”, 1997

⁹⁷ The one Christian we spoke to said that there weren't great relations between any people of different religions in Amarapura, not just Muslims and Buddhists.

⁹⁸ The word ‘kalar’, which originally meant ‘foreigner’ of any description, has in recent years become a specific term to describe Muslims. It has derogatory undertones, but is of such common usage that Burmese Muslims also refer to themselves using the term.

“Kalars who come from Sar Kyin Wa village are clever. They also offer food to the monks. If they are going to destroy the mosque, they let them. And so the monks don't destroy the mosque any more.⁹⁹ They get on with the monks. But in Bone Oh, they try to convert people. They didn't give monks permission to destroy the mosque. The monks forcibly destroyed the mosque. I think that was 7 years ago. Also, Kyee Myin Daing, U Yin Village, near Kyauk Sein pagoda there's a kalar village. The government is doing a market. They want to move the jade market here. I haven't heard about any conflict in that area.”
– Male, 35+ Senior NLD party member, *post*

Many of our interviewees – both Muslim and Buddhist – talked about Bone Oh village as a site for potential or actual conflict. However, it was not possible to establish the exact dynamics of this – was it the large concentration of Muslims in one place, or the particular behavior of these Muslims (if they were perceived as more radical), or the fact they are the main butchers and meat sellers for Amarapura?

People told us they were concerned about Muslims moving into non-Muslim villages and upsetting a delicate demographic and social balance – and potentially also contributing to the general concerns about influxes of ‘outsiders’ (see land analysis, above). Some villages reportedly will not accept Muslims at all:

“They come in groups to Amarapura, I heard. From this corner near my house, to the corner of Sa Kyin Wa, kalars are spreading. Bamars go to their shops and throw stones, I heard.” – Female, laborer, Bamar Buddhist, *post*

“There are more people moving here of a different religion. Most Buddhists don't really like this. It's been about 2 years that people of a different religion have started moving here and renting houses here. Buying plots of land [..] So now in the ward there are 4 or 5 houses of a different religion. Close to here, some wards don't allow people of a different religion to move in at all.”
Male, 35+, Bamar Buddhist, teashop owner, *post*

People are also suspicious of Muslims teaching Arabic, which they see as an impending sign of Muslim domination, and preaching in villages (which Muslims are apparently forbidden to do, see below):

“We are now encountering a situation in which religion is (again) spreading. It's worrying. The way they are living and their behavior is worrying. They are recruiting/proselytizing for their religion. They know how to successfully do this. In this ward there are children of marriageable age. The mother is Buddhist, father is Muslim. Now, they are very close with them (the people

⁹⁹ We heard a version of this story from the monk himself, who said that Muslims of an unidentified village gave the key to their mosque, when they feared it was going to be destroyed during the Mandalay violence in 2014, and it wasn't destroyed.

who are moving in here). They teach the Kalar religion from there.” – Male, 35+, Bamar Buddhist, teashop owner, *post*

One Muslim CSO activist whom we spoke to suggested that this concern was related to an increase in India-funded Sunni schools, which preach a conservative form of Islam. However, further research is required to properly understand this dynamic.

Both Muslims and Buddhists fear an outbreak of religious conflict, but the two Muslims we spoke to feel particularly vulnerable. One spoke in detail about the history of violence and discrimination against Muslims both around Amarapura and Mandalay, and more broadly across the country; another described how her family reacted after the violence in Mandalay in 2014:

“After sunset, no one left their house, we closed our doors, we couldn't sleep at home, we sat and had the light on, and talked. We didn't dare to sleep, because we were so frightened” – female, U35, Muslim, activist/laborer, *post*

In addition, groups of armed Muslim men reportedly stood watch in some villages when they heard rumors that the villages were to be attacked.

Rumors about violence means that people feel a constant low level of threat – but they may also feel that they need this information for their own safety, which is why these rumors get shared (this dynamic is discussed further below, in section 6.3). One Muslim interviewee told us that women often brought back what he referred to as ‘news’ (not rumors) to the villages about the kind of threats that Muslims face:

“[I get news from] women (who are coming back from the main market in Mandalay) and from business people. For example, monks are coming and will destroy the mosque, that kind of thing, women bring this back when they go into the villages” – Male, Muslim, 35+, farmer/seller, *post*

On the Buddhist side, similar kinds of rumors of Muslim violence foster a fear of Muslim threat:

“About 2 years ago, we heard that communal violence between Buddhist and Muslim will occur in Amarapura and 144 [a curfew order] was announced. We heard that Muslims would wash their feet with the blood of monks at the mosque. People were so worried about that rumor” – Female, Bamar Buddhist, weaver, *post*

We received conflicting messages about the role and strength of MaBaTha in Amarapura. MaBaTha has clearly acted as a spoiler of peace in some instances. It

seems that MaBaTha have been active in preventing Muslims from buying land,¹⁰⁰ and that Muslims feel unable to enter or pass through certain MaBaTha villages. MaBaTha monks may also have been involved in the construction of a monastery in Kyimyindaing, a mixed Buddhist-Muslim village, directly next to a Sunni mosque, which seems to have caused some tensions. MaBaTha were also involved in a campaign against the participation of non-MaBaTha monks in an annual Muslim celebration, to which these non-MaBaTha monks are invited every year.

MaBaTha was also reportedly involved in spreading pamphlets before the election, which said that the NLD was a Muslim party ('MuDaung - မွတ်ဒေါင်း'). However, many people reported that in the lead-up to the elections and subsequently, MaBaTha's power has waned, perhaps because they were felt to have become too involved in political activities. Online hate speech monitors have also noted a drop in online MaBaTha activity during this period.¹⁰¹ As an indicator of this waning power, we were told that many monks have reportedly left MaBaTha:

"At the start, a lot of monks accepted MaBaTha and became members. Later, MaBaTha's progress got under way and they didn't like their activities. Lots of monks left MaBaTha because they didn't like them" – Male, 35+, monk, *post*.

Other interviewees said that MaBaTha was still strong in some villages.¹⁰² There were mixed feelings about the Protection of Race and Religion Laws that were passed in 2015, and which MaBaTha was actively involved in promoting. Some people thought these laws were appropriate and necessary for protecting race and religion, even if they did not think that MaBaTha should be involved in political activities. Others were less sure. One woman said:

"I don't like what MaBaTha says. They want to control the kind of boyfriend I have." – Female, U35, laborer, *post*

There seems to be a history of anti-Muslim discrimination on the part of the government in Amarapura (as elsewhere in the country¹⁰³), although we were unable

¹⁰⁰ According to one of our interviewees, a Muslim from Bone Oh bought land in Pan Beh in 2014, only for MaBaTha to call a public meeting in Pan Beh, at which anyone who supported the sale of the land to the Muslim was told to publicly put their name to a piece of paper saying so. The Muslim has been unable to realize his purchase, and has also been unable to reclaim the money that he paid.

¹⁰¹ Centre for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH) 2015, *Situation Update Number 9*, as of 4 December 2015.

¹⁰² In its latest report, on the 2015 elections, the International Crisis Group argues that 'it is premature to conclude that MaBaTha is significantly diminished as a religious or political force. It remains committed to its broader agenda, which was never simply about elections. All indications are that it will continue to pursue it vigorously'. International Crisis Group (2015), *The Myanmar Elections: Results and Implications*.

¹⁰³ Some acts of state discrimination against Muslims and other Burmese of Indian origin are documented in the Search for Common Ground (2015) Conflict Analysis.

to verify what we were told. According to one inhabitant of Bone Oh, the last time that Muslims in his village were given permission by the government to renovate or rebuild one of their eight mosques was in 1982. Another Muslim interviewee told us that the USDP MP Aung Thaung promised Bone Oh before the 2010 election that they would be given permission to build a new mosque if they voted for the USDP, only for him to renege on that promise after the election.

One interviewee remembered that Muslims had to pay 20 lakhs protection money annually to the military government to prevent the destruction of their mosques, although this seems to have ceased. There is also an ongoing dispute about land ownership and a mixed/Muslim cemetery very close to the historic center of Amarapura and U Bein's Bridge. There are two main elements to this: (1) part of the cemetery has been reclaimed by the government because a pagoda from the Thai era was discovered there; whilst (2) Muslims have been given permission at Naypyitaw level to rebuild a shrine of an important Muslim leader that was destroyed at some point around 2010-12. However, they are still being prevented from completing construction of the new shrine by the local authorities, "so they could profit from it, of course" (Male, 35+, Muslim, farmer/seller, *post*). However, whether the government is consistently a spoiler of peace is unclear. We did hear of one incident where the ward official had allowed Muslims fleeing the violence in Meikthila to be put on the household guest lists in one Muslim village, thereby suggesting that officials could be helpful at times, albeit within the constraints of the government's household list and guest registration system.¹⁰⁴

6.2.2.4 Forces for peace

There are forces for peace in Amarapura. Most notably, there are relations between moderate Muslim and non-MaBaTha Buddhist religious leaders, and these leaders participate in each other's interfaith events. Some well-respected, moderate monks are keen to maintain peace and focus on their religious practice. And many individuals indicated that even if they did not like Muslims, that didn't mean they were likely to instigate violence against them:

"Our town is small. Everyone knows everyone. If something surprising happened. The news would get out. Also for religious matters, everyone knows each other, if you don't like someone you don't say, if they don't like you they don't say but keep it quiet. We know the other religions. We try to avoid spreading hate." – Male, 35+. Weaving workshop owner, Buddhist Bamar, *post*

In addition, people remember the conflict in Mandalay, and the impact that it had on them economically, regardless of their religion, and are worried about an outbreak either in Mandalay, Amarapura, or elsewhere that could affect them.

¹⁰⁴ Under the 2012 Ward or Village Tract Administration Law, which replaced a 1907 law (but confirmed existing household and guest registration practices under that law), people are required to inform their ward/village tract administrator of both the arrival and departure of all guests who stay in their house overnight. All regular inhabitants of a household must be registered at the ward/village tract office on a household registration form. See Fortify Rights (2015), *Midnight Intrusions: Ending Guest Registration and Household Intrusions in Myanmar*.

“During the previous religious conflict, we had to stop selling/business activities. Here, the business of weavers, flower sellers really struggled.” – Female, Bamar Buddhist, weaver, *pre*

“If they hear about rumors/conflict, employers have fewer orders; they can’t employ people. If it happens in Yangon, people from Yangon don’t order things any more. Here too, so business drops. I am worried about conflict happening.” – Female, Bamar Buddhist, weaver, *pre*

This is a potential force for peace: M.MAS research has found evidence that people have used reminders of the negative economic impact of outbreaks of violence as a means to dissuade people from engaging in acts that could again fuel conflict.¹⁰⁵

Finally, we heard of a few instances where conflict had not happened, despite the potential that it could. In Kyan Tan recently, there was an incident of food poisoning at a Buddhist donation ceremony. Muslims are the only butchers in Amarapura, and they could have easily been blamed for providing bad meat, but they were not:

“When the donation [food poisoning] issue happened in Kyan Tan, it wasn’t because of the quality of the chicken [that the Muslims had sold] but because of the way they [the Buddhists] cooked it. It was because of the way they cooked the chicken in dirty water” – female, laborer, Buddhist Bamar, *post*

In October 2015, just before the research, a rape case occurred in Amarapura and nationalist groups started spreading rumors about the case. The police responded quickly with a statement that provided details on the perpetrator, and this reportedly stemmed the rumors.¹⁰⁶ Nobody we spoke to in Amarapura mentioned this incident.

6.2.2.5 Factors that contribute to conflict

There is clearly a link between times when tensions are heightened in Amarapura and when violence occurs in other parts of the country, for example in Mandalay, Myinkyan and Meikhtila. This has not led to violence, but it has led to increased fears on both sides – Muslim and Buddhist – of violence, which can actually increase the risk of violence if it provokes a defensive response.

Rumors have also reinforced general underlying feelings of hatred and fear of Muslims on the part of Buddhists. There has been a definite rise in hate speech, and in the activities of the 969 and MaBaTha movements, especially since 2012 and in lead-up to 2015 election. As the quotes above show, many Buddhists seem genuinely concerned about threats to their religion, and are particularly alarmed by

¹⁰⁵ M.MAS project, success stories, forthcoming (2016). The CPCS report also notes the negative economic impact of conflict on communities, CPCS (2015), *This Is Not Who We Are*.

¹⁰⁶ CDNH (2015), Situation Update No 6 and Situation Update No. 5.

more extremist brands of Islam both in and outside Myanmar. This adds to a sense that the two sides are growing apart, even if previous outbreaks of conflict suggest that there was never a time of perfect harmony in Amarapura.

The role of the government and the USDP in discriminating against Muslims has the potential to contribute to conflict, and to legitimate Buddhist perceptions of Muslims as not deserving of the same rights as Buddhists. And there are potentially other social and economic factors at work in contributing to distrust of Muslims on the part of the Buddhist population, for example the links with tensions over land ownership and squatting, and the fears about increasing numbers of migrant workers.

6.2.3 Conflict Analysis – Lashio

6.2.3.1 Background

Lashio is the last major town on the main road from Mandalay to China, in Northern Shan State. It has a diverse population of ethnic Shan (both Buddhists and Muslims), Ta'ang Buddhists, Kachin (predominantly Christians), Gurkha (originally from Nepal), Panthay Muslim, ethnic Chinese and more recent arrivals from China, Muslims of Burmese and Indian origin, and Bamar Buddhists. Originally the Muslim population was predominantly Panthays and some Shan Muslims, but this has changed as more migrants have moved to Lashio from other parts of the country.¹⁰⁷

Lashio has a large population of migrant workers who come from central Myanmar and other parts of Shan state, and currently a large population of people displaced by fighting around Lashio between various ethnic armed groups and the Tatmadaw. Many of these people are sheltered at Mansu Pagoda, on the northern side of Ward 7, which also sheltered Muslims during the outbreak of violence in 2013. Lashio also has a large army population, as it is the center of the North-East Command, the Tatmadaw's main base in Northern Shan. An army base and a MaBaTha monastery border Ward 7, the ward that reportedly has the highest Muslim population. Wards 5, 7, and 8 are contiguous and reach from the center of the town to its eastern borders.

Lashio is a trading hub for Chinese goods, and very dependent on trade with China, which has recently been interrupted by fighting between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups in Northern Shan State. There is a large mosque in the center of town, next to the main night market. This mosque was burnt down in the outbreak of Buddhist-Muslim violence that occurred in 2013, but has since been repaired. The USDP's Dr Sai Mauk Kham, the current vice president, won the Lashio seat in the Pyithu Hluttaw.

In Lashio, from asking people about what kind of news they share, and what they were worried about, we established that people's main concerns are:

- The economy, particularly falling salaries and rising prices:

¹⁰⁷ International Crisis Group, *Myanmar: the Dark Side of the Transition*, 2013

“We mostly talk about economic issues. We're not as interested in political news as in regional/local news. We're more interested in local news” – Male, FGD participant, group of bus drivers and motorcycle taxi drivers, Lashio, *post*

- Political instability. People have been worried about the risk of instability during the transition. In the lead-up to the election, people were particularly concerned that political instability would result in ethnic conflict.

“Now, in my neighborhood, people are talking about the election. They are talking about the Muse road being blocked. I'm worried about what is going to happen at voting time. I also speak about the fighting.” – Male Bamar Buddhist, 35+, Lashio, *pre*

- Drug-related crime and drug-abuse. Many people told us about drug dealers preying on children outside schools, and about people who had taken drugs getting into motorbike accidents, or stealing to pay for their habit. They also connect this to a rise in criminal gangs, and to an increase in missing children and people trafficking.
- The fighting between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups in Northern Shan State. People are concerned not only because of the negative effects on people in conflict-affected areas, but also about how the fighting affects the economy. Fighting prevents or limits travel to insecure areas and raises the price of goods from China. In addition, the influx of IDPs to Lashio has is perceived to have contributed to the number of people coming to Lashio looking for work, and hence to a reduction in the daily wage.

“The bad news I hear is about the fighting, bombs going off, people say that the Kokang¹⁰⁸ are going to come and seize Lashio. The fighting is happening quite close.” – female, Muslim, businesswoman, Lashio, *post*

“I've been hearing really bad news about the fighting in Northern Shan. The IDPs are in real need of help. People from those areas are in real difficulty.” – Male, 35+ Shan, social worker, Lashio, *post*

“When will the Kokang fighting finish, when we will be able to go to work, that's what we talk about” – Male, Bamar, laborer Lashio, *pre*

- Natural disasters, particularly as a result of environmental destruction.
- Religious conflict (explored further below).
- Chinese and local conflict (explored further below).
- Land issues, particularly outside Lashio.¹⁰⁹

6.2.3.2 Chinese and local conflict in Lashio

China has had a long historical involvement in Shan state, and there are many ethnic Chinese living in Lashio who have migrated over the preceding decades and centuries. During the Socialist era, anti-Chinese sentiment was stoked by the government following tensions between Burma and China, and in 1967 there were intense anti-Chinese riots in Rangoon. It was not possible to find out how much of an

¹⁰⁸ ethnic Han Chinese group in Myanmar

¹⁰⁹ This is discussed in the DCA Consortia Shan State Rapid Conflict Assessment, 2014. The DCA conflict assessment uncovered ‘an ethno-centric political conflict between Burmese and other Shan ethnic groups’. This did not come out so strongly for us in Lashio, although we were not asking direct questions about it.

impact this had on local-Chinese relations in Lashio.¹¹⁰ The Chinese are currently seen by the rest of the population as encroaching on both legitimate and illegitimate business activity in Shan state as a whole, including in Lashio.¹¹¹ The Chinese government's involvement in the Tatmadaw's conflict with ethnic armed groups in Shan state has also contributed to tensions.¹¹²

Relations between the Chinese inhabitants of Lashio and the rest of the population, especially the Bamar, seem poor. The fact that we were only able to interview one member of the Chinese community in Lashio means that we are not in a position to present a robust analysis of both sides of the conflict. However, this conflict is nonetheless worth exploring because of the high levels of rumors and hate speech we found in relation to the Chinese, who seem to be blamed for most of the social ills in Lashio. Chinese are held responsible by many people for the high levels of crime in Lashio, drug trafficking and drug abuse, arms trafficking, and money laundering. This can be seen from the following quote:

“Now crime is really increasing. If you are using your phone, they snatch it. [...] Near the golf course they rob people. There are lots of Chinese in that area. You shouldn't go out at night, one Kachin was attacked” – FGD participant, Bamar Buddhist, Laborer, Lashio, *pre*

There is also suspicion that a large number of Chinese have migrated from China in recent years for work, and that these people have been able to pay to illegally obtain NRC cards.

“Ethnicity was given to the Kokang. But Chinese people don't have a door [that they have to open to enter Myanmar], they can come and go as they like. Ethnic people all sell their houses and their land [to the Chinese] and come to settle on the outskirts of the city” – Female, Buddhist, Lashio, *post*

And there is a perception that Chinese have economic control over Lashio, yet give jobs to migrants from Upper Myanmar, rather than local people:

¹¹⁰ The 1967 riots seem to have been concentrated on Rangoon, and prompted conscious assimilation strategies of the Chinese population in Myanmar, although it is not known how much of an effect the riots would have had in places as far removed from the capital as Lashio. Hongwei Fan (2012), “The 1967 anti-Chinese riots in Burma and Sino–Burmese relations,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 43, pp 234-256. There are also similarities between the patterns by which the riots broke out, and the patterns in subsequent outbreaks of inter-communal violence, e.g. an inciting event which is stimulated by anti-Chinese hate speech, and the reported role of government forces in perpetrating the violence.

¹¹¹ See also the DCA Consortia Shan State Rapid Conflict Assessment, 2014: ‘Militia groups and Chinese and Thai business people and their business interests with the Government of the Union of Myanmar are seen as root causes of conflict that ultimately lead to further divisions between the rich and the poor.’ Wider anti-Chinese sentiment was not explored in the DCA conflict assessment.

¹¹² See *inter alia* Transnational Institute (2015), *Military Confrontation or Political Dialogue: Consequences of the Kokang Crisis for Peace and Democracy in Myanmar*, Myanmar Policy Briefing No. 15.

“Lots more migrants are coming, they come to get work from the Chinese. They don't want to accept those who come from this area [Lashio]. They give people from Upper Myanmar about 26,000 MMK/month, to do whatever work. Even a whole village has moved here.” – Male, Buddhist, U35, Student, Lashio, *pre*

Tensions are sufficiently high that Chinese New Year celebrations were toned down in 2014, and remained tense in 2015. In another suggestion of Chinese feelings of vulnerability, one interviewee told us that Chinese businessmen were donating to MaBaTha, because they were worried about being the target of MaBaTha, after the Muslims.¹¹³ In general, there seems to be a lack of integration or mixing between the two communities:

“From since I started school, in school we divided into two groups. Chinese students never mixed with Bamar students. And Bamar students never mixed with Chinese students. [...] In lots of Chinese minds, they really don't like Myanmar citizens. Chinese hate the Bamar ethnicity. In Chinese communities, Bamar as known as ‘ထုံလောက်မြတ်’ - stupid enough to profit from” – Male, U35, Chinese, CSO activist, *pre*

On the other hand, some of our interviewees felt that anti-Chinese sentiments were still less strong than anti-Muslim sentiments:

“Religious differences, ethnicity differences - things are fine with the Chinese. Things are not fine with the Muslims.” – Female, U35, Bamar Buddhist, sales staff, Ward 7

6.2.3.3 Religious conflict in Lashio

In May 2013 anti-Muslim violence broke out in Lashio. A mob of about 200-300 people killed one person, looted and destroyed Muslims homes, shops and property, and burnt down a large orphanage. This violence was triggered by a Muslim man, who is reportedly mentally ill, pouring petrol on a Buddhist woman and setting her alight. She suffered serious injuries but survived. The response of the authorities was not immediate, and when the soldiers did come out on the streets to stop the violence, they reportedly took advantage of the violence in order to profit.

There was some surprise that Lashio was the site of an outbreak of inter-communal violence at the time it occurred, given that the Muslims of Lashio are mostly Shan, not as identifiable as the Indian origin Muslims of Meiktila and other parts of central

¹¹³ A MaBaTha monk was quoted as saying “Muslims are our first concerns. Chinese are second. In Lashio, Chinese make up 50pc of the population, which is why we need to be concerned,” in Fiona MacGregor, Myanmar Times, 30 September 2015, MaBaTha Branch steps up activities in Shan State, <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/16745-ma-ba-tha-branch-steps-up-activities-in-shan-state.html>

Myanmar, and given the other potentially more obvious sources of conflict in Lashio (Chinese and ethnic).¹¹⁴ We were not able to explore this.

A number of people we spoke to said that the violence had been organized from outside Lashio, citing the fact that the people perpetrating the violence had covered their faces and that they did not know the streets.¹¹⁵ However, others told us that local people, especially young men, were involved.¹¹⁶ It is not clear who instigated the violence. We also heard a story told by one inhabitant of Ward 7, the most affected area, that the ward administrator had called Muslim people in the area before the conflict occurred, in order to inform them that it would happen, and to warn them to leave their houses. This is taken as evidence of government involvement in the violence/conflict, as it suggested that the ward administrator had been informed by his superiors. And of course, MaBaTha has been very active in Lashio. But these accounts remain unverified.

We got mixed reports as to whether the violence in 2013 affected the economy. Some people told us that it had:

“After the violence, the market prices rose. That was the consequence of the religious violence.” Male, 35+, Shan, social worker, Ward 7, *post*

“The business went dead [after the violence]. For me, I did not earn income during that period. The business income cannot be estimated. Lashio became like a ghost town. People were not seen outside.” Male, 35+, Shan games shop owner, *post*

But this was not true across the entire city. The central market, next to the main mosque, which was partially destroyed, was closed and people didn't dare go out, but it reportedly had a positive effect on more local markets. And one group of interviewees (whom we suspect had received MaBaTha training because of their unusually neutral and careful responses to our questions) were adamant that it had had no effect at all:

Q. “When the conflict happened, did the [market] price rise?” A. “No, it didn't.”
– Bamar Buddhist laborers, FGD participants, *pre*

Since the violence in 2013, the situation has remained tense between Muslims and Buddhists, with very little mixing between the two groups. Muslims and Buddhists no

¹¹⁴ ICG (2013), *The Dark Side of the Transition*.

¹¹⁵ That ‘outsiders’ were responsible for the violence was also alleged in CPCS (2015), *This Is Not Who We Are*.

¹¹⁶ The involvement of local people was also found by ICG (2013), *The Dark Side of the Transition*.

longer buy from each other's shops,¹¹⁷ and also no longer participate in each other's religious festivals.

"In Lashio society, after the conflict, there was less harmony and we are becoming more divided. The harmony is becoming destroyed" – Female, 35+, Muslim, businesswoman, *post*

F1, M2 – "I don't want to mix with Muslims any more. I don't buy at Muslim shops any more." F4 – "At school too, there isn't much mixing." – Shan Buddhists, Ward 7, *post*

We found the underlying levels of hostility towards Muslims to be very high on the part of Buddhists of different ethnicities. There are a number of rumors circulating about the threats posed by Muslims. We were told that Muslim shops poison the food they sell, and that Muslims were going to throw arsenic instead of water at Thingyan, that Muslims were storing arms in the mosque, and that if the NLD were to win, there would be a Muslim president, and the Muslims would take over. People told us that:

"Now that Daw ASSK has won, kalars are coming back into prominence. Don't buy land or gold, you have to make sure that money is the main thing you save. Seriously, in the ward, kalars are raising their heads again." – LGBT, Ward 7, *post*

"I only arrived in Lashio in about 2013. If my Ta'ang, Shan, Bamar friends talk about Muslims, they speak really hatefully" – Male, Ta'ang Buddhist news editor, *pre*

There seems to be particular hostility towards Muslims outsiders, in line with the general hostility towards all migrants to Lashio:

"The Muslims that come from Central Myanmar and rent houses here are causing the problem" – Female participant in a mixed Kachin and Shan focus group, *post*

In addition, we were told that before the violence, the wealthy Muslims heard that it would happen, and bought plane and bus tickets to leave, and some left. It is hard to tell why this rumor has such currency. It seemed to illustrate Buddhist concerns about Muslim threat, and disbelief that the violence could have been the perpetrated by Buddhists (rather than the perceived enemy, Muslims).¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ This economic segregation as a result of the conflict was also found by CPCS in their listening interviews with people in Lashio. CPCS (2015), *This Is Not Who We Are*

¹¹⁸ This rumor could function in the same way as the rumors that the Israeli Secret Service alerted Jews to avoid going to work in the World Trade Center when it was destroyed in September 2001. See DiFonzo and Bordia, 2007.

The main spoiler of peace, MaBaTha, continued to be active in Lashio in the lead-up to the elections,¹¹⁹ and held a big victory event there following the passing of the Protection of Race and Religion Laws. As noted above, some of our interviewees seemed to have participated in MaBaTha social media training; this was discernable by the very muted responses they gave to questions about Muslim-Buddhist relations after the outbreak of violence, and to questions about rumors. As in Amarapura, MaBaTha seems to have reduced their activities following the election, but this may only be temporary.

The role of the government in this conflict is unclear. As in Amarapura, there is some level of anti-Muslim discrimination. For example, obtaining an NRC card is reportedly harder for Muslims than for Chinese. One woman related her family's experience:

"I have a NRC card. All of my relatives have the same card. But my little brother has a three-folded-card [a card that is folded into three pages]. [...] Because we're not ethnic people, it's not easy. The process is like that: first, we had to pay MMK 50,000 for a three-folded-card then apply for an NRC card. There are also Chinese. They don't speak Burmese. But they have NRC cards." – Female, 35+, Muslim, businesswoman, Lashio

In addition, the fate of the Muslim orphanage that was destroyed by fire in the 2013 outbreak of violence remains unclear. Under Myanmar law properties destroyed by fire can be reclaimed by the government. Muslims have not been able to re-build the orphanage, but the government has not repurposed the land. The damaged building, which is on one of Lashio's main streets, serves as a visible reminder of the conflict.

In Lashio, the religious conflict intersects with the ethnic conflict and Chinese conflict. As described above, Chinese business people reportedly donate to MaBaTha because they are scared they will be MaBaTha's next target. But the ethnic groups in Shan state are also concerned that the movement to Protect Race and Religion is aimed at fostering disunity in Shan state, and particularly at weakening ethnic unity against the Tatmadaw. They thus see the increase in Buddhist nationalism through a lens of Bamar-ethnic conflict.¹²⁰ This tension has also affected relations across all religions, with Hindus and Christians also feeling vulnerable.

¹¹⁹ Fiona MacGregor, "MaBaTha Branch steps up activities in Shan State", *Myanmar Times*, 30 September 2015.

¹²⁰ This was also identified as an issue in the DCA Consortia (2014) Shan State rapid conflict assessment.

6.2.3.4 Forces for peace

It was challenging to identify sources of peace. Aside from some examples of people helping each other during the violence – the Mansu pagoda providing shelter to Muslims fleeing the violence, and the ward administrator who tipped off the Muslims in his ward that the violence was about to happen – we did not hear much that suggested that people were able to find ways of bridging the divide between the two religions.

One young Muslim woman told us about her attempts to promote interfaith relations, and how challenging it had been: the government hadn't allowed their interfaith group to register, and it had been difficult to bring people together. We were also told that five monks from Mandalay who are active in promoting interfaith relations had come to Lashio to try to help prevent the violence in 2013, but had been unable to do so.

Even though CSOs have organized some interfaith activities, the diversity of Lashio seems to militate against bringing people together, and people talked about a very divided civil society. Different identity groups are working to support their own identity group, be that Ta'ang, Shan, Kokang, LGBT, and so on, and are busy addressing the conflicts that these groups face, rather than the issue of religious conflict. In particular, people seem more immediately concerned by the fighting between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups that is taking place outside Lashio, than by the possibility of future outbreaks of Muslim-Buddhist violence. This may also militate against people feeling especially motivated to address Muslim-Buddhist tensions.

6.2.3.5 Factors that contribute to the conflict

The level of hate speech has risen in the years of the transition government (since 2011), and this provides a potential background reason for why some people thought Muslim homes and property were a legitimate target for attack, as well as contributing to general Buddhist distrust of Muslims. One Muslim dated the start of these problems to 2012:

“[In] 2012 Daw Suu came to Lashio. She went around the whole town. From this time onwards, they started to broadcast hate speech against kalars who were in the audience and discriminate against them.” – Muslim participant, FGD, Lashio, *pre*

There is clearly a level of distrust of outsiders who come to Lashio to work, and this distrust may be particularly intense for Muslims who move to Lashio, as it plays into both economic fears and fears about threats to Buddhism. Overall, people in Lashio suffer from high levels of lack of trust and feelings of insecurity that are exacerbated by the multiple conflicts and crime that they experience, or hear about, in their daily lives. This may intensify feelings of distrust towards people they perceive as different, or outsiders, including Muslims. Their feelings of economic insecurity, in particular, may play into this dynamic.

6.2.4 Religious conflict analyses – summary table

	Amarapura	Lashio
Manifestations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing background hate speech against Muslims • Distrust on both sides and increasing segregation • MaBaTha anti-Muslim activities, including in relation to land purchasing • Government discrimination against Muslims 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outbreak of violence in 2013 • Ongoing background hate speech against Muslims • Distrust on both sides and increasing segregation • Government discrimination against Muslims • Spillover into ethnic conflict
Actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MaBaTha and other religious nationalist actors – spoilers • Well-respected moderate religious leaders on both sides – forces for peace • Government authorities – role unclear, some discrimination against Muslims • General Buddhist population – distrust of Muslims, but role unknown • General Muslim population – fear of violence/conflict, but role unknown • Muslims moving into Amarapura – perceived as more problematic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MaBaTha and other religious nationalist actors – spoilers • Moderate religious leaders on both sides • Government authorities – role unknown • Instigators of violence/conflict – identity unknown • General Buddhist population (including different ethnic groups) – distrust of Muslims, but role unknown • General Muslim population – role unknown • Muslims moving into Lashio – perceived as more problematic • Ethnic groups of different religions – worried about spillover effect onto their conflicts
Forces for peace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing inter-faith efforts of moderate religious leaders on both sides • Fear of the economic impact of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A few examples of people helping each other during the violence, including the Mansu pagoda seyadaw

	conflict/violence on both sides	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some interfaith initiatives, although these have struggled
Contributing factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase in hate speech since 2011/12 and Buddhist concerns about Muslim threat The role of anti-Muslim violence in other parts of the country Distrust of outsiders who come to Amarapura to work, including Muslims Social and economic factors, e.g. tensions over land ownership and squatting, and fears about increasing numbers of migrant workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase in hate speech since 2011/12 and Buddhist concerns re Muslim threat Distrust of outsiders who come to Lashio to work, including Muslims Feelings of insecurity on the part of the population

6.3 HOW RUMORS CONTRIBUTE TO RELIGIOUS CONFLICT/VIOLENCE IN LASHIO AND AMARAPURA

People share news – and rumors – about information that they perceive to affect them. The prevalence in Lashio and Amarapura of rumors about Muslims, and about Muslim-Buddhist conflict, is an indicator that people are concerned about this conflict. Thus, rumors serve to manifest tensions. Unfortunately, this also has the potential to contribute to conflict and violence in the ways described below.

6.3.1 *Vulnerability to rumors in insecure situations*

People may be more likely to believe information if they perceive a threat to their existence, whether or not the information is plausible. One monk we interviewed explained that he thought a rumor he had heard was implausible – but that he was nonetheless worried that it might come true, because he was so worried about violence:

“I am worried about some kind of violence starting. The other day, in Kachin state, the news was that ISIS was secretly entering, and doing training with the Kachin side, although I'm not sure that I directly believe it. It's not possible, so I don't believe it. But really, I'm a little worried that that kind of thing might happen. A while ago I separately heard that the KIA was connecting with them.” – Male, 35+, Monk, Amarapura, *post*

The fact that people feel insecure in Lashio and Amarapura – whether as a result of their fears about crime, the economy, ethnic conflict, religious conflict, or political instability – means that they are more susceptible to sharing and believing rumors, and responding to these rumors, whether or not they are true. This potentially has a direct impact on the way that rumors relate to conflict and violence, as it means that:

- a. People are less likely to check rumors that they fear might affect their security and therefore they might act on a perceived threat and escalate a situation. This is evident in the behavior of the Muslim community in Amarapura, who sent armed groups of men out on the street to keep watch when they have heard rumors that Buddhists are coming to attack them – thereby increasing the likelihood that they would be seen as potential aggressors themselves.
- b. People are more susceptible to manipulated information spread as rumors, with the intent of causing conflict or violence. We were told of some specific instances where crimes had been falsely attributed to Muslims, perhaps with malicious intent. For example, one interviewee in Lashio told us of a rape case which was blamed on Muslims, but that “Actually, [the woman] was killed and robbed by her neighbor because he wanted money. Here, people spread rumors because they want to cause trouble.” – Male, LGBT, CSO activist, Lashio

In Lashio, people told us that very often, rumors came true – which might suggest that overall they are likely to take rumors seriously. One man described a situation in which this had happened, in relation to ethnically Chinese IDPs with Myanmar citizenship who had come to Lashio to escape the fighting in Kokang:

In Lashio, people told us that very often, rumors came true – which might suggest that overall they are likely to take rumors seriously

“Within some of the rumors there is also truth. For example, amongst the IDPs from Laukaing there are also bombers, people who are armed, I heard this news. Now about three months ago, they were checking the household guest list, and amongst the Chinese IDPs there were armed people and criminals. So, some rumors can come true.” – Male, 35+, Pagoda trustee, Lashio, *pre*

Yet people can – and do – choose to ignore rumors. In both Lashio and Amarapura, people reported hearing lots of rumors about how Muslims would take over the country if the NLD won, for example:

“If Daw Suu wins, kalars will get strong and overtake the country, they say in the teashops (men); If Daw Suu wins Myanmar will get worse than before, they say in the market shops (women)” – Male, 35+, NLD senior party member

However, this did not prevent most of the population of Amarapura from voting for the NLD, whatever their reservations about Muslims. While the USDP candidates

won in Lashio, it was a close call, and it would be a mistake to attribute this victory to rumors about Muslims.¹²¹

6.3.2 Background levels of hatred and distrust of Muslims

In both Lashio and Amarapura, rumors contribute to the background level of hatred and distrust of Muslims on the part of the Buddhist population. We heard negative rumors about Muslims in both places. These rumors described the threat that Muslims pose to Myanmar as a country and Buddhism as its main religion, including the risk that an NLD victory would enable Muslims to take over, and that Muslims had a strategy of marrying women of different religions to spread their religion. The rumors spoke about these threats generally, but were also integrated with specific local context and knowledge. For example, in Amarapura people spoke about Muslims attempting to encroach on or proselytize in specific villages, and in Lashio people reported that Muslims were storing arms in the mosque.

This kind of background hatred and distrust may not in itself result in outbreaks of violence – indeed some of our interviewees in Amarapura pointed out that even if they didn't like Muslims, they had no interest in getting into open conflict with them. However it does mean that Buddhists and Muslims in these areas do not mix, and fosters an environment of suspicion and hostility, which creates an enabling environment for violence, and is one of the four factors (a hostile relationship, a response to 'trigger' events, a keenly felt justification for killing, and a sense of impunity on the part of the aggressors) that contributes to inter-communal violence.¹²²

General factors that trigger outbreaks of violence

- a hostile relationship
- a response to 'trigger' events,
- a keenly felt justification for killing,
- a sense of impunity on the part of the aggressors

Donald Horowitz, The Deadly Ethnic Riot (2001)

¹²¹ It is important not to read too much into this. As the ICG report cautions, 'voting for the NLD is not inconsistent with Buddhist nationalist sentiments'. ICG (2015), *The Myanmar Elections*. For a description of the voting results in Lashio, see Ye Mon, Anger As Advance Votes Push USDP to Lead in Lashio, 10 November, *Myanmar Times*, <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/17521-anger-as-advance-votes-push-usdp-to-lead-in-lashio.html>. Reports on the USDP victory in Meiktila, on the other hand, suggest that Muslim-Buddhist tensions did play a role there. Phyo Thiha Cho, "Meiktila: How the USDP Won in a Traumatized City", 24 November 2015, *Myanmar Now*, <http://www.irrawaddy.com/election/feature/meiktila>; Maung Zaw, "Communal Violence Haunts Meiktila Vote", 12 November 2015, *Myanmar Times*, <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/17584-communal-violence-haunts-meiktila-vote.html>

¹²² See Section 2.3.2 for a discussion of these factors.

6.3.3 Rumors as triggers?

Rumors alone are not sufficient to trigger violence. The 2013 outbreak of violence in Lashio was triggered by the (true) rumors of a crime committed by a Muslim man against a Buddhist woman. But we heard of many instances where rumors had not triggered violence, even despite people's efforts to the contrary:

“When the Mandalay conflict happened, then monks at my monastery got out on the street and were active, broadcasting rumors and such. It really had an affect on our monastery's reputation. From the back of motorcycles, they were encouraging people with false news” – Male, Monk, 35+, *post*

This is also true of other inter-communal conflicts: while rumors and hate speech against the Chinese in Lashio have contributed to an environment of suspicion and dislike, they have not triggered any active violence.

Other factors – which are sometimes harder to identify – contribute to the underlying conflict and outbreaks of violence. It is essential that these factors be understood if the root causes of conflict are to be addressed.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

This final section draws upon the research findings and analysis to provide recommendations for the CIM project, in terms of approaches and recommended actions. Many of these recommendations have broader applicability for peacebuilding, civil society actors and other stakeholders who are working on issues of rumors, manipulated information and inter-communal violence in Myanmar.

Key Recommendations

- Build on existing, local efforts and community structures
- Mobilize key community influencers
- Develop strategies to monitor informal communications
- Conduct further research
- Activities to bridge intra-faith and inter-ethnic divides
- Community education on rumor management.
- Support forces for peace and efforts to support community resilience.

Given the level of suspicion of many within the Buddhist population about international actors becoming involved in national issues, and particularly in issues related to religious conflict, international actors need to be very careful with the kind of support they provide. In addition, all activities should build on existing, local efforts and local civil society structures.¹²³

7.1 RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION

Many people in the target areas rely heavily on word-of-mouth as a source of information. This is one of the key ways in which rumors, false or otherwise, are transmitted. A number of organizations in Myanmar are conducting monitoring of online rumor transmission, but there has been less focus on how people share rumors offline.

As such, any communications strategy must rapidly employ strategies that allow people to reliably verify information they hear from informal sources, especially during times of heightened insecurity or tension.

Recommended actions:

Develop mechanisms to monitor informal information channels: *Keep a close eye on the ebb and flow of information through informal as well as formal channels through regular information sharing sessions with Key Community Influencers and others in the target areas, as well as closely monitoring Facebook, and other online information sharing tools.*

7.2 RECOGNIZE AND UNDERSTAND THE NUANCES IN EACH LOCAL CONTEXT

¹²³ Both of these points are also noted in Adapt and Mercy Corps (2014), Inter-communal Violence in Myanmar.

As the analysis shows, the contexts and the conflicts in Lashio and Amarapura are quite different, even if there are some similarities between the two. And while the research was able to identify factors that cause conflict and contribute to violence, the root causes of the conflicts have yet to be fully understood. Projects addressing inter-communal violence need to build upon local conflict analyses – and these conflict analyses need to be ongoing. While this research provides a solid basis, there is still much more to understand in Lashio and Amarapura about the conflict dynamics in these two areas that can help inform project interventions, for example:

- What is the relationship between the Sufis and Sunnis in Amarapura, and is there a difference in their experiences of Muslim-Buddhist relations? Similarly, what is the relationship between Shan, Panthay, Sufi, Sunni and Shia Muslims in Lashio, what are the intra-faith dynamics, and are Muslim-Buddhist relations between these different groups and Buddhists of different ethnicities (Shan, Bamar, etc.) different?
- What are the underlying causes of the conflict in Lashio and Amarapura? Are political, social and economic factors the main conflict drivers? Or is this genuinely a 'religious' conflict?
- What has been the history of the conflict over the last few decades? Is the conflict in Lashio relatively new, as some have suggested it might be? In Amarapura, how far back – beyond 1997 (the date of the last recorded outbreak of anti-Muslim violence) – does the conflict date?
- Who are the 'outsiders' whom some people say were the instigators of violence in Lashio, and is there a way to involve them in peacebuilding activities? Did some of the 'outsiders' who were involved in the Mandalay violence in 2014 come from Amarapura, and if so can they be involved in project activities? Are the outsiders people who have only recently moved to the area to seek work?
- Which types of people – if any – are most susceptible to hate speech and rumors? Are people in more rural parts of Amarapura less likely to follow the news, and more likely to ascribe to extremist views, and be more susceptible to rumors, than their peers in urban areas? Could this be true of poor, uneducated Bamar migrants in Lashio? Or are distinctions between urban/rural, rich/poor, educated/uneducated not relevant?
- Why do people in Amarapura and especially in Lashio feel so insecure, and so conscious of crime? Is it because crime rates are genuinely high, and because they do not believe that the police and legal authorities are capable of action to reduce crime rates and hold people accountable for crimes they commit? Or does it reflect wider feelings of political and economic insecurity?

Recommended action:

- **Continued research:** *The main activity needed to further explore these issues is further research, whether it be research studies or ongoing consultations and conversations carried out during the course of project implementation.*

7.3 MITIGATE THE BACKGROUND LEVELS OF ANTI-MUSLIM HATE SPEECH.

Hate speech creates an enabling environment for violence, by fostering hostility, suspicion and fear. This is a national problem, which takes on local nuances in each area. There are numerous ways that this issue could be addressed. As described in

the textbox in section 5.2, a number of actors are already working to address this issue through early warning and response systems, positive messaging campaigns and interfaith dialogue events. However, most important is to recognize that, as this research shows, hate speech draws on genuine concerns on the part of the Buddhist population in both Lashio and Amarapura, related to feelings of external threats to Buddhism, as well as to economic, political and personal insecurity. These concerns need to be engaged with, as well as the more obvious aspects of the anti-Muslim narratives.

Recommended action:

- **Review suitability/approach of Interfaith Activities.** *Some people specifically requested support for interfaith activities, to address the divides across communities. However, others told us that interfaith activities are not trusted by communities, or are ineffective, because they are targeted towards peace, and neglect to take into consideration other pressing community concerns. They thought that peacebuilding activities work better if they are undertaken by community groups whose primary purpose is not related to peace, but instead to areas such as the environment, or livelihoods. This underlines the importance of ensuring that support to interfaith activities must be based on a critical analysis of the context, and only undertaken based upon genuine community demand and interest (as should be the principle for all activities).*

7.4 STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY RESILIENCE TO POTENTIAL ‘TRIGGER’ RUMORS

The research uncovered a number of examples of incidents where key actors within communities had managed to publicly refute rumors and thus avoid outbreaks of violence. But communities’ own current resilience levels are low, given their feelings of insecurity and the background levels of anti-Muslim hate speech. Efforts should be considered to support communities to self-manage and fact-check or refute rumors.

Recommended Action:

- **Identify and engage Key Community Influencers:** *Use the criteria to ensure that Key Community Influencers are mobilized as much as possible in efforts to combat rumors and false information. Training will be critical in order to ensure that they are equipped to identify and mitigate information that is perceived to be damaging to social cohesion and peace.*
- **Community education.** *Quite a few of the people we interviewed said that they would be very interested in learning more about rumors, how to verify information, and how to combat the effect of rumors. There seems to be an appetite for this kind of community education in some areas, which could address some of the problems of trigger rumors and background hate speech. Examples of projects to mitigate the impact of rumors that have been carried out in other countries are provided in Annex 2, and could inform projects here.*

Supporting relevant local and national actors – including key community influences – to refute potential trigger rumors, as they arise. *These responses*

seem to work when they are instigated by local actors – be they respected religious figures, or local authorities – or in the case of national issues, by leading national political actors/government authorities. For example, specific interventions by the police to refute rumors regarding a rape case in Amarapura in October 2015 prevented an escalation of tension, and possibly an outbreak of violence.¹²⁴ The research identified positive ‘key community influencers’ in both Lashio and Amarapura, including prominent religious leaders already involved in interfaith work,¹²⁵ who could be supported to continue the work they do to refute rumors. Many of these actors already have the ability to identify rumors and respond to them. Training will be critical in order to ensure that they are equipped to identify and mitigate information that is perceived to be damaging to social cohesion and peace. However, exactly how to constructively support them to maintain or strengthen that ability needs to be discussed carefully with the actors themselves.

¹²⁴ The value of this kind of rumor-busting at a national level was recognized by one of the monks we interviewed in Amarapura, who said that: “The Commander in Chief Min Aung Hlaing said on election day, we will respect the election results. This kind of speech is really effective, I think. I think that when rumors are coming out, the people at the top should work to allay people's fears.” Other examples of local-level interventions to prevent conflict over rumored events (both true and false) are provided in CPCS (2015), *This Is Not Who We Are* and documented in M.MAS ongoing success stories documentation (forthcoming, 2016).

¹²⁵ One of the challenges with supporting government authorities who have shown a willingness to support peace through their efforts to warn and protect Muslims in the areas they administrate, is that many government employees – though not all – are rotated regularly to different parts of the country.

8 ANNEX 1: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

NB: it was not possible to ask the religion and ethnicity of all interviewees. Where this is not known, this is indicated as (NK).

Mandalay 26-30 October						
	Age	Gender	Religion	Ethnicity	Occupation	No.
FGD	U35	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Factory worker	9
FGD	U35	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Youth activists/mixed	5
FGD	U35	LGBT	NK	NK	LGBT	4
FGD	Mixed	Mixed	Bahai	Bahai	Educated/mixed	7
FGD	35+	M	Muslim	Panthay	Educated professionals (retired)	5
FGD		F	Buddhist	Bamar	Weavers in Amarapura	7
KII	35+	M	Buddhist	NK	Monk	1
KII	35+	F	NK	NK	CSO activist	1
KII	35+	M	Buddhist	NK	CSO activist	1
KII	35+	M	Buddhist	NK	Monk	1
KII	35+	M	Muslim	Bamar	CSO leader	1
					TOTAL	42

Amarapura 16-20 November						
	Age	Gender	Religion	Ethnicity	Occupation	No.
FGD	Mixed	Mixed	Buddhist	Bamar	Laborers/squatters	6
FGD	Mixed	Mixed	Buddhist	Bamar	Laborers	5
FGD	Mixed	F	Mixed	Bamar	Laborers/CSO volunteers	10
FGD		F	Buddhist	Bamar	Business owners	5
KII	35+	M	Buddhist	Bamar	NLD chairman	1
KII	NK	M	Buddhist	Bamar	Motorcycle taxi/NLD	1
KII	U35	M	Buddhist	Bamar	Mechanic/ NLD	1
KII	35+	M	Buddhist	NK	Monk	1
KII	35+	M	Buddhist	Bamar	Free Funeral Service	1

KII	35+	M	Muslim	NK	Farmer/Seller	1
KII	35+	M	Buddhist	Bamar	weaving workshop owner	1
KII	35+	M	Buddhist	Bamar	parahitta/painting workshop	1
KII	35+	M	Buddhist	NK	Monk	1
KII	35+	M	Buddhist	Bamar	teashop owner	1
KII	35+	F	Buddhist	Bamar	weaver	1
(informal)		M	Muslim	NK	activist	1
KII	35+	M/F	Buddhist	Bamar	beautician	1
KII	U35	F	Muslim	NK	activist, laborer	1
KII	U35	M	Christian	Bamar	Sells chicken	1
					TOTAL	41

Lashio 2-6 November						
	Age	Gender	Religion	Ethnicity	Occupation	No.
FGD	Mixed	Mixed	Buddhist	NK	Pagoda trustee & students	7
FGD	Mixed	Mixed	Christian and Muslim	Lisu (Christian), NK (Muslim)	Students, activists, journalist	7
FGD	NK	Mixed	Buddhist	Bamar	Laborer	9
FGD	Mixed	Mixed	NK	Mixed	Students and elders	8
FGD	NK	LGBT	NK	NK	Activists	8
KII	NK	F	Buddhist	NK	CSO activist	1
KII	35+	F	Buddhist	Shan	CSO activist	1
KII	U35	M	NK	Chinese	CSO	1
KII	35+	M	Buddhist	Bamar	NK	1
KII	U35	M	Buddhist	Ta'ang	Editor	1
KII	NK	F	NK	NK	CSO activist	1
KII	35+	M	Hindu	Gurkha	CSO activist	1

KII	35+	M	NK	NK	CSO activist	1
KII	35+	M	NK	Shan	Games shop owner	1
					TOTAL	48

Lashio 23-28 November							
	Age	Gender	Religion	Ethnicity	Occupation	Location	No
FG D	Mixed	Mixed	Buddhist	Shan	Mixed	Ward 7	6
FG D		Mixed	Buddhist	Bamar	Mixed	Ward 8	8
FG D	Mixed	Mixed		Kachin & Shan	Teacher, vol fire service	Ward 5	7
FG D	Mixed	M	Mixed	Mixed	bus driver, cycle taxi, teashop owner	Mansu bus terminal	14
KII	35+	F	Muslim	NK	businesswoman	NK	1
KII	35+	F	Muslim	NK	teacher	Ward 8	1
KII	35+	M	NK	Shan	Social worker	Ward 7	1
KII	35+	F	Buddhist	NK	Govt staff	Ward 5	1
KII	U35	F	Buddhist	Bamar	sales staff	Ward 6	1
KII	35+	F	Buddhist	Shan/Bamar	housewife	Ward 6	1
KII	35+	M	Buddhist	Shan	HIV volunteer	Ward 3	1
KII	35+	M	Buddhist	NK	NK	Ward 7	1
						TOTAL	43

9 ANNEX 2: LEARNING FROM OTHER COUNTRIES

There are few documented examples worldwide of projects that attempt to mitigate the impact of rumors and misinformation. The impact of most of these projects is unknown, and they do not yet seem to constitute a school of established practice. However, these projects may provide some useful learning. They are listed below:

- The Council of Europe has developed anti-rumor strategies to combat prejudice and ‘positively manage diversity’ in cities, drawing on the success of a rumor management project in Barcelona.¹²⁶
- One political scientist in the US ran a number of experiments to counter political misinformation spread in the form of rumors. He found that *‘effectively countering rumors is a difficult task. There is no proven method to correct mistaken political beliefs. Rumors tend to be sticky and merely repeating a rumor – even in the context of debunking that mistruth – increases its power.’*¹²⁷ However, he did find that if an unexpected source countered the rumor – e.g. someone from the political party whose interests were served by the rumor – people were more likely to reject the rumor.
- Internews has also developed programs to combat rumors in post-earthquake Nepal and Ebola-affected Liberia. These programs use a reporting system to monitor and correct false rumors that are being shared locally, through a network of local informants and using a variety of media.¹²⁸
- Search for Common Ground has undertaken a number of projects to actively counter misinformation in relation to elections (in Guinea and Sierra Leone), and undertaken rumor management training in the Nigerian Plateau.¹²⁹ Evaluations of this work found it consistently effective in contributing to an atmosphere of calm around the elections in the case of Guinea and Sierra Leone, and contributing to the lessening of inter-communal tensions in the Nigerian Plateau. SFCF has also used SMS technology to send ‘messages of peace’ to contribute to the spread of positive messaging in Nigeria (SMS Blast).¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Daniel de Torres, Christina Baglai, Seán Ó Siochrú, Dr Kseniya Khovanova-Rubicondo, *CITIES FREE OF RUMOURS: How to build an anti-rumour strategy in my city*, Council of Europe, 2015.

¹²⁷ Berinsky, RUMORS, TRUTHS, AND REALITY, 2012

¹²⁸ <http://www.internews.org/our-stories/project-updates/can-you-stop-rumour>

<https://medium.com/local-voices-global-change/combating-rumors-about-ebola-sms-done-right-da1da1b222e8>

¹²⁹ And potentially also amongst Malian refugees in Niger: Enhanced Information and Communications for Non-Violence among Malian Refugees in Niger, 2014

¹³⁰ <http://www.frontlinesms.com/2014/08/13/sfcg-nigeria-uses-frontlinesms-to-create-a-conflict-early-warning-system/>

10 ANNEX 3: FGDS AND KII CHECKLISTS

10.1 QUESTIONS FOR KIIS

KIIS – one main question with the other questions leading on from it

- *Can you think of a ‘news event’ that you think is important, and how you got and shared information related to that event?*
 - *E.g. death of Aung Thaung, Daw Suu’s release, Myitsone damn, riots in Mandalay/Lashio*
- *Is that how you usually share information?*
 - *If so, why do you use this way / why not?*
 - *Has your way of information sharing changed?*
- *If you hear information, who do you usually check it with?*
 - *Why do you choose that person?*
 - *Are there any other ways you check information?*
- *Are there particular types of information that you are more likely to share?*
 - *Positive/negative?*
- *What are the main types of information sources that you use and that you trust?*
 - *What makes you trust these sources?*
- *What about rumors. Have you heard any rumors that made you worried for your family or your community? Where did you hear them from? What did you do when you heard the rumor?*
 - *Do you have examples that you can show us/share with us?*
 - *What kind of rumors do you think are dangerous/have a bad effect and what kind do you think are normal? What about information that has been manipulated?*
- *What types of issues make you worried?*
 - *Why?*
 - *Has that changed?*
 - *Are there any conflicts that make you worried?*
 - *How do people help each other when there are problems in the community? Has that changed?*
- *What are the issues that you are always talking about? Or that your community is always talking about?*
 - *Why?*
- *If they are a community influencer or have done positive things:*
 - *What makes it possible / what motivates you to work in this way?*

Prompting/probing questions

Really? How come?

Can you give me some examples?

What do you mean by 'xx'?

Since when have you felt/done this?

How does that make you feel?

How did you find out about that?

1. Introduction – 5 minutes

- Explain the purpose of the FGD:
 - Search and MIDO, with funding from the Kann Let program, are implementing a Community Information Management Project. The overall objective of this project is “ရပ်ရွာအကျိုး... ဖွံ့ဖြိုးမှုအတွက် ... ဆန်းစစ်မှု... သတင်းတွေ”
 - Search and MIDO have commissioned research to start the project. The purpose of the research is to understand what are the community information channels and networks in Lashio and Mandalay, and what types of information are shared through these channels.
 - Focus group discussions and key informant interviews are being undertaken as part of this research. The information gathered during these FGDs and KIs will be used primarily for internal purposes, to help design a project that is based on local realities and needs. The research may also be shared with key stakeholders.
 - The FGD will be recorded and we will also take notes. Records from the FGDs will be confidential and will not be shared beyond the research team. If we use your comments as part of the research, your identity will not be revealed.
- Ask for the participants’ verbal consent
- Explain what the format will be (questions, mapping, max 90 minutes)
- Explain that the discussion is informal, everyone is expected to participate, and divergent views are welcome
- Request that people turn off their mobile phones and participate fully, and that one person talks at a time

2. How do people receive and share information? – 20 minutes

- Guiding questions:
 - What would you say are the main/popular news sources in your community? E.g. Facebook, journals, friends, key people in the community.
 - Which of these news sources / people are trusted the most? What is it that makes people trust them?
 - How do people assess whether information that you hear is true or not? [*this question was changed in the second round of field research to ‘How do people assess whether information that you hear is true?’*]
 - Are there certain people that are trusted as credible news sources? Are there certain people in your community that share lots of information? How do they share it?

- When you hear information, who do you mostly share it with?
- What kind of information do you think is important to share?
- Can you think of any kinds of information people share too much of, or that has negative effects?

3. Mapping positive and negative information sources and channels on Lashio/MDY map – 20 minutes

- Ask people to identify the main sources (i.e. people, places, *ICT?* etc) where they get information on the map
- Ask people to identify the main ways that information moves from group to group
- Get them to add blue or red stickers if these information channels are positive or negative

4. Issues of concern and community history – mapping and discussion – 20 minutes

- *Ask people to draw a timeline on one sheet and map the significant events in their community on it*
 - *historical (last 5 years)*
 - *future (next 3 years)*
- *Prompt them to talk about the timeline and about particular events/conflicts that you think are relevant:*
 - How did they hear about this event?
 - What did they do first when they heard?
 - Why do they think it happened?
- What types of issues make you worried? Why? Has that changed?
 - Prompt – nationally, locally?
 - Conflict?
- *If the group is comfortable:* What triggers violence in your area?
- What are the issues that you are always talking about?
- Who helps resolve these issues? Prevent violence? How do they do it?

5. Wrap up – 5 minutes

- Thank everyone for their time
- Invite them to refreshments

Prompting questions

Really? How come?

Can you give me some examples?

What do you mean by 'xx'?

Since when have you felt/done this?

How does that make you feel?

How did you find out about that?

Tools you will need

Flip chart paper

Sellotape / blue tack to hang the flip charts on the walls

Map of Mandalay/Lashio

Fresh marker pens in different colors – 8

Tips:

- Start by setting the group at ease – they should understand what they will be doing and that there are no right or wrong answers
- Try and make sure your questions are open-ended and avoid asking 'why' because this can put people on the defensive
- Use probing techniques and prompts to elicit more information
 - Repeat the question – this gives more time for the participants to think
 - Ask for specific details as if you don't have a full understanding of the situation so they can help you to understand
 - Give a thoughtful nod or an expectant look in order to get a fuller answer
 - Be aware of your own body language.
 - Repeat the reply
 - Ask when, what, where, which and how questions
- Control the discussion and make sure that there is full participation from all participants
 - Address questions to individuals who haven't spoken much
 - Look in another direction if an individual talks for too long
 - Intervene, politely summarize the point, then refocus the discussion

Blue and red stickers to stick on the maps for positive and negative information flows