**Text 3**

SITTWE, Myanmar: Surging sectarian violence in western Myanmar has left at least 64 people dead and scores more wounded, a local official said on Friday, casting a shadow over the government's reform drive.

People have fled their homes in droves following the latest clashes in Rakhine state, where months of communal tensions have torn apart communities and left tens of thousands of mainly Rohingya living in squalid camps.

"The total death toll is 34 men and 30 women," Rakhine state spokesman Win Myaing told AFP. He revised down an earlier toll of 112 people from the renewed violence which erupted on October 21, blaming a "mistake in calculating".

The casualties were from both sides, he said, adding most were stabbed as violence engulfed four townships forcing an estimated 3,000 Rohingya to escape in boats hoping to dock near existing refugee camps on the outskirts of Sittwe.

"But we cannot allow them (into the camps) as we are worried of possible clashes with residents. They are on an island opposite Sittwe," Win Myaing said, conceding authorities are now struggling to provide relief to them.

The United Nations responded to the bloodshed on Friday with a stark warning that Myanmar's reforms are under threat from the continued unrest between ethnic Rakhine and the Rohingya.

"The vigilante attacks, targeted threats and extremist rhetoric must be stopped," a spokesman for Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in a statement released in Yangon.

"If this is not done... the reform and opening up process being currently pursued by the government is likely to be jeopardized."

President Thein Sein has been widely-praised for overseeing sweeping reforms in the former junta-ruled nation, including the release of hundreds of political prisoners and the election of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to parliament. But the Rakhine violence poses a stern challenge to the reform process.

Myanmar's 800,000 Rohingya are seen as illegal immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh by the government and many Myanmar citizens -- who call them "Bengalis".

The latest violence, which prompted Myanmar's main Islamic organisations to cancel celebrations for the four-day Eid al-Adha holiday that began on Friday, is seen as serious challenge to the government.

The UN's refugee arm has said it fears large numbers of Rohingya will attempt the perilous sea journey south over the coming weeks to escape violence in Rakhine and the sprawling refugee camps in Bangladesh.

(Source: www.channelnewsasia.com - posted 26 October 2012)