



INPUTS FOR THEMATIC REPORT ON THE RISE OF ANTI-SEMITISM AND OTHER FORMS OF RACISM, RACIAL DISCRIMINATION, XENOPHOBIA AND RELATED INTOLERANCE IN TIMES OF COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

The [International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism \(IMADR\)](#) is an international non-profit, non-governmental human rights organisation devoted to eliminating discrimination and racism, forging international solidarity among discriminated groups and advancing the international human rights system. IMADR is grateful to the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, Ms. E. Tendayi Achiume, for providing stakeholders the opportunity to contribute to her next thematic report on the rise of anti-Semitism and other forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance in times of COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified manifestations of racism and discrimination against indigenous peoples, minorities, migrants and other marginalised groups around the world, which the UN Secretary-General António Guterres described as *“a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering”*¹. This submission intends to highlight the situation in Sri Lanka where nationalist and religious extremists have been fuelling racism and discrimination against ethno-religious minorities, in particular Muslims, since the beginning of the spread of COVID-19 in the country.

NATIONALIST AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM IN SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. According to 2012 census², Sinhalese account the majority in the Sri Lankan population (74.9%) who are mainly Buddhists. Tamils are the second largest population (15.3%) whose dominant religion is Hinduism. Muslim population belongs to Moors (9.3%), thus making most Tamils and Muslims ethno-religious minorities. A small number of Sinhalese and Tamils profess Christianity. While ethno-religious minorities in Sri Lanka have been subject to both direct and indirect discrimination for a long time, there has been a persistent and increased pattern of attacks against them by nationalist and religious extremists in recent years. The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief recently shared his observation that the politicisation of ethnic and religious identity is employed by certain Buddhist religious leaders to invoke nationalist sentiments among the Sri Lankan population which promote hatred and division among people.³

A Sinhalese Buddhist organisation, Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), was formed in 2012. It claims that Sinhalese's status as the Sri Lanka's majority is threatened by the alleged growth of the Muslim population as well as by over 60

¹ <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-05-08/appeal-address-and-counter-covid-19-hate-speech>

² <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PopHouSat/CPH2011/index.php?fileName=Activities/TentativelistofPublications>

³ A/HRC/43/48/Add.2, paragraph 60



million Tamils in southern India.⁴ BBS declared its aim as the protection of Sinhalese and Buddhism, and it quickly gained support from Sinhalese leaders in politics and other spheres of the society. BBS has been inciting hatred against Muslims and promoting disinformation about the minority community since its establishment.⁵ Since 2012, events of large-scale violence against Muslims have taken place continuously with the involvement of Sinhalese Buddhist extremists. One of the largest violent incidents against Muslims took place in Althugama in 2014. Four people were reported to be killed and about 80 people were severely injured during the anti-Muslim riots, which were triggered by a BBS rally against Muslims.⁶ In 2015, “*Sinhala Le*” campaign – *Sinha* means a lion and *Le* means blood – launched a poster campaign. Their poster promoted a reinterpreted image of the national flag both online and offline which took out the saffron and green stripes, representations of the Tamil and Muslim communities in Sri Lanka.⁷ The image clearly targeted the Muslim and Tamil communities for ethnic tensions.⁸ It was observed that the message of the campaign and of several extremist groups was in line with what BBS promoted.⁹ The ethno-nationalistic rhetoric of the “*Sinha-le*” campaign has been used by political parties as an effective tool for mass mobilisation.¹⁰

The Easter Sunday Attacks in 2019, which killed over 265 people, intensified the hostile environment against Muslims. For instance, mobs destroyed hundreds of places of worship, houses and shops owned by Muslims in Kurunegala District and other areas between 13th and 14th May 2019.¹¹ Lately, anti-Muslim groups have exploited the fact that the Easter bombings were carried out by Islamist terrorists in order to boost incitement to hatred and violence against Muslims in Sri Lanka.¹² Based on these foundations, Sinhalese Buddhist extremists have sought to further promote racism and discrimination against ethno-religious minorities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION IN SRI LANKA

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka was recorded on 2nd March 2020¹³, and the “police curfew” was imposed on 20th March¹⁴. From the early stage of the spread of COVID-19, Sri Lankan civil society expressed concerns that hate speech and hostility against Muslims were widespread in both mainstream and social media due to the public focus on the religious identity of deceased persons who had or were suspected of being infected with COVID-19, and they were accused for spreading the novel coronavirus.¹⁵ This was

⁴ A/HRC/43/48/Add.2, paragraph 63

⁵ Ibid, paragraph 64

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid, paragraph 66

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid, paragraph 60

¹¹ Ibid, paragraph 26

¹² Ibid, paragraph 27

¹³ <https://www.who.int/srilanka/covid-19>

¹⁴ <https://www.mfa.gov.lk/declaration-of-police-curfew-island-wide/>

¹⁵ Civil society letter (5 April, 2020), *Disposal of bodies of deceased persons who were infected with and suspected of being infected with COVID-19*, <https://www.cpalanka.org/disposal-of-bodies-of-deceased-persons-who-were-infected-with-and-suspected-of-being-infected-with-covid-19/>



evident from the case of the town of Beruwala in Kalutara District, Western Province, which is considered as a Muslim dominant area. Derana TV broadcasted a health officer's comment who accused two patients from Beruwala for "*depriv[ing] Sri Lanka of enjoying Sinhala New Year*".¹⁶ The term "Beruwala people" was widely used to call anyone suspected of having COVID-19 or quarantined in the District.¹⁷ Also, after the health authorities enforced quarantine on over 200 people in connection with a service conducted by a Tamil Pastor based in Switzerland who showed symptoms of COVID-19 after returning from the service in Jaffna in the Northern Province, a local media continuously called them as "*Tamils who are aligned with foreign preachers*".¹⁸

Disinformation that Muslims were breaking the "police curfew" to conduct religious activities was widespread in both mainstream and social media. After the arrests of few Muslims for taking part in religious services at Horowpathana, accusations against Muslims had been spread by some Sinhalese Buddhist extremists.¹⁹ The Muslim Council of Sri Lanka wrote on 27th March to Ada Darana News to protest against the news outlet's inaccurate report that a congregational prayer gathering took place on Friday 20th March at Jami'ul Alfar Jummah Masjid (Red Mosque) in Colombo.²⁰ Hiru TV broadcasted in March 2020 which used a video²¹ of a religious service that took place at a mosque in 2019, suggesting that Muslims held a large religious service during the curfew.²² While the arrests were made against two persons who had distributed the video, it remains unclear whether any action has been taken against the media outlets. Meanwhile, Buddhist groups were able to collectively perform Pirith in different parts of Sri Lanka without facing any consequence.²³

On 12nd April, a group of organisations, including the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka and the Colombo District Mosques' Federation, complained to the Inspector General of Police that hateful posts and audio clips were spreading in social media.²⁴ The complainants also noted that the President of the Sri Lanka Health Officers Association was recorded in one of those audio clips.²⁵ In one recording, a person who was allegedly from the intelligence agency accused Muslim women for offering sexual conducts to Sinhalese men and spitting on food products in supermarkets in order to spread COVID-19, and the speaker urged the listeners to boycott goods

¹⁶ The Alliance of Independent Professionals (28 April, 2020), *STATUS STATEMENT IV: 28 April 2020, Sri Lanka's Response to Covid-19*

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid (4 April, 2020), *STATUS STATEMENT II: 04 April 2020, Sri Lanka's Response to Covid-19*

²⁰ Muslim Council of Sri Lanka (27 March, 2020),

<https://www.facebook.com/MuslimCouncilOfSriLanka/photos/a.100302628057487/201402824614133/?type=3&theater>

²¹ Video is available at: <https://srilanka.factcrescendo.com/2020/03/30/fact-check-a-year-old-image-being-shared-as-recent-from-beruwala/>

²² Groundviews (3 May, 2020), *Freedom of Expression vs. Hate Speech, Fake and Misleading News*,

<https://groundviews.org/2020/05/03/freedom-of-expression-vs-hate-speech-fake-and-misleading-news/>

²³ The Alliance of Independent Professionals (4 April, 2020), *STATUS STATEMENT II: 04 April 2020, Sri Lanka's Response to Covid-19*

²⁴ Al Jazeera (11 May, 2020), *Sri Lanka: Muslims face extra threat as coronavirus stirs hate*,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/sri-lanka-muslims-face-extra-threat-coronavirus-stirs-hate-200510183518512.html>

²⁵ The Island (12 April, 2020), *Group of Muslim organisations urges IGP to probe hate mongering campaign against their community*, http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=221142



from Muslim-owned businesses.²⁶ The complainants highlighted factual inaccuracies of the both accusations²⁷, and the police arrested a person who circulated the recording²⁸. Yet, there has been no report whether the speaker and others in the recordings were punished. Sinhalese Buddhist extremists are believed to have played considerable part in these attacks against Muslims.²⁹

Discrimination against Muslims during the pandemic has not been limited in mainstream and social media, but also in decision-making of the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL). The Government's shift on 31st March to make cremation compulsory for all victims of COVID-19 is considered by many as a manifestation of the institutionalised discrimination against the minority Muslims rather than a public health measure.³⁰ The decision also raised a serious concern that it could be used to justify discriminatory treatments of Muslims. In a joint letter dated 8th April, a group of UN Special Rapporteurs reminded the GoSL to “*firmly condemn*” any scapegoating of ethnic or religious community for the spread of COVID-19 and requested for information on measures against the potential increase in hate speech against Muslims and other minorities.³¹

CHALLENGES IN TACKLING RACIST HATE SPEECH IN SRI LANKA

While there have been occasional arrests of few individuals who promoted disinformation and hate speech against the minority Muslim community since March 2020, the GoSL has failed to hold those responsible accountable and effectively protect ethno-religious minorities from discrimination and human rights violations. In Sri Lanka, many victims share the view that perpetrators of hate speech are able to continue promoting their propaganda without facing any legal consequences.³² The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief observed that insufficient implementation of the existing legislation is a major reason for the impunity for perpetrators of hate speech in Sri Lanka.³³ The lack of political will, undermining of rule of law, limited awareness on legislations, and potentially negative public reactions are underlying factors of such a lack of accountability.³⁴ His observation remains relevant to the situation in the country as of the date of this submission. The culture of impunity continues to persist and be exploited by Sinhalese Buddhist extremists in times of COVID-19 to advance their racist campaigns against ethno-religious minorities, in particular Muslims.

²⁶ Groundviews (3 May, 2020), *Freedom of Expression vs. Hate Speech, Fake and Misleading News*, <https://groundviews.org/2020/05/03/freedom-of-expression-vs-hate-speech-fake-and-misleading-news/>

²⁷ The Island (12 April, 2020), *Group of Muslim organisations urges IGP to probe hate mongering campaign against their community*, http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=221142

²⁸ Groundviews (3 May, 2020), *Freedom of Expression vs. Hate Speech, Fake and Misleading News*, <https://groundviews.org/2020/05/03/freedom-of-expression-vs-hate-speech-fake-and-misleading-news/>

²⁹ Al Jazeera (11 May, 2020), *Sri Lanka: Muslims face extra threat as coronavirus stirs hate*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/sri-lanka-muslims-face-extra-threat-coronavirus-stirs-hate-200510183518512.html>

³⁰ Al Jazeera (20 May, 2020), *Like India, Sri Lanka is using coronavirus to stigmatise Muslims*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/india-sri-lanka-coronavirus-stigmatise-muslims-200519134939934.html>

³¹ LKA 2/2020

³² A/HRC/43/48/Add.2, paragraph 67

³³ Ibid, paragraph 68

³⁴ Ibid