



Baby of only 20 days forcefully cremated in Sri Lanka against the wishes of his Muslim parents

STOP FORCED CREMATIONS OF COVID DECEASED IN SRI LANKA

THE CORDOBA FOUNDATION | SRI LANKA ISLAMIC FORUM UK

The Coronavirus has exacerbated racist tendencies in Sri Lanka against religious and ethnic minorities. The government's move to prohibit burial and mandatorily cremate bodies of COVID-19 victims, without any scientific evidence and against the WHO's guidance, is designed to target Muslim and Christian minorities.

Objections by rights groups

There have been calls from several UN Special Rapporteurs as well as human rights organisations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch calling on the government to review and rescind the unfair decision on mandatory cremation. So far they have been ignored. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief urged the Sri Lankan government to respect burial rights and stop hate speech against Muslims. He stated: "We respectfully reiterate the importance that the government continues to uphold the right of freedom of religion or belief as well as the right of the minorities even during this challenging time". Amnesty International wrote: "[Sri Lankan authorities] must respect the right of religious minorities to carry out the final rites. At this difficult time, the authorities should be bringing communities together and not deepening divisions between them. Grieving relatives of people who have died because of COVID-19 should be able to bid farewell to their loved ones in the way that they wish, especially where this is permissible under international guidelines".



“ [Sri Lankan authorities] must respect the right of religious minorities to carry out the final rites.”

Amnesty International

The (hitherto) independent Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL), has also weighed in on the issue. In their letter titled "HRCSL

observations and recommendations on Extraordinary Gazette no. 2170/8 dated 11 April 2020 addressed to the Secretary of the Ministry of Health it stated: "mandating cremation of coronavirus victims is unacceptable and a gross violation of human rights". The HRCSL clearly observes that "mandating cremation of those who have died or suspected to have died from Covid-19 is neither necessary nor proportionate to the achievement of protection of public health and therefore is not a permissible restriction of the freedom to manifest religion or beliefs" and that "forced and rushed cremation of dead bodies prior to without procuring conclusive evidence on the cause of death and not allowing family members the opportunity to, perform final rites while adhering to accepted safety measures is a violation of the freedom to manifest religion or beliefs". It also goes on to boldly recommend to the Government to "permit burials as well as cremations of bodies of persons who succumb to the Covid-19 virus while adhering to required health guidelines". The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation last month urged Sri Lanka to permit Muslims to bury their family members "in line with their religious beliefs and obligations".

Non-Buddhist minorities targeted in Sri Lanka

The cremation issue is just one in a number of incidents against the minorities over the last 10 years since the end of the bloody 28-year old ethnic conflict. Either through state sanctioned action or complicity, since 2009, the amount of hate speech and organised acts of violence have increased. From 2012 in particular, there have been hundreds of incidents against Muslim and Christians and other non-Buddhist minorities. After the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, following an organised campaign of violence against Muslim businesses, thousands of Muslims were detained for various durations, and over a hundred still remain detained, the prominent one amongst them being of the lawyer, Hejaaz Hisbullah, who was arrested during the COVID-19 pandemic and has to date not been formally charged.

“Mandating cremation of Corona virus victims is unacceptable and a gross violation of human rights.”

Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka

Legal challenge against forced cremations

With their pleas to politicians and bureaucrats gone unheard, eleven affected families, both Muslim and Christian, took up a legal battle against the cremations, accusing the government of violating their freedom of religion and fundamental rights under the constitution. However, the Supreme Court refused to hear the petitions and dismissed the cases, dashing their final hopes of justice and putting a halt to the mandatory cremations.

With no political or legal domestic remedy forthcoming, Muslims of Sri Lanka are appealing to the international community to use their good offices and also bring diplomatic and international legal pressure upon the Sri Lankan government. We view this emerging situation as potentially dangerous and inimical to the future progress, development and wellbeing of Sri Lanka; and liable to lead to more bloodshed and violence at a time when the country is already fatigued by decades of war, hatred and hostilities.

What you can do

We ask for you to take all possible action within your scope, and to call upon the international community to pressure the Sri Lankan government to:

- 1 Immediately overturn the policy on forced cremations of Covid deceased in Sri Lanka and respect the religious beliefs of non-Buddhist minorities to bury their dead.
- 2 Protect the just aspirations and the human rights of all Sri Lankans, including all minorities, irrespective of their racial and religious differences, as per its obligations under the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and also the provisions of the Constitution of the country.
- 3 Make provisions under law to ban hate speech which has in recent times led to many attacks including on religious places worship particularly belonging to Muslims and Christians, initiated by extremist elements of the Sinhala Buddhist clergy and some extremist groups.
- 4 Apply the law of the land without discrimination and arrest the culprits who have been responsible for committing acts of wanton destruction, vandalism and indiscriminate attacks on places of worship and commercial establishments belonging to the minorities.
- 5 Take positive measures to dispel the sense of insecurity among the minorities as a direct and indirect result of the perceived majoritarian style approach adopted by extremist groups among the majority Sinhala Buddhist population, especially after the end of the war in 2009.
- 6 Promote positive peace and harmony among all sections of the Sri Lankan people, by stressing the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual character of the Sri Lankan nation.
- 7 Foster and support inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue within and outside Sri Lanka.
- 8 Support human rights defenders in and outside the country.
- 9 Donate to support this campaign. Email info@thecordobafoundation.com for details



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