Islamophobia and attacks on Muslims in Sri Lanka

Incident Map

During the past year, there has been an unprecedented level of violent attacks, demonstrations and hate speech targeting Sri Lanka’s eight per cent Muslim population. Mainly perpetrated by Buddhist fundamentalist groups, the events have left the country’s second largest minority community – the Muslims – feeling afraid and vulnerable. The response from the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) has been limited. Police inaction in some cases has enabled violence to take place and there have been few arrests.

The ‘Bodu Bala Sena’ or ‘Buddhist power force’ is the main group behind the targeting of Muslims. Appeals by Muslim civil society to the GoSL to take action against this group have met with little positive response. On 27 January 2013, President Mahinda Rajapaksha reportedly met monks and members of the Bodu Bala Sena and asked them to avoid conflicts with other religious communities. The President’s statement at this meeting was only publicised in the English language and not in the Sinhalese language media, thereby not reaching a large number of supporters of the Bodu Bala Sena. In his speech on Independence Day, 4 February 2013, there was again a call to stop inciting racial hatred. While these initiatives must be welcomed, they are far from adequate considering the level of violence and hatred being unleashed on Muslims at present.

MRG has received reports of other religious communities facing serious problems too. However the Muslim community is currently facing a concerted campaign against them. In addition to attacks on places of religious worship there are calls to boycott Muslim shops and establishments, all of which is increasing tensions, particularly in areas where Muslims and Sinhalese live close to each other. The incidents against Muslims are widespread across the country and have picked up momentum during the last months. Here are some of the major events that have taken place since April 2012.

In addition to the protests and attacks, there has been a spate of online hate campaigns targeting Muslims. These campaigns have run on social networking sites and also appear as responses to comments and news on other websites. The campaigns use degrading and threatening language about Muslims and on some occasions insult Islamic beliefs and texts. There is also currently a major campaign against the system of issuing halal certificates, which at present is done by a national level Muslim religious body.

Recommendations

To the Government of Sri Lanka

- Take immediate action to protect all religious minority communities from violent attacks, threats of violence as well as incitement to religious hatred. Community property, including places of religious property, must be protected and access ensured. This protection responsibility extends to ensuring the safety and well-being of potentially vulnerable groups within minority communities, including women, children, the elderly and persons with disabilities.
- Take immediate action to investigate impartially all attacks against all places of religious worship. Prosecute those involved in the attacks in accordance with Sri Lankan law.
- Take immediate action to enforce Sri Lankan law with regard to the activities of fundamentalist groups that engage in attacks on places of religious worship in line with international human rights norms.
- Take immediate action to draft legislation regarding the prevention of religious intolerance and hate speech. The drafting process must include full consultation with minority community representatives in relevant languages.
- Take immediate action to implement Lessons Learned & Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) recommendations on freedom of religion and minority rights.
- Take action to promote the religious freedom of all communities in accordance with international human rights standards.
- Ensure a strong UN HRC resolution on Sri Lanka that establishes an international, independent and impartial mechanism to investigate violations of international human rights and humanitarian norms during the recent armed conflict in Sri Lanka as well as current violations, including with regard to religious freedom and minority rights.
- Use their bilateral communications with the GoSL to raise their concern about the on-going attacks on Muslims and call for immediate measures to be taken to ensure the protection of Muslim and all other minority communities.

To UN Human Rights Council (HRC) member states

- Respond to communications made by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Independent Expert on Minority Issues and invite them to visit and report on Sri Lanka.
- Finally, the President should make a public statement, in all national languages, condemning acts of violence and incitement to religious hatred against Muslims and all other communities and assure minorities that their rights will be protected.

Lessons Learned & Reconciliation

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28 May 2012
Muslims were stopped from worshipping at a mosque in Kurunegala, north central Sri Lanka by Buddhist clergy and local politicians in the area. According to the local Muslims, they were invited to an event by Buddhist clergy in a nearby temple, which they attended. At the event, they were questioned about the origins of the mosque and its legality. The Muslim representatives responded that it was registered under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Muslim community members said they were subsequently threatened and forced to sign a document which stated that they would not use the premises for religious purposes. The mosque remains unused.

24 July 2012
A group of 150 protesters led by a Buddhist monk entered a mosque in Kurunegala, north central Sri Lanka, and threatened worshipers. Police intervened and removed the protesters.

19 January 2013
Over a hundred Buddhists protested in Maharaugama, north of the capital Colombo. The demonstrators marched to a Muslim-owned shopping complex ‘No Limit’, demanding that it be shut down. ‘No Limit’ is one of Sri Lanka’s biggest retail chains.

31 July 2012
A group of Buddhist monks disturbed Muslims engaged in prayer at a mosque in Rajagiriya, which borders the capital Colombo. The monks maintained surveillance of the mosque for a few days following this incident. In August, police gave notice to the mosque to be closed down until proper registration documentation was provided. Muslim activists say, after providing these documents to the police, they have enabled community members to use the mosque.

25 May 2012
A group of about 70 protesters conducted a demonstration at the premises of a mosque in Dehiwala, on the outskirts of the capital city Colombo. Some protesters threw stones and damaged parts of the mosque.

26 July 2012
Police ordered the closure of a Muslim educational centre in Dehiwala after protests by Buddhist groups that the premises were not properly registered and that the conducting of religious activities and classes in the premises was disturbing neighbours. According to Muslim activists, the centre had not used any public audio systems, and they were unconvincing as to how their presence was affecting neighbours. The centre had been functioning since 2010 and had 56 students following religious classes there.

24 January 2013
Demonstrators conducted an anti-Muslim rally in the western town of Kulliyapitiya, calling for a boycott of Muslim products and establishments. The protesters also distributed printed material critical of Islam.

26 October 2012
An unidentified group set fire to and burnt down a mosque in Malwathu Oya, Anuradhapura, in north central Sri Lanka. The mosque was built in the year 2000 and over 30 families resided within its vicinity. Following the incident, local Muslims began using a home for their group prayers. Buddhist monks continue to conduct protests, calling for the closure of the new religious space and for the removal of Muslims from the area.

20 April 2012
A group of up to 2,000 Sinhala Buddhists, including members of the clergy, protested outside and attacked a mosque in Dembulla, north central Sri Lanka. The protesters, carrying Buddhist flags, shouted slogans and demonstrated outside the mosque, disrupting traditional Friday afternoon prayers. Despite police presence, the protesters subsequently broke into the premises of the mosque and caused some damage to property. The protesters claimed the mosque had been built on a Buddhist sacred site. Muslims in the area say the mosque has been there for over half a century. Subsequent to the attacks, the GoSL ordered the relocation of the mosque.

28 August 2012
A public campaign against Muslims was launched in the north central town of Dembulla calling on people to boycott Muslim shops and not sell land to Muslims, as well as claiming that the Muslim population is expected to grow to 20-30 per cent of the total by the year 2021. Printed material making these points were widely distributed across the town.

14 October 2012
Thousands of demonstrators in the capital city Colombo, chanting anti-Muslim rhetoric, protested against an attack on Buddhists in Bangladesh. The protesters pelted stones at the Bangladeshi embassy in Colombo. They were protesting the destruction of 22 temples and homes of minority Buddhists in the Upazila and Chittagong divisions of Bangladesh in late September.

7 January 2013
A group of people led by Buddhist monks tried to break into Sri Lanka’s Law College in Colombo, demanding to meet the principal on claims that the institution was favouring Muslims. The protesters claimed that a disproportionate number of people qualifying as lawyers in the country were from the Muslim community.

17 February 2013
Thousands marched in a demonstration organised by Bodu Bala Sena in the capital Colombo calling for the abolition of the halal certification system. They also called for shops to stop selling halal products. There were some incidents of violence and intimidation during the protest, including an attack on the BBC media crew who were there to report the incident.

Further Reading