

Sri Lanka : Statement condemning continued attacks on places of worship of religious minorities by Buddhist extremist mobs

Thursday 23 January 2014, by [Collective / Multiple signers](#) (Date first published: 23 January 2014).

Statement condemning the continued attacks on religious places of worship by Buddhist extremist mobs, the inaction of the Police and the silence of the mainstream religions and the mass media.

We the undersigned, strongly condemn the continuing attacks on places of worship by Buddhist extremist mobs, the inaction of the Police in the face of these violent attacks and their failure to take the assailants into custody, and the silence of the established religious institutions and mainstream media.

We are outraged over the spate of violent attacks against places of worship of religious minorities, including those of Christians, Muslims and Hindus, and remain deeply concerned at the apparent State complicity and level of impunity enjoyed by certain extremist groups. Between January to September 2013, 227 attacks against Muslim places of worship and other institutions [1] have been recorded, and in the year 2013, 103 cases of attacks on Christian Churches and Pastors have been recorded. [2] During the same period many Hindu temples too have been attacked [3] around the country. The actual number of incidents is much higher, as many incidents remain unreported, due to fear of reprisals and the lack of confidence in law enforcement agencies.

We urge all communities to respect the religious beliefs and constitutionally guaranteed rights of freedom of assembly in the act of worship of their fellow citizens, and not to be misled by the bigoted propaganda of hate groups.

The most recent attacks took place at around 10am, on January 12, 2014, when the Assemblies of God (AoG) and Calvary Churches in Hikkaduwa (Galle district), were attacked by a 300-strong mob led by men in saffron robes claiming to be "Buddhist monks", party to an extremist group named Hela Bodu Pawra (loosely translated as Buddhist Heritage Fortress), during their Sunday morning service. Serious damage was caused to the two buildings. Stones were also thrown at the premises while some worshippers were trapped inside. On the night before these attacks (11), the pastors of both churches had received information of the impending attacks, and having informed the Police, were guaranteed protection and instructed to go ahead with the regular service of worship the following morning. Still the Police was still unwilling or unable to stop the mobs from attacking these churches and further, refrained from using legally permitted minimum force at least, to dispel these mobs. (However, on previous instances, the police and security forces have shown very little restraint in using maximum force such as tear gas and even gun fire, as evident during the Free Trade Zone [4] and Weliweriya [5] protests for instance.)

The violent mob alleged that these churches were not registered with the Ministry of Buddha Sasana

and Religious Affairs, and were therefore illegal. The tense situation prevailed past 12pm, with the Police unwilling to disperse those engaged in these acts of violence. A senior police officer who arrived at the scene gave an assurance to the monks that the churches would be closed for 2 weeks (until 10th February, 2014), during which time the issue would be resolved. Thereafter, the mob had dispersed.

In another incident earlier in the morning on the 12th at around 2.30am, a place of worship of the Foursquare Gospel Church in Pitipana, Homagama, was set on fire by unidentified persons, and a threatening note was found hanging on the gate of the premises warning Christians who gather there of possible dire consequences. [6]

On the following day (13), the Police Spokesman SSP Ajith Rohana stated that the police have compiled a report on the attacks and submitted a list of identified suspects (inclusive of 8 monks), to the courts, and that all investigations concerning protests and demonstrations related to religion will be handed over to the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs. It is ironic that investigative duties coming within the direct purview of the Police have, in this instance, been handed over to the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs. This action is however in keeping with the trend initiated by the Ministry of Buddha Sasana, in their Circular dated 16th October, 2008, which calls on all new religious places of worship to obtain written approval from the Ministry prior to the setting up/maintaining of such places. This raises the troubling question as to why a multi-ethnic and religious country must seek approval from a Ministry that clearly prioritizes one religion over the rest, by its name alone. Whilst acknowledging that there must be a central and independent body to register/monitor churches and places of worship, we find there lies a conflict of interest in a Ministry tasked (although not exclusively,) to further Buddhism, being the sole authority on approving/registering other places of worship.

The deafening silence on the part of mainstream religious institutions in relation to these attacks, is appalling, albeit not surprising, considering their unwillingness to show solidarity with each other and to confront the government, with the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka being the one exception.

We welcome and reiterate the open letter published by the Muslim Council to President Mahinda Rajapakse calling on him to "...order the law enforcement agencies to rein-in these mobs that infringe on the peoples fundamental right to worship. Should there be any breach of law by any individual or groups, we kindly urge that due process is followed and necessary legal action is taken without letting individuals or religious groups to take the law in to their own hand."

We also note with growing concern that Breaking News Alert Service or mainstream media institution has given little or no coverage to these attacks, or previous attacks instigated by Buddhist extremist groups.

Further, we wish to highlight and commend the orders made by the Galle Additional Magistrate to the Hikkaduwa Police on 16th January, and ask that they be implemented with immediate effect. The orders call on the Police to arrest all identified suspects immediately, and all media institutions to provide the police with unedited footage of the attacks, to assist with ongoing investigations.

We therefore urge law enforcement authorities to ensure strict adherence to rule of law and prosecute those who are responsible for these heinous crimes, in the existence of abundant evidence available with the public and media organisations. In addition, we are very disturbed to see continued Police inaction and delays in responding to incidents of racist mob violence, which is a clear indication of State complicity, and the lack of any interest by the newly minted Ministry of Law and Order headed by the President, to hold perpetrators to account.

23rd January, 2014

Signatures:

Individuals

1. Ahilan Kadirgamar
2. Ajit Abeysekera
3. Ameenah Hussein
4. Anberiya Hanifa
5. Anushan Selvarajah
6. Anushaya Collure
7. Asoka Obeyesekere
8. B. Gowthaman
9. B. Skanthakumar
10. Bhavani Fonseka
11. Buddhima Padmasiri
12. C. Dissanayake
13. Cayathri Divakalala
14. Chamira Perera
15. Chandralal Colombage
16. Chandrika De Silva - Freelance Journalist
17. Chandula Kumbukage
18. Damaris Wickremesekera
19. Deanne Uyangoda
20. Deborah Philip
21. Devika Karunaratne
22. Dilhara Pathirana
23. Dilshy Banu
24. Dr. G. Chris Rodrigo
25. Dr. Mareena Thaha Reffai

26. Dr. Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu
27. Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran
28. Emil van der Poorten
29. Faizun Zackariya
30. Farzana Haniffa
31. G.A. Prabath Kumara - Chief Coordinator, Future In Our Hands Development Fund , Badulla
32. Gajen Mahendra
33. Godfrey Yogarajah - Executive Director, Religious Freedom, World Evangelical Alliance
34. Herman Kumara
35. Hilmy Ahamed
36. J. Henry de Mel
37. Jansila Majeed
38. Jayasingam. T
39. Jayatilaka Kammallaweera
40. Joe William
41. Johann Tranchell
42. Jovita Arulanantham
43. K. Rajaledsumi
44. K.S. Ratnavale
45. Kumari Kumaragamage
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48. M. H. Mohamed Hisham
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56. Mirak Raheem
57. Mohammed Mahuruf
58. Nicola Perera
59. Nilantha Ilangamuwa
60. Nilshan Fonseka
61. Nimalka Fernando
62. Nirmanusan Balasundaram
63. Niyanthini Kadirgamar
64. P.N. Singham
65. Padmini Weerasooriya
66. Prof. Jayantha Seneviratne - University of Kelaniya
67. Prof. Kumar David - Marx School
68. R.M.B. Senanayake
69. Ranil D. Guneratne
70. Rev. Fr. Emmanuel Sebamalai
71. Rev. Fr. Jeyabalan Croos
72. Rev. Fr. Nandana Manatunga
73. Rev. Fr. Ravichandran Emmanuel
74. Rev. Fr. Sarath Iddamalgoda
75. Ruki Fernando
76. S. M. Praveen - OMI
77. Sampath Samarakoon
78. Sanjana Hattotuwa
79. Sanjaya Senanayake
80. Shantha Pathirana
81. Shreen Abdul Saroor

82. Silma Mohideen Ahamed
83. Siritunga Jayasuriya - United Socialist Party
84. Srinath Perera – Attorney-at-Law & General Secretary, Free Trade Union Centre
85. Sritharan Sritharuni
86. Stalingeorge Nishanthini
87. Sumathy Sivamohan
88. Sunanda Deshapriya
89. Sunil Jayasekera
90. T. Mathuri – Attorney-at-Law
91. Taanya Tranchell
92. Tehani Ariyaratne
93. Thiruni Kelegama
94. U.L. Jaufer
95. Udaya Kalupathirana
96. Victor Panangala
- Organizations
97. Almuslimaath
98. Association of Family Members of the Disappeared
99. Buddhist Liberation Front
100. Center for Social Concerns, Ja-Ela
101. Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA)
102. Free Media Movement
103. INFORM Human Rights Documentation Center
104. Muslim Women’s Research and Action Forum
105. National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka
106. National Peace Council of Sri Lanka (NPC)
107. Secretariat for Muslims (SFM)
108. The Muslim Council of Sri Lanka

Footnotes

- [1] Address by Ms. Flavia Pansieri United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights at the 24th session of the Human Rights Council, Geneva, 25 September 2013 - <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=13820&LangID=E>
- [2] Source: National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka - <http://nceasl.org/>
- [3] Colombo Telegraph, Dambulla Kovil Attacked; Hindu Politico Says Mosques And Kovils Must Not Be Shifted - <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/dambulla-kovil-attacked-hindu-politico-says-mosques-and-kovils-must-not-be-shifted/> & Tamil Guardian, Attacks on Hindu temples escalate - <http://www.tamilguardian.com/article.asp?articleid=4839>
- [4] The Sunday Leader, FTZ Worker Succumbs To Injuries - <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2011/06/01/ftz-worker-succumbs-to-injuries/>
- [5] The Republic Square - Akila Dinesh, 17-year old killed during Weliweriya clash - <http://www.therepublicsquare.com/politics/2013/08/02/akila-dinesh-17-year-old-killed-at-weliweriya-clash/>
- [6] Incident details - Source: National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka - <http://nceasl.org/category/religious-liberty/incident-reports/>