

INTERVENTION

Niranjala Arulnandhy / Centre for Human Rights and Development (CHRD)
Sri Lanka

Agenda item #3.

Protection of the existence of and prevention of violence against religious minorities

Thank you Madame Chair

I am Niranjala Arulnandhy representing the Centre for Human Rights and Development, a NGO based in Colombo, Sri Lanka

Let me begin my intervention by noting the first article of the UNDM calling on the states to protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity.

(For that reason) we agree with the provisions in Draft Recommendation No.22 on domestic anti discrimination legislation.

The right to religious freedom is guaranteed by the Constitution of 1978¹, where Articles 10 and 12 of the Sri Lanka Fundamental Rights Chapter clearly states that every person is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice' and more importantly '...entitled to equal protection of the law'. However, the implementation of this protection falls short of international standards, judging by the UDHR and the ICCPR, which the State has already ratified.

It is feared that the growing intolerance against religious minorities may divide the country further in a time while the State is working towards reconciliation following 30 years of ethnic conflict.

In fact such violence has grown in frequency and ferocity over the years.

Consecutive governments in Sri Lanka have for years faced intense pressure from Buddhist nationalists demanding a solution to the problem of a perceived growth in minority religions in this country with a Buddhist majority.² Such groups have perpetrated a number of attacks against religious minorities and their institutions, including church burnings.

¹ Sri Lanka is not a Buddhist state, its 1978 Constitution, while assuring freedom of religion to all citizens, grants "foremost place" to Buddhism and declares it "the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddhist Sasana (broad teachings of the Buddha)."

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² [1] Buddhists comprise 70 percent of Sri Lanka's 20 million people most are Sinhalese. Hindus, Muslims and Christians are the main religious minorities. While Hindus are all Tamils, Muslims and Christians speak Sinhala or Tamil depending on where they live.

Now, in the post war context, mosques and Muslim-owned businesses have come under attack. In April last year, a mosque in Dambulla, a town located 150 km north of Sri Lanka's capital Colombo, was vandalized. Early this year, a Sinhalese-Buddhist group—the Bodu Bala Sena ran a violent campaign calling for the boycott of halal-certified products. In September, a mob forced Muslims to shut down a new mosque in Colombo.

Functioning with impunity, these groups have furthered their campaign of violence against religious minorities.

Therefore, we urge the Forum to call on the State of Sri Lanka to ensure implementation of the Draft Recommendation No. 22 which will further ensure religious freedom and protection.

Thank you.