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**U.S. Department of State
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:
Sri Lanka**

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SRI LANKA

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution gives Buddhism a foremost position, but it also provides for the right of members of other faiths to practice their religions freely, and the Government respects this right in practice. Despite the constitutional preference for Buddhism, major religious festivals of all faiths are celebrated as national holidays.

There is a Ministry of Cultural and Religious Affairs and a Ministry of Buddha "Sasana" or Buddhist Affairs; the same person currently leads both ministries. Within the Ministry of Cultural and Religious Affairs, there is a department of Hindu Religious and Cultural Affairs and a Department of Muslim Cultural and Religious Affairs. A Senior Assistant Secretary in the Ministry of Cultural and Religious Affairs monitors government relations with the Christian denominations, which effectively have resisted greater government involvement in their affairs. Instead they are registered individually through acts of Parliament or as corporations under Sri Lankan law.

Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity are all practiced in the country. Approximately 70 percent of the population are Buddhist, 15 percent are Hindu, 7 percent are Muslim, and 8 percent are Christian. There are also small numbers of Baha'is. Christians tend to be concentrated in the western part of the country, with much of the north almost exclusively Hindu. The other parts of the country have a mixture of religions, with Buddhism overwhelmingly present in the south.

The majority of Sinhalese are Theravada Buddhists. Almost all of the Muslims are Sunnis, with a small minority of Shi'as, including members of the Borah community. Roman Catholics account for almost 90 percent of the Christians, with Anglicans and other mainstream Protestant churches also present in the cities. The Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Assemblies of God are present as well. Evangelical Christian groups have made gains in membership in recent years, although the overall number of members in these groups is still small.

Foreign clergy may work in the country, but for more than 30 years the Government has prohibited the entry of new foreign Jesuit clergy. In 1962 the Government reached an agreement with the Catholic Church that new foreign clergy would not be permitted to enter the country on a permanent basis. As foreign clergy retired, Sri Lankans would replace them. It permitted those already in the country to remain. However, the Jesuits want their clergy to be replaced by foreign members of their order as they retire. The local Catholic Church hierarchy does not support the Jesuits in the dispute

and is not lobbying the Government to change the agreement. Most religious workers in the country, including most Christian clergy, are Sri Lankan in origin.

Some evangelical Christians, who constitute less than 1 percent of the population, have expressed concern that their efforts at proselytization often are met with hostility and harassment by the local Buddhist clergy and others opposed to their work. They sometimes complain that the Government tacitly condones such harassment. However, there is no evidence to support this claim. The Assemblies of God filed a fundamental rights case with the Supreme Court in 1997, after the local village council in Gampaha tried to block the construction of a church on the grounds that it would interfere with Buddhism. The Supreme Court ruled that the construction of the church could proceed. The new church building is nearing completion.

Religion is a mandatory subject in the school curriculum. Parents and children can choose which religion a child studies: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, or Christianity. Religion is taught in schools from an academic point of view.

The Government has established councils for interfaith understanding.

Issues related to family law, including divorce, child custody, and inheritance are adjudicated by the customary law of each ethnic or religious group. In 1995 the Government raised the minimum age of marriage for women from 12 to 18 years, except in the case of Muslims, who continue to follow their customary religious practices. The application of different legal practices based on membership in a religious or ethnic group often results in discrimination against women.

There is no tax exemption for religious organizations as such. However, churches and temples are allowed to register as charitable organizations and therefore are entitled to some tax relief.

For the past 16 years the Government (controlled by the Sinhalese, and predominantly Buddhist, majority) has fought the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an insurgent organization fighting for a separate state for the country's Tamil (and predominantly Hindu) minority. Religion does not play a significant role in the conflict, which essentially is rooted in linguistic, ethnic, and political differences. Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians have all been affected by the conflict, which has claimed an estimated 60,000 lives. The military has issued warnings via public radio before commencing major operations, instructing civilians to congregate at safe zones around churches and temples; however, in the conflict areas in the north, the Government occasionally has been accused of bombing and shelling Hindu temples and Christian churches. In March 1999, government forces recaptured the town of Madhu in the northwestern area of the country, the site of a famous Catholic shrine. Because Madhu was controlled by the LTTE, for several years Catholics from the south had not been able to make the pilgrimage to Madhu. After the town was recaptured by government forces, Catholics were able to resume the pilgrimage.

Security force personnel probably were responsible for the 1997 death of Reverend Innasi Arulpalan, a priest from the Jaffna diocese of the Church of South India. Although the University Teachers for Human Rights-Jaffna (UTHR-J) reported that witnesses claimed to have seen Reverend Arulpalan and two other individuals being taken away by the army on August 25, 1997, subsequent investigations by reliable, independent sources failed to identify any witnesses who actually saw the three in

army custody. Their mutilated bodies were found on September 9, 1997. Although initially the military formally denied responsibility for the incident and placed the blame on the LTTE, since then senior military officials have suggested that the Reverend may have been killed accidentally, because his death occurred near the army's forward defense lines, an area where confrontations with the LTTE were common. There is no evidence to indicate that his religious beliefs or affiliation were a factor in his killing. Although it promised a further investigation into the matter, by the end of 1998 the Government had not produced additional information regarding the case and no further inquiries into the Reverend's death were continuing.

On February 1, 1998, police and home guards allegedly massacred eight Tamil civilians, including three children, possibly in reprisal for the LTTE bombing of the "Temple of the Tooth" 1 week earlier. Some 31 police officers and 10 home guards were arrested in connection with the case. In September 1998, 21 of these individuals were charged, 4 with murder and 17 with unlawful assembly. The other 20 were released after the Attorney General determined that there was insufficient evidence against them. The cases had not been heard as of June 30, 1999. The killing of the Tamil civilians in February 1998 was a consequence of the country's internal conflict, and there was no evidence to indicate that it was motivated by religion.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

The LTTE has targeted Buddhist sites, most notably the historic Dalada Maligawa or "Temple of the Tooth," the holiest Buddhist shrine in the country, in the town of Kandy on January 25, 1998. Thirteen worshipers, including several children, were killed by the bombing. Following a bombing in Colombo in October 1997, an LTTE suicide bomber threw a grenade into a temple compound and killed a Buddhist monk. In 1985 the LTTE massacred 150 persons worshipping at a holy Buddhist site in Anuradhapura. In 1987 the LTTE killed 31 Buddhist monks.

The LTTE has discriminated against Muslims, and in 1990 expelled some 46,000 Muslim inhabitants--virtually the entire Muslim population--from their homes in areas under LTTE control in the northern part of the island. Most of these persons remain displaced and currently live in refugee camps. Although some Muslims returned to Jaffna in 1997, they did not remain there due to the continuing threat posed by the LTTE. There are credible reports that the LTTE has warned Muslims displaced from the Mannar area (approximately 50,000 persons) not to return to their homes until the conflict is over. In the past, the LTTE has expropriated Muslim homes, lands, and businesses and threatened Muslim families with death if they attempt to return. However, it appears these attacks by the LTTE are not targeted against persons due to their religious beliefs, but as part of an overall strategy to clear the north and east of persons not sympathetic to the cause of an independent Tamil state.

The LTTE has been accused in the past of using church and temple compounds, where civilians are instructed by the Government to congregate in the event of hostilities, as shields for the storage of munitions.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Discrimination based on religious differences is much less common than discrimination based on ethnic group or caste. In general, the members of the various faiths tend to be tolerant of each other's religious beliefs. However, on occasion, evangelical Christians have been harassed by Buddhist monks for their attempts to convert Buddhists to Christianity, and sometimes complain that the Government tacitly condones such harassment, although there is no evidence to support this claim (see Section I).

On April 2, 1999, two bombs were planted in an Assemblies of God prayer hall under construction in the mainly Buddhist town of Tissamaharama (in the south). One of the bombs exploded that night, causing a small amount of structural damage to the building. The other bomb was found on the morning of April 3 and defused. No one was injured in these incidents. According to his widow, Lionel Jayasinghe, the founder of the congregation, was killed on March 25, 1988, because his ambition to convert Buddhists to Christianity met with violent opposition from his neighbors. His death was investigated by the authorities, but no arrests were made in connection with the killing. Jayasinghe's widow now leads the congregation founded by her husband.

There are reports that members of various religious groups give preference in hiring in the private sector to members of their own group or denomination. This practice likely is linked to the country's ongoing ethnic problems and does not appear to be based principally on religion. There is no indication of preference in employment in the public sector on the basis of religion.

The Borah Muslim World Congress held in April 1999 attracted more than 3,000 participants from a number of countries to hear remarks by the group's spiritual leader, Dr. Syenda Mohammed Burhamuddin.

In December 1997, a mob led by Buddhist clerics attacked an Assemblies of God church in Matara, damaging it severely in the process. The mob also reportedly assaulted several members of the congregation. Police were stationed in the area due to the size of the crowd, and intervened to help some of the congregation to leave the area. Police also have investigated the incident, but no one has been charged. However, relations between the Assemblies of God and the Buddhist communities in Matara have since returned to normal.

In mid-February 1999, a group of religious leaders from the Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian communities made a 3-day visit to the north central part of the country, which is controlled by the LTTE. The purpose of the visit was to assess the humanitarian situation in the region and to talk with senior LTTE leaders to discuss the conflict and the prospects for peace. The group later met with the President, but there had been no concrete results from the religious leaders' initiative as of June 30, 1999. Follow up meetings with the LTTE which were scheduled for mid-1999 were cancelled after government forces captured additional LTTE-held territory north of the town of Madhu.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the overall context of the promotion of human rights. Representatives of the Embassy regularly meet with representatives of all of the country's religious groups to review a wide range of human rights, ethnic, and religious freedom issues. The U.S. Ambassador has met with many religious figures, both in Colombo and in his travels around the country. Christian bishops and prominent Buddhist monks, as well as prominent members of the Hindu and Muslim communities, are in regular contact with the Embassy. The Embassy has been supportive of efforts by interfaith religious leaders to promote a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Sri Lanka.

In January 1998, the U.S. Government criticized the LTTE bombing of the "Temple of the Tooth."

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