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USCIRF is increasingly concerned about the religious freedom situation in Sri Lanka. In the last year there have been numerous attacks against religious minority communities, including Muslims, Hindus, and Christians, by extremist Buddhist monks and laity affiliated with Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist groups such as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and Sinhala Ravaya. Additionally, USCIRF received multiple reports that government officials and police did not stop religiously-motivated attacks and in some cases participated in them, did not provide adequate protection for minority communities, and even harassed religious minority communities at their houses of worship. USCIRF reported on its monitoring of Sri Lanka between 2006 and 2010, but it was neither a CPC nor Tier 2 country.

Background

Until 2009, Sri Lanka was ravaged by a 26-year civil war primarily between government troops and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an ethnically-based movement seeking an independent state. During the war, both sides failed to take steps to prevent or stop incidents of communal violence involving Sinhalese Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. The UN and the United States have repeatedly called on the Sri Lankan government to allow an independent investigation of alleged war crimes committed by the government and the LTTE. The political aftermath of the civil war and allegations of war crimes continue to exacerbate religious and ethnic tensions.

Hostility against religious minorities

The BBS frequently makes public derogatory statements about religious minorities, calls for bans on Muslim headscarves and halal slaughter, urges Buddhists not to do business with religious minorities, and demands the adoption of an anti-conversion law. NGOs and various religious communities assert that it is BBS policy to incite Buddhist Monks and laity to violence. Allegedly, the BBS has close political and financial ties to the government. In a March 2013 speech celebrating the opening of a BBS training school, Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, the brother of the Sri Lankan president, said "It is the monks who protect our country, religion and race."

Increasing violence

Dozens of religiously-motivated attacks occurred during the last reporting year, with authorities rarely making arrests or initiating prosecutions. For example, over two days in August 2013, as Muslims celebrated the end of Ramadan, dozens of Buddhist monks and laity attacked the Grandpass mosque in Colombo and nearby Muslim homes. Four people were seriously injured. Reportedly, local police were warned of the attack in advance, but arrived after the violence. No known arrests were made. The Sri Lanka Muslim Council reportedly agreed to close the mosque and relocate to avoid ongoing harassment and potential violence. Video of the incident is widely available on the internet. Video of a January 2014 mob attack on the Assembly of God and Calvary churches in Hikkaduwa is also available on the internet. Again, local police reportedly had been pre-warned but arrived after the attack. Eighteen individuals were arrested, including seven Buddhist monks. All were granted bail pending trial. It is not known if a trial date has been scheduled.

Recommendations

Since the end of the civil war, the United States has supported ethnic reconciliation efforts and post-conflict humanitarian support. In on-going engagement with the Sri Lankan government, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should: press the government to allow for a transparent and independent investigation into alleged 2009 war crimes as it relates to targeted attacks on religious minorities; ensure a portion humanitarian aid to Sri Lanka is used to help protect religious or ethnic minorities who have been or are likely targets of religious-motivated violence; train local government officials, police officers and judges on international religious freedom standards and on how to investigate and to fairly adjudicate violent attacks when they occur; and urge government officials to frequently and publically denounce religiously-motivated harassment and violence.

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