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SRI LANKA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to change religion. The constitution and other laws give Buddhism the “foremost place” among the country’s religious faiths and commit the government to protecting it while respecting the rights of religious minorities. According to representatives of religious minority communities and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), government officials at the local level engaged in systematic discrimination against religious minorities, especially Muslims and converts to nondenominational Christian groups. Local government officials and police reportedly responded minimally or not at all to numerous incidents of religiously motivated violence against Muslim and Christian minorities. There were some reports of government officials being complicit in physical attacks on religious minorities and their places of worship. In June then Justice Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe publicly threatened to disbar and jail prominent human rights attorney Lakshan Dias for giving a media interview in which he stated that more than 190 documented attacks on evangelical Christians had occurred under the current government. Nondenominational Christian churches, often referred to as “evangelical” or “free groups,” continued to report physical attacks and harassment by police and local government officials who often sided with the religious majority in a given community. The government continued to enforce the ministerial circular issued by the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs in 2008, which required registration of and permission for construction of new places of worship.

Attacks on religious minorities continued unabated from the previous year. The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) documented 97 incidents of attacks on churches, intimidation and violence against pastors and their congregations, and obstruction of worship services. The Sri Lankan Muslim Council (MCSL) reported dozens of violent attacks on mosques and Muslim prayer rooms during the year, especially during Ramadan. Buddhist nationalist groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS, Buddhist Power Force) continued to promote the supremacy of the ethnic Sinhalese Buddhist majority and denigrate religious and ethnic minorities, especially via social media.

The U.S. Ambassador repeatedly urged political leaders to defend religious minorities and protect religious freedom for all, emphasizing the importance of religious minorities in the national reconciliation process. Embassy personnel held

outreach events and met often with religious and civic leaders to foster interfaith dialogue. The U.S. government funded multiple foreign assistance programs designed to build on global best practices in interfaith and interreligious cooperation and confidence building.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 22.4 million (July 2017 estimate). The 2012 national census lists 70.2 percent of the population as Buddhist, 12.6 percent Hindu, 9.7 percent Muslim, and 7.4 percent Christian. According to census data, the Theravada Buddhist community, which comprises nearly all Sri Lankan Buddhists, is a majority in the Central, North-Central, Northwestern, Sabaragamuwa, Southern, Uva, and Western Provinces.

Tamils, mainly Hindu with a significant Christian minority, constitute the majority in Northern Province and are the second largest group, after Muslims, in Eastern Province. Most Muslims self-identify as a separate ethnic group. Tamils of Indian origin, who are mainly Hindu, have a large presence in the Central, Sabaragamuwa, and Uva Provinces. Muslims form a plurality in the Eastern Province, and there are sizable Muslim populations in the Central, North-Central, Northwestern, Sabaragamuwa, Uva, and Western Provinces. Christians reside throughout the country but have a larger presence in the Eastern, Northern, Northwestern, and Western Provinces and a smaller presence in the Sabaragamuwa and Uva Provinces.

Most Muslims are Sunni, with small Shia and Ahmadi minorities. An estimated 82 percent of Christians are Roman Catholic. Other groups include Anglicans (Church of Ceylon), the Dutch Reformed Church, Methodists, Baptists, Assembly of God, Pentecostals, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Christian evangelicals, "free groups," and house churches have grown in recent years, although there are no reliable estimates of their numbers, and membership remains relatively low compared to the larger Christian community. There is a very small Jewish population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

According to the constitution, every person is "entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion," including the freedom to choose a religion. The

constitution gives citizens the right to manifest their religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, or teaching, both in public and in private. The constitution accords Buddhism the “foremost place” among the country’s religious faiths and requires the government to protect it, although it does not recognize it as the state religion. A 2003 Supreme Court ruling determined the state was constitutionally required to protect only Buddhism, and other religions did not have the same right to state protection. The same ruling also held that no fundamental right to proselytize exists or is protected under the constitution.

According to some legal experts, there is no legal basis for compulsory registration of places of worship with the state. The government, however, keeps in place a 2008 ministerial circular, introduced by the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs, requiring all new construction of places of worship, regardless of the religion, to receive permission from the Ministry of Buddha Sasana.

Religious groups must register with the government to obtain approval to construct new places of worship, sponsor religious worker (missionary) visas/immigration permits, operate schools, and apply for subsidies for religious education. Religious organizations may also seek incorporation by an act of parliament, which requires a simple majority and affords religious groups state recognition.

Specific government ministers are responsible for addressing the concerns of each major religious community. Departmental/ministerial assignments are based on the religion of the respective incumbent minister – a customary political tradition that has spanned the past several governments. Currently, the minister of sustainable development and wildlife is also responsible for the religious affairs of Buddha Sasana; the minister of prison reforms, rehabilitation, and resettlement is also responsible for Hindu religious affairs; the minister of postal services is also responsible for Muslim religious affairs; and the minister of tourism development is also responsible for Christian religious affairs.

Religion is a compulsory subject in both public and private school curricula. Parents may elect for their children to study Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, or Christianity, provided sufficient demand (at least 15 students) exists within the school for the chosen subject. Students may not opt out of religious instruction. All schools teaching the Sri Lankan Ordinary Level syllabus must use the Ministry of Education curriculum on religion, which covers the four main religions and is compulsory for the General Certificate Education Ordinary Level exams (equivalent to U.S. grade 12). Private schools not following the Sri Lankan

Ordinary Level syllabus (international schools) are not required to teach religious studies.

Matters related to family law, including divorce, child custody, and property inheritance, are adjudicated either under customary law of the ethnic or religious group in question or under the country's civil law. Religious community members, however, report the practice varies by region, and numerous exceptions exist. Sharia and cultural practice typically govern Muslim marriages and divorces while civil law applies to most property rights. According to civil society groups in Northern Province, civil law governs marriages while the Thesawalamai (Hindu) customary law often governs the division of property. Civil law also governs most Sinhalese and Tamil marriages, including mixed marriages or those of individuals who claim no religious affiliation.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Summary Paragraph: Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. According to religious and civil society groups, local government actors often ignored – or were reportedly complicit in – abuses of and illegal restrictions on religious freedom. Victims said government actors and police at the local (village, division, and provincial) level responded minimally or not at all to numerous reported incidents of religiously motivated violence against Muslim and Christian minorities. Nondenominational Christian churches continued to report physical attacks and harassment by police and local government officials. These churches asserted authorities often sided with the religious majority in a given community and demanded Christian groups stop worship activities or relocate their places of worship outside the local jurisdiction, ostensibly to maintain community peace. The government maintained the ministerial circular issued by the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs in 2008, which required registration of and permission for construction of places of worship. According to evangelical Christian groups, local authorities selectively applied the circular and used it as a pretext for abuses of religious minorities. The legal requirement of religious education for children resulted in cases in which students belonging to religious minorities were forced to study the dominant religion in a given region, such as Buddhism or Hinduism.

Nondenominational Christian churches (often referred to as “evangelical” or “free groups”) continued to report physical attacks and harassment by police and local government officials whom they said often sided with the religious majority in a given community. Local authorities sometimes demanded the Christian groups stop worship activities or relocate their places of worship outside the local jurisdiction, ostensibly to maintain community peace. Local police and government officials reportedly continued to cite a 2011 government circular requiring places of worship to obtain approval to conduct religious activities. The circular extended the provisions of the 2008 circular on construction of religious facilities. The Ministry of Buddha Sasana, however, revoked the 2011 circular by a letter issued in 2012. The 2008 circular – although still legally in force – had no explicit basis in national law, according to observers. Local police and government officials, however, reportedly continued to cite the 2011 circular to intimidate local Christian groups and threaten them with incarceration. Police also cited the 2008 circular in dozens of reported cases to prohibit, intimidate, and close down Christian and Muslim places of worship. According to Christian and Muslim civil society groups, official harassment often happened in concert with harassment by local Buddhist monks and Buddhist nationalist organizations.

On July 11, villagers from Illangaithurai in the Eastern Province broke into the premises of the Jesus’ Touch Church while the pastor was conducting a prayer meeting. The villagers assaulted the pastor and dragged him outside the church. Police prevented an escalation of violence. On July 12, the pastor lodged a complaint regarding the incident, but the police officer in charge (OIC) showed him a letter from the divisional secretary of Trincomalee Town that accused his church of proselytizing and instructed police to take action against the pastor.

On April 29, local sources reported two unknown assailants assaulted two Jehovah’s Witnesses in Ridigama, North Central Province. The victims were subsequently taken to the local police station. The police officer on the scene reportedly affirmed persons have the right to share their religious beliefs with others, but he asked the Jehovah’s Witnesses not to proselytize in the Ridigama area. Police also discouraged the Jehovah’s Witnesses from filing a complaint, stating any action by police would prompt the leader of the Ridigama Buddhist temple to call President Maithripala Sirisena and dismiss the officers.

In June human rights activist and lawyer Lakshan Dias fled to Singapore after stating on television there had been more than 190 attacks on evangelical Christian groups since the current government came to power. President Sirisena publicly refuted Dias’s statement, saying that he had spoken to the head of the Catholic

Church in the country, Cardinal Malcom Ranjith, who disputed Dias's claim and said, "I don't know where those statistics came from." Ranjith added there had been no attacks on Catholics under the current government. Following the president's remarks, then Justice Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe, whom the government subsequently removed from office for reasons unrelated to this issue, publicly threatened Dias with disbarment and imprisonment. Dias received a police summons in response to a complaint lodged by three Buddhist monks and a fourth person who accused him of inciting racial and religious hatred. He responded with a statement to the police citing evidence of the attacks in question. As of year's end, there were no additional reports that Dias had been summoned or questioned. He remained free, but the case remained open.

On June 17, civil society activists reported approximately 20 villagers, the local police OIC, five other police officers, and three Buddhist monks gathered at the premises of the Elim Prayer Centre in Galgamuwa, Kurunegala. The group threatened the local pastor because the monks stated he was converting the people of the village, and the OIC ordered the pastor to stop all religious activities and leave the village permanently. In a follow-up order on June 21, the Galgamuwa Police OIC demanded the pastor obtain approval from the central government's Department of Christian Religious Affairs in order to continue with his religious worship activities in the district.

According to civil society groups, on August 14, officers of the Civil Security Department visited a Christian family and informed members they would need approval from the Galgamuwa divisional secretary to conduct prayer meetings in their home. The divisional secretary then told the pastor that because Galgamuwa was a Buddhist village, he would not grant approval. On August 21, the pastor presented a letter from the Department of Christian Religious Affairs explaining that registration was not required. Police reportedly accepted the letter but still compelled the family to sign a statement that they would not increase the number of attendees at their prayer meeting.

Civil society groups and local politicians stated the construction of Buddhist shrines by Buddhist groups and the military in the predominantly Hindu and Muslim Northern and Eastern Provinces constituted religious intimidation, as some shrines were built in areas with few, if any, Buddhist residents. According to local politicians in the north, the military sometimes acted outside its official capacity and aided in the construction of Buddhist statues. After meeting with the Buddhist prelates (leaders) of the Malwatte and Asgiriya temples in Kandy, Northern Chief Minister C. V. Wigneswaran told the press on September 9 that persons in the

north had no objections to Buddhist statues, but they must be built legally without creating conflict.

After receiving invitations from the president's office to attend the opening of a Buddhist temple in Mannar, the Thiruketheeswaram Hindu Temple and Federation of Community Based Organizations in Mannar urged President Sirisena not to participate in the event since the temple had allegedly been built on private land seized from non-Buddhist Tamils during the conflict. The president ultimately declined to attend the opening on September 29.

In December two Buddhist monks visited and reportedly laid claim to the site of a Hindu temple in Muttur, Trincomalee District, shortly after local Hindu villagers had bulldozed the area in preparation for a renovation project at the site. The Hindu villagers claimed to have worshipped at the site for more than 100 years, although the temple had only been registered with the government since 2013. Shortly after the monks' visit, the Eastern Province governor and other government officials held a meeting at the temple, which prompted angry protests by Hindu villagers and a shouting match between the villagers and the governor's wife. The Department of Archaeology planned to excavate the site to determine whether a Buddhist temple did, in fact, predate the Hindu temple.

Although religious education is compulsory, not all schools had sufficient resources to teach all four recognized religions – Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity – and some students were forced to study religions other than their own. Government schools frequently experienced a shortage of teachers, sometimes requiring available teachers to teach the curriculum of a faith different from their own.

While the law requires government and semigovernment schools, some religiously affiliated, to accept students of all faiths, there were some reports of schools refusing students admission on religious grounds. According to human rights groups, on September 27, the interview board of a government school, St. Anne's College in Kurunegala, informed a parent it had denied her child admission because she was a member of the Assemblies of God church. St. Anne's accepts children from Buddhist and Catholic backgrounds, but reportedly refused entry to evangelical Christian children. In September the principal of another government Catholic school, Holy Family Balika Vidyalaya in Kurunegala, reportedly refused admission to two students for the same reason. Human rights groups filed legal cases alleging the denial of fundamental rights before the Supreme Court in both cases.

The Department of Christian Affairs launched a public awareness campaign to encourage nondenominational groups to register as religious organizations, but the government had not actually registered them because a political decision by the minister on the registration of nondenominational Christian groups was pending as of December 31. Instead, nondenominational Christian groups continued to incorporate as commercial trusts, legal societies, or NGOs to engage in financial transactions, open bank accounts, and hold property. Without formal government recognition via the registration process, however, nondenominational churches reported they could not sponsor “religious worker” visas for visiting clergy and faced restrictions on holding meetings or constructing new places of worship. According to evangelical groups, nondenominational churches experienced two major difficulties in complying with local officials’ registration requirements. First, rural congregations often could not obtain deeds to land due to the degradation of hard copy Land Registry documentation and incomplete land surveys. Second, without the consent of the majority of the local community or the local Buddhist temple, local councils often opted not to approve the construction of new religious buildings. Church leaders reported they repeatedly appealed to local government officials and the ministry responsible for Christian religious affairs for assistance, with limited success.

In May President Sirisena ordered law enforcement agencies to take stern action against those responsible for attacking Muslims and damaging their places of worship. The president asked then-Law and Order Minister Sagala Ratnayake to lead the effort, and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said local police must be held accountable for responding to the incidents. On May 31, the president proposed a district-level interreligious forum to address ongoing violence between Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian communities. He said there should be no room for religious conflicts, which spread disunity in the country.

Also in May the independent but quasigovernmental Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission issued an appeal to President Sirisena, expressing concern about the escalating “acts of violence and aggression” against religious minorities and urging the government to take action against the perpetrators. Some civil society groups stated the government had failed to take prompt action in response to the attacks.

On June 21, authorities arrested the general secretary of the BBS, Galabodatte Gnanasara, for failing to appear in court concerning a case filed against him for forcefully entering and sabotaging a press conference in 2014. After he posted bail, authorities rearrested Gnanasara the same day for hate speech and obstructing

police duties. They subsequently released him again on bail. On June 7, police arrested a suspect in connection with a Molotov cocktail attack on a shop in Maharagama. The suspect confessed to four attacks on Muslim shops and stated he was a BBS member. On June 9, police arrested a suspect in a different Molotov cocktail attack on a mosque in Trincomalee.

The cases against all of the accused in the 2014 attacks on Muslims progressed slowly during the year. Lawyers with knowledge of the cases stated 42 cases related to the anti-Muslim riots in 2014 in Aluthgama remained pending.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Buddhist nationalist groups such as the BBS continued to promote the supremacy of the ethnic Sinhalese Buddhist majority and denigrate religious and ethnic minorities, especially via social media. Civil society observers expressed concern the rhetoric of the BBS and other Buddhist nationalist groups incited societal actors to commit acts of violence against members of religious minority groups.

The NCEASL documented 97 cases of attacks on churches, intimidation and violence against pastors and their congregations, and obstruction of worship services during the year, compared with 89 cases in 2016. The Centre for Policy Alternatives stated several Buddhist nationalist organizations regularly espoused hate speech and continued to enjoy impunity from arrest and investigation.

In January a mob of villagers, reportedly with two Buddhist monks, attacked and destroyed the Kithusevana Church in the village of Karuwalagaswewa in Puttalam District. The mob threatened church members and tried to force a congregant and his daughter to participate in the destruction of the church. Two court cases on the incident were ongoing at the Puttalam Magistrates Court at year's end.

According to witness statements, in August neighbors assaulted the pastor and a congregant from the House of Prayer Ministries in Batticaloa while the latter were preparing for prayer meeting. One of the neighbors had disturbed the church service on other occasions. The neighbor complained to police about noise pollution and threw stones at the church, breaking windows.

In September a mob led by Buddhist monks from the nationalist Sinhale Jathika Balamuluwa (Sinhalese National Force) attacked a shelter outside of Colombo housing 31 Rohingya refugees from Burma. The monks accused the Rohingya of being members of ISIS and demanded their immediate deportation. The mob outnumbered local police at the scene, who did not make any arrests at the time, reportedly out of fear of inciting violence; however, police facilitated the evacuation of the Rohingya from the site. In close coordination with the government, the local UN resident coordinator moved all of the refugees to a refugee detention center outside the capital. On September 27, a second group of Buddhist monks led an impromptu protest at the UN High Commissioner for Refugees office in Colombo objecting to the Rohingya group's presence in the country. The government condemned the demonstration. In September police arrested six suspects in connection with the attack. In October they arrested two Buddhist monks who allegedly led the attack. Afterward, the police arrested an unnamed additional suspect, but did not make details of the arrest available. Of the nine suspects, police released eight on bail and one was remanded until December 11. Their cases were pending as of the end of the year's end.

On March 17, police arrested five Jehovah's Witnesses for proselytizing in Nikaweratiya, North Western Province. Buddhist monks reportedly verbally abused the Witnesses, told them to leave the area, and demanded they stop preaching.

In March a civil society organization reported a group of approximately 50 persons, including Buddhist monks, forced its way into a Christian church in Ingriya following a Sunday service. The group threatened members of the congregation who were still present, demanding they provide their names and stop holding services. After the church filed a complaint, a mob smashed windows in the home of the church's pastor and surrounded the home. Police arrived and recommended the pastor and his family go to a safer place. Civil society members also reported that in April a group of 30 Buddhist monks, together with villagers, surrounded a church in Devinuwara in Matara District. The mob yelled death threats, grabbed Bibles from members of the congregation, and threatened to destroy the church if services did not stop. In May a larger crowd of nearly 2,000, led by 30-40 Buddhist monks, conducted a large demonstration, again threatening they would destroy the church. Later in May five demonstrators disrupted the church's services, shouting death threats and derogatory remarks.

Local press reported widespread assaults on mosques and Muslim prayer rooms throughout the year, and especially in May and June during Ramadan. Attackers

threw stones and other objects at buildings, and there were some reports of homemade Molotov cocktails. There were also reports of several attacks on Muslim businesses by unknown assailants during Ramadan. In May the general secretary of the BBS, Galabodatte Gnanasara, called Islam a “mental illness” and threatened a “bloodbath” in predominantly Muslim areas. Several of Gnanasara’s followers also threatened self-immolation if the authorities arrested or imprisoned the monk. During the year, some Muslim NGOs stopped documenting incidents targeting the community due to financial constraints, but the MCSL listed 22 attacks in May and June alone. Some Muslim civil society leaders believed the attacks were a response to a Supreme Court decision on May 15 to hear a contempt of court case against Gnanasara.

On May 15, a group firebombed a mosque in the Colombo suburb of Panadura, and on May 16, a group of eight attacked a mosque in another Colombo suburb, Kohilawatte, damaging the mosques on both occasions.

On May 17 and 18, arsonists set fire to three Muslim shops in Wennappuwa. On May 19, unknown assailants firebombed a mosque in Manarapitiya in Central Province. On May 21, assailants attacked a mosque in Kurunegala, and on June 15, police announced the arrest of two suspected BBS members in connection with the attack. On May 20 and 21, unknown arsonists set fire to three shops owned by Muslims in Beruwal in Southern Province, Maharagama in the Western Province, and Ampara in Eastern Province. Unknown assailants also firebombed a Muslim-owned pharmacy in Navinna in Western Province on May 23.

On June 2, unknown assailants threw four Molotov cocktails at a mosque in Manayaweley in Eastern Province. On June 3, unknown assailants firebombed a Muslim-owned pharmacy in Nugegoda in Western Province. On June 5 and 6, unknown assailants set other Muslim-owned shops on fire in Nugegoda and Maharagama, also in Western Province, and, on June 7, a Muslim-owned bakery was set on fire in Maligakanda in Western Province. On August 23, an unknown group threw stones at two mosques in Kurunegala.

On May 16, civil society reported heightened tensions between a Buddhist monk and Muslim community members in the Eastern Province town of Selva Nagar in Trincomalee District. Villagers stated the monk, who was head of a temple with six acres of land, was attempting to claim an additional 49 acres of surrounding land cultivation by local Muslim farmers. More than 1,000 Muslim villagers later moved en masse to a neighboring village overnight out of fear for their safety.

On November 17, a mob damaged dozens of Muslims' homes and at least two mosques in arson attacks in Ginthota after a minor road accident involving a Buddhist and a Muslim inflamed tensions between members of the two groups. Police arrested 22 persons for involvement in the attacks.

In December Jaffna-based civil society activists protested the cremation in Jaffna of Meegahajandure Gnanarathana, chief Buddhist prelate of Northern Province since 1991. A politically active Tamil lawyers group filed a lawsuit to block the ceremony in the local magistrate's court, and protestors called the funeral ceremony a "hostile act" and a "desecration." Protestors noted Buddhists in the area were few and objected to the funeral location. Others in both the Tamil and Sinhalese communities, including National Peace Council Director Jehan Perera, pleaded for tolerance. They noted Gnanarathana had served in Jaffna for many years, and there were no longer significant numbers of Buddhists in Jaffna because most had fled or been forcibly expelled from the area during the war.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In regular meetings with the president, prime minister, and other senior government officials, the Ambassador emphasized the need for respect for and inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities in the post-conflict reconciliation process. During times of heightened religious and ethnic tensions, the Ambassador urged political leaders to defuse the immediate crisis and called on citizens to disavow religious violence. Embassy officers also met regularly with cabinet ministers with religious portfolios to encourage them to build ties across religions as part of sustainable reconciliation.

In response to the Ramadan attacks on Muslim mosques and businesses and threats to the NCEASL and evangelical Christians, the Ambassador publicly tweeted his support for freedom of religion and protection from violence. In June the Ambassador met with Muslim civil society members about the attacks and traveled to Batticaloa in the Eastern Province where he held a highly publicized iftar to show solidarity with Muslims. In his public remarks, the Ambassador said, "Attacks on religious places of worship are reprehensible" and called for the arrest and trial of the perpetrators. During the same visit, the Ambassador met with the Catholic bishop and two Jesuit priests in Batticaloa.

Department and embassy officials met with Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu civil society activists and victims of reported attacks across the country to gauge the climate for religious minorities. In addition, embassy and visiting

Department officials met with religious groups, civil society organizations, and government officials to express concern about harassment of, attacks on, and government and societal discrimination against members of religious minority groups. In outreach events, the Ambassador and other U.S. officials encouraged religious leaders and civil society to play a productive role in demonstrating how a post-conflict, religiously diverse country could achieve lasting peace and inclusive prosperity. They also hosted and participated in events with religious groups.

The Department of State and the embassy supported the work of civil society organizations to strengthen the capacity of religious and community leaders to lead peacebuilding activities through district-level interreligious reconciliation committees, consisting of religious and civic leaders and laypersons from different faith traditions and ethnicities. In July a senior embassy official spoke to a district interreligious reconciliation committee in Kandy to promote religious harmony in the Central Province. In November the embassy held an interreligious outreach event in Kalutara, an area marked by violent anti-Muslim riots in 2014, to formulate a youth action plan and promote interreligious and interethnic understanding. Attendees included young persons and clergy from all four main religious groups, who lauded the event's focus on local community-based dialogue.