

**2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:****Sri Lanka**

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

U.S. Department of State, September 5, 2000

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22/11-00

SRI LANKA

Although the Constitution gives Buddhism a foremost position, it also provides for the right of members of other faiths to practice their religion freely, and the Government respects this right in practice.

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

Despite generally amicable relations among persons of different faiths, there has been occasional resistance by Buddhists to Christian church activity, and in particular to the growth of evangelical Christian denominations. The courts generally have upheld the right of these groups to worship and to construct facilities to house their congregations. However, the State limits the number of foreign religious workers granted temporary residence permits.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion**Legal/Policy Framework**

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.

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 domestic law.

Religious Demography

Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity all are 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 also are 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 still is small.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Foreign clergy may work in the country, but for the last 30 years, the Government has taken steps to limit the number of foreign Christian religious workers given temporary work permits. Permission usually is restricted to denominations that are registered formally with the Government. 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 Church reached agreement with the local council before the Supreme Court heard the case, and the building project was allowed to proceed. The denomination complains that it continues to face opposition at the local level in many places but states that legal action or the threat of legal action generally has resulted in the Church being allowed to construct facilities for its congregations and conduct worship services.

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.

Despite the constitutional preference for Buddhism, major religious festivals of all faiths are celebrated as national holidays.

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 can result 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 17 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 all have been affected by the conflict, which has claimed more than 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 from the LTTE, 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, but recapture of the shrine by the LTTE in November 1999 once again limited access.

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 there were reports that witnesses claimed that the army took away Reverend Arulpalan and two other individuals, these reports could not be confirmed. The military initially formally denied responsibility for the incident and placed the blame on the LTTE. Senior military officials later 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. Despite a promise of further investigation into the matter, the Government has not produced additional information regarding the case. There is no evidence to indicate that his religious beliefs or affiliation were a factor in his killing.

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.

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

worshippers, 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 or near welfare centers. 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 thousands of Muslims displaced from the Mannar area 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 that these attacks by the LTTE are not targeted against persons due to their religious beliefs, but that they are targeted 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.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

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.

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 were few concrete results from the meeting. 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. Religious leaders have continued to serve as unofficial envoys between the two warring sides.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the overall context of its 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.

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