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Sri Lanka

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The Constitution accords Buddhism the "foremost place," but it is not recognized as the state religion. The Constitution also provides for the right of members of other faiths to practice their religion freely, and the Government generally 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 activities of evangelical Christian denominations. While the courts generally have upheld the right of evangelical Christian groups to worship and to construct facilities to house their congregations, 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. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 25,322 square miles and a population of approximately 18.5 million. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity all are practiced in the country. Approximately 70 percent of the population are Buddhist, 15 percent are Hindu, 8 percent are Christian, and 7 percent are Muslim. Christians tend to be concentrated in the west, 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.

Most members of the majority Sinhalese community are Theravada Buddhists. Almost all Muslims are Sunnis, with a small minority of Shi'a, 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 increased in membership in recent years, although the overall number of members in these groups still is small.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

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 generally respects this right in practice.

There are separate ministries in the Government, led by different ministers, that address religious affairs. These include: The Ministry of Buddha Sasana ("clergy"), the Ministry of Muslim Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Hindu Affairs, and the Ministry of Christian Affairs. Each of these ministries has been empowered to deal with issues involving the religion in question.

In January a bill intended to curb religious conversions of Hindus was drafted and presented to the Cabinet. As of the end of the reporting period, the bill was still under review.

Some Christian denominations have resisted greater government involvement in their affairs; instead they are registered individually through acts of Parliament or as corporations under domestic law. Christian denominations must fill out and submit forms in order to be recognized as corporations. This gives them legal standing in Sri Lanka to be treated as corporate entities in their financial and real estate transactions.

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 exemptions.

The Government has established councils for interfaith understanding.

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

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Foreign clergy may work in the country, but for the last three decades, 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 proselytizing often are met with hostility and harassment by the local Buddhist clergy and others opposed to their work. In April two Christians were physically assaulted by a Buddhist monk. They sometimes complain that the Government tacitly condones such harassment, but there is no evidence to support this claim. The Assemblies of God claims that it continues to face opposition at the local level in many areas 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 may choose whether a child studies Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, or Christianity. Students of minority religions other than Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity must pursue religious instruction outside of the public school system. There are no separate syllabi provided for smaller religions. Religion is taught in schools from an academic point of view.

Issues related to family law, including divorce, child custody, and inheritance are adjudicated by the customary law of each ethnic or religious group. The minimum age of marriage for women is 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 may result in discrimination against women.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Since 1983 the Government (controlled by the Sinhalese, and predominantly Buddhist, majority) 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. However, in December 2001, the Government and the LTTE each announced unilateral cease fires. The peace process is fragile; in April, the LTTE pulled out of talks with the Government. Religion did 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 had issued warnings through 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. During the period covered by this report, however, some Buddhists clergy were allowed to visit Buddhist shrines in LTTE-controlled areas for the first time in many years.

The LTTE 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 in January 1998. Thirteen worshipers, including several children, were killed by the bombing. The Government still is attempting to locate and arrest the LTTE perpetrators of the attack. As a result, the Government has augmented security at a number of religious sites island-wide, including the Temple of the Tooth. In contrast to previous years, the LTTE did not target Buddhist sites during the period covered by this report; however, the LTTE has not indicated that it will abstain from attacking such targets in the future.

The LTTE has discriminated against Muslims, and in 1990 expelled some 46,000 Muslim inhabitants—virtually the entire Muslim population—from their homes in 540 areas under LTTE control in the northern part of the island. Most of these persons remain displaced and 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. Despite the ceasefire and peace process, the LTTE continues to extort money from Muslim families and businesses in eastern Sri Lanka. However, it appears that these attacks by the LTTE are not targeted against persons due to their religious beliefs, but that they are rather a part of an overall strategy to clear the north and east of persons not sympathetic to the LTTE. The LTTE has made some conciliatory statements to the Muslim community, but

the statements were viewed with skepticism by some Muslims. During the year, the LTTE invited Muslim IDPs to return home, asserting they will not be harmed. Although some Muslim IDPs have begun returning home, the vast majority have not and were instead waiting for a guarantee from the Government for their safety in LTTE-controlled areas.

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.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including 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 III. 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 this version of Christianity, and they at times complain that the Government tacitly condones such harassment, although no evidence has been presented to support this claim (see Section I).

On May 17, a group of laypersons associated with a local Buddhist temple visited Pastor Rozario at his home in the village of Neluwa, in the Galle District, and instructed him not to convert persons of other faiths to Christianity. Following the incident, Rozario made a complaint to police. On June 17, other persons attacked Pastor Rozario and set fire to items in his home. Suspects in both incidents are scheduled for trial in March 2004.

On May 25, 500 Hindus broke into the Heavenly Harvest Church in Kaluvenkerni, beat church members, including children, and ransacked the building. The Hindu mob then set fire to the homes of all 25 Christian families in the village and tried to force two Christians to renounce their faith. The police who arrived on the scene were outnumbered but managed to drive the pastor to safety. The LTTE have asked Christian villagers to return and promised to look after their safety. As of the end of the period covered by this report, no arrests had been made, and none seemed likely.

On June 3, a mob of 100 Buddhists surrounded St. Stephen's Lutheran Church at midnight and destroyed a small church hall still under construction. A Christian family next door was threatened with death if they reported the incident. Local authorities made one arrest after the attack but took no other action. Villagers subsequently threatened to bomb the church if the Christians attempted to rebuild it.

In September 2002, a group of Christians vandalized a Jehovah's Witness hall in Negombo, breaking windows, destroying electrical systems, and burning equipment. Members of the congregation claimed that the police did not react to the disturbance until after the crowd dispersed. In November a Christian mob stormed the same meeting hall, assaulting Jehovah's Witnesses and again vandalizing the premises. In December an appeal was made for police action and cooperation. A police spokesman visited the site and submitted a report to the Inspector General of Police. As of the end of the reporting period, the outcome of the investigation had not been made public.

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.

In April 2001, a Muslim cashier was attacked by four Sinhalese in Mawanella. When the Muslim community protested police inaction, the Muslim persons were confronted by rioting Sinhalese, and two Muslims were killed. Due to police inaction, the senior superintendent of police was transferred; arrests were then made by the police.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting 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 inter-faith religious leaders to promote a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

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