



His Excellency Gotabaya Rajapaksa  
President of Sri Lanka,  
Presidential Secretariat  
Colombo 01  
Sri Lanka.

18<sup>th</sup> November 2020.

Your Excellency,

**RE: FORCED CREMATION OF COVID-19 VICTIMS**

We, the organizations of Sri Lankan Muslims in the United Kingdom (UK) write to you to express our concern about the continuation of the policy of forcible cremation of bodies of Muslim victims of COVID-19. We are gravely disappointed that the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) is continuing to cremate the fatalities of COVID-19 victims despite World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines and appeals from many local and international organizations including the United Nations (UN). Unfortunately, Sri Lanka is once again attracting international attention for the wrong reasons.

Your Excellency, we are very much appreciative about the positive measures taken by the GoSL to fight this viral epidemic. We are also happy to note that the Muslim community in Sri Lanka, has joined with all other communities in fully supporting the laudable efforts made by the GoSL and public health professionals to combat this pandemic. In fact, the Muslim organizations have given an exemplary lead in fully cooperating with the authorities and taking the necessary measures to stop all congregational activities, as well as putting the community in an alert mode, in the fight against this invisible common enemy. In fact, an inclusive approach is paramount in tackling this crisis.

The Islamic faith requires the deceased to be buried in accordance with religious guidelines and it is forbidden to cremate the deceased. The forcible cremation of bodies of COVID-19 victims has been causing much pain, anguish and agitation among the Muslim community as well as some of the Christian community in Sri Lanka.

The guidelines of the **WHO clearly state that the mortal remains of COVID-19 victims can be either buried or cremated**, respecting the religious and cultural beliefs and practices of the families and their communities. It was however regrettable to note that the amendment made to the Public health guidelines in Sri Lanka to accommodate the burial option, was later removed without assigning any valid reasons. Directive issued by the Ministry of Health on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020 dictated that bodies can only be cremated, thereby prohibiting burial. This is contrary not only to the WHO guidelines, but to the practice of over **180 countries and territories that allow both ways of disposal of bodies**. There is no evidence from any country in the world that burial of COVID-19 fatalities can cause harm to other humans or to the environment. Further, medical professionals have also cleared the fact that buried remains will **NOT** contaminate the water table both locally and internationally. Dr Paba Palihawadana (Deputy Director General of Health Services, Sri Lanka), in an interview also supported this position and the letter sent to the Prime Minister by UN resident coordinator for Sri Lanka, Hanaa Singer on 12<sup>th</sup> of November 2020 explains this further.

It is also notable that the Mumbai High Court dismissed such claims and ruled in favour of allowing burial in cemeteries close to thickly populated residential areas in May 2020, observing no scientific data to support that COVID-19 spreads through burial of dead bodies.

[<https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/bombay-high-court-rejects-plea-against-burial-of-deceased-covid-19-patients/article31649224.ece>]

Further, South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR) have also expressed their concern over the mandatory cremation in Sri Lanka. [<http://www.southasianrights.org/sahr-expresses-concern-over-sri-lankan-authorities-insisting-on-mandatory-cremation-for-muslims-who-died-of-covid-19/>]

Be as it may, the practice of forcible cremation is also a violation of the fundamental human right of freedom of belief and worship and the freedom to manifest one's beliefs. It also goes contrary to the rights of minorities, which are allowed by international conventions and declarations to preserve and practice their religions and cultures.

On all the occasions of cremations the families have also been forced to buy coffins for the cremation, adding insult to injury, thereby demeaning and degrading to not only the dead, but also their families. Hitherto, to our knowledge, 14 Muslim victims have been cremated against the will of their families. We understand that several interventions taken by the Muslim religious leadership, civil society and politicians (including those in your government) have failed up to date to bring about a constructive solution for the abandonment of this abhorrent practice of forced cremations.

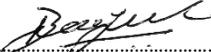
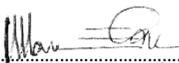
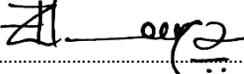
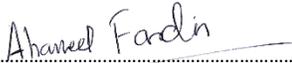
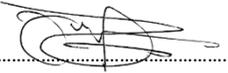
Due to this circumstance, we are highly concerned about the undermining impact this unsubstantiated policy of forced cremation is having on the dignity of the Muslims in Sri Lanka among whom we have our loved ones and relatives. We therefore appeal to the GoSL to give an attentive ear to the plea of the Muslim community of Sri Lanka and the international community to ensure that their dignity and religious rights are not infringed and urgently reconsider reintroducing the amendment to provide the burial option too, with strict conditions to avoid infection spread, as provided in the WHO guidelines. We appeal to the compassion and magnanimity of your excellency's government to ensure that everyone's fundamental

religious rights are protected, without compromising the public health of the population. We request your kind indulgence to favourably consider our appeal in this regard and approve our rights to burial of COVID-19 victims.

Thanking you,

Yours Sincerely,

Sri Lankan Muslim Community Organisations in the United Kingdom

<p><b>Association of Sri Lankan Muslims – Reading (ASLAM)</b> 2 Cholmeley Terrace, Reading, RG1 3NL, UK</p>	 Baazir Rahman (President)
<p><b>Al Furqan Islamic Da'wah Association, UK</b> 33 Rowsley Street, Leicester, LE5 5JN, UK</p>	 Inthisar Mohamed (President)
<p><b>British Sri Lankan Muslim Community Watford</b> 3H Foxhill, Watford, WD24 6SX, UK</p>	 Nakshan Mohamed (President)
<p><b>Islah Trust, UK</b> Northfields Neighbourhood Centre, Brighton Road, Leicester, LE5 0HD, UK</p>	 Mohammed Rifai Jiffry (President)
<p><b>Sri Lankan Muslim Diaspora Initiative UK (SLMDI UK)</b> 14 Loveletts, Crawley, RH11 8EG, UK</p>	 Zareena Muzammil LLB (Hons) (General Secretary)
<p><b>Sri Lankan Muslim Foundation Crawley (SLMFC)</b> Goffs Park House, Old Horsham Road, Crawley, RH11 8PB, UK</p>	 Razmy Nazeer Mohamed (Chairman)
<p><b>Sri Lankan Muslim Foundation – Leicester</b> 39 Edgehill Road, Leicester, LE4 9EA, UK</p>	 Murzi Abdul Careem (President)
<p><b>Sri Lankan Muslim Welfare Association Crawley (SLMWAC)</b> St Leonard's Church Hall, Martyrs Avenue, Crawley, RH11 7RX, UK</p>	 Mohamed Musthafa Niyas (Vice Chairman)
<p><b>Sri Lankan Moors Society – UK</b> 42 Ealing Road, Wembley, Middlesex, HA0 4TL, UK</p>	 Irfan Iqbal (General Secretary)
<p><b>Tees Lanka Islamic Society – Middlesbrough</b> 151A Victory Road, Middlesbrough, TS1 3HR, UK</p>	 Ahamed Fardin (President)
<p><b>UK Madawala Welfare Society (UKMBWS)</b> 11 Lewins Way, Slough, Berkshire, SL1 5JQ, UK</p>	 Aneez Mohamed (President)