

13 January 2021

Honourable Imran Khan
Prime Minister of Islamic Republic of Pakistan
Pakistan

Honoured Prime Minister

Humble Appeal To Use Your Good Offices With Government Of Sri Lanka (GoSL)
To Respect The Burial Rights Of Muslims And Christians

On behalf of the affected Muslim and Christian communities in Sri Lanka, **People's Rights Group (PRG)**, a rights based advocacy and lobbying group based in the UK particularly dealing with human rights violations in Sri Lanka, wishes to respectfully draw your fervent attention particularly to a grave and disturbing development taking place in Sri Lanka, in the midst of the COVID pandemic. Since April 2020, Sri Lanka has been implementing a mandatory cremation policy for all those who die out of COVID as well as those suspected of dying out of it, and has been forcibly cremating bodies despite opposition from the victims' families. To date, over 150 bodies have been forcibly cremated. This has caused immense pain and anguish among the Muslim and some Christian communities in the country. The practice of forced cremation continues despite international and national expert advice, and calls by the UN, human rights bodies, civil and political organizations to end it.

The Muslims of Sri Lanka have always held you in great esteem, being one of the prominent world Muslim leaders who has been consistently drawing the attention of the world about the imperative need to confront the rising tide of Islamophobia that is spreading in Europe and beyond to achieve global peace and justice. Perhaps the most powerful and passionate part of your 50-minute speech at the United Nations General Assembly in 2019, was the plea to world leaders to end Islamophobia. The painful issue of 'forced cremation' in Sri Lanka too is clearly 'State Sanctioned Islamophobia' and a grave violation of human rights to practice one's religion and culture enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Sri Lanka's Constitution, which has been gaining much traction across the world.

At first glance, Sri Lankan authorities insisting that the bodies of all Covid-19 victims be cremated, no matter their religion, might seem fair. However, upon closer inspection it is patently clear that the decision to enforce the 'forced cremations Policy' was taken on arbitrary grounds sans any scientific evidence, contrary to WHO guidelines followed by over 190 countries, and its motivations must therefore be questioned. The World Health Organization (WHO) has quite explicitly laid down guidelines, which state that both cremation and burial options are safe in such disposal. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) also says, '*Decedents with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 can be buried or cremated as usual*'. The UN Resident Coordinator in Sri Lanka Hanaa Singer stated, 'during epidemics, for reasons of public health, Governments often need to take difficult and at times unpopular measures. However, in this case, the negative consequences of not allowing burials seem to outweigh any potential epidemiological benefit. Many scientific experts both in Sri Lanka and outside have also been quite vocal against this gross violation of human rights in the guise of fighting the COVID pandemic. The latest report by a committee of virology experts led by a renowned Sri Lankan expert Prof Jennifer Perera, appointed by the Ministry of Health also unequivocally reiterated that the burial option is quite safe and should be offered apart from the cremation option.

Despite the clear evidence to support the safety of burial option, the Minister of Health recently announced in Parliament that the government would continue to follow their mandatory cremation policy. One of the top health officials, Dr. Channa Perera even expressed the fear in a BBC interview that COVID bodies may be used as biological weapon as well, which clearly smacked of Islamophobia, which found resonance among the growing anti-Muslim hate lobby. Thus, while fighting the pandemic, Sri Lanka appears to have unfortunately given a new lease of life to an equally dangerous 'State sanctioned' racism, which includes growing Islamophobia.

We are pleased to note that your honoured self will be visiting Sri Lanka shortly. Pakistan has always been a great friend of Sri Lanka, helping the country in the many critical instances in the past. Successive governments in both in Sri Lanka and Pakistan, have always valued this friendly relationship covering trade, commerce, culture and defence matters, and made efforts to further widen and deepen it.

In this context, PRG fervently appeals to you, to leverage Pakistan's influence both as a friend and as a Commonwealth and SAARC ally, to request Sri Lanka into ending forced cremations. PRG therefore respectfully requests you to raise this issue with the government, especially during your state visit to Sri Lanka and help the bring justice to the affected minority communities in Sri Lanka. For ***"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere"***- Martin Luther King, Jr.

Yours Faithfully



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