

10th April 2020

VERY URGENT

Dear Dr. Ghebreyesus,

FERVENT REQUEST TO INTERVENE TO STOP FORCED CREMATIONS , WHICH TANTAMOUNTS TO GROSS HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST COVID 19 IN SRI LANKA

We record our highest appreciation for your commitment and leadership in fighting the COVID 19 global pandemic. We also appreciate the efforts of WHO at Regional level and at Country level under the able leadership of Dr Poonam Khetrpal Singh and Dr Razia Narayan Pendse respectively.

We would like to bring to your attention that, with the complicity of the Sri Lankan government, the fight against COVID-19 has become an excuse to infringe upon the rights of minorities and deny their inalienable right to practice their religion, guaranteed by the ICCPR and other human rights instruments.

In particular, we are concerned about the current practice of forced cremations of victims of COVID 19 without any recourse by families to opt for other funeral procedures, despite the clear guidelines issued by the WHO allowing both burial and cremation. This is affecting members of the Islamic and Christian faiths who have protested the lack of sensitivity and flexibility shown by the authorities, in spite of detailed submissions made by experts and professionals (of all faiths) with scientific evidence that burial constitutes no risk of contamination of soil or water. The Government of Sri Lanka is consistently insisting on the cremation of bodies of COVID victims without considering their cultural and religious rights.

The Muslim community in particular has been unduly effected with a number of victims being cremated against the wishes of their families. All representations made by religious, political and civil society leaders to the highest level of the government have been totally disregarded, and the practice continues unfettered. It is noted with concern that the amendment the Government introduced at the initial stages, to include burial as an option was later withdrawn without any consultation with the affected community or without citing any scientific grounds.

Since the first death in the country occurred on the 29th of March 2020, three victims belonging to the Islamic faith have died, and in all cases bodies have been forcibly cremated. It is of even further concern that the families' cooperation has been sought in exchange for allowing extra time to view the body and to perform limited religious rights. The Muslim community which strictly believes that bodies should be buried and not cremated is in a state of shock and helplessness. In this situation even if the COVID19 crisis is overcome, it may take a very long time to heal the psychological wounds caused by human rights violations, exacerbating the impact of the crisis itself.

In addition to the grave violation of human rights, the forcible cremation of bodies and the concerns expressed against the practice have caused other dangerous consequences as well, such as racial and religious profiling of victims and the marginalization of the minority community. Such practices have resulted in the breakdown of the community's trust in the health system and in the law enforcement mechanism, which will have far reaching consequences on the fight against the coronavirus.



Address: Kemp House, 152-160 City Road,
London, United Kingdom EC1V 2NX
Email: mail@prgsrilanka.org | Web: prgsrilanka.org
Tel: +44(0)20 8191 9612

If one country fails, the whole world fails. As such it is of paramount importance that the situation in Sri Lanka is addressed urgently and decisively. Failure to do so will not only be the failure of Sri Lanka, but also the failure of the international community as a whole.

In keeping with the WHO's admirable work of working with governments to contain the virus, we urge the WHO to intervene in this matter in order to immediately put an end to forced cremations, and ensure that the fight against COVID 19 in Sri Lanka is an effective and inclusive one that respects human rights.

With regards,

Baazir Rahman,
Dissemination Manager

To

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus
Director General, World Health Organization

Cc.

1. Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh
Regional Director – South-East Asia
2. Dr Razia Narayan Pendse
Representative, Sri Lanka