



**UNITED NATIONS
SRI LANKA**

TOGETHER FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Honourable Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa,

Allow me to reiterate the solidarity of the United Nations with the people of Sri Lanka in these challenging times marked by the COVID-19 emergency. Please be assured that the United Nations and its specialized agencies, funds and programmes will continue providing support on the management of the epidemic.

Across the world, the safe and dignified handling of those patients whose life has been tragically claimed by this virus has been an important part of the COVID-19 response.

I am following with encouragement recent media reports that the current prohibition of burials of COVID-19 victims in Sri Lanka could be revisited shortly. In this context, I wish to take the opportunity to reiterate the concerns of the United Nations with the existing Ministry of Health guidelines, which stipulate cremation as the only method for the disposal of bodies suspected of COVID-19 infection.

The World Health Organization, in its 24 March 2020 and subsequent updated interim guidance on 4 September 2020 on the "*Infection prevention and control for the safe management of a dead body in the context of COVID-19*", notes that based on current knowledge of the symptoms of COVID-19 and its main modes of transmission (droplet/contact), the likelihood of transmission when handling human remains is low. The common assumption that people who died of a communicable disease should be cremated to prevent spread is not supported by evidence. Instead, cremation is a matter of cultural choice and available resources. According to World Health Organization guidance, people who have died from COVID-19 can therefore be buried or cremated according to local standards and family preferences, with appropriate protocols for handling the body.

In the same context, I deem it important to inform you that I have received impassioned appeals from within and outside the Muslim community that perceive the current policy on burials as discriminatory. Against this background, I fear that not allowing burials is having a negative effect on social cohesion and, more importantly, could also adversely impact the measures for containing the spread of the virus as it may discourage people to access medical care when they have symptoms or history of contact.

Hon Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa
Prime Minister of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka
Prime Minister's Office
Temple Trees
Colombo 3

I recognize that 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. Considering the evidenced-based guidance of the World Health Organization, as well as the commitments of the Government of Sri Lanka to respect and uphold the rights of all communities, I therefore express my hope that the existing policy be revised so as to allow the safe and dignified burial of COVID-19 victims.

The United Nations avails itself of this opportunity to renew its highest consideration to the Government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and stands ready to provide any relevant support on this matter.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Hanaa Singer', written in a cursive style.

Ms Hanaa Singer
UN Resident Coordinator

C.c: Hon. Dinesh Gunawardena, Minister of Foreign Relations
Hon. Pavithra Wanniarachchi, Minister of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine
Hon. Ali Sabry, Minister of Justice