

Reference: TG ASA 33/2021/06

Prime Minister Imran Khan
Prime Minister's Office
Constitution Avenue, G-5/2, Islamabad
Pakistan

17 February 2021

Dear Prime Minister Imran Khan,

RE: VIOLATION OF THE RELIGIOUS RIGHTS OF MUSLIMS IN SRI LANKA

I write with reference to your official state visit to the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, on 22 February 2021, and your address to the Parliament of Sri Lanka, scheduled for 24 February 2021. The Governments of Sri Lanka and Pakistan have been long standing allies and it is in consideration of this that I write to you, with great concern, on the plight of the minority Muslim community in Sri Lanka. We raise these issues with you especially in light of the letter you issued on 20 October 2020, calling for Muslim states to act to counter growing Islamophobia in non-Muslim states.

We are particularly concerned that the Government has implemented a policy of mandatory cremations for people who have died or are suspected as having died from COVID-19. This is despite Ministry of Health guidelines originally permitting both burials and cremations, and guidance from the World Health Organization (WHO), Government-appointed expert groups, and other expert bodies, sanctioning both cremations and burials for COVID-19 victims. The Government of Sri Lanka has yet to provide credible reasoning behind this seemingly arbitrary policy which continues to cause the Muslim community immeasurable grief.

Since burials are an essential part of a person's last rites according to Islamic principles, forced cremations are an unjust and unnecessary infringement of the religious rights of Muslims. UN experts have referred to the forced cremation policy as a human rights violation that is "based on discrimination, aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism amounting to persecution of Muslims and other minorities in the country".

The forced cremation of Muslim victims of COVID-19 is in contravention of both domestic legislation and international human rights law and practice. The Constitution of Sri Lanka, particularly Articles 10 and 12, expressly protects the freedom of religion, and from discrimination based on religion. Furthermore, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Sri Lanka has acceded, clearly sets out that every person has the freedom to follow religious practices.

Honorable Prime Minister, we urge you to raise this issue of forced cremations at the highest levels possible during your visit to Sri Lanka, in solidarity with a minority community who has been stripped of any means of recourse. We urge you to call upon the Government of Sri Lanka to stop forced cremations and to bring to an end discrimination faced by the Muslim community in Sri Lanka.

We would be pleased to provide any further information you may require.

Yours sincerely,

Julie Verhaar
Acting Secretary General