



Sri Lanka’s compulsory cremation order is an affront to religious sensibilities

(Washington, D.C., April 14, 2020) — The Sri Lankan government’s confirmation that cremation would be the only option for those who died or are suspected to have died of COVID-19 is another affront to Sri Lanka’s religious minorities, and further displays the state’s persistent disregard for the sensibilities of non-Sinhala Buddhist communities. Nearly one year after the Easter bombings, and the subsequent riots targeted at the Muslim community, Sri Lanka persists in implementing measures that marginalise its ethnic communities and religious minorities.

“The decision to make cremation compulsory for COVID-19 deaths shows the absolute disregard the government has for the Muslim and Christian communities that observe burials as a core tenet of their religious practices,” said Mario Arulthas, Advocacy Director for PEARL. “The authorities’ decision challenges the religious freedom of these communities and goes against WHO’s recommendations to respect the cultural choices of the victims’ family.”

The coronavirus pandemic is a global health crisis of an unprecedented nature, forcing governments around the world to take action and enforce emergency measures. PEARL recognizes the rapid spread of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka and understands the exceptional circumstances and difficult challenges faced by the government and officials. However, we are deeply concerned by Sri Lanka’s efforts to address this pandemic by militarizing public health and excessively restricting civil liberties. The nomination of Shavendra de Silva, a credibly accused war criminal, to lead the National Operation Centre for the Prevention of the COVID-19 Outbreak is an alarming example of how Sri Lanka continues to run roughshod over credible allegations of widespread mass atrocities perpetrated by state actors. His appointment to this important post serves as a reminder that officials have repeatedly proven their lack of political will to serve justice and accountability for victims of atrocity crimes committed by Sri Lankan military personnel.

Recently the Acting Inspector General of Police, C.D. Wickramaratne ordered the Criminal Investigation Department to arrest those who ‘criticize,’ ‘scold/chastise,’ or ‘point out minor shortcomings in’ the government’s response to COVID-19. Criticism is vital to civic engagement and does not merit arrest. Measures to enforce blanket censorship and arbitrary detentions follow an alarming pattern of imposing emergency legislation with no legal basis to curtail human rights and freedom of expression.

Instead of developing a response that is respectful of human rights, with the full engagement of the public, Sri Lanka has led health initiatives through the military, thereby contributing to a legacy of oppression and abuse suffered by Tamils and Muslims. PEARL urges Sri Lanka to respect the human rights of its citizens, maintain civilian oversight in the pandemic response and follow scientifically grounded advice from international bodies such as the WHO.