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Suicide attack targets faithful at Mosque

AsiaNews (10.03.2009) / HRWF Int. (11.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – Ten dead and over twenty wounded according to the Colombo government in the wake of a suicide attack on a mosque in the South of the country. At 10.30 this morning a man detonated himself close to Godapitiya mosque, in Akurassa city, Matara district.

Initial reports say the attacker hurled himself against a procession of Muslim faithful who were in the city to mark Milad Festival, the Islamic celebrations for Milad-un-Nabi, prophet Mohammad's birthday.

Among those wounded are government representatives and the minister for communications Mahinda Wijesekara. Head of the Petrol ministry, A. H. M. Fowzie, who was at the celebration declared: "There were six ministers and the terrorists used this occasion to target them".

The Ministry for Defence has accused the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Lte) but so far they have not claimed the attack.

1.4 million Muslims live in Sri Lanka representing 7.5 % of the islands' 19 million inhabitants. Islam is the nations third largest religion after Buddhism (over 13 million faithful, 69% of the population) and Hinduism (circa 9 million).

Anti-conversion bill: minorities fear restrictions on religious freedom

By Melani Manel Perera

AsiaNews (30.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (04.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – A draft anti-conversion bill has been before Sri Lanka's parliament since 6 January and could become law before the end of next month. National media have tended to give the matter scant coverage but many in the population wonder about its risks and merit. The bill is purportedly designed to stop people from being forced to convert from one religion to another under duress or when enticed by money or economic advantages.

The Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a party founded in 2004 and led by Buddhist monks, is one of the bill's main backers. But Catholic leader and senior Member of Parliament Joseph Michael Perera has called for two debates on the proposal because it affects all religions, various organisations and political parties, and could harm relations among the island nation's various confessions.

Buddhists are 68 per cent of the population of Sri Lanka; Hindus are about 11 per cent; Muslims 9 per cent; Christians about 6.8 per cent.

Most Sri Lankan Buddhists welcomed the anti-conversion bill. A young university student told AsiaNews that "this law is as necessary as the government's destruction of the LTTE (Tamil Tigers rebels). We must rid ourselves of all those who convert (others), priests and pastors who destroy our Buddhist-Sinhalese culture. Christians are living in this land peacefully because of the great Buddhism. . . . Otherwise they would have washed out long ago."

At least one Buddhist businessman agrees with the student. For him "there is no place for many religions, many ethnic groups or many cultures. This is the only purely Buddhist and Sinhalese country in the world."

The bill is above all controversial because it does not clearly define what constitutes forced conversion. In fact charity work and help to the poor could be seen as a form of coercion to be punished with up to seven years in prison or fines of up to 500,000 rupees (US\$ 4,400).

In 2004 the JHU had tabled a similar law, provoking criticism, especially in Christian communities. But in response to a challenge filed by the National Christian Evangelical Alliance Sri Lanka's Supreme Court ruled that two points in this early draft bill were unconstitutional because they were in violation of Article 10 of the Sri Lankan constitution which says that "Every person is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice."

At that time the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka (CBCSL) had sent a letter to lawmakers, warning them of the "terrible dangers" the bill could entail if it was adopted.

Working with the National Council of Christian Churches and some Hindu and Muslim leaders, the CBCS opposed the bill, warning however some Christian fundamentalist groups against taking advantage of the debate to harm inter-faith relations in the country.

Even now that anti-conversion legislation is back on the front burner, Protestant communities were quick off the mark in their opposition—on Monday Evangelical Churches organised a collective prayer at Colombo's Vihara Maha Devi Park.

Catholic Church leaders appear to be showing more restraint in the matter. For their part, the faithful are waiting for the bishops to speak up.

One Catholic when asked about the issue said: "We are waiting for our bishops and fathers to take the initiative and take steps for the good of our faith. We need a society that is united. We need Church leaders to come together as one voice and articulate our opposition to this terrible law."

Sri Lankan Parliament to vote on anti-conversion laws

Draft 'Bill for the Prohibition of Forcible Conversions' enters final phase

By Krishni de Alwis

Compass Direct (26.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (27.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – The Sri Lankan Parliament may soon enact laws designed to restrict religious conversions.

A standing committee assigned to consider a draft “Bill for the Prohibition of Forceable Conversions” presented its report to Parliament on Jan. 6, suggesting minor amendments that clear the way for a final vote in February. The provisions of the bill criminalize any act to convert or attempt to convert a person from one religion to another religion by the use of force, fraud or allurement. Those found guilty of breaking the law could be imprisoned for up to seven years and/or fined up to 500,000 rupees (US\$4,425).

The Ven. Omalpe Sobitha Thero, a member of the Buddhist Jathika Hela Urumaya party (JHU or National Heritage Party), first proposed the draft in 2004. While the JHU claims the bill is designed to stop unethical conversions, civil rights groups and Christian churches say it will infringe on the constitutional rights of freedom of religion and legitimize harassment of religious minorities.

Buddhists form a 70 percent majority in Sri Lanka, with Roman Catholics constituting 7 percent and Protestant Christians only 1 percent of the population.

After the first reading of the bill in Parliament in August 2004, 22 petitions were filed in the Supreme Court challenging the validity of the draft legislation.

The Supreme Court determined the draft bill to be valid except for clauses 3 and 4(b), which it deemed unconstitutional. These clauses required any person who converted or participated in a religious conversion ceremony to report to a government official and prescribed punishment for failure to report such conversions.

The draft was then referred to a parliamentary standing committee for further review. In its report, presented to the House on Jan. 6, the committee made a few amendments to the original draft in keeping with Supreme Court recommendations. The most notable amendment was the deletion of the need to report conversions and the punishment prescribed for not reporting them.

These amendments paved the way for the draft bill to be passed by a simple majority vote when it is presented for a final reading in Parliament this February.

Chief Opposition Whip Joseph Michael Perera, however, has requested a two-day debate on the draft bill on grounds that it would affect all religions.

Fulfilling campaign promises

The JHU, founded and led by Buddhist clergymen, made anti-conversion legislation a cornerstone of its debut election campaign in 2004, when it won nine seats in Parliament. With the possibility of an early general election this year, the bill has become a matter of political survival for the JHU.

At a press briefing on Jan. 7, Ven. Ellawela Medhananda Thero, a Buddhist monk and Member of Parliament representing the JHU, called on all political parties to vote in favor of the bill.

“People expected us to fulfill two goals,” he said. “One was to end unethical conversions and the other was to liberate the country from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. That is why we entered politics.”

Ven. Medhananda Thero added that the purpose of the bill was to protect all major religions in the country from fundamentalists and unethical conversions.

Sri Lanka's Christian community and civil rights groups have strongly objected to the draft legislation. Far from stemming alleged forced conversions, they claim the bill will become a weapon of harassment through misapplication, limiting the fundamental rights of thought, conscience and religion. These rights include the right to adopt a religion and the right to practice, observe and teach religion.

The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) said in a recent press statement that, "It is our gravest concern that this bill will grant legal sanction for the harassment of religious communities or individuals, and offer convenient tools of harassment for settling personal disputes and grudges, totally unrelated to acts of alleged 'forced' conversion."

Banning compassion

According to Section 2 of the draft bill, the offer of any temptation such as a gift, cash or any other gratification to convert or attempt to convert a person from one religion to another is punishable with up to seven years of prison and a maximum fine of 500,000 rupees (US\$4,425) – equal to approximately three years' wages for the average Sri Lankan citizen.

Sri Lankan Christians have repeatedly expressed concern that key sections of the draft bill are open to wide and subjective interpretation that could criminalize not only legitimate religious activity but also legitimate social action by faith-based organizations or individuals.

"A lady who heads a charitable trust caring for orphans asked if she could be charged under this law, since she is a Christian and some of the children she cares for are not," a lawyer told Compass. "Many people will now think twice before helping the poor or needy, for fear of being accused of committing a criminal act."

Ironically, on June 4, 2008, in his address to the new Sri Lankan ambassador to the Holy See, Pope Benedict XVI had acknowledged the Sri Lankan government's appreciation of the Catholic Church's charity work in the country.

"Such action is a concrete example of the Church's willing and prompt response to the mission she has received to serve those most in need," he said. "I commend any future measures which will help guarantee that Catholic hospitals, schools and charitable agencies can continue to care for the sick, the young and the vulnerable regardless of ethnic or religious background."

He went on to assure the government that "the Church will continue in her efforts to reach out with compassion to all."

On Jan. 8, at his traditional New Year meeting with all ambassadors to the Holy See, the pope appeared to be addressing concerns over anti-conversion legislation.

"The Church does not demand privileges, but the full application of the principle of religious freedom," he said. He also called on Asian governments to ensure that "legislation concerning religious communities guarantees the full exercise of this fundamental right, with respect for international norms."

Since the first draft anti-conversion bill was presented to Parliament in 2004, the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka, NCEASL and Catholic Bishops Conference of Sri Lanka have repeatedly called for an alternative solution based on inter-faith dialogue with fair representation of all religious communities.

"Enactment of laws to regulate something as intrinsically personal as spiritual beliefs will not contribute towards resolving disagreements and promoting religious harmony," said Godfrey Yogarajah, executive director of the World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Commission. "On the contrary, it will create mistrust and animosity."
