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Sri Lanka: Religious minorities must have their final rites respected

Sri Lanka's authorities must respect the right of religious minorities to carry out the final rites of their relatives in accordance with their own traditions unless they can show that restrictions are needed to prevent the spread of COVID-19, Amnesty International said today.

Two of the early COVID-19-related deaths in Sri Lanka have been those of Muslims who were forcibly cremated on the instructions of the authorities and against the wishes of the deceased's families.

"At this difficult time, the authorities should be bringing communities together and not deepening divisions between them. Grieving relatives of people who have died because of COVID-19 should be able to bid farewell to their loved ones in the way that they wish, especially where this is permissible under international guidelines," said Biraj Patnaik, South Asia Director at Amnesty International.

The World Health Organization's guidelines for the safe management of a dead body in the context of Covid-19 allows for either burials or cremations and this position was mirrored in the Sri Lanka Ministry of Health guidelines issued on 27 March 2020. On 31 March, the Sri Lankan guidelines were revised to exclusively order cremations for people who die or are suspected to have died as a result of contracting the COVID-19 virus. The government has not provided adequate or reasonable justification for departing from the WHO guidelines, which underlines concerns that the change was not necessary to protect public health.

For Sri Lanka's Muslim community, which makes up nine per cent of the population, burials are considered to be a required part of the final rites in accordance with Islamic traditions.

The first Muslim death took place on 31 March, in Negombo, a town on Sri Lanka's western coast, before the guidelines were revised to exclude burials. Despite protests by the relatives of the deceased, community leaders and Muslim politicians, a burial was blocked by the authorities, and a cremation took place instead. The second Muslim death happened on 1 April at the National Institute of Infectious Diseases and the person was cremated a day later despite efforts by the victim's family and the Muslim community to carry out a burial.

The forced cremations have resurfaced fears that Sri Lanka's Muslim minority community is being targeted by the authorities. Last year, the authorities did not intervene to stop attacks on Muslim-owned shops and homes by violent mobs and emergency regulations were abused to ban women wearing the face veil, in the aftermath of the 21 April bombings by

an Islamist armed group that killed more than 250 people in attacks on three churches and three hotels in Sri Lanka.

Given the underlying religious and cultural sensitivities, Amnesty International urges the Government of Sri Lanka to ensure that religious rites and practices are respected as far as possible and in line with international guidelines; and any changes to guidelines involve prior consultation with the affected community.

“COVID-19 does not discriminate between groups. Its victims include people of all faiths and none. As it strikes almost every country in the world, the virus is showing that we are united by our common humanity. The only way to deal with this crisis is as one, united in our support for the health workers on the frontlines and people from all backgrounds who are at risk during the pandemic,” said Biraj Patnaik.