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16 organisations in Australia send appeal to UN to persuade SL to allow burial of COVID dead

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The public outcry not only by Muslims but also Buddhists, Hindus and Christians, have done little to change the Government's hard-line approach – Pic by Shehan Gunasekara

Sixteen Australian organisations have made an appeal to the United Nations Secretary General António Guterres and several other international organisations requesting them to persuade the Sri Lankan Government to withdraw its compulsory instruction to cremate all COVID-19 victims.

The signatories to the Appeal are: Assn of United Sri Lankan Australian Muslims of Western Australia Inc. (AUSLAMWA), Austra Lanka Muslim Association Inc. (ALMA), Australian Advocacy for Good Governance in Sri Lanka (AAGGSL), Australian National Imams Council (ANIC), Bridging Lanka Limited (BLL), Darebin Ethnic Communities Council Inc. (DECC), Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV), Melbourne Human Rights Forum (MHRF), Muslim Information Network of Australasia Inc. (MINA), National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA), Noorul-Islam Society, People for Human Rights and Equality (PHRE), Sri Lanka Invites (SLI), United Sri Lankan Muslim Association of Australia (USMAA), Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania (UCA Synod) and Whittlesea Tamil Association (WTA).

Australian Advocacy for Good Governance in Sri Lanka (AAGGSL) is an organisation committed to positively subscribing to the establishment of practising democracy and rule of law in Sri Lanka while respecting the rights and will of all its peoples. Following is the letter sent by Dr Lionel Bopage, President Australian Advocacy for Good Governance in Sri Lanka, Melbourne, Australia

We write to bring to your notice a cold-hearted directive by the Government of Sri Lanka with regard to the disposal of bodies of COVID-19 victims which is in breach of fundamental human rights, particularly the religious and cultural rights, of Sri Lanka's Muslim and Christian communities.

On 31 March of this year, the Government amended the 'Provisional Clinical Practice Guidelines on COVID-19 Suspected and Confirmed Patients' by adding a new clause that read "The body should be cremated within 24 hours (preferably within 12 hours)". The abrupt change – made without any community consultation, or proven medical or scientific justification – renders cremation as the only means to dispose of the bodies of COVID-19 victims.

The practice of cremation is in violation of the fundamental teachings of Islam that prohibits cremation which is believed to be a desecration of the deceased. This authoritarian and insensitive action by the Government has caused immense pain and anguish among Islamic and Christian religious followers. Their traditional and cultural practice is to bury their dead after administering the last rites in accordance with the beliefs of the deceased and their communities of faith.

The Government's 'pseudoscience' explanation is that the ground water will be contaminated if the bodies of the COVID-19 victims are buried underground – a claim totally rejected by most of the professionals competent in the fields of Virology, Epidemiology and Geology in the country. The so-called Expert Committee formed by the government to advise on the matter, clearly lacks the presence of competent virologists and epidemiologists, and has produced no scientific evidence that proves the occurrence of such contamination.

Out of desperation and as a mark of protest many families have refused to sign on papers that consent to cremation, and abandoned the corpses in the hospitals and police morgues rather than going against their religious beliefs. Consequently, the bodies are kept in morgues for lengthy periods and cremated at the sole discretion of the powers that be. This is in total disregard to and in violation of the guidelines set out by the World Health Organization. Furthermore, fearing the likelihood of cremation, some members of the Muslim community are not presenting themselves for treatment, making the task of pandemic control even more difficult for the health authorities.

Recently, members of Muslim and Christian communities went to the Supreme Court of the country to have their constitutionally guaranteed rights upheld. Yet, the Court refused to hear the 11 applications without giving any reason. This creates a worrisome situation where the affected communities and families have exhausted all legal avenues to obtain justice through the legal system in the country.

The practice also goes against minority rights, which are protected by international conventions and declarations ratified by Sri Lanka. The United Nations and several of its affiliated mandates such as the OHCHR, Special Repertoires, as well as many international organisations such as the Organization for Islamic Cooperation, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and others have condemned the practice of forced cremation as a serious violation of human rights.

The public outcry not only by Muslims but also Buddhists, Hindus and Christians, have done little to change the Government's hard-line approach. Attempts by civil society activists, politicians, and other organisations to seek redress from the highest court in the land, too, have proved futile. And most civil society organisations see this as nothing but racial discrimination, particularly against the Muslims.

In the circumstances, we the following organisations, appeal to the United Nations to persuade the Government of Sri Lanka to withdraw the compulsory instruction to cremate all COVID-19 victims in Sri Lanka. This is an arbitrary process which is neither based on science nor recommended by the WHO, nor even adopted by countries such as the USA, Italy, Brazil, India, UK and Mexico – all of which have suffered much higher number of deaths from the pandemic.

The trauma experienced by the minorities of Sri Lanka as a result of this most unethical, insensitive and vexing governmental action is causing resentment, disharmony and unrest in the country.

Thank you for your urgent attention to this matter.

Signatories:

Assn of United Sri Lankan Australian Muslims of Western Australia Inc. (AUSLAMWA), Austra Lanka Muslim Association Inc. (ALMA), Australian Advocacy for Good Governance in Sri Lanka (AAGGSL), Australian National Imams Council (ANIC), Bridging Lanka Limited (BLL), Darebin Ethnic Communities Council Inc. (DECC), Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV), Melbourne Human Rights Forum (MHRF), Muslim Information Network of Australasia Inc. (MINA), National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA), Noorul-Islam Society, People for Human Rights and Equality (PHRE), Sri Lanka Invites (SLI), United Sri Lankan Muslim Association of Australia (USMAA), Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania (UCA Synod) and Whittlesea Tamil Association (WTA).

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