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SRI LANKA | CSW calls for safeguard on religious pluralism following Dambulla mosque attack

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is urging the Sri Lankan government to protect against the threat posed by Sinhala Buddhist nationalists and safeguard Sri Lanka's religious pluralism, following the attack on a mosque in Dambulla carried out by a large mob led by Buddhist monks on April 20.

The assailants stormed the mosque, claiming it was illegal because it stood in a designated area sacred to Buddhists. The mosque was evacuated, Friday prayers were cancelled, and police sealed the building. News reports suggest that crude petrol bombs had been thrown at the mosque the previous night, causing minor damages. The mob also called for the demolition of a Hindu temple being built in the zone.

Video footage from the time of the incident shows monks stirring up tensions along ethno-religious lines, with one declaring "a victory for those who love the race, have Sinhala blood, and are Buddhists". Another monk disrobed and exposed himself to the mosque, in a sign of disrespect, and others were involved in physical violence.

According to Associated Press (AP), Laskhman Perera, a parliamentarian from the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance, said on Monday that the mosque and other buildings would be relocated to outside the designated sacred zone within six months.

The claim that the mosque is illegal is highly questionable. The Muslim Council of Sri Lanka (MCSL) confirmed in a statement on Tuesday that the mosque was officially registered and had existed for over 50 years, significantly pre-dating the designation of a sacred area.

The MCSL statement continued, "It is regrettable that a group of radical elements of the Buddhist community has been consistently undermining the coexistence of the different ethnic communities in Sri Lanka."

In a submission this week to Sri Lanka's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the United Nations, CSW recommended that "Sri Lanka should ensure that all religious denominations which act in a lawful and peaceful manner are granted equal treatment under the law, and should ensure that all citizens are able to enjoy the right to FORB irrespective of their religious affiliation".

CSW's South Asia Team Leader David Griffiths said, "Sri Lanka is still reeling from the effects of the long-running civil war which had deep and profound implications for the social and political fabric of nation. Against this background, it is vital that the government do everything in its power to safeguard the rights of all its citizens through the rule of law, and foster a sense of citizenship that transcends ethnic and religious identities. Although on a much smaller scale, the incident in Dambulla is somewhat reminiscent of the 1992 storming of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, India, which provided an enduring rallying point for Hindu extremist hatred and violence against Muslims. The Sri Lankan government must resolve the Dambulla matter in a fair and equitable manner, and ensure that all religions and their adherents are accorded equal respect. This is particularly important to safeguard against the threat posed by hard-line Sinhala Buddhist nationalists against all religious minority communities."

Notes to Editors:

1. Please include the following linked text in any online articles using the above information: Find out more about [religious freedom in Sri Lanka](#) from Christian Solidarity Worldwide.