



6.27.17

## **SRI LANKA | Human Rights Lawyer Threatened**

Prominent Sri Lankan human rights lawyer, Lakshan Dias, was criticized by government officials and threatened with being disbarred from his profession after commenting on religious intolerance against Christians and Muslims during his appearance on a television talk show.

On June 14, Dias was a guest on a television program called “Aluth Palimenthuwa (New Parliament),” aired by Derana TV, and quoted data from the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL), which estimates that Christians were subject to 195 incidents of discrimination, intimidation and violence between 2015 and June 2017. NCEASL has been monitoring and documenting incidents of discrimination, intimidation and violence against Sri Lanka’s Christian community for over two decades.

On June 16, during a television news program, Sri Lankan President Sirisena referred to the talk show without naming Dias and dismissed his claims as false on the basis of the opinion of Archbishop of Colombo’s Cardinal Malcom Rajinith, who reportedly said he was unaware of such incidents. The following day, Sri Lanka’s Minister for Justice and Buddha Sasana (Religious Affairs), Wijeyadasa Rajapakse, threatened to bar Dias from the legal profession unless he retracted his comments and apologized within 24 hours. The Bar Council of Sri Lanka, which convened to determine the matter, advised Dias to produce an affidavit to support his claims.

According to the 2011 census, 70.2% of Sri Lanka’s population Buddhist, while 12.6% are Hindus, 9.7% are Muslims and 7.2% are Christians. The Constitution accords Buddhism “the foremost place” in the state. Religious intolerance in Sri Lanka has been rising since early 2000, and in particular, since the end of the civil war in 2009, when Buddhist fundamentalist groups such as the Bodu Bela Sena began a campaign of hate speech against religious minorities.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “It is deeply worrying that the government has chosen to condemn and threaten Mr. Dias rather than engage with the problem of

religious intolerance in Sri Lanka and the NCEASL's research. We call on the government of Sri Lanka to uphold his right freedom of expression and to withdraw the threats against him. It must also confront the problem of religious intolerance in the country and ensure that all citizens have their rights to freedom of religions or belief upheld, regardless of their religious affiliation."