Attacks in Aluthgama and Beruwala

LST is gravely concerned over the events that occurred in Aluthgama and Beruwala this weekend. Following a Buddhist meeting held in Aluthgama on Sunday June 15th, incidents of violence against Muslims and Muslim owned homes and businesses occurred. It has been reported that at least 3 Muslims have died of gunshot wounds, while 78 others have been seriously injured in the violence\(^1\). In addition at least nine shops and up to 40 houses have been gutted in Aluthgama, while three mosques were attacked.\(^2\)

Under the Sri Lankan constitution, all minorities are protected from discrimination and violence. Under chapter III of the Constitution (Fundamental Rights), Article 10 states 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.” Under this article, Muslims and Christians, who make up about 10% of the population, are protected from discrimination based on their religion. Furthermore, the Constitution, under Chapter III, Article 12(1) states, “All persons are equal before the law and are entitled to the equal protection of the law.” This means that those Buddhist and Muslim extremists responsible for inciting the violence, looting, and killing, must be held accountable for their actions. While the Constitution of Sri Lanka, which is stated as the “Supreme Law” of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, protects the many minorities of the country, the implementation of these fundamental rights, or lack thereof, has been criticized by many within and outside the country. Under the Constitution, the government is legally required to make sure that those who committed these actions in Aluthgama and Beruwela are brought to justice.

Sri Lanka ratified the United Nations International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on 18th February 1982, and it entered into force on 20th March 1982. Upon ratifying the convention Sri Lankan government was legally bound to protect and enhance the rights for all citizens, including people belonging to minority groups.\(^3\) While this signing of an international document is significant, like the Constitution, implementation of the elements of this convention has been random and at the will of the government. UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon has expressed his concern on the communal violence that erupted in Southern Sri Lanka, and has urged the Sri Lankan Government to take necessary measures to ensure the safety of all Sri Lankans. The Secretary-General recalled the Human Rights Council Resolution (HRC25/L1/Rev.1) on Sri Lanka that urges the Government to investigate alleged attacks on members of religious minority groups.\(^4\) The Sri Lankan government has categorically denied the implementation of the Human Rights Council Resolution saying that it is an infringement of state sovereignty. While Sri Lanka has a commitment to protect the minorities within its borders under domestic and international law,

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\(^1\) http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27864716
\(^3\) http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CERD.aspx
it is clear from history as well as the multiple attacks in the past two years, that the government is only committed to protecting minorities on paper, not through action.

This is most clearly demonstrated by the response of President Rajapaksa, who has issued statements through his twitter account. On June 15th he tweeted “The Government will not allow anyone to take the law into their own hands. I urge all parties concerned to act in restraint. An investigation will be held for law to take its course of action to bring to book those responsible for incidents in Aluthgama.” This incident of violence, that has been called the worst in recent history, seemingly has not been met with much concern. There needs to be complete condemnation of the hate speech and violent actions made by Buddhist extremists in order for minorities within the country to feel protected.

The violence against religious minorities is not new to Sri Lanka, although this incident is thought to be one of the worst in recent history. For the past two years violence against Muslim and Christian minorities has been increasing, but there has been little action against the Buddhist extremists by the government. Buddhist extremists have been reported to have attacked a number of Muslim-owned commercial establishments, and agitated against certain religious practices, including the halal system of slaughtering animals for consumption by Muslims. On September 10th, 2011 monks attacked a Muslim shrine in Anuradhapura, on April 20th, 2012 a mob stormed a Dambulla Mosque, and then in July of 2013, a mob attacked a Colombo mosque, and there was another attack carried out on a mosque in Grandpass on August 10th, 2013. N. M. Ameen, president of Sri Lanka Muslim Council, said more than 20 mosques had been attacked between 2012 and 2013.

While government statements condemn the extremists, actions to hold them accountable, has been limited. Media reports within the country, as well as statements made by non-Muslim government officials make the lootings and deaths out to be minor incidences. By using Twitter as the only means of communicating their concern over the violence, the government has limited the audience of the statement, as well as the seriousness of the attacks. By not even giving an official statement, the government shows that it has conflicting political concerns about holding those guilty of violence accountable for their actions. If they were to allow an independent investigation to take place within Sri Lanka on the crimes against all minorities within the country, it would show its willingness to protect these people. Violence by any religion in Sri Lanka is unacceptable and it is up to the people of the country to make sure that the government holds all those who threaten peace and safety accountable for their actions.

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5 https://twitter.com/PresRajapaksa
7 http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-14926002