

The Escalating Danger Facing Christians in Sri Lanka

Graeme Swincer OAM¹ for Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group, October 2023

Introduction

A year ago I published an update on the dangers facing Tamil Asylum Seekers if they were to be Returned to Sri Lanka². I have reasons to believe that those dangers have not diminished. However in continuing my research I have become acutely aware of another section of the Sri Lanka population who are living precariously in their nation in a context of general insecurity. Christians, who now represent just less than 8% of the population, have long endured a measure of discrimination and potential danger. However, this peril has increased greatly over the past 30 years, and has escalated dramatically in the past 5 years. It can be argued that the threat is uneven, certain sections of the Christian population apparently being considerably more vulnerable than others.

Historical Perspective

Christians probably arrived in Sri Lanka long before Europeans as a result of communication with India, where the Apostle Thomas is believed to have planted what is now the great Mar Thoma church. There is certainly evidence of a vital Christian presence during the sixth century CE³. But the contemporary—and predominantly Catholic—Christian community in Sri Lanka originates from the colonial influence of the Portuguese, who arrived in Sri Lanka in 1505 and regularly traveled with Catholic missionaries. The Dutch, British, and Portuguese plied and inhabited the coastline of Sri Lanka through the early nineteenth century, when the British gained colonial control of the whole island - control that lasted until Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948. This history resulted in establishment of a variety of steadily growing English and Dutch protestant churches. More recently Pentecostal and Seventh Day Adventist churches have been planted.

In the post-colonial period, the Sri Lankan Civil War and Tamil insurgency have dominated public life. The Tamil uprising generally opposed a Buddhist majority government, which sought and still seeks to strengthen the role of Buddhism as a favoured religious community.

In the mid-2000s, Christians faced a series of several hundred violent attacks⁴. Fuelled by extreme ethnoreligious Buddhist movements, it picked up momentum so that initial discriminatory sentiments against Christians quickly escalated to allegations of unethical conversion, full-on confrontations, attacks on pastors and believers, arsons of church properties, and even a couple of incidents of martyrdom. At the same time, a committee—formed with Catholic and Anglican bishops together with charismatic and Pentecostal pastors—working diligently to stave off some of the graver dangers of rising persecution⁵.

From **2005 until 2015**, the government led by Mahinda Rajapaksa appeared to turn a blind eye to these attacks and provocations, or perhaps even encouraged them, because of Rajapaksa's reliance upon the strength of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists. In providing historical perspective the international organisation *Church in Chains* stated⁶ that persecution of Christians has escalated since 2012, citing mob attacks on churches and state-sanctioned church closures, intimidation and discrimination (notably in relation to Christian burials being prevented).

¹ Retired agricultural scientist, international development programs coordinator, and cross cultural consultant, trainer and researcher.

² "Further Update on the Dangers Facing Tamil Asylum Seekers if they were to be Returned to Sri Lanka", October 2022, *Further-Update-on-the-Dangers-Facing-Tamil-Asylum-Seekers-if-they-were-to-be-Returned-to-Sri-Lanka-2.pdf* (bmrsg.org.au)

³ "The Struggle for Sri Lanka's Second Birth: Christians have served well as our society fell apart amid economic crisis. But we still have work to do", Ivor Poobalan (PhD, Principal of Sri Lanka's Colombo Theological Seminary), *Christianity Today*, 16 July 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/july-web-only/sri-lanka-crisis-protests-rajapaksa-christian-churches.html>

⁴ However, it is to be noted that the beginning of essentially unprecedented persecution began in the early 1990s; see the article by Dr Ivor Poobalan, cited above.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "Church in Chains", 29 March 2023, <https://www.churchinchains.ie/country-profiles/sri-lanka/>

After January 2015 – the electoral defeat of Mahinda Rajakasa

Mahinda Rajakasa's electoral defeat, in January 2015, brought Sri Lanka's minorities a significant degree of hope⁷. But this hope has not been realised. Persecution of Christians and indeed of other minority religious groups, and attacks on their institutions has accelerated significantly and continues to the present day.

As early as April 2016 the Christian Broadcasting Network⁸ reported on several violent incidents. In summary:

Release International, a ministry that exposes persecution of Christians, reports the targeting is coming from several fronts, perpetrated by Buddhist monks and government officials alike.

They have been forcing churches and prayer meetings to close down. And in several instances the monks have refused to allow Christians to bury their dead in public cemeteries, or even on church grounds.

A local human rights lawyer has documented at least 120 cases of persecution against Christians over the past year.

. . . it is Buddhist monks who are leading the attacks against the churches. . . . aided by pro-Buddhist authorities."

In one incident

100 villagers led by two Buddhist monks forced their way into a church . . . shouted at the pastor, "If you continue this service we will physically assault you!". The local police refused to provide protection and told the pastor to stop all worship meetings unless he could get court approval to meet.

Release International also reported that

. . . in August of 2015, ten Buddhist monks and 30 villagers interrupted a church meeting in Galle District. They attacked members of the congregation, including the pastor and his wife. Mobs have launched violent attacks in other areas too. A crowd led by Buddhist monks set fire to a pastor's home and car at a church in Hambantota District.

And in Gampaha District, two people abducted a pastor, partially strangled him and threatened that if he did not stop the worship services, 200 people would come to destroy his church.

At the same time the magazine *Christian Today* reported⁹ that after the end of the civil war in 2009 "Christians are the new target":

The previous administration was heavily influenced by Buddhist extremism and Christians were regularly subject to very violent attacks. The arrival of new president Maithripala Sirisena brought hope to embattled Christians.

However, in just over a year since Sirisena was elected, more than 120 incidents against Christians have been documented by [one] organisation. Indeed, the number of attacks on Christians has risen. In 2012, under the previous government, 52 incidents were recorded. In 2013 that figure had almost doubled to 103 incidents. Now at more than 120, the outlook is ominous for Sri Lanka's Christians.

Although Sri Lanka has other minority religious groups, the seven per cent of the population who are Christian bear the brunt of the persecution. This is because Christianity is seen as a colonial religion for Westerners, . . . The Sri Lankan government has effectively created a national identity around Buddhist philosophy. To be Sri Lankan is to be Buddhist. As a result, Buddhist monks are given positions of power in government and often actually lead attacks on Christians, seen as the last vestiges of colonialism.

As well as the link to Western rule, Christians are also treated with suspicion because of their perceived desire to proselytise.

The Easter Sunday bombings - 21 April 2019

The international press and community took hardly any notice of this festering tyranny until the horrendous suicide bombing attacks on three churches and three luxury hotels, killing 259 people and injuring more than 450, on Easter Sunday, 21 April 2019.

⁷ "Under Caesar's Sword - Scholarly Analysis: Christian Responses to Persecution in Sri Lanka" University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA, <https://ucs.nd.edu/learn/sri-lanka/>

⁸ "Christians Facing Violent Persecution in Buddhist Sri Lanka", CBN⁸ NEWS, 18 April 2016, <https://www2.cbn.com/news/world/christians-facing-violent-persecution-buddhist-sri-lanka>

⁹ "New Government, Old Story: The Ongoing Persecution of Christians in Sri Lanka", 12 April 2016, <https://orthochristian.com/92472.html>

The Washington Post¹⁰ and the New York Times¹¹ both carried headline reports. The Guardian¹² published an expert analysis of the incidents from a British-based Sri Lankan researcher. *Release International* added impressive additional detailed information and analysis¹³.

The New York Times couched its report in the context of an account of ongoing persecution of Christians in other Asian countries: India, Myanmar, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan and even the Philippines. The common theme was the growing appeal of a politics based on ethnic and sectarian identity.

The Washington Post report emphasised that the Sri Lankan government was blaming the attacks on local Islamist militant groups¹⁴ thought to have international connections. Indeed Islamic State claimed responsibility. However the WP report also cited a human rights activist who claimed that church services across the country had faced some sort of disruption on each of the previous 11 Sundays, adding that none of those incidents had been linked with Islamic perpetrators:

Last year, the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka reported 86 verifiable cases of discrimination, threats and violence against Christians. Before Sunday's attacks, 26 such incidents had occurred this year, including the disruption of a Sunday service by Buddhist monks.

After April 2019

- Following the Easter Sunday bombings there was no let-up in the danger faced by Christians. The government showed no inclination to improve security or offer protection. Within two months the Catholic Church was calling on the government to take action¹⁵:

Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, Archbishop of Colombo, an outspoken critic of the Sri Lankan government's apparent failure to act on Indian government intelligence ahead of the Easter attacks, has demanded more security during church services in the aftermath of the violence.

The Order hopes that the Sri Lankan government will heed this call for additional security, and provide protection for all of Sri Lanka's Christians. The failure of authorities to act decisively in the wake of attacks such as the Sri Lanka bombings only encourages more persecution of Christians. . . .

Everyone knows that somewhere out there extremely dangerous people are running around who could attack again at any time. . . .

Returning from a fact-finding and project-assessment trip to the country, Veronique Vogel, head of Sri Lanka projects for the Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need, said: "Many told me that they are afraid to enter a church or feel fear when they hear bells ringing."

- Another (brief) article, an editorial from *Decision Magazine*¹⁶, noted the ongoing harassment and violence against Christians in the five months following the Easter Sunday 2019 bombings, quoting the research of *International Christian Concern*:

ICC reports that in the nation's Gampaha District, a mob of 100, led by six Buddhist monks and 15 police officers, threatened members of Zion Revival Church, demanding they cease worship, and warning they would arrest the pastor if he ever entered their village again.

In Batticaloa District, an angry mob with sticks attacked and beat six Christians, five of whom were taken to a local hospital.

¹⁰ "For Christians in Sri Lanka, violence is at once old and new", Emily Tamkin, Washington Post, 22 April 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/04/21/christians-sri-lanka-violence-is-once-old-new/>

¹¹ "Religious Minorities Across Asia Suffer Amid Surge in Sectarian Politics. The bombings of three churches in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday highlighted the vulnerability of Christians in Asia.", 21 April 2019 Hannah Beech, Dharisha Bastians and Kai Schultz, New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/21/world/asia/sri-lanka-religion-christians.html>

¹² "Sri Lanka's Christians were left unprotected for far too long. Politicians and police have done little to halt the persecution of religious minorities. That will change now, but it's already too late." Tasnim Nazeer¹², 22 April 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/21/sri-lanka-christians-religious-minorities-persecution>

¹³ "SRI LANKA – Persecuted but not abandoned", Release International, May 2019, <https://releaseinternational.org/sri-lanka-persecuted-but-not-abandoned/>

¹⁴ Identified by Release International as National Thowheeth Jama'ath and Jammiyathul Millathu Ibrahim.

¹⁵ "After bombings, Sri Lankan Christians still too afraid to go to church", Order of Saint Andrew, Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, 17 June, 2019, <https://christianpersecution.com/sri-lanka/after-bombings-sri-lankan-christians-still-too-afraid-to-go-to-church/>

¹⁶ "Persecution of Christians Rising in Sri Lanka", Editorial by *Decision Magazine* Staff, 01 November 2019, <https://decisionmagazine.com/persecution-christians-rising/>

And in the nation's Badulla District, local government officials blocked construction of an Assemblies of God church due to opposition, after initially approving it.

"As Sri Lanka's Christians recover from the devastation wrought by the Easter Bombings, these reports of persecution continue to instil a sense of fear among Christians," said William Stark, regional manager for South Asia at International Christian Concern.

- Numerous other incidents from the months following the famous April 2019 bombings have been reported in detail. One example is provided by the International Organisation Barnabas Aid¹⁷:

Three Sri Lankan Christians needed hospital treatment after they were ambushed and attacked by a 50-strong extremist mob, led by three Buddhist monks, on Sunday 2 February.

The three were among a group of Christian friends, including a pastor, his wife and son, who were attempting to leave the village of *Ihala Yakkura*, Polonnaruwa district, after being threatened in an incident earlier that day.

As the group drove away from the village they found the road blocked by felled trees. When their cars came to a halt, the Buddhist mob descended in an ambush attack. The extremists assaulted the pastor's son and the other Christians, including women, and damaged their vehicles.

The pastor managed to flee with his family and drove directly to the nearest police station to raise the alarm. The three injured Christians were later admitted to hospital for treatment.

In an intimidating confrontation earlier the same day, around 150 Buddhist extremists, led by four monks, had marched on a house church in the village during morning worship, and demanded an end to the service. The monks threatened the pastor and, using obscene language, ordered him to leave the village and never return. They claimed *Ihala Yakkura* was a "Buddhist village" where Christian worship activities would not be permitted.

A senior police officer and a local government official at the scene falsely claimed that the pastor needed to register the church premises, which are owned by members of the congregation, and obtain permission to conduct a worship service.

Police arrested five people the following day, however, the monks involved in the incidents were not taken into custody.

The report quoted Bishop Asiri Perera, president of Sri Lanka's Methodist Church, who raised concerns about police inaction following the brutal beating of a Bible college student in August 2019 by extremist monks:

Christians are not being treated as equal citizens in their own country.

- Barnabas Aid also reported the destruction of a church building, on 05 October 2020, interrupting the Sunday service:

A mob of extremists has attacked and destroyed a much-loved church building on a hilltop, near China Bay, on the outskirts of the coastal city of Trincomalee, in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka.

Church minister, Jorge Dissanayake, lamented the loss of the building situated on the "Mount of the Cross", commenting that many believers visited the place of worship as a pilgrimage.

- Two 2022 reports from the US government^{18,19}, provide useful updates about religious freedom in Sri Lanka, both by way of summaries and by the citing of specific recent violent incidents.

The cited USCIRF Country Update of November 2022 stated that:

As of August 2022, the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) had documented 53 incidents of persecution against Christians, including acts of discrimination, threats, intimidation, violence, hate speech, and property damage. Christian advocacy groups have noted that Buddhist nationalists consider Christianity to be a product of Western colonialism that threatens the Buddhist identity of Sri Lanka. Pastors and churches have faced calls from Sri Lankans, including Buddhist monks to cease religious activities.

. . . In March, a mob of 600 people, including about 60 monks, forcibly entered the premises of the Mercy Gate Chapel in Amalgama to demand that the church cease all religious activities. They threatened the pastor with death if worship activities continued, and two persons in the mob assaulted a congregant.

¹⁷ "Three Sri Lankan Christians injured in double attack by extremist Buddhist mobs", Barnabas Aid, 27 February 2020, <https://www.barnabasaid.org/au/news/three-sri-lankan-christians-injured-in-double-attack-by-extremist-buddhi/>

¹⁸ "2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sri Lanka", US Office of International Religious Freedom, 12 May 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/sri-lanka/>

¹⁹ "Religious Freedom Conditions in Sri Lanka, USCIRF Country Update: Sri Lanka", November 2022, Zack Udin, USCIRF Research Analyst, <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2022-11/2022%20Sri%20Lanka%20Country%20Update%2011.23.22.pdf>

Local police informed the mob that there was no legal basis on which to close the church, but the monks refused to leave until they could inspect the building. The pastor initially refused, but after the police chief assured the pastor that no harm would be done, the monks were allowed to enter and question the pastor about activities in the church. The mob left the premises shortly thereafter. In the weeks that followed, authorities and villagers joined in repeatedly demanding that the pastor stop worship services and warned him that violence could occur if he did not stop his activities.

- This picture is confirmed and corroborated by a scholarly report²⁰ from the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA, finalised in August 2022. The report noted that:

In November 2019, after Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected President and then appointed former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, his older brother, as Prime Minister, sporadic, sectarian persecution against Christians escalated and has continued to the present. President Rajapaksa resigned in July 2022 in response to mass demonstrations. In 2021, the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) reported 77 hostile sectarian actions against Christians, which ranged from intimidation to physical violence. In comparison, NCEASL reported 50 such actions in 2020. In March 2022, a mob of around 600 people, including 60 Buddhist monks, broke into a Christian Sunday worship service and attempted to close it down, threatening the pastor with death and seriously injuring one worshiper.²¹

Christians in Sri Lanka have reduced the visibility and assertiveness of their evangelism, and many have shifted their energies towards social service projects. To overcome legal and bureaucratic hurdles preventing their assembly and construction of worship spaces, congregations increasingly meet in homes, build churches surreptitiously, or secure permission for construction by designating the structures as “service centers”, “community halls”, and the like.

Christians have also increased their engagement with people of other faiths, investing more energetically in interfaith dialogue, celebrating non-Christian holidays, adapting elements of other religions into Christian belief and practice, and participating in collaborative, interfaith service and civil space projects with the aim of undermining the allegation that Christian charity is merely a pretext for conversion. Sri Lankan Christians have also increased their engagement with the political process, ever more fiercely promoting secular values and defending religious freedom, and advocating both rhetorically and legally for those negatively affected by anti-Christian currents. After the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings, Christian leaders vigorously criticized both the government’s clumsy and heavy-handed investigative response and its failure to prevent the attacks despite intelligence from Indian authorities. In July 2021, Malcolm Ranjith, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Colombo, sent a 20-page letter to President Rajapaksa decrying the government’s failure to deliver justice to victims of the attacks and promising that the Catholic community would lobby for justice through demonstrations if its demands were not met. Subsequently, in August 2021 Archbishop Ranjith publicly called on the nation’s Catholics to raise black flags in protest on the two-year anniversary of the attacks. During the months-long popular demonstrations that ultimately forced President Rajapaksa to resign and to flee Sri Lanka in July 2022, Christians promoted interreligious unity in support of their protests. In May 2022, for example, Catholic nuns joined Muslims to prepare food and festivities for Buddhists celebrating the religious festival Vesak (Buddha Day).

- In September 2022, Shaheryar Gill of *Persecuted Church* published his organisation’s submission on Sri Lanka to the U.N. Human Rights Council²². After highlighting Sri Lanka’s oppressive legal framework (see below), Gill discussed several instances in which Buddhist fundamentalists attacked Christians. For example:

. . . in March 2022, a mob of 600 people, made up of “Buddhist fundamentalists who believe that the country is a historic Buddhist land,” including 60 Buddhist monks, stormed a Christian church during Sunday service and demanded that all religious activities stop.

In February 2021, a church . . . was attacked with gasoline bombs and stones.

In January 2021, a mob of about 75 people attacked a pastor who was visiting a Christian home The mob violently attacked the pastor’s driver and “forced the pastor and his wife to leave the village.”

²⁰ “Under Caesar’s Sword: Scholarly Analysis - Christian Responses to Persecution in Sri Lanka”, University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA, <https://ucs.nd.edu/learn/sri-lanka/>

²¹ This incident is detailed above. See also the New York Times report “Mob of 600 Break into Sri Lankan Church”, International Christian Concern, 03 October 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/21/world/asia/sri-lanka-religion-christians.html>

²² Exposing Increasing Persecution of Christians in Sri Lanka and Urging U.N. To Demand Protection for Religious Minorities”, Shaheryar Gill, Persecuted Church, 15 September 2022, <https://aclj.org/persecuted-church/exposing-increasing-persecution-of-christians-in-sri-lanka-and-urging-un-to-demand-protection-for-religious-minorities>

In October 2020, a Christian pastor shut down his church after “five years of intimidation [from Buddhist monks] that culminated in him being ordered to a police station where he faced further threats not only to himself but against his parishioners.”

On August 4, 2019, a group “of Buddhist monks viciously beat up a Christian student” following a Sunday service.

Highlighting several other instances of violence, the report urged the U.N. to engage with the Sri Lankan government and hold it responsible for its international obligations under the human rights treaties it has ratified. *Persecuted Church* asked the U.N. to urge Sri Lanka “to properly investigate and prosecute all cases of attacks against Christians and other minorities by Buddhist extremists and actively work to put a stop to these types of religiously motivated attacks.”

- A recent (March 2023) brief country profile from the international organisation *Church in Chains*²³ provides corroborating perspective and evidence of ongoing attacks:

Traditional churches are generally tolerated, but newer churches are sometimes attacked by radical Buddhist mobs or local government officials angered by the increasing number of Evangelicals and Pentecostals and many pastors have been beaten, threatened and detained.

. . . Buddhist monks are very influential in rural areas and sometimes incite large mobs to attack Christians and churches and also Muslim businesses and mosques, with police and local officials often complicit.

Bodu Bala Sena or “Buddhist Power Force” is believed to be behind most attacks on minorities. A Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist organisation, it formed in Colombo in July 2012 when Buddhist monks broke away from the Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Heritage) party, saying it was not sufficiently militant in protecting Buddhism.

Strengthening of the oppressive legal framework

Human Rights Watch reported that on 09 March, 2021, the Sri Lanka government expanded “the draconian and abusive Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA)” to allow it “to more easily target religious and racial minorities, in violation of their basic rights”²⁴. The new regulation allows two-years of detention without trial for causing “religious, racial, or communal disharmony”:

“The Sri Lankan government has added a new weapon to its arsenal of abusive laws, putting religious and racial minorities at greater risk of torture and prolonged detention without trial”, said Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “Instead of addressing the UN’s concerns by repealing the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act, the Rajapaksa administration is embracing it with a vengeance.”

The regulation broadly allows the authorities to detain and “rehabilitate” anyone who “by words either spoken or intended to be read or by signs or by visible representations” causes the commission of violence or “religious, racial or communal disharmony or feelings of ill will or hostility between different communities or racial or religious groups.” . . .

Sri Lanka’s relatively small Christian community has . . . been targeted. “You can’t even write anything on Facebook,” a Christian activist told Human Rights Watch. “Anything could happen. We don’t feel safe to express ourselves. They could lock you up under any pretext.”

United Nations Human Rights Reports

UN Human Rights Reports are typically exercises in diplomacy. However over the past decade or more the official reports on Sri Lanka have become increasingly scathing. In March 2023, in an article entitled “UN Paints Bleak Picture of Rights in Sri Lanka”²⁵, Human Rights Watch summarised the most recent UN annual report as an “alarming litany of rights violations”. Among many subjects the article mentions treatment of minorities:

The report describes the targeting of minorities, notably Tamils and Muslims, by “land grabs,” “hate speech and misinformation,” and “attacks against places of worship.” Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people continue to face criminal prosecution.

²³ “Church in Chains”, 29 March 2023, <https://www.churchinchains.ie/country-profiles/sri-lanka/>

²⁴ “Sri Lanka: ‘Religious Disharmony’ Order Threatens Minorities”, Human Rights Watch, 16 March 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/16/sri-lanka-religious-disharmony-order-threatens-minorities>

²⁵ “UN Paints Bleak Picture of Rights in Sri Lanka: Entrenched Patterns of Abuse Define Country’s Current Crisis”, Meenakshi Ganguly, Deputy Asia Director, Human Rights Watch, 30 March 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/30/un-paints-bleak-picture-rights-sri-lanka>

Documentation²⁶ of the Human Rights Committee dialogue that led up to the March 2023 report shows clearly that the category “minorities” includes Hindus and Christians.

Violence and hate speech against Muslims, Hindus and Christians remained unaddressed, with perpetrators not being held to account. . . . Obstacles in registration of religious institutions and physical assaults against Muslims and Christians, including in their places of worship, were concerning.

This picture of unaccountable human rights abuses is highlighted in the recently released advance version of the annual report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights²⁷:

Lack of accountability at all levels remains the fundamental main human rights problem. Whether it refers to war crime atrocities, post-war emblematic cases, torture and deaths in police custody, excesses in crowd control, corruption and the abuse of power, Sri Lanka suffers from an extraordinary accountability deficit that unless addressed will drag the country further behind.

On this basis alone there is no avoiding the conclusion that Christians in Sri Lanka exist in an extremely insecure, indeed precarious, environment with no assurance of government protection.

Official government country Information

It is to be noted that the most recent Australian (DFAT)²⁸ and UK Home Office²⁹ country reports on Sri Lanka, now slightly dated, contain numerous sections that acknowledge the overall picture portrayed in the other reports cited above. The UK Country Policy and Information Note quotes extensively from the DFAT Country Information Report.

Unfortunately, the stated conclusions sometimes use equivocal language, qualifying clauses, and three-years-old information, seemingly downplaying the dangers. The impression that this discrepancy from the plethora of unequivocal and more up-to-date reports cited above is consistent with the thesis of a book *UK Home Office Denialism of the Persecution of Christians in Sri Lanka*³⁰ published in May 2020 by the British Pakistani Christian Association. Authored by Desmond Fernandes, a former lecturer at De Montfort University in England, the book documents the nature and extent of persecution of Christians in Sri Lanka and the way in which the UK Home Office continued to assert that religious minorities do not face a real risk of serious harm or persecution in Sri Lanka. BPCA trustee Juliet Chowdhry said the association’s book was commissioned immediately after members met with Sri Lankan community leaders following the 2019 Easter bomb attacks.

Clearly, there are substantial reasons to treat with caution the summaries and conclusions indicated in these government documents. That position is supported by the extended discussion in my article cited above (footnote 2) about a May 2021 landmark immigration case in the United Kingdom.

Conclusion

“Religious and ethnic tensions remain persistent and pervasive in Sri Lankan society. Before Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s resignation, his government’s promotion of Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism had contributed to an increasingly hostile environment for the country’s

²⁶ “In Dialogue with Sri Lanka, Experts of the Human Rights Committee Commend Settlement of Internally Displaced Persons, Raise Issues Concerning Constitutional Reform and Impunity for Military Officers’ Alleged Human Rights Violations”, The United Nations Office at Geneva, Meeting Summaries, 09 March 2023, <https://www.un Geneva.org/en/news-media/meeting-summary/2023/03/dialogue-sri-lanka-experts-human-rights-committee-commend>

²⁷ “Situation of human rights in Sri Lanka”, Human Rights Council, Fifty-fourth session, 11 September–6 October 2023, 06 September 2023, [https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/09/accountability-central-sri-lankas-future-un-human-rights-report#:~:text=GENEVA%20\(6%20September%202023\)%20%E2%80%93,Office%20report%20published%20on%20Wednesday.](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/09/accountability-central-sri-lankas-future-un-human-rights-report#:~:text=GENEVA%20(6%20September%202023)%20%E2%80%93,Office%20report%20published%20on%20Wednesday.)

²⁸ DFAT COUNTRY INFORMATION REPORT SRI LANKA, 23 December 2021, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/country-information-report-sri-lanka.pdf>

²⁹ Country Policy and Information Note Sri Lanka – Religious Minorities, Version 2.0, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/612dfeb08fa8f53dd0d601b7/Sri_Lanka_-_Religious_Minorities_-_CPIN_-_v2.0_-_August_2021.pdf

³⁰ See the article “Persecution increasing in Sri Lanka, says Christian group: British Pakistani Christian Association backs UN expert’s recent report on violations of freedom of religion”, Union of Catholic Asian News, published 11 March 2020, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/persecution-increasing-in-sri-lanka-says-christian-group/87423>

religious and ethnic minorities in which religious freedom violations often occurred with impunity. Both before and after his resignation, problems persisted in 2022 through the enforcement of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, discrimination against Muslims and other religious minorities, and land disputes that threaten religious minority property.”³¹

Specifically, Christians have become the group in Sri Lankan society that is most clearly the target of persecution. The non-Catholic portion, representing perhaps 1% of the population, is especially vulnerable to discrimination and violent attack. They are scared and seemingly defenceless. The government has not condemned the ongoing atrocities nor has it intervened or provided protection. The Christian community lives in such fear that many are reluctant to attend their places of assembly or worship. Apparently most of them are trapped in the situation, usually both economically and in practical terms unable to consider migrating to a more secure context. Certainly any Sri Lankan Christians who are already living in other countries would be most unwise to risk returning to their homeland in the near future. What may have been a relative secure place for them on religious grounds just a decade or two ago, is now far from that. And there are few signs of improvement, both in the social and economic situation in general and in the persecution of Christians in particular.

³¹ “Religious Freedom Conditions in Sri Lanka, USCIRF Country Update: Sri Lanka”, November 2022, Zack Udin, USCIRF Research Analyst, <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2022-11/2022%20Sri%20Lanka%20Country%20Update%2011.23.22.pdf>