



24th Dec 2020

Hon Min. Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi
Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
Foreign Office Building,
Constitution Avenue,
G-5, Islamabad,
Pakistan.

Hon Min. Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi

RE : Seeking Support for the International Campaign to Stop 'Forced Cremation' of Covid Bodies in Sri Lanka!

COSMOS UK (Council of Sri Lankan Muslim Organisations UK), an umbrella organization of twenty-eight Sri Lankan Muslim Organizations based in UK, regret to bring to your of a grave and disturbing development taking place in Sri Lanka, in the midst of the dreaded Covid pandemic, which has adversely impacted upon the people around the world. Unfortunately, instead of uniting the people in the fight against the invisible enemy, the Sri Lankan authorities have been creating deepening divisions between them. In complete disregard for the basic human rights of the minorities, and despite strong protests and pleas from the community leaders, and human rights watch dogs as well as appeals from the international community, Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) has been forcibly cremating those who have died as a result of Covid-19.

This State sanctioned racism has been particularly affecting the victims among the Muslim and Christian communities, whose grieving relatives are unable to bid farewell to their loved ones in accordance with their faith. Both Islam and Christianity enjoin burying the dead and have prohibited cremation, as long as burial does not pose any risks to the living. Almost 100 Muslims have been forcibly cremated to-date, as a result of this inhumane policy. On December 9, a 20-day-old baby named Shaykh was forcibly cremated in a cemetery in Borella, the largest suburb of Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo – the youngest among 15 Muslims who were cremated recently.

At first glance, Sri Lankan authorities insisting that the bodies of all Covid-19 victims be cremated, no matter their religion, might seem fair. The Sri Lankan health authorities say the bodies of COVID-19 victims will contaminate the groundwater if they are buried. However, upon closer inspection it is patently clear that the decision to enforce the 'Forced cremations Policy 'was taken on arbitrary grounds sans any scientific evidence, contrary to WHO guidelines, and its motivations must therefore be questioned. The World Health Organization (WHO) has quite explicitly laid down guidelines which states, that both cremation and burial options are safe in such disposal.



WHO tweeted on 10th April 2020 that *'It is a common myth that persons who have died of a communicable disease should be cremated, but this is not true. Cremation is a matter of cultural choice and available resources'*. European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) also says, *'Decedents with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 can be buried or cremated as usual'*.

It is thus patently clear that the measure of forced cremation by Sri Lanka's authorities is not covered under any health advisory prescribed by the World Health Organization (WHO) to enhance governmental responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many scientific pundits and virologists both in Sri Lanka and outside, have also been quite vocal against this gross violation of human rights in the guise of fighting the Covid pandemic. It is reported that the burial option is completely safe. Hence, there is no reasonable justification to enforce cremation as an obligatory measure. Thus, while fighting the pandemic, Sri Lanka appears to have unfortunately given a new lease of life to an equally dangerous virus: 'State sanctioned 'racism which includes growing Islamophobia.

The issue has also been raised by many human rights organizations, and the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief urged the government to respect burial rights of its Muslim minority. As the UN Resident Coordinator in Sri Lanka Hanaa Singer stated, 'during epidemics, for reasons of public health, Governments often need to take difficult and at times unpopular measures. However, in this case, the negative consequences of not allowing burials seem to outweigh any potential epidemiological benefit. The common assumption that people who died of a communicable disease should be cremated to prevent spread is not supported by evidence. 'Muslim and Christian families in Sri Lanka whose relatives were cremated had justice denied to them, after the Supreme Court threw out their case when challenged that their religious rights were violated.

We are pleased to note that the Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC) of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), in which your great country is also a member, has expressed extreme concern over reports of Sri Lankan authorities insisting on cremation for COVID-19 Muslim victims. Against this practice, inconsistent with Islamic precepts, the OIC thus called for respect to the burial ritual in the Muslim faith. Accordingly, IPHRC urged the Sri Lankan government to fulfill its human rights obligations by respecting the right of its Muslim minority to practice their religion free from any discrimination, including the uncompromised right to honour the dignity of their dead in line with their religious beliefs and obligations. Maldives recently offered to bury the dead of Sri Lankan Muslim Covid victims. However, although it was a gesture of solidarity and a laudable offer, Sri Lankan Muslims feel that it will only further promote the racist narrative of the anti-Muslim hate lobby in Sri Lanka that Muslims do not belong to the country.



It is alarming that GoSL continues to dismiss both local and international pleas to review this warped policy. Under these circumstances, Sri Lankan Muslims look upon the governments and their brethren in Muslim countries, to use their good offices in addressing the issue and also leverage their influence to pressure Sri Lanka into ending these forced cremations.

We seek your support to bring justice to the affected Muslim community in Sri Lanka. May Almighty guide all of us in the right path.

Thanking You

Yours sincerely

.....
Mr Mohamed L. Abdul Wahid
Chairman
Cosmos UK

References

1. AlJazeera, 18 Dec 2020, "Outrage in Sri Lanka over cremation of Muslim COVID victims" (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/18/i-had-no-stre>)
2. France24, 14 Dec 2020, "Anger grows in Sri Lanka over forced Muslim virus cremations" (<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20201214-anger-grows-in-sri-lanka-over-forced-muslim-virus-cremations>)
3. TRTWorld, 14 Dec 2020, "Forced cremations of Muslim Covid-19 victims cause outrage in Sri Lanka" (<https://www.trtworld.com/asia/forced-cremations-of-muslim-covid-19-victims-cause-outrage-in-sri-lanka-42356>)
4. Amnesty International, 10 Dec 2020 "Forced cremations in Sri Lanka" (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/12/forced-cremations-in-sri-lanka/>)
5. The Guardian, 04 Dec 2020, "Muslims in Sri Lanka 'denied justice' over forced cremations of Covid victims" (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/04/muslims-sri-lanka-justice-forced-cremations-covid-victims>)
6. Colombo Telegraph, 17 Nov 2020, "Unreasonable 'Covid-Cremation Policy': Potentially Deadly Payback Would Be Enormous!" (<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/unreasonable-covid-cremation-policy-potentially-deadly-payback-would-be-enormous/>)
7. Arab News, 06 Nov 2020, "OIC condemns cremation of COVID-19 infected Muslim remains in Sri Lanka" (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1759081/saudi-arabia>)
8. BBC News, 05 July 2020, "Coronavirus funerals: Sri Lanka's Muslims decry forced cremation" (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-53295551>)
9. TRTWorld, 14 May 2020, "Compulsory cremation: A nightmare for Sri Lanka's Muslims" (<https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/compulsory-cremation-a-nightmare-for-sri-lanka-s-muslims-36307>)
10. AlJazeera, 03 Apr 2020, "Anguish as Sri Lanka forces Muslims to cremate COVID-19 victims" (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/3/anguish-as-sri-lanka-forces-muslims-to-cremate-covid-19-victims>)