



Franciscans International

A voice at the United Nations

SUMMARY

Side Event of the 28th Session of the UN Human Rights Council Freedom of Religion in Sri Lanka Thursday, 12 March 2015

Organised by the International Movement against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR) and Franciscans International

On March 12th Franciscans International co-hosted a parallel event to the UN Human Rights Council with the International Movement against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR) entitled the Freedom of Religion in Sri Lanka. The speakers for the event included Mr Ruki Fernando, a Sri Lankan human rights defender, Mr Mohamed Nizam Kariapper, a mayor from East Sri Lanka and the Deputy Secretary General of the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress, and Dr. Heiner Bielefeldt, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The chair and moderator for the paneled discussion was Dr. Nimalka Fernando from IMADR, who works on gender targeted issues within the field of human rights and is from Sri Lanka as well.

The event focused on how Sri Lanka can address the impact that radical Buddhism has had on creating an atmosphere of segregation and fear to move forward towards religious coexistence and tolerance. Given the recent Presidential elections in Sri Lanka in January 2015, many human rights activists hope that the prevailing atmosphere of tension and discrimination directed towards non-Buddhist religious groups and ethnic minorities will lift. While Sri Lanka's constitution acknowledges the strong presence Buddhism has in its society, it also expresses the need for religious freedom and respect. The panelists indicated that while there have still been sporadic cases of targeted violence since the new elections, there is renewed hope that a paradigm shift in how the government responds to these acts and overall atmosphere will foster a deeper sense of democracy and open dialogue.

The focus of the event was the deep concern for the perversion of Buddhist principles that the radical Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) group of monks has used to legitimize acts of discrimination and the desire for a homogenous Buddhist state in Sri Lanka. They have been serving as a self-declared vigilante police force since 2012 that have largely been able to claim impunity from the national government. They have been recorded as inciting violent riots against Muslim and Christian communities and are responsible for the burning and pillaging of churches, mosques, and shops throughout the country.

Mr. Kariapper expressed distinct concern for stability moving further into the year as 2015 marks the one-hundredth anniversary of a large-scale movement against Muslims in Sri Lanka. He fears that the mainstreaming of the BBS's desire for a singularly Buddhist territory has become institutionalized and that there is a need for a greater sense of accountability within the judicial system. However, he also spoke of his hope for the new government and for the new constitution that, if passed, will limit the power of executive.

Human Rights Defender activist Mr. Fernando, who also represented the Christian communities in Sri Lanka, gave a less optimistic view for what he sees as the government's lacking commitment to changing the passive stance of its predecessor and expressed the need for minority groups to collaborate in drawing attention to the actions of the BBS. He spoke to his own experiences of the discrimination and unfair imprisonment that activists, including those who are Buddhist, have faced from the BBS and national government. He likewise expressed a need to address what drives the BBS towards radicalism and to figure out what Buddhists within Sri Lanka and around the world can do in response.

Special Rapporteur Mr. Bielefeldt spoke on the importance of addressing communal, religious based violence and the impunity that often occurs in states where that religion is likewise associated with the government. He expressed deep concern not only for the minority groups within Sri Lanka, but also for the majority, which will also eventually feel the effects of having a group like the BBS in control. "Freedom from fear", he said, "is the precondition for religious freedom and the ability to openly identify with ones beliefs". Which is why there is a need to immediately address current and past situations to curb sentiments of intimidation and rumors. He expressed a need for the international community to take note of this and to hold Sri Lanka accountable to its international commitments.

During the open section of the discussion a few individuals spoke on their own experiences with religious tensions in Sri Lanka, including a Sri Lankan from Hindu community and Ms. Sandhya Eknaligoda who is Buddhist and the wife Mr. Prageeth Eknaligoda, victim of enforced disappearance in Sri Lanka. The panelists commended Ms. Sandya for providing her perspective and voicing the concern that many Buddhists within Sri Lanka also feel. The discussion on what the government might do in the future continued and several individuals questioned what steps should be taken to find solutions and where examples might be found to emulate religious coexistence in the face of an extremist group like the BBS.