



**SRI LANKA**  
**Report**  
February 2021

## Aim

This report aims to raise awareness towards the minority groups of Sri Lanka that are undergoing various human rights violations. It covers some major events that occurred in February 2021. Light must be shed upon the ongoing violations towards these minority groups.



<b>Country</b>	Sri Lanka (officially the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka)
<b>Population</b>	21 Million (21,803,000)
<b>Capital</b>	Kotte <sup>1</sup> (administrative) and Colombo (commercial) <sup>2</sup>
<b>Largest City</b>	Anuradhapura
<b>Major languages</b>	Sinhala, Tamil and English.
<b>Religion</b>	70.2% Buddhism, 12.6% Hinduism, 9.7%islam, 7.4 % Christian and 0.1% other
<b>Ethnicities</b>	74.9% Sinhalese, 11.2% Sri Lankan Tamils, 9.2% Sri Lankan Moors, 4.2% Indian Tamils and 0.5% others (including Chinese, Indians and Burghers)
<b>Life expectancy at birth:</b>	76.81 years in 2018 <sup>3</sup>

1. Official capital (with official title)
2. The economic, executive, and judicial capital
3. Life expectancy at birth, (total) years - Sri Lanka <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?locations=LK>

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## Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is an island located in South-East Asia and is often referred to as the 'the pearl of the Indian ocean' due to its shape and location. Sri Lanka has historical ancestry origins that date back to a group of individuals called the Sinhalese, who migrated there from India in 500BC.

In the early centuries, up until the 13th century, Sri Lanka often suffered conflicts and political turmoil from its neighbouring country India. In 1505, Sri Lanka was divided into three areas: The Tamils lived in the North, the Sinhalese kingdom was in the Southwest based in Kotte, and another in the centre and East based in Kandy. These divisions played essential roles in the colonisations of various superpowers in the centuries to come.

From 1505 until the mid-20th century, Sri Lanka underwent colonisation from the Portuguese, Dutch, and British. Mostly involving wars over territory, Sri Lanka faced similar circumstances to what occurred in India during these centuries. Sri Lanka fought for its independence for many years, eventually managing to achieve this on the 4th of February 1948, edging away from the British crowned colony empire of 'Ceylon'.

In modern day Sri Lanka, there here is still disputes between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. These disputes have followed in the footsteps of past civil wars, tensions and riots that began after British rule in the 1950's. Even though Sinhalese has the largest populations in Sri Lanka, the disputes between these two ethnic groups is still going on in the 21st Century.

4. (2020) A SHORT HISTORY OF SRI LANKA By Tim Lambert <http://www.localhistories.org/srilanka.html>
5. Ibid
6. Ibid

## Marginalised Groups and Disputes

Sri Lanka contains a vast amount of diversified ethno-cultural individuals. The major ethnic population of Sri Lanka is the Sinhalese (with the language being Sinhala) which make up for 74.9% of the population. This follows with Buddhism being the majority religion in Sri Lanka. The Karava make up 3.3% of the population. With the Sri Lankan Tamils (the language being Tamil) being the largest minority group in Sri Lanka occupying 11.1% of the population. There are also other minority groups that form in Sri Lanka, such as the Moors that practice Islam (which make up of 9.3% of the population) and the distinct ethnic group called the Indian Tamils (which make up for 4.1% of the population). The minority religions are Christianity and Islam.<sup>7</sup>

There has been an ongoing war between the two major ethnic groups found in Sri Lanka. These two groups are 'the largely Buddhist, Sinhala-speaking majority and the mostly Hindu, Tamil-speaking minority'.<sup>8</sup>



This conflict was accentuated by the Sri Lankan civil war which lasted from 1983-2009, fought between Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (also known as the Tamil Tigers), who were tired of continuous discrimination and violent prosecution, and the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan Government.

In 2009, the 26-year war ended with the Government claiming victory. This war ravaged the island nation and killed more than 70,000 people, as well as causing catastrophic economic issues.<sup>9</sup> After the war ended, relations between the two

7. (2012) Census of population housing <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PopHouSat/CPH2011/Pages/Activities/Reports/FinalReport/Population/Table%20A3.pdf>  
 8. (1988, December) Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine. Conflict and Confusion in Sri Lanka <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/conflict-and-confusion-sri-lanka>.  
 9. (2009, December) 10. The End of Sri Lanka's Cataclysmic Civil War [http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1945379\\_1944421\\_1944388,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1945379_1944421_1944388,00.html)

groups have not improved. Certain humanitarian projects as well as political solutions have been created in order shed light to the atrocities that were carried out during this civil war. There are also ongoing human rights violations that may be related to the Sri Lankan history. The often-asked question is whether the Sri Lankan war wounds will ever heal and whether this plays a part in the human rights violations in Sri Lanka in the 21st century.<sup>10</sup>

10. Ibid

## Human Rights Violations

Along with the atrocities that were carried out during the Sri Lanka civil war, there have been several human rights violations and crimes towards the marginalised individuals of this island country. (The civil war itself demonstrated cases of unlawful killing, disappearances of people and cases of torture. These cases, however, have also been reported years after the civil war ended, by larger news channels and human rights defenders. These are among several other issues involved in the country, that have to do with the police/intelligence agency brutality towards lawyers, human rights defenders and journalists.<sup>11</sup> This has followed with multiple years of protests and civil unrest in a country that demands answers from its political leaders.

11. Sri Lanka Human Rights, Human Rights Concerns <https://www.amnestyusa.org/countries/sri-lanka/>

## Major cases in February

### Anti-Muslim' Sentiments

Following the defeat of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in 2009, the relationships between ethnic and religious groups became very fragile within Sri Lanka. The ethnic Muslims (moors) groups in Sri Lanka are a major targeted group often suffering from these conflicts.<sup>12</sup> The Muslim community in Sri Lankan history was always peaceful among its fellow Sinhalese and Tamil neighbours, however, they have often been faced with challenges due to fostering 'their ethnic identity and religious-cultural practices'.<sup>13</sup> After the Sri Lankan Civil war ended there was a large amount of ethno-nationalist forces that used 'religious violence against ethno-religious minorities as a means to dominate the social and political spheres in the country'.<sup>14</sup> An example of this was by the Sinhala Buddhists. This created a vast amount of tension towards the religious minorities which were often subjected to hate campaigns, propaganda to threats, intimidation, minor destruction of property, and occasional physical violence.'

### Cremation order

The ongoing Covid-19 crisis has caused global issues worldwide. In Sri Lanka, however, there has been a human rights crisis trend that has suggested an apparent disregard for the cultural practices of one of its major minority groups. The Muslims in Sri Lanka are being forced to cremate the bodies of their loved ones who, the government believe, have passed away from Covid-19. Cremation is explicitly forbidden in Islam,<sup>15</sup> with most Muslims wishing to bury their deceased loved ones with the common practice of Sharia (which indicates a religious law and often calls for a burial). This has caused major upset and protests from the Muslim communities towards the Sri Lankan government.

12. (2016, June 7th) Anti-Muslim Sentiments and Violence: A Major Threat to Ethnic Reconciliation and Ethnic Harmony in Post-War Sri Lanka <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/7/10/125/htm>

13. Ibid

14. Ibid

15. (2021, February 19th) Bangladesh must speak out against forced cremation of Muslims in Sri Lanka

16. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/02/bangladesh-must-speak-out-against-forced-cremation-of-muslims-in-sri-lanka/>

## The case of Baby Shaykh

A 20-day old baby boy named Shaykh was cremated against the parent's permission, following assumptions that the baby had Covid-19. The news report by Amnesty suggested that the baby tested positive for Covid-19 while both parents tested negative.<sup>16</sup> The parents were devastated and refused to enter the hall where the cremation was taking place. The father's despair was evident in his words: "How can you watch your baby son being burnt?"<sup>17</sup>

This has shed light into aspects suggesting that cultural practices from certain minorities are often disregarded, playing a discriminatory role towards the Muslim community of Sri Lanka. This marginalised minority community has suffered years of discrimination both during and after the Sri Lankan civil war, questioning these new cremation laws paints a bigger picture towards the human rights violations of Muslims in Sri Lanka.

16. Ibid

17. (2020, December) Covid-19: Sri Lanka forcibly cremates Muslim baby sparking anger <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55359285>

## Reversal of 'Anti-Muslim' cremation order

Due to controversies found in the laws, Sri Lanka decided to end the mandatory cremation order in February, which started in the first place for fears related to the spread of the new coronavirus. The government suggested that the burial of bodies might have caused the contamination of waters with virus (a hypothesis that was never scientifically proven).<sup>18</sup> As mentioned in the case above, the removal of this order comes whilst shedding light upon the 'anti-Muslim' mentality that has shadowed Sri Lanka for over fifty years. The Sri Lankan government endeavoured to avoid reversing this order, including presenting the matter to the Supreme Court; however, the cases were dismissed. Since this cremation order came into effect, a large number of Muslims were forced to cremate their loved ones without voluntarily agreeing to this.<sup>19</sup>

18. (2021, February 26th) Covid-19: Sri Lanka reverses 'anti-Muslim' cremation order <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56205737>

19. Ibid

## Human Rights abusers to be held accountable in resolution

A new resolution from the United Nations Human Rights Council was passed in the month of February 2021, demanding that Sri Lanka holds accountable and punishes perpetrators of past human rights violations. During the Sri Lankan civil war, there was allegedly never an accountability process to violators. Sri Lanka is urging the United Nations Human Rights Council to reject these claims.<sup>20</sup> As previously mentioned in this report, the ongoing human rights issues in Sri Lanka have increased despite the end of the civil war. This comes as officials have investigated into 'Sri Lanka's Tamil separatist conflict and taken sanctions against top generals and others accused of war crimes'.<sup>21</sup> Many countries have agreed with this resolution, with multiple foreign countries<sup>22</sup> suggesting that there has been an increase in human rights violations. These violations have also been spotlighted in the context of Covid-19 laws and restrictions. The aim of this resolution is to seek clarification and to hold Sri Lankan individuals responsible for the hate crimes perpetrated during the Sri Lankan civil war, while further attempting to reduce the current human rights violations in 2021.

20. (2021, February 24th) 'Political move': Sri Lanka urges rejection of UNHRC resolution  
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/24/sri-lanka-calls-un-rights-bodys-resolution-a-political-move>

21. Ibid

22. Ibid

## Concluding remarks

The international community needs to give larger attention to the events that are occurring in Sri Lanka. Human rights violations continue without appropriate and proportionate media coverage. It is time that the international community gives support to the Sri Lankan people. In particular, to the marginalised groups that have suffered over 26 years of war and the individuals that are still affected by certain aspects of discrimination resulting from it, and continuing despite it. It is paramount to shed light on what is happening, since most of the hate that was created between the Tamil and Sinhalese ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, is still present among minority communities today.

## References

This report mentions some of the Human Rights violations that have happened in Sri Lanka during the month February, 2021. Due to limited social media and news channels Sri Lanka and the fact that most reports and news outlets are state controlled,<sup>23</sup> some of the violations mentioned above may have occurred in the earlier years and only been reported recently. There are still continuous human rights violations occurring in Sri Lanka some of which are not directly caused by the civil war, but may be somehow still be related.

The Global Human Rights Defence team used various references to highlight these events. Some news outlets were used and highlighted more than others, therefore GHRD would like to show gratitude to the following sources:

### **Amnesty International (amnesty.org)**

A global movement aiming at injustice towards individuals. Presenting a lot of material on human rights related issues and accurate news on ongoing humanitarian crisis globally.

### **The British Broadcasting Cooperation (bbc.com)**

A public service provider and news outlet station, providing worldwide global news.

### **Deutsche Welle (dw.com)**

A German public state-owned international broadcaster covering worldwide news.

23. <https://sri-lanka.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/state-run-media/>

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[www.ghrd.org](http://www.ghrd.org)

