



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Challenges to Religious Freedom in Sri Lanka

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Frederick Davie, USCIRF Vice Chair

Good morning, everyone and welcome to today's hearing on *Challenges to Religious Freedom in Sri Lanka*. Thank you to our distinguished witnesses for taking the time to join us today.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this important hearing.

This month marks the 15th anniversary of the end of the Sri Lankan Civil war, and therefore an appropriate time to discuss current religious freedom challenges and opportunities in Sri Lanka. While not a religious conflict, the decades-long civil war included central religious divisions between the predominantly Buddhist Sinhalese majority and the primarily Hindu and Christian Tamil minorities. Sri Lanka's Muslim population was equally affected, with large scale displacement in the northern part of the country. Fifteen years after the war's conclusion, Sri Lanka continues to reconcile with its history of ethnic and religious violence.

In 2023 and most recently, in our 2024 annual report released last week, USCIRF recommended that the U.S. Department of State place Sri Lanka on its Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe religious freedom violations. In the years following the civil war's conclusion, discrimination against religious minorities—particularly Tamil Christians, Tamil Hindus, and Muslims—have exacerbated religious tensions. In the aftermath of attacks like the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings, the Sri Lankan government has used laws to disproportionately target and silence religious minority communities under the guise of national security and curbing the insult to religion. Simultaneously, the Sri Lankan government has used constitutional provisions to target religious minorities' places of worship, which our witnesses will discuss in greater detail.

I will now turn the floor over to Commissioner David Curry for his opening remarks.

David Curry, USCIRF Commissioner

Thank you, Vice Chair Davie. I would like to join in welcoming everyone to today's hearing. And thank you very much to our witnesses for taking the time to join us today and offer your expertise. I had the opportunity, along with

Commissioner Schneck, to visit Sri Lanka for the first time this past October. It was a tremendous experience to travel throughout the country, including the North and East, to meet with religious communities and leaders from all faiths, journalists, and government officials.

During the USCIRF delegation, we also had the opportunity to visit one of the three hotels struck during the horrific 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, where religious minorities were largely targeted during Easter Sunday services. In total, three churches and three hotels were attacked and over 260 people died. Following the deadly attacks, authorities used the problematic Prevention of Terrorism Act, or PTA, to arbitrarily detain hundreds of Muslim men and women.

Enacted as a temporary measure in 1979, the PTA continues to be used by Sri Lankan authorities to arrest, search, and detain individuals. While designed to curb terrorism concerns, the PTA's broad and vague language has been used with increasing frequency to target religious minorities and human rights advocates, including one of our witnesses testifying today.

In recent years, authorities have also utilized the PTA, in combination with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Act, or ICCPR Act, to crack down on religious minorities. While designed to protect religion from insult, the ICCPR Act has been used as a blasphemy law to silence religious minorities and curtail freedom of thought. During the *Aragalaya* in 2022, for example, Sri Lankans came together to protest economic conditions in the country. Authorities used both the PTA and ICCPR Act to arbitrarily arrest several Catholic priests and Buddhist monks who vocalized their disapproval with the government. Sri Lankan authorities have also used these discriminatory laws to detain comedians, poets, lawyers, and activists. USCIRF remains particularly concerned that proposed

amendments to the PTA, the newly proposed Ant-terrorism Act, and the newly proposed Online Safety Bill will exacerbate these types of arrests.

We are also concerned about the targeting of places of worship. During our time in Sri Lanka, we spoke with members of the Christian community who described increasing harassment and challenges in registering churches at the local level, despite no requirement by the national government. Recent announcements by the Ministry of Buddhasasna Religious and Cultural Affairs that authorities will raid “unregistered” places of worship is especially of concern and an issue USCIRF will continue to track.

I will now turn the floor over to Commissioner Stephen Schneck.

Stephen Schneck, USCIRF Commissioner

Thank you, Commissioner Curry. Welcome, everyone. I wanted to take a moment to discuss some observations that Commissioner Curry and I were able formulate during the USCIRF delegation to Sri Lanka last October that he mentioned.

In 2023, USCIRF conducted a delegation to Sri Lanka. Commissioners and staff had the opportunity to raise several of the concerns mentioned by Vice Chair Davie and Commissioner Curry, including the PTA and the ICCPR Act. We also met with a number of different religious communities in Colombo, Trincomalee, and Jaffna, and were encouraged by several interfaith efforts at the local level. In Trincomalee, for example, our delegation was greeted by members of the Catholic church as well as members of the Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim communities to discuss interfaith efforts, including supporting the public celebration of different religious holidays. We were also grateful for the opportunity to visit several religious sites, including Hindu temples, churches, and mosques.

In recent years, however, there has been an increasing trend of land disputes involving tensions between Buddhist heritage conservation and sites that religious minorities claim as their own. This came up in several discussions throughout our delegation. Different communities that we met with explained how Sri Lanka's Department of Archeology, which operates under the Ministry of Buddhasasana Religious and Cultural Affairs, has worked in collaboration with Buddhist monks and local authorities to identify and preserve cultural sites throughout the country. In some cases, this has led to the expropriation of Hindu and Muslim places of worship, which our witnesses will discuss in more depth today.

Thank you, and I will now turn the floor back over to Vice Chair Davie.

Frederick Davie, USCIRF Vice Chair

Thank you, Commissioner Schneck. I would now like to briefly introduce our witnesses. Each person's full biography can be found on our website at www.uscirf.gov.

First, we will hear from Hejaaz Hizbullah, who is a human rights lawyer known for his advocacy on behalf of Sri Lanka's Muslim community that has been affected by hate speech and discrimination. As Commissioner Curry mentioned, he was targeted and formerly detained as a result of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, or PTA.

Our next witness will be Madura Rasaratnam, who is the Interim Executive Director of the People for Equality and Relief in Lanka, or PEARL. Dr. Rasaratnam, is also an associate professor of Comparative Politics at City, University of London. Her research examines ethnic and nationalist conflict with a regional focus on South Asia.

She will be followed by Mike Gabriel, the Head of Religious Liberty Commission at the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka.

Our fourth witness is Shreen Abdul Saroor, who is a Co-Founder of the Women's Action Network. Through this group, she is creating a new generation of young women leaders from divergent groups who don't typically work together—such as Muslim, Tamil, and Sinhalese—to ramp up the women's movement in Sri Lanka.

And our final witness is Alan Keenan, who is the International Crisis Group's Senior Consultant on Sri Lanka. He has lived and worked in Sri Lanka for extended periods and holds a PhD in Political Theory.

Thank you all for being here. Mr. Hizbullah, you may begin your testimony.