

Islamophobia and attacks on Muslims in Sri Lanka

Incident Map

Islamophobia and attacks on Muslims on the rise in Sri Lanka

During the past year, there has been an unprecedented level of violent attacks, demonstrations and hate speech targeting Sri Lanka's eight per cent Muslim population. Mainly perpetrated by Buddhist fundamentalist groups, the events have left the country's second largest minority community – the Muslims – feeling afraid and vulnerable. The response from the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) has been limited. Police inaction in some cases has enabled violence to take place and there have been few arrests.

The 'Bodu Bala Sena' or 'Buddhist power force' is the main group behind the targeting of Muslims. Appeals by Muslim civil society to the GoSL to take action against this group have met with little positive response. On 27 January 2013, President Mahinda Rajapaksha reportedly met monks and members of the Bodu Bala Sena and asked them to avoid conflicts with other religious

communities. The President's statement at this meeting was only publicised in the English language and not in the Sinhalese language media, thereby not reaching a large number of supporters of the Bodu Bala Sena. In his speech on Independence Day, 4 February 2013, there was again a call to stop inciting racial hatred. While these initiatives must be welcomed, they are far from adequate considering the level of violence and hatred being unleashed on Muslims at present.

MRG has received reports of other religious communities facing serious

problems too. However the Muslim community is currently facing a concerted campaign against them. In addition to attacks on places of religious worship there are calls to boycott Muslim shops and establishments, all of which is increasing tensions, particularly in areas where Muslims and Sinhalese live close to each other. The incidents against Muslims are widespread across the country and have picked up momentum during the last months. Here are some of the major events that have taken place since April 2012.

In addition to the protests and attacks, there has been a spate of online hate campaigns targeting Muslims. These campaigns have run on social networking sites and also appear as responses to comments and news on other websites. The campaigns use degrading and threatening language about Muslims and on some occasions insult Islamic beliefs and texts. There is also currently a major campaign against the system of issuing halal certificates, which at present is done by a national level Muslim religious body.

Recommendations

To the Government of Sri Lanka

- Take immediate action to protect all religious minority communities from violent attacks, threats of violence as well as incitement to religious hatred. Community property, including places of religious property, must be protected and access ensured. This protection responsibility extends to ensuring the safety and well-being of potentially vulnerable groups within minority communities, including women, children, the elderly and persons with disabilities.
- Take immediate action to investigate impartially all attacks against all

places of religious worship. Prosecute those involved in the attacks in accordance with Sri Lankan law.

- Take immediate action to enforce Sri Lankan law with regard to the activities of fundamentalist groups that engage in attacks on places of religious worship in line with international human rights norms.
- Take immediate action to draft legislation regarding the prevention of religious intolerance and hate speech. The drafting process must include full consultation with minority community representatives in relevant languages.
- Take immediate action to implement Lessons Learned & Reconciliation Commission (LLRC)

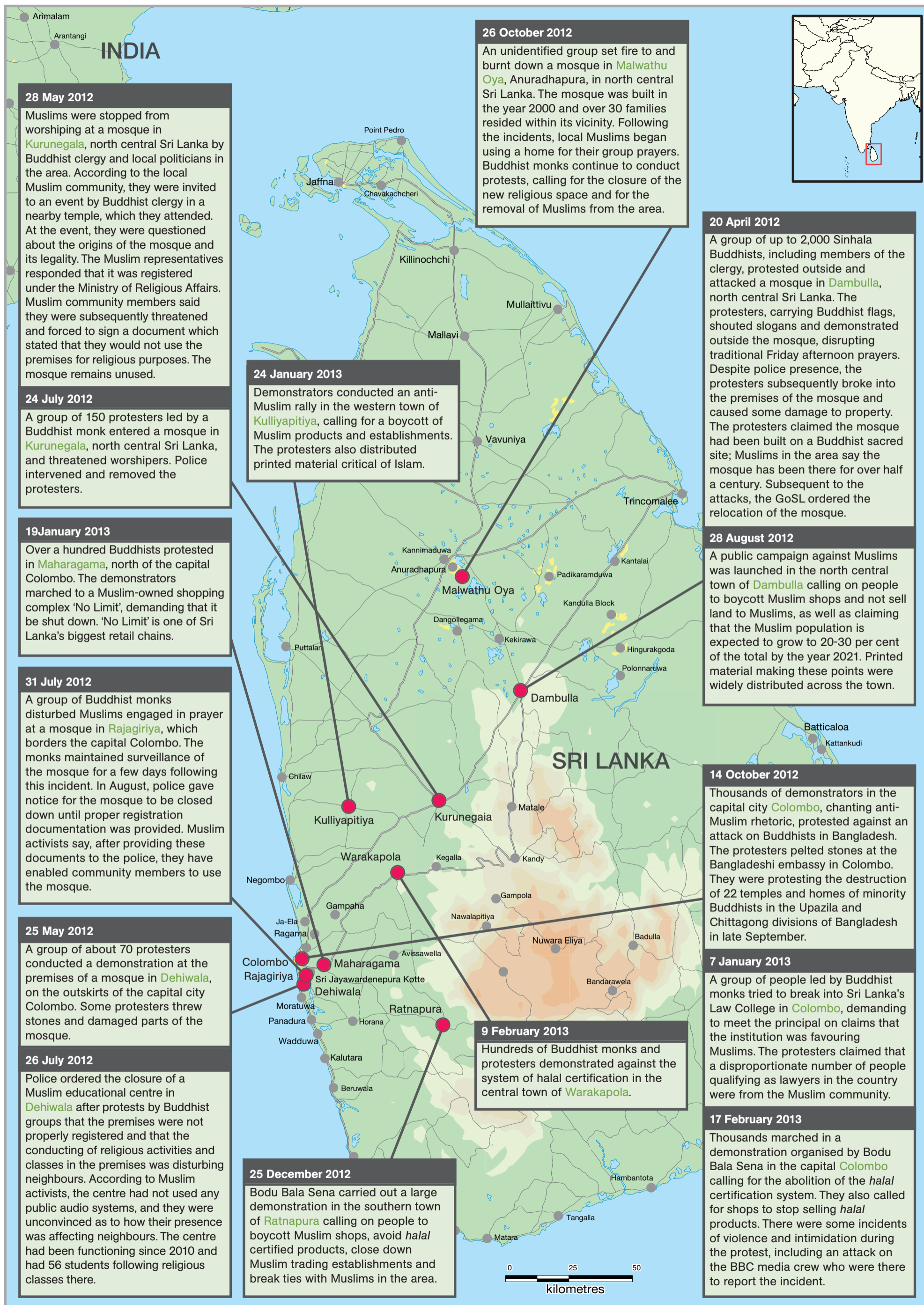
recommendations on freedom of religion and minority rights.

- Take action to promote the religious freedom of all communities in accordance with international human rights standards.
- Respond to communications made by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Independent Expert on Minority Issues and invite them to visit and report on Sri Lanka.
- Finally, the President should make a public statement, in all national languages, condemning acts of violence and incitement to religious hatred against Muslims and all other communities and assure minorities that their rights will be protected.

To UN Human Rights Council (HRC) member states

- Ensure a strong UN HRC resolution on Sri Lanka that establishes an international, independent and impartial mechanism to investigate violations of international human rights and humanitarian norms during the recent armed conflict in Sri Lanka as well as current violations, including with regard to religious freedom and minority rights.
- Use their bilateral communications with the GoSL to raise their concern about the on-going attacks on Muslims and call for immediate measures to be taken to ensure the protection of Muslim and all other minority communities.

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Further Reading

1. Sri Lanka civil society statement. <http://groundviews.org/2013/02/15/civil-society-organisations-condemn-anti-muslim-rhetoric-and-attacks-in-sri-lanka>
2. Gulf News: Neo-fascism on the rise in Sri Lanka. <http://gulfnews.com/opinions/columnists/neo-fascism-on-the-rise-in-sri-lanka-1.1150052>
3. Saudi Gazette: Sri Lanka's journey to a foreboding future.
4. BBC: Sri Lanka hardline group calls for *halal* boycott. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-21494959>