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Sri Lankan authorities move to protect religious freedom

JW.ORG (21.08.2015) - <http://www.jw.org/en/news/legal/by-region/sri-lanka/police-buddhist-extremists-monks/> - Sri Lankan high courts have agreed to review several cases of violence perpetrated by religious extremists against Jehovah's Witnesses. Since 2013, the Witnesses have endured increasing incidents of mob attacks, threats, and verbal abuse instigated by extremist Buddhist monks. A climate of impunity and religious intolerance exists because the police have not acted to protect the Witnesses or other religious minorities, thus emboldening religious extremists to continue their behavior.

Incidents Leading to Supreme Court Hearing

On March 1, 2014, in Talawa (North-Central Province), two women who are Jehovah's Witnesses were talking to others about their religious beliefs—a practice that is legally permitted in Sri Lanka. Two Buddhist monks and two policemen falsely accused them of "forcing conversions." The police arrested the women and took them to the station, where both the police and the monks verbally abused them for hours. The police did not charge the women with a crime but still detained them overnight.

In another incident that occurred on October 29, 2014, in Walasmulla (Southern Province), police arrested four women (pictured) and detained them overnight with convicted criminals. Although unharmed physically, they were subjected to hours of verbal abuse throughout the ordeal.

In both cases, the Witnesses filed a complaint against the officers and a fundamental rights application with the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka. The Supreme Court has found merit to both these claims and agreed to hear the cases. The women involved in the Talawa incident said: "We are happy that the Supreme Court has agreed to hear this matter. It has restored our faith in the justice system in Sri Lanka." At the preliminary hearing, held on May 29, 2015, Justice Sisira de Abrew stated that the Witnesses "are very kind people" and that the religious publications they distribute "are not against Buddhism." Both hearing dates are set for later this year.

Court of Appeal to Review Police for Failing to Act

In Colombo, the capital city, Jehovah's Witnesses filed an application with the Court of Appeal citing 11 incidents where police failed to protect them. In one of the incidents, a Buddhist monk severely beat Niroshan Silva and then took him by force to the police station to lodge a complaint against him. However, instead of protecting Mr. Silva, the police physically abused him.

Mr. Silva stated, "We are not asking for any special treatment in Sri Lanka, only that justice may prevail in supporting the fundamental right of freedom of religion for all." The court agreed to hear the case.

Recent Progress

Sri Lanka has acknowledged the problem of religious intolerance and has promised to "step up efforts to protect freedom of religion." Jehovah's Witnesses view this admission as progress.

Mr. J. C. Weliamuna, a senior fundamental rights attorney-at-law appearing on behalf of the Witnesses, commented: "Sri Lanka has been a multireligious country for decades, and all these religions have been united in peaceful coexistence until recently. Some have undermined this by committing acts of intimidation and violence against Jehovah's Witnesses and other minority religious groups, violating the Witnesses' constitutional rights. The authorities should not entertain the false accusations but should carry out full investigations."

The Witnesses remain hopeful that the courts will protect their fundamental right to practice their religion peacefully. They now look to the government to enforce the rule of law and to uphold the fundamental freedoms guaranteed by its constitution.
