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# Forced Cremations in Sri Lanka

## Briefing for MPs

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### TOP LINES

- The Labour Party is committed to defending the rule of law and human rights across the world. This includes in Sri Lanka, where concerns for religious freedoms for minorities have deepened since Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected as President in December 2019.
- Reports of the forced cremation of victims of COVID-19 – including those of Muslim and Christian faith for whom burial rituals and traditions are sacred – are deeply concerning. The World Health Organisation has issued guidance stating that the burial of Covid-19 dead poses no danger to public health.
- The Labour Party supports the work of the United Nations resident coordinator for Sri Lanka and UN regional groups, which have all written to the Sri Lanka government calling for COVID-19 victims to be handled with dignity and in accordance with their own religious beliefs.
- The Foreign Secretary must raise these concerns immediately with his counterpart in Sri Lanka, and the UK government should work with international partners to ensure the rights of the Sri Lankan people are upheld, and their religious practices respected.

### BACKGROUND

Sri Lankan Muslims have been left stripped of their human rights amid a new wave of cases of the government forcibly cremating Muslims under the guise of COVID-19 regulations. This practice first began in March, despite calls to respect the religious sensitivities of their families.

There have been a number of Islamophobic riots over the years in Sri Lanka and Islamophobia has further intensified since the tragic Easter bombings in 2019. Many Muslims in the country feel that they are being punished by having their final rites taken away from them.

Now that a second wave of the virus is spreading rapidly in the country, the Sri Lankan government has intensified its crackdown on Sri Lankan Muslims by forcing larger numbers of families into the cremation of their dead relatives. A shocking case involved a 20-day-old baby from a Muslim family who died after allegedly testing positive for the virus, yet the mother who was nursing the baby and the baby's father reportedly tested negative. The parents were left absolutely distraught that their pleas were dismissed, and the baby's body was taken away from them to be cremated against their will. Reports have suggested that around 100 Muslim bodies have been forcibly cremated.

Final rites, particularly the burial of the dead, are an integral and vital aspect of the exercise of freedoms. For Muslims, burial of the dead is mandated by their religion, and cremation is regarded as not only prohibited but also a desecration of a loved one's body.

Despite the World Health Organisation's guidelines that allow for both burial and cremation for COVID-19 victims and pleas from human rights organisations, the Sri Lankan government continues to make baseless allegations that they have to cremate bodies due to a potential spread of the virus, but there is no evidence of this.

In another blow to freedom of religion, Muslims in Sri Lanka were denied justice by the Sri Lankan Supreme Court and the mandatory cremations were kept in place. The issue has also been raised by the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief, who urged the government to respect the burial rights of its Muslim minority.

The Sri Lankan government withdrew from the UNHRC in February 2020.

### **KEY POINT 1**

**Labour should call on the Government to urgently request the Sri Lankan authorities to suspend forced cremations, in order to protect burial rites for Muslim communities.**

#### **Suggested Questions:**

- What representations has the Foreign Secretary made to his Sri Lankan counterpart, in light of Sri Lanka's policy of mandating cremations for all COVID-19 victims in Sri Lanka?
- What conversations has the Foreign Secretary had with the Sri Lankan government about the recent passing into law of the 20<sup>th</sup> amendment, which appears to remove almost all checks on the power of the executive president, undermine the independence of the judiciary, and therefore erode democracy in Sri Lanka?

### **KEY POINT 2**

**Labour should urge the Sri Lankan Government to heed the WHO guidelines, which clearly permit burials. The UK has been carrying out burials in a safe format, within the WHO guidelines. There is no scientific evidence to suggest that burials are unsafe.**

#### **Suggested Question:**

- In light of forced cremations in Sri Lanka, has the Foreign Secretary raised the WHO guidelines and advice with the Sri Lankan government, which safely allow burials for COVID-19 victims?

### **KEY POINT 3**

**Labour should put pressure on the Government to work with the UN and human rights groups to ensure religious rites are being upheld in Sri Lanka.**

#### **Suggested Questions:**

- What steps is the Foreign Secretary taking to support the UN and other human rights organisations to help prevent forced cremations in Sri Lanka?
- What action does the UK government plan to take at the UN Human Rights Council in March in response to (a) Sri Lanka's recent withdrawal from its human rights obligations under Article 40/1 and (b) the forced cremations of Sri Lankan citizens?

## KEY POINT 4

**Labour must push the UK government to ensure that future trade agreements between the UK and Sri Lanka do not undermine the UK's stated commitment to pursuing accountability and justice for human rights abuses in Sri Lanka.**

### Suggested Questions:

- What discussions has the Foreign Secretary had with the new trade envoy to Sri Lanka on ensuring that future trade agreements between the UK and Sri Lanka support the UK's policy on accountability and justice for human rights abuses in Sri Lanka?

## FURTHER BRIEFING AND READING

For further briefing, please contact:

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The Economist, [Sri Lanka is forcibly cremating Muslims who die of covid-19](#), 2021

Amnesty International, [Forced Cremations in Sri Lanka](#), 2020

The Guardian, [Muslims in Sri Lanka 'denied justice' over forced cremations of Covid victims](#), 2020

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### About the New Diplomacy Project:

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