



Sri Lanka



Barnabas supports income-generation projects for Sri Lankan war widows

A senior pastor and his wife were returning from visiting a church member in southern Sri Lanka when their motorbike was cut up by a 4x4 vehicle. The pastor's wife was thrown to the ground. The couple were then set upon by a mob of 40 men, accompanied by five Buddhist monks and a local government official. The pastor was beaten and threatened with death if he did not stop spreading Christianity.

Attacks like this one in August 2012 on Christians and their property in Sri Lanka are sporadic but often severe. The government, which claims to uphold religious freedom whilst affording Buddhism (which is practised by about 70% of Sri Lankans) the "foremost place", does little to investigate or prevent attacks by Buddhist extremists. A Sinhalese Buddhist and nationalist lobby demands privileges for itself at the expense of the Christian minority and campaigns for laws to control religious conversion.

Christians (and others) who seek to bring the government's human rights abuses to international attention take great risks. More than a dozen Christian ministers have "disappeared"; they are thought to have been abducted and murdered by President Mahinda Rajapaksa's regime, after speaking out for the beleaguered Tamil people. Christian children may also experience discrimination at school. Fourteen-year-old Amila Tharanga Thilakaratne, who is the only Christian schoolboy in his class, was severely beaten by a Buddhist monk and left bleeding from the ear when he professed his faith in the classroom in June 2012.

Many Sri Lankan Christians, still feeling the effects of the 26-year long bloody civil war that ended in 2009, live in desperate poverty and need since their homes and churches were destroyed in the conflict.

Christianity has a long history on the island, pre-dating the arrival of Westerners by many centuries. Tradition claims that Sri Lanka was first evangelised by the apostle Thomas. Small Christian communities existed on the coasts of Sri Lanka during the succeeding centuries, but Christianity made significant progress only from the sixteenth century. Despite this long-standing presence, Christians now number only some 8% of the population, and their faith is perceived by many Sri Lankans as a product of Western colonialism.

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