



UNDERSTANDING PRESS COVERAGE ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

#MINORMATTERS

PERIOD COVERED : MAY 2020

INTRODUCTION

Ethno-religious violence has been a growing problem in post-war Sri Lanka. Events in Mawanella (2001),¹ Gintota (2017),² Aluthgama (2014),³ Digana (2018)⁴ and more recently in Kurunegala/Minuwangoda (May 2019)⁵ demonstrate the extent and frequency of this type of violence.

This report is the 13th in a series of reports prepared by Verité Research (VR) for Minor Matters. These reports examine how the print media reports on religious freedom in Sri Lanka. They aim to analyse the frequency and tonality of coverage in various newspapers in English, Sinhala and Tamil to provide both quantitative and qualitative insights.

Press coverage is assessed by observing articles in terms of their sentiment on religious freedom, i.e., supporting, neutral or opposing. This sentiment analysis is based on an assessment of two components: a) news grading, in which the substance of the news article/content is analysed, and b) view grading, in which the tonality of the coverage, pictures, and any other additional cues used to position sentiment regarding the news item are analysed.

This report also qualitatively analyses articles related to religious freedom within the context of broader themes such as physical violence towards people and property; inflammatory speech; court cases, laws and regulations pertaining to religious freedom; religious inequality and discrimination; and other related reporting relevant to religious freedom. Newspaper summaries that have a bearing on religious freedom are listed in chronological order at the end of the report.

¹ G.H. Peiris, *A reappraisal of evidence and claims. Emerging Buddhist – Muslim rivalry in Sri Lanka?* The Island (2017) at http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=articledetails&code_title=167737 [Last accessed 11 December 2018].

² Dharisha Bastians, *Gintota and the shadows of extremism*. Daily FT (2017) at <http://www.ft.lk/opinion/Gintota-and-the-shadows-of-extremism/14-643843> [Last accessed 11 December 2018].

³ Dharisha Bastians, *Death toll rises to 4 from Aluthgama riot*. Daily FT (2014) at <http://www.ft.lk/article/308988/Death-toll-rises-to-4-from-Aluthgama-riots> [Last accessed 11 December 2018].

⁴ Daily FT, *Digana turns divisive* (2018) at <http://www.ft.lk/top-story/Digana-turns-divisive-/26-650661> [Last accessed 11 December 2018].

⁵ BBC, *Sri Lanka extends nationwide curfew after anti-Muslim riots* (2019) at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48269240> [Last accessed 21 May 2019].

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study, religious freedom is understood as:

- ✦ The freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of one's choice;⁶
- ✦ The freedom not to be discriminated against or to suffer any disability on the grounds of religion;⁷
- ✦ The freedom not to be subject to any restriction or condition with regard to access to places of public worship of one's own religion;⁸ and
- ✦ The freedom to be entitled to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice or teaching.⁹

Press reports on religious freedom that appeared during May 2020 were monitored. The following 10 daily and weekend newspapers in the 2 local languages (Sinhala and Tamil) were examined (see table below).

Sinhala Newspapers	Tamil Newspapers
<i>Lankadeepa/Sunday Lankadeepa</i>	<i>Virakesari/Sunday Virakesari</i>
<i>Divaina/Sunday Divaina</i>	<i>Thinakaran/Sunday Thinakaran</i>
<i>Dinamina/Silumina</i>	<i>Uthayan</i>
<i>Anidda</i>	

These newspapers were selected based on readership data in the National Demographic and Media Survey produced by Kantar LMRB for the year 2017. *Lankadeepa* and *Virakesari* have the highest readership among the daily Sinhala and Tamil newspapers respectively. *Divaina* has the second highest readership among the daily Sinhala newspapers. Meanwhile, *Dinamina* and *Silumina* were selected on the basis of them being state-owned newspapers.

⁶ Article 10 of the Sri Lanka Constitution.

⁷ Article 12 (2) and article 27 (6) of the Sri Lanka Constitution.

⁸ Article 12 (3) of the Sri Lanka Constitution.

⁹ Article 14 (1) (e) of the Sri Lanka Constitution.

Despite the absence of readership data, *Anidda* was selected as its content generally differs from coverage in the mainstream press and can be considered to provide alternative and/or different insights into events.

Likewise, *Uthayan*, a Jaffna-based publication, was selected despite the absence of its readership data mainly because it, being a regional publication, can be considered to provide alternative and/or different insights into events. State-owned newspapers in both the languages, i.e, *Dinamina* and its Sunday publication, *Silumina*, were included for the Sinhala sample whereas *Thinakaran* and its Sunday version *Sunday Thinakaran* were selected to represent the Tamil sample

Travel restrictions and the police curfew implemented to control the spread of COVID-19 adversely affected the publication and distribution of certain newspapers in May 2020. Consequently all papers monitored during the period were e-papers. However, *Anidda* was not published—either in print or as an e-paper—on 03 May 2020 and 10 May 2020. Meanwhile, *Uthayan* was published as an e-paper on days where curfew was imposed. However, restrictions on travel between districts meant that the paper was not distributed outside of Jaffna on days where physical copies were published. This report monitored *Uthayan* e-papers published in May 2020.

In these newspapers, articles that **had a bearing on religious freedom** were selected to assess the tonality of the reporting. These articles included:¹⁰

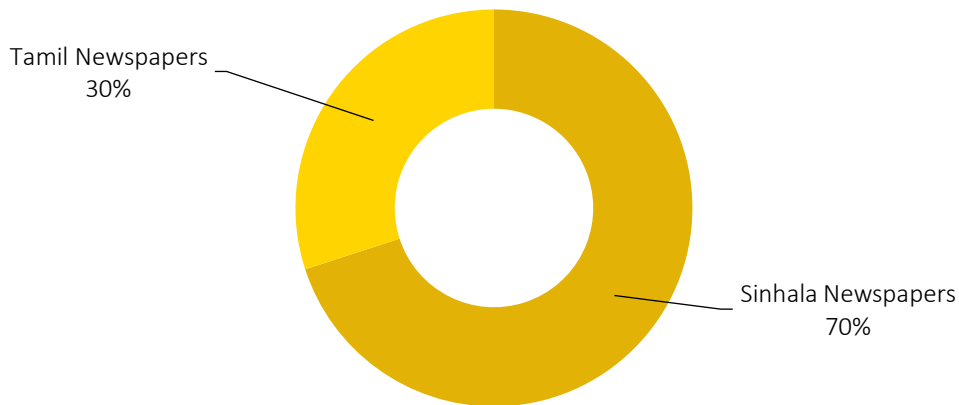
- ✦ Articles that referred to instances of physical violence that were religiously motivated, or targeted religious communities, figures or sites;
- ✦ Articles that referred to or contained speech prompting physical violence or threatening remarks targeted at religious communities, leaders or institutions; and
- ✦ Articles that discussed court cases, laws or regulations pertaining to religious freedom.

¹⁰ NB: the aforementioned list is only illustrative and not exhaustive.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Overview

Number of Articles by Language

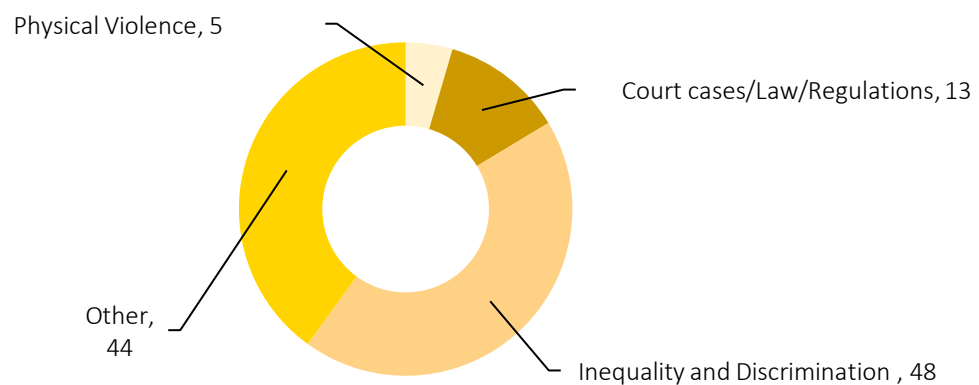


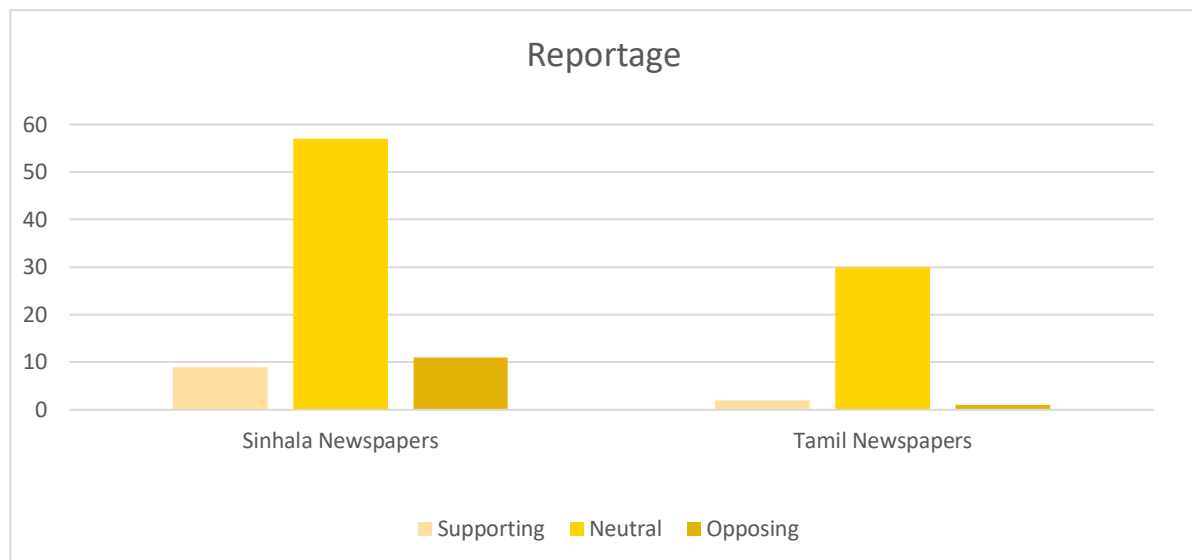
From May 2020, the Sinhala and Tamil newspapers monitored carried a total of 110 articles relating to religious freedom. Out of this, 70 percent (77 articles) were carried in the Sinhala newspapers while the Tamil newspapers accounted for 30 percent (33 articles) of the coverage.

Religious freedom was discussed under the following five themes:

- ✦ Physical violence;
- ✦ Inflammatory speech;
- ✦ Court cases/law/regulations;
- ✦ Inequality and discrimination; and
- ✦ Other related reporting.

Number of articles pertaining to religious freedom by theme



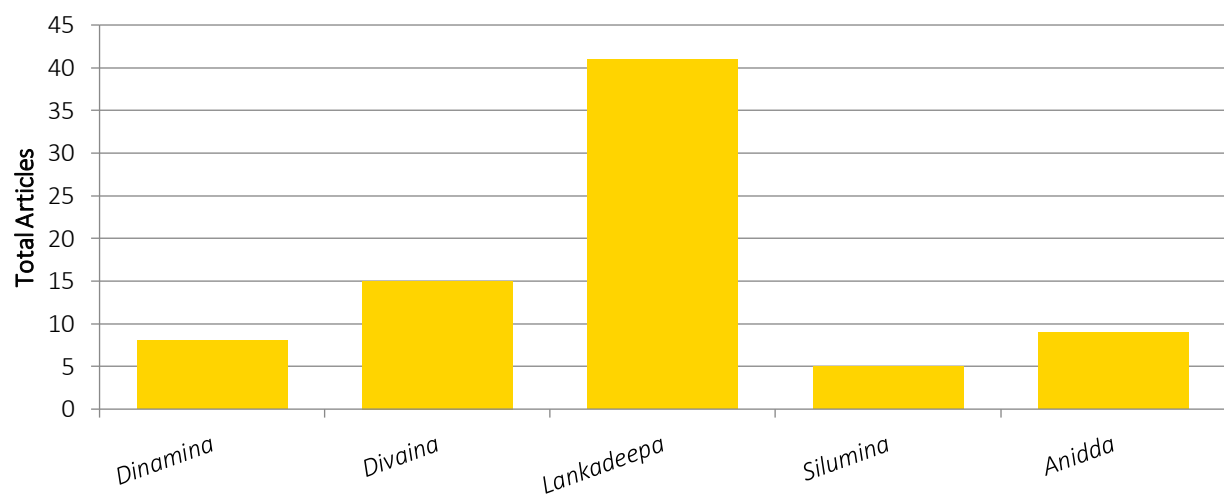


- ✦ Of the 77 articles in the Sinhala newspapers, 11 articles supported religious freedom, 57 articles were neutral, and nine articles opposed religious freedom.
- ✦ Of the 33 articles in the Tamil newspapers, one article supported religious freedom, 30 articles were neutral, and two articles opposed religious freedom.

Coverage in Sinhala newspapers

Sinhala Newspapers	No. Articles	Reportage		
		Supporting	Neutral	Opposing
<i>Dinamina</i>	8	2	6	0
<i>Divaina</i>	15	2	9	4
<i>Lankadeepa</i>	41	4	35	2
<i>Silumina</i>	4	1	2	1
<i>Anidda</i>	9	2	5	2
Total	77	11	57	9

Sinhala Newspapers



The Sinhala press featured 77 articles that had a bearing on religious freedom. 11 articles supported religious freedom, 57 articles were neutral, and nine articles opposed religious freedom.

✦ The **11 articles that supported religious freedom** are as follows:

- ✦ Articles in *Divaina*, *Dinamina*, and *Lankadeepa* highlighted initiatives by Hindu and Christian religious communities to mark Vesak amidst COVID-19. The authors put forward messages of religious co-existence and harmony.¹¹
- ✦ A *Lankadeepa* editorial discussed the Muhudu Maha Viharaya in Ampara in the Eastern Province as a site of archaeological significance. The author suggested that preserving the site was a national responsibility shared by all communities regardless of race or religion as it would protect their shared culture and history.¹²
- ✦ Articles in *Lankadeepa*, *Dinamina* and *Divaina* discussed an incident where a Muslim man died while saving a Tamil girl from drowning during her attempted suicide. Some of the articles also noted the involvement of a Sinhala policeman in rescuing the girl. The authors highlighted the different ethno-religious identities of the individuals involved in the incident and called for greater religious co-existence and harmony. A *Lankadeepa* article reporting on the same issue also highlighted the fact that the deceased hero's family was itself comprised of different religions. This was done to underscore a similar message on religious co-existence.¹³
- ✦ An article in *Silumina* on the distribution of COVID-19 relief by a Buddhist temple noted that the aid was being distribution to all those in need of it regardless of race or religion.¹⁴
- ✦ An opinion article in *Anidda* noted that a Catholic church in the Mullaitivu District had commemorated the lives, lost during the war, by lighting 1,000 oil lamps on May 18. The author voices his hopes that the action would pave the way towards reducing the divides between communities.¹⁵
- ✦ An opinion article in *Anidda* discussed religious co-existence during COVID-19. The author called on the government and the public work towards greater co-existence and tolerance by respecting and honoring others' religious beliefs.¹⁶

✦ Meanwhile, the **nine articles that opposed religious freedom** are as follows:

¹¹ *Divaina*, May 5, p.7; *Dinamina*, May 6, p.13; *Lankadeepa*, May 7, p.7.

¹² *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.4.

¹³ *Dinamina*, May 23, p.11; *Lankadeepa*, May 23, p.4; *Divaina*, May 31, p.3; *Lankadeepa*, May 31, p.1.

¹⁴ *Silumina*, May 31, p.7.

¹⁵ *Anidda*, May 24, p.6.

¹⁶ *Anidda*, May 24, p.6.

- ✦ An article in *Divaina* highlighted that a temple constructed in violation of quarantine and curfew regulations imposed due to COVID-19, was a Hindu temple.¹⁷
- ✦ An opinion article in *Divaina* discussing developments related to Muhudu Maha Viharaya in Ampara's contested lands expressed anti-Muslim sentiments. The authors referred to Muslim 'extremists' having 'stolen' the temple's lands and destroyed artefacts. They also suggested that such 'extremists' were a threat to Buddhist historical sites.¹⁸
- ✦ An opinion article in *Divaina* stated that 'people of other religions' were responsible for the destruction of historically and culturally significant Buddhist sites. Muhudu Maha Viharaya was described as an example of this occurrence.¹⁹
- ✦ Articles in *Lankadeepa* and *Silumina* discussed a stampede that broke out in Maligawatte on 21 May 2020 during a distribution of money that was organised in violation of COVID-19 quarantine and curfew regulations and which resulted in the deaths of three women. The authors highlighted the fact that the organisers of the event were Muslim, and that it took place in the vicinity of a mosque.²⁰
- ✦ An article in *Lankadeepa* discussed contestations over land involving the Devanagala Temple in Mawanella in the Sabaragamuwa Province. The chief incumbent of the temple was quoted referring to Muslim 'extremists' and 'settlers' who had 'taken over' the temple's land and defaced valuable artefacts.²¹
- ✦ An opinion article in *Anidda* voiced concerns that the government was discriminating against the Muslim community through its decision to mandate cremation for COVID-19 deaths. The author further criticised the government for alienating minorities in country and subtly declaring 'total allegiance' to Sinhala-Buddhists.²²
- ✦ An opinion article in *Anidda* criticised Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith's for his perceived 'subservience' to the government, comparing him to 'ultra-religious extremist Buddhist clergy'. The author also suggested that recent revelations in

¹⁷ *Lankadeepa*, May 18, P.13.

¹⁸ *Divaina*, May 24, p.3.

¹⁹ *Divaina*, May 24, p.8.

²⁰ *Lankadeepa*, May 24, p.1; *Silumina*, May 31, p.2.

²¹ *Lankadeepa*, May 31, p.20.

²² *Anidda*, May 15, p.8.

connection to Easter Sunday attacks were intended to incite further antagonism towards the Muslim community.²³

- ✦ An opinion article in *Divaina* negatively highlighted NGO criticisms of the government's treatment of minorities. The author suggested that the criticisms inaccurately accused the government of discriminatory behaviour. Support for the NGOs that came from Muslim groups was also subject to scrutiny, and the Sri Lankan Muslim community was chastised for seeking 'exclusive' treatment before the law.²⁴

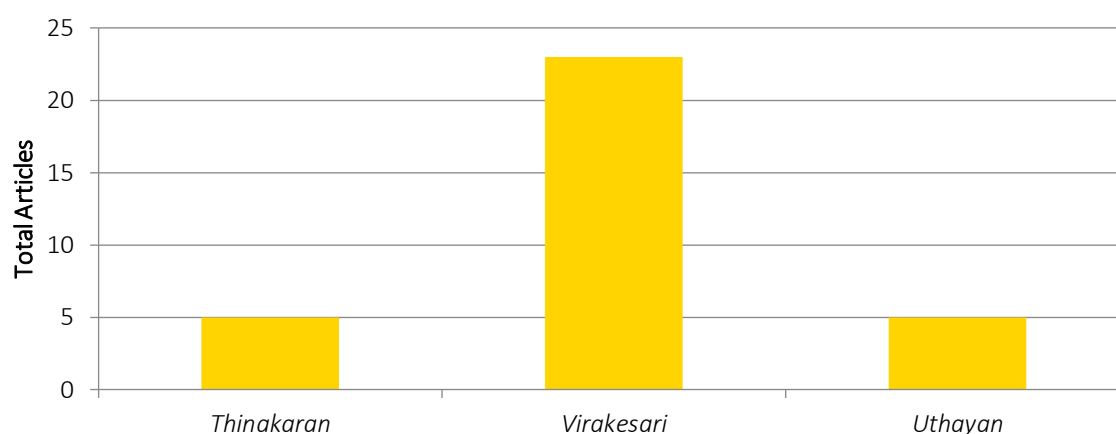
²³ *Anidda*, May 31, p.8.

²⁴ *Divaina*, May 23, p.8.

Coverage in Tamil newspapers

Tamil Newspapers	No. Articles	Reportage		
		Supporting	Neutral	Opposing
<i>Thinakaran</i>	5	0	5	0
<i>Virakesari</i>	23	1	20	2
<i>Uthayan</i>	5	0	5	0
Total	33	1	30	2

Tamil Newspapers



The Tamil press featured 33 articles that had a bearing on religious freedom. 2 articles supported religious freedom, 29 were neutral, and 2 articles opposed religious freedom.

- ✦ The **article that supported religious freedom** is as follows:
- ✦ An opinion published in *Virakesari* voiced support for the Muslim community in the face of regulations requiring that all COVID-19 deaths be cremated. The author suggested that the Muslim community was being discriminated against as they are not allowed to do burials in a context where only cremations are permissible.²⁵

²⁵ *Virakesari*, May 04, p.4.

- ✦ Meanwhile, the **two articles that opposed religious freedom** are as follows:
- ✦ Columns in *Virakesari* suggested that developments related to the conservation of the Muhudu Maha Viharaya in Ampara were part of a planned 'Buddhistisation' of the East. The authors suggested that the developments would pave the way for 'eradication' of Tamils and the 'seizure' and destruction of religious sites belonging to ethno-religious minorities.²⁶

²⁶ *Virakesari*, May 30, p.25; *Virakesari*, May 31, p.12.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The 110 articles monitored during the month of May 2020 can be categorised under four overarching themes pertaining to religious freedom. These themes are *physical violence towards people and/or property; court cases, laws and regulations pertaining to religious freedom; religious inequality and discrimination;* and *other related reporting*.

This section aims to identify and understand press sentiment in reporting on events/issues related to these overarching themes. These events/issues are selected on the basis of the volume of coverage they received in editorials, opinion articles, feature articles and statements made by political and non-political actors/groups. Only novel events/issues that received coverage were selected for in-depth qualitative analysis in this report.

Two events/issues were selected for the month of May. These two issues/events were as follows: (1) contestations over land claimed to belong to the Muhudu Maha Viharaya temple; and (2) ethno-religious profiling in the context of COVID-19.²⁷

Both issues can be categorised under the theme of *religious inequality and discrimination*.

Overarching theme	Events/ Issues
Religious inequality and discrimination	Contestations over land claimed to belong to the Muhudu Maha Viharaya temple
	Ethno-religious discrimination in COVID-19 related coverage

Religious inequality and discrimination

²⁷ References from VR's Ethics Eye, the online platform and The Media Analysis, the weekly analysis from instances in March and April have been incorporated into the analysis where necessary and applicable.

This theme relates to any form of discrimination on religious grounds.

(1) Contestations over land claimed to belong to the Muhudu Maha Viharaya temple

Muhudu Maha Viharaya is an ancient Buddhist temple located in Pottuvil, Ampara in the Eastern Province. Temple prelates claim temple lands are being ‘encroached’ on—an issue that rose to the public eye in May 2020 following government involvement on the matter.²⁸ On the orders of Secretary to the Ministry of Defence Kamal Gunaratne, a sub-unit of the Sri Lanka Navy was deployed on 15 May 2020 to ‘protect’ temple grounds.²⁹ An official survey of temple lands was also carried out in mid-May.³⁰ On 22 May 2020, it was announced that a Presidential Task Force (PTF) would be appointed under the Gunaratne to ‘conduct a comprehensive survey of archaeological sites in the East and to take measures to preserve them.’³¹

Coverage of developments relating to the Muhudu Maha Viharaya dominated Sinhala press reportage in May 2020, but only gained traction in the Tamil Press in the wake of the announcement that a PTF would be appointed. The following analysis explains the polarised narratives in press reporting and sentiment on the incident in the Sinhala and Tamil language newspapers. In both instances, voices in the press highlighted a perceived existential threat to an ethno-religious identity. However, they diverged on whether Sinhala-Buddhists were the **source** or the **target** of the threat.

Sinhala Press: Sinhala-Buddhists as target of existential threat

Voices in some of the mainstream Sinhala press framed the issue as one of returning land belonging to the temple that had been ‘stolen’ from the temple and ‘encroached’ on.³² Accordingly, the Sinhala press featured voices calling on the government to ‘protect’ these lands.³³

Justifications for why the temple grounds required protections framed its significance in relation to culture and identity. Against this backdrop, the site was projected as a ‘national treasure’ and part of the ‘nation’s culture and heritage’.³⁴ An article in *Lankadeepa* explained

²⁸ *Lankadeepa*, May 13, p.13; *Dinamina*, May 14, p.15; *Divaina*, May 15, p.7; *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.14; *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.1; *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.14; *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.10; *Divaina*, May 16, p.5; *Lankadeepa*, May 20, p.1; *Divaina*, May 24, p.8; *Lankadeepa*, May 24, p.18.

²⁹ *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.1.

³⁰ *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.1; *Silumina*, May 31, p.1; *Silumina*, May 31, p.1.

³¹ President’s Office, *Presidential Task Force to protect archaeological* (22 May 2020) at <https://www.presidentsoffice.gov.lk/index.php/2020/05/22/presidential-task-force-to-protect-archaeological-sites/?lang=en#:~:text=President%20Gotabaya%20Rajapaksa%20said%20that,take%20measures%20to%20preserve%20them.> [last accessed on 26 June 2020].

³² *Lankadeepa*, May 13, p.13; *Dinamina*, May 14, p.15; *Divaina*, May 15, p.7; *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.14; *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.1; *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.14; *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.10; *Divaina*, May 16, p.5; *Lankadeepa*, May 20, p.1; *Divaina*, May 24, p.8; *Lankadeepa*, May 24, p.18.

³³ *Divaina*, May 15, p.7; *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.14; *Dinamina*, May 16, p.1.

³⁴ *Dinamina*, May 16, p.1; *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.9.

that the temple is believed to be the landing site of Viharamaha Devi—queen consort to King Kavantissa, and mother to King Dutugemunu.³⁵ While not mutually exclusive, such appeals were typically presented as separate from justifications that centered on the temple's significance to Buddhist culture and heritage.

Voices featured in the Sinhala press also presented three framings of the group that should be held accountable for the 'theft' of temple land. First, some articles restricted themselves to mentions of **vague perpetrators** such as 'various parties' or 'land thieves'.³⁶ Second Minister for the Environment and Wildlife Resources S.M. Chandrasena cast blame on '**government officials**' for 'parceling out land'.³⁷ The minister characterised the officials as not caring about archaeological conservation and claimed they had received 'political protection'.³⁸ Finally, sections of the Sinhala press apportioned blame to '**people of other religions**' for encroaching on temple lands.³⁹ Articles in *Divaina* and *Lankadeepa* identified Muslims as the specific ethno-religious community occupying Muhudu Maha Viharaya's lands.⁴⁰ In some instances, the tone of reportage was explicitly anti-Muslim. An opinion article in *Divaina* for instance, repeatedly accused 'Muslim extremists' and 'extremist dry fish vendors' of 'stealing' the Temple's lands.⁴¹ Several news articles asserted that the persons encroaching on temple lands had also 'destroyed' or 'removed' artefacts of historical, cultural, and spiritual significance.⁴² A *Lankadeepa* opinion fit these assertions into a broader narrative of 'people of other religions' seeking to 'destroy the heritage of the Buddhist people'.⁴³ Similar anxieties were also raised within the month of May in relation to Muslims encroaching on Aradhana Viharaya in Thoppur, and the Devanagala temple in Mawanella.⁴⁴ In each instance the actions of the 'settlers' was interpreted as being deliberately destructive.⁴⁵ Consequently, sections of the mainstream press conveyed the impression that Buddhist heritage was under threat.

This position can be understood in the context of Stanley Tambiah's observation that the Sinhala-Buddhist community in Sri Lanka is a 'majority with a minority complex'.⁴⁶ Within this mindset, ethno-religious minorities in Sri Lanka—such as Muslims, Tamils, and Christians—are perceived as belonging to global communities from which they can draw support. In the

³⁵ *Lankadeepa*, May 24, p.18.

³⁶ *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.10; *Dinamina*, May 14, p.15; *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.14; *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.4.

³⁷ *Dinamina*, May 14, p.15; *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.10.

³⁸ *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.10.

³⁹ *Divaina*, May 24, p.8.

⁴⁰ *Divaina*, May 15, p.7; *Lankadeepa*, May 17, p.1; *Divaina*, May 24, p.3.

⁴¹ *Divaina*, May 24, p.3.

⁴² *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.14; *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.4; *Divaina*, May 24, p.3.

⁴³ *Divaina*, May 24, p.8.

⁴⁴ *Divaina*, May 24, p.8; *Lankadeepa*, May 31, p.20.

⁴⁵ Sinhala press coverage of the issue also featured statements regarding the need to protect Muhudu Maha Viharaya from 'outsiders' and 'invaders'. The terminology used indicates that the perspectives expressed by the Sinhala press draw legitimacy from 'a subconscious host-guest contract' that has been discussed in previous reports.

⁴⁶ For example, see Stanley J. Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic fratricide and the dismantling of democracy* (IB Tauris, 1986).

absence of a similar global community, Sinhala-Buddhists see themselves as the ‘true’ minority in a context where the minorities in Sri Lanka can draw support from other global communities. Moreover, Sinhala-Buddhists are a sub-national minority in Ampara, where Muhudu Maha Viharaya is located.⁴⁷ Consequently, Muslims—as the sub-national majority in the region—are perceived as a serious existential threat to Sinhala-Buddhists in Ampara. This anxiety was captured by a Sinhala opinion piece in *Divaina* which made specific note of the fact that Muhudu Maha Viharaya is the ‘sole Buddhist temple in the midst of Muslim villages’ while describing alleged tensions between the temple and area residents.⁴⁸ In this context, area residents parking their vehicles on temple land, and complaining that the noise from the temple speakers disrupted their children’s studies were interpreted as acts of hostility that justified the temple’s appeal for government protection.⁴⁹ The author of another *Divaina* opinion piece appeared to be projecting a similar anxiety when he noted that Aradhana Viharaya is ‘adjacent to a Muslim community’ while the ‘only Sinhala community is in Dehiwatta’.⁵⁰ Such anti-Muslim sentiment is reminiscent of anti-Tamil sentiment expressed in Sinhala press reporting on contested religious sites in the Northern Province, where Tamil-Hindus constitute the ethno-religious majority.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Nadine Vanniasinkam, Kasun Pathiraja, Mohamed Faslan & Dinushka Jayawickreme, *Inter-religious Conflict in Four Districts of Sri Lanka* (International Centre for Ethnic Studies and Equitas– International Centre for HumanRights Education, 2018).

⁴⁸ *Divaina*, May 24, p.3.

⁴⁹ *Divaina*, May 24, p.3.

⁵⁰ *Divaina*, May 24, p.8.

⁵¹ Verité Research, *Understanding Press Coverage on Religious Freedom* (June 2019) at <http://www.minormatters.org/en/media-pdfs> [last accessed 24 June 2020]; Verité Research, *Understanding Press Coverage on Religious Freedom* (September 2019) at <http://www.minormatters.org/en/media-pdfs> [last accessed 24 June 2020].

Tamil Press: Sinhala-Buddhists as source of existential threat

The Tamil press framed the government involvement to resolve the issue of Muhudu Maha Viharaya's contested lands—by authorising surveys and establishing the Presidential Task Force for Archaeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province—as an effort to 'spread Buddhism and eradicate the Tamils from the region'.⁵² The existential insecurity reflected in this position is consistent with the Tamil press's perspective on contested religious sites in the North. The Tamil press framed conservation activities at a Buddhist temple adjacent to the Kanniya hot springs in Trincomalee as a 'deliberate attempt at 'Buddhistisation' of a Hindu religious space'.⁵³ Similarly, the Tamil press discussed the cremation of a Buddhist monk on the grounds of a contested religious site in Nayuru, in the context of the 'forceful Buddhistisation' of the North.⁵⁴

Notably, the justification of land rights based on archeological significance was seen as a red flag.⁵⁵ This perspective can be understood in the context of concerns that the expansion of Sinhala-Buddhist spaces in Ampara has been enabled by the Department of Archaeology acquiring privately-owned land, by means of the Sacred Spaces Act.⁵⁶ This is in line with observations in previous reports, which noted that the Tamil press perceived the Department of Archaeology to be discriminating acts against Hindu places of worship and 'forcibly imposing Buddhism'.⁵⁷ Some voices in the Sinhala press appeared to endorse this tactic by explicitly calling for the release of 'historical sites' from the grip of 'extremists' by declaring them archaeological preserves.⁵⁸

Voices in the Tamil press viewed Muhudu Maha Viharaya as the latest in a long line of government efforts to change the 'ethnic ratio' in the Eastern Province in favour of Sinhala-Buddhists.⁵⁹ It discussed the developments through the lens of perceived growing threat of state-sanctioned Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarianism in the East that sought to eliminate minority heritage from the region.⁶⁰ This mirrors the Tamil press' sentiments in relation to the contestations over religious sites located in the Northern Province such as Kinniya and

⁵² *Uthayan*, May 25, p.6.

⁵³ Verité Research, *Understanding Press Coverage on Religious Freedom* (June 2019) at <http://www.minormatters.org/en/media-pdfs> [last accessed 24 June 2020].

⁵⁴ Verité Research, *Understanding Press Coverage on Religious Freedom* (September 2019) at <http://www.minormatters.org/en/media-pdfs> [last accessed 24 June 2020].

⁵⁵ *Virakesari*, May 30, p.25.

⁵⁶ Nadine Vanniasinkam, Kasun Pathiraja, Mohamed Faslan & Dinushka Jayawickreme, *Inter-religious Conflict in Four Districts of Sri Lanka* (International Centre for Ethnic Studies and Equitas– International Centre for HumanRights Education, 2018).

⁵⁷ Verité Research, *Understanding Press Coverage on Religious Freedom* (October-December 2018) at <http://www.minormatters.org/en/media-pdfs> [last accessed 24 June 2020]; Verité Research, *Understanding Press Coverage on Religious Freedom* (January 2019) at <http://www.minormatters.org/en/media-pdfs> [last accessed 24 June 2020].

⁵⁸ *Divaina*, May 24, p.3.

⁵⁹ *Virakesari*, May 31, p.12.

⁶⁰ *Virakesari*, May 30, p.25; *Virakesari*, May 31, p.12; *Virakesari*, May 31, p.1; *Uthayan*, May 25, p.6

Nayuru.⁶¹ Notably, despite the Sinhala press' perception that the issue—when framed as an ethno-religious conflict—was primarily a Sinhala-Buddhist-Muslim conflict, the Tamil press interpreted efforts to establish the temple's claim to the contested land as an attack on Tamils, too.⁶²

⁶¹Verité Research, *Understanding Press Coverage on Religious Freedom* (June 2019) at <http://www.minormatters.org/en/media-pdfs> [last accessed 24 June 2020]; Verité Research, *Understanding Press Coverage on Religious Freedom* (September 2019) at <http://www.minormatters.org/en/media-pdfs> [last accessed 24 June 2020].

⁶²*Virakesari*, May 30, p.25; *Virakesari*, May 31, p.12; *Virakesari*, May 31, p.1; *Uthayan*, May 25, p.6.

(2) Ethno-religious discrimination in COVID-19 related coverage

The first Sri Lankan COVID-19 patient was identified on 11 March 2020.⁶³ As patient numbers rose, COVID-19 related coverage began to dominate the general reporting in the Sinhala and Tamil press. However, the tone and framing of such issues in sections of the Sinhala press appeared to advance anti-minority sentiments. This pattern emerged in relation to two areas of reportage in May 2020:

- (1) Reporting on patients and persons violating curfew/quarantine regulations
- (2) Reporting on the mandated cremation of COVID-19 deaths

Reporting on patients and persons violating curfew/quarantine regulations

From the outset, the Tamil and Sinhala press both acknowledged that the actions of the general public would play a significant role in controlling the spread of COVID-19. However, while the Tamil press framed the public as the ‘solution’ to controlling COVID-19, the Sinhala press focused on casting blame on the public for the spread of the virus.⁶⁴ COVID-19 patients in particular were stigmatised within mainstream press reportage. Patients were accused of acting irresponsibly and ‘spreading the virus’ to others. Such individuals were framed as a threat to public health and wellbeing—with certain press reports referring to them as ‘human bombs’, ‘terrorist-like characters’ and ‘anti-social individuals’.⁶⁵

In the context of these negative press sentiments towards patients, the mainstream Sinhala press and government voices repeatedly placed emphasis on the ethnicity and religion of patients from minority communities. Consequently, the selective emphasis of such coverage appeared to specifically place blame on minorities—particularly Muslims and Tamils—for the spread of the virus (See Exhibits 1-3).⁶⁶ Notably, some strands of reporting did not explicitly name minority ethno-religious communities, but implicitly invoked them through references to stereotypes associated with the community. For instance, an article in *Aruna* stated that the patient belonged to ‘a community that had a high population density’ (Exhibit 4). This implicated the Muslim community, which is perceived to have grown exponentially from 1981 to 2012.⁶⁷ This perception is one that is deeply entrenched in the Sri Lankan psyche. The expansion of the Muslim population is one of two strategies the Sinhala press linked to Sri Lankan Muslims’ perceived agenda of population rebalancing. This narrative was repeatedly

⁶³ Newsfirst.lk, *Health officials confirm 1st Sri Lankan Covid-19 patient* (11 May 2020) at <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2020/03/11/health-officials-confirm-1st-sri-lankan-covid-19-patient/> [last accessed on 26 June 2020].

⁶⁴ This idea has previously been explored by Verité Research in its weekly publication *The Media Analysis*. For example, refer Verité Research, *The Media Analysis*, Vol.10 #13 (23 March-29 March, 2020).

⁶⁵ This idea has previously been explored by Verité Research in its weekly publication *The Media Analysis*. For example, refer Verité Research, *The Media Analysis*, Vol.10 #13 (23 March-29 March, 2020).

⁶⁶ This idea has previously been explored by Verité Research in its weekly publication *The Media Analysis*. For example, refer Verité Research, *The Media Analysis*, Vol.10 #13 (23 March-29 March, 2020).

⁶⁷ Gehan Gunatilleke, *The Chronic and the Entrenched: Ethno-religious Violence in Sri Lanka* (Equitas and ICES 2018), p.74. <http://ices.lk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/The-Chronic-and-the-Entrenched-Mr.Gihan-Book-FINAL-WEB-PDF.pdf>.

referenced in May 2019, when a Muslim doctor was accused of illegally sterilising multiple Buddhist women.⁶⁸

කෝවිඩ්: බිය ගැන්වීම්, තැනි ගැන්වීම් සහ කොන්කිරීම්

ස්විස්වලින් ආප්පු දේවගැති සානන් මාර්ග විසංගතයෙන් කාපනේ වැනසු හැටි

ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ දෙමළ ජාතික පිරිසකුමක වන මේ පෝල් පිරිසකුමා පුජාවන් පැවැත්වීමට මෙන්ම ආශීර්වාද පුජා පැවැත්වීමටත් ඉතා දක්ෂයි. මේ නිසා ඔහු ජනප්‍රියයි.

ඉරිදා මව්බිම 2020-04-05

ආපනග ඇරඹාලේ දේවස්ථානයේ පුජාවට සහභාගී වූ පුද්ගලයෝ සැහ වී සිටිති. ඔවුන් දැන් කොරෝනා වසරසා ආසාදිත වූවන් සේ සැලකිය හැකිය. ඊට ප්‍රධාන හේතුව වන්නේ දේවස්ථානවල දේව මෙහෙයන්හි ඔවුනොවුන් වැලඳ ගැනීමත් ආශීර්වාද සිරිමේළු රෙරග ස්පර්ශ කොට ආශීර්වාද සිරිමත්ය.

එය එසේ නම් මේ දිනවල කොරෝනා මිනිස් බෝවීම් උතුරේ සැම ස්ථානයකම සැහ වී තිබේද?

ETHICSEYE
BEYOND THE MARGINS

Exhibit 1: Identifies the patient as Tamil and asks whether ‘human Corona bombs’ are hidden all over the North.⁶⁹

කෝවිඩ් - 19 සහ කොන් කිරීම්

ආණ්ඩුවට රාජකාරි දෙකක්

ගටපත්ව තිබූ රිකියා මුස්ලිම් විරෝධය ගළු අවුරුවාදීමට ගත්තා වනම් සිරිකියය. එහෙත් එක් දෙයක් පැහැදිලිව සිටියදුකුය. ඇතැම් මුස්ලිම් දේපොලක නායකයන් හා ඇතැම් මුස්ලිම් කොටස්වල ක්‍රියාකලාපය කිසිසේත් අනුමත කළ නොහැකිය.

දැනට සිටුව ඇති මරණ තුනෙන් දෙදෙනෙකුම මුස්ලිම් ජාතිකයෝ වෙති. ඉකුත් දින කිහිපයේ වාර්තා වූ ආසාදිතයන් අතරද මුස්ලිම් ජාතිකයන් සැලකිය යුතු ගණනක් සිටී. මුස්ලිම්වරුන් සමූහ වශයෙන් පිටත් වීමට කැඳවුවත් පක්ෂිත්වයන් වීම කොරෝනා වසංගතයට අදාළව පරිස්සම් සහගත නැත.

2020-04-03 **මව්බිම**

ETHICSEYE
BEYOND THE MARGINS

නාත්තන්ඩිය මුස්ලිම් පවුල සමඟ සබඳතා පවත්වා තිබෙනවා

දෙරණ රාත්‍රී 06.55
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ETHICSEYE
BEYOND THE MARGINS

Exhibit 2: Identifies the patients as Muslim.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Verité Research, *Understanding Press Coverage on Religious Freedom* (May 2019) at <http://www.minormatters.org/en/media-pdfs> [last accessed 29 June 2020].

⁶⁹ The graphic was extracted from Ethics Eye, a media platform run by Verité Research. <https://www.facebook.com/ethicseye/photos/a.234027673618964/1114087242279665/?type=3&theater>

⁷⁰ The graphic was extracted from Ethics Eye, a media platform run by Verité Research. <https://www.facebook.com/ethicseye/photos/a.234027673618964/111706932517696/?type=3&theater>



Exhibit 3: Identifies both the patient and the resident's of the village he had visited as Tamil. Also refers to the patient as the 'Devil's cousin' regretting that there was noone to drown the pastor which would have "finished [him] off".⁷¹



Exhibit 4: Identifies patient as belonging to 'a community that had a high population'.⁷²

⁷¹ The graphic was extracted from Ethics Eye, a media platform run by Verité Research.

<https://www.facebook.com/ethicseye/photos/a.234027673618964/1114618155559907/?type=3&theater>

⁷² The graphic was extracted from Ethics Eye, a media platform run by Verité Research.

<https://www.facebook.com/ethicseye/photos/a.234027673618964/1121214341566955/?type=3&theater>

Voices in the alternative press were critical of such ‘racial profiling’, perceiving it to be an ‘attempt to ignite conflict between ethnic groups’.⁷³ However, this critique gained little traction and the trend of ethno-religious profiling in COVID-19 coverage persisted into May 2020.

At this stage, individuals perceived to be violating COVID-19 regulations relating to curfew and physical distancing were also apportioned a share of blame for the spread of the virus. For instance, an article on the unauthorised construction of a *Hindu* temple on land belonging to the National Housing Development Authority highlighted the fact that construction activities violated quarantine and curfew regulations.⁷⁴ Similarly, several newspapers noted that it was a *Muslim* businessman whose aid distribution—carried out in violation of COVID-19 regulations—had prompted the stampede in Maligawatte, which killed three women.⁷⁵ In instances where the businessman’s ethnicity wasn’t explicitly stated, it was referenced by noting that the incident took place ‘adjacent to the Maligawatte Grand Mosque’.⁷⁶ Notably, some breaking news coverage on the incident aired by some Sinhala TV channels reported that the stampede occurred *at* the mosque premises—an error that was not explicitly acknowledged in subsequent reporting.⁷⁷ Exhibit 4 presents a further example of this trend. Not only did the article reference the Maligawatte stampede, it also perpetuated a negative stereotype that fasting Muslims gorge themselves on oily food and spending the day waiting for it to digest, and asserted that Muslims in Sri Lanka ‘enjoy more freedom than in Saudi Arabia’.

⁷³ This idea has previously been explored by Verité Research in its weekly publication *The Media Analysis*. For example, refer Verité Research, *The Media Analysis*, Vol.10 #15 & 16 (06 April-19 April, 2020).

⁷⁴ *Divaina*, May 19, p.3.

⁷⁵ *Divaina*, May 24, p.10.

⁷⁶ *Lankadeepa*, May 24, p.1.

⁷⁷ This information was extracted from a video from Ethics Eye, a media platform run by Verité Research. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=172619310844578>

Exhibit 5⁷⁸

Reporting on the mandated cremation of COVID-19 deaths

On 02 April, 2020 the cremation of a Muslim patient who died of COVID-19 sparked public debate on the safety of burial versus cremation, as Muslims pointed out that cremation was in opposition to their religious beliefs.⁷⁹ On 11 April, 2020 the Ministry of Health and Indigenous Medical Services published Gazette No.2170/08 under Quarantine and Prevention of Diseases Ordinance.⁸⁰ The gazette introduced regulations mandating the cremation of corpses of persons confirmed or suspected to have died of COVID-19. The mainstream Sinhala press diverged from both the alternative Sinhala press and the Tamil press in terms of their framing of Muslims in relation to the issue.

Mainstream Sinhala press: Muslims as a threat to public health

Overall, the mainstream Sinhala press responded to the debate on cremation by framing cremation as being in the interest of public health. This was in-line with Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa's call for the public to comply with health guidelines irrespective of ethnicity, religion or political affiliation. However, some sections of the mainstream press singled out the Muslim community as 'noncomplying' citizens. These sections condemned

⁷⁸ The graphic was extracted from Ethics Eye, a media platform run by Verité Research.

<https://www.facebook.com/ethicseye/photos/a.234027673618964/1152968211724901/?type=3&theater>

⁷⁹ Shereena Qazi & Ashkar Thasleem, *Anguish as Sri Lanka forces Muslims to cremate COVID-19 victims*, (03 April 2020) at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/anguish-sri-lanka-forces-muslims-cremate-covid-19-victims-200403053706048.html> [last accessed on 29 June 2020].

⁸¹ *Divaina*, May 23, p.8.

Muslims for indulging in ‘extremist’ religious beliefs and compromising public health. This strand of reporting appeared to tap into and enhance existing anti-Muslim sentiments that had been built in relation to COVID-19 patients.

Sections of the Sinhala press continued to express such anti-Muslim sentiments in May. An opinion article in *Divaina* questioned whether Muslims sought an ‘exclusive law for themselves’.⁸¹ Such commentary draws on a common narrative within anti-Muslim rhetoric that Muslims in Sri Lanka seek to contribute to international Muslim expansionism by introducing ‘Muslim laws’ in Muslim-dominated regions. As noted in previous reports, such developments are thought of as ‘discriminatory’ towards Sri Lanka’s ‘original residents’ (i.e. Buddhists). Consequently, negative press sentiment on this matter can be understood in relation to the ‘subconscious host-guest contract’ within the Sri Lankan psyche.⁸²

Beyond this, Sinhala news coverage on mandated cremations in May primarily concerned with a fundamental rights (FR) petition filed by former MP Rishad Bathiudeen.⁸³ Such coverage was typically neutral in tone. However, by framing legal proceedings against cremation in terms of ‘Bathiudeen’s petition’ alone, the mainstream Sinhala press failed to acknowledge similar FRs filed by other parties. For instance, the Tamil press noted that the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and ‘two Christians’ had also filed petitions challenging the gazette. Moreover, some Sinhala newspapers concurrently carried articles that delegitimized Bathiudeen by featuring claims that he encouraged ‘separatism’, protected ‘Islamic radicals’, and was the brother of an individual linked to the Easter Sunday attacks.⁸⁴ As Bathiudeen’s is the sole perspective opposing cremation featured in the mainstream Sinhala press, coverage delegitimising him has the potential to delegitimise opposition to the gazette by association.

⁸¹ *Divaina*, May 23, p.8.

⁸² Verité Research, *Understanding Press Coverage on Religious Freedom* (September 2019) at <http://www.minormatters.org/en/media-pdfs> [last accessed 24 June 2020].

⁸³ *Divaina*, May 15, p.4; *Lankadeepa*, May 16, p.11; *Divaina*, May 27, p.4; *Lankadeepa*, May 28, p.14.

⁸⁴ *Divaina*, May 15, p.4; *Divaina*, May 23, p.8.

Alternative Sinhala press & Tamil press: Muslims under threat from government and mainstream Sinhala press?

By contrast, voices in the Tamil and alternative Sinhala press presented a counter-narrative that cast Muslims in a more sympathetic light. These voices agreed with the need to adhere to public health guidelines, but also advocated for greater public understanding and sensitivity regarding religious rites.⁸⁵ Whereas voices in the Sinhala press underscored government regulations and justifications for mandated cremation, the Tamil press highlighted the fact that the World Health Organisation had allowed for both burial and cremation in its guidelines—suggesting there was no international consensus in favour of cremation.⁸⁶

In May, voices featured in the Tamil and alternative Sinhala press framed mandated cremation as a measure taken to discriminate against Muslims.⁸⁷ Tamil news coverage on the issue also featured numerous voices from outside the Muslim community that were critical of the gazette. Parliamentary candidate for the Samagi Jana Balavegaya Mujibur Rahman—in an interview with *Anidda*—took this critique a step further by positioning it as a ‘systematic program of misinformation that the Muslim...intentionally spread the disease like a biological weapon’ that he alleged had been orchestrated by the government.⁸⁸ This position was not present in the Tamil press.

Tamil news coverage on the subject of mandated cremations included statements from Tamil political leaders, Sinhala-Buddhist politicians and human rights organisations.⁸⁹ It was also noted that two of the FR petitions challenging the order had been filed by Christians.⁹⁰ By featuring voices from across the religious spectrum, the Tamil press implicitly conveyed the impression of inter-religious solidarity and support for the Muslim community. Meanwhile, *Anidda* published an article titled "Anyone should understand my grief" which featured the perspective of the husband of a Muslim woman who was cremated after she was erroneously identified as a COVID-19 patient.⁹¹ In this manner, sections of the alternative press presented a humanising perspective on those opposing mandated cremation that was absent from the mainstream Sinhala press.

⁸⁵ This idea has previously been explored by Verité Research in its weekly publication *The Media Analysis*. For example, refer Verité Research, *The Media Analysis*, Vol.10 #14 (30 March-05 April, 2020).

⁸⁶ This idea has previously been explored by Verité Research in its weekly publication *The Media Analysis*. For example, refer Verité Research, *The Media Analysis*, Vol.10 #14 (30 March-05 April, 2020).

⁸⁷ *Virakesari*, May 04, p.4.

⁸⁸ *Anidda*, May 24, p.10.

⁸⁹ *Virakesari*, May 09, p.2; *Uthayan*, May 10, p.5; *Uthayan*, May 10, p.6.

⁹⁰ *Virakesari*, May 12, p.1.

⁹¹ *Anidda*, May 24, p.3.

CONCLUSION

This report was based on media reportage featured during the month of May 2020 on issues related to religious freedom. The reportage was carried in newspapers in the two national languages—Sinhala and Tamil. The analysis in this report considered 110 articles dealing with religious freedom under five overarching themes. The events/issues that were qualitatively analysed in this report related to two of these five themes, i.e., court cases, laws and regulations pertaining to religious freedom, and religious inequality and discrimination. The articles selected for analysis were chosen on the basis that they featured new events/issues, which gained traction in the Tamil and/or Sinhala press. These articles were analysed by taking into consideration the sentiment expressed towards religious freedom. The sentiment was identified through the content, perspectives and tone of reporting in these respective articles. A qualitative analysis of the reported content led to the following key findings:

The Sinhala and Tamil press' polarised framing of developments relating to Muhudu Maha Viharaya temple in Ampara reflected certain narratives embedded in the Sri Lankan psyche pertaining to majority-minority ethno-religious relations. Drawing on existential insecurities, the Sinhala press advanced an anti-minority and anti-Muslim rhetoric while the Tamil press advanced an anti-Buddhist rhetoric. As such, the Sinhala press perceived government intervention at Muhudu Maha Viharaya as providing a measure of security against threats to Sinhala-Buddhist identity in the East. Meanwhile, the Tamil press interpreted the development as the forceful 'Buddhistisation' of a minority-dominated area.

In the month of May the mainstream Sinhala press advanced anti-minority sentiments in the context of coverage on COVID-19. The ethnic and religious identities of individuals violating curfew and quarantine regulations were frequently revealed when the persons belonged to ethno-religious minorities. Consequently, a disproportionate share of blame directed at individuals perceived to be spreading the virus appeared to be apportioned to minorities. Against this backdrop, Sinhala press sentiments on Muslim opposition to the mandated cremation of COVID-19 deaths ranged from neutral to negative. By contrast, alternative Sinhala press and Tamil press coverage on the issue was sympathetic to Muslims—viewing them as being subject to discrimination.

RELATED REPORTING

Muslim student in Wellawaya receives an 'A' for Buddhism (I.R. Indika) - A Muslim student from the Malwaththawala national school in Wellawaya has received 'A' grades in all nine subjects, including Buddhism, at the GCE Ordinary Level examinations.⁹²

Hatred on Muslims continue from Aluthgama until COVID-19 - Measures have been taken to discriminate against the Muslim minority community in Sri Lanka amidst the entire world is facing the COVID-19 pandemic. The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommended that the COVID-19 victims' bodies could be either buried or cremated. But in Sri Lanka the Muslim *janazas* were cremated despite the Muslim community expressing concerns. The Muslims were left worried that the *janazas* were not buried. The Muslim community has been treated as they have lost their right of burial which is the tradition of the followers of Islam.⁹³

Vesak moon dawns in the North in the midst of corona (Dinasena Rathugamage) - Vesak celebrations in Sri Lanka were marred last year by the terrible Easter Sunday terrorist attacks that took many innocent lives and this year the coronavirus pandemic has prevented people from gathering together or celebrating Vesak in the traditional way. The celebration of Vesak transcends any religious or racial difference. This has been evident in the way Vesak is celebrated in the North - by decorating with lanterns and partaking in dansals. Though the coronavirus pandemic has been responsible for tremendous hardship on the one hand, it has also been responsible for shutting down liquor stores, gambling dens and casinos and could be considered a handbook for righteousness on the other!⁹⁴

Five arrested for defacing gravestones at Jaffna cemetery (Dinasena Rathugamage) - The Jaffna police arrested five suspects for defacing gravestones at the American-Ceylon Mission in Welikamam, Navaly, on May 04. The police reported that 03 of the arrested suspects were Catholics and the other 02 were Hindus. Christian leaders in the area said that the crosses from the graves had been removed and destroyed and that they suspected the acts were religious hate crimes.⁹⁵

Christians should join their Buddhist neighbours in celebrating Vesak (Chandima Karunaratne) - Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith said that Christians should join their Buddhist neighbours in celebrating Vesak together in a spirit of unity and friendship. He went on to say that he regretted the fact that restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic prevented certain traditional celebrations and people gathering together in large numbers, but that Christians should help their Buddhist neighbours to celebrate Vesak in appropriate ways. He ended by

⁹² *Lankadeepa*, May 04, p.3.

⁹³ *Virakesari*, May 04, p.4.

⁹⁴ *Divaina*, May 05, p.7.

⁹⁵ *Dinamina*, May 05, p.3.

blessing the Buddhist people of the country and praying for a joyful and peaceful Vesak for the entire nation.⁹⁶

ACJU requests Muslims to observe guidelines (Sirin Saroor) - The All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) requested all Muslims in the country to follow the guidelines of the health sector when the curfew is relaxed. The ACJU said in a statement that the public should not go out unnecessarily.⁹⁷

Vesak sermon at Grandpass Hindu temple on Poya day (Ranjan Kasturi) - A Vesak sermon will be delivered at the Arulmigu Shri Gnanaherava Swami Hindu temple at Grandpass, to mark Vesak on May 07. The incumbent of the Hindu temple said that this event had been organized to encourage religious co-existence and harmony between people from all religions and races, to mark this sacred day.⁹⁸

“The Muslim woman who died for Corona buried in an inappropriate manner”- Ganesan - Leader of the Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA) Mano Ganesan said that the Muslim woman who died for Corona buried in an inappropriate manner. He condemned the ethnic partiality on Muslim community in the country. He made the comment in his Twitter post.⁹⁹

ACJU requests to reconsider cremation of Janazas (N. Thanuja) – The All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) has written to the Director General of Health Services, Dr. Anil Jasinghe requesting him to review the decision to cremate the janazas of Muslims who succumbed to COVID-19. In the letter, the ACJU states that the Muslim community stand on this matter has always been that, a Muslim deceased due to COVID-19, should have the option of being buried, in line with the WHO guidelines and as implemented in more than 180 countries, since it is an integral part of our faith and a religious obligation of the community towards the deceased.¹⁰⁰

ACJU requests Jasinghe to review the decision to cremate Janazas (M.R.M. Waseem) – The All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) has written to the Director General of Health Services, Dr. Anil Jasinghe requesting him to review the decision to cremate the janazas of Muslims who succumbed to COVID-19. In the letter, the ACJU states that the Muslim community stand on this matter has always been that, a Muslim deceased due to COVID-19, should have the option of being buried, in line with the WHO guidelines and as implemented in more than 180 countries, since it is an integral part of our faith and a religious obligation of the community towards the deceased.¹⁰¹

“Anti-Muslim hate increasing in Sri Lanka”- International Crisis Group - The International Crisis Group (ICG) has issued a statement condemning the measures adopted by the Sri Lankan

⁹⁶ *Dinamina*, May 06, p.13.

⁹⁷ *Thinakaran*, May 06, p.1.

⁹⁸ *Lankadeepa*, May 07, p.7.

⁹⁹ *Virakesai*, May 09, p.1.

¹⁰⁰ *Virakesai*, May 09, p.1.

¹⁰¹ *Thinakaran*, May 09, p.1.

government during the coronavirus pandemic and warning against growing anti-Muslim hate speech, and a looming constitutional crisis. The ICG noted that in both social and traditional media, Muslims are falsely blamed for the spread of the disease and the government are yet to take action to correct these narratives. The government has also taken steps against the Muslim faith such as mandating compulsory cremation which goes against Islamic burial practices.¹⁰²

ACJU asks Jasinghe to review the decision on cremation of Muslims' Janazas - The All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) has written to the Director General of Health Services, Dr. Anil Jasinghe requesting him to review the decision to cremate the janazas of Muslims who succumbed to COVID-19. In the letter, the ACJU states that the Muslim community stand on this matter has always been that, a Muslim deceased due to COVID-19, should have the option of being buried, in line with the WHO guidelines and as implemented in more than 180 countries, since it is an integral part of our faith and a religious obligation of the community towards the deceased.¹⁰³

ACJU requests Jasinghe to review the decision to cremate Janazas - The All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) has written to the Director General of Health Services, Dr. Anil Jasinghe requesting him to review the decision to cremate the janazas of Muslims who succumbed to COVID-19. In the letter, the ACJU states that the Muslim community stand on this matter has always been that, a Muslim deceased due to COVID-19, should have the option of being buried, in line with the WHO guidelines and as implemented in more than 180 countries, since it is an integral part of our faith and a religious obligation of the community towards the deceased.¹⁰⁴

Ganesan condemns ethnic based inequality - Leader of the Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA) Mano Ganesan said that the Muslim woman who died for Corona buried in an inappropriate manner. He condemned the ethnic partiality on Muslim community in the country. He made the comment in his Twitter post.¹⁰⁵

Rathnayake tweets supporting the Muslims – Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) MP Bimal Rathnayake's tweet follows as "Farewell of Two Mothers! Heart Breaking! Mr President If you r' incapable of guaranteeing a dignified & safe life for d Muslims in this country, pls guarantee them to have a dignified funeral. This targeted discrimination of Muslims is even against Buddhist Teachings. Stop this."¹⁰⁶

"Muslim parties failed to make use of the opportunity"- Zuhair – Former MP M.M. Zuhair, PC said that the Muslim political parties have failed to use the opportunity to raise the issues faced by the Muslim communities at the meeting convened by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa

¹⁰² *Virakesari*, May 09, p.2.

¹⁰³ *Thinakaran*, May 09, p.1.

¹⁰⁴ *Uthayan*, May 10, p.11.

¹⁰⁵ *Uthayan*, May 10, p.5.

¹⁰⁶ *Uthayan*, May 10, p.6.

to brief the COVID-19 situation in Sri Lanka. He added that the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) had made use of the opportunity.¹⁰⁷

Two petitions filed against the cremation of Janazas (M.F.M. Bazeer) – Two petitions filed against the cremation of Janazas Two Fundamental Rights Petition in the Supreme Court have been filed challenging the rules followed to dispose the bodies of Muslim victims of COVID19. The petitions were filed by the Sri Lanka Muslim Council. Meanwhile three parties including the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) are preparing to file FR petitions in this regard.¹⁰⁸

Government servants are not to blame for the government's inability to control the economy - former Finance Minister Mangala Samaraweera - Former Minister of Finance Mangala Samaraweera says that the present [Gotabaya Rajapaksa] government is discriminating against the Tamil and Muslim communities to placate Sinhala nationalists in the run up to a general election.¹⁰⁹

“Those who support the government carry out false propaganda to hide their inability”- Hakeem (M.F.M. Bazeer) – Leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) Rauf Hakkeem said that some individuals who have been with the ruling party spread false news that he had been criticizing the efforts being made by his friend M.A. Sumanthiran against cremation of Muslim janazas. He alleged that the government has been tough and firm on the cremation of janazas.¹¹⁰

“If the election be held at this situation, there is a possibility of increase of COVID-19 spread”- Mahroof - Former MP Abdullah Mohamed Mahroof said that if the general election is held at this situation, there is the possibility of COVID-19 spreading. Responding to reporters, he added that the government did not take into consideration of the misinterpretation on the Muslims in terms of COVID-19 by main media outlets. He added that 70 out of 120 countries have accepted that Muslims’ Janazas could be buried, Sri Lanka did not accept it and hurt the Muslim community.¹¹¹

Two more petitions against cremation of Janazas (M.F.M. Bazeer) – Two more Fundamental Rights (FR) petitions were filed at the Supreme Court against the creation of COVID-19 victims by two Catholics. Osala Lakmal Anil Herath and Ranmal Antony Amarasinghe have filed the FR petitions.¹¹²

Take steps to amend the gazette on cremation of dead bodies” - Bathiudeen (M.R.M. Waseem) – Leader of Sri Lanka’s main Muslim party, the All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC) and former minister Rishad Bathiudeen, in letter to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to take steps to amend

¹⁰⁷ *Thinakaran*, May 11, p.3.

¹⁰⁸ *Virakesari*, May 11, p.1.

¹⁰⁹ *Lankadeepa*, May 11, p.11.

¹¹⁰ *Virakesari*, May 11, p.2.

¹¹¹ *Virakesari*, May 11, p.13.

¹¹² *Virakesari*, May 12, p.1.

the gazette which had been already issued on cremation of COVID-19 victims. He added that the gazette should be amended in a way to allow the victims to be buried as accepted method of the World Health Organisation (WHO).¹¹³

“Muslim parties missed the opportunity to propose on problems faced by the Muslims” - M. M. Zuhair - President's Counsel Mr. M.M. Zuhair said that the Muslim political parties had missed the opportunity to convey the issues of the Muslims while the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) had made use of the opportunity by taking part in the meeting which was convened by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa.¹¹⁴

Jewellery and cash stolen from Samimale Shri Muttumari Hindu temple (Gamini Bandara Ilangatilake) - The prelate of the Samimale Shri Muttumari Hindu temple in Maskeliya, reported that a thief had broken into the temple and stolen jewellery and cash from 03 offering boxes within the temple. The Maskeliya Police is investigating the matter further.¹¹⁵

Government pays attention to halt encroachment of Muhudu Maha Viharaya land (Hingurane Navaratne Samarathunga) - The prelate of the Muhudu Maha Viharaya in Ampara said that the government had taken steps to arrest suspects involved in encroaching on land belonging to the temple and halting this illegal activity.¹¹⁶

Government gazettes 30 acres including Muhudu Maha Viharaya as archaeological preserve (Rakshana Shriyantha) - Minister for the Environment and Wildlife Resources S.M. Chandrasena said that the government has decided to declare an area amounting to 30 acres, including the Muhudu Maha Viharaya and surrounding area, situated in Ampara, an archaeological preserve. The minister said that certain government officials had been encroaching on the land and parceling it out without any thought of protecting lands with archaeological significance and that action would be taken against these individuals.¹¹⁷

Contempt of court case against Gnanasara Thera on September 16 (Nelka Madegedera) - The contempt of court case against Gnanasara Thera for violating the Magistrate's court order in carrying out the funeral rites of the prelate of Gurukanda Viharaya in Mullaitivu, has been fixed for September 16 in the Appeal Court of Colombo. The General Secretary of the Bodu Bala Sena, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thera is alleged to have violated the Mullaitivu District

¹¹³ *Virakesari*, May 12, p.13.

¹¹⁴ *Virakesari*, May 13, p.16.

¹¹⁵ *Divaina*, May 13, p.6.

¹¹⁶ *Lankadeepa*, May 13, p.13.

¹¹⁷ *Dinamina*, May 14, p.15.

court's order and carried out the funeral rites of the prelate of the Gurukanda Viharaya within the premises of the Hindu temple in contempt of the court order.¹¹⁸

Contempt of court case against Gnanasara Thera and three others fixed for September 160 (Thilini de Silva) - The contempt of court case against Gnanasara Thera for violating the Magistrate's court order in carrying out the funeral rites of the prelate of Gurukanda Viharaya in Mullaitivu, has been fixed for September 16 in the Appeal Court of Colombo. The General Secretary of the Bodu Bala Sena, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thera is alleged to have violated the Mullaitivu District court's order and carried out the funeral rites of the prelate of the Gurukanda Viharaya within the premises of the Hindu temple in contempt of the court order.¹¹⁹

Tiger attack in 1985 which caused a bloodbath in Anuradhapura (Athula Bandara) - Anuradhapura is a city that is sacred to Buddhists. Buddhist devotees from all over Sri Lanka make a pilgrimage to Anuradhapura to participate in religious rites and ceremonies and fulfill vows. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam did not respect the sanctity of the city of Anuradhapura. Their terrorist attack on the city of Anuradhapura on May 14, 1985 took many lives and caused a bloodbath in the sacred city.¹²⁰

OIC states' Heads of Mission write to President over cremation of Muslims who succumb to COVID-19 - The Ambassadors and High Commissioners of Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) states in Sri Lanka have written to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, insisting the cremation of members of the Muslim community who succumb to COVID-19 needs to be addressed forthright, through frank consultation with the Muslims of Sri Lanka and the Government. In the letter signed by 16 Heads of Mission in Colombo, the Ambassadors and High Commissioners said that scientists, public health functionaries and medical practitioners across countries affirm that the WHO Guidelines carefully and adequately provide for individuals and communities to make a choice in respect of burial and cremation, in keeping with the person's faith.¹²¹

Bathiudeen files Fundamental Right petition in SC against cremation of Muslims died of COVID-19 - Leader of Sri Lanka's main Muslim party, All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC) and former minister Rishad Bathiudeen joined by several former Muslim lawmakers has filed a Fundamental Rights Petition in the Supreme Court on 14 May challenging the rules followed to dispose the bodies of suspected Muslim victims of COVID19, which he alleges is done contrary to the method practiced by followers of Islamic Faith.¹²²

¹¹⁸ *Dinamina*, May 14, p.15.

¹¹⁹ *Lankadeepa*, May 14, p.9.

¹²⁰ *Lankadeepa*, May 14, p.11.

¹²¹ *Virakesari*, May 14, p.5.

¹²² *Virakesari*, May 15, p.1.

Rishad goes to court against gazette regarding corona cremation measures (A.J.A. Abeinayake)

- Former Minister Rishad Bathiudeen and three other former Members of Parliament have filed a Fundamental Rights petition in the Supreme Court against the Health Ministry's gazette notification setting out regulations that dictate that the remains of those who succumb to the COVID-19 pandemic must be cremated. The petition states that the cremation of a Muslim person's remains is totally contrary to Islamic beliefs and teachings, is a violation of the fundamental human right to practice one's religion and requests relief from the Supreme Court. The petition cites the Health Minister - Pavithra Wanniarachchi, Director General Health Services - Dr. Anil Jayasinghe and Secretary - Ministry of Health as respondents.¹²³

Arrest Rishad also, not only Rajitha (Sirimantha Ratnasekera) - General Secretary of the Bodu Bala Sena - Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thera says that former minister Rishad Bathiudeen should be brought to justice along with former minister Rajitha Senarathne. Gnanasara Thera alleged that Bathiudeen was a prominent political leader who encouraged separatism among the communities of this country and provided political protection to Islamic radicals. Gnanasara Thera went on to say that the people of this country longed to see political leaders like this arrested for their crimes and called on the government to fulfill the people's hopes.¹²⁴

Muhudu Maha Viharaya, which had 72 acres, gazetted as 30 acres (Sirimantha Ratnasekera) - President of the 'Hela Bodu Saviya Sanvidanaya' - Budugala Jinawansa Thera queried the gazette notification assigning 30 acres to the Muhudu Maha Viharaya and the fate of the balance 42 acres of archaeological significance. The Muhudu Maha Muhudu Maha Viharaya, situated in the Ampara District, is a site of archaeological significance. Jinawansa Thera wrote to the Commissioner General of the Department of Archeology - Mr. Senarath Disanayake, setting out his concerns that the 42 acres not included in the gazette notification had been encroached on by the Muslim community and items of archaeological and historical significance including statues and carvings had been robbed from the site. Jinawansa Thera went on to call on the government to protect the Muhudu Maha Muhudu Maha Viharaya, as it had religious and cultural significance for the Buddhist community in Sri Lanka.¹²⁵

Muhudu Maha Viharaya - the historical story (Ellawala Medananda Thera) - The Muhudu Maha Viharaya, situated in the Ampara District, is a site of archaeological, historical and religious significance to the Buddhist community of Sri Lanka. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has directed that 30 acres of the Muhudu Maha Viharaya site be designated an archaeological site, through a gazette notification. Minister of Land and Land Development - S.M. Chandrasena, has said that all necessary steps will be taken to enforce this decision immediately. However, only 30 acres of the site have been preserved by the gazette notification. The balance 42 acres of the site are also of archaeological significance and are an irreplaceable part of Sri Lankan history and culture. The land belonging to the Muhudu Maha Viharaya has been encroached

¹²³ *Divaina*, May 15, p.4.

¹²⁴ *Divaina*, May 15, p.4.

¹²⁵ *Divaina*, May 15, p.7.

on by various parties and items of archaeological and historical significance including statues and carvings had been removed from the site. The government has a duty to protect the Muhudu Maha Viharaya, as it had religious and cultural significance for the Buddhist community in Sri Lanka.¹²⁶

Army protection for the Muhudu Maha Viharaya (Vasanthi Chandrapala, et al) - The government has decided to assign the Navy to protect the Muhudu Maha Viharaya site from May 15. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has directed that 30 acres of the Muhudu Maha Viharaya site be designated an archaeological site, by a gazette notification. Following a meeting with the President on May 14, the Defence Secretary - Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Kamal Gunaratne informed the prelate of the Muhudu Maha Viharaya of the government's decision to assign the Navy to protect the site and prevent any unauthorized persons from encroaching or squatting on the site.¹²⁷

Protecting archaeological sites is a national responsibility - President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has directed that the Muhudu Maha Viharaya site be designated an archaeological site, by a gazette notification. The Muhudu Maha Viharaya, situated in the Ampara District, is a site of archaeological significance. There have been reports that the site had been encroached on by various parties and items of archaeological and historical significance including statues and carvings, removed from the site. The Muhudu Maha Viharaya, has religious and cultural significance for the Buddhist community in Sri Lanka. However, there is a national responsibility on the part of all communities, whatever their religion or race, to preserve sites such as these, as they are an irreplaceable part of our common culture and history.¹²⁸

Muhudu Maha Viharaya land: the President's fulfillment of a 30-year request is the protection of a national treasure (Vinitha M. Gamage) - The President of the 'Samastha Lanka Bouddha Maha Sammilenkaya' - Jagath Sumathipala says that President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's actions directing that the Muhudu Maha Viharaya site be designated an archaeological site, is the answer to a plea made for 30 years and is an laudable act to preserve a national treasure of Sri Lanka. He went on to say that all the citizens of the country should contribute to restoring and preserving this site as it is an irreplaceable part of this nation's culture and history.¹²⁹

Find and take action against officials who shared out Muhudu Maha Viharaya land (Vinitha M. Gamage) - Minister for the Environment and Wildlife Resources, Land and Land Development - S.M. Chandrasena has directed the Ampara District Secretary to immediately locate the government officials who parceled out plots of land belonging to the Muhudu Maha Viharaya and initiate legal action against them. The Minister went on to say that the officials who had

¹²⁶ *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.14.

¹²⁷ *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.1.

¹²⁸ *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.4.

¹²⁹ *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.9.

encroached on the Viharaya's land, had done so with political protection and that those who had assisted and protected them would also be brought to justice.¹³⁰

A thera and four others arrested for violating quarantine (Nayanariya Bandara) - A Buddhist monk from a Monaragala viharaya and four others were arrested for violating quarantine regulations by the Monaragala Police.¹³¹

Muslim woes during Gotabaya Presidency - President Gotabaya Rajapakse was elected President without the sizable vote of the minority communities of Sri Lanka and his choice of taking oaths besides the Ruvanwelisaya Dagoba further alienated the minorities, while subtly proclaiming total allegiance to Sinhala Buddhist culture and heritage. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's arbitrary decision to cremate fatalities without considering religious beliefs or honouring WHO sanctioned last rites, further ensured a perceived direct attack on the Muslim community. Even though Sri Lanka followed WHO directives until 1 April 2020, when state-appointed medical authority Dr. Anil Jayasinghe stated that COVID-19 fatalities must be either buried (8' deep) or cremated within 24 hours, health authorities hurriedly cremated the body of the first Muslim victim who died on 30 March 2020 at approximately 7 PM, without even informing relatives of the death or permitting any of the family to pay their last respects. Of the nine COVID-19 deaths thus far, four were Muslim and they were all cremated despite a huge outcry on local and international forums, as the act of cremation is in total violation of Islamic beliefs. Adding insult to injury, the President and many others have stated in public forums that carriers of the coronavirus are Muslims, that they are spreading the virus deliberately and that the virus would have been contained if not for the Muslim community. This displays a vindictive, racist and religious extremist stance that is impossible to explain away. Even though many foreign journalists have questioned Sri Lanka's stance on the issue, they have been sidelined and ignored. The Rajapakse clan did not receive the Muslim community's vote because of past atrocities against Muslims and now it is obvious that they are seeking revenge for the slight.¹³²

We will not allow outsiders to take one grain of sand belonging to the Muhudu Maha Viharaya (Subashini Senanayake) - The Defence Secretary - Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Kamal Gunaratne said that the government would not permit outsiders to take even one grain of sand belonging to the Muhudu Maha Viharaya. He went on to say that President Gotabaya Rajapaksa had directed that the Viharaya be designated a national treasure and archaeological site and had given him full authority to enforce whatever needed to be done to ensure the protection and preservation of the site. He went on to say that all necessary steps would be taken to ensure that all lands belonging to the Viharaya were preserved to ensure that future generations could see this national treasure.¹³³

¹³⁰ *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.10.

¹³¹ *Lankadeepa*, May 15, p.19.

¹³² *Anidra*, May 15, p.8.

¹³³ *Dinamina*, May 16, p.1.

Gazetting 30 acres for the Muhudu Maha Viharaya is giving in to extremists (Sujeewa Thathsara) - President of 'Surakimu Sri Lanka' - Pahiyangala Ananda Sagara Thera says that the designation of only 30 out of 72 acres belonging to the Muhudu Maha Viharaya as an archaeologically significant site by the government was an action aimed at pacifying extremists. The thera went on to say that it was regrettable that more than half of the Viharaya's land was in the hands of extremists. The thera urged the government to take the necessary action to prevent extremists from encroaching on the land and destroying items of cultural and religious significance to the Buddhist community in Sri Lanka.¹³⁴

Rishad files petition against the cremation of Muslims who died due to corona (Thilini de Silva) - Former Minister Rishad Badiudeen and three other former Members of Parliament have filed a Fundamental Rights petition in the Supreme Court against the Health Ministry's gazette notification setting out regulations that dictate that the remains of those who succumb to the COVID-19 pandemic must be cremated. The petition states that the cremation of a Muslim person's remains is totally contrary to Islamic beliefs and teachings, is a violation of the fundamental human right to practice one's religion and requests relief from the Supreme Court. The petition cites the Health Minister - Pavithra Wanniarachchi, Director General Health Services - Dr. Anil Jayasinghe and Secretary - Ministry of Health as respondents.¹³⁵

Akkaraipattu Municipal Council passes resolution urging burial of Janazas - Akkaraipattu Municipal Council passed a resolution urging burial of Janazas who die for COVID-19. Mayor of council Adaulla Ahamad said that they had been worried and frustrated over the gazette which emphasized that the all COVID-19 victims including the Muslim Janazas to be cremated.¹³⁶

500 families settled on Muhudu Maha Viharaya land (Dayaseeli Liyanage, et al) - More than 500 families have settled on land belonging to the Muhudu Maha Viharaya in the Ampara District. These families belong to the Muslim community. Minister for the Environment and Wildlife Resources, Land and Land Development - S.M. Chandrasena has directed the relevant departments to take necessary action in this regard.¹³⁷

Bail for 15 people who built an unauthorized kovil on Housing Authority land' (Amadoru Amarajeeva) - The Trincomalee Magistrate - Suvakumar recommended to the Uppuveli Police that 15 persons be released on a personal surety bail of LKR 100,000 each. The accused had been arrested for allegedly building an unauthorized Hindu temple on land belonging to the National Housing Development Authority in the Esvarapuram area. The Uppuveli police are conducting further investigations.¹³⁸

Maravila Father arrested for conducting service in violation of curfew (Hiran Priyankara Jayasinghe) - Mahaweveva Public Inspector (PHI) - B.M. Vajira Nilantha and the Marawila police

¹³⁴ *Divaina*, May 16, p.5.

¹³⁵ *Lankadeepa*, May 16, p.11.

¹³⁶ *Virakesari*, May 16, p.11.

¹³⁷ *Lankadeepa*, May 17, p.1.

¹³⁸ *Lankadeepa*, May 18, p.13.

arrested a priest for conducting a service on May 16 in violation of quarantine regulations. Following a complaint made by neighbours, the Marawila police conducted an operation which discovered 27 people and several children gathered on the third floor of a building in Marawila town. The Marawila police and the Mahawevea PHI are taking legal action against the priest for violating curfew regulations.¹³⁹

100,000 signatures gathered to support for proper burial of janazas - The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) started gathering of hundred thousand signatures on urging the president and prime minister to bury the Muslims who fall for COVID-19 in Sri Lanka. The campaign started in Ampara district.¹⁴⁰

Speakers at Mosques allowed to use for Adan prayers only (M.R.M. Waseem) – Director of the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs Mr. A.B.M. Ashraff said that the speakers attached at the mosques would be allowed for Adan prayers only. He added that they would not be allowed for preaching during the Ramadan period. He made the remarks in a statement.¹⁴¹

Temple built on government land in the midst of corona (Saman Mallawarachchi) - The Uppuveli Police arrested 15 persons for allegedly building an unauthorized Hindu temple on land belonging to the National Housing Development Authority in the Esvarapuram area. The construction work had been done in violation of quarantine and curfew regulations. The Uppuveli police will produce the suspects to the Trincomalee Magistrates Court.¹⁴²

Worshiper who attended Swiss Pastor's Jaffna service admitted to the IDH (Nimanthi Ranasighe, et al) - A worshiper who attended a service conducted by a pastor from Switzerland in the Aryalai region of Jaffna has been transferred from Jaffna Hospital to the Infectious Diseases Hospital (IDH) in Angoda, following complications due to contracting the coronavirus. Jaffna Government Medical Officials call for all those who attended the service conducted by the Swiss pastor to seek medical advice immediately as they may have also contracted the disease.¹⁴³

The only philosophy appropriate for the Twentieth Century has gone to the hands of heretics - Former Finance Minister - Mangala Samaraweera released a statement saying that following his statement made to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), a phrase that he used - 'Sangha kalliya' [Sangha gang], had gained much publicity in the media. The Sangha kalliya is nothing new. All through history, from the time of the Lord Buddha, these Sangha kalliya's took form. They challenged the true Buddhist philosophy on many occasions. During the time of the Lord Buddha, a Sangha kalliya conspired against even him. Even now there is a Sangha kalliya that is trying to fool the Sinhala Buddhist people of this country with their false doctrines. It is

¹³⁹ *Lankadeepa*, May 18, p.13.

¹⁴⁰ *Virakesari*, May 18, p.12.

¹⁴¹ *Virakesari*, May 19, p.3.

¹⁴² *Divaina*, May 19, p.3.

¹⁴³ *Lankadeepa*, May 19, p.6.

the responsibility of all Buddhist monks who believe in the teachings of the Lord Buddha and the Buddhist Sangha to stand up to this challenge and save not only the Sinhala Buddhist people of this country but the true Buddhist philosophy that was taught by the Lord Buddha. All of us true Buddhists must stand up to this dangerous challenge and save the true Buddhist philosophy from being corrupted.¹⁴⁴

Archaeological surveyors discussion to decide Muhudu MahaMuhudu Maha Viharaya land extend today (Sujith Hewajulige) - Director General of the Department of Archeology - Prof. Senarath Disanayake, surveyors and officials of the Department of Archeology will participate in a discussion today, May 20, to decide on the extent of the land belonging to the Muhudu Maha Viharaya. The government recently released a gazette notification declaring the Muhudu MahaMuhudu Maha Viharaya a site of historical significance. The discussion will determine the extent of the land belonging to the Viharaya. Prof. Senarath Disanayake said that any unauthorized encroachments or buildings on land belonging to the Viharaya will be removed.¹⁴⁵

I commit to protecting the honour of war heroes - President Gotabaya Rajapaksa speaking at the Victory Day celebrations on May 19, said that he would do everything in his power to protect the honour of war heroes. He went on to say that he well knew the challenges and hardships faced by members of the armed forces. He said that those who had fallen and those had served in the war to defeat LTTE terrorism and preserve the territorial integrity of the country would never be forgotten. He went on to say that separatism, racism and extremism in any form would not be tolerated by his government. He added that this land belonged to the several communities of different races and religions who lived here and that all communities should live together in harmony, while respecting each other's culture and traditions.¹⁴⁶

The only philosophy appropriate for the Twentieth Century has gone to the hands of heretics - Former Finance Minister - Mangala Samaraweera released a statement saying that following his statement made to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), a phrase that he used - 'Sangha kalliya' [Sangha gang], had gained much publicity in the media. The Sangha kalliya is nothing new. All through history, from the time of the Lord Buddha, these Sangha kalliya's took form. They challenged the true Buddhist philosophy on many occasions. During the time of the Lord Buddha, a Sangha kalliya conspired against even him. Even now there is a Sangha kalliya that is trying to fool the Sinhala Buddhist people of this country with their false doctrines. It is the responsibility of all Buddhist monks who believe in the teachings of the Lord Buddha and the Buddhist Sangha to stand up to this challenge and save not only the Sinhala Buddhist people of this country but the true Buddhist philosophy that was taught by the Lord Buddha.

¹⁴⁴ *Lankadeepa*, May 19, p.8.

¹⁴⁵ *Lankadeepa*, May 20, p.1.

¹⁴⁶ *Lankadeepa*, May 20, p.5.

All of us true Buddhists must stand up to this dangerous challenge and save the true Buddhist philosophy from being corrupted.¹⁴⁷

Desecration of statues at two Catholic churches in Puttalam (Hiran Priyankara Jayasinghe, et al) - Puttalam police reported that two churches - the main Catholic church in Puttalam town and the Catholic church at Palaviya town had been attacked by unknown persons with stones. Statues at both churches had been damaged by the attack. Puttalam police are conducting further investigations.¹⁴⁸

"Cremation of Janaza: not only the politicians, others too failed to address their side of argument"- Dawood - Leader of the United Peace Alliance Basheer Segu Dawood said that not only the political parties which had filed Fundamental Rights petition on cremation of Muslim Janazas but also others too had failed to take forward their side argument to the people. Speaking to reporters, he added that burial of Janazas is a Muslim tradition. He added that when the requests to the government gets failed, it should be taken forward by the people to the court.¹⁴⁹

Muslims' Janazas should be buried; resolution passed at Karaitivu Divisional Secretariat - The Divisional Secretariat of Karaitivu at its 27th sitting on May 19, passed a resolution which states that members of the Muslim community who succumb to COVID-19 needs to be buried according to their tradition.¹⁵⁰

"Majority people should teach Samaraweera a lesson"- Abeygunawardana (R. Hashan) – Addressing a media conference, former UPFA MP Rohitha Abeygunawardana said that former UNP MP Mangala Samaraweera had been disrespecting the Buddhist monks and Buddhism in his comments. He called on the Sinhala Buddhist people to teach Samaraweera a lesson at the upcoming general election.¹⁵¹

"No change on my stance on burial of janazas"- Sabry (M.R.M. Waseem) - President's Counsel Ali Sabry said that there is no change in his stance on burial of Muslim Janazas. Responding to an international media, he added that he would not worry about if the National List MP post is not given to him for voicing for the Muslim community.¹⁵²

Elections will punish Mangala for disparaging Sinhala Buddhists (Anura Balasuriya) - Former state Minister Rohitha Abeygunawardana says that the people of this country will punish former Minister Mangala Samaraweera for denigrating the Sinhala Buddhists of Sri Lanka by withholding their vote at the forthcoming general elections. He went on to say that Samaraweera had attacked the Maha Sanga in the media recently. This is not the first time

¹⁴⁷ *Lankadeepa*, May 20, p.8.

¹⁴⁸ *Lankadeepa*, May 20, p.6.

¹⁴⁹ *Virakesari*, May 20, p.15.

¹⁵⁰ *Thinakaran*, May 21, p.7.

¹⁵¹ *Virakesari*, May 21, p.3.

¹⁵² *Virakesari*, May 21, p.5.

that Samaraweera has attacked the Maha Sangha and the Sinhala Buddhists of Sri Lanka in the media. The people of this country will not tolerate Samaraweera's statements and will make their displeasure evident by rejecting him and his party at the forthcoming general elections, just as they did at the Presidential elections, when they handed President Gotabaya Rajapaksa a resounding victory.¹⁵³

Undisciplined bikkhus acting on social media - The Ramangya Maha Nikaya has directed its members to pay attention to indisciplined monks who have been making statements on social media and to take action against these monks to remove them from the Nikaya if necessary. It goes on to direct all regional bodies to check whether indisciplined monks are registered with them or with the Ministry for Buddhist Affairs and to take the necessary action to remove these monks from the Nikaya immediately.¹⁵⁴

Permission needed for victims of the coronavirus to be buried according to their religion (R. Shriwelrajah) - At the meeting of the Kalmunai Urban Council held on 21 May 2020, a motion was proposed and unanimously adopted to request that COVID-19 victims receive burial rites according to their religious convictions, in accordance with recent directives issued by the WHO. Copies of the proposal were to be duly sent to the President, Prime Minister, Director General of Health and the COVID-19 Task Force.¹⁵⁵

A Muslim youth who gave life to a Tamil girl (Asela Kuruluwansha) - Owing to torrential rains that fell continuously during the past month, the Upper Kotmale reservoir overflowed and sluice gates were opened. At approximately 10 AM on 21 May 2020, an echoing scream pierced the silence, announcing that a girl had attempted suicide. It was later revealed that she was being forced into marriage by her parents, hearing which her lover had committed suicide in the Nanu Oya and was being prepared for last rites. Although hundreds came running and stood gazing down on her bobbing body from the bridge of the dam, no one dared step in to attempt rescue until M. Rizwan, a mason working on a building nearby overheard the loud outcry. He grabbed a rope and dived in without thinking twice. By the time Police arrived and threw in a makeshift lifesaver comprising an inflated tyre-tube and rope, they were able to save the young woman, but Rizwan did not resurface. In this tragedy involving a Tamil, a Muslim and a Sinhala Buddhist Police Constable, those who keep harping on racial and religious divides should think afresh of what they are doing.¹⁵⁶

Ranjan accused of insulting Buddhism (Gayan Kumara Weerasinghe) - Former MP Ranjan Ramanayake was interrogated by the CID - IT Intel Division on 22 May 2020 at length, regarding his participation in an online media discussion where he allegedly denigrated Buddhism. The webinar in question had taken place in 2019, during the Yahapalanaya government.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ *Divaina*, May 22, p.9.

¹⁵⁴ *Lankadeepa*, May 22, p.1.

¹⁵⁵ *Lankadeepa*, May 22, p.2.

¹⁵⁶ *Dinamina*, May 23, p.11.

¹⁵⁷ *Dinamina*, May 23, p.1.

The NGO scourge that opposed the crushing of the coronavirus (Keerthi Warnakulasuriya) - The corona pandemic has proved to be a great revenue earner for Non-Government Organizations (NGO) in Sri Lanka, who were reportedly upset by Army Commander Shavendra Silva's appointment as Head of the COVID-19 Task Force. 164 such organizational activists from 17 NGO's have signed a petition addressed to Yasmin Sooka, former UN official, who in turn immediately dispatched an erroneous report to the Geneva-based Human Rights Commission. Following are some of the points highlighted in her false report: The Task Force under the leadership of the Army Commander comprises war criminals. The Task Force was created to decimate the Muslim population. In line with this, several Muslim factions condone Sooka report. Such erroneous reporting against Sri Lankan authorities to foreign media has been operational since 17 March 2020 and remains so to date. Those who suggested the war against the LTTE should be stopped and those who claimed ISIS had no operatives in Sri Lanka, are also part of this network. Upon investigating lists of those sending petitions overseas claiming that Sri Lanka seeks to eliminate Muslims, it was discovered that some of those names were hitherto unknown. Meanwhile Rishad Bathiudeen's brother was also arrested on suspicion, for his involvement in the Easter bombings. This was misrepresented overseas saying that the authorities are arresting Muslims under the guise of COVID-19. But weren't the Easter attacks carried out by Muslim extremists? During the past regime, Muslim politicians grew stronger. Even the Secret Police were silenced. President Gotabaya has made it impossible for such acts to continue, by not giving in to terrorists and releasing suspects on a phone call, as was the case during the previous government. All the power Muslim politicians held with the previous government is now nullified. In addition, TNA leader R. Sampanthan is seeking foreign aid from the diaspora in Canada and Britain, claiming aid is needed for COVID-19 relief. He has held a video conference call with diaspora activists asking them to directly credit the accounts of former MP's of the Tamil National Alliance. It is obvious that these monies are to fund election campaigns and not to fight the corona pandemic. Although Sampanthan has asked the Tamil diaspora for aid he is being supported by the LTTE diaspora. Meanwhile UN Representative Ahamed Shaeed has reported that the gazette notification regarding cremation of COVID-19 fatalities should be reversed. In the writer's opinion, it is obvious that NGO activists are behind this request. Meanwhile, Secret Police activity examining Muslim extremist offices in Muthur and Puttalam has been described as 'arresting civilian activists,' by NGO's. The government has not bothered to contradict this erroneous report thus far. Yasmin Sooka claims that COVID-19 suppression should be in the hands of civil activists. This is unacceptable meddling in state affairs. The Geneva Human Rights Council has no right to meddle with any country's internal affairs. Sooka report further states that the Army involvement in containing the pandemic is likely to involve the use of undue military force against Muslims. The 164 activists of 17 NGOs in their petition, chose to ignore the Buddhists and Catholics of the country who succumbed to the virus. It was not only COVID-19 fatalities that were cremated, normal funeral rites for any other cause of death were not permitted, except for incineration. Should there be an exclusive law only for Muslims?¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ *Divaina*, May 23, p.8.

Let us not abandon the hero Rizwan's family in their distress - We reported a tragic news item yesterday where a young father of two drowned in the raging waters of the Upper Kotmale reservoir after saving a young woman who attempted suicide. A heart-wrenching tale displaying human values. The widely circulated tragedy across social media highlighted the fact that the girl was Tamil and the young man who dived in to save her was Hameed Rizwan, a Muslim. The man who brought the near-suicide victim to shore was Sinhalese, Talawakele Police OIC Ruwan Fernando. Humanity does not consist of colour or creed. A lesson those who check a person's ID and jump to conclusions should imbibe. On one hand are those who embrace racism and religious extremity, whose inhuman suicide pacts are still fresh in our memory. Therefore, Rizwan and Ruwan's examples are vital to us all. Rizwan was a poor young Muslim who struggled for daily subsistence as a mason, to keep his young family from starvation. We trust our readers will do justice to his memory in helping his two young innocent children to survive, displaying our common humanity.¹⁵⁹

Web discussion held insulting Buddhism (Nimanthi Ranasinghe) - The Criminal Investigations Department (CID) questioned former Member of Parliament Ranjan Ramanayake regarding a social media discussion on the internet insulting Buddhism. A CID official said that Ramanayake made a statement to the CID regarding a YouTube discussion that all monks were subject to abuse as children, thereby insulting Buddhism. A complaint had been made to the CID by an incumbent monk of a temple in Kalutara.¹⁶⁰

The operation that rescued the Maha Muhudu Viharaya from the clutches of extremist dry-fish vendors (Tharanga Ratnaweera) - There is a Navy camp near the Muhudu Maha Viharaya in Pottuvil. Navy personnel from the camp are now busy repairing and maintaining the temple. The land belonging to the temple was stolen by Muslim extremists. They had also destroyed many items of historical and religious significance at the site. The Muhudu Maha Viharaya in Pottuvil in the Ampara District is the sole Buddhist temple in the midst of Muslim villages. The temple is a site of great archaeological significance. The temple and surrounding land were declared an archaeological site by gazette notification in 1951. The preserve declared by the gazette notification was 72 acres in extent and included the temple and surrounding areas of historical significance. The preserve was confirmed by a further gazette notification in 1965. In 2012 the Muslim community bulldozed an ancient building covered by sand and caused severe unrest in the community by their actions. Following this the extremist dry-fish vendors in the area began to use the temple land to park their vehicles. These dry-fish vendors obstructed vehicles travelling to the temple. The adjacent communities made constant complaints to the police that the noise from the temple's speakers was too loud and prevented their children from studying. Following an appeal to the government, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has taken action to preserve the site. However, the support of the Muslim community is also needed to develop the temple. These historical sites are not the sole property of Sinhala Buddhists. They are the common heritage of all communities in Sri Lanka.

¹⁵⁹ *Lankadeepa*, May 23, p.4.

¹⁶⁰ *Lankadeepa*, May 23, p.10.

The Muhudu Maha Viharaya needs assistance to develop classes and construct buildings. The temple is one historical site that has been saved from the ravages of extremists. There are many more sites in Sri Lanka that are suffering under the iron boot of extremists. These sites must be released from the depredations of extremists by being declared archaeological preserves.¹⁶¹

The temple is doomed, if we await invitations to rebuild 'Welcome Temple' (Tissa Gunatilake) - Sri Lankan history is filled with occurrences where invaders destroyed Buddhist religious sites. From the Indian invaders to the European powers that conquered this country, they all were not second to each other in destroying Buddhist religious sites, for their own ends. In the recent past, the LTTE continued this destruction of historical Buddhist sites in the North and East of the country. People of other religions are responsible for the destruction of many historically and culturally significant Buddhist sites. The latest in this long story is the encroachment on the lands of the Muhudu Maha Viharaya. Fortunately, the government has taken steps to put a halt to this destruction of a historically significant Buddhist religious site. There is a conspiracy to encroach on the historically significant Aradana Viharaya [Welcome Temple] and erase all signs of Buddhist history by non-Buddhists. This site shares the plight of many Buddhist temples in the East of the country. As the Sinhala Buddhist communities who lived in these areas fled the depredations of the LTTE, the Buddhist temples that were part and parcel of their communities suffered neglect and deterioration. This process has been sped up hundred-fold at the Welcome Temple by non-Buddhists, who are using bulldozers to destroy the heritage of the Buddhist people and encroach on land that is filled with the ruins and treasures of the country's history. At present the Welcome Temple is adjacent to a Muslim community in Nopur. The only Sinhala community in the region is in Dehiwatta. If immediate action is not taken to preserve the Welcome Temple, it too will go the way of so many of Sri Lanka's historical Buddhist sites and be lost to future generations.¹⁶²

Be a Democrat instead of being a Dictator (Bulitha Pradeep Kumara) - Former Minister Mangala Samaraweera caused a stir by his statement about a 'Sangha kalliya' in Sri Lanka. He was accused by many parties of denigrating Buddhism and disrespecting the Maha Sangha by his remarks. Answering questions Samaraweera said that he had never denigrated or disrespected the Maha Sangha. He said that he had been a Buddhist since childhood and that it was impossible for him to stand by and say nothing when he saw certain people wearing robes indulge in activities that brought shame upon Buddhism. He said that there were certain people wearing robes who indulged in politics. He asks whether these so-called monks are following the precepts of the Lord Buddha. The Minister reiterated that he is a Buddhist, but a Sri Lankan Buddhist. He had studied Buddhism in school since his childhood and was an ardent follower of the Lord Buddha's teachings. However, he said that he was angered when seeing how certain people wearing robes act, and so was forced to speak out against them.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ *Divaina*, May 24, p.3.

¹⁶² *Divaina*, May 24, p 8.

¹⁶³ *Divaina*, May 24, p.10.

Three women crushed to death in an attempt to receive aid (Srinath Prasanna Jayasuriya) - Three women were crushed to death in a crowd while attempting to receive LKR 1,000 being distributed by a rich businessman adjacent to the Maligawatte Grand Mosque on 21 May 2020, in celebration of Ramazan. The businessman distributed LKR 4.5 million to the people who gathered near the mosque. More than 300 people were jostling to be among the recipients.¹⁶⁴

I am a good traditional Buddhist' - Mangala responds to accusations (Prasanna Sanjeeva Tennekoon) - Former Minister Mangala Samaraweera caused a stir by his statement about a 'Sangha kalliya' in Sri Lanka. He was accused by many parties of denigrating Buddhism and disrespecting the Maha Sangha by his remarks. Answering questions Samaraweera said that he was a good traditional Buddhist. He said that his statements should be understood as the lament of a good Buddhist who saw that Buddhism was being denigrated by certain ill-disciplined monks and not as attacking the Maha Sangha in any way. He said that the country had been blessed by good leaders since independence up to the present President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.¹⁶⁵

The Maha Sangha's opinion of Mangala's statements (Dayaseeli Liyanage) - Former Minister Mangala Samaraweera's remarks regarding a 'Sangha kalliya' in the country was denigrating to Buddhism and disrespectful of the Maha Sangha. Samaraweera's statement was answered by the chief prelates of the main Nikayas in Sri Lanka. The chief prelate of the Sri Lanka Ramangya Nikaya expressed disapproval of Mangala Samaraweera's remarks and said that his statement was against the Buddhist culture of the country. He said that the former Minister had pointed out wrongdoing but had done so like an enemy. He went on to say that the way Samaraweera made his remarks was contrary to Sri Lankan culture and Buddhist culture. The chief prelate of the Asgiriya chapter said that any attempts to denigrate the Dhamma must be rejected. He went on to say that Buddhism played a primary role in the culture and traditions of Sri Lanka. He said that any attempt to denigrate Buddhism or the Dhamma which played such an important role in the life of the country and its people, must be rejected.¹⁶⁶

The Muhudu Maha Viharaya - sacred grounds lost to property thieves (Sajeeva Wijeweera) - The Muhdu Maha Viharaya is where Viharamahadevi arrived in Sri Lanka, as legend has it. In recent times this archaeological treasure has been subject to encroachment by land thieves. The site contains many ruins and statues of historical significance. The action taken by the government to preserve the site is timely and commendable. The temple is part of this country's historical and cultural heritage.¹⁶⁷

Difference in quarantine in the North and South - The media has reported that the police and armed forces took measures to prevent the family members of those who lost their lives in the war in the North, from commemorating their memories. Former Chief Minister of the Northern

¹⁶⁴ *Lankadeepa*, May 24, p.1.

¹⁶⁵ *Lankadeepa*, May 24, p.10.

¹⁶⁶ *Lankadeepa*, May 24, p.10.

¹⁶⁷ *Lankadeepa*, May 24, p.18.

Province, C.V. Wigneswaran was prevented by the security forces from attending memorial ceremonies. Others were produced before the Jaffna Magistrate's Court for allegedly violating lockdown and quarantine, public health and safety regulations. However, quarantine regulations were not imposed on ceremonies conducted in the South, commemorating the end of the war and the memories of war heroes who lost their lives. Despite the fact that some armed forces personnel participating in rehearsals were found to be infected with the coronavirus disease, the security forces did not cancel or impede the memorial ceremony. This is the difference between how quarantine regulations were enforced in the North and South.¹⁶⁸

"Anyone should understand my grief" (By Rekha Nilukshi Herath) - The ninth fatality due to the COVID-19 pandemic officially reported by the government was a woman belonging to the Muslim community in Bandaranayake Mawatha in Colombo. Speaking to her husband, some facts become clear: the deceased was admitted to the National Hospital in Colombo on May 02; she was diagnosed with the coronavirus disease and transferred to the relevant ward at the National Hospital on May 04; that night she was transferred to the Infectious Diseases Hospital (IDH) in Colombo; she passed away that night, but the family only discovered the fact of her death the next morning. The body of the diseased was cremated. Her husband questions whether she was actually infected with the coronavirus as no-one else in the family was infected.¹⁶⁹

Lighting one thousand oil lamps in memory of a dark past and hope for a bright future (By Ruki Fernando) - The Catholic church in the small town of Iranapalay in the Mullaitivu District was lit with the flames of a thousand oil lamps on May 18. The lamps were lit in memory of the many people who lost their lives in the war. There have been many reports in the media about the security forces preventing the Tamil community in the North and East from commemorating loved ones who lost their lives in the war. However, the government conducted a memorial ceremony to celebrate the victory over the LTTE and commemorate war heroes. May 18 has proven to be a divisive day and this year was no different. Hopefully, this simple act by the church in Iranapalay will be the first step toward healing the divide between the diverse communities of the nation.¹⁷⁰

Religious co-existence in a time of corona (By Shantha D. Pathirana) - The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected every facet of people's lives. Is it possible to follow one's religious beliefs while obeying the social and individual distancing that has become the norm? Religious leaders in the past have maintained close contact with their communities by meeting, discussing and teaching. Religious co-existence has been limited to superficial photo-ops, Facebook and social media posts, without any real substance. Some religious leaders cling on to the thinly veiled belief that their particular brand of religion is superior to all others. The government must take

¹⁶⁸ *Anidda, May 24, p.2*

¹⁶⁹ *Anidda, May 24, p.3.*

¹⁷⁰ *Anidda, May 24, p.6.*

priority in promoting religious co-existence, tolerance and co-operation, but non-governmental organizations also have an important part to play. People must learn to respect and honour one another's religious beliefs so that Sri Lanka becomes a tolerant, diverse, multi-religious and multicultural nation.¹⁷¹

"Muslims are supposed to have spread corona like a biological weapon" - Mujibur Rahuman (By Rekha Nilukshi Herath) - Samagi Jana Balavegaya' parliamentary candidate, Mujibur Rahuman, states that despite World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations, endorsed by the government, permitting cremation and burial of those who succumbed to the COVID-19 disease, the first fatalities in the Muslim community due to the pandemic which occurred in Negombo, were cremated. This is totally contrary to the tenets of the Islamic faith. The Muslim community was targeted with various racist allegations. There is evidence that the government planned a systematic program of misinformation that the Muslim community was responsible for spreading the disease and that the Muslim community intentionally spread the disease like a biological weapon.¹⁷²

Religious co-existence in a time of corona (By Rekha Nilukshi Herath) - M.V.E. Ravichandran Piyana stated that the police and armed forces took measures to prevent the family members of those who lost their lives in the war in the North, from commemorating their memories. Quarantine regulations were not imposed on ceremonies conducted in the South, commemorating the end of the war and the memories of war heroes who lost their lives. People in the South were permitted to hold gatherings to celebrate the victory over the LTTE and commemorate war heroes. However, people in the North were not allowed to commemorate their family members and loved ones killed in the war.¹⁷³

The Maha Sanga enjoys over the president's speech - The Maha Sanga told President Gotabaya Rajapaksa that there were no words to thank him for the speech delivered by him at the national war victory celebration. At a meeting with the Maha Sanga at the presidential Secretariat, Gotabaya told them that a Presidential Task Force would be established, and all archaeological sites would be protected.¹⁷⁴

The Tamil National Cultural Forum condemns the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on 'Archaeological Heritage - The Tamil National Cultural Forum condemned and expressed displeasure on the establishment of the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on 'Archaeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. In a statement, it said that the Department of Archaeological had been working on destruction of Tamil archaeological sites and spreading Buddhism in the region for the last ten years. Hardline Sinhala Buddhist organisations which are against the Tamil and Muslim communities are

¹⁷¹ *Anidda*, May 24, p.6.

¹⁷² *Anidda*, May 24, p.10.

¹⁷³ *Anidda*, May 24, p.12

¹⁷⁴ *Uthayan*, May 24, p.6.

behind this, it added. It further added that the president has promised the Maha Sangha to establish the task force to spread Buddhism and eradicate the Tamils from the region.¹⁷⁵

Muslims observe quiet Eid at home - Muslims stay at home during this year's Eid Al-Fitr as the island country enforced a nation-wide curfew to prevent mass gatherings and the spread of the coronavirus. The All-Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) and the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs had requested the people to observe it at their homes.¹⁷⁶

Ramalan that ended a month of fasting (M.S.M. Ayoob) - The Ramazan festival culminates the month-long fast observed by Muslims the world-over. The sighting of the new moon signals the end of the fast and the celebration of Ramazan. Due to the festival beginning with the sighting of the new moon, some countries may celebrate Ramazan on different days, according to when they sight the new moon. In Sri Lanka, the festival begins when the Grand Mosque in Colombo confirms the sighting of the new moon. Islam teaches that the Ramazan festival include the giving of alms to the poor and many Muslims follow these precepts. Many Muslims donate a percentage of their income as alms to the poor. Ramazan especially, is a time when Muslims are beholden to look after those who are less fortunate. This year Muslims in Sri Lanka celebrate Ramazan in the midst of quarantine and lockdown regulations imposed to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Large gatherings of people, especially at places of worship have been forbidden in order to prevent the spread of the disease. Thus, Muslims in Sri Lanka celebrated Ramazan at home, with members of their immediate family, in accord with quarantine regulations. However, many Muslims used bank transfers and other means to donate alms to those in need.¹⁷⁷

Muslims celebrate Ramazan in lockdown (Ranjan Kasthuri) - Muslims in Sri Lanka celebrated Ramazan on May 24 amidst the lockdown imposed to curb the COVID-19 pandemic. The Sri Lankan government implemented stringent quarantine and lockdown regulations in a bid to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Large gathering, especially at places of religious worship were proscribed to prevent the spread of the disease. Despite these restrictions and the inability to attend the mosque, the Muslim community in Sri Lanka celebrated Ramazan at home, with members of their immediate family, in accord with quarantine regulations.¹⁷⁸

Come up with a plan to deal with those desecrating the Sangha, I will provide solutions - President (Sujith Hewajulige) - President Gotabaya Rajapaksa said that if the Maha Sangha prepares a plan and presents a proposal on how to deal with ill-disciplined monks who were desecrating the Tripitaka and shaming Buddhism by their actions, he would take the necessary steps against them. Rajapaksa said that he had directed the heads of the armed forces to investigate all extremist and terrorist groups within the country. The President made these remarks at a meeting of the Buddhist Advisory Council held at the Presidential Secretariat on

¹⁷⁵ *Uthayan*, May 25, p.6.

¹⁷⁶ *Virakesari*, May 25, p.7.

¹⁷⁷ *Lankadeepa*, May 25, p.5.

¹⁷⁸ *Lankadeepa*, May 25, p.6.

May 22. The educational syllabus of the country was also discussed at length at the meeting. Some of the monks participating in the meeting expressed their concerns that some parties were attempting to exclude subjects such as literature and history from the educational syllabus. The President answered their concerns by stating that development of education was one of the main principles that formed the platform he contested with at the Presidential election and that education remained a priority of his administration. The venerable Theras participating in the meeting invoked the blessings of the triple gem on the President and the armed forces of the country¹⁷⁹

Pohottuwa MP's in a fast to protest grabbing of sacred grounds in Mihintale (B.G. Chaturanga)

- A protest fast was held on 26 May 2020 by Members of the Mihintale Provincial Council, subsequent to a discussion held in regard to Poson celebrations, chaired by the Anuradhapura Government Agent. They protested a statement made at the gathering, intimating that the Members were grabbing lands belonging to the Temple precincts. They explained that what they are accused of is the settling of farming communities in 1983 through the Gam Udawa project. They went on to say that the people were now pleading, saying that they are about to be evicted by the Temple authorities and to please protect them and their families. Considering their pleas, it was unfair of the Temple authorities to accuse the Members of grabbing land. That is why the Members opted to protest. They were promised a hearing on 4 June 2020 after which the protest halted. However, Chairman Lal Seneviratne stated that if they do not receive a favourable decision, they will stage a fast unto death.¹⁸⁰

Rishad's petition regarding corona fatality funeral rites to be considered on 22 July 2020 (A.J.A.

Abeynaike) - Former Member of Parliament (MP) Rishad Bathiudeen together with 3 other former MP's of the All Ceylon Peoples' Congress have submitted a petition stating that the COVID-19 fatality funeral norm of forcible cremation is a violation of basic human rights. This petition is to be considered by the Colombo High Court on 22 July 2020. Even though Sri Lanka had issued a gazette notification on 11 April 2020 that all COVID-19 fatalities will be cremated as per World Health Organization (WHO) directive, the petitioners claim that WHO had issued no such directive, giving the standard options of burial or cremation, in accordance with one's preference. They further stated that according to Islam, their dead must be interred, not cremated, and there was no scientific evidence to support the theory that spread of the virus could be contained by cremating victims.¹⁸¹

Religious observances on 1 and 2 June in memory of the Aranthalawa massacre (Wasantha

Chandrapala and Kumara C. Liyanaarachchi) - Two days of religious observances have been set aside in memory of the Buddhist monks who were slaughtered 33 years ago. The simple memorial gathering will adhere to COVID-19 guidelines, stated the incumbent Priest of the North Central Province, Ven. Kirindiwela Somaratana Thero.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ *Lankadeepa*, May 26, p.5.

¹⁸⁰ *Divaina*, May 27, p.3.

¹⁸¹ *Divaina*, May 27, p.4.

¹⁸² *Lankadeepa*, May 28, p.7.

Former MP Rishad's petition regarding corona fatality funeral rites to be considered on 22 July 2020 (Thilini de Silva and Ranjan Katugampola) - Former Member of Parliament (MP) Rishad Bathiudeen together with 3 other former MPs of the All Ceylon Peoples' Congress have submitted a petition stating that the COVID-19 fatality funeral norm of forcible cremation is a violation of basic human rights. This petition is to be considered by the High Court on 22 July 2020. Even though Sri Lanka had issued a gazette notification on 11 April 2020 that all COVID-19 fatalities will be cremated as per World Health Organization (WHO) directive, the petitioners claim that WHO had issued no such directive, giving the standard options of burial or cremation, in accordance with one's preference. They further stated that according to Islam, their dead must be interred and not cremated.¹⁸³

"Take steps to open the masjids"- Ahamed - Former Chief Minister of Eastern Province and Deputy Leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) Hafeez Nazeer Ahamed called on the government to take measures to open the masjids of Muslims for prayers. He also said that other places of worship should also be open soon.¹⁸⁴

Conservation efforts of the Maha Muhudu Viharaya to begin next week (Wasantha Chandrapala, U Wijesinghe & Kumara C Liyanarachchi) - Following a plea submitted to the Ministry of Buddha Sasana, Cultural & Religious Affairs, 27 May 2020 saw the disputed Temple properties being finally surveyed, after negotiations in the Pottuvil area. The vast acreage is to undergo conservation efforts next week.¹⁸⁵

Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism emerges in the East (Thirumalai Navam) – Political leaders and intellectuals in the East have expressed concerns over the emergence of the Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism in the region following the establishment of the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on 'Archaeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. The government has taken this step to make the Buddhist people ahead of the general election. The intellectuals' concern is that the government is attempting to acquire the lands in the East under the guise of archaeology and convert the province as the Buddhist region. The reality is the process of grabbing of lands and Buddhistisation in the East began 89 years ago. The minority people in the East concern that the places of worship of the minority people would be seized and their existence be vanished."¹⁸⁶

Thondaman's role in the Estate - Ever since gaining Independence the only name that gave the Sri Lankan government sustained, viable opposition was Arumugam Thondaman who passed away on 26 May 2020. Three generations of Thondamans have been in leadership of the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) and have sought to bring about justice for Tamil estate

¹⁸³ *Lankadeepa*, May 28, p.14.

¹⁸⁴ *Virakesari*, May 28, p.19.

¹⁸⁵ *Lankadeepa*, May 29, p.12.

¹⁸⁶ *Virakesari*, May 30, p.25.

workers. Although the CWC have been in discussion with the LTTE, they never sought to adopt or promote their extremist ideologies.¹⁸⁷

Arumugam Thondaman provided a great service to the nation irrespective of race or religion - Pelpola Vipassi Thero in a message of condolence said that Arumugam Thondaman provided immeasurable service to the nation and won the trust and loyalty of the estate workers he represented. Even though he was not a Buddhist, he has done far more than many Buddhists for temples and our nation. His demise is a great loss to the nation and to the upcountry Tamil population in particular.¹⁸⁸

A Muslim heart that was lost giving life to a Tamil heart (Ruwan Jayawardena) - All media was abuzz last week about a tragedy in Upper Kotmale reservoir, where a young Muslim lost his life in saving a Tamil girl who attempted suicide, and how a Sinhala Police OIC was able to get her to safety. In a day and age where religious and racial tension is fraught with the likes of terrorist Zahran, let us hope for the rising of more heroic Rizwans in our land.¹⁸⁹

Legal survey of the Maha Muhudu Viharaya lands begin (Tharaka Wickramasekera) - 27 May 2020 saw the disputed Maha Muhudu Viharaya Temple properties being finally surveyed, following further discussion and negotiations in the Pottuvil area. This was following a plea submitted to the Ministry of Buddha Sasana, Cultural and Religious Affairs.¹⁹⁰

Bad results from a good deed (Ven. Muruttetuwe Ananda) - Buddhism says that whatever good or bad a person does follows them like a cartwheel follows an ox. Last week, a wealthy Muslim businessman tried to hand out cash to celebrate Ramazan and 3 elderly poor women were crushed to death and several others seriously injured trying to obtain it. If this Muslim businessman had considered the current COVID-19 restrictions and informed police of his plan to distribute money to the poor of Panchikawaththa, maybe this tragedy could have been avoided.¹⁹¹

Humanitarian aid at Thalagala Mangalarama Temple - Ven Sumanarathana Thero said that the temple had been able to distribute dry rations to over 1200 poor families living in 30 densely populated villages surrounding the area. The distribution was done in four stages irrespective of race or religion, to Buddhists Christians, Hindus and Muslims of these villages, rendered helpless owing to COVID-19.¹⁹²

Experiences of 324 persons quarantined from Maradana (Nishani Herath Banneheka) - Following the third COVID-19 death of a Muslim man from residential flats in Maradana, 324 persons from the area were taken to a quarantine centre in Punani. Several Muslim and Tamil

¹⁸⁷ *Lankadeepa*, May 30, p.4.

¹⁸⁸ *Lankadeepa*, May 30, p.13.

¹⁸⁹ *Divaina*, May 31, p.3.

¹⁹⁰ *Silumina*, May 31, p.1.

¹⁹¹ *Silumina*, May 31, p.2.

¹⁹² *Silumina*, May 31, p.7.

individuals relate their experiences as being almost holiday-like, with provision of better accommodation than their own homes, good meals, dessert, TV for entertainment and exploring the jungle and seeing wildlife. They hold the Army doctors and other officials who cared for them in high esteem.¹⁹³

The Devanagala Temple that was overrun by extremists (Saman Vijaya Bandara) - Of great historical and archaeological significance, the Devanagala Temple precincts have now been almost fully taken over by Muslim extremists and we are only left with 3 acres for the Temple, alleged the Chief Incumbent Ven. Punyasara Thero. He states that numerous incidents have occurred where the Muslim settlers have deliberately defaced valuable artifacts of both spiritual and archaeological significance for many years, and blames politicians for bringing them in and consecutive governments for failing to protect Buddhist heritage and culture in this land.¹⁹⁴

Hameed Rizwan drowned, Police OIC and PC swam to bring the girl to safety (Shantha Chandrasiri Hulangnuge) - Rizwan's mother is Sinhalese. His wife is Christian. His two young children are Buddhist. Mohamed Rizwan's funeral rites were held according to Buddhist tradition. Those who fight and kill each other in the name of nationality and race have a great deal to learn from Rizwan's intricately woven family. Most of these facts only came to light after his tragic demise.¹⁹⁵

Aranthalawa Bhikku massacre 33 years ago (Saman Dissanayake) - Decades of terrorism under the despicable separatist Eelam Tigers and their crimes are no small matter. Many innocent unarmed individuals were victims of their violence. The Aranthalawa Bhikku massacre of 2 June 1987 was one of the most heinous acts against humanity and religion. The writer recounts the gruesome event in minute detail.¹⁹⁶

Dalada Maligawa conducts usual rites and ceremonies even without devotees (J A L Jayasinghe) - Unlike usual full moon Poya days, COVID-19 has rendered the usually packed and overflowing Dalada Maligawa temple a place devoid of humanity. Nonetheless, throughout emergency regulations and lockdown, the Temple clergy ensured all ceremonial rites were duly conducted and will continue to do so.¹⁹⁷

The Cardinal is not the final judge whom God sent to mankind (By K.W. Jayaranjana) - It seems that Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith believes he is on a superlative plane with God, having revelations of things mere humans can have no access to. A case in point is terrorist attack on Easter Sunday, 21 April 2019, and how he seemingly knew what to avoid. The problem is with his behavior until then, where he was antagonistic towards the previous regime, while being in

¹⁹³ *Silumina*, May 31, p.16.

¹⁹⁴ *Lankadeepa*, May 31, p.20.

¹⁹⁵ *Lankadeepa*, May 31, p.1.

¹⁹⁶ *Lankadeepa*, May 31, p.3.

¹⁹⁷ *Lankadeepa*, May 31, p.10.

obvious subservience to the current government. The unending pages of 'fresh' revelations of the Presidential Commission investigating the Easter attacks are not fresh. They were all revealed some time ago and alleged suspects arrested. What is being done now is blowing things out of proportion by individuals who are obviously saying what they are ordered to say in order to incite further antagonism and suspicion against Muslims and re-arrest those who were formerly released due to insufficient evidence. The flagrant disregard for basic human rights in the pursuit of an elusive brand of justice puts the Cardinal on equal footing with some of the ultra-religious extremist Buddhist clergy as loyal followers of the latest would-be modern Hitler: the dictator of Sri Lanka.¹⁹⁸

The same problem exists for both main parties (By Prof. Sarath Wijesuriya) - Sri Lanka's future has already been pushed into a very bad place owing to corrupt politics, politicians and individuals. Both main political parties must take the blame for this as they operate in a very similar fashion and only use politics as the quickest way to wealth, not only for the politicians themselves but for all their relatives and wider families. Current politicians seem to be mostly thugs, criminals and thieves, rather than leaders of the nation, and this is a mournful state of affairs. Even submission of nominees for election is a fight unto the death for most factions. Both main parties contain their own thugs, extremists of the Maha Sangha who are directly involved in politics and those steeped in their own particular caste or creed. The Rajapaksas have displayed their innate inability of doing anything other than deploying scare tactics in politics in order to become rulers of the country. They have shown a woeful lack of integrity, fear of lies, and shame. Just because men don saffron robes and shave their heads does not make them monks [bhikkus]. It is as loathsome for a nation's leaders to bow to corrupt priests, as it is for priests to provide guidance and counsel to corrupt politicians.¹⁹⁹

"Presidential Task Force is to destroy the archaeological sites of the Tamils"- TNA (R. Yasi) – The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) said that the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on 'Archaeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa had been established in order to vandalize the Tamil cultural, religious archaeological remains and sites in the region. Spokesperson of the TNA M.A. Sumanthiran said that the stance of the TNA is that the initiative of the government is destructive and bring a negative impact to the Tamil community. He added that the TNA will not accept the PTF and would soon speak to the president and prime minister in this regard.²⁰⁰

Next chapter of structural agenda (R. Ram) – Presidential Task Force (PTF) on 'Archaeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. The PTF is headed by Maj. Gen. (Retd) Kamal Gunaratne. The PTF was established by the president to make the Buddhist clergy happy on their request to preserve the archaeological sites in the East. Currently, there are 375 sites been identified in the East. This process of preserving the

¹⁹⁸ *Anidda*, May 31, p.8.

¹⁹⁹ *Anidda*, May 31, p.9.

²⁰⁰ *Virakesari*, May 31, p.1.

sites is considered as the process of eradicating the existence of the Tamil people from the East. It is a bloodless and weaponless war on the Tamils. Hundreds of initiatives have been made to change the history and the origins of Tamils in the island since the independence. The ultimate goal of the PTF is to change the ethnic ratio and make the East as the Sinhala Buddhist region.²⁰¹

²⁰¹ *Virakesari*, May 31, p.12.