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Forum on Minority Issues
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Mr. Chairman,

Minorities live in specific places and violence against them takes place in specific contexts. It is important that this Forum convey to the Human Rights Council and the broader United Nations the importance of preventing and addressing violence against specific minorities in the specific places where that violence is foreseeable or has already taken place.

Discrimination against ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities, including members of Tamil, Muslim and Christian communities remains a serious problem in Sri Lanka. Minorities have been singled for restrictions on freedom of expression and association. Police have failed to protect minorities when they have been threatened with violence by communal forces, and have not arrested perpetrators, even when there was photographic evidence to identify them.

Some political leaders from the majority Sinhalese community have exploited or manufactured religious tensions, leading to attacks and violence against religious minorities, including their places of worship and businesses, which are typically committed with impunity. Buddhist hard-line nationalist organizations, a prominent one being the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) have emerged with alleged links to high government officials and political platforms that are often closely aligned with those of the ruling party.

These groups have organized protests and attacks against religious minorities and places of worship, as well as issuing threats and smear campaigns against human rights defenders and minority opposition politicians.

The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) recorded 131 incidents of threats or attacks against Christians, including 32 acts of violence between January 2013 and June 2014. In 65 cases, the reported perpetrator was a state official — most often a police officer who failed to protect congregations under attack or advised them to stop religious activities.

Muslim groups documented over two hundred incidents of threats, harassment and violence against Muslims, Christians and their places of worship in 2013; fifty-one reportedly involved violence.

Attacks against members of the Muslim minority continued and escalated in 2014 when large scale violence in a Muslim neighbourhood in Aluthgama in June killed and injured residents and destroyed homes and businesses.

In connection with the violence in Aluthgama, Beruwala and in several other places, witnesses told Sri Lankan human rights defenders that members of the security forces stood by during attacks, or failed to arrive at the scene until after people had been seriously injured. A media blackout limited public access to information about the spreading violence and the Sri Lankan government's response was slow and muted.

More recently there have been fewer reported attacks on Muslim and Christian minorities in Sri Lanka. However the situation demands close attention, including by the United Nations presence in Sri Lanka. A Presidential election will be held in Sri Lanka on 8 January 2015. There is a long history of electoral violence in Sri Lanka, and there is a risk that the recent violence against minorities will be renewed in the context of the election. The United Nations, including the Human Rights Council, must be attentive to this risk and be prepared to assert its authority to prevent further violence and to respond robustly to violence if it occurs.

Thank you Mr Chairman.