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Sri Lanka: Act now to prevent further anti-Muslim violence

Sri Lankan authorities must act immediately to end attacks on Muslims in the country, and to rein in violent groups that target religious minorities, and take action against perpetrators, Amnesty International said.

Since 16 April, human rights defenders in Sri Lanka have recorded at least 18 alleged incidents of violence and intimidation against Muslims, including petrol bomb and mob attacks on mosques, businesses and homes that have resulted in extensive property damage. Activists say that the police have failed to prevent these attacks or to arrest perpetrators. On 23 May, President Sirisena ordered the Law and Order Ministry to take action. We urge authorities to follow through.

Buddhist monks affiliated with the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) a hardline Buddhist group, are also alleged to have attempted forcible land grabs in eastern Sri Lanka, and the media has reported a series of provocative and religiously charged speeches by BBS leader Gnanasara Thero.

On 8 May, Gnanasara Thero claimed at a press conference that Muslim Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution in Myanmar were trying to invade Sri Lanka. On 21 May, assailants threw petrol bombs at the Mallawapitiya mosque in Kurunegala after a BBS procession was stopped by police. BBS leaders blamed Muslims for obstructing their procession and allegedly encouraged the gathered crowd to attack them. It was the fourth attack on a mosque since mid-April.

In June 2014, anti-Muslim violence in the town of Aluthgama after a speech by the BBS leader claimed four lives and caused substantial property damage. The re-emergence of violence against Muslims in Sri Lanka is alarming. As we have seen before in Sri Lanka, there is a real risk of it spreading if the government doesn't act to end it immediately. Those responsible for violence must be held to account, and at risk Muslim communities given the protection they need.