



Amnesty International Public Statement

ASA 37/6550/2017

20 June 2017

### **Sri Lankan Minister threatens human rights lawyer for highlighting allegations of religious attacks**

Amnesty International is appalled by the recent comments by Sri Lankan Minister of Justice and Buddha Sasana, Wijedasa Rajapakse, denying allegations of attacks against Christians before any independent investigation has even been conducted and threatening to remove senior lawyer and prominent human rights defender Lakshan Dias from the legal profession if he did not apologise to the nation for speaking publicly about reported attacks on Christians.

The Minister's comments were televised in a 17 June news segment on ITN, a state controlled television station. He was reacting to a statement Dias made on 14 June referring to a report by the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) to 195 alleged attacks against Christians and Christian places of worship since 2015.

The Minister's remarks dismiss these serious allegations which do not appear to have been independently investigated by the state. They also constitute an attack on freedom of expression and appear to be an attempt to intimidate a human rights defender and member of the legal community. Any effort to have Lakshan Dias disbarred for highlighting allegations of human rights violations and abuses would be inconsistent with international standards, including the United Nations Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers which state:

Lawyers like other citizens are entitled to freedom of expression, belief, association and assembly. In particular, they shall have the right to take part in public discussion of matters concerning the law, the administration of justice and the promotion and protection of human rights... without suffering professional restrictions by reason of their lawful action...

They also ignore the seriousness of ongoing violence against religious minorities in Sri Lanka. There have been scores of reported attacks against Christian and Muslims, their places of worship and businesses in 2017 alone.

Amnesty International supports the calls of Sri Lankan human rights defenders for an independent investigation of recent attacks against religious minorities, places of worship and businesses.