**Forced cremations**

BY R I M M E L M O H Y D I N 2021-02-18

ON Oct 29, 2020, Prime Minister Imran Khan wrote an open letter to the leaders of Muslim-majority countries. He asked them to `act collectively` to tackle the `rising tide of Islamophobia and attacks`.

He wrote this in light of French President Emmanuel Macron`s divisive rhetoric in response to the killing of a teacher in Nice.

Muslims living in non-Muslim countries, the prime minister wrote, were being subject to `overt and covert discrimination`.

Prime Minister Imran Khan identified a significant problem. Muslims have been vilified, held responsible as a single unit and faced fierce discrimination. Unfortunately, such treatmentis showing no sign of relenting in his own neighbourhood of South Asia.

He need not look further than the horrors unfolding in Sri Lanka. He would see how Sri Lankan Muslims have faced forced evictions, smear campaigns and unlawful arrests.

Muslim doctors, Muslim asylum-seekers, Muslim lawyers, Muslim business-owners and entire Muslim neighbourhoods have faced the brunt of being a minority that faces widespread hatred.

Sadly, this list now also includes the Muslim dead.

When Covid-19 infections began to be reported in Sri Lanka, a new frontier for discrimination against Muslims emerged. On March 30, 2020, the first Muslim death due to Covid-19 took place in Negombo. The family was still grieving the death of their loved one from this new and, at the time, poorly understood disease when the body was taken away and forcibly cremated by health of ficials. The family`s religious identity or consent did not matter. Nor, apparently, did the Sri Lankan Ministry of Health guidelines that allowed for both burials and cremations to contain the Covid-19 outbreak.

And just one day later, these guidelines were revised to order cremations for anyone who died or was suspected to have died of Covid19. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa said he was concerned that burying Covid-19 victims would `contaminate the groundwater`. The World Health Organisation holds that there is no evidence that the virus can spread from a dead body, and so does not take this position.

What, however, can and has spread in Sri Lanka steadily in recent years is anti-Muslim sentiment. On April 21, 2019, the National Tawheed Jamath, a local Islamist armed group, targeted three churches and three hotels in a series of bombings, claiming the lives of over 250 people. Shortly after and right on cue, Muslims became the target of intimidation, threats and even violence.

On May 12, 2019, Christian groups pelted mosques and Muslim-owned businesses with stones because of a Facebook post. The post in question said: `Don`t laugh more, 1 day u willcry.` It was construed as a threat because the originator was Muslim. On May 13, 2019, mobs in the North-Western and Western Provinces of Sri Lanka targeted Muslim shops, homes, mosques and killed a 45-year-old Muslim man. A Muslim doctor was arrested af ter false rumours spread that he had sterilised 4,000 Buddhist women. The Muslim lawyer who represented him is stillin jail, without charge.

The pattern of discrimination had already embedded itself into the Sri Lankan tapestry.

The pandemic only provided another opportunity. Itis exemplifiedin Sri Lanka being the only country that is forcing Muslim communities to cremate their dead. Even Muslims who have tested negative for Covid-19 have been impacted, as demonstrated by the forced cremation of Fathima Rinosa, a 44-year-old Muslim woman who eventually tested negative. The lack of a public health necessity for forced cremations brings into question the intent of the cremation policy and it appears to be a fig leaf for discrimination.

An infant was also not spared. Twenty-day-old Shaykh was hurriedly cremated, without the consent of his parents. Although an antigen test on the baby returned positive, both his father and mother, who was breastfeeding him at the time, had negative antigen testresults. The hospital refused to conduct another Covid-19 test prior to cremation.

The intention to stop forced cremations has been announced thrice by Sri Lanka`s prime minister and the president, yet they continue to happen. Prime Minister Khan acknowledged and welcomed the latest announcement on Feb 10. He must now push them to gazette the step. There appears to be confusion within the media whether this announcement can be taken as official notice to stop.

Prime Minister Khan must secure that clarity through an of ficial government public notice.

When he heads to Colombo on Feb 22, he must remember the contents of his letter. He must consider his responsibility as a Muslim leader. He must recognise that by not raising this issue with his counterpart, he would be seen as complicit in the indifference that often lets realpolitik trump standing up for what`s right.

Otherwise, all of his promises will turn to ashes. The writer is the South Asia campaigner for Amnesty International.