
SRI LANKA PRESIDENT PLEDGES INQUIRY INTO RELIGIOUS RIOTS

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President Maithripala Sirisena is to appoint a three-member commission to investigate attacks on Muslims by Buddhist mobs in Sri Lanka. A police curfew imposed in Kandy district on March 6 was lifted on March 10 but a 10-day nationwide state of emergency declared on March 6 remains in place. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said those responsible for the attacks will be revealed soon. He said compensation will be paid to affected families. According to police, 465 houses, vehicles and businesses have been destroyed or damaged in the religious violence as the nation struggles to recover from the civil war (1983-2009) that wreaked immeasurable loss and destruction. Many residents said Muslim-owned businesses, houses and vehicles have been set on fire in recent days despite a heavy military and police presence.

Muslims say they are living in fear in Kandy district. It is common to see young and old Muslims gathered in front of their burnt houses, shops and vehicles. Some villages in Kandy district are empty except for police and soldiers. All Muslim shops are closed in many places.

Police, soldiers and armed cars patrol village streets. Military checkpoints have been installed at junctions to check those who come from outside the area. M.M Saleem, 69, and his relatives saw flames destroy their newly built two-story houses and vehicles in Mullegama-Abathenna in Kandy. "We have lost all the family belongings. My children and family members are frightened and shocked," said Saleem, crying. When over 500 people arrived in the village shouting abusive language, Saleem and his daughter with five children left everything and ran away around 9 a.m. on March 5. Saleem said two police vehicles were close to his house when the Buddhist mobs attacked around 20 houses. "Mobs attacked all our properties with the blessings of the police □ we can't trust the police and army. Our house and vehicles have been attacked in their presence and we don't know what could happen next week," he told ucanews.com

"The curfew and military became a blessing for the mobs since there was nobody on the roads even after March 5. "It is shame that the government let the Buddhist mobs create a violent atmosphere and uncertainty among all minority communities all over the country. "Our children can see a heavy military presence with guns and they do not want to come out to play with their friends. We are still in fear to come back to the village." ensions erupted after a Sinhalese lorry driver was killed by a group of Muslim men in Kandy. According to residents, Buddhist mobs from outside the area carried out planned attacks.

The police asked those who have suffered damage to property to report to the nearest police station on March 11. M. Nisamdeen, 51, a father of five in Kubukkadura, said many attackers were

school-age children who came from outside Kandy with poles and stones. "There was a Buddhist monk who led the mob," he said.

Abdeen Shakilabibi, 53, who was cleaning her damaged house, said minority Muslims are scared to live among majority Buddhists. Kandy Mosque has formed an information desk to collect all details of attacks. It says 25 mosques have been attacked and two people have died. Similar anti-Muslim violence erupted in the east of Sri Lanka in late February after a false rumor about birth control pills being served in a Muslim restaurant in Ampara to Sinhalese customers. This fed into Sinhalese fears of a conspiracy to reduce the Sinhalese population.

Provincial Council Minister Thilina Bandara Tennakoon said the government is making every effort to give compensation to victims. "Government officials have already started to collect information village by village and deployed police and [military] forces day and night to ensure security," Thennakon told ucanews.com The attacks have led to the arrest of 161 suspects. Two students were arrested for spreading false information via social media. Residents of Kandy blamed racist groups, not the Sinhalese community as a whole. They said extremist groups were destroying communal harmony and causing havoc in Sri Lanka.

Buddhist nationalist group Bodu Bala Sena has claimed that minorities should know their place. Bodu Bala Sena, Mahason Balaya, Rawana Balaya, Sinhala Rawaya and Sinhale are operational arms of some Buddhist monks who encourage a majoritarian agenda. Former president Mahinda Rajapaksa has been blamed for previously helping these groups.

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