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Sri Lanka

Response to Information Request Number:	LKA02001.ZNY
Date:	September 10, 2002
Subject:	Sri Lanka: Information on Treatment of Moors (Muslims) by Sinhalese and Tamils
From:	INS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	Sri Lanka / Child soldiers / Civil wars / Displaced persons / Forced removals / Killings / Religious discrimination / Religious minorities / Urban violence

Query:

Are Sri Lankan Moors (Muslims) at risk of harm by either Sinhalese or Tamils? Are they suspected by Sinhalese of collusion or affiliation with Tamils, or vice versa?

Response:

SUMMARY

Sri Lanka's minority Muslims are at risk of extortion by the country's Tamil rebels, who often fund their activities by forcing Muslim – and Tamil – merchants in northern and eastern Sri Lanka to pay unofficial "taxes." The rebels, known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or the Tamil Tigers, have in the past kidnapped Muslim merchants who resisted their demands. Subsequently, the families of those kidnapped are forced to pay for their release. Human rights groups and other observers report that the LTTE continues to extort money from Muslims despite an April 2002 pledge to end the practice. Separately, Muslims recently have been caught up in at least two violent ethnic-based clashes.

Specific information on suspicion by Sinhalese of Moor/Muslim collusion or affiliation with Tamils, or vice versa, is unavailable in the sources contacted by the RIC within time

Reasonable Fear
Screenings
Refugees
Humanitarian Parole
SAFE (Verification
Program)

constraints.

BACKGROUND

Sri Lanka's Muslims, known historically as Moors, make up around 7 percent of the country's population of 19.4 million (CIA undated). Their presence reflects the island's historic trade links with India and strategic location in the Indian Ocean as a crossroads for European and Arab trade with the Far East. The so-called "Ceylon Moors" are descendants of early Arab traders who settled on the island centuries ago. The "Indian or Coast Moors" trace their roots to laborers or traders from southern India who began to arrive in large numbers from the late nineteenth century onwards. A small group of Muslims, the Malays, are descended from Southeast Asian merchants who settled on the island (De Silva 1981; Tambiah 1996). The Resource Information Center found no evidence to suggest that these traditional distinctions among Muslims in Sri Lanka affect the treatment of individual Muslims in Sri Lanka today.

As this report went to publication, the Government of Sri Lanka and the country's Tamil rebels, known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or the Tamil Tigers, were preparing for peace talks scheduled for mid-September 2002 in Bangkok, Thailand. The talks are aimed at ending Sri Lanka's 19 year long civil war, which has killed more than 60,000 people since 1983 (AFP 13 Apr 2002; ECONOMIST 13 Apr 2002). Having committed widespread atrocities against civilians, the LTTE has committed itself to holding peace talks with the Government, which is dominated by the country's Sinhalese majority (AFP 13 Apr 2002; ECONOMIST 13 Apr 2002).

In February 2002, the LTTE and the Government of Sri Lanka agreed to a cease-fire. On September 4, 2002, the Sri Lankan government lifted a 4-year-old ban on the LTTE, thus meeting an LTTE pre-condition to the peace talks later in the month. During the war, the LTTE carried out many large-scale attacks on Muslim as well as Sinhalese civilians in northern and eastern Sri Lanka in its bid to establish a homeland for Sri Lanka's minority ethnic Tamil population (3.2 million), who it claims suffer discrimination by the majority Sinhalese (14 million) (Ganguly 4 Sep 2002). These attacks largely ended in the late 1990s (AI 20 Sep 1999). During the war, the LTTE also seized Muslim homes, land, and businesses, and has extorted money from civilians (USDOS 4 Mar 2002).

The LTTE made a pledge to stop extorting money from Muslims in an April 2002 pact with Sri Lanka's main Muslim political party, the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress. The pact appeared to be related to the LTTE's effort to recast itself as moderate after being branded a terrorist organization by the United States and banned in Britain, Canada, and other countries where it raises money from expatriate Tamils, according to a Sri Lankan academic who is a senior lecturer at the University of Peradeniya in Sri Lanka, but is currently in the United States on a Fulbright scholarship (Senior Lecturer 4 Sep 2002). The LTTE issued fewer threats to Muslim merchants immediately after signing the pact, but has

once again resorted to extortion, according to an Amnesty International researcher who visited Sri Lanka in June 2002. The researcher said that it is hard to draw a narrow profile of Muslims who are most at risk of extortion because most Muslims are small businessmen, which makes them as a group particularly vulnerable to extortion (AI 29 Aug 2002). The Sri Lankan academic and the U.S. Department of State specialist on Sri Lanka both concurred that LTTE extortion of Muslims has resumed (Senior Lecturer 4 Sep 2002; USDOS 5 Sep 2002).

Human Rights Watch reports the following:

"On May 29, 2002, the SLMM [Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission, the body put in place to monitor compliance with the February 2002 cease-fire agreement between the LTTE and the Government of Sri Lanka] reported that of 197 complaints it had received to date, 58 were judged to be violations of the cease-fire. The largest number of admissible complaints (30) was from Batticaloa, where civilians have complained for months about increased LTTE harassment, including recruitment or [sic] child soldiers, abductions for ransom and extortion... 'A possible interim administration headed by the LTTE as the future scenario without any guarantee for civilian rights would mean many people would not dare to take a risk in complaining to the monitoring mission,' said one Tamil observer... In fact, residents of Batticaloa say that pressure from the LTTE has grown noticeably since the cease-fire began, particularly after the MOU allowed the group to open political offices in government-controlled areas. Similar complaints were received from Trincomalee" (HRW Jul 2002).

In its pact with the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress, the LTTE reportedly also promised to allow tens of thousands of Muslims whom it forced out of northern Sri Lanka in 1990 to return to their homes (AFP 13 Apr 2002). Because there are so few Muslims left in northern Sri Lanka, extortion of Muslims is a problem mainly in Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts in eastern Sri Lanka (AI 29 Aug 2002). The east is home to about one-third of Sri Lanka's Muslims (Senior Lecturer 4 Sep 2002).

Despite the continuing problem of extortion, the overall relationship between the LTTE and Sri Lanka's Muslims appears to have improved since the February 2002 cease-fire, according to a Sri Lanka specialist at the U.S. State Department. As evidence, the specialist pointed to the LTTE's pledge to allow Muslims to return to northern Sri Lanka (USDOS 5 Sep 2002).

The dialogue between the Government and LTTE could have a significant impact on Sri Lanka's Muslims. If talks are successful, the LTTE could play a role in local government in the north and east, giving the group some formal control over the affairs of the Muslim community (HRW Jul 2002).

According to the Sri Lankan academic, while some Muslims now resist LTTE extortion

demands and others continue to pay out of fear, some merchants now pay mainly because they want good relations with the group that may one day run their local government. Some Muslim merchants, for example, pay the LTTE in order to get permission to transport goods to rebel-controlled areas (Senior Lecturer 4 Sep 2002).

The LTTE's expulsion of Muslims from the north and other abuses have less to do with religious differences than with the rebel group's ideological aim of carving out a Tamil homeland in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, the U.S. State Department said in its global human rights report covering 2001. The LTTE's abuses against Muslims "are part of an overall strategy to clear the north and east of persons not sympathetic to the cause of an independent Tamil state," the report said (USDOS 4 Mar 2002).

SUSPICION BY SINHALESE OF MUSLIMS/MOORS COLLUDING WITH TAMILS, AND VICE VERSA

Specific information on Sinhalese suspicion of Moor/Muslim collusion or affiliation with Tamils, and specific information on Tamil suspicion of Moor/Muslim collusion or affiliation with the Sinhalese is unavailable in the sources contacted by the RIC within time constraints.

According to a Sri Lankan academic source, some ordinary Tamils harbor anti-Muslim feelings, owing in part to more than a decade of relentless LTTE propaganda. He alleged that Muslims face some employment discrimination in Tamil-majority areas (Senior Lecturer 4 Sep 2002).

According to the U.S. Department of State (USDOS 26 Oct 2001): "There are reports that members of various religious groups give preference in hiring in the private sector to members of their own group or denomination. This practice likely is linked to the country's ongoing ethnic problems..."

For its part, the Sinhalese-dominated Government of Sri Lanka generally has viewed Muslims – as well as moderate Tamils – as allies in its campaign against the LTTE, arming Muslim and Tamil civilians in local militias known as Home Guards. Moreover, Muslim political parties, such as the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress, have played key roles in supporting successive Sinhalese-dominated governments in Sri Lanka (FH 2001).

According to the U.S. State Department Sri Lanka specialist, few reports have emerged of official discrimination against Muslims in Sri Lanka (USDOS 5 Sep 2002). On the ground, however, Muslims have at times been caught up in clashes with Sinhalese or Tamil mobs. Violent clashes between Muslims and Tamils in the Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts in June 2002 left at least seven people wounded and several shops destroyed (AFP 27 Jun 2002).

Fighting between Muslims and Sinhalese in the central town of Mawanella in April 2001 killed two Muslims and destroyed scores of buildings and several vehicles. The clashes began when some 2,000 Sinhalese attacked Muslims who were protesting what they called police inaction during an assault by three Sinhalese on a Muslim store clerk (USDOS 4 Mar 2002). The three Sinhalese allegedly had ruling party links and targeted the clerk because he had refused to pay protection money (AFP 7 Dec 2001). In the ensuing clashes, police reportedly did nothing to prevent the destruction of Muslim property (USDOS 4 Mar 2002; AFP 7 Dec 2001). Minor protests by Muslims continued until May 4 when the police broke up a large-scale protest in Colombo by force. The Sri Lankan government was still investigating the Mawanella incident at the end of 2001 (USDOS 4 Mar 2002).

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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