

# Activity reported on anti-conversion bill in Sri Lanka

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SRI JAYEWARDENEPURA KOTTE, Sri Lanka (ABP) — Religious freedom advocates worry that an anti-conversion bill making its way through Sri Lanka's Parliament could be used to justify discrimination against the small South Asian country's Christian minority.

Groups including the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka and the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty oppose the "Prevention of Forcible Conversion Bill," which was discussed Oct. 23 by the Legislative Standing Committee and appears headed before Parliament within the next few months.

Introduced in 2004 by Sri Lanka's Jathika Hela Urumaya Party — a political party headed by Buddhist monks — the bill would outlaw religious conversions carried out by "force," "allurement" or other unethical means like taking advantage of a person's "inexperience, trust, need, low intellect, naivety or state of distress."

## **Law could encourage violence**

Depending on how it's interpreted or enforced, faith-based humanitarian groups fear the law could be used to crack down on all evangelism and encourage violence against evangelical Christians.

JHU, roughly translated in English as National Heritage Party, has sought an anti-conversion bill since 2002. The currently pending bill, which has government support, has been held up in a committee since 2006 due to constitutional problems.

Fundamentalist Buddhists have long pressured the government to address the "problem" of the growth of Christian churches in rural areas. They accuse Christian organizations of using aid to entice or coerce vulnerable people to change their religion and claim that such conversions jeopardize the nation's Buddhist identity.

JHU leader Omalpe Sobhitha Thero has been quoted as saying the two greatest threats facing Sri Lanka are the Tamil Tigers — a militant secessionist group branded a terrorist organization by 31 countries, including the United States — and U.S.-funded Christian missionaries.

Anti-missionary sentiment intensified following the 2004 tsunami, which brought an influx of foreign Christian aid workers, some set on proselytizing.

Sri Lanka's Constitution accords Buddhism a "foremost place" but does not formally recognize it as a state religion. Sri Lanka's Supreme Court, however, has endorsed discrimination against non-Buddhist organizations and stated the growth of Christianity threatens not only the primacy but the very existence of Buddhism.

### **Sporadic attacks worry U. S. State Department**

The Constitution gives members of other faiths a right to freely practice their religion, but the U.S. State Department has raised concerns about sporadic attacks on Christian communities. Some groups allege that the government has tacitly condoned harassment and attacks against Christians by inadequately enforcing the law.

Formerly the British colony of Ceylon, Sri Lanka's 19-million population is 70 percent Buddhist, 15 percent Hindu, 8 percent Muslim and about 7 percent Christian. Despite concern by some Buddhists about losing ground to Christianity in rural areas, the Beckett Fund says the sizes of the various religious populations have been consistent for decades.

A forwarded email reportedly from a Sri Lankan pastor voiced fear that if passed the law could be used to imprison both pastors who share their faith and believers who convert to Christianity from Buddhism and Hinduism and that faith-based NGOs like World Vision would be forced to leave the country.

*-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.*

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