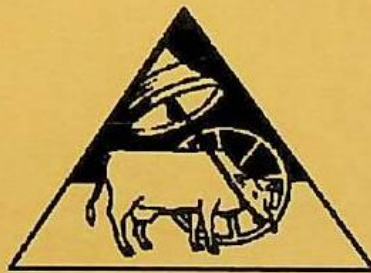


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LST REVIEW

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PERSPECTIVES ON THE ALUTHGAMA INCIDENT



Law & Society Trust

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Editor's Note

The '*Aluthgama* incident', refers to the communal violence that Sri Lanka witnessed in June 2014 in the southern town of Aluthgama. The riots were a 'culmination' of contentious events that had transpired between Muslims and Sinhala communities. The articles and report extracts included in this edition of the LST review captures the nature of the contention and the events preceding the riots. Prominent among their discussions is a reference to an 'anti-Muslim sentiment' generated through 'hate speech', and fuelled by claims of a *Jihadist* movement that is working to undermine Buddhism and Sri Lanka's cultural heritage. The main source of the hate speech, and a key actor in the events and incidents leading to Aluthgama, is the *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS), a group led by of Buddhist monks and of a nationalist political orientation with the purported mission of protecting Buddhism and the Buddhist heritage of Sri Lanka.

The Law & Society Trust, as an organisation committed to the rule of law, social justice and human rights, commissioned a fact finding mission and report concerning the *Aluthgama* incident; a large portion of the report is included in this review. The report is a meticulous narrative of the events that led to the riots and the incidents that transpired in its aftermath. It allows the reader to formulate an informed perspective of the causes and consequences of the riots, and includes the testimonies of those affected in both communities.

The discussion in Janeen Fernando's article brings to focus the manner in which the phenomenon of 'globalised Islamist extremism' is used in justifying and defining the Muslim threat in Sri Lanka. Citing references of 'western style' propaganda, he identifies a linkage between the mission of the BBS, and claims of a subversive agency within Sri Lanka that is connected to global Jihadist movements that perpetuate Islamist extremism. He identifies the role of social media as a key medium by which these claims and sentiments are made popular, though not always substantiated.

Hejaaz Hisbullah, in his article, questions the possible motivation behind the sequence of events that led to Aluthgama. He argues that it is a political ploy to perpetuate the (then) government as the guardian of the Sinhala Buddhist nation in the aftermath of the conflict. He argues that with the 'othering' of the Muslim community, there is scope for this appeal among the Sinhala majority.

It is vital for a country that has experienced the brunt of civil conflict to understand the causes, consequences and motivations associated with communal violence. As it is said, 'the fact that it happened once is indication that it can, happen again'.

Rasika Mendis
Editor

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Globalised Extremism: The Role of Internationalised Anti-Islamic Ideology in Constructing the 'Islamist Threat' in Sri Lanka

Janeen Fernando*

This paper will examine the emergent relationship between the rise of hard-line Buddhist nationalism, (also referred to as 'Buddhist Extremism') in post-war Sri Lanka and the globalised, though predominantly Western, anti-Islamic propaganda.

'Buddhist extremism' in Sri Lanka is not a post-war phenomenon. Additionally, the link between global anti-Islamic sentiment and the strong re-emergence of hard-line Buddhist nationalism and Buddhist extremism is not one of cause and effect. However, in its most recent manifestation, Buddhist extremist forces such as the *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS) or 'Buddhist Power Force' have consistently and prominently used the impending 'threat of Islamic extremism' as a rallying cry for their cause. This influence can also be seen clearly in the wide proliferation of anti-Islamic propaganda on social media the newest and ubiquitous medium for spreading extremist ideas.

The paper will focus primarily on the BBS due to its role as the dominant hard-line Buddhist group in post war Sri Lanka. It will identify key campaigns and arguments championed by the BBS in constructing the discourse of an 'Islamist threat' or 'Muslim extremism' in Sri Lanka. The BBS construction of the 'Islamic threat' in their campaigns, speeches and declarations will be analysed to identify the core messages presented by the BBS in framing national discourse on the threat.

The positions taken by the BBS in relation to international developments and the complementary nature of those positions to appealing to the global anti-Islamic ideology will be examined. This includes its professed support for Israel, proposing alliances with Hindu nationalists and the appeal to create a Pan-Buddhist anti-Islamic front.

Finally, it will look at hard-line Buddhist nationalist activism and messaging on social media and examine the focus of several active pages with a large following. Here too, it will be demonstrated that there is a significant mirroring of globally dominant anti-Islamic ideas utilised in the threat construction process and 'othering' of Sri Lanka's Muslim population. Here too, there is an appeal to create a regional pan-Buddhist movement to resist Islamization of Sri Lanka.

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Background and History

Hard-line Buddhist nationalism or Buddhist extremism in Sri Lanka did not emerge in a vacuum. The current manifestation of Buddhist nationalism can trace its origins back to at least as far back as 1988 with the emergence of the *Jathika Chinthanaya* or national consciousness proposed by ideologues such as Gunadasa Amarasekara in his work *Ganadura Mediyama Dakinemi Arunalu*.¹ Many historians also point to its origins with the emergence of administrative structures of a nation state during the British colonial era.² The support for extremist forms of Buddhist nationalism, which espouse a strong antipathy towards minorities, is often attributed to a deeply rooted belief that Sri Lanka represents the historic homeland of the Sinhalese, thus allowing a superior or even exclusive claim to shaping the Sri Lankan state and society.³

Antipathy specifically towards Muslims by Buddhist nationalist groups is also not a new development. The oft-cited example of the 1915 communal riots is illustrative of the deeper historical roots of the problem. In more recent times, charismatic personalities such as the Ven. Gangodawila Soma thero who preached against the 'destructive influences' of religious minorities also focused on Sri Lanka's Muslim minority.⁴

The mobilisation of anti-Islamic sentiment on a large scale as seen particularly from 2011 to 2014 culminating in the Aluthgama ethno-religious communal riots is however unprecedented in Sri Lanka's post-independence history. Buddhist 'patriotic organisations' have a long history of being in the ideological forefront against Tamil nationalism and separatism but anti-Muslim campaigns only emerged as a central focus for such organisations in the post-war era.

As the leading organisation in the build-up of post-war anti-Muslim sentiment, the BBS based their claim of the primacy of Sinhala-Buddhists in Sri Lanka on the same ideological roots that other Sinhala-Buddhist organisations have done in the past. The claim of special historic ethno-religious significance to a territorial space is not unique to Sri Lanka. They are often reliant on an interpretation of history that emphasises unique cultural attributes but would therefore seem at odds with imported ideas.

Legitimacy dependent on exclusive historical claims may seem incompatible with globalised anti-Islamic ideas of predominantly Western origins but have been extensively utilised by the BBS. The ideas used have largely been perpetuated by far right political parties and fringe movements in Western countries. This has often been intertwined with

¹ Perera, S. (1995). Formation of Ethnocentrism and the Perpetuation of Hatred: The Role of Socialization and Media in the Sri Lankan Conflict. *Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences*, 18(1 & 2), p.72.

² Seneviratne, H. (2002). *Buddhism, Identity and Conflict*.

³ DeVotta, N. (2007). *Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology*. Washington, DC: East-West Center Washington.

⁴ Examples of allegations raised by the Ven. Soma can be found in the televised debate between him and then Sri Lanka Muslim Congress leader M.H.M. Ashroff See- TNL, (n.d.). *Nenapahana*. [video] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkDmEUJ99Z4> [Accessed 4 May 2015].

the popular rhetoric of the 'war on terror' which is directed almost exclusively at 'jihadist' or 'islamist' terrorists and other militant groups⁵.

The BBS and framing the 'Islamic threat'

The BBS was officially founded in 2012 and held their first convention on July 28, 2012 at the Banadaranaika Memorial International Conference Hall. The prominent leadership figures include the Chairperson Kirama Wimalajothi thero, the General Secretary Galabodaaththe Gnanasara thero and the Chief Executive Officer Dilantha Withanage.

Since inception, the BBS showed a proclivity towards placing the 'Islamic threat' against Sri Lanka's ethno-religious majority Sinhala-Buddhist community as a primary area of focus. A protest in Badulla provides an early example of when the BBS made national headlines. The protest had two objectives: to denounce threats made against the Buddhist shrines in Bodhgaya and to highlight the alleged 'vandalism of Buddhist heritage' in Sri Lanka⁶.

A manifesto document elucidates 12 broad categories of objectives or 'basic goals'⁷ of the BBS of which the final is 'taking steps to counter anti-Buddhist activities'.⁸ The section goes on to identify a need to tackle 'anti-Buddhist forces both locally and internationally'.⁹ Actions towards this particular goal garnered national attention and support for the BBS, and many of its most prominent campaigns focused on tackling 'anti-Buddhist activities'. The BBS consistently asserted that a major source of the said anti-Buddhist forces and threats to Buddhism were 'extremist' Muslims in Sri Lanka and the international Islamic extremist groups that supported local extremists¹⁰.

The BBS became a national phenomenon with their launch of an anti-halal campaign as part of the *Maharagama Declaration* in February 2013. Here the group's general secretary, the Ven. Gnanasara thero called on the attendees at the rally to 'become an unofficial civilian police force against Muslim extremism'.¹¹

Notable parallels were displayed to campaigns taking place in many Western countries, and support for the BBS campaign locally expressed on social media often copied or

⁵ Sides, John, and Kimberley Gross. 2015. 'Stereotypes Of Muslims And Support For The War On Terror'. George Washington University. <http://home.gwu.edu/~jsides/muslims.pdf>

⁶ Dailymirror.lk., 2015. 'Bodu Bala Sena Protest ::: Dailymirror.Lk ::: Breaking News'. <http://www.dailymirror.lk/22961/bodu-bala-sena-protest>.

⁷ Bodu Bala Sena: *Kathikaawathaka Erabuma*. (2013). Colombo: Bodu Bala Sena, p.44.

⁸ Bodu Bala Sena: *Kathikaawathaka Erabuma*. (2013). Colombo: Bodu Bala Sena, p.23.

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ Colombotelegraph.com, (2015). *Gota's Statement On Muslim Extremism Is An 'Important Victory' - BBS / Colombo Telegraph*. [online] Available at: <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/gotas-statement-on-muslim-extremism-is-an-important-victory-bbs/> [Accessed 4 May 2015].

¹¹ Bastians, D. (2013). *"This is a Sinhala country, Sinhala Government": Bodu Bala Sena / DailyFT - Be Empowered*. [online] Ft.lk. Available at: <http://www.ft.lk/2013/02/18/this-is-a-sinhala-country-sinhala-government-bodu-bala-sena/> [Accessed 4 May 2015].

borrowed material from their far right Western counterparts.¹² Mobilising the populace against a non-threatening presence of Islamic practices in the form of a logo on consumer products may have proved difficult. However, similar to their Western counterparts the BBS promulgated the idea of a nexus between Halal certification and the more potent threat of transnational jihad. Thus, most propaganda relied on veiled or open references to other commonly used anti-Islamic attacks including targeting conservative forms of dress¹³, accusing Muslim organisations of being terrorist sympathisers¹⁴, the allegation of overpopulation through a high birth rate¹⁵, linking terrorism to Muslims, and presenting halal as a 'Trojan horse' for funding terrorism¹⁶ and being a means for a backdoor takeover by radical Islam to establish Sharia law in Sri Lanka.

The BBS' campaigns regularly conflated extremist Islamic groups such as the Islamic States (IS) and the Sri Lankan Muslim community referring to 'Muslims' as a monolithic entity. Hence, the claim of Islamic extremism in Sri Lanka was presented without evidence but largely uncontested in public debate. Evidence for such claims however, remain sparse as violence perpetrated by Islamist groups in Sri Lanka is hitherto absent.¹⁷ In contrast, alleged violence against religious minorities involving Buddhist clergy has been rising steadily in recent years¹⁸.

The casting of an internationalised, monolithic Islamic extremism as the basis for the 'Islamic threat' can be identified as a consistent theme in BBS propaganda. The framework for hard-line Buddhist nationalism cannot be understood as simply a reaction to transnational jihadism devoid of the history and context of Sinhala nationalism. But the rise of transnational jihadism and the ability to create a perception of association to Sri Lankan Muslims, however spurious, plays a major role in the building of the 'Islamic threat' narrative and thereby popular support for the BBS.

The BBS' anti-Muslim rhetoric consistently sought to stay within the framework of anti-Islamic ideology prevalent in the international arena. They also sought to align themselves

¹² This is discussed in more detail in the following section on social media

¹³ Ceylontoday.lk, (2015). *Ceylon Today / Ban the burqa*. [online] Available at: <http://www.ceylontoday.lk/16-24545-news-detail-ban-the-burqa.html> [Accessed 4 May 2015].

¹⁴ Asianmirror.lk, (2014). *BBS Challenges Muslim Bodies In SL to Disclose Their Stance On ISIS And Boko Haram*. [online] Available at: <http://www.asianmirror.lk/news/item/3028-bbs-challenges-muslim-bodies-in-sl-to-disclose-their-stance-on-isis-and-boko-haram> [Accessed 4 May 2015].

¹⁵ Bastians, D. (2013). *"This is a Sinhala country, Sinhala Government": Bodu Bala Sena / DailyFT - Be Empowered*. [online] Ft.lk. Available at: <http://www.ft.lk/2013/02/18/this-is-a-sinhala-country-sinhala-government-bodu-bala-sena/> [Accessed 4 May 2015].

¹⁶ Bodu Bala Sena, (2015). *Al-Qaeda and the Taliban are banned in Sri Lanka*. [online] Available at: <http://www.bodubalasena.info/#/ශ්‍රී-ලංකාව-හි-අල්-කයිඩා-හි-හමුදා-වහන්සේ-හි-අනුමැතිය-ලබා-දීම/c12hj/231C4DA3-A514-4E24-BBE6-225A58F1FB7E> [Accessed 4 May 2015].

¹⁷ This paper does not examine the alleged radicalization of Muslims in Sri Lanka as argued by nationalist groups as the anti-Muslim campaigns discussed have no identifiable relationship to Muslim radicalization; the campaigns themselves did not attempt to position themselves as reactionary to a clearly identifiable indigenous 'Islamic threat' only a nebulous global threat.

¹⁸ Groundviews.org, 2015. 'INFOGRAPHIC: Religious Violence In Post-War Sri Lanka | Groundviews'. <http://groundviews.org/2014/09/16/infographic-religious-violence-in-post-war-sri-lanka/>.

with interest groups and partners internationally that were supportive of the same ideas. This approach tapped into an existing internationalised sentiment regarding Islam in constructing the threat narrative. The approach also attempted to legitimize the BBS as within a broader spectrum of actors opposed to 'Islamic extremism' ranging from sections of American conservatives to Hindu nationalists.

This approach of aligning with international anti-Muslim rhetoric can be seen in the positions taken by the BBS in relation to international events and actors. Noting the changes in the Indian political landscape with the resounding victory recorded by the Bharathiya Janata Party under the leadership of Narendra Modi and the rising influence of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)¹⁹, the BBS reached out to suggest a partnership citing the RSS as a source of inspiration.²⁰ Gnanasara Thero also voiced concerns about Islamic extremism's 'threat to India'.²¹ The BBS also took a position of vocal support for Israel during a period when Muslim groups in Sri Lanka were protesting operations against Hamas.²²

International Buddhist solidarity against Islamist threats also formed an important prong in the BBS's approach. The most prominent of such attempts was the forging of formal ties with the Burmese Buddhist extremist group 969, culminating in a visit by its leader, the Ven. Ashin Wirathu to deliver the keynote address at a BBS convention.²³

In all of the above instances, the BBS demonstrated a clear and consistent approach towards building the narrative of an 'Islamic threat'. The following section demonstrates how many of the ideas presented by the BBS reflect an existing international anti-Islamic narrative.

Borrowing from the West

Many of the campaigns carried out by organisations such as the BBS, though adjusted to the local context, often mirror similar campaigns undertaken by far right political movements in countries such as the United Kingdom, France and Australia. A survey of anti-Halal and anti-Sharia law campaigns in the world show that a vast majority of them

¹⁹Narayan, D. (2014). [online] The Caravan. Available at: Narayan, Dinesh. 2014. 'RSS 3.0'. The Caravan - A Journal Of Politics And Culture. <http://www.caravanmagazine.in/reportage/rss-30>. [Accessed 4 May 2015]

²⁰Janardhanan, A. (2014). *Hardline Lanka Buddhists to launch party, say inspired by BJP, RSS*. [online] The Indian Express. Available at: <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics/hardline-lanka-buddhists-to-launch-party-say-inspired-by-bjp-rss/> [Accessed 4 May 2015].

²¹Adaderana.lk, (2014). *Muslims a threat to India as well - Gnanasara Thero*. [online] Available at: <http://www.adaderana.lk/news/muslims-a-threat-to-india-as-well-gnanasara-thero> [Accessed 4 May 2015].

²²Ferdinando, S. (2014). BBS warns Muslim group over anti-Israeli protests in Colombo. [online] Island.lk. Available at: http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=108391 [Accessed 4 May 2015]

²³Aljazeera.com, (2014). *Buddhist monk to fight 'jihad threat'*. [online] Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/southasia/2014/09/buddhist-monk-fight-jihad-threat-asia-2014928163612953861.html> [Accessed 4 May 2015].

originate from the West²⁴ and are often championed by far right groups such as the English Defence League in the United Kingdom.²⁵

Many recurring statements by the BBS leadership and some of their main campaigns focus on opposing Halal certification, and to a lesser degree, Sharia law as being 'backdoor' approaches of transnational jihad. Both these areas of focus have been regular features in campaigns of far right European political parties and organisations predating the rise of the BBS.

The UK, for example, has seen a long running campaign focused on 'preventing Sharia law in the UK' by both far right groups and others as an urgent need for preserving the cultural identity and security of the respective countries.²⁶ Anti-Halal campaigns have also been a growing phenomenon in Western Europe and Australia. The movements to boycott Halal certified products offer similar arguments to the BBS, opposing it on grounds of animal welfare and more sinister claims that Halal licensing fees are used to finance terrorism.

Such claims have been given significant media coverage in many Western countries and given supportive coverage by global media networks such as the Christian Broadcasting Network²⁷. Mainstream British newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* have also highlighted the 'Halal issue' on many occasions over several years, often presenting the presence of halal certified food as a covert entry of Islamic practices into British society²⁸. More recently, anti-Halal campaigns have been gaining momentum in Australia, spearheaded by a group called *Reclaim Australia*.²⁹

It should be noted here that far right movements in the West never succeeded in gaining the legitimacy, support, and widespread media prominence afforded to the BBS. However, they have, despite stiff resistance and state antipathy, seen growing support. This may be indicative of the ability to maintain such movements even if state action should anti-Muslim campaigns become confined to the fringes of political debate.

²⁴ For example see - Boycott Halal, (20). *BOYCOTT HALAL - How & Why We BOYCOTT HALAL - Boycott Halal*. [online] Available at: <http://www.boycotthalal.com/boycott-halal-how-why-we-boycott-halal/> [Accessed 4 May 2015].

²⁵ Sheffield, J. (2015). *A Critical Analysis of the English Defence League*. 1st ed. [ebook] Available at: http://www.internetjournalofcriminology.com/Sheffield_A_Critical_Analysis_of_the_English_Defence_League_IJC_Aug_2011.pdfhttp://www.internetjournalofcriminology.com/Sheffield_A_Critical_Analysis_of_the_English_Defence_League_IJC_Aug_2011.pdf [Accessed 4 May 2015].

²⁶ Onelawforall.org.uk, (2009). *One Law for All - No sharia law Campaign*. [online] Available at: <http://www.onelawforall.org.uk/> [Accessed 4 May 2015].

²⁷ Cbn.com, (2012). *Muslim Halal Food Sales Supporting Terrorism?*. [online] Available at: <http://www.cbn.com/tv/1397750218001> [Accessed 3 May 2015].

²⁸ Mail Online, (2010). *Britain goes halal... but no-one tells the public: How famous institutions serve ritually slaughtered meat with no warning*. [online] Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1313303/Britain-goes-halal---tells-public.html> [Accessed 4 May 2015].

²⁹ ABC News, (2014). *Campaign to boycott halal food gains momentum in Australia*. [online] Available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-11-20/campaign-to-boycott-halal-food-gains-momentum-in-australia/6907844> [Accessed 4 May 2015].

Extremism and hate speech in social media

With the exponential increase in internet access and social media use in Sri Lanka, particularly on Facebook, social media also became a prominent platform for disseminating extremist 'Sinhala Buddhist' ideas in Sri Lanka.

It is difficult to establish a causal chain as to whether social media campaigns result from absorbing the messages of the leadership of organisations such as the BBS or adopt a similar ideology independently. However, there is a high degree of complementarity between the organisations and Facebook pages with no formal affiliation to them. Some of the content published cites BBS and other such organisations as their source or promote events which are organised by them but a much higher number of posts demonstrate a strong ideological complementarity. This is most pronounced in the framing of the 'Islamic threat' as 'imminent', similar to the rhetoric of the BBS.³⁰

A brief survey of several active Facebook pages³¹ regularly promoting extremist content show that recurring themes in content are comparable to positions taken on the Islamic threat by both the BBS and Western anti-Islamic groups.

Pages such as *Sinhala Buddhist*, *The Sword*, *Buddhist Defence League* and *The Buddhist Awakening* all use the same lines of argument denouncing Halal certification³², Muslim dress³³ and presenting international Islamist terror groups such as the IS as a threat to Buddhism³⁴.

³⁰ For a detailed discussion of content see - Samarasinghe, S. and Hattotuwa, S. (2014). *Liking violence: A study of hate speech on Facebook in Sri Lanka* / Centre for Policy Alternatives. [online] Cpalanka.org. Available at: <http://www.cpalanka.org/liking-violence-a-study-of-hate-speech-on-facebook-in-sri-lanka/> [Accessed 4 May 2015].

³¹ All pages referred to were active as of 4th May 2015 and had recorded over 15 000 likes each

³² Facebook, (2014). *The Sword - සිංහලයාගේ ඡායාරූපය - The Sword - සිංහලයාගේ ඡායාරූපය* / Facebook. [online] Available at: https://www.facebook.com/TheSword.lk/photos/pb.536664646372835.-2207520000.1430766244.656290854410213/?type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Ffbcdn-sphotos-e-a.akamaihd.net%2Fhphotos-ak-xpf1%2Fv%2Ft1.0-9%2F1545872_656290854410213_2028603845_n.jpg%3Foh%3Dd2781d5b401819e983cd7cad9a226436%26oe%3D55D24D0C%26_gda_%3D1438694026_a6f7f20ae40a6a04913f8d959c4f4a9e&size=800%2C625&fbid=656290854410213 [Accessed 4 May 2015].

³³ Facebook.com, (2015). *Sinhala Buddhist*. [online] Available at:

https://www.facebook.com/SinhalaBuddhist/photos/pb.151742781933.-2207520000.1430767297.10153178287851934/?type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Ffbcdn-sphotos-g-a.akamaihd.net%2Fhphotos-ak-xpa1%2Ft31.0-8%2F10830539_10153178287851934_3031373381623496950_o.jpg&smallsrc=https%3A%2F%2Ffbcdn-sphotos-g-a.akamaihd.net%2Fhphotos-ak-xfp1%2Fv%2Ft1.0-9%2F11050727_10153178287851934_3031373381623496950_n.jpg%3Foh%3D9d3ca98b451c44dac2bb9cc4c9aec65e%26oe%3D55C51344%26_gda_%3D1440652833_f92eef4054295cb57fc961163c36a659&size=1000%2C922&fbid=10153178287851934 [Accessed 4 May 2015].

³⁴ Facebook.com, (2014). *Buddhist Defense League's Photos - Buddhist Defense League* / Facebook. [online] Available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/BuddhistDefenceLeague/photos/pb.326560140769889.-2207520000.1430767799.674011596024740/?type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Ffbcdn-sphotos-a-a.akamaihd.net%2Fhphotos-ak-xaf1%2Ft31.0->

Usage of international slogans, campaigns and imagery are common across the pages and many focus as much on presenting the 'Islamic threat', both local and foreign, as on asserting the historic claim of Sinhala Buddhists. Some pages such as the *Buddhist Defence League* mirror the BBS efforts to appeal to a pan-Buddhist alliance against 'Islamic extremism' presenting both allegations of threats to Buddhism in countries such as Burma and lauding efforts of promoting cooperation between groups such as 969 and the BBS. Some pages repost content from global anti-Islamic websites and Facebook pages such as 'boycotthalal.com'. In a notable example of the extensive interaction of ideologically founded global movements, the boycotthalal.com website carried many complementary posts regarding the BBS anti-halal campaign.³⁵

Globalized Extremism

In conclusion, it could be observed that at both the elite level of hard-line Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka, and at the local level of open mediums such as Facebook, their anti-Islamic ideas are aligned with globally prevalent anti-Islamic ideas. This approach supports hard-line Buddhist nationalist groups' attempts to popularise the narrative of an 'Islamic threat' in Sri Lanka. Drawing on this globalised ideology, organisations such as the BBS have attempted to position themselves within this spectrum, by borrowing arguments against Islamic practices such as Halal food and Sharia law.

As the above sections demonstrated this often involves alleging a link between Islamic practices and extremism or even terrorism. This claim has been articulated both by the BBS and anti-Islamic social media pages in strikingly similar fashion to their Western far-right counterparts, often basing their claims on reasoning similar or identical to campaigns originating from the West.

Thus it can be argued that the anti-Muslim manifestation of Buddhist extremism in Sri Lanka does not exist in isolation but is constantly interacting with similar ideas and even drawing inspiration from campaigns that exist in the global anti-Islamic narrative. As the 'Islamic threat' narrative plays an important role in taking the message of anti-Islamic propaganda to the Sri Lankan public, this relationship should then be seen as an important factor in understanding the impact of Buddhist extremism in Sri Lanka.

While support for the BBS as an organisation is not founded upon support for anti-Islamic ideas, support for BBS and other hard-line groups' claims of fighting against Islamic extremism is at least partially dependant on accepting the narrative of threat construction

8%2F10562567_674011596024740_3888983041216403996_o.jpg&smallsrc=https%3A%2F%2Fbcdn-sphotos-a-a.akamaihd.net%2Fphotos-ak-xaf1%2Fv%2Ft1.0-9%2F10616056_674011596024740_3888983041216403996_n.jpg%3Foh%3D3d282d7b0de9b57fa32f1d09203211b2%26oe%3D55CA7316%26_gda_%3D1439715495_6be1d8d91cb6e384ee421ded91f216ef&size=1024%2C768&fbid=674011596024740 [Accessed 4 May 2015].

³⁵ Boycott Halal, (2013). *Call For Halal Boycott & an immediate removal of Halal Certificates*. [online] Available at: <http://www.boycotthalal.com/sri-lanka-call-halal-boycott/> [Accessed 4 May 2015].

that is largely borrowed from the predominantly western reaction towards radicalised Islamic groups and antipathy towards Islamic cultural practices.

This suggests an understudied dimension of support for hard-line Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka that can potentially be drawn on to act as a complementary proponent towards galvanising support. In a context of rising violence by transnational jihadist extremist groups such as the IS, the possibility emerges that such developments could play a significant role in promoting anti-minority activity. It could also bolster the legitimacy and urgency of acting against the 'Islamic threat'.

This provides a further bulwark for hard-line Buddhist groups as opposed to relying solely on the appeal of Sinhala-Buddhist identity and claims of primacy. Should the threat narrative continue to enjoy support, the implications for Sri Lanka's Muslim community are significant. There is currently no visible signs of what could be termed as violent 'Muslim extremism' in Sri Lanka. However, as support for the BBS has demonstrated, this may have little bearing on the threat narrative's potency. The potential for extreme Buddhist nationalist groups to utilise the 'Islamic threat' as a tool for social mobilization should then be viewed as a persistent factor. And one that may endure even in a context where the threat of Islamic extremism in Sri Lanka is absent or negligible.



Understanding Aluthgama – What was it all about?

Hejaaz Hizbullah*

Introduction: was “Aluthgama” a localised incident?

There are two interpretations of the violence that ensued in Aluthgama in 2014. One is that it was a localised reaction to a Muslim act of provocation. Those who held this view also felt, that the *hartal* held a few days later was a further example of an ‘over-reaction’ and act of provocation by the Muslim community. Then there were those who saw the Aluthgama riots as part of something bigger. The authors of “*Where have all the neighbours gone?*” (hereinafter “the report”)¹ adopt this latter view. The report brings to attention that the Aluthgama attacks ‘were carried out in pursuit of a certain national level anti – Muslim agenda’ propagated by the Bodu Bala Sena (hereinafter the BBS) and associated groups with no opposition from the State.² But to what extent is this view valid? If there was a plan, then what were its objectives? This paper attempts to address these two questions by seeking to position the riots in Aluthgama in the context in which it took place.

It would be naïve to assume that the Aluthgama riots were disconnected with what was going on in the rest of the country. Long before Aluthgama burnt, it was on fire. By May 2014 segments of the Sinhala community were exposed to and influenced by an anti – Muslim hate campaign that was unprecedented in volume and viciousness in recent history or at any time at all. As the report brings to attention, “prior to the riots, the tension between the two communities was already discernible through hate speech that was circulated on social media”.³ As Hermann Goering said ‘the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked... It works the same way in any country’.⁴ Arguably, the hate campaign in Sri Lanka was premised on this thinking, particularly in the lead up to Aluthgama, as outlined below.

Events and Incidents that led up to Aluthgama

In the lead up to Aluthgama, the Muslims have been continually portrayed as an existential threat to the Sinhala – Buddhists and to Sinhala Buddhism. Social media was

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¹ F Haniffa, H Amarasuriya, V Wijenayake and G Gunatilake (2014) “*Where have all the neighbours gone?*”, Law and Society Trust, Colombo

² Ibid pg. 2

³ Supra note 01, p. 106; Also see in video of BBS General Secretary’s speech at its Kandy Meeting held on March 17, 2013 available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOO69qvJwqU>> (accessed on April 10, 2014), at 15:10 to 15:30 minutes

⁴ Gilbert, G.M. *Nuremberg Diary*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1947 (p 278)

inundated with messages of threats of Muslim invasions or an Islamisation of Sri Lanka with examples being taken from the spread of Islam in countries like Malaysia and Indonesia. Text messages were circulated warning of militant groups trained and waiting to attack the Sinhalese in 2015. A campaign against 'halal certification', was based on the grounds that money earned as certification fees were being used to fund militant groups, and that 'halal certified foods' lead to infertility in women. Although complaints with regard to some of these were directly lodged with the Inspector General and the then powerful Defence Secretary – no meaningful measures were taken to stop this fear mongering. And the fear mongering played out in Aluthgama in recruiting attackers and neutralising any opposition that would emerge from the Sinhalese themselves.

The report lists out three main rumours that were circulated during the period immediately before the riots in Aluthgama.⁵ They were that - a temple in Dharga Town had been attacked and a Buddha statue destroyed, a monk had been hacked to death inside a mosque, and finally that a novice monk had been kidnapped from a temple in order to be killed. A poster announcing a meeting of the BBS in Aluthgama on June 15, 2014 stated; 'මුසල මරණකර ජර්ජනවාදී ලේඛනලේසා සංස්ථා වහන්සේට පහරදී කෙලෙස අවසන්ය' [blighted Marakkala terrorist lebbes attacked and destroyed our reverend monk]. The meeting was referred to as 'අවසන් තීරණය ජර්ජනාශයට පත්කෙරෙන මහා බෞද්ධ සමුළුව' [the great Buddhist conference to announce the final decision]

As the report points out, the anti – Muslim hate campaign prepared the ground for the riots to follow. However the catalyst, the main event for the violence that ripped the two communities apart, was the arson attack on 'New Asma Mahal' in Aluthgama, a fancy goods store with a 'rags to riches' story behind it. At around 7 pm on April 27th, 2014 four police officers from the Bentota Police Station visited New Asma Mahal in Aluthgama,⁶ to investigate a complaint that a young Sinhalese boy had been molested by a salesman in the shop when he had visited the shop with his mother that afternoon. However no such complaint had in fact been lodged although a Sinhalese woman had visited the shop with her son that afternoon. After examining the CCTV camera recordings within the shop the police officers left having been satisfied as the recordings did not reveal any abuse taking place. The next day April 28, 2014, the Aluthgama Police also visited the shop and directed the shop owner and the salesman to come to the police station the next day. The Aluthgama Police did not wish to see the CCTV recordings. A complaint had still not been lodged.

It was on April 29, 2014, a full day after the alleged incident of abuse, that the first complaint was lodged.⁷ Mohamed Khan, the owner of the shop was also present at the police station when the complaint was being recorded along with his brother – the salesman accused of molestation. His brother was arrested soon after the complaint was recorded and produced before the Magistrate of Kalutara on April 30, 2014. No effort was made to view the CCTV recordings of the alleged incident. On April 30, 2014, the Magistrate granted bail

⁵ "Where have all the neighbours gone?", Supra note. 1 pg 10

⁶ The facts are based on the affidavit of Mohamed Khan the proprietor of New Asma Mahal tendered to the Supreme Court in SC FR 203/2014.

⁷ Vide report filed by OIC – Aluthgama Police dated April 30th, 2014 in case no: BR 1135/14 before the Magistrate's Court of Kalutara

with specific submissions being made by Counsel for the suspect that there was no evidence of abuse.

In the meantime, a storm was brewing over Aluthgama. Outside the stores, around 10 – 15 Buddhist priests were protesting against the incident. And on May 8, 2014 a protest rally organised and led by Buddhist clergy demanded the closure of the shop. The protest rally took place despite an order by the Magistrate against the rally being held. In the early hours of May 9, 2014 New Asma Mahal was completely burnt to the ground after an arson attack. No arrests have been made on the arson attack to date.

Whilst the Police have concluded investigations on the sexual abuse case – charges are yet to be filed against the suspect. Mohamed Khan and his brother claim that the case is unfounded and 'sinister', and maintain the view that it is a ploy to damage his flourishing business and to set the ground for targeting Muslim shops in Aluthgama. It is too early to comment on the allegations made against the salesman of New Asma Mahal. However, the allegations of sexual abuse clearly caused contention in the community, and had aggravated the Sinhalese community, who were by then saturated with stories that clearly portrayed Muslim males as routinely harassing the Sinhalese.

Thus, similar to the propaganda against Jews and the Rohingya Muslims, Sri Lanka Muslim males were portrayed as sexual predators. At a large public meeting in Kandy, held on March 17, 2013, the General Secretary of the BBS stated that fashion stores owned by Muslims, such as "No Limit" and "Fashion Bug"⁸ were places of sexual exploitation of Sinhalese girls. The following words are heard in a recording of the meeting: *"We have all the proof about the Kandy Fashion Bug and No Limit outlets. There are harems and in these are your daughters. That is the truth ... what is the harm we have done to Muslims? How can we tolerate this? ... Can we let them create such harems?"*⁹ Less than a fortnight after the meeting on March 28, 2013, a mob led by Buddhist clergy attacked a warehouse in Pepiliyana of the Fashion Bug chain alleging that a Sinhalese girl was raped at the warehouse.

It was at this same meeting that another Buddhist priest stated that Muslims are directed in the Holy Quran to spit three times into the food before serving to non – Muslims. The message was clearly targeted at Muslim hotels and in particular the Muslim Hotel in Kandy. All of these however have not been substantiated, and are gross attempts to target Muslim trade establishments.¹⁰

A prominent journalist, D B S Jeyaraj writes that the attack on Fashion Bug was preceded by a meeting where *"Buddhist priests and civilian speakers addressing the meeting harped on the alleged rape incident and stated that the honour and chastity of innocent young Sinhala Buddhist girls was at stake. 'Fashion Bug' was accused of exploiting the Sinhala girls employed in the establishment"*.¹¹ The allegation of rape was found to be entirely false.

⁸ 'No Limit' and 'Fashion Bug' are Muslim owned leading retail fashion outlets in Sri Lanka.

⁹ See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AHJrS8un4yU>> (accessed on April 10th, 2015)

¹⁰ See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zXdYTgPg>> (accessed on April 10th, 2015)

¹¹ Vide <<http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/19211>> (accessed on April 10th, 2015)

Ashin Wirathu the Buddhist leader of the Anti – Muslim movement in Myanmar and VIP at a BBS led conference in Colombo in 2014,¹² speaking to the UK Guardian newspaper stated “*We are being raped in every town, being sexually harassed in every town, being ganged up on and bullied in every town*” although little of what he said has been proven.¹³ Several attacks have been triggered by allegations of criminal acts by Muslims in Myanmar including rape but little in terms of proof or prosecution is evident – although several were killed and shops and houses burnt. This reflects a feature common to hate campaigns led by nationalist groups in history, notably in Nazi propaganda, which also portrayed Jewish males as a hyper – sexualized group waiting to ravish the German girl¹⁴

On June 10, 2014, a few days prior to the Aluthgama incident, two Sinhalese girls visited a Muslim owned shop in the town of Badulla, saying that they wanted to buy a pair of denim jeans. They left the shop alleging that a salesman in the shop had recorded on his mobile phone, a video of one of the girls as she tried on the pair of jeans. However, no video footage was found on the salesman’s phone. As in Aluthgama, later in the evening the shop was attacked by a mob that assaulted the salesman and demanded the closure of the shop. The case was settled a few months later with the complainants not wishing to pursue the matter. Thus, a common pattern is observed¹⁵ – allegations of sexual abuse followed by a mob attack, with demands against Muslim establishments. A similar pattern is evident with regards to the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar – where criminal allegations including sexual harassment and rape are made, and then are followed by mob attacks.¹⁶ It is therefore difficult to reduce the Aluthgama riots as a localised reaction that is disconnected with other events that had transpired in other parts of the country.

Conclusion: what is the motivation?

It is important to consider then, if Aluthgama is a part of a larger campaign, what are the end objectives of such a campaign?

Tissaranee Gunasekera asks “*What was the aim of the authorities? A little riot? A controlled riot? A stage – managed riot? A limited Black June? A short sharp lesson to all minorities to mind their words and deeds? A tiny reminder to the Muslims, Tamils and Christians that they live on sufferance? Create a new enemy to divert Sinhala – Buddhist attention? A signal to Narendra Modi and the West that we too are anti – Muslim? Some of this? All of this?*”¹⁷ These are all pertinent questions.

¹² See < <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/33560> > (accessed April 10th, 2015)

¹³ See < <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/18/buddhist-monk-spreads-hatred-burma> > (accessed on April 10th, 2015)

¹⁴ Gregg Hunt *Framing Consent: Nazi Anti – Semitic Imagery 1933 – 1945* available at < <http://web.calstatela.edu/centers/perspectives/vol38/Framing%20Consent%20sep%20pdf.pdf> > (accessed on April 10th, 2015)

¹⁵ See < <https://mffcoexist.wordpress.com/2014/06/11/allegation-in-badulla-muslim-textile-shop/> > (accessed on April 10th, 2015)

¹⁶ S Kiersons – A Formula for Ethnic Cleansing in Burma available at < <https://thesentinelproject.org/2013/08/28/a-formula-for-ethnic-cleansing-in-burma/> > (April 10th, 2015)

¹⁷ Tissanee Gunasekera *This is no country for decent Sinhalese and Buddhists – Horror in Aluthgama: Their Crime: our shame in Mayhem during Curfew* (compiled by Latheef Farook) p 39.

This paper proposes that Aluthgama was 'designed' by larger forces, namely 'the Rajapakse regime'. It is because they wanted it to happen that they allowed the meeting to occur and gathered the crowds. It also explains why the Special Task Force (STF) stood by and watched as houses in the community were burnt. The curfew kept Muslims confined to the mosques but the Sinhalese mobs roamed freely. The Rajapakse regime wanted a small low intensity riot with which they could pin-down the Muslims; a riot without deaths, rapes and not too widespread. And this need for violence is not surprising. Violence against minority ethnic groups by the majority has historically been a political tool. It has been used to maintain control and to marginalise a particular community. Franz Neumann in *Behemoth*, in reference to the Nazi regime argues that violence is 'not just one unimportant phenomenon in the structure' of the Nazi society but 'is the very basis upon which [it] rests'.

The riots would give a clear message. To the Sinhala Buddhists it would confirm the Rajapakse regime as the protector of the Sinhala Buddhists and Buddhism and portray it as 'our government' – a government that would turn a blind eye as Muslim shops and houses burnt. The end of the war against the LTTE had created a culture of Sinhala-Buddhist triumphalism with a subscriber voter base that the regime found to constitute as a critical mass of the electorate. The riots would feed this Sinhala-Buddhist triumphalism and keep this critical mass of the electorate aligned to the Rajapakse's.

To the Muslims – these incidents spelled "hopelessness". The Muslims have little power to contest the majority Sinhala – Buddhists, except in trade. The riots did not however, have the power to undermine Muslim trade. Muslim political parties, in the aftermath of Aluthgama, did not seek to confront the Sinhala – Buddhist hegemony unlike the Tamils. Also, the Muslims did not seek to align themselves with forces outside the country, such as diaspora lobbies, in order to influence foreign relations. Hence the Muslims were easy 'guinea pigs' in the Rajapakse experiment.

The inherent danger however, as seen in the aftermath of the Tamil riots in 1983, is that localised low intensity riots is reason enough for the making of indigenous militant outfits. Riots have the effect of radicalising already discontent communities with recourse to militancy and making them turn to further violence as the only solution.

Again in reference to the Rohingya community, with each episode of violence, they would recede out of mainstream life. They go into ghettos or camps. And in Nazi Germany, riots were tools by which violence against the Jewish community was normalised in order to de-sensitise the holocaust that was to follow.¹⁸ Riots also marginalise communities and push them out or away from the mainstream.¹⁹

The government failed to suppress the coverage on the riots. Sri Lanka was no Myanmar where knowledge of the riots could have been kept suppressed. Despite all mainstream media failing to give adequate coverage social media covered the riots, with coverage

¹⁸ See <http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%207001.pdf>

¹⁹ See S Kierson Supra note 16

extending to the New York Times!²⁰ The riots became a liability for the Government. As a result the radicalisation project also could not succeed entirely. From hopelessness there was hope – that realised with the results of the Presidential elections of 2015, when the Rajapakse regime was defeated

There is still a need for caution and learning -- everything is not fine as yet. It is necessary in the interest of Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic existence, to re – think the nature of events that led to Aluthgama. All important, to question, do we have a 'government', a 'media' and a 'police force' that sees beyond ethnicity and religion, or do we have, as the BBS General Secretary refers to it, a 'Sinhala Government' a 'Sinhala Media' and a 'Sinhala Police'? What is the guarantee for the Muslim community that they will not to be used henceforth, in perpetuating Sinhala-Buddhist politics?

²⁰ Buddhist – Muslim unrest boils over in Sri Lanka
<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/17/world/asia/deadly-religious-violence-erupts-in-sri-lanka.html?_r=0> (accessed on April 10th, 2015)



Extracts from the 'Aluthgama Report'

The report "Where Have All the Neighbours Gone?" (hereinafter the *Aluthgama* report) was published by the Law & Society Trust following a fact finding mission to Aluthgama, Dharga Town, Valipanna and Beruwela, in the aftermath of the 'Aluthgama riots' in June 2014.*

This section of the Review includes extracts from the *Aluthgama* report, which records the incidents that set the stage for the Aluthgama riots, and the events immediately before and after the riots. The report records the testimonies of those who witnessed the riots and were affected by it, and provides valuable insight into the diverse reactions from political entities, state institutions, and the media.

In Acknowledgements, page i:

"... At the time, the investigating team visited the burnt store fronts and homes, peaceful people from both communities who had lived side by side for generations expressed sadness and an inability to comprehend what had happened; several individuals said they were unable to look at their neighbours or make eye contact with "the others"..."

Chapter 1, pages 1-3:

"In the context of a difficult transition from War to Peace, the anti-Muslim sentiment is a phenomenon that has taken centre stage in Sri Lanka. The Muslim population, nine percent of Sri Lanka's the total population live dispersed in small communities throughout the country with significant concentrations in the Eastern, North Central and Western Provinces. In the aftermath of the government forces' military victory over the rebels, there emerged several Sinhala Buddhist nationalist groups who saw the favored "other" no longer primarily as Tamil, but as Muslim as well. Since late 2011, the anti-Muslim sentiment has been propagated in a systematic manner by several groups. Aluthgama, June 2014 is the most recent, the most violent and arguably the most widespread instantiation of this hate sentiment. This report is formulated in the aftermath of Aluthgama by the Law & Society Trust in partnership with the National Front for Good Governance. This report is an account of what happened in Aluthgama and has been framed and analyzed from a

* The team which conducted the investigation was led by Dr Farzana Haniffa, (Senior Lecturer in Anthropology University of Colombo) Dr Harini Amarasuriya, (Senior Lecturer in Anthropology the Open University) and Vishakha Wijenayake (Assistant Lecturer, Department of Law, and University of Jaffna). Gehan Gunatilleke (Attorney-at-Law, and Senior Researcher, Verite Research) read through the draft and made important comments. Dilhara Pathirana of the Law & Society Trust provided editorial assistance to the publication.

perspective that prioritizes Sri Lanka's potential for democracy and pluralism during one of its darkest hours. The group of researchers that engaged in this endeavor was selected for their proven commitment of pluralism and democracy.

June 2014 saw the eruption of anti-Muslim violence in the southern Sri Lankan towns of Aluthgama, Dharga Town, Valipanna and Beruwela. Hate sentiment had been assiduously cultivated over the past two years by the Monk's group formed in 2012, the Bodu Bala Sena and there has been sporadic violence against Muslim communities throughout the country during that time.¹ This sentiment erupted in a systematic and orchestrated spate of violence on the 15th and 16th of June 2014. The trigger event is considered to be an altercation between a Buddhist monk and three Muslim youths who are accused of assaulting the monk. The large public meeting held in the aftermath in response to the event featured the Bodu Bala Sena General Secretary, the Ven. Galabodaththe Gnanasara Thero. Many of his statements were racist and inflammatory.

The violence against Muslims erupted on the evening of the 15th after Police curfew had been imposed on the area and continued over two days. During this time not only were the houses and businesses of Muslims (and some Sinhalese in Pathirajagoda, Adhikarigoda, Mihiripanna and Welipanna) looted, burnt and destroyed, the relationship between local Sinhala and Muslim communities was severely impaired. The relationship of Muslims of that area to the law enforcement agencies and to the state in general was also transformed and an entire community was traumatized. This report attempts to document the event and its consequences to the affected communities. We argue in this report that the event presents evidence of an orchestrated attack on a community consisting mostly of Muslims but that included Sinhalese as well, and that the attacks and the consequences victimized both communities. We are of the view that the attacks were carried out in the pursuit of a certain national level anti-Muslim agenda propagated by the BBS and associated groups with no opposition from the state. The local people of Aluthgama and other affected areas were merely instrumentalised in taking forward this agenda.

The fact that this took place at a time when Sri Lanka was experiencing an already difficult transition from war to peace is doubly regrettable. The evidence from the field visits, media coverage and response from politicians and civil society indicates that there is a deep crisis facing the country. The state's consistent blaming of the Muslims of Dharga Town for the attack and its refusal to accept any responsibility for the manner in which the violence was carried out, the eyewitness accounts of the complicity of the law enforcement agencies in letting the mobs run amok are reminiscent of yet another orchestrated riot in the country's past – Black July or the anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983.

¹ SFM documentation on hate sentiment since 2014 January. Available at: <http://bit.ly/1vCc3jy>

Muslim civil society representatives who were interviewed in Colombo and the affected areas did not see Aluthgama as an end but a beginning, and anticipated even greater violence..."

Chapter 2: The Bodu Bala Sena

"Background:

The events of 15th and 16th June cannot be considered in isolation from the anti-Muslim hate sentiment so successfully propagated over the post war years by the Bodu Bala Sena and its proxy groups. Chapter 2 discusses the manner in which the BBS framed the Muslims as the ideal, quintessential and tragically necessary 'other' of the new post war triumphalist Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.

The Monk as an Actor of Sri Lanka's Historical Narrative

Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka have been revered by Buddhists for their role as the protectors and disseminators of the teachings of the Buddha. Certain monks throughout history have used this position of respect to influence the shaping of the political consciousness of Sri Lanka.

The Sangha Community has sought patronage of the monarchy for their subsistence. The *Mahāvamsa*, which chronicled the better part of pre-colonial Sri Lankan history is a narrative presented from the point of view of a monk.² Thisaranee Gunsekera writes that not only does the *Mahāvamsa* shape the 'Sinhala commonsense and by extension the moral-ethical outlook of the average Sinhalese' but it also plays the role of the Book of Sinhala Buddhism.³ She cites a narrative in the *Mahawansa* where a group of monks arrived to console a King Dutugemunu lamenting over the slaughter of millions in his war against Elara with the words: 'From this deed arises no hindrance in thy way to heaven. Only one and a half human beings have been slain here by thee, O lord of men. The one had come unto the (three) refuges, the other had taken on himself the five precepts.' Not only is this historical account symbolic of the dehumanization of the 'other', by reducing the 'slaughter of millions' to insignificance, it also demonstrates that the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist rhetoric (as formulated in this case by the *Mahāvamsa* chronicler has historically attempted to justify violence against those considered outsiders.

² James J. Hughes, "Buddhist Monks and Politics in Sri Lanka", Presented at Spring Institute for Social Science Research University of Chicago in 1987.

³ Thisaranee Gunsekera, 'Occupied by Extremism', LankaNewspapers.com, 29 March 2009.

During the Colonial era, Buddhist monks adopted a more activist role in asserting self-determination from alien domination.⁴ Anagarika Dharmapala's rhetoric however, idealizing an exclusivist Sinhala-Buddhist identity, and in addition to carrying out anti-colonialist propaganda also alienated minorities within Sri Lanka. In 1956, SWRD Bandaranaike's Mahajana Eksath Peramuna appealed to five segments of the masses, i.e. Sangha, Veda, Guru, Govi, Kamkaru, galvanizing this Sinhala-Buddhist revival in mainstream politics. Bandaranaike's victory at the polls was a stamp of State approval to the burgeoning Sinhala-Buddhist political tradition.⁵ Henceforth, scholars Gunadasa Amarasekera and Nalin de Silva amongst others have reiterated the existence of a Sinhala Buddhist nation state that has an ancient civilizational foundation.⁶

In 2001 Venerable Baddegama Samitha Thero became the first Buddhist monk to be elected to the Sri Lankan Parliament. A new page in the involvement of the Sangha community in advancing the Sinhala-Buddhist identity on a nationalistic platform had been truly turned however when the Jathika Hela Urumaya fielded 200 monks in 2004 and was successful in winning 9 seats in Parliament.⁷ It is with the Jathika Hela Urumaya that Galagodaththe GnanasaraThero honed his skills, working as a chief coordinator for the party, before leaving the party on the grounds that it was not militant enough.⁸

The formation of the Bodu Bala Sena

The Bodu Bala Sena was launched on 07 May 2012. The Executive Committee of the organisation consists of – Chief of Bodu Bala Sena, Ven. KiramaVimalajothi Thera; Secretary of Bodhu Bala Sena, Ven. Galagadatthea GnanasaraThera; Other executive committee members, Ven. Haputhalea Paghgasara Thera, Ven. Vitharandheniyea Nandha Thera and DilanthaVithanage (lay Member).⁹

There is much speculation on a certain trip organized by Worldview International Foundation to Norway made by three members of the Bodu Bala Sena in April 2011 about a year prior to its formation.¹⁰ Bodu Bala Sena has consistently denied it received any funding

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ A. R. M. Imtiyaz "Politicization of Buddhism and Electoral Politics in Sri Lanka" Ali Riaz, Religion and Politics in South Asia (London: Routledge, 2010).

⁶ Jude Lal Fernando, 'Religion, Conflict and Peace in Sri Lanka: The Politics of Interpretation of Nationhoods', LIT Berlin (2013), p.115.

⁷ Mahinda Deegalle, "Politics of the Jathika Hela Urumaya Monks: Buddhism and Ethnicity in Contemporary Sri Lanka", Contemporary Buddhism 5 (2) 2004: 83-103.

⁸ See "GnanasaraThero is Freely Roaming the Streets and Challenging Police Dare Arrest Him", Tamils Guide, 16 July 2014.

⁹ See "Genesis of Bodu Bala Sena", Asian Tribune, 7 April 2013.

¹⁰ See "Making Sense of BoduBalaSena", The Island, 25 April 2014.

from the Government of Norway.¹¹ In a recent statement on 20th June 2014, the Norwegian Government has stated that it denies any financial, moral or ideological support to Bodu Bala Sena, stating further that under no circumstances will Norway support organizations that seem to work against religious kinship and peaceful coexistence, neither in Sri Lanka nor in any other country.¹²

The BBS held its first National Convention at the BMICH on 28th July 2012 with over 1200 bhikkhus and 300 bhikkhunis attending the event.¹³ The head of the Bodu Bala Sena and Director of the Buddhist Cultural Centre Nedimala, Ven. Kirama Vimalajothithera presented the five resolutions passed at the conference. The first of such resolutions required the government to take serious note of the dwindling growth rate of the Sinhala Buddhist population and to put an end to the family planning surgeries and stop promotional payments made by the government to doctors and the persons undergoing such surgeries. Secondly, it was resolved to amend laws as the existing legal system based on Roman-Dutch and English law is insufficient to protect and safeguard the rights and identities of local Buddhists. Thirdly, they called for reforms in the educational system with a view to prioritizing religious education. The fourth resolution demanded the government to implement recommendations of the Buddha Sasana Commission report of November 1959. The fifth resolution called for a regulatory body to supervise the content of books and other materials on Buddhism and to do away with those that had distorted the doctrine.¹⁴

Bodu Bala Sena gets vocal

Since then the Bodu Bala Sena has engaged in various protests against Islamic 'extremism' locally and globally. They protested in Badulla against the vandalism of Buddhagaya by the Mujahideen terrorist group.¹⁵ One of the early incidents of tensions created by BBS was in January 2013 in Buwelikada, a town near Kandy where a group of Sinhala youth travelling in a bus began a quarrel with Muslims, claiming that a van had obstructed the road resulting in a clash that had several Muslims injured and hospitalized.¹⁶ Anti-Muslim posters had been pasted all over the town, Buddhist flags had been forcibly placed atop Muslim houses and businesses and loudspeakers with Buddhist religious preaching had

¹¹ See "Genesis of Bodu Bala Sena", Asian Tribune, 7 April 2013.

¹² See "Statement regarding the alleged connection between BoduBalaSena and Norway", 20 June 2014 as found at www.norway.lk.

¹³ See "Buddhist clergy wants birth control operations banned", The Island, 29 July 2012.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ See "Bodu Bala Sena protest", Daily Mirror, 25 October 2012.

¹⁶ See "Sri Lankan Buddhist chauvinists provoke violence against Muslims", World Socialist Web Site, 9 January 2013.

been installed on a Muslim business building. The Police Special Task Force (STF) was unable to prevent or punish the offenders.¹⁷

In April 2012 a fire-bomb attack was directed against a mosque in the city of Dambulla, following which 2,000 Buddhists including monks stormed the mosque demanding its demolition claiming it was built illegally.¹⁸ While the Prime Minister ordered for the relocation of the mosque, Muslims in the Eastern Province conducted a strike to protest against the attack.¹⁹ Gnanasara Thero has leveled accusations against Islamic extremists in the Eastern Province who he claims are attempting to create a separate state in the East.²⁰

By the end of 2012, the BBS had already identified itself as an unofficial police force.²¹ Further extending their vigilantism on 7th January 2013, the BBS stormed into Sri Lanka Law College in Hulftsdorp alleging that exam results were being distorted in favour of Muslim students.²² They accused Minister of Justice Rauff Hakeem of being complicit in this.²³ And on 21st January 2013 they raided a hotel in Beruwala claiming that they were operating a 'Buddha Bar'.²⁴

None of the above allegations of the BBS regarding extremism in the East, irregularities with regards to the law entrance examination, and the existence of a Buddha Bar have been proven.

BBS' Engagement with Political Figures

In a letter to the Bodu Bala Sena, Malwatte Mahanayake Most Ven. Tibbatuwawe Sri Siddhartha Sumangala Thera sent his blessings with regard to the activities of the organization. The letter stated that the time has come for authorities to open their eyes to reality and see the latest statistical and census reports which pointed out the drastic decrease of Sinhala population and Buddhist shrines.²⁵ On 25th of December 2012 they had

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ See, "Sri Lankan Muslims Strike over Dambulla Mosque", BBC, 26 April 2012.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.* Galabodaththe Ganasara made these remarks in November 2012 pursuant to the destruction of a Buddhist temple by an unidentified group in Ampara, Eastern Province.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² See "Law school entrance delayed by a week", Hiru News, 8 January 2013.

²³ See "Muslim students have passed due to their skill: Hakeem", Lanka C News, 20 December 2012. The minister has stated that he has no connection with the education policies, examinations, and the preparing of question papers, maintained by Law College of Sri Lanka.

²⁴ See "Hotel managers arrested over 'Nirvana style' dinner event", Sunday Times, 27 January 2013. No "Buddha Bar", however was found on the premises.

²⁵ See "Malwatte Mahanayake welcomes BoduBalaSena", Forum for Peaceful Co-existence Sri Lanka, 1 January 2013. The letter also stated the following: "The path taken by a group of bhikkhus under the leadership of KiramaVimalajothiNayakaSthavira and

a meeting with the Defence Secretary, Gotabaya Rajapaksha²⁶ and a month later on 28th January 2013, they met his brother, President Mahinda Rajapaksha at Temple Trees.²⁷ While accusing the government of not taking adequate measures to curb the anti-Muslim propaganda by the BBS, a delegation by United National Party led by Kegalle MP Kabir Hashim met with four monks of BBS.²⁸ In February 2013, the BBS also had meetings with the army and police to warn them that "extremist groups" were operating in the country.²⁹

On 9th March 2013, the Defense Secretary inaugurated 'Meth Sevana,' the Cultural and Training Centre of Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), in Pilana, Wanchawala in Galle, with the purpose of conducting training programmes for bhikkus and laymen.³⁰ Head of Meth Sevana, Ven. Embilipitiye Vijitha Thera is reported to have said that the Defence Secretary commended the service of the BBS towards the progress of the Buddha Sasana.³¹ The defense secretary's participation at this event seemed to seal commentators' assessment that the BBS was a tool, if not a creation of the regime.

'Say no to Halal' Says BBS

On 2nd January 2013 BBS conducted a "Ban Halal" Campaign.³² The campaign gained momentum with the passing of the Maharagama Declaration on 17th February 2013.³³ The Declaration contained 10 points, one of which was to impose a ban on halal certified foods. The BBS stated to a crowd carrying 'Ban Halal' slogans that they would give the government time until 31st March 2013 to ban the Halal certification. Among their other concerns were sending Sri Lankan women to the Middle East, mosque-building with Middle Eastern funds, certain birth control methods that they claimed were aimed at stunting the

GalagodaaththeGnanasata was a timely action to awaken the nation. The truth is that both Sinhala Buddhist clergy and laymen and the Theravada SambuddhaSasana have been confronted with challenges from both national and international fronts. The Bodu Bala Sena has all the potential to raise the rights of the Buddhists and to expel the wrong opinions on the Bhikkhus among the uninitiated minds."

²⁶ See "Sri Lankan Buddhist chauvinists provoke violence against Muslims", World Socialist Web Site, 9 January 2013.

²⁷ With Economic Development Minister Basil Rajapaksa. Minister of Water Supply and Drainage Dinesh Gunawardena, Minister of Petroleum Industries SusilPremajayantha, Deputy Minister of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs M.K.A.D.S. Gunawardana, Secretary to the President LalithWeeratunga and Chief-of-Staff Gamini Senerath also attending the meetingSee "President Rajapaksa stresses need for respecting rights of all communities", The Island, 28 January 2013.

²⁸ See "UNP, Bodu Bala Sena in pow-wow", Daily FT, 13 February 2013.

²⁹ See "Army asks for Evidence", The Sunday Leader, 1 March 2013.

³⁰ See "Gota inaugurates BBS Meth Sevana", Ceylon Today, 10 March 2013.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² See "Sri Lankan Buddhist chauvinists provoke violence against Muslims", World Socialist Web Site, 9 January 2013.

³³ See "Bodu Bala Sena gives ultimatum to Ban Halal certification", Mirror, 18 February 2013.

Sinhalese population and the Muslim women's clothing which they termed as '*gonibilla*' outfit.³⁴

In response to the BBS propaganda against the Halal Certification, the clergy of both Buddhist and Islamic faith in collaboration with the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce met at Cinnamon Grand Hotel on 11th March 2013.³⁵ The All Ceylon Jama'iyathul Ulama announced that the controversial Halal logo would no longer need to be compulsorily displayed on the packaging of consumer products.³⁶ On 12th March 2013, the BBS refused to accept the above as a solution. They condemned those who attended such meeting and claimed that the only solution available is to completely ban the Halal logo.³⁷ However by 17 March 2013, Gnanasara Thero addressing a rally held in Kandy city stated that they had successfully won the Halal issue and will therefore now take on the task of removing a mosque from Kuragala Buddhist monastery complex.³⁸ Later on in Panadura, the BBS stated that the Ministry of Defence had given them an assurance that the Halal issue will be resolved.³⁹

BBS and Violent Vigilantism

Muslims are not the only religious minority against whom the BBS has had grievances. In March 2013 the Bodu Bala Sena including a mob of hundred surrounded a pastor's house in Asgiriya, Kandy set fire to tyres outside and screamed in abusive language at those inside.⁴⁰ On 24th March 2013 they held their Convention in Panadura and claimed that Sri Lanka is not a multi-racial or multi-religious country but a Sinhala Buddhist country. Gnanasara Thero said that the people should be prepared to rally against Christian and Muslim extremist groups operating in the country.⁴¹

On 28th March 2013 violence against Muslims escalated when Fashion Bug, a popular Muslim owned garment chain store was attacked.⁴² Footage shows Buddhist monks leading

³⁴ See "This is a Sinhala country, Sinhala Government": BoduBalaSena", Daily FT, 18 February 2013.

³⁵ See "Losing the Ideas Battle", Daily FT, 14 March 2013.

³⁶ *Ibid.* The report also states: "The Ceylon Chamber Chairman announced that the Chambers had advised its membership to get products without the offending logo to retail shelves as soon as possible, so that the matter could finally be put to rest and the tensions created by the Halal issue effectively defused. Senior monks, like Prof. Bellanwila Wimalaratana Thero, hailed the consensus as proof that problems between religious communities could be resolved through discussion instead of fisticuffs."

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ See "Sri Lanka's Buddhist extremists vow to remove Muslim mosque in Kuragala", Colombo Page, 18 March 2013.

³⁹ See "BBS insists Lanka not multiracial", Colombo Gazette, 24 March 2013.

⁴⁰ As seen at <http://world-asia-21840600/>.

⁴¹ See "BBS insists Lanka not multiracial", Colombo Gazette, 24 March 2013.

⁴² See "Sri Lanka crowd attacks Muslim warehouse in Colombo", BBC, 29 March 2013.

a crowd of people and then throwing stones at the warehouse in Pepiliyana, while the police stood by and failed to stop the events from unfolding.⁴³ Prior to the incident, BBS had circulated a text urging people to boycott Muslim shops and the Jathika Hela Urumaya had issued a statement saying: "Sinhalese Buddhists should be determined to teach such Muslim extremists a lesson that they will never forget".⁴⁴ However BBS condemned the attack and refused to take responsibility for it.⁴⁵

On 19th April 2013, BBS disrupted a peaceful candle light vigil which was organized by the Facebook group calling themselves Buddhist Questioning Bodu Bala Sena.⁴⁶ The event was organized to chant stanzas from the Subashithaya, which deal with the concept of 'Samma Vacha' (translating as good/beneficial words). BBS officials opposed this and the police are believed to have taken two of the participants of the vigil for questioning. It is reported that the IGP had given the order to the police to arrest everyone if they refused to disperse.⁴⁷

When a mosque in Mahiyangana was subject to attack in July 2013 where raw pork and stones were thrown at worshippers, Minister Rauff Hakeem was vocal in his criticism against the BBS.⁴⁸ He claimed that the attacks against the Muslims were organized and that that Secretary General of Bodu Bala Sena, Ven. Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thera, is "openly promoting a hate campaign in the area." He also bemoaned the government's impervious attitude towards religious extremism, pointing out that the police had made no arrests.⁴⁹

2014 and Premonitions of Things to Come

The year 2014 witnessed the continuation of BBS' violent trajectory with an attack against churches in Hikkaduwa. The BBS monks and a throng of supporters attacked two churches in the area. While the police were deployed to control the situation, they were unable to control the massive crowds.⁵⁰ On 9th April 2014 BBS' Gnanasara Thero and his supporters raided a press conference organized by the Jathika Bala Sena and Muslim Clerics.⁵¹ Footage shows the General Secretary of BBS being vociferously abusive to those present

⁴³ *Ibid.* The footage can be viewed at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-21973292>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ See "BBS condemns the attack" Daily Mirror, 29 March 2013.

⁴⁶ See "On 'Nightclub Buddhists': The Disrupted Vigil", The Sunday Leader, 21 April 2013.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* It is also reported that "In the aftermath of the incident, Dilantha Withanage circulated a text to the media with a disturbing allegation. 'Arrest fake Buddhists (who supported LTTE) who distort national anthem of Sri Lanka.'"

⁴⁸ See "Mahiyangana mosque closed after attacks: raw pork and stones thrown at worshippers", The Republic Square, 29 July 2013.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Footage available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c84C_m4kD6c.

⁵¹ Footage available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFSgzuNyBCA>.

stating that Muslims should not discuss their problems with Buddhist Priests.⁵² In March, a Protestant Christian Pastor and his wife were assaulted by a mob of about 250 led by Buddhist monks belonging to Bodu Bala Sena in Asgiriya, Kandy.⁵³

On 10th June 2014, shortly before the incidents in Aluthgama and Beruwala the Bar Association of Sri Lanka had requested the Attorney General, Palitha Fernando to take steps against the actions of the BBS. The BBS condemned this letter and challenged the BASL for a debate on the contents of the letter.⁵⁴ To date, no action seems to have been taken on the part of the Attorney General's Department.

While there has been talk for over a year on a governmental policy to curb hate speech, this is yet to come into fruition. In April 2013, Vasudeva Nanayakkara, the Minister of National Languages and Social Integration, rejected claims that a Cabinet paper seeking a ban on extremist groups is being prepared. He was also quoted stating that, "This is a democratic country and organizations have the right to express their ideas".⁵⁵ The Jathika Hela Urumaya has taken the position that they would strongly oppose any such cabinet paper.⁵⁶

The lack of any censure of the BBS's high handed actions by members of the government, the lack of any arrests in the instances where Buddhist monks were openly breaking the law – such as in the case of the attack on the Fashion Bug store and the violent incidents of early 2014 are indicative of the regime's tacit acceptance of and sympathy for the ideologies and strategies of the BBS. Muslim civil society organizations have adopted a strategy of engaging with state representatives – mainly the Defense Secretary in seeking solutions to the problems Muslims were faced with. During crisis situations – such as the Halal issue and the attack against Fashion Bug the Defense Secretary has reached out to Muslims in looking for a settlement. Some Muslim organisations are also seeking more traditional approaches such as legal recourse and compiling documentation regarding hate incidents in order to provide the necessary information to highlight the issue in the international arena. Azath Salley, the leader of the Muslim Tamil National Alliance and a prominent political voice critical of the BBS was arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act No. 48 of

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ See "Christian Pastor attacked by Buddhist extremists" UCAN, 14 March 2014. The report also states that Buddhist monks also threatened the villagers in the province of Sabaragamuwa, ordering them not to support and not to spend time with the Pastor.

⁵⁴ See "Video: BBS challenges BASL to debate on letter sent to AG", Daily Mirror, 10 June 2014.

⁵⁵ See "Sri Lankan minister denies cabinet paper aimed at banning extremist organizations", Colombo Page, 7 April 2013.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

1979.⁵⁷ Such incidents set a precedent of retribution against those taking a strong stance against the actions of the BBS.

The events of June 2014 have to be understood in the above context. While the events were a great shock to the community that experienced it, it was no great surprise to many who were watching events unfold in Sri Lanka. Such violence had long been anticipated given the rising anti-Muslim sentiment and rhetoric in both social and traditional media and the increasingly violent activities of the BBS and associated groups such as the Ravana Balaya and Sinhala Ravaya.⁵⁸

Chapter III: The Trigger Event

"Tensions in Aluthgama had been simmering for some time prior the eruptions of June 15th 2014. For instance, on the 9th of May, there was an incident in Aluthgama town bazaar where a fancy goods shop owned by a Muslim was burnt down. This burning was subsequent to an incident inside the shop where a woman alleged that a shop employee sexually harassed her seven-year old son. The case has been brought before the courts. In the aftermath of the burning, the shop owner stated in a television interview that the burning was primarily motivated by the jealousy of his competitors. In a later interview with the BBC he commented on the tensions in the area, and his concern regarding a further deterioration of relations between communities and said that he hoped that this would be the last Muslim shop in the area that is burnt. Reports from the mother of the child in the case state that the police were inactive and did not respond in a timely manner to the mother's complaint.

The veracity of the sexual assault story could not be established, as a Police entry had been lodged and a court case was pending. The suspect was released on bail. As a result of the preceding events, there was a gathering outside the police station and subsequently in front of the shop calling on the shop owner to close the shop and leave. The owner refused to do so. That night the shop was set ablaze. The narrative regarding what occurred in this particular instance is ethnic specific and sets the tone for what was to come. For instance, the shop owner and all Muslims we interviewed in Aluthgama said that the CCTV proved that nothing untoward had taken place.

⁵⁷ See, "Sri Lanka: The Arrest and Detention of AzathSalley", Asian Human Rights Commission, 6 May 2013; "Aazath Salley Arrested", Colombo Gazette, 2 May 2013.

⁵⁸ <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/hate-incidents-report-what-is-to-come-for-muslims-in-sri-lanka-are-ominous-muslim-secretariat/>

However, the Ravaya newspaper reported the mother of the child stating that the CCTV recorded some form of abuse as taking place.⁵⁹ Both parties, however, were extremely unhappy with the Police and its handling of the case. The story of the molestation featured in Ven. Gnanasara's rhetoric on the 15th and also featured repeatedly in various explanations of the event – especially those offered by JHU parliamentarian Champaka Ranawaka.⁶⁰

The immediate trigger to the riots is considered by many to be the altercation in Pathirajagoda between three Muslim youths and the driver of the Ven. Ayagama Samitha's vehicle. The dispute rages around whether the monk himself was attacked or not. The Ven. Ayagama Samitha is currently on record in a video released by the JHU stating that one of the Muslim youth, "the tall one," he says, hit him on the arm.⁶¹ We heard from Muslim community leaders that the Muslims of the area had also attempted various forms of "damage control" in the aftermath of the incident by persuading the two young men involved to surrender to the police and obtain the monk's forgiveness. The men – two who were at the scene and a brother who had gone to the Police Station as an act of good faith on the part of the Muslim community were made to kneel in front of the monks while at the Police station, according to one source, and were slapped by the monk in the presence of officials of the Aluthgama police and a large crowd of by-standers.⁶²

After the altercation on 12th June, authorities in the area seem to have anticipated some trouble from the Dharga Town Muslims who gathered for congregational prayer on Friday at noon. On Friday morning, the community leadership including members of the mosque committee, and the multi-religious traders association of Dharga Town (including the Sinhala secretary of the association) had been summoned for a meeting at the Kalutara SSP's office. The people who spoke to us mentioned that they met with the DIG Anura Senanayake and a Major Mohamed of Military Intelligence. They said they were instructed to ensure that nothing untoward happened in Dharga Town in the aftermath of Friday Jumma prayers.

In order to ensure that no violent incidents took place, our informant—trustee of the Jumma mosque stated that they were on the roads from 11.45 a.m. onwards to instruct people to be vigilant. They said they changed the venue of the Jumma prayers from the Main mosque (Periya Palli) that was located on the main road and conducted prayers in the

⁵⁹ Dharisha Bastians of the Daily FT reported on 13th June that the CCTV found no evidence of the molestation. The case is presently being heard in court.

⁶⁰ See JHU press conference of 21st June 2014.

⁶¹ See video *The True Story of Aluthgama* aired at JHU press conference on 21st June. Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrBgKWapYFA>

⁶² A Shura Council press release later indicated that the third brother, a Moulavi had filed action against the Police and the Monks for kicking him while he was made to kneel.

Theru Palli Mosque on Zaviya road in the interior. People were also told not to gather on the main road after prayers and to proceed to their homes and businesses via the smaller by-roads. According to witnesses there was a strong STF presence in the area even on the 13th.

The Muslims at the meeting had made their own concerns clear to the authorities. The group had advised the security personnel that extra security be placed at the three entrances to Dharga Town that were known for the eruption of ethnic violence in the past. Ambagaha Handiya, Velipitiya and the Hathramang Handiya near the Kande Vihara. The police had written down the information about the areas. They also stated that they had discussed the proposed BBS meeting scheduled for the 15th and warned that it might lead to violence. They were told that preventing the meeting from being held may not be advisable – that it may lead to further problems—and that maximum security – including the deployment of an addition 1200 STF personnel would be provided to prevent any untoward incidents. While there were no incidents after Jumma prayers on the 13th, there was violence in the night. A shop belonging to a Sinhala lady doctor and her son had been stoned in Ambagaha Handiya and the Muslim owned shop Mallika's in Aluthgama had also been stoned and the glass fronts of both shops had been shattered. Witnesses said that although there was an STF presence in Aluthgama and certain areas of Dharga Town, security had not been provided in the "border areas" as advised by the locals.

When it was announced that there would be a BBS presence at a meeting organized by the Beruwela Shasana Arakshaka Bala Mandalaya on the 15th of June, there was an effort made by various parties within and outside Aluthgama, including Muslim civil society, and religious leaders, and local politicians to request the authorities to take preventive action to avoid the escalation of the situation.

A delegation of Muslim religious and civil society organizations visited Kalutara to discuss with senior DIG Anura Senanayake the possible threat of violence in Aluthgama on the 15th.⁶³ The National Shooru Council (NSC) Press Release on the 15th stated that the group had urged the government "not to permit the racially motivated demonstration set to be planned today by racial Buddhist groups." It further stated that the NSC pointed out it can

⁶³ According to a Muslim Council Press Release the delegation was coordinated by lawyer Shiraz Noordeen and comprised the following: the All Ceylon Jamiathul Ulema represented by ShkMurshidMulaffer (Ex-Co Member), ShkFazilFarook (Ex-Co Member), Muslim Council of Sri Lanka represented by N. M Ameen (President) and Asker Khan (Secretary), the Colombo Masjid Federation represented by M R M Rikaz (President – Maradana), M RameezNaalir (President – Dehiwela/Mount Lavinia), the Wakf Board represented by ArkamUvais (Chairman), the Young Men's Muslim Association represented by K.N.Deen(National President).

arouse unnecessary tensions in the area and appealed to the leaders to settle the matter amicably.⁶⁴

Members of the delegation that met the IGP later informed the research team that the IGP assured the delegation that while they will permit the meeting to be held, there will be adequate Police and STF presence to ensure that nothing untoward would take place in the aftermath. People of Aluthgama also informed us that they called various political figures for assistance—including Muslim ministers and members of the JVP leadership who assured them that since there was adequate security provided they had nothing to worry about. Some of the members of the Muslim civil society delegation stated that they were in fact relieved when they left Aluthgama on the 15th since the area had a strong police and Special Task Force (STF) presence. Shop owners in Aluthgama also stated that they felt somewhat safe since there was such a substantial STF presence.

The Advertisement for the meeting on the 15th carries the logos of the BBS and the Sinhala Ravaya and although it has been claimed subsequently that it was organized by the Sashanarakshaka Balamandalaya of Beruwela and not by the BBS. The notice does not feature this information.

The poster reads

Oh! Sinhalese, on the sacred Poya day some blighted Marakkala terrorist lebbes attacked and destroyed our reverend monk! That deed is done. There is nothing left to talk about.

The great Buddhist gathering to proclaim the final decision is going to be held on the 15th of June at 3 p.m. in Aluthgama.

Many, and not just representatives of the Muslim community, had been apprehensive due to the tone of the invitation in the midst of prevailing tensions. In addition to the Muslim civil society representatives, Kumara Welgama and Rohitha Abeygunewardena too are named in the Shoora Council press release mentioned above as calling upon the authorities to prevent the BBS led meeting.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Shoora Council statement released on 15th June, signed by Ismail Azeez, General Secretary NSC.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

The meeting

The meeting received wide coverage in the press and the monk's rhetoric is full of incendiary statements. Expressing his anger at the deployment of security forces against the meeting, the monk called on everyone to remember that the country's forces still consisted of a Sinhala army and a Sinhala police force. Arguably, the monk's ethnicised invocation was later endorsed by the STF which did little to help affected Muslims during the violence.

The monk also stated that if the Muslims did not toe the line (as defined by the Sinhala Nationalists) there would be no protection for their shops in the Aluthgama, Beruwela areas. (Aba Saranai) He also called the President to account for appointing a Muslim to the post of Minister of Justice. The meeting and speeches discussed the affront to Buddhism that occurred as a result of the alleged assault on the young monk, the Ven. Ayagama Samitha in Pathirajagoda. The monk stated that this was the culmination of a series of events where Muslims harmed Buddhists. Here he reminded the crowd in very explicit language that a Muslim in Aluthgama town was accused of grabbing a young boy's genitals just a month earlier. The Buddhists were not permitted to talk of offences by Muslims he said, if they did they were termed racist. (At that point the monk says- Yes! We are racist!) He said, if one Sinhalese is touched it will be the end of all Muslims! The meeting called on the Buddhist to awaken, become responsible and act to save the nation and the religion.

Singer Madu Madawa Aravinda who also participated at the event stated in his few minutes on the podium that he curses King Senarath, the Sinhala king who provided shelter to the Muslims during the time of the Portuguese and regrets the shortsightedness of the Sinhalese who let the Muslims multiply to a million in the Eighties and two million today. He also added that if the Muslims are with the Sinhalese—like the famous Muslim singer Mohideen Baig known for his Buddhist devotional songs then they can live peacefully, but they should beware that if they do not because then they too will be sent to their own Mullivaikal!⁶⁶

The Venerable Gnanasara ended his speech by saying, "in the future if another yellow robe is even touched, no need to go to the police, let the law of the jungle take over."

⁶⁶ Footage from BBS led rally in Aluthgama on 15th June 2014. Clip available on youtube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66MNsQLmgA>

The Procession

The procession that went past the Periya Palli or the Main Mosque of Dharga Town on the Aluthgama - Mathugama Road has been discussed in video footage, government communiqués and political party press conferences. Raw footage as well as edited clips has been circulating on social media with the discussion point being who – Muslims or Sinhalese—were the ones to cast the first stone that set off the violence. There are two pieces in particular that we consider worth commenting on. In one raw clip, there is what appears to be the opening crowd of the procession walking down the main road and we see young men beginning to pelt stones without bending down to pick them up. Our attention was drawn to this video by Muslim interlocutors as evidence of the fact that the mobs were organized – the young men carried backpacks from which they presumably took stones. Muslims in general were less interested in the who-started-it narrative given their experience with the organized nature of the looting and violence. One person at the Seenawatte mosque stated that the story about who threw the first stone was irrelevant because before the stones were cast a van belonging to someone from Seenawatte was already burning on the road. And this was before the crowd reached the Main mosque from which the alleged stone was thrown. While we could not corroborate the chronology whether the van was burnt before or not – we witnessed the burnt shell of the van on the road before the main mosque.

There was one Sinhala interlocutor who drew our attention to the same video stating that the video shows stones coming from the Muslim side. The second video that surfaced a month after the event is an edited clip with sound effects, text bubbles and footage that shows many camera perspectives. This video provides a full view of the presence of both Muslims and Sinhalese at the event, and most importantly it captures STF and police inaction. It provides visuals of many stone throwing Muslims, and attempts through the text to show that Muslims were “not innocent.” It points to a cloud of thick smoke in the frame which it notes with captions as “a Sinhala village burning.” The competing narratives that inform national level discussions even today are informed by versions such as this.

It is noteworthy that on no occasion did the Muslims attempt to portray themselves as “innocent” in the manner that was being portrayed by propaganda in the aftermath of the event. That in fact was irrelevant to many who spoke with us. When discussing the procession and the attacks, affected Muslims were quick to point out that they attempted to defend themselves. For instance, in relation to the procession we were told that while the Sinhalese came armed and prepared the Muslims only had stones with which to fight back, “just like in Palestine,” one person said. In another instance, in Seenawatte, one person stated that the people of the area were capable of looking after themselves, that it is the STF that prevented them from doing so while facilitating the attacks by the armed mobs. In

Welipitiya, Seenawatte and Adhikarigoda and Military road we found evidence of persons attempting to hold the mobs at bay. This resulted in two deaths and many injuries.”

Chapter IV: The Violence – Testimonies of those Affected

“This chapter is a compilation of detailed testimonies from affected persons. We are of the opinion that an inclusion of such a section is significant in order to illustrate the experience of the affected people and to give readers as comprehensive an overview of the actual violence and its effects. We hope thereby that this incident will become a part of general knowledge about Sri Lanka’s difficult transition away from war towards a democratic peace. In the latter part of the chapter, we have summarized the main findings from the personal narratives. The chapter is organized in terms of affected areas visited by the research team. Information gathered from interviews in Colombo and via phone conversations have also been included.

From the interview narratives, the team concluded that there were several areas that experienced a similar pattern of violence at almost the same time across the Aluthgama Bazaar and Dharga Town area. These areas are at a distance from the main thoroughfare through which the procession passed after the meeting in Aluthgama town. These places were attacked by groups of similarly armed thugs with similar patterns of activity. In Dharga Town the areas of SeenaWatte, Military Road, New Road, Adhikarigoda, Welipitiya and Mihiripanna Road were affected. In addition, Muslim businesses in Aluthgama town were also torched and looted. The areas in Dharga Town that were attacked are identified by locals as “border areas;” where Muslims of Dharga Town live in close proximity to Sinhala households. In addition to the attacks on Muslim houses in these areas, there were six houses belonging to Sinhalese that were also attacked in Pathirajagoda. Pathirajagoda, in the middle of Dharga Town, is located at a substantial distance from the badly affected Muslim areas but the Sinhala houses that were attacked were built close to Muslim and Sinhala houses. Additionally, Aluthgama town is located on the Galle road away from the Aluthgama-Mathugama road leading to Dharga Town. In Adhikarigoda where there was substantial damage to Muslim houses, there was one Sinhala house that was also attacked. On Mihiripanna Road bordering the Bentharariver, a Sinhala owned holiday home was attacked and burnt.

The Beruwela DS office provides figures on the damages disaggregated according to religion. These include damages in Authgama, Dhargatown, Welipanna and Beruwela, but do not include damages in Mathugama and Kaluthara DS divisions.

Damages to homes

	Muslim	Sinhala
Completely Damaged	31	2
Partially Damaged	195	20

Damage to Businesses

	Muslim	Sinhala
Completely damaged	69	5
Partially damaged	52	9

Stories from Dharga Town

Seenawatte

Seenawatte was a mixed neighborhood where Muslim families lived in close proximity to Sinhala families. We spoke to an extended family of three households who were the only Muslims in that neighbourhood. They had lost a house and a shop. There had been a wedding in the family the previous night and the family had gathered at one house that was inside a small lane. The house and shop that were attacked and damaged were on the main road. There had been three to four groups of youth that came within half an hour. Each of them came shouting insults at "thambiyas."

The witness stated the following:

First there was one group that came and this group was led by two monks. They threw stones and broke all the windows of the house. Then 15 minutes later another group arrived. Then a few minutes later, a third group came. They were the worst, they broke and smashed and burnt down everything. Later when we were trying to put out the fires there was another group that came – a group of young boys - maybe 15 years old. The STF chased them away. There were others who came with their faces covered and took the stuff from the houses put them into bags and carried them out.

The witness also stated that the STF was in the vicinity and when he ran to ask for assistance when the house was burning he was told that they had come for some other work and could not help him. He had gone once more and he was told "Malli, these are things that you created, so sort it out yourselves." (*Malli Umbalah karagaththu deval umbalabala ganilla.*)

Later when the mobs had left and the fire had been put out, they had moved the women and children to the mosque. After they left, the house had been broken into, cupboards opened and money and jewellery taken.

In the burnt house and shop, the mob had gathered clothes and books and other inflammatory material, placed them in the middle of a room and set them on fire. Movable goods of value—including a new washing machine that was still in its packing were carried off. The photocopy machine and scanner in the shop were destroyed with axes. One of the affected persons made a remark that we were to hear often on our visits - "*Meka mankolla kamak, jathi vadayak nevey.*" "This is highway robbery - there is nothing ethnic/religious about this."

A retired government official who lived in the area stated the following:

The curfew was in force. And also, when the house on the other side of the road was being set on fire, the STF was going on bikes. I showed them, that they were burning the house. Even before that, when the incidents were starting, the STF went by in a vehicle. But, they didn't take any notice. Even the police were not bothered. After everything was over, our Sinhala neighbors came and said that we have lived here for 52 years and never had any problems and they were feeling bad. I am now 55 years.

(He also stated that it was with the help of neighbours that he was able to put out the fire.)

Another individual recounted the manner in which the STF visited their houses after the violence had broken out and told them to go to the mosque, that they would provide security to the houses. The STF persons had said they were not able to guarantee the security of the individuals but that they would protect the houses. Therefore the people had left for the mosque. When they returned and saw their destroyed houses they felt that they had been duped into clearing the area so that the mobs could have a free hand to loot their valuables and burn their homes.

Speaking of the looting this person said,

We had collected some jewelry for our daughter's wedding and there was a nine sovereign chain made for her. All that jewelry was looted by them. And, there were some ceramic sets from abroad. They have taken half of that lot and the remainder they have smashed and broken and thrown on the floor. There was an alpha safe, where we kept our valuables. They have broken that open and taken the things.

Another individual in the same area:

This happened around 6 or 6.30 in the evening. Not only have they burnt my belongings, but they have also robbed things from the house. In two months time, I am planning to give my daughter in marriage. The money that I had saved for her wedding was also robbed. Now I am economically very badly placed. All my belongings and assets were looted and destroyed. You, please try to tell these stories to the government and other Muslim brothers.

In another instance, one of the persons that were there stated that they saw the perpetrators and not only did the neighbors not help them, they were among those who attacked.

This is my house and this is my vehicle (pointing to a burnt house and vehicle). They have destroyed all these belongings and ruined our life. But these were not done by outsiders; these were done by the same people whom we have associated and provided with food and things.

Another person who was injured and was refused assistance by the STF stated:

They had powerful weapons in their hands. I was beaten by one of those and got injured on my head (showing his head). Here I have the medical chit to prove my admission to the hospital. I have this report in my hand. When I was beaten on the head and bleeding, there was no one to take me to the hospital. There was only an STF jeep. So, I begged them to take me to the hospital, they said that, at that moment they cannot do anything.

Another person—a woman reiterating the fact that the armed forces who were around did nothing to stop the violence stated the following:

The forces were near a temple. It may be around 300 meters from here. We were told that the STF will provide security to this area as well. But when the incident took place none of them were there. Neither the (STF) nor the police, nobody was there.

But when they were attacking my shop I saw a police jeep going past at a high speed. I saw that very well. While all these incidents were taking place not only did the STF or police not come to our assistance, but they also did not take any action against the perpetrators. Till they smashed and burnt everything none of them came to this area to stop them.

When asked about the identity of the perpetrators she said yes, they were from the neighbourhood. She said that there were many young boys. But she also talked of other neighbours who confronted the mobs and tried to help.

Yes, they came and helped me. They came forward and defended us arguing with that crowd. They told the crowd not to harm us and not to attack our properties as we are good people. The crowd scolded them in filth and told them to get inside. In that house there was a Sinhala lady, who was pregnant but she also came to the road and told that crowd not to do any harm as these people are good and do not harm or damage any of their belongings. The crowd did not listen to her, smashed every Muslim house and vehicles causing damage. My shop was broken and damaged before my very eyes.

We also encountered a witness who talked about people attempting to defend themselves and driving away the mobs:

Here the Bodu Bala Sena had a procession, didn't they? When it went past, there was a lot of tension with accusations that stones were thrown at the *pansala* (big temple). When that was happening, I was at the gate. At the same time from this side, a crowd of Sinhala people with stones and poles came marching. They were all known to us, even some women were among them. As I was there at the gate, I told them not to throw stones at the houses. They said, 'no Miss we won't do that' and asked me to get inside the house. Even in that crowd some were saying don't throw stones or get into houses or the mosque. However, one or two had thrown stones at the mosque there. After getting stoned, some youths who were at the mosque at that time came out to see who was throwing stones. Can we expect them not to react?

But, only three youths were there at the mosque at that time. They came running behind this crowd chasing them and started throwing stones at them. When the mosque was being attacked, you can't expect them to look on. Because the youth started to retaliate, the crowd started to run. When they were running, they opened the gate and threw stones and bottles at this car. Not only this car, on the other side my sister's vehicle was also damaged, and there was a beauty salon and some other

shops down the road that were also stoned and smashed. If not for those three youths, that mob would have come inside and turned the car upside down. We cannot blame those three youths; they didn't go beyond this point.

Another spoke about how he witnessed crowds gathered at the Masjid Road, Hospital Road junction at exactly 6.27. (The man remembers the exact time because he was watching the clock in order to break fast that day.) He stated that there were approximately 20-25 persons carrying sticks and rods (polu). This crowd that was waiting was distinct from the procession that was going down the Aluthgama –Mathugama road in Dharga Town. He also stated that the crowd gathered here was led by a woman dressed in a red t-shirt and pants. She was a woman that he said he has often seen in the Ganegama area.

Another, who lost a small store, a pharmacy, two vehicles and his house in the carnage recounted his experience. He stated that he was compelled to watch as the mobs destroyed his van in full view of the Police and STF. He said that they beat the van with metal rods and sticks, broke the glass, then overturned it and threw in a torch to make it burn. He said he did not recognize the face of the man who set fire to his vehicle but watched as a policeman dragged the man away – after he committed the act—and made him leave the area. He also said that he had been specifically targeted. Mobs had jumped into his house and burnt another van that was in his garage. This was not visible to the outside. He said they had information from local people about Muslim people's assets. The man also said that the Muslims of the area had the strength to protect themselves. But they had confidence in the STF and believed what they had been told. As a consequence all the Muslims from the village had been trapped in the mosque and he was isolated. No Muslims were allowed to move during the curfew he stated "but while we were constrained we saw before our eyes other people moving quite freely. There were motorbikes moving hither and thither with pillion riders right in front of our eyes while we were not even allowed to cross the road."

He stated that it was quite clear that this was a deliberate attack on the Muslims' economy. He stated that he had worked hard to make the way clear to do business successfully and live a decent life. But this incident has put huge obstacles on that path. "The government must take the responsibility to clear that path again for us. That is all that is to be said."

Military Road

The following is the account of an elderly middle class Muslim woman living by herself on Military road in Dharga Town:

I was praying in the house when I heard the windows being broken. My relations had told me that there might be trouble. I locked myself in my bedroom but they broke the door down and came in. There were about 500 thugs in my house that day. They broke everything. They even killed the birds that were in that nest. They shattered my father's picture.

I was saved because I talked to them. I don't know how I had the strength to talk to them but I was able to talk to them. They did not touch me. I am so thankful. When some of them tried to attack me, the others said, no don't hit her, she's innocent. So there must have been something soft in their hearts. I don't know how I walked out of the house on my own. They handed me over to the STF who were about 100 feet away at the top of Military Road and said take her safely, she is innocent. The STF officers asked me where I wanted to go. Miraculously I remembered a number of my friend. And they said they would send me there. And I said, I cannot go alone, I have never gone anywhere alone. Then one of the officers (the OIC) said he would personally take me to my friend's house. They treated me very well. They must have felt sorry for me.

If my parents were alive these things would not have happened to me. They would have looked after me. I am innocent. I don't know why this happened to me.

In Military Road we also spoke with a father and a son in the transportation business who suffered severe economic losses. They had tried to reason with the mobs to save their property and had also tried to fight them and defend themselves. The following are their narratives:

The father:

At about seven o'clock in the evening they broke the gate and entered the house. We tried to stop them as best as we could - we talked to them, I begged them not to set fire to the vehicles and the house but they scolded us in filth. We tried to fight them off but the crowd became too big and although we tried to get away - myself and my son, we both got hurt in the struggle. They ran all over the compound, and destroyed everything that they could find. They took fuel out of the two motorbikes and set fire to the lorries and vans in the compound. They stole all our valuables and destroyed everything else. All our documents - our deeds, birth certificates - everything was destroyed.

The son:

My father has lived here for 40 years in his own land. We have been doing business in this place for a long time. When they attacked this place, they destroyed 7 vehicles, 3 motorcycles and the entire house. We don't even have anything to wear; they robbed all our valuables cash, jewellery. They have taken all the things that they could take from the house. Their motive was to loot and steal everything possible from us and vanish, and killing us was not their main motive. This attack took place around 7 o'clock in the evening and about 50 to 60 people surrounded our house and carried out this attack. My father and I fought with them to stop them coming into the house. It took them almost 3 hours to get in. My family too had got stuck inside the house. That is why we fought with them and it took such a long time.

The army and the police did not come. Even the STF was not there. If even one guard or a policeman had been there we could have saved everything. Even our gate wouldn't have been struck by a stone. See, these bruises and wounds (Showing one on his head, arm, shoulder, and chest and on hips). Even my father was attacked with stones and iron bars. He is a heart patient and had a bypass surgery recently. He is just taking Panadol and some painkillers without any prescription. Now, we can't even afford this. We have lost our identity cards as well.

Some of them were from the surrounding area, I think. Others were strangers; I have not seen them before. We were close with not only Muslims but also with Sinhalese. We never realized that they were smoldering with hate. Whether Muslims or Sinhalese we all are human, but is this the way to treat people in Sri Lanka? When my family got stuck inside they didn't give us a chance to get them out of the house.

Another man from military road:

They started smashing houses around 7 o'clock. STF was here at this junction. I went and told them that a mob was smashing the houses and advancing, therefore please come to the spot. They told me to go back, that they will look after things. When they didn't come I went a second time, at that time too they didn't pay much attention but scolded me in filth. "You, mother f****r get lost from here." They said. The third time when I went and told him, he used the same filth and warned that every time I change my shirt and pose as different persons. In the meantime the mob had smashed the house and set fire to it.

Some of our boys gathered together and chased the attackers. Thereafter they ran away and after that the STF came from the same side that the attackers had run to. The STF opened fire, but that was towards us and not on the attackers.

Testimony of a woman who was trapped inside her house with her children:

Suddenly at around 6.30 in the evening a crowd started throwing stones at our gate and beat it with iron bars. At the time I was alone at home with my two children. One of them is a young girl and the other one is a small boy. We got scared and ran into the bathroom and closed the door. After that they went and came back again. They came back and scolded us in filth. They used utter filth, and shouted at us to come out. They shouted that they have come with weapons and want to kill us; and that they will somehow kill us. After sometime we again heard lots of people shouting and heard sound of shattering window panes and breaking of doors and cupboards, furniture. After that we didn't understand what was happening but suddenly we heard the noise of fire and flames. They were shouting that they have set fire and for us not to hide and to come forward and fight. We heard the sound of flames bursting and spreading. We didn't have any way to escape, and we couldn't come out because of the children; I was crying and praying to Allah. I was begging him - is this the way you want us to end, is this mercy? My son at that time asked, are we going to get killed? I didn't have an answer for him, I told him to pray to Allah, pray to Allah. Only he can save us, otherwise we will die. Then my daughter said, we will say the last prayer before we die.

(They later managed to come out of the house)

Pathirajagoda

We visited the affected Sinhala families located in Pathirajagoda. There were 6 Sinhala families – all related to one another who are a family of masons. Their houses were attacked around 6.45 in the evening on the 15th. One of them stated that a crowd of about 250 people arrived at their location and split into four teams and started attacking the houses. One woman stated that twelve of them shut themselves up in one room and they did not see what the mob did. One of the men said that the crowd had split into four groups and attacked the four houses. The people of the house stated that while some of the persons were from outside they said some of the attackers were familiar to them, that they were Muslims from the neighborhood. The others they recognized from their voices, they said. Some of them had hid in a room; others had run away. When they came back, the houses were burnt. They said they found burning tyres in the houses.

They held the Muslims in their immediate neighbourhood responsible for the attacks on them. They felt that it was a personal quarrel that provoked the attacks. There were rivalries with their neighbours with regards to work and there were also court cases over land. They also stated that the crowd seems to have come two or three times. They had put out the fires of the first crowd and then left for the temple. But when they returned the houses had been burnt down. They said that money and jewelry was stolen and books and belongings of one of their children, a second year university student, had been destroyed.

While there had been such communal incidents before and people had walked past their houses, no one had attacked them before. They said that they had never expected that such a thing would happen to them.

They said that as masons they received a lot of work requests from the Muslim people of Dharga Town, that they built their houses. They had more business than their Muslim rivals about whom they spoke disparagingly. They were not educated they said. They said they had a certain respect and a certain standing in the town from the Muslims. Their closeness was such that they used to enter through the front door and exit out of the back door. But, they said it was all gone now. And they were worried now they had heard that the Muslims would no longer be giving them work. They were receiving assistance from temples, three times from the state, and from Sarvodaya. While one of them stated that there had been no problems before this, and the BBS meeting was the cause for the troubles, another had a different perspective. The other person stated that the events occurred because a monk was attacked on a Poya day. He said, "how can anyone not respond to that?" Also the Aluthgama police had not done anything to either write down the complaint or to arrest the attackers. They said that the monk was humiliated by keeping him waiting. There was a perception that the Aluthgama police supported the Muslims. They felt that they were targeted because the mobs thought they had attended the procession. They said they told their attackers, "we did not go in the procession, don't hurt us."

The origin of the attack and the pattern of attacks were similar to that which we had heard from Muslim groups as well. The timing of the attack at 6.45 or thereabouts, the fact that local people were mobilized to show which houses belonged to whom, the fact that a group that seemed like 200 had arrived, that they had used tyres in the rooms to burn the houses is similar to narratives from other places, is ominous and curious. The Sinhala people had no doubt that the mob was Muslim.

However, other than the cluster of 6 houses no other houses in the vicinity were attacked. And given the timing of the attack, it is unlikely that the attack was in retaliation to similar attacks on Muslim houses. It took place simultaneously with the other attacks in all

places other than Welipitiya. In this instance too the power was out and the attacks took place in total darkness powered only by the lights that the attackers carried. The blinding lights were such that their faces could not be seen, we were told. The victims said that they identified their neighbours by their voices.

Adhikarigoda

The following are excerpts from interviews conducted in Adhikarigoda with affected Muslim families in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. The main findings from the area included the STF's refusal to intervene, the consistent looting of goods from houses, the fact that they either used incendiary material from the house itself – like sofa cushions, mattresses, clothing, books etc. or used tyres. In one instance, a woman told us that the tyres from their Sinhala neighbour's house were used to set fire to their house. She was not sure if they had given it to the mobs, or if they had stolen it.

The following are the eyewitness accounts from Adhikarigoda:

We informed the police, when we informed the STF at Dharga Town (Special Task Force) they held the weapons pointing to our chest and said "*Thambila, umbalapalayang, umbalapalayang, apibalagannang*" (addressing us in a degrading manner and telling us that they will look after things and for us to get lost). We told them, that we didn't want to come out to fight, but our houses are on fire and we want to go and save them. In response, they said they are not bothered about those things, they won't get destroyed, but if you come outside, we will shoot you. So, we called the local people to ask for protection. We called the police emergency number 119, they said "we will come, we will come". But, never came.

They cleared the cupboards and took away all the valuables. In our house, in the centre, there is a wall dividing it into two units. So, after robbing from this side they climbed over the wall and jumped into the next unit. There were no males at that time, only ladies were present. There were approximately 15 women, four young girls and three were with babies and a few old women. My aunt has 3 young children, and the youngest was only a few months old. They called those young children, and said: "*thambilah, umbalata ginithiyanawa. Umbalata ownanang meya villaumbalage badu arang yanta*" (called them in a degrading manner and said we are going to set fire to your house, if you want, you come here and get your things). They had fun saying those things and taunting them. Luckily Allah saved them, if they were allowed to go forward; the mob would have raped all those women.

Interview with young woman:

There were around 50 to 60 people, they were young people. They were wearing boots and had covered their faces with helmets.⁶⁷

Yes, we told the Police about all this, but they also had a hand in this act. They gave an opportunity for those attackers to attack us, even a monk was among them.

Owner of a large house that was burnt in that area:

Damage to the house alone is estimated at 110 million. My son-in-law undertakes jewelry work. I am not lying, I had only 30,000/- in cash. My son makes bags for garment factories. He had a stock worth 7 lakhs at that time. They have looted that. Then he had kept 4 or 5 different kinds of Juki sewing machines each cost around 50,000/-, 80,000/- and 110,000/-. They removed the good machines and parts from them and set fire to the rest. My son who had arrived from abroad had brought goods worth 20 lakhs for his brother's wedding. Nothing was spared. They robbed everything. So, if we are calculating the cost of all these, for instance, for the garment materials alone there was a loss of 15 million, my son-in-law's jewelry was worth around 40 million.

There was a table, spread with books and records, detailing all the accounts of my son and son-in-law and daughter. These books were set on fire; all the details were in that book. They were in tears over the loss of these ledgers as they are now unable to assess their dues. They have set fire to everything, even the TV, computer. This is a newly built house gifted to my daughter. There were 7 almirahs, only a broken steel cabinet was left behind. They have taken the hall settees too. They have robbed my daughter's jewellery and cash.

I will show you the bathroom, they have removed the bathroom fittings as well. (Showing the bathroom and backyard of the house, where the 6 or 7 sewing machines were destroyed.)

They were in full uniform. They were wearing boots and helmets. They were well armed; we were not able to do anything to them.

⁶⁷ We heard later that a shop selling helmets in Adhikarigoda had been broken in to and looted.

A woman from Adhikarigoda

It was 6.30 in the evening on 15th June, Sunday and we were having our evening prayers. We heard people shouting "thambilla, thambilla". Then my brother came and told us that there was a Sinhala mob coming to attack us. When we heard them shouting, we stopped the prayers halfway and ran towards the mosque. We didn't take any of the things or cash, we just ran away. We went to the house up on the hill there. By around 6.45 or 7 o' clock in the evening we heard houses being ransacked and people being attacked.

They came inside the house and took all the furniture that was there in the front room, like the settees and chairs, in a vehicle. They come inside the rooms, opened the almirah and took cash of 1½ lakhs and 10 gold sovereigns. The rest of the things they set on fire. (She is showing the remaining things in an almirah) There was a LCD TV, sewing machine, and a large study table. They put everything together and set fire to them.

After that, the riots which started at 6.30, between the Sinhalese and Muslims went on till 11 o'clock at night. The Muslims were totally unprepared for this attack. The attackers were wearing helmets and boots. They had arrack bottles filled with petrol. They lit these bottles and threw it onto the roofs of the houses. We women were alone as our men had gone somewhere and were unable to return.

We called the police and STF and informed them. But, till 11 O' clock none of them come. The STF came around 6.30 in the evening, and then our youths told them about the rising tension in the area. But they were told - 'all of you fight and die, we are not bothered' and then they left. After that, for about 5 hours they did not answer any of our calls nor did they come. After everything was over, our brother appeared from somewhere. By that time they had burnt all the houses.

Adhikarigoda Sinhala family whose house was burnt

Interview with mother and son outside their house that was being repaired by the army:

The son recounts, seeing some Sinhalese boys on motorcycles going down the road shouting anti-Muslim slogans. Then a little while later the Sinhalese boys return, agitated and shouting that the Muslims were attacking them. He says he saw a group of Muslims coming up the road and they were pelting scent bottles and soft drink bottles at the Sinhalese group. As a result, the Sinhalese group retreated. He said that he earlier heard

that there was tension and the Muslims were trying to leave their homes in a hurry. He had then gone to the Muslim house where they usually park their van and had taken it to their aunt's house for safety. "We had heard that a Buddhist priest had been killed by the Muslims. Naturally, the Sinhalese boys got very angry." He said. There were also women in the mob; wearing shorts and carrying poles and using foul language that we had not even heard of, he said. The boy said that there were "professional people" also in the crowd. The Sinhalese mob got agitated because they were being pelted with bottles. They were injured. His aunt who is attached to the Pradeshiya Sabha kept calling the police but the lines were busy. He said a gang of Muslims took control of the junction close by and set fire to his house. It was the only Sinhala house in that area. According to him, the Muslims now say the Sinhalese made a mistake and burnt a house belonging to a Sinhalese as well. But that cannot be because the *Seevali* Buddha statue was broken and smashed and they had used the Vesak lanterns as fuel to burn the house. When the Sinhalese heard that their house was burnt, they became more violent, he said. About 7000 people arrived. There were lorries which contained bottles. The Muslims used 'scent' bottles; but the Sinhalese had larger bottles – mostly alcohol bottles. He also said that the power was cut off. The lights were turned off and the attacks were carried out using large flashlights. Because of the lights they could not really see and identify anyone. These lights were directed at them and at the houses. They (the boy) knew it was the Muslims from their neighbourhood who were attacking them because they recognised their voices. Also they used the name of the boy's cousin – they used filthy language in referring to her. So it had to be people who knew them. When the mobs heard that there was a Sinhala house burnt, they immediately came and tried to put the fire out.

The Muslim people in the area avoid us now. They look very unfriendly. It is very unpleasant. Even children with whom we played ignore us now. We have never had problems in this area. We lived together very peacefully. You have to understand each other's differences and live together. When there was a funeral in the front house, we provided lights for them – not other Muslim families because there are problems between Muslims also and they got on better with us than with each other. The people in this area are not bad; but the people on the hill (*kandauda*), are different. They are jihad. They are the ones who attacked our house. They transport cattle in small vans. They have been reported several times but the police don't do anything. If the police implement the law none of this would have happened. The Muslims don't wear helmets – yet, the police don't do anything.

I don't like living in this area anymore. I want to move somewhere else. My brother is a very quiet and gentle person. But his drum was burnt and since then he has been very upset and says he doesn't want to live here anymore and wants to move elsewhere. How can we live here looking at these people's faces? My father can

understand Tamil – these people didn't know that he could understand what they were saying. My father was fortunately not here – he was stuck somewhere else and couldn't come. If he had been here and he started talking in Tamil, they would have thought he was a Muslim and there could have been more problems!

The mother said that it was the result of friction between the "*modakattiya*" from both communities that led to an attack between the two groups and that it was these groups beating each other up that resulted in the third- their house being burnt. She also said that it was people who got hurt that were retaliating. She also said that these things happen, and that they should all move forward now. The mother was confident that relations with their neighbours would be restored soon. They had lived very closely together and felt in time all would be well.

New Road (Fatha Hajiar Mawatha)

This was an area with large and spacious houses – clearly a wealthy neighbourhood. We visited one house that was being speedily rebuilt by workers clad in some sort of uniform. We later learnt that they were from the Navy. We could see the shell of one completely burnt out house next door and some damaged houses in the vicinity. The owner of the house is a merchant who frequently travels to the United States for work since he has a work permit. His large spacious, newly built house – completed in May 2013 was attacked on the night of the 15th. He said even though petrol bombs and glass were being thrown he managed to drive his car out of the gates and thereby saved it from being attacked. Then he appealed to the STF who were standing outside and told them that their houses were being broken and to please help. The STF was not responsive. Then he had called his cousin who was in the security trade and had asked him to contact an influential person in the STF whom he knew. The man from Dharga Town had called the STF high- up and when the person responded he had told the story. He had put the STF person on the speaker and given the phone to the STF cadre in Dharga Town. They had reacted immediately saying 'yes sir, yes sir, will do so immediately sir' and given it to their commanding officer who then got some of the cadre to respond. The STF cadres had fired shots in the air to disperse the crowd and STF personnel had run into the house and doused the flames and halted the burning. Later the local commander had asked the Muslim man how he knew such a high- up in the STF. He said they had known each other. He used to visit their house when they lived abroad. We were told that the house – windows, curtains etc were scattered with glass, the furniture was covered in soot and one sofa set was completely burnt. When we entered the house, reconstruction work was nearly completed and we saw close to twenty navy personnel completing work on the house. The Muslim house owner requested that we not mention the name of the STF officer since he was grateful for the help that he had received and that he did not want that officer to get into trouble for it. This indicated the

orchestrated nature of the attack. Undoubtedly, if they had attempted to, the forces, the STF in particular, could have easily halted the attack. But it was clear that they had instructions not to do so.

Mihiripenna Road

The following is a summary of a narrative from a Sinhala property owner from Mihiripenna Road in Dharga Town:

I owned a property of 66 perches on Mihiripenna road, Dharga Town. It was being refurbished to be turned into a holiday bungalow. We had purchased the land and fully completed the house. At the time of the riots, the garden was being paved. We usually go on Sundays to check on the work. But my husband's relatives called and told us not to come because there was tension in the area. We were also told by the person who was working in our house not to step out of the premises.

Around 10 pm on the 15th, a Muslim mob had come and attacked our house with petrol bombs. They had burned down the entire house, our jeep, our boat. Everything was completely burnt. The worker almost lost his life. The property is adjacent to the river and he hid in a canal near the river and managed to escape. There had been around 40 people and they were speaking in Tamil. We learnt about the incident from the previous owner (he is Muslim). He himself did not say the people who attacked were Muslims but the person who was working at our house said so.

Our gates were new and each one cost around 5 lakhs. Those were completely axed. They had burnt down our jeep and our boat that we had recently bought. We lost about 20 million worth of assets. The Navy is rebuilding everything and we are grateful for that. It is our hard earned money. Nobody has the right to destroy anybody else's property. We have lodged a complaint at the Aluthgama police and with the CID.

Another house owned by a foreigner that is run by a Sinhala person was also attacked. But there were other Muslim houses that were not attacked. So it was definitely done by the Muslims. Other people could have easily come and averted this. But they didn't. I think this has a lot to do with jealousy. Even if you look at the Muslim houses that were attacked, the people who owned these houses were doing well.

We have been very good to Muslims. I have helped them with legal work. I have represented a Muslim lawyer and prevented his license to practice law being cancelled, even when none of the Muslim lawyers were willing to help him. My husband had lent a

hand at their funerals but now we don't even feel like smiling at them because they could have helped us, but they did not.

Main findings from the event narratives and observations in the area

1. The attacks were carried out simultaneously by groups of persons already positioned in certain areas. For instance the Adhikarigoda, Seenawatte Pathirajagoda and Military Road attacks took place at around 6.45 and immediately after the declaration of curfew.
2. In all four areas mentioned above there was a presence of the STF but they refused to engage with affected persons when the violence was being perpetrated and after the attacks were completed.

In most of the areas the people reported that the mobs consisted partly of people from the area. This was confirmed by the Muslims who were attacked and also by the residents of the Sinhala homes that were targeted.

3. In all areas, and particularly in Seenawatte, the people repeatedly stressed that the STF had prevented the Muslims from moving freely while the curfew was in place, but that Sinhala people were moving about without any intervention by the forces.
4. According to victim statements, no help was forthcoming from the forces in taking victims for medical treatment, dousing the fires or in providing any form of protection. (see below for the two exceptions)
5. One exception was the incident of New Road where a senior STF official's intervention was sought and the attackers dispersed through the STF firing shots in the air. The other was the case of an elderly lady on Military Road who was "handed over" to the STF by the attackers and was later assisted by the STF to find a place of safety. Meanwhile the mobs continued the attack and looting of her house and other houses in her neighbourhood.
6. There were similarities in the manner in which the attacks were carried out, the weapons used and the activities of the attackers. They moved in crowds, carried petrol filled glass bottles – generally arrack bottles. They carried sticks and iron rods. Eye-witnesses also said that they gathered incendiary material such as cushions, clothing, mattresses, or in some cases tyres, and lit fires in the middle of rooms.

Witnesses pointed out that the attackers were uninterested in hurting people; they in fact took measures to avoid such attacks. In many instances they told people – ‘we are going to burn your house, leave’. Sometimes they set fire to goods in houses while people were hiding in other rooms. The perpetrators were bent on committing theft and arson and not so much on inflicting injuries on people themselves, except in instances of resistance. The one exception was the Tamil security guard at the Lanka farm in Welipanne. He was hacked to death by the attackers. While it is a great relief that there wasn't greater violence perpetrated on individuals it remains a curious phenomenon that marks this event of ethnic violence as different from others that this country has experienced.

7. Looting was a significant element in the attacks. Jewelry and money were painstakingly looked for and extracted. New appliances, machine parts, furniture that was considered to be of value and bathroom fittings were systematically looted and loaded into vehicles that were brought for that purpose. Almirahs and cupboards were broken into and cash and jewelry stolen in most of the houses. Furniture and stocks from stores were systematically emptied and carried off.
8. Assets such as homes, shops, vehicles, stocks of goods, machinery used for business purposes were targeted and either looted or destroyed. It was very clear to the targeted Muslims that this was an attack on their economic well being.
9. The blinding lights that were used due to power being cut off were another similarity reported from Pathirajagoda, Adhikarigoda, and Welipitiya.
10. The age group of the mobs in most accounts was young – between 15-35 years. Women too were involved in the attacks usually urging the men to attack but sometimes directly participating in the violence. There were reports that the crowds included monks and that many (including at least one monk) were intoxicated.
11. There was an unmistakable class element to the violence. All houses that were targeted were owned by wealthy, upper-middle and middle class families with assets such as household furniture, computers, TVs, cars and jewelry. The mobs seem to have been composed of young men and in some instances, women, of poorer classes. The manner in which most of the middle class interlocutors referred to the mobs was telling. They all looked “uneducated,” “their faces were rough,” “the women used filth that we had never even heard of.” These are all indicators of class that are mainly used by the middle class to refer to the less affluent. One mentioned that the

Ven.Gnanasara was in fact calling such a group of "*rasthiyadukarayo*" when he said in his speech "*thanrasthiyadugahuwaathi*."⁶⁸

12. Following from 11 above, it seems that class relations were temporarily trumped by ethnic relations in the affected areas. Due to the violence, communities that were close to one another no longer spoke with each other. Many Muslims were distressed that their neighbours did not warn them, and felt that they may have colluded with the mobs. They also did not attempt to help them out when they were in difficulty. The affected Sinhalese in turn are devastated by the losses to property and cannot entertain the thought that no one tried to stop the attacks, and that in one instance, Muslim people that they knew were participating in the violence against them. The Sinhalese who were bystanders are finding it difficult to formulate a narrative of the incidents that absolve or at least explain the actions of members of their ethnic group but still critiques what happened.
13. The breakdown in relations is regrettable. We saw very few instances of good relations asserting themselves. Of all the testimonies that we collected there were only two that spoke of Sinhalese opposing the attackers or assisting Muslims to douse the fires. We attribute this to fear, to the rumours that were circulating and to the relentless hate campaign that has been maintained for the past two years by the Bodu Bala Sena and associated groups.
14. The case of the attack on the Welipitiya Mosque is most distressing since there were deaths and gunshot injuries to those who attempted to defend themselves. We note with interest the mention of the presence of the military officer both before and after the incidents of violence. They are curious and worth further scrutiny."

Chapter V: In the Aftermath

The State Response to Aluthgama

"The Muslim civil society's chosen strategy for engaging with the authorities on many of their concerns with regards to issues in the BBS era was through dialogue with those that they assume to be holding power. For instance, the Muslim Council, the ACJU and other organisations including the YMMA have consistently engaged with the Defence Secretary on issues of concern. As a result many said that they had a working relationship with

⁶⁸ Rasthiyadu Karayo is a colloquial Sinhala term that roughly translates as those that "hang about" with nothing specific to do. The Ven. Gnanasara's said "enough with the hanging about" using the same word "*rasthiyadu*."

officials in military intelligence and would call them when they had issues that needed to be resolved. When news of the violence broke out on the evening of 15th June too they followed the pattern and called for a meeting with officials.

The Meeting in Dehiwela Mosque on 15th June 2014

When they heard of the violence breaking out in Aluthgama, members of Muslim civil society gathered together at the Dehiwela Mosque and requested a meeting with representatives of military intelligence. At this meeting, what was taking place in Aluthgama and what measures were adopted by the authorities were discussed. Suresh Sally and Brigadier Hendawitharana attended the meeting and explained the situation to the Muslims. They said that the BBS led meeting in Aluthgama was concluded and the crowd dispersed without incident. However, due to Muslims throwing stones at the procession the violence had erupted. They had also stated that there were several rumours about Muslim aggression like Muslims attacking a van full of monks etc. The military intelligence had to face outbursts from agitated members of Muslim civil society who felt that they were attempting to place the blame for the violence solely on the Muslims. At the conclusion of the meeting, the Muslims were unclear about the future course of action, but continued to try and contact the people in Military intelligence for information about steps being taken. They had told the Muslims that action would be taken but later they were informed that the DIG himself had told Muslim representatives close to him that the mobs were too large and too violent, and even though they tried to contain them, they were unable to do so.

Meeting in the Kalutara Kachcheri on 16th June

In the aftermath of the first day's violence, there was a meeting called by the Prime Minister at the Kalutara Kachcheri. We were able to speak with a Muslim representative who attended the meeting. He stated that those present included the Prime Minister, and Ministers Basil Rajapakse, S.B.Dissanayake, Dulles Alahapperuma, Kumara Welgama, Rohitha Abeygunewardena, Prasanna Ranatunge, A.H.M. Fowzie, Mohamed Aslam, and Mayor of Kalutara Jaufar Mahroof. In addition the IGP S.K.Illangakone and the DIG Anura Senenayake were present. While there was an invitation extended to both Muslim and Buddhist clergy in the area, the Ven. Gnanasara of the BBS had arrived with his own entourage. At the outset, it is interesting that state representatives considered it necessary to invite the Ven. Gnanasara to the meeting given that the meeting in Aluthgama and his speech at the meeting were regarded by many to have had a role to play in the violence. We believe that it speaks to the government's agenda of limiting the story of Aluthgama to the version propagated by the BBS. Our informant stated that at that meeting it was agreed that forces will be deployed from the East in order to control the situation, and additionally

there was an understanding between the Ven. Gnanasara and the IGP to release seven of the eleven people who were arrested in connection with the incident. In exchange, the Ven. Gnanasara had agreed to cancel the scheduled BBS meeting in Mawanella. We were also told that during the discussion several persons had attempted to state ideas that were contrary to BBS ideology. In one instance when Minister Kumara Welgama had made an intervention, the Ven. Gnanasara had shouted him down resulting in Kumara Welgama being asked to leave the room.⁶⁹

Official Statements on the Aluthgama Riots: The Sri Lankan Government representatives

The first response to Aluthgama from the executive was via a tweet from President Rajapaksa who urged people to remain calm. As will be documented in the next section, the media coverage of the attack in the aftermath was limited and the government consistently attempted to downplay the incident and to propagate a narrative regarding the incident that did not take account of all the contributing elements. At no point did the government acknowledge either the extent of the violence, the severe breakdown of relations in the affected areas, the seriousness of the fact that an event of this nature occurred in the period of transitioning from war to peace, or the manner in which southern Muslims' sensibilities were affected. In its attempts to downplay the seriousness of the incidents, the government lost the opportunity to engage in necessary reconciliation work among the communities. In doing so the government reinstituted the idea of Muslim marginality, Sinhala Buddhist superiority and the fact that the BBS could act with impunity.

For instance, the State Response to queries into the incident at the ongoing UNHRC meeting related the following sequence of event:

On 12th June, a Buddhist monk was assaulted by three Muslim youth, following a dispute. The three suspects were produced before the Magistrate and remanded, while the monk, who made a statement to the Police, was admitted to hospital.

On 15th June, the Buddhist monk was proceeding to the temple accompanied by some other monks and lay persons, when stones were thrown at the group as they were passing the Mosque in Dharga Town. This incident led to the violence, which

⁶⁹ JHU provincial council member Udaya Gamapila in an article in the Ceylon Today of 6th July 2014 refers to this meeting on the 16th and reiterates the narrative of a peaceful procession being pelted with stones while passing the mosque. It also includes the disputed story of the monk being assaulted as fact, and attributes the story to the IGP.

spread to Beruwala by 16th June. Police were compelled to use tear gas and impose curfew to bring the situation under control.⁷⁰

In the first paragraph above, the fact that the Muslim youth assaulting the monk is being disputed is not reflected.⁷¹ Further, the fact that the monk, although admitted to hospital had no visible injuries, that there was no JMO report on his injuries, is excluded. In the second paragraph, no mention is made of the fact that the monk was taken to the temple in the aftermath of a rally where hate speech with violent references to the destruction of both Muslim persons and property spewed for two hours, and that the monks and lay persons that accompanied him came after such a rally. Further, the incident that led to the violence is portrayed as stones being thrown at the group of monks and laypersons that passed by the mosque. No information is offered regarding the coordinated nature of attacks in other parts of the town, or the fact that most of the violence and destruction was perpetrated while police curfew was being enforced. In a later paragraph too the statement refers to "violence which was triggered by the assault of a Buddhist monk."

The state remained consistent in its attempt to locate the violence as originating from the Muslim community actions. In response to a statement by the leader of the opposition, the Prime Minister stated on 17th June 2014 that the violence erupted when the group taking the allegedly injured monk to his temple in Dharga Town was attacked. The group passed the Main mosque of Dharga Town at which point some parties started stoning them, he said. It was then that the violence erupted.⁷²

On 21st June 2014 in the context of continuing tensions throughout the country, the President called a special meeting of Muslim Parliamentarians in Badulla and released a two minute audio recorded statement.⁷³ The statement referring to Aluthgama stated that there may be a foreign conspiracy to undermine the post war progress made in Sri Lanka and that the country should be a place where there is respect for the ideas of "the other", that being able to have such respect was the hallmark of a civilized society. This salutary statement, the one that was closest to an acknowledgment of the enormity of what happened was followed up the very next day by an incensed assertion by the President that

⁷⁰<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/prompt-action-on-aluthgama-violence-taken-sri-lanka-tells-unhrc/>

⁷¹ Today, a Moulavi, a brother of the young men accused of hitting the monk has complained to the IGP of being kicked in the neck by a Buddhist monk at the Aluthgama police station on 12th June. In the complaint he denies categorically that they assaulted the monk

⁷² Sirasa News First prime time news at 7. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cTARXgaQKI>

⁷³ <http://colombogazette.com/2014/06/21/mr-orders-police-action-over-hatred/>

people were calling "*Maha Loku Hartal*" for "*podu Siddhin*."⁷⁴ Speaking at the opening of the fuel storage facility and a re-fuelling terminal at the Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport and the Magampura Harbour, the President spoke disparagingly about too much being made of Aluthgama.⁷⁵ He stated that those who did not call hartals when the LTTE were killing Muslims in Kattankudi, when Muslims were being chased out from the north with two hours notice –were now calling for a hartal. He further added that what happened in Aluthgama was not something that was significant enough to merit bringing in the army.⁷⁶

Such conflicting positions by those in authority were rife in the media and contributed to the maintenance of tension for at least two weeks after the event. Even in early July, the government remained consistent in its apportioning of blame for the event to the alleged assault of the monk in Pathirajagoda and continued to maintain that the violence took place after the group accompanying the monk back to the temple was pelted with stones near the Main mosque in Dharga Town. On 10th July 2014, Leader of the Opposition, Ranil Wickremasinghe in Questions by Private Notice inquired from the Prime Minister about the losses incurred in the Aluthgama and Beruwela incidents. The Prime Minister in response to the questions of the leader of the opposition again referred to the above context when speaking of the events.⁷⁷

The statement issued by the IGP in the immediate aftermath (on 16th June) also maintained the government line and went so far as to say that if not for the actions of the Police and STF, the outcome would have been worse. The IGP when asked about the fact that civil society groups wanted the meeting featuring the BBS banned, stated that the authorities had extensive discussions with the religious leadership of both the Buddhists and the Muslims in the area and both groups had stated quite clearly that there would be no violence and that the event would be purely religious in nature.⁷⁸ Therefore, the authorities did not expect that violence would occur. In response to the accusations that the

⁷⁴<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Sxl9lYNndk>, also see <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/maha-loku-hartals-are-organized-for-minor-incidents-mahinda-slams-muslim-hartals/> People in Dharga town and Beruwela made reference to this speech and were very distressed and critical of it by it.

⁷⁵ There had been a call for a country-wide hartal (or shut down) of Muslim shops and businesses in protest of the Aluthgama incidents. However this was only successful in some areas. The Muslim community as a whole did not want anything kindled while tensions remained high.

⁷⁶ Although the army was brought in late on the 16th to stop the violence, and today they are present in the areas and are engaged in rebuilding damaged property.

⁷⁷ Hansard. 10th July 2014, p. 353. The Hon. Abdul Haleem provided some necessary context by showing the manner in which the BBS was brought in to take advantage of the tension and propagate hate sentiment. There was a reference to the Ven. Gnanasara's term "Aba Saranai" used during the meeting, meaning that "they will be destroyed."

⁷⁸ Sirasa news first Sinhala language TV news program at 7 p.m - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPijsObJA3U>

Police and STF had not acted to prevent the violence, the IGP stated that if the Police and the Special Task Force had not fulfilled their duties and carried out their tasks in the necessary manner the situation in Aluthgama and adjacent areas would have been worse. He said that it is due to the commitment of the STF and the Police that the situation was contained.⁷⁹ This might possibly be the case – if the Police had not prevented the Muslims from engaging with the attackers, then more blood might have been shed. However, the fact that the Police feel that the manner in which they can control a riot and limit the loss of life is by permitting mobs to strategically target the homes and property of one group of persons remains extremely troubling.

The Defense Secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapakse gave a wide ranging interview to the Daily Mirror newspaper on 1st July 2014 that referred to the Aluthgama riots. In this interview he expressed his “sadness” regarding what had happened and denied any connection with BBS or any other similar group. He dismissed the evidence on the basis of which this claim was constantly being made—his presence at one BBS sponsored event.

Speaking of the Muslims, however, he had the following to say:

If you specifically speak about the Muslim community not only the Sinhalese Buddhists, but the Sinhalese Catholics also have certain issues with them. In Mannar there are no Sinhalese but there are issues between the Muslims and the Tamil Catholics. What about the Tamils in Batticaloa? They have issues. What about the Catholics in Wattala and Ja-ela who have brought these issues to me. This is why I believe that we have to talk to the Muslims. I am currently conducting a wide-ranging dialogue with them. Moderate Muslims have told me that they have issues with certain extreme elements of the Muslim community. They have told me about them. We are working with these moderates. I am not saying that there are Muslim terrorists in this country. The Indian intelligence agencies have told me that there is a possibility of Islamic Terrorism being based in Sri Lanka to act against India. However, we investigated these concerns and found that there is no merit in these concerns or claims. Our intelligence agencies are very active on these issues. But there are certain instances which go beyond the Security Forces and the Government. The religious leaders must work together on them. I have worked on this throughout. I have met the Muslim community and religious leaders many times; our intelligence agencies have worked with them to prevent this sort of issue.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ <http://colombogazette.com/2014/06/16/police-did-not-expect-clash-after-rally/>

⁸⁰ <http://www.dailymirror.lk/news/49090-if-proven-i-will-resign-gota.html>

In the above excerpt, the Defense Secretary seems to be saying that regardless of the lack of evidence regarding Islamic terrorism in the country, the Muslims are somehow a "problem." They are a problem not just for the Sinhalese but for the Sinhalese Catholics, the Tamil Catholics, the Tamils of the Eastern Province and the Catholics of Wattala-Jaela area. Additionally he is also saying that there is a difference between "traditional Muslims" and "extremist Muslims." While it is perhaps important that the Defense Secretary urges engagement with Muslims, it is troubling that he also propagates an ideology that sees specific issues that may arise between individuals or communities in different parts of the island as somehow reducible to a common "Muslim problem." What is evident in such a reduction is the manner in which all Muslim communities despite their class, regional, sectarian, linguistic and reformist diversity are considered to be the same in Sri Lanka. This is true not just of the defense secretary but of other actors as well. In identifying such issues as common "problems with Muslims" the Defense Secretary is echoing BBS rhetoric and revealing fundamental similarities between the BBS ideology regarding Muslims, and his own.

The Opposition United National Party response to the Aluthgama incidents.

The UNP's consistent raising of the issue in the press and in Parliament has ensured that the incident becomes a matter of public record.⁸¹ Significant interventions by the opposition include the meeting called by the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament on 20th June, Wickremasinghe's visit to Aluthgama and his speech there on 30th June, and the raising of the issue in Parliament on 19th June and 10th July.

Further, UNP Parliamentarian Palitha Thewarapperuma was an eyewitness to the violence in Dharga Town. On the evening of the 16th the parliamentarian volunteered to travel from Valipenna to Dharga Town to bring in a family for the funeral of a man who died of a heart attack due to shock in the Welipenne area.

⁸¹ A motion suggested by provincial councillor A. Azmin was passed in the Northern Provincial Council condemning the occurrences in Aluthgama. Commenting on the motion, Anandi Sasheedaran stated that they protested the events of Aluthgama. She pointed out, however, that when Vella Mullivaikkal was happening Muslims did not state the same on behalf of the Tamils. Further she stated that when Prabakaran was killed Muslims lit crackers. Tamils however today, will stand with the Muslims. This was an interesting account of Muslims taking the state's side during the conflict and its aftermath. Although the narrative does not include the complexity of relations between Muslims and Tamil nationalism, it is an interesting reminder of differences that continue to exist between minorities as well as the need for and opportunities for greater trust building. In the same vein it is interesting to note that the attempt by Muslim MPs of the Eastern Provincial Council to raise the Aluthgama issue in the Eastern Provincial Council was not successful. (Divaina 27th June 2014. p.1)

When traveling back with a van full of children and women family members of the deceased, they were attacked by the mob that was still roaming around in Dharga Town. Thewarapperuma stated that the mob was armed with swords and large wooden clubs and were freely wandering around in the presence of hundreds of police personnel. He said that his vehicle was attacked with large pieces of concrete. One such piece hit a woman on the side of the head. Another hit a nine month old child. He said that he drove on and away from the mobs while looking through a tiny hole in the shattered windscreen of the vehicle. Thewarapperuma made these comments in Parliament on 18th June 2014.⁸² In an interview with the web edition of the Daily Mirror Newspaper, Thewarapperuma later accused the government of being responsible for the violence. He stated that one of the mosques that were damaged actually had a claymore mine exploded inside it. He said that as a former member of the armed forces he knew about such explosive devices and that the harm caused inside the mosque was not by a petrol bomb.⁸³ Thewarapperuma also made a public statement that unless the IGP resigns he would resign. And when the IGP did not resign Thewarapperuma gave in his resignation to the party leader Ranil Wickremasinghe.⁸⁴

The JMO report on the deaths of the two men from Welipitiya stated that the death of one of the victims was due to cut injuries. In response the UNP MP Mangala Samaraweera held a press conference at which he accused the defense ministry of being responsible for the violence and for the cover up in the aftermath. He named three members of the military intelligence services whom he claimed were involved. He was then threatened with legal action under the Official Secrets Act.⁸⁵

On 29th June, Ranil Wickremasinghe together with a group of UNP parliamentarians visited Aluthgama and Dharga Town. At a meeting at the Madrasathul Rahuman mosque in Adhikarigoda the opposition leader met with a large group representing both the Muslim and Sinhala communities of the area and made several key points. 1. That this area was one in which all the religious and ethnic communities of Sri Lanka had long lived among one another, and that when disputes arose local mechanisms and local interventions by way of the religious and community leadership was generally utilized to minimize the tensions. However, in this instance, outsiders were permitted to come in and instigate violence. 2. That the filth (*kunuharapa katha*) that was spewed by the BBS in Aluthgama on the 15th is now being shown with subtitles all over the world. This portrays the Sinhalese in an extremely negative light. 3. The damage to the economy due to the destruction of Muslim

⁸²http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=105387 (Thewarapperuma complains that Police STF watched as thugs attacked him, some Muslims. Web edition of Island 19th June 2014)

⁸³<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/stf-police-watched-the-savages-run-riot-claymore-bomb-was-used-on-mosque/>

⁸⁴ Who of course, refused to accept it.

⁸⁵ Island 28th June 2014. Arrest those who assist BBS in committing crimes against Muslims.

shops and businesses is affecting the Sinhala communities as well. It may in fact affect the tourism industry in the area as well. He stated it was time for all the people to come together and resolve their difference and show the world that the Sinhalese Buddhist were not a backward and primitive people (*mlechcha*).

In a manner that avoided any reference to who was most affected and calling the government clearly to account, the opposition leader called attention to the fact that while it was Muslim shops that were targeted today, it may very well be Sinhala shops that will be targeted tomorrow. He also expressed his condolences to those of all communities that suffered losses and stated that there was no room for extremism of any sort in this country.⁸⁶

In a special meeting on coexistence in Parliament on 26th June 2014, the UNP formulated its own national multi religious committee to safeguard ethnic harmony and avoid riots of the nature experienced in 1983. The Leader of the Opposition, admitting that the UNP failed to prevent the riots of 1983, stated that this initiative will have a common and independent approach and will not seek the support the opinion of the government. The newspapers reported that the committee would have the following functions:

The proposed committee will mainly focus at pressurizing the Government to "set the record straight and to develop multi religious harmony from the lessons learnt from the recent clashes in Aluthgama and Beruwala, ensure Constitutional rights of all religious faiths in the country, ensure the establishing of rule of law while maintaining justice and equity at all times, and to gather opinion from all religious leaders to help plotting the future."⁸⁷

The newspaper report further stated that:

Opposition Leader who accepted the UNP Government's failure to prevent the July 1983 riots said: "Bodu Bala Sena receives the Government's support. The Government shouldn't have allowed this to take place. If this case leads to another situation similar to what we experienced in Black July, none of us will be able to imagine the damage it could cause."

⁸⁶ The above statement is a paraphrasing of an account that appeared in the Lankadeepa of 30th June 2014, pp.1 & 10.

⁸⁷ UNP Raps Government. Daily FT. 27th June 2014. P.1, Also see Divaina 27th June.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) on Aluthgama.

The JVP leadership was very active in their response to the violence in Aluthgama. They were among the first to visit the areas and commiserate with the people. Additionally, they referred to the events several times in Parliament

They have publicly accused the government of being behind the violence.⁸⁸ During a debate on the deterioration of Law and Order in the Country, on 10th July 2014 JVP leader Anura Kumara Disسانayake directly connected the violence in Aluthgama to the deterioration of law and order in the country. He also corrected the figures regarding damages that were proposed by the Prime Minister in response to a question by the Leader of the Opposition and placed on record the numbers of properties damaged. He stated that three mosques were damaged, that the glass was broken in a place where a Buddha statue was placed and called the event a black mark in the history of the country. He also drew attention to the fact that the promise of Rs.200 million was insufficient for the rebuilding of damaged properties. Speaking of the case of the clothing shop Mallika's in Aluthgama he stated that the government was yet to pay the compensation promised to this shop owner after a similar event in 2006. Therefore he seriously questioned the government's sincerity with regards to paying 200 million towards reconstruction in this instance.

Tamil National Alliance

On 17th June 2014, R. Sampanthan, Leader of the Tamil National Alliance, called attention to the events of Aluthgama in Parliament. He emphasized that the Ven. Galagoda the Gnanasara's speech incited hate and violence, and that the police were inactive at the time of the violence. He questioned as to why the procession was not stopped and stated that the government had been very active in quelling protestors calling for wage hikes and students protesting various issues. He expressed his surprise at why such a procession was not stopped in a similar manner at a time when tensions were high.⁸⁹

"The 'Real Story' of Aluthgama"

The opposition political parties were committed to an analysis of the events that implicated the government, and while the state institutions and functionaries were committed to their story of the attack on the monk and the stone throwing at the procession, the Jathika Hela Urumaya used the incident to push an intense anti-Muslim campaign further. The JHU campaign contributed to maintaining the ethno-religious tensions in the aftermath of

⁸⁸ <http://www.srilankanews.lk/index.php/news/general-news/3637-those-who-sparked-aluthgama-clashes-backed-by-government-jvp>

⁸⁹ Island, 20th June 2014, p. 3.

Aluthgama and interventions by its member Champika Ranawaka attempted to retell the story in terms of Muslim culpability and victimization of the Sinhalese.

JHU parliamentarian Patali Champika Ranawaka appeared on TV in the immediate aftermath of the Aluthgama riots and appealed for calm. However, in calling for calm the parliamentarian also emphasized the state version of events by calling attention to both the alleged incident of assaulting the monk and throwing stones at the procession. He went further however, and criticized those calling the altercation between the monk and the Muslims a small incident involving a few individuals. He insisted that it was a great affront to the entire Buddhist establishment that such an incident took place on a Poson Poya day and that Muslims should have asked for forgiveness from the Sinhala Buddhist population for what the "extremists" had carried out. He stated that although the event is being portrayed as one where the Sinhalese attacked the Muslims, the event was in fact set in motion by the presence of Muslim "Jihadists". He also called the Tauheed Jamaat an "extremist" organization and stated that they and other "extremist" groups need to be first addressed before calling attention to the BBS and other Sinhala Buddhist groups.⁹⁰

A second press conference was called on the 21st of June. At this press conference there was a 14 minute video of the affected Sinhala families in Pathirajagoda. The video edited, with written captions and a musical soundtrack provides illustrations of the burnt houses and in the final section, a view of the damaged building holding a Buddha statue in Welipanna. The clip depicts the damaged glass windows and the exterior walls of the building. A man interviewed states that the Police were around and had said—presumably to the mob that were attacking— that "it is ok to hit (damage the building) but don't burn it." Framed as a telling of the "Sinhala" side of the story, Ranawake's intervention exacerbated ethnic sentiment regarding the event. The aftermath of June 15th was a time when both communities in the area were victimized by the violence in various ways; it was a time when the entire incident could have been understood as something that the local people could do little to avoid. Committing to seeing the events as a Sinhala-Muslim clash (and one that was brought upon themselves/initiated by Muslim actors) and framing it as the "real story" of Aluthgama was unfortunate.⁹¹

In his statement that accompanied the video, Ranawake referred to all Muslims as Jihadists. He also claimed that the police permitted three thousand persons to gather at the mosque in Dharga Town and permitted persons from Colombo to arrive and spread anti

⁹⁰ <http://www.gossiplankahotnews.com/2014/06/patali-champika-ranawaka-on-muslim.html>

⁹¹ See also Devasiri's analysis of Sinhala nationalism and the event.
<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/an-alternative-analysis-of-aluthgama/>

Sinhala anti Buddhist ideas among this crowd.⁹² He also stated that the stoning of the procession was an organized attack. Ranawaka's press statement, as Nirmal Dewasiri (Senior Lecturer, Department of History) stated in a different context, was a mixture of truths, half-truths and lies. Ranawaka stated that there are small groups of jihadists working among the moderate Muslims, that they were compelling the utilization of symbols such as the burka and the cap for young Muslim men and women attending university.⁹³ Ranawake also made several other questionable assertions including that the All Ceylon Jamiathul Ulema was formulated in 1929 in order to ensure that there would be no vote for women that it was the people of Dharga Town that brought about the compulsion for halal in 2012.⁹⁴ In addition he referred to "the destruction" that has befallen countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan and Syria, the growth of Boko Haram in Nigeria, and attributed all of the above to the development of jihadist ideology. He stated that the same destruction that occurred in Iraq and Syria can happen here in Sri Lanka. He stated that the military intelligence was not taking the necessary steps, and is therefore responsible for Islamic extremism growing in this country. Ranawaka's statement was indeed a study in truths, half-truths and blatant untruths. What was clear however was the intention to prevent the de-escalation of tension and maintain the slow burn of the anti-Muslim sentiment.

Competing Narratives at the ground level

On our journeys among both the Sinhala and Muslim populations of Aluthgama and Beruwela, we encountered many versions of what happened on that Poya day. It was intriguing to note the ways in which the representatives of Sinhala communities, those that were affected by violence and those that were not, attempted to make sense of what had happened through a mixture of their own personal experiences of interactions with neighbours of a different religion, and partly through what they heard and saw through the media. There was no dispute about the fact that the monk was struck among the Sinhalese. The Muslims on the other hand told us that both the monk and the driver were now willing to come forward and say that they were *not* hurt. In the Muslim version of events those who organized the riot were waiting for a trigger of some form—if this altercation was not the issue it would have been something else. Sinhalese stated that it was completely natural for Buddhists to react in this way if a monk was assaulted on a Poya day. To further complicate matters, the Muslims see the monk being refused admission to two local hospitals and the absence of any JMO report about the monk's injuries as indicative that

⁹² There is no reference to such a meeting anywhere else in the coverage of the event. Our conversations in Dharga town showed no evidence of such an event having occurred that day.

⁹³ There are many stories of dress code compulsion in universities. This while unfortunate, is not ethnic/religion specific. Young women are not permitted, for instance, to wear three quarter pants either. Therefore while, policing dress exists it is probably inaccurate to term such behavior "jihadism."

⁹⁴ These assertions are both false.

the monk was not attacked. Sinhala narratives state that the police delayed in taking the monk's complaint and in apprehending the perpetrators and thereby exacerbated the issue. One person stated that the Police humiliated the monk by keeping him waiting. The conversation reached a national level with the government version matching the version of most Sinhalese.

The National Shooru Council has sent out a press release stating that one of the three Muslim youth who had been jailed for the alleged assault of the monk had complained to the IGP regarding the ill treatment that they suffered at the Aluthgama Police Station. The person, a Moulawi, claimed that he and his brothers were made to kneel and walk towards the monks in the Police Station and that he was kicked in the neck by a monk while kneeling. This happened in full view of many police personnel and Muslim and Sinhala community representatives. As a religious leader, the Moulawi was seeking redress for the injustice that he suffered. In the complaint the three Muslims deny categorically that the monk was attacked in anyway. They state that there was an exchange of blows with the driver.⁹⁵ (See Annex I)

While the trigger event itself remains controversial with Muslims and Sinhala versions being different, Sinhala families that we spoke with in Adhikarigoda, Seenawatte and Pathirajagoda also depended greatly on another hotly debated element of the story. Who threw the first stones? Part of the state narrative too depends on this fact of Muslims throwing stones at the "peacefully" dispersing crowds to account for the violence of the 15th. The understanding of the few Sinhala families that we spoke to was also that the violence would not have broken out if a stone had not been thrown by Muslims towards the peacefully dispersing procession. It seemed important to many Sinhalese that the violence was understood as instigated by the Muslims.

For the Muslims, the fact that mobs started attacking Muslim properties in several different places simultaneously and the systematic nature of the attacks on their economic assets, and the fact that they seemed to be well informed regarding who and what to attack, overshadowed the importance of the "who threw the first stone" narrative. In fact, the above evidence, to many affected Muslims highlighted a far larger issue – that of state collusion in the attacks against them. They were more interested in stressing the similarity in the manner in which the attacks were carried out, the kind of weapons used, the manner in which mobs set fires inside houses, the systematic manner in which looting was carried out – with vehicles being especially brought for such a purpose, the inaction of the police and the STF as larger and more significant than individual intension.

⁹⁵ National Shooru Council press statement on 16/07/2014.

We also heard stories about the many rumours that were circulating regarding Muslims during the two days of violence. People heard that temples were being attacked by Muslims, that young novice monks were being abducted and cut up and that two monks of a nearby temple had been killed and buried and crowds were needed to go and recover the bodies. Many Sinhalese stated that these were the reasons that people became agitated enough to carry out the attacks. They even said "what were people supposed to do when they hear that a monk had been cut up?" There were also rumours about impending attacks by Muslims. As already recorded, there was a fear that Muslims would attack Sinhalese on the 16th after the funeral of the two men who died the previous night. The fact that citizens were of the view that mobs were justified in reacting violently to rumours signifies a serious breakdown in law and order.

All were distressed by the deterioration in relations between the communities. Masons in Pathirajagoda whose houses were burnt were concerned about the rumours that they would no longer receive work from Muslim clients. In Welipitiya we heard that Sinhalese thought the mosques were asking Muslims not to employ Sinhalese. The Adhikarigoda Sinhalese spoke with great distress about the fact that people that they had excellent relations with just a few days prior to the incidents were no longer speaking with them – were looking away. Some Sinhalese were very disturbed by the occurrence and told us that they were ashamed of what had happened and of what had been done to the neighbours that they had such good relations with. Two women actually were in tears while narrating the incident. These individual revealed that their relations with their neighbours were so close that during the funeral of their brother their Muslim friends were among those who carried the coffin. We encountered several Sinhalese Buddhists –among them a Buddhist monk who expressed great regret at the incident- who were struggling to make sense of the events.

In Welipanna, Muslims spoke of the manner in which just three or four days before they had experienced floods and that they had distributed food to all those in the area from relief supplies that had arrived at the mosque.⁹⁶ In Seenawatte, a Muslim family said that when water was scarce they supplied water in their truck to the entire neighborhood. A Sinhala woman whose house was burnt spoke of how she and her husband had helped Muslims. In relating these stories many felt betrayed by their neighbors and affected people of both communities felt that their neighbours could have been more helpful. Muslims felt betrayed and thought it significant that the Buddhists had conspicuously hung up Buddhist flags

⁹⁶ This story was later substantiated in an interview given to the Daily Mirror by UNP parliamentarian PalithaThevarapperuma who said that during that time there was no assistance for the people of Welipanna and they depended on good neighbourly relations among the communities, and that they survived on relief distributed from the mosque.

and lanterns to deflect the thugs from Sinhala houses.⁹⁷ The breakdown in relations is a serious and substantial issue that will have long term impacts in the communities if not addressed forthwith. Ideally the state should take immediate steps to heal wounds at the community level. While the seemingly speedy rebuilding may be one way of doing so it may not suffice.

Muslim Parliamentarians' response to the event.

In the immediate aftermath of Aluthgama, Rauf Hakeem, leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress came to the fore in several strongly worded and evidently strongly felt assertions regarding the state's culpability, the hate speech by the Ven. Gnanasara and the need for compensation for the victims. In his statement in Parliament during the debate on the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights investigation in to alleged serious violations and abuses of human rights and related crimes by both parties in Sri Lanka, Hakeem stated that what the High Commissioner had stated regarding the religious violence in the country can no longer be called a "tissue of lies." He referred to Article 3 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Act (ICCPR Act) that is in place in Sri Lanka and questioned as to why those engaging in hate speech and incitement were not being prosecuted under it. He also warned that the direction in which the country was heading "the precipice" was in direct contravention of international covenants to which the country was a signatory and may auger yet greater interventions of this nature. On holding the Ven. Gnanasara accountable on the issue of hate speech Hakeem stated:

What happened in Alutgama is an example of a cognizable offence under our own Act. So, why are we not taking into custody that very person who is spreading this hatred and inciting people to violence? It is the bounden duty of this Government to do so. Are we going to stand as mute sentinels and pay only lip service to these provisions and render them toothless? Having statutory provisions and declaring to the world that we have enough tools to prosecute such conduct is not enough. Full implementation, of the letter and the spirit of these provisions, is mandated in the light of the abysmal precipice we are sliding down today.⁹⁸

Additionally, during an interview on Aljazeera's Inside Story on 17th June 2014, Rauf Hakeem was very vocal on the spread of hate speech and highly critical of the state response. He gave interviews to BBC as well in which he seemed extremely distressed by events and spoke very strongly. Using his Sinhala language skills to good effect he strongly criticized the law enforcement authorities' response in Aluthgama in the local media as

⁹⁷ Of course given that it was just a few days after Poya it was probably the case that Sinhala houses were anyway decorated for the Poya.

⁹⁸ Hansard 17th June 2014, p. 752.

well. More recently the SLMC has released a report on the incident that offers comprehensive documentation on the affected persons and their estimated losses.

More recently however, there is a certain silence from the political actors regarding Aluthgama. On 10th July 2014 there were "questions by private notice" in Parliament by the Leader of the Opposition, Ranil Wickremasinghe on the losses suffered in Aluthgama. There was virtually no Muslim representatives present in Parliament at that time.

Other local and International Statements in response to the Event

In the aftermath of the incidents there was an outcry. A series of statements from groups both internationally and locally including UNHRC head Navaneetham Pillay, a group of leading business associations in the country, and civil society organisations were released condemning the violence.⁹⁹ Groundviews compiled or "curated" a list of statements with links to the statement texts that is available here. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1LLYyXN40uJE4p7R8CY48b7ckd8mxBIkuKzdipkhawX0/edit?usp=sharing>.

Chapter VI: Media Coverage of Aluthgama Riots

"The line that separates conventional mainstream media from social media is becoming increasingly blurred. Most newspapers and television broadcast services carry 24/7 news coverage via social media. Professional journalists operate their blogs and twitter accounts independently of the media establishment to which they are attached. These nuances of present media were in full display during the riots in Aluthgama and Beruwala.

Conventional Media¹⁰⁰

Today, Newspapers and television news providers operate twitter accounts through which they provide 24/7 news updates. However, as the events in Aluthgama and Beruwala

⁹⁹ Of the above statements, that of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party of which the President is a member is interesting. In this statement condemning the violence, the party reiterated its moderate stance and urged the people not to be swayed by extremism. It also stated that it suspects that the events were set in motion by elements that are trying to undermine the hard won peace and reconciliation and President Rajapaksa's historic good relations with the Muslim world. The statement took pains to not attribute blame to any community and emphasized the need to call upon people's collective humanity and not on ethnic or religious affiliations alone. See Dinamina 18th June 2014, p. 1. SLFP statement (on Aluthgama Violence).

¹⁰⁰ This section offers an analysis of the mainstream English and Sinhala media with some references to alternative Sinhala media such as the Ravaya newspaper. It does not cover any Tamil sources.

unfolded, the media giants had very little to say. Ada Derana updated the public around 8.30 pm that police curfew had been enforced in Beruwala areas in addition to Aluthgama area.¹⁰¹ This was followed by an update at 6.41 am next morning which communicated a message from the President stating that anybody taking the law into their own hands will be punished.¹⁰² Daily Mirror too provided a similar coverage on Twitter. Lankadeepa on the other hand seemed to disregard the events.¹⁰³

Certain key individual journalists representing international and local media were more comprehensive in providing specific details of the events to the public through Twitter. BBC's Charles Haviland, Daily FT's Dharisha Bastians and Al Jazeera's Dinouk Colombage provided consistent updates of the carnage that was taking place during the curfew hours of 15th night in Aluthgama. "#srilanka Minister Rauff Hakeem in tears at Dharga Town mosque: says #muslim women fled to jungles after rape threats. #Aluthgama #SriLanka", tweeted Charles Haviland. He further tweets, "Local Sinhalese Buddhist people #aluthgama say Buddhist hardliners had come from outside & there was violence on both sides. #srilanka #lka". Uploading photos of the riots and the destruction as it happened, these journalists filled a lacuna that was created by other mainstream news providers to best utilize new technology to provide the public with relevant updates.

When the print versions of newspapers rolled out 16th morning, they did little to shed light on the complexities of what unfolded in Aluthgama.¹⁰⁴ Most newspapers reported the same narrative that has been promoted by the government authorities. The narrative went to the effect that a curfew had been imposed in Aluthgama after Muslims pelted stones at a peaceful Buddhist procession after which clashes ensued between Buddhists and Muslims.¹⁰⁵ The BBS rally and the incendiary speech of Gnanasara Thero were not mentioned. This account of the story also claimed that the Police had done well to keep the situation under control.

Even in the days following the incident the print media seemed to be unable to expand the depth of its coverage. Instead of delving into multiple narratives from the grassroots, the media organizations were content providing the public with press releases of interest groups. The Sinhala Newspapers provided statements by the President, the IGP, Minister

¹⁰¹Screenshots of some of the twitter feed can be found at:
<https://app.box.com/s/frnz8fg4khjj6zeq04iq/1/2092435554>.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴Screenshots of some online versions of daily newspapers on 16 June 2014 can be found at:
<https://app.box.com/s/frnz8fg4khjj6zeq04iq>.

¹⁰⁵ See "Police Curfew in Aluthgama and Beruwala", Ceylon Today, 16 June 2014; "Curfew in Aluthgama and Beruwala", Daily Mirror, 16 June 2014; "Curfew in Aluthgama and Beruwala", Divaina, 16 June 2014.

Rauff Hakeem, members of the Opposition and even the Bodu Bala Sena.¹⁰⁶ Minister Champika Ranawaka was reported making a statement to the effect that no lives have been lost due to acts of Bodu Bala Sena or Sihala Ravaya or Ravana Balaya and that Muslim extremist groups must be held responsible for the two deaths and destruction of property.¹⁰⁷

A few newspapers carried editorials that, while being cautious to not contradict the official report, managed however, to hold the law enforcement authorities accountable for the lackluster manner in which they handled the situation.¹⁰⁸ These editorials among other articles published, carried the message that violence needed to stop, and highlighted the importance of religious co-existence.¹⁰⁹ However, much of the Sinhala print media continued to reflect the BBS ideology. For instance, an article on capturing a drug dealer would unnecessarily highlight the religious identity of such a person to be Muslim¹¹⁰; a report on a man impersonating a woman by dressing in Islamic garb¹¹¹; an unrelated story of a monk being murdered at his temple.¹¹² While there were a few articles arguing for unity the general tone did little to endorse the position.

Newspapers such as Ravaya and Daily FT, have from the very initial point till now continued to provide a counter-point to the official mainstream discourse on the event.¹¹³ Not only have these papers carried out investigative pieces which were lacking in any other newspaper but they have presented articles with analysis that was discerning of the issues at hand.¹¹⁴ However, the readership of these papers is limited.

Social Media

The impact of social media prior to, during and after the violence requires close examination. The term social media includes platforms such as Facebook, twitter, blogging,

¹⁰⁶ See Announcements and Press conferences on Divaina, 17 June 2014.

¹⁰⁷ See "Law not fairly enforced", Lankadeepa, 17 June 2014.

¹⁰⁸ See "The IGP Must Resign", The Nation, 22 June 2014.

¹⁰⁹ See editorials on Divaina, Lankadeepa and Maubima, 17 June 2014.

¹¹⁰ See "A smuggler of 8 lakhs worth of narcotics caught", Lankadeepa, 17 June 2014.

¹¹¹ See "Man impersonating a woman in Muslim Attire arrested", Divaina, 17 June 2014.

¹¹² See "Monk Murdered in Bakamuna", Lankadeepa, 29 June 2014. Note that this article was juxtaposed with an article containing an interview with Minister Vasudeva Nanayakkara's accurate account of the events that happened during and after the curfew in Aluthgama, where he contradicts the journalist's assertions that Sinhala and Muslim communities were equally affected by the violence.

¹¹³ See "Alas Aluthgama" Daily FT, 16 June 2014; "No investigations on Gnanasara, says IGP", "The unpleasant memories of Dharga Town", Rayava, 29 June 2014; "Govt. 'blatantly misinformed' UNHRC about Aluthgama clashes: Muslim Council" Daily FT, 2 July 2014.

¹¹⁴ "Did social media add fuel to the fire?", Rayava, 29 June 2014; "Aluthgama, A game without winners", Daily FT, 3 July 2014.

YouTube and other spaces and forums where individuals who may not necessarily be professional journalists can publish material.

Prior to the riots, the tension between the two communities was already discernible through the hate speech that was circulated on social media. Facebook groups such as Sinhala Buddhist and the personal page of Gnanasara Thero liberally uploaded photographs that were incredibly offensive to the Muslim community.¹¹⁵ Most of Bodu Bala Sena's campaigns were promoted through these media and each hateful photo would garner thousands of likes on Facebook. Comments on these pages were indicative of a mindset full of hatred and violence. According to Sanjana Hattotuwa, the curator of Groundviews, research shows that there are over 35 groups online that propagate religious hatred.¹¹⁶ It is through these channels that the Muslim community in the Aluthgama area became aware of the organization of a rally and the anti-Muslim sentiment behind it.¹¹⁷

During the riots and in the events immediately leading up to the riots there are several factors to be noted. Firstly, it is customary for Bodu Bala Sena to stream their public speeches on YouTube and all Muslims who recounted the accounts of 15th June stated how they watched Gnanasara Thero giving the speech in Aluthgama stating the words '*aba sarana!*' (meaning that Muslims will be destroyed).¹¹⁸ The fact that Muslims had access to this speech on social media made them conscious of the threat that was posed by the rally conducted by the BBS.

Secondly, social media was also used to spread rumours which incited the Sinhala Buddhist community. There were three main rumours; first that a temple in Dharga Town had been attacked and a Buddha statue had been destroyed, second, that a monk had been hacked to death inside the premises of a mosque, and third, was that novice monks were being kidnapped from temples in order to be killed.¹¹⁹ These rumours spread like wildfire over social media and through mobile phones via text messages.¹²⁰ Given that conventional media was at a standstill, there was no voice of sanity or of authority which acted to dispel these myths. Due to this, some of the Sinhala Buddhist community may have been incited to engage in violence in a fit of righteous anger. Even if this may not have been the case,

¹¹⁵ See "Facebook Bans 'Bodu Bala Sena' and GnanasaraThera" Asian Mirror, 20 June 2014.

¹¹⁶ He made this comment at a public forum held at Royal College Colombo on 17 July 2014.

¹¹⁷ As observed through the interviews with both Muslim and Sinhala residents of Aluthgama and Beruwala.

¹¹⁸ All Muslims who were interviewed after the riots noted the gravity of the threat generated by this term and the manner in which it made them fear for their lives.

¹¹⁹ These rumours are a synthesis of all the accounts provided by witnesses, both Muslim and Sinhalese.

¹²⁰ A Sinhala family from the Sinniwatta area provided information that various rumours were circulated among the Sinhala public via SMS and Facebook immediately before the riots occurred.

what it definitely achieved was to stop Buddhists from preventing such violence, and in making them feel that this attack against the Muslim community in fact was justified.

It should also be noted that the event occurred in the aftermath of a spate of hate sentiment in social media, at large Buddhist gatherings and in some traditional mainstream media. Therefore the Sinhala Buddhist media consuming public was well placed to hear and comprehend these rumours in the form of a threat to which they needed to respond.

Thirdly, and more importantly one must acknowledge the contribution made by social media during and in the aftermath of the riots in uncovering alternative narratives that were ignored by conventional media. The twitter-verse was abounding with ordinary persons with smartphones updating on what was occurring in Aluthgama while a curfew had cut off the city from the rest of the country.¹²¹ You Tube had a plethora of videos coming from smartphones and CCTV cameras of the mob that wandered the streets of Aluthgama.¹²² The police and the STF and their function or the lack of it was recorded and uploaded online. One witness stated that his son had videoed the attackers on his smart phone and used WhatsApp to transmit those videos to his relatives in the Middle East. Before they knew it, people who were outside of Aluthgama were uploading evidence of what exactly was going on in the riots.

Groundviews, a platform for citizen journalism was compiling all witness accounts in an orderly fashion as the events unfolded.¹²³ It was also one of the platforms where the voices of those individuals who bore opinions different to the mainstream narrative were first heard. Other websites such as The Republic Square also provided the online researcher with a relatively accurate account of the extent of the carnage.¹²⁴ However, in the mayhem of social media only a reader or viewer with considerable media literacy would be able to sift the fabricated evidence from the legitimate accounts from the ground. Therefore, in spite of social media acting as a valuable tool of information, it has also failed to create clarity."

¹²¹ See "Aluthgama riots: Social media breaks SL media's shameful silence", First Post, 17 June 2014.

¹²² See "CCTV footage. BBS Aluthgama attack. 15/6/2014", YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1DkG7nO9fg>; "CCTV footage of Aluthgama attack-Gossipbooklk", Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZw6Rw72dDk>.

¹²³ See "Aluthgama riots and deaths: Vital updates" Groundviews, 16 June 2014.

¹²⁴ See "What happened in Aluthgama, a verified account", The Republic Square, 15 June 2014.

Chapter VII: In the Aftermath of Aluthgama Legal Responses

"In the aftermath of the riots there was a sense of helplessness among the people who had had all their valuables looted and all their property destroyed. Understanding of the legal remedies available to them was minimal.¹²⁵ Even when certain individuals dared to make complaints against those who had been identified as the perpetrators, the Muslims recounted instances where the complainants were arrested by the Police. Therefore, a sense of disillusionment *vis-a-vis* the system was instilled in the general public.¹²⁶

The private Bar was among the first to come to the aid of those who were affected by the Aluthgama riots.¹²⁷ The Bar Association of Sri Lanka had warned the government and the Attorney General's Department of the incitement of religious disharmony by the Bodu Bala Sena. They also mobilized to provide legal services for those who desperately needed legal advice after their property and security was violated during the incidents on the 15th and 16th of June 2014.¹²⁸

Two inquests were initiated where Upul Jayasuriya, the President and Ajith Pathirana the Secretary of the BASL appeared. The first case was filed in the Magistrate's Court, Kalutara under case number B.R. 1501/14 pertaining to deaths of two Muslims resulting from the Sinhala Muslim riots. This mainly attempted to clarify the inconsistencies in the JMO report with regard to the deaths, where it was recorded that the death was caused by cut injuries but gunshot wounds were also present. The police had stated that this was an interim JMO report when it was becoming evident that the matter was being investigated further. As the Counsel stated that they had doubts about the validity of the JMO report the doctor was summoned.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ It was observed that victims of the violence who acted as witnesses were unaware of various court procedures available to them in order to ensure that governmental authorities exercise their duty correctly.

¹²⁶ Witnesses in Beruwala pointed out that they were targeted and persecuted by the police when they went to complain against the damage done to their property. There were 12 complaints lodged against them and some of them were arrested. Therefore, this dissuaded others from going to the police to make complaints about their losses.

¹²⁷ An elderly lady who was affected by the riots in Military Street Aluthgama stated that the Sri Lanka Bar Association came to her aid right after the incidents took place. This account was corroborated by testimonies of lawyers who worked on the field immediately after the riots.

¹²⁸ According to the account of a lawyer who worked in the field with the victims of the riot the Sri Lanka Bar Association, its President and Secretary took a personal interest in the matters.

¹²⁹ This is based on a lawyer's opinion on case number B.R. 1501/14 and its implications.

The second application pertained to damages. There had not been a single instance where the Government Analyst had inspected the scene.¹³⁰ The court had ordered the police to stop the cleaning until the government analyst had investigated the area. The government analyst was only given orders with regard to Welipitiya although arson took place in other areas. There were around 15 cases where the Government Analysts' Department was called to immediately conduct the investigation. Another application was filed to stop the clearing operation. However, the order came too late, as most of the clearing had already begun by that point. Over twenty complaints have been filed with the Magistrate's Court of Kalutara in order to look into the damages to property under the provisions of the Penal Code.¹³¹

There was no proper direction provided to people in terms of how their rights would be enforced. There were various governmental departments handling different areas of relief.¹³² Very little of the destruction that occurred has gone through an official documentation process. The Legal Aid Commission and the Attorney General's Department have failed to step in and assist those who required legal advice.¹³³ The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka however had paid a visit to Aluthgama and had requested those whose fundamental rights had been violated due to the riots to file affidavits.¹³⁴

A resident of Dharga Town – Mohamed Junaid Mohamed Imran who had been victimized by the anti-Muslim violence has taken the initiative to file a Fundamental Rights application in the Supreme Courts in terms of Articles 17 and 126 of the Constitution, in his own interest and in the interest of the public against Inspector General of Police, Senior Deputy Inspector General of Police of the Western Province, Commandant of the Special Task Force of the Sri Lanka Police, Secretary to the Ministry of Law and Order and the Attorney General.¹³⁵ The petitioner who had suffered gunshot wounds on June 15 as a result of the anti-Muslim violence in Dharga Town, states as grounds for his application the gross and systematic failure on the part of Sri Lanka Police Department to uphold the rule of law and to fulfill their duties and obligations.¹³⁶

¹³⁰ This is based on the information given by a lawyer. The witness reports by victims of the Aluthgama and Beruwala areas did not provide any account with was contrary to this.

¹³¹ This is based on reports filed at the Kalutara Magistrate's Court.

¹³² The authors made the observation that the lack of coordination by the governmental departments in giving redress to victims had generated a sense of confusion and hopelessness in the public. Often the authors had to step in to facilitate the rehabilitation process by providing information about which governmental officer they should speak to, while conducting interviews.

¹³³ This is based on witness provided by a member of the private Bar.

¹³⁴ This is based on the testimonies of various witnesses in Aluthgama.

¹³⁵ SC (FR) Application Number: 203/14.

¹³⁶ See "Aluthgama Gun-Shot Victim Goes to SC; Full Text off The Petition", Colombo Telegraph, 17 July 2014.

According to the petition, the Police Department failed to uphold Sections 56 and 77 of the Police Ordinance No.16 of 1865 and Section 107 of Criminal Procedure Act No. 15 of 1979. This is so as the police failed to take any preventive or punitive measures against hate campaigns directed against Muslims and other religious minorities for the past two and half years, which have created a 'tinderbox' environment. The Petition states that there was a gross negligence, lethargy, inaction and indifference shown by the Police and that the Muslims of Aluthgama and Beruwala were clearly of the view that the Police and the Special Task Force facilitated the attack on Muslims."

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

"There was evidence that the hate speech cultivating hate sentiment against Muslims had had an extremely deleterious effect on communities' perceptions of one another. The fact that rumours circulating in the aftermath spoke of violent attacks by Muslims against monks and temples, and that the people believed such stories to the extent that they joined mobs that were perpetrating violence against Muslims is a sad comment on the state of law and order in society.

At no point did the government acknowledge either the extent of the violence, the severe breakdown of relations in the affected areas, the seriousness of the fact that an event of this nature occurred in the period of transition from war to peace, or the manner in which southern Muslims' sensibilities were affected. The government response attempted to down-play the seriousness of the incident and mitigates the damage to its reputation in the international arena. The government response suggests that its concern was with regard to dealing with perceptions that the government was unstable, or racist: to manage the narratives emerging out of the events in a way that did not damage their reputation. In doing so, the government lost the opportunity to do the necessary reconciliation work among the communities. The government also reinstituted the idea of Muslim marginality, Buddhist superiority and the fact that the BBS could act with impunity. It also exposed the limitations of the government's capacity to understand the extent to which such incidents affect individuals and communities. Even the swift response of the government to rebuild homes and buildings suggests that the government's strategy is to deal with only infrastructure problems. The larger, more complex and serious issues of community relations, minority insecurities, majority dominance were ignored or not even recognized.

In addition to the attacks on Muslim houses in Dharga Town, six houses in Pathirajagoda and one house on Mihiripenna Road belonging to Sinhalese were also attacked. The attacks

in Pathirajagoda occurred at the same time as the other attacks in Dharga Town. One Sinhala house in Adhikharigoda was attacked later in what may have been a retaliation. The attacks on the Pathirajagoda houses occurred at the same time as those on the Muslim houses in Dharga Town and we feel therefore that they could not have been in retaliation. While we acknowledge the victims' testimonies that they recognized neighbors among Muslim persons who showed the mobs the way, evidence indicates that the mobs that attacked the Sinhala homes were organized and carried out the attacks in a manner similar to those who attacked Muslim houses. The similarities include minimal harm to persons, organized and systematic looting of jewelry and cash, using domestic materials including furniture, books and car tyres for the burning. These similarities speak not to a spontaneous attack either by Sinhala mobs or by Muslim neighbors but part of a larger organizing strategy. It is also curious that the attacks against the Sinhalese were limited to these six houses alone while the other Sinhala houses close by were untouched

The fact that the government responded within a week by sending the military in for rebuilding, and the fact that rebuilding efforts are continuing sends a positive message to the Muslim community that the government is committed in some way to reversing the consequences of the incident. However, the limited progress with regards to finding and prosecuting the perpetrators of the crimes, the fact that those inciting hatred are still at large, and seem to be continuing their work, the fact that the government maintained a limited account of events sends the message to reassure racist and violent segments of society that they got away with criminal acts.

The presence of the military for clearing and rebuilding purposes is having a significant impact on communities in the area. The fact that the government pledged a certain amount of money and the military personnel are already there engaging in rebuilding activities is somewhat hopeful. While some expressed concern for such a large military presence in the area, others had developed good relations with the military. Some families were providing cooking pots and stoves for the military and permission to use their houses while building was ongoing. The military in Adhikarigoda had also shown flexibility with regards to the building process by moving walls, and doing minor changes to the original plan. This attitude prompted one government official to actually call this a "blessing in disguise" and that many might end up with houses that were better built than the original.¹³⁷

The lack of any mechanism for an independent inquiry into the events remains a problem and indicates that the government is not interested in establishing any credible account of what happened during those two days.

¹³⁷ Needless to say the research team did not concur with this statement!

The government in offering explanations for the violence that frame Muslims as instigators of the large scale violence perpetrated against them contributed to the further escalation of anti Muslim sentiment and also to the deterioration of relations between the Muslim and Sinhala communities. The dominant explanations sought to ensure that the Sinhala communities were not upset or blamed for what happened in anyway. This reinforced the hierarchical positioning of ethnic communities, which were largely internalized by both communities. It is extremely unfortunate that even opposition political parties have failed to send any strong messages to counter this. Although all groups speak of the need to ensure 'equality' between different groups, there is an implicit understanding that this equality is within a framework that accepts Sinhala superiority.

One of the most unfortunate consequences from the incidents is the breakdown of relations between Sinhala and Muslim neighbours in the area. We met people who were hopeful that relations may improve. Others say that they can barely look at the perpetrators of violence who are walking around with impunity.

The Muslim political parties, especially the SLMC and its leader Rauf Hakeem were vociferous in the aftermath and the party has recently released a report with a call for financial assistance towards rebuilding damaged property. The commitment to documentation and for providing accurate and verified information on what has happened is commendable and we urge the leadership to continue to publicly engage with issues that emerge.

Opposition political parties – the UNP, TNA and JVP were vocal in their criticism of the government and some even went so far as accusing the government of orchestrating the events. All political party interventions blamed the troubling law and order situation in the country as leading to such a situation. The many pronouncements, discussions and debates in parliament by political party representatives have ensured that the many narratives of the event are part of the country's historical record.

The Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) on the other hand attempted to capitalize on the event for its own political advantage. While arguably, the Sinhalese affected by the violence did not receive as much media coverage as the attacks against Muslims, the manner in which the JHU "spin" worked to provide an exclusively Sinhala Buddhist narrative of the event did little to ease the situation and only – and quite intentionally – served to exacerbate this. Media interventions by JHU members Udaya Gamanpila and Champika Ranawaka both contributed to the maintaining of tensions in the aftermath.

While it is difficult to claim with authority as to who was behind these riots, it is important to note that the signs of organization and orchestration were evident. The transportation provided for looted goods, the weapons that the attackers had at 6.30pm, their access to glass bottles, petrol, and long sticks and iron rods and lengths of bicycle chains, the pieces of metal canisters that we saw and photographed, dispel any possibility of a spontaneous conflagration.

We can also say with authority that the STF was complicit in the attacks by way of omission. Not only are there many testimonies of STF refusing to help people, we also have testimonies of abuse directed at Muslims who requested such help. While some of this sentiment on the part of individual members of the STF can be attributed to the vitriolic generated by hate speech and general anti Muslim sentiment cultivated during the past few years, the widespread nature of the refusal to assist speaks to a more systematic position on the part of the STF.

During the violence the role of the media was crucial on two levels; at one level the traditional media was muffled and was an illustration of both the state power over the media and the state position on the event. Social media and new media technology on the other hand enabled the spreading of the story all over the world."

Recommendations

"A comprehensive and impartial state investigation into the incidents of Aluthgama and nearby places is a dire and urgent need. Through this investigation the impact of the hate speech, the inaction of the Police and the STF, the looting, the damages suffered by the affected people and the breakdown of community should be highlighted.

A discourse that counters BBS propaganda by a commitment to justice and equality and good governance but also provides necessary information on the Muslim community that reveals their historical and cultural specificity as citizens of Sri Lanka and thereby minimizes the othering effects of the hate speeches are an urgent need at this juncture. The position adopted by the JHU for instance, is damaging to the polity as a whole and requires reversing (emphasis added)

Muslim civil society must be more aware and better incorporate an analysis regarding the historical similarity between what they as a community are experiencing and certain actions against the Tamil community. For instance, the resonances of June 2014 with July 1983 are many and have been pointed out by commentators including the leader of the

opposition. The violence of June thankfully did not spread beyond the specific areas of the south but for a moment during the time that the violence was taking place, it looked as if it might.¹³⁸

While leaving open the strategy of constantly consulting with the government it is also crucial that Muslim civil society organizations expend a similar amount of energy on engagements with other organizations with a history of interventions on issues of rights and impunity.

While civil society organizations engaged in human rights work have signed petitions and taken positions against the manner in which the BBS is contributing to the deterioration of the human rights situation in post-war Sri Lanka, it is important that organizations that are taking a non ethnic specific stance against the excesses of the regime incorporate an analysis of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism today and the Muslim issue as raised by the BBS into their critique of the regime. If not, it is possible that their critique will completely miss the manner in which the Muslim issue emerges out of the complex post war transition taking place in this country (emphasis added).

It is important that there are attempts to bridge the divide that was created by the anti-Muslim sentiment propagated by the BBS and associated groups and later exacerbated by the violence. Any attempt at such mediation however must be sensitive to not causing greater harm.

There is evidence that many of those who participated in the violence (monks as well as laypeople) were young men and to a lesser extent, women. Specific initiatives to work with young women and men, especially those who fall through the cracks of education and employment, are extremely necessary since these groups are vulnerable to mobilisation for events of this nature.

The Buddhist Clergy must take responsibility to educate and sensitize its members regarding issues relating to reconciliation and the importance of strengthening community relations, especially the role of religion in bridging differences rather than reinforcing differences.

¹³⁸ The attack on Harcourts Pharmacy in Dehiwela on June 15th night is a case in point. CCTV footage shows young men simply walking into the premises and destroying counters and throwing a petrol bomb with their body language showing complete confidence. The burning of the large No Limit clothing store a week later exacerbated these sentiments

Opposition parties across the ideological divide need to find ways of building the confidence of minority communities. Their analysis of the regime and its consequences need to take into account much more strongly the issue of ethnic relations and move beyond simplistic accounts of ethnic relations such as those that locate the deterioration of ethnic harmony as a consequence of colonialism.

While it is commendable that reconstruction efforts have been undertaken with some speed, there is evidence that not much more than clearing has taken place in most areas. It is imperative that all affected people experience some measure of relief through the government effort. It is important that in this instance the government does not stop the reconstruction effort before it achieves results for all affected persons. REPPIA (Rehabilitation of Persons, Properties & Industries Authority) forms were circulated among the affected persons asking for an accounting of their losses. It is important that these claims too are processed quickly in order that people can rebuild their lives.

Government efforts at rebuilding consequent to the events at Aluthgama and elsewhere must also move beyond simply rebuilding homes and buildings and consider the very serious impact these events had on the economic wellbeing of these communities. Specific interventions aimed at ensuring that the communities are able to rebuild their means of livelihood again are required."

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