

Rash of Attacks on Christians Reported in Sri Lanka

✖ **COLOMBO, Sri Lanka**—Attacks on Christians in Sri Lanka have surged noticeably in recent weeks, following the government's defeat of Tamil separatists in May.

Attacks were reported in Puttlam, Gampaha and Kurunegala districts in western Sri Lanka, central Polonnaruwa district, Mannar district in the north and Matara district in the south, according to the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL).

Most recently, attackers on July 28 set fire to an Assemblies of God church in Norachcholai, Puttlam district, destroying the building. The pastor received frantic calls from neighbors at about 8:45 p.m. reporting that the building was in flames, echoing a similar arson attack almost a year ago that destroyed the original building on the site.

Church members have registered a complaint with police, but at press time no arrests had been made.

When a pastor of a Foursquare Gospel church and his wife visited a church member in Radawana village, Gampaha district during the third week of July, a 50-strong mob gathered at the door and shouted that they would not tolerate any further Christian activity in the village, NCEASL reported. The mob then prevented the couple from leaving the house, hit the pastor with a rod and threw a bucket of cow dung at him.

The disturbance continued for two hours before police finally answered repeated requests for assistance and arrived at the house, arresting three people who were later released.

Earlier, on June 28, a mob consisting of more than 100 people,

including Buddhist monks, surrounded the home of a female pastor of another Foursquare Gospel church in the village, according to the NCEASL. At the time the pastor, whose name was withheld for security reasons, and her husband were away. Their 13-year-old daughter watched helplessly as the mob broke in, shouted insults and destroyed chairs and other furniture.

Hearing that their home was under attack, the parents rushed to get police help, but the mob had dispersed by the time officers arrived. Police called the pastor into the Gampaha police station for questioning on July 9 and July 11; on the second occasion, protestors surrounded her and other pastors who accompanied her, spitting on them and initially preventing them from entering the police station.

Later, in the presence of Buddhist monks and other protestors, the pastor was forced to sign a document promising not to host worship services for non-family members.

Also in Gampaha district, a mob on July 14 destroyed the partially-built home of Sanjana Kumara, a Christian resident of Obawatte village. On receiving a phone call from a friend, Kumara rushed to the scene to find the supporting pillars of the house pulled down, damaging the structure beyond repair.

Villagers launched a smear campaign against Kumara on July 6, after he invited his pastor and other Christians to bless the construction of his home. As the group prayed, about 30 people entered the premises and demanded that they stop worshiping. The mob then threatened to kill Kumara, falsely accusing him of constructing a church building.

On July 8, Kumara discovered that unknown persons had broken into a storage shed on the property, stealing tools and painting a Buddhist blessing on the walls. Police were reluctant to record Kumara's complaint until a lawyer intervened.

The Sri Lanka population is 69.1 percent Buddhist, 7.6 percent

Muslim, 7.1 percent Hindu and 6.2 percent Christian, with the remaining 10 percent unspecified.

Sword Attack

In Markandura village, Kurunegala district, seven men wielding swords on July 12 attacked caretaker Akila Dias and three other members of the Vineyard Community church, causing serious injury to church members and church property. Dias and others received emergency care at a local hospital before being transferred to a larger hospital in the area for treatment.

Church members filed a complaint with police, identifying one of the attackers as the same man who had assaulted the church pastor and another worker with a machete in March; at that time police had arrested the man but released him on bail.

Several other attacks followed, including one on June 29 in which the church premises were desecrated with human feces. Documents were also circulated on July 18 describing the church as a divisive force aiming to destroy peace in the local community.

On the night of July 12, attackers tore off roof tiles from the church building and threw them to the ground, leaving it exposed to the elements.

On July 5, a mob of around 100 people, half of them Buddhist monks, forcibly entered an Assemblies of God church in Dickwella, Matara district, warning church members to cease all Christian worship in the area and pasting notices on the walls declaring that "any form of Christian worship in this place is completely prohibited."

The congregation has filed a complaint with local police.

On June 23, a Foursquare Gospel pastor from Polonnaruwa district was stopped by a group of men riding motorcycles as

he drove home after attending a late evening prayer meeting. Three men wearing masks attacked him with knives and shouted, "This is your last day! If we let you live, you will convert the whole town!"

The pastor sustained severe cuts to his arms as he warded off blows aimed at his neck, before driving away to seek medical help. Police in Polonnaruwa have initiated an inquiry.

Finally, in Thalvapadu village, Mannar district, members of an Apostolic church were dedicating their newly constructed building on June 7 when a mob of about 300 people forcibly entered the premises, threatening the pastor and congregation. They demolished the new church building, throwing roofing sheets and bricks onto a plot of adjacent land.

When church members filed a complaint, police arrested seven of the attackers; a case has been filed with a local court.