

The new martyrs

On Feb. 17, two men on a motorcycle gunned down Pastor Neil Edirisinghe and shot his wife in the stomach outside their home in Ampara, Sri Lanka, as their toddler son looked on. Although one would be tempted to think the incident was related to the bitter ethnic conflict ravaging the country, it was not.

Local newspapers report that a businessman, now in custody, had hired the gunmen to kill the 37-year-old pastor because he had aided his estranged wife's conversion to Christianity. It appears that violence against Christians is back in fashion in this overwhelmingly Buddhist country.

As reported by the National Christian Evangelical Association of Sri Lanka and news outlets:

- On Feb. 14, in Weeraketiya, Hambanthota District, the home of a sick congregant was stoned while a local pastor, his wife and two children ministered to the ill parishioner.
- On Feb. 17, in Math-

ugama, Kaluthara District, a mob of about 50, some with anti-Christian posters and some armed with rods, gathered around a church during a Sunday service and verbally and physically assaulted members of the congregation as they exited the church.

On March 2, in Lunuwila, Putlam District, a group of students were attacked and seriously beaten by a gang of more than 10 masked men as they walked to their Bible College. A local town official then threatened to close the school.

On March 2 in Udugama, Galle District, a mob of about 200 gathered in front of the home of a local pastor and issued the following ultimatum: leave the village or face death.

- On March 3, in Mulativu District, a church came under an arson attack while the pas-

tor of the church and his family were still inside.

In its latest International Report on Religious Freedom on Sri Lanka, the U.S. State Department cites reports of "more than 300 attacks" against Christians over the last four years with "several dozen confirmed by the U.S. Embassy."

By Roger Severino

While the government of Sri Lanka officially bemoans the violence, law enforcement and judicial officers on the ground routinely look the other way and perpetrators are rarely caught and prosecuted. The government has contributed to the climate of violence by openly courting the extremist Buddhist vote by proposing and campaigning for criminal anti-conversion laws.

Additionally, Sri Lanka's Supreme Court held that its constitution bars Christian so-

cial service organizations from incorporating because "the spreading of Christianity ... would impair the very existence of Buddhism."

Although the government isn't lighting the torches, its indifference to violence, regime of legalized discrimination, and political exploitation of religious tensions has undoubtedly fanned the flames.

The international community has not looked kindly on Sri Lanka's actions. According to a Dec. 12, 2005, report from the U.N.'s Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the government's politicized handling of the issue of conversions "provided more justification for religious intolerance." Only a concerted international outcry stopped the passage of the government's misguided criminal anti-conversion proposals. As for Sri Lanka's openly discriminatory incorporation laws, the United Nations Human Rights Committee ruled in October 2005 that they violate international

covenants and must be remedied. But this mandate has been ignored.

Sri Lanka's ambassador to the United States, Bernard Goonetilleke, was asked about these issues at an Institute for Religion and Public Policy event in Washington, D.C. on Feb. 20. In a welcome declaration, he pledged his government would follow the policy of the previous administration, saying proposed anti-conversion laws would not "see the light of day." But he was unwilling to give more than a cursory discussion of the plight of Christians in Sri Lanka and what the government plans to do to end the discrimination and stop the violence.

The ambassador was far more comfortable discussing the government's war with the Tamil Tigers and U.S. aid received after the devastating tsunami.

When asked about the recent murder of Pastor Edirisinghe, the ambassador was unwilling to recognize it as a part

of a broader religious conflict. "You see this as an attack on a pastor or religious persecution, but the murder may have been the result of a personal rivalry. A pastor could also get involved in a confrontation or personal rivalry," he said, lamenting that there were no Buddhist nations calling for investigations into attacks on Sri Lanka's Buddhist temples and citizens.

The ambassador was correct that the Edirisinghe murder was personal—but only in the sense that it was the pastor's personal Christian convictions that cost him his life.

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