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## **Easter Attacks In Sri Lanka**

*By Amresh Gunasingham*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Several near-simultaneous blasts tore through three churches and three luxury hotels in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, the bloodiest outbreak of violence in the South Asian island state since the end of a civil war a decade ago.*

### **COMMENTARY**

ALMOST 300 people, including more than 30 foreigners, were killed in suicide bomb attacks in Sri Lanka on Sunday 21 April 2019, which will severely test a government reeling from a political crisis last year in a country with a troubled history of inter-ethnic and faith-fueled violence. The attacks have been unprecedented in scale and devastation since 9/11.

Six coordinated explosions took place at 8.45 a.m. local time, followed by separate blasts later in the day. According to media reports, there were eight attacks in all, involving churches in Negombo and Kochchikade in the country's west, and Batticaloa in the east. The three affected hotels are located along a stretch of road in the heart of the capital Colombo. A pipe bomb found near the capital's main airport was also detonated by explosives experts. Almost 90 bomb detonators were also found at a crowded bus station.

### **Complex, Coordinated Attack, But By Whom?**

There were no immediate claims of responsibility, nor any established motive for the series of attacks, although the government has blamed a local extremist organisation called the National Thowheed Jamath (NTJ) and has sought assistance from the international security community to establish if any international terrorist networks were involved. According to security experts, the complex and coordinated nature of the attacks suggests some involvement of international terrorist networks.

The authorities on Sunday also imposed a nationwide curfew, blocked social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, and withheld information about those detained. The extraordinary step was taken out of fear that misinformation and hate speech could spread, provoking further violence.

Similar steps were taken after several incidents of communal violence in March last year. At that time, some of the violence had been instigated by Facebook postings that threatened attacks on Muslims, the government said.

### **Communal Tensions**

Sri Lanka is home to a Buddhist majority as well as several religious minorities, including Hindus, Muslims and Christians, who are predominantly Roman Catholics. They make up 12.6 percent, 9.7 percent and 7.4 percent of the country's population respectively.

However, the unprecedented targeting of Christians and foreign tourists on Easter Sunday represents a shift in Sri Lanka. The government had previously fought a brutal three-decades-long civil war against Tamil ethno-separatists.

In the years since, reconciliation between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities has remained elusive, while there has been a resurgence in Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, with groups such as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) accused of fueling violent attacks against minority communities, especially Muslims.

Sunday's attacks have also come against the backdrop of a sharp increase in incidents of violence against Christian minorities in Sri Lanka. The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka, representing more than 200 churches, reported 86 incidents of discrimination, threats and violence against Christians last year. Groups belonging to the majority Buddhist Sinhala community were reported to be behind the attacks.

In a 2018 report on Sri Lanka, the US State Department also noted that some Christian leaders complained of being put under pressure from the authorities to end or curtail services, which they were deemed to be "unlawful gatherings". It appears that Catholic Sri Lankans, who had been attending Easter service in the three affected churches, suffered the biggest casualties in the suicide attacks.

### **Operational Failure?**

A letter warning of imminent terrorist attacks sent to security agencies several days prior to the attack has been made public by a government minister, raising questions of the failure of law enforcement agencies to take pre-emptive action. According to analysts, the government's extensive military and intelligence apparatus built up during the civil war years was caught off-guard by Sunday's attacks and still unable to adequately assess emerging threats.

In the letter dated 11 April, Sri Lankan police had circulated a document entitled 'Information of an alleged plan attack', which contained a warning by an unnamed

foreign intelligence agency of possible suicide attacks being planned against Catholic churches and the Indian High Commission in Colombo by NTJ and its leader Mohamed Zahran. Government officials have since indicated that the alleged suicide bombers and those since arrested were affiliated with the group.

NTJ is a relatively unknown radical Islamist group said to have been formed in Kattankudy, a Muslim-dominated town in eastern Sri Lanka, in 2014. The group came to prominence in 2017 when some of its leaders were prosecuted for allegedly making derogatory remarks in a video against Buddhism.

Last year, a group of young Muslim university students, allegedly affiliated to NTJ, were also linked to the vandalising of Buddhist statues, seen as an attempt to instigate tensions between Buddhists and Muslims. It is not known if NTJ has affiliations with international Islamist networks or operated independently, although some experts link its members to Islamic State (IS) as well as Sri Lankan nationals known to have travelled to Syria and Iraq.

Radical Islamist groups have been quietly growing in influence, particularly in the eastern regions of Sri Lanka. Religious organisations known to preach strict interpretations of religious doctrines and practices have also been gaining traction. Security officials believe some of the several dozen Sri Lankan nationals believed to have travelled to Syria in recent years may have returned and engaged in radical activities back home.

According to reports, in January this year, law enforcement agencies had seized a large quantity of explosives, detonators and other weaponry and arrested several individuals in a remote compound in Wanathawilluwa, on the north-western coast. Investigations revealed a group of local Islamists, likely connected to NTJ, was planning to attack several historic Buddhist monuments around the country.

## **Outlook**

The decade following the end of Sri Lanka's civil war has been largely peaceful – with few reports of terrorism-related attacks. Yet, there are clear signs that the peace is fragile; relations between the different religious groups in the country have been affected by global and regional extremism. In recent years, resurgent hardline Buddhist groups have perpetrated a series of incidents of violence against Muslim and Christian communities.

Sunday's attacks targeting Christians represents another turn toward more religio-political violence. Although no group immediately claimed credit, supporters of IS were quick to frame the assault as revenge for attacks on Muslims and mosques. If so, it is still a mystery why the Christians were attacked when the Islamists' grievance was possibly more in retaliation against rising Buddhist extremism.

Given tenuous Buddhist-Muslim relations, a fear of reprisal attacks by hardline elements within the Sinhalese Buddhist majority against Muslims in Sri Lanka looms large, which the authorities will have to guard against, while also conducting a swift and thorough investigation into Sunday's terrorist attacks. On this score, the Sri

Lankan communities and government will need to work in concert to ensure that the country does not slide back into its internecine past.

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