

Easter Attacks in Sri Lanka: Failure of the Security

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Summary

A series of ghastly attacks took place in churches and hotels in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, 21 April 2019. As developments unfold, this brief aims to provide an initial analysis of what we know so far.

Introduction

A [string](#) of six bombings at churches and luxury hotels in Sri Lanka on 21 April 2019 has shaken the entire world. The attacks were seemingly well-coordinated and carried out with great sophistication in high-profile locations with the intention of producing a high casualty event. The targeted churches are popular in their respective localities, and had amassed a high turnout of worshippers on the occasion of Easter Sunday. The three hotels that were attacked - the Shangri-La Hotel, the Cinnamon Grand Hotel and The Kingsbury - are amongst the most luxurious hotels in the country which attract affluent tourists and locals alike.

The highly organized suicide attacks were unusual for post-war Sri Lanka. As of the morning of 24 April 2019, the death toll is reported at [approximately 360 people](#). On the evening of 22 April 2019, the President of Sri Lanka, Maithripala Sirisena issued a Gazette Extraordinary declaring a state of emergency, which provided the police and military powers to detain and conduct search-and-seizure operations and interrogate suspects without a court's approval. A total of 58 suspects have been detained so far. There is also an ongoing social media blackout to prevent the spread of misinformation.

Local authorities narrowed their [suspicions](#) on the National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ), a little-known extremist group with operations in eastern Sri Lanka. The NTJ gained attention last year for vandalising Buddhist statues in Mawanella, in central Sri Lanka. In 2016, its Secretary, Abdul Razik, was arrested on charges of inflammatory comments against Buddhists. He later issued an apology. Although the group has Facebook and Twitter pages, its presence on these platforms is sparse. The [leader](#) of the NTJ, Mohammed Zaharan, had spent a considerable time in both Sri Lanka and India. He used online platforms three years ago to [incite](#) hate, and called for non-Muslims to be 'eliminated'. Local Muslim leaders had apparently [reported him to authorities](#), but did not generate much response.

While speculations were rife that the NTJ could not have acted alone given that it is a small and obscure group with limited funding and resources, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) claimed responsibility for the bombings via its Amaq news agency. Sri Lankan State Minister of Defence Ruwan Wijewardene told Parliament that the attacks were carried out by ISIS in retaliation for the mosque attacks in Christchurch. After being badly battered, losing its territory in Iraq and Syria and the dismantlement of its caliphate, the militant group has made a number of [unsupported claims of responsibility for attacks such as the attack in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kabul and Pakistan](#). Nonetheless, if this assertion is true, then it reflects an incredible manoeuvre given that the

Christchurch attack was only about a month before, on 15 March 2019, and that synchronous suicide bombings, such as these, require significant organisational skills, logistics and planning.

Failure of National Security Measures

For a country with previous experience in terrorism during the days of the civil war, its response to this attack comes as a shock. From the looks of it, the local security agencies did not take proactive measures. Harin Fernando, Sri Lankan Minister of Telecommunication, was the first to reveal prior knowledge of the attacks. Later, Mano Ganeshan, another Member of Parliament confirmed that his security division was informed of a possible threat. Sirisena, addressing the nation on 23 April 2019, claimed that he was not informed of a possible threat and if he was, he could have taken appropriate measures. As such, he has said that he would have a complete police and security overhaul. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, in the meantime, while acknowledging that his government had received prior information of the attack, also claimed that the received intelligence was not shared with him or with other ministers. During a [press briefing](#), Minister of Health and government spokesperson, Rajitha Senaratne, reiterated that Wickremesinghe was uninformed. He pointed out that the letter signed by the Deputy Inspector General of Police, Priyalal Disanayaka, which is circulating on social media, only [addressed parts of the security divisions](#) – namely Ministerial Security, Judicial Security, Diplomatic Security, and Retired-Presidents Security divisions. Highlighting this has not been addressed to either the President's or Prime Minister's Security Divisions, Senaratne said that the Police chief, Pujuth Jayasundara, should resign and take responsibility for his failure. He also hinted that the information may have not been shared with Wickremesinghe since his personal issues with Sirisena are far from over. The President is also the Minister of Defence and Commander of the three forces in Sri Lanka and may have deliberately left him out of intelligence meetings.

While the soured relationship between the leaders could have been a reason for the failure of precautions, other aspects that have led to deteriorated national security in the country cannot be ruled out. Sri Lanka's Emergency Regulations and Counter-terrorism laws have been inactive for the past few years. As a result, the security forces did not have legal authority to carry out search-and-seizure operations. Additionally, for almost three years, the government is attempting to replace the highly draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) with a new counter-terrorism act. Furthermore, as the Chief of Army clearly [revealed](#), there has been a lack of integration in intelligence sharing due to the fractured and divisive system. From the current revelations, it is unclear as to whether the information was shared with other responsible divisions to provide public security safety.

It is clear that a multitude of factors have contributed to the current turmoil and have cost the lives of innocent people and injured many more. However, playing the blame game would be unwise at this difficult juncture. While the respective authorities have a moral obligation to admit to the failure of ensuring the security of civilians, it is also a time to reflect upon the mistakes and strengthen the mechanisms to prevent similar incidents in the future.

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