

Punish those responsible for the Sri Lanka attacks, not Muslim minorities

By Farahnaz Ispahani

Religious Freedom Institute (24.04.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2XHqs3K> – The largest single attack on Sri Lankan soil was not claimed by any extremist group until early Tuesday when ISIS declared responsibility. ISIS has conducted targeted attacks on Easter in the past, so the likelihood that the little-known Sri Lankan Islamic radical group, National Towheeth Jamaath (NTJ), is actually an ISIS affiliate or franchisee seems plausible.

Sri Lankans are trying to pick up the pieces after this attack, which consisted of a series of coordinated bomb blasts that ripped through churches and hotels on Easter Sunday, leaving almost 321 people dead and over 500 injured at last count. Until the ISIS claim of responsibility, the Sri Lankan government was pinning the blame on a local Islamist extremist group. This was seen by some as an attempt to create friction between the Christian and Muslim communities and demonize Sri Lankan Muslims right before the elections. The government, beset with conflict between the president and prime minister, is already being accused of negligence in ignoring intelligence about the attacks.

World faith leaders have expressed condemnation and sympathy, including Pope Francis, who expressed closeness to the Sri Lankan Christian community and said “to all the victims of such cruel violence, I entrust to the Lord all those who are tragically gone and I pray for the wounded and all those who suffer because of this tragic event.”

Egypt’s Al-Azhar University is the Sunni Muslim world’s

foremost religious institution, and it's Grand Imam Shaikh Ahmed al-Tayeb said, "I cannot imagine a human being could target the peaceful on their celebration day," and that "Those terrorists' perverted disposition goes against the teachings of all religions." "I pray," added Shaikh Tayeb, "that God grants patience to the families of the casualties and recovery to the injured."

The Sri Lankan government said they were investigating international assistance to NTJ. Until yesterday, NTJ was an obscure Sri Lankan Islamist group best known for vandalizing Buddha statues and demanding that women be fully veiled.

Muslim and Christian discord has been very minimal in Sri Lankan society. Both Christians and Muslims are religious minorities there. Since the major conflict issue for Sri Lanka in the past was always ethnic, the main source of unrest was a decades long, head-on clash between the ethnic Tamils and the Sinhalese.

Amarnath Amarasingam, a senior research fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue who studies extremism in Sri Lanka and the region said in a recent interview in the New Yorker Magazine:

As far as I know, there was no real conflict between Muslims and the Christians. Particularly in the east, they lived quite happily. The Tamil communities, the Christian communities, the Muslim community—it is a very diverse area. And I would say the same thing about Colombo. There was no real conflict like that. It is partly the targeting of the Christian population that makes me think it is not just a local-born and -bred Muslim organization that planned and carried out this operation. The targeting of churches, Christian communities, during Easter has a very international-jihadist component to it.

According to the U.S. State Department's 2017 Annual Religious

Freedom Report:

Attacks on religious minorities continued unabated from the previous year. The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) documented 97 incidents of attacks on churches, intimidation and violence against pastors and their congregations, and obstruction of worship services. The Sri Lankan Muslim Council (MCSL) reported dozens of violent attacks on mosques and Muslim prayer rooms during the year, especially during Ramadan. Buddhist nationalist groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS, Buddhist Power Force) continued to promote the supremacy of the ethnic Sinhalese Buddhist majority and denigrate religious and ethnic minorities, especially via social media.

It is very difficult to understand how a small, local terrorist group like NTJ could coordinate an attack of this scale unless supported from the outside, and with ISIS's recent claim of involvement, it may be the source of such support. This coordinated act of terror is reminiscent of the Pulwama attack in Kashmir recently. In the Pulwama attack, a Pakistani based extremist Islamist group, Jaish e Muhammad, claimed responsibility. The suicide bomber was a young local Kashmiri from Pulwama district and a member of Jaish-e-Mohammed.

This attack is also reminiscent of the Mumbai, India attacks in July 2011, which consisted of a series of three coordinated bomb explosions at different locations across the city. Jaish e Muhammad also took responsibility for that incident.

From the start, ISIS had been discussed as a possible suspect. They have often targeted both ancient and modern churches and peoples, including Christians, Yezidis, and Shia Muslims. Moreover, it is indisputable that they have the capability. When ISIS's AMAQ news propaganda agency claimed responsibility yesterday for the blasts, no one should have been taken by surprise. The group, which has previously made a series of

unsupported claims, did not provide any evidence.

Elsewhere in the region, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party colleagues have been intensifying their anti-Muslim rhetoric and pursuing anti-Muslim immigration legislation during the Indian elections. In addition, Pakistani politicians, including Prime Minister Imran Khan, used the Blasphemy and Anti-Ahmadiyya card to denigrate Muslims during his election campaign. The cancer of hatred for 'the other' has today spread all over South Asia and now, increasingly, in Southeast Asia as well.

Even in the West today politicians play up religious sentiment and anti-otherness to win elections. In this context we must keep in mind that the Sri Lankan elections are also on the horizon, slated to be held by December of this year.

The use of hate speech and naming and blaming religious minorities for attacks on civilians and military personnel is extremely dangerous. The religious minorities in Sri Lanka are facing greater persecution today than at any other time in the nation's history. This hatred and otherization of Sri Lankan Christians and Muslims may play well to the Buddhist majority, particularly before a national election, but as the global trend shows, this approach damages a society's integrity, economy, and finally its stability. After fighting an ethnic war for decades one hopes the Sri Lankan government tones down its blame game and finds the actual culprit behind this highly sophisticated attack. Upon the conclusion of a proper investigation, may the government act decisively to punish those responsible according to all international mechanisms available.

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SRI LANKA: Easter Sunday bomb attacks against churches and hotels: Over 300 dead

Human Rights Without Frontiers strongly condemns the bomb attacks on hotels and churches in Sri Lanka targeting Christians and other innocent civilians. The bombings have left over 300 dead and hundreds more injured.

CNN (23.04.2019) – <https://cnn.it/2Uze9nX> – The first wave of attacks struck during packed Easter Sunday services between 8:45 a.m. and 9:30 a.m.

Suicide bombers struck three churches around the country: St. Antony's, a popular shrine in the capital, Colombo; St. Sebastian's in Negombo, north of the capital, where 102 people died; and the Zion Church, in the eastern port city of Batticaloa.

About the same time, more blasts ripped through three luxury hotels in Colombo: The Shangri-La, the Cinnamon Grand and the Kingsbury, all popular with foreign tourists and the country's business community.

At the Shangri-La, the bomb was detonated just after 9 a.m at the Table One cafe as guests were eating breakfast.

Later in the day, a blast rocked a hotel in front of the Dehiwala Zoo in Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia. The final blast struck a private house in Mahawila Gardens, in Dematagoda, during a raid in connection with the earlier attacks, officials said. Three police officers were killed.

It is not clear why Christians were targeted: Christianity is a minority religion in Sri Lanka, accounting for 7.4% of the total population of 21.4 million. According to census data, 70.2% of Sri Lankans identify as Buddhist, 12% Hindu and 9.7% Muslim.

Who were the victims?

BBC (23.04.2019) – <https://bbc.in/2IQ7u6U> – Most of those who died were Sri Lankan nationals, including scores of Christians attending Easter Sunday church services.

Sri Lankan officials said 38 foreign nationals were among the dead, with another 14 unaccounted for. The death toll includes at least eight British citizens and at least 10 Indian

nationals.

The mass funeral for about 30 victims took place at St Sebastian's church in Negombo, north of Colombo, which was one of the places targeted in Sunday's blasts. Another funeral service was scheduled for later on Tuesday.

A moment of silence was also observed at 08:30 on Tuesday, reflecting the time the first of six bombs detonated.

Flags were lowered to half-mast and people, many of them in tears, bowed their heads in respect.

Why was Sri Lanka chosen as a target? Islam expert Susanne Schröter answers...

DW (23.04.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2ZtFdcb> – It must be made clear that Sri Lanka is a country where Christians have never been a group with much political significance. Furthermore, the attackers could not latch on to a narrative of conflict between Muslims and Christians, because this conflict doesn't exist in Sri Lanka. This is why what happened was very unusual.

I think that Sri Lanka was chosen because it was an easy target. The authorities were obviously ill-equipped and were not being vigilant, although they had reportedly been warned of imminent attacks.

The brutality of the attacks, and the symbolic timing and location, were intended to elicit the greatest possible international impact. The terrorists clearly achieved this aim and sent a message: "You can use international forces to drive us out of Syria and Iraq, but we haven't been defeated and we are still powerful."

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SRI LANKA: Violence, discrimination against Christians escalate in Sri Lanka

Christian Headlines (19.10.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2qj30ex> – Attacks and other actions against Christians in Sri Lanka have escalated this year, with Hindu extremism beginning to take

root along with long-time Buddhist aggression, according to rights advocates.

“Last month there have been more incidents that have been documented than previous months,” an attorney with the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) who requested anonymity told Morning Star News.

NCEASL reported 67 incidents against Christians in Sri Lanka from January through September. Last month saw the highest number of cases reported this year, 12, while 10 incidents were recorded in each of two months, July and March, followed by April and January with eight incidents each.

June and July saw seven incidents each, followed by May with four and February with two.

The highest number of incidents fell under the category of “violence” and “threats” against Christians, with 16 cases each, according to NCEASL figures. This was followed by nine incidents in each of the categories of “discrimination,” “demands for closure” (of worship places) and “intimidation,” while “police inaction,” “false allegations” and “registration” (of cases against Christians) registered two incidents each. One case each of “legal challenge” and “demonstration” were recorded.

Sri Lanka’s population is about 70 percent Buddhist and 13 percent Hindu.

Entire Communities Instigated

There is a trend from group attacks to groups instigating entire communities, the rights advocate said.

“We are witnessing that communities are being mobilized in an increasing manner against Christians,” the attorney said. “The incidents are not anymore only led by extremist groups, but we are seeing that the extremist elements are able to influence communities as a whole and lead violent mob attacks against places of worship and people.”

Among recent cases, a large mob in Southern Province gathered to protest against a church in their community, which was followed by a violent attack, and then discrimination. In Beliatta in Hambantota district, a mob of about 100 people from nearby villages on Sept. 12 vandalized the Assemblies of God Church building.

NCEASL reported that the assailants damaged the church building structure, two motorcycles parked outside and desecrated and removed religious symbols hanging on the front door. A few of them entered the premises, threatened the pastor and his family with death, demanded that worship services stop and told the pastor to leave the village.

They harassed women in the congregation and spewed obscenities, and a Buddhist monk later joined them and further

aggravated matters. When three police officers arrived at 12 p.m., they had to call for back-up because the crowd had grown out of control and was not allowing the pastor or anyone else to leave – the mob assaulted a member of the congregation who tried to leave.

After 10 more officers arrived, only then were police able to carry the pastor safely to the Beliatta Police Station. He filed a complaint.

Later that night at about 11:45 p.m., according to NCEASL, unidentified people pelted the pastor's home with stones for about 20 minutes. The stones injured the pastor's uncle, endangered his child and damaged roof tiles. Police secured the area after the pastor called an emergency hotline.

Police arrived at about 1 a.m., arrested one person and continued to provide security to the pastor's family with seven officers at his place. The following day, the pastor filed another complaint.

On Sept. 12 in the same town, around 500 people, including Buddhist monks, staged a protest against the pastor and church worship.

"Both these protests were in the Southern Province, and the people who were protesting were Buddhists since the province is largely a Buddhist area," the attorney told Morning Star News. "But what is concerning is that since the end of the [1983-2009 civil] war, we now also see such attacks taking

place also in the Hindu Tamil areas, in the east particularly.”

Rise of Hindu Extremism

Some attacks by Hindus have been reported in the north as well, where there are sizeable Hindu populations, but not as many as in the eastern Hindu areas, the attorney said.

“In the Eastern Province, we see a lot of influence from the India’s Hindu right-wing groups such as the RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh] seeping into Sri Lanka,” the attorney said. “Hindu extremist groups have had meetings with Hindu villagers promoting hatred and division and inciting them towards violence.”

The instigation has led to violence, denial of burial in public cemeteries and other rights violations.

“In this way, we see not only Buddhist extremism, which is something that has always been in the country, but also a rise in Hindu extremism, particularly in the Eastern Province,” the attorney told Morning Star News.

With NCEASL help, victims have been able to file police complaints, leading courts to take up their cases, the attorney said.

“There have been instances when cases have been filed against Christians, and the bias is very visible,” the attorney said. “In these cases, the Christians have had no choice but to

approach the courts. Some judges who may also be biased never give an order in a matter of religious freedom because they do not want to set a precedent and very often force the Christians to settle the matter rather than giving justice. So, in many incidents no one gets punished by law.”

The attorney has seen many cases where Christians have responded in forgiveness and have moved on, but also many instances where Christians get very discouraged.

“I have come across a few pastors who has been so discouraged that their congregations have left them, and at least two pastors have actually left the country in the past year,” the attorney said. “It has been a sad situation. On one hand there has been growth in the church because of persecution, but there have also been instances where it has completely broken the church.”

Sri Lanka is ranked 44th on Christian support organization Open Doors’ 2018 World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.

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NORTH KOREA: Sri Lanka, Poland say no to North Korean workers

By Elizabeth Shim

UPI (28.09.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2yje2Wu> – Countries that once welcomed North Korean forced laborers to farms and construction sites are banning workers or asking existing workers to leave.

Sri Lanka and Poland are applying new restrictions on North Korean labor mobility in abidance with United Nations Security Council sanctions resolutions, Voice of America reported Thursday.

The measures are being taken as Malaysia, a country that enjoyed friendly ties with Pyongyang since 1973, is executing a North Korea travel ban, citing tensions on the peninsula.

According to VOA, the Sri Lankan government is no longer allowing North Koreans to use its online system to apply for a work visa, and banning them from applying for the visas at diplomatic missions overseas.

North Koreans are also not allowed to apply for visitor or tourist visas, according to the report.

In a statement on its policies, Sri Lanka said the regulations allow the country to “fulfill our obligations” and implement Resolution 2321, while supporting nuclear non-proliferation.

In Poland, North Koreans will no longer be issued temporary residence permits or work permits, according to VOA.

Poland is complying with a European Union request to suspend the issuance of permits, and abiding by U.N. Resolutions 2371 and 2375.

Poland still hosts 400 North Korean workers who earn foreign currency for the Kim Jong Un regime.

Malaysia previously hosted North Korean “guest workers” but they may have all voluntarily left the country, or were expelled, following the assassination of Kim Jong Nam, the North Korean leader’s half-brother, in an airport in Kuala Lumpur.

Malaysia may be further distancing itself from Pyongyang following weapons provocations.

In a statement released Thursday, the Malaysian government stated all citizens are banned from visiting North Korea until further notice, Yonhap reported.

Malaysia’s foreign ministry cited “tensions on the Korean peninsula” as one of the reasons for the travel ban, although a similar ban was not announced for South Korea, a popular tourist destination.

The announcement comes after Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak said he would review diplomatic ties with North Korea, following a summit with U.S. President Donald Trump.

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