SRI LANKA TERROR ATTACKS AND THEIR AFTERMATH

By Donnelly McCleland

Sri Lankan police raided the headquarters of a hard-line Islamist group founded by the suspected ringleader behind the Easter suicide bombings of churches and hotels, a Reuters witness said, as Sunday mass [on 28 April] was cancelled due to fears of further attacks. Armed police in the town of Kattankudy searched the headquarters of the National Thawheedh Jamaath (NTJ) and detained one man at the premises, a Reuters reporter at the scene said. Police did not comment. On Saturday [27 April] the government banned the NTJ under new emergency laws. The authorities believe Zahran Hashim, the founder of NTJ, masterminded and was one of the nine suicide bombers in the attacks on Easter Sunday which killed 253 people. Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attacks. (Reuters)

The Easter Sunday terror attacks

On Easter Sunday [21 April], suicide bombers killed at least 253 people and injured some 500 at churches and luxury hotels across Sri Lanka. Most of those killed were Sri Lankans. The dead also included 40 foreigners, from the UK, the US, Australia, Turkey, India, China, Denmark, the Netherlands and Portugal. The official death toll had reached 359 by Thursday 25 April. However, the Sri Lankan government then revised the figure down, blaming a calculation error due to the devastating impact of the explosions on the victims.

Beginning at 8:45 am local time on 21 April, six blasts were set off in a short space of time. Three were at churches – in the Kochchikade district of the capital, Colombo; in Negombo, to the north; and in the eastern city of Batticaloa. The other three blasts hit the Shangri-La, Kingsbury and Cinnamon Grand hotels in Colombo. Two further explosions were reported later as police searched for suspects – one in Dehiwala in southern Colombo, and another one near the Colombo district of Dematagoda, during a police raid. Late that same day, an improvised explosive device was found and disposed of close to the country's main airport, near Colombo.

On Monday 22 April, another blast rocked a street near a church in the capital. Police were attempting to defuse explosives in a vehicle used by the attackers when it blew up. According to police sources, an attack on a fourth hotel failed and helped lead police to the Islamist group now blamed for the assault.

A complex operation with possible international backing

Evidence is mounting that local jihadists linked to the Islamic State (IS) group carried out the attack, and police have made a number of arrests and raids, some of which have resulted in the deaths of suspects and police alike. On Friday 26 April, relatives of the bombers' suspected mastermind, Islamist preacher Zahran Hashim, were among 15 people killed when police raided a house in the eastern town of Sainthamaruthu. More than 100 people, including foreigners from Syria and Egypt, have been detained for questioning over the Easter attacks. Police believe that radical Muslim preacher Zahran led the NTJ – or a splinter faction – to mount the attacks in Colombo as well as on a church in Batticaloa in the east. The authorities have named the other group suspected of involvement as Jammiyathul Millathu Ibrahim. Neither group were well known before the attacks, but the government has come under heavy criticism for not heeding intelligence warnings of the bombings, including one from India's spy service before the attacks.

Neither of the suspected groups claimed responsibility for the attacks. However, on Tuesday 23 April, Islamic State (IS) said it had carried out the attacks and released video of men it says were the bombers, pledging allegiance to the
group. All but one of the men can be seen with their faces covered. Some are holding knives. The man with his face uncovered has been named as Hashim, who went on to blow himself up at a hotel in Colombo. IS said, "members of the US-led coalition and Christians in Sri Lanka" had been targeted.

BBC security correspondent Gordon Corera reports that IS has in the past claimed attacks it was not involved with, but this statement is being taken seriously due to the scale of the attacks and the choice of targets being more in line with IS ideology than with traditional types of communal violence seen in Sri Lanka. If it turns out that Islamic State was in fact behind the attacks, then Sri Lanka joins an expanding list of countries impacted by a transnational pattern of Islamist violence carried out against Christians and the West. The Sri Lankan Church was then a target by association.

According to the Sri Lankan government, most of the attackers were "well educated" and had come from "middle- or upper middle-class" families. Two were sons of a wealthy spice trader, Mohamed Ibrahim, who was arrested after the attacks.

The aftermath

The government admitted a "major intelligence lapse" after it was revealed that an Indian intelligence warning from the beginning of the month about planned attacks against churches and VIP targets was not properly shared by the authorities. Security services had been monitoring the NTJ, but the prime minister and the cabinet were not warned, ministers said. Mr Sirisena and Mr Wickremesinghe are bitter enemies whose rivalry pushed Sri Lanka into a constitutional crisis last year that was resolved only through the Supreme Court’s intervention. This animosity could account in part for the possible breakdown in communication between different branches of the government. President Maithripala Sirisena has indicated his intention to fire the defence secretary and inspector general of police.

Sri Lanka is a nation reeling in the aftermath. There have been numerous mass funerals and smaller ones. What has been particularly difficult is the enormous number of children killed in the attacks. The overall number of casualties from the attacks is unclear but officials believe children could end up accounting for more than a fifth of the final death toll. According to BBC correspondent Ayesha Perera: "For Sri Lankans the loss of so many children has been one of the most defining features of these attacks. It is not the bombers who are the subject of conversation - but the children. It was the images of innocence that gripped the public imagination – these children also represented what could be called the first "innocent" generation. War, division and brutality were not part of their daily diet."

In just a few weeks Sri Lanka will celebrate 10 years since the end of their almost 30-year civil war between government forces and separatist Tamil militants, which saw tens of thousands killed. The past decade has not been total strife free - there have been anti-Muslim riots and attacks on churches. Religious tensions were on the rise though never on this scale. However, the bloodshed that regularly affected Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims of generations before had all but gone.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

The Archbishop of Colombo Malcolm Ranjith, who asked churches to suspend Sunday mass on 28 April due to security fears, delivered a televised special sermon from a chapel at his home. The service was attended by President Maithripala Sirisena, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, in a rare public display of unity.

During the Archbishop’s address he said: “We extend our hand of friendship and fraternity to all our brothers and sisters of whatever class, society or religion that differentiates us.”

Easter Sunday’s attacks were the worst ever against Sri Lanka’s small Christian minority, who make up just 7% of the 21 million population. Theravada Buddhism is Sri Lanka’s major religion, accounting for about 70% of the population. Hindus and Muslims make up around 12% and 10% of the population respectively. The dominant Sinhalese Buddhist population have frequently targeted religious minorities, including Christians and especially Muslims. In fact, Christians and Muslims in Sri Lanka have developed a degree of solidarity as persecuted minorities.

How does the global Church respond to their hurting brothers and sisters? There is much anguish for those who are grieving and suffering in the wake of the attacks. But there is also a need for wisdom regarding how best to support the Sri Lankan Church. After a 2006 attack on the Palestinian Bible Society, Pastor Labib Madanat spoke of the need
for fellow Christians to strengthen the courage of the suffering Church. He said that fellow believers should not strengthen self-pity among those affected, and should let Christ rather than Satan shape a response. This is far easier said than done, but speaking forgiveness rather than justice or retribution is the most powerful testimony in these tragedies.

PRAY

➢ For the Lord to comfort all those suffering and grieving
➢ For Church leaders in Sri Lanka to speak and model forgiveness rather than retribution
➢ For the global body of Christ to support the Sri Lankan Church in a Godly way

IMAGE SOURCE: