

Religious services canceled after Sri Lanka church bombings

“What was attacked was Sri Lanka’s strained but still living tradition of inter-religious and inter-ethnic cooperation and friendship,” wrote one NGO leader.

by [Simon Montlake](#) in the [May 22, 2019](#) issue



St. Anthony's Shrine in the Archdiocese of Colombo, Sri Lanka, on April 6, 2019—weeks before it was targeted in Easter Sunday bombings. [Some rights reserved](#) by [AntanO](#).

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) In the week following the multiple bombings of churches and hotels in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, Muslim leaders discouraged attending Friday prayer services and Catholic churches canceled Sunday mass.

Killing more than 250 people and wounding hundreds more, it was Asia’s deadliest terrorist attack in decades.

News of the attack seemed to fit an all too familiar pattern: one more massacre against a religious community that would heighten interfaith tensions. Two days later, the self-described Islamic State claimed responsibility.

“Intercommunal conflict and schism is precisely what ISIS hopes to provoke,” wrote Alan Keenan, project director in Sri Lanka for the International Crisis Group, about the attack. “In addition to the Christian community that was the direct target of the bombings . . . what was attacked was Sri Lanka’s strained but still living tradition of inter-religious and inter-ethnic cooperation and friendship.”

As investigations began into who the Sri Lanka bombers were and what motivations they had, there was the question of how Sri Lanka fumbled intelligence warnings about an attack on Christian targets. The *New York Times* and other newspapers have reported that the United States and India had warned Sri Lanka in prior weeks about possible suicide bombings on the island. President Maithripala Sirisena has called for an inquiry into the failure to respond to those warnings.

Sri Lanka is, in some ways, an unlikely site for an ISIS attack. Its political fault lines have long been primarily ethnic, between the Sinhalese majority, which is predominantly Buddhist, and Tamil minority, which is mostly Hindu and Christian. It also has a Muslim minority estimated at 10 percent. Sri Lanka ranks low on the list of countries where Christians and Muslims have been violently at odds.

Sri Lankan Tamil militants fought for an independent state for three decades, until the defeat of the Tamil Tiger group in 2009. Muslims were targeted by both sides during a brutal war that tore the country apart and included terrorist attacks and assassinations of civilian leaders.

Since then, social tensions have continued, including attacks by Sinhalese Buddhists on Muslims—often fomented by militant Buddhist groups with political patrons. Authorities have warned of creeping radicalization among Muslims, and in 2016, a justice minister said that 32 Sri Lankan Muslims had traveled to Syria to join ISIS. More recently, militants were accused of destroying Buddhist statues.

Still, such sectarian tensions don’t explain the scale and sophistication of the Easter Sunday attacks—or the targeting of Christian communities. Local Muslim militants had focused on Buddhists and secular Muslims, not Christians or vacationers in Sri Lanka’s booming tourism industry.

Analysts say ISIS militants returning from Syria could have brought back an anti-Christian agenda, but they would have needed a local network to carry out any attacks.

Sri Lanka's state defense minister, Ruwan Wijewardene, told Parliament that the government had information possibly linking the April 21 bombings to the March 15 mosque massacres in Christchurch, New Zealand, when dozens of Muslim worshipers were shot by a white supremacist. Given the level of planning required for multiple suicide attacks in different cities, that timeline seems suspicious. Similar large-scale attacks have reportedly taken months to prepare.

It's more likely that the Easter attacks were already in the works and that Christchurch may have convinced a few waverers to join. That's not the same as a retaliatory attack. And Wijewardene may have reason to muddy the waters—and deflect blame—after a systemic government failure. ISIS, meanwhile, has every reason to claim that it was responsible.

"It seems that of late they're just claiming anything they can," said Gary LaFree, a criminologist at the University of Maryland and founder of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, or START.

LaFree helped create START's widely consulted terrorism database, which goes back to 1970. He points to a wave of terrorist incidents since 2002 that peaked in 2014 and has since fallen, despite high-profile attacks like those in Sri Lanka. While Easter Sunday's bombings were particularly deadly, the global trend in terms of fatalities and number of incidents offers some encouragement. "It's been falling for three years and pretty substantially," he said.

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