



# Sri Lanka's 2019 Easter Bombings

April 24, 2019

## The Attack

A series of Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka claimed over 350 lives and left over 500 injured. At least 38 of the dead are foreigners, [including four Americans](#). The bombings targeted churches in the capital Colombo, as well as Negombo, and Batticaloa. The Shangri-la, Cinnamon Grand, and Kingsbury Hotels in Colombo were also targeted. A planned attack on a fourth hotel failed and reportedly helped police identify the perpetrators of the attacks. The attacks were carried out by nine Sri Lankan suicide bombers and are the worst violence to strike Sri Lanka since the 2009 end of its civil war between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Sri Lankan officials have declared that the attacks were carried out by [National Thowheeth Jama'ath](#) (NTJ), a little-known Sri Lankan Islamist terrorist group. The scale, coordination, and targets of the attack have led some observers to suggest [possible linkages with the Islamic State](#) (IS), a view enhanced by [video of the suspected leader](#) of the attacks and his followers appearing to be swearing allegiance to the IS. The [IS reportedly stated](#) that “Those that carried out the attack that targeted members of the U.S.-led coalition and Christians in Sri Lanka the day before yesterday are Islamic State group fighters.” A Sri Lankan official reportedly [stated](#) that as early as 2017, the United States had warned Sri Lankan officials that the Islamic State was recruiting across Southeast Asia and that Sri Lanka could become a “hub” for the group’s activities. The United States apparently had [no prior knowledge](#) of the 2019 plot.

An estimated 32 or more Sri Lankans went to fight with the IS in Syria, and these fighters [may have facilitated](#) linkages between the IS and NTJ. Sri Lankan Health Minister Rajitha Senaratne has [stated](#), “We do not believe these attacks were carried out by a group of people who were confined to this country.... There was an international network without which these attacks could not have succeeded.” The extent of any such linkages is currently unclear.

The attack targeted the Sri Lankan Christian minority. [Christians account for 7.6% of Sri Lanka's population](#) of over 22 million. Buddhists account for 70% of the population while Hindus (12.6%), and Muslims (9.7%) are other significant minority groups. Most of Sri Lanka's Christians are Catholics, while Protestants account for approximately 1% of Sri Lanka's population. [Christian influence in Sri Lanka](#) can be traced back to periods when Sri Lanka was a Portuguese, Dutch, and British colony.

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## The Sri Lankan Government's Response

Senior Sri Lankan police officials reportedly had intelligence that NTJ was planning an attack. The intelligence reportedly identified NTJ and five of its members, but was not raised to the attention of the Sri Lankan Cabinet. It is also reported that [India warned the Sri Lankan government](#) in early April of a possible bomb attack. Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil [Wickremesinghe reportedly stated](#), "We must look into why adequate precautions were not taken.... Neither I nor the Ministers were kept informed." President Maithripala [Sirisena has also demanded the resignation of top security officials](#). Sri Lankan police have arrested at least 60 suspects in connection with the attacks. A curfew was also instituted across the country and social media was blocked. Defense Minister Ruwan Wijewardene has urged media not to use the names of the attackers. [Wijiwardene has asserted](#) that the attacks were carried out in response to the Australian white supremacist attack against Mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, which killed 50 Muslims. Police were granted [emergency powers to detain and question](#) suspects without a court order and masses at churches were canceled.

## Recent Tensions with the Muslim Community

There are signs that the bombings may be stirring new religious hatred in some parts of Sri Lanka. [Muslims reportedly fear a backlash](#) despite calls for calm from religious leaders. The emergence of the NTJ may be part of a response by some Sri Lankan Muslims to the rising prominence of Buddhist extremist groups. Since 2012, the hardline Sinhalese Buddhist group Bodu Bala Sena [has been vocal](#) in its opposition to the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka. A Buddhist mob [attacked](#) a Colombo mosque in 2013 and injured 13 people. Sri Lanka declared a state of emergency and established a curfew in the central district of Kandy in March 2018 following [sectarian violence between Muslims and Buddhists](#). The Vice President of the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka, Hilmy Ahmad, has stated that he [warned military intelligence](#) about NTJ approximately three years ago.

## U.S. Response

A White House statement following the attacks said, "The United States condemns in the strongest terms the outrageous terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka that have claimed so many precious lives on this Easter Sunday. Our heartfelt condolences go out to the families of the more than 200 killed and hundreds of others wounded." Secretary of State [Pompeo stated](#), "We stand with the Sri Lankan government and people as they confront violent extremism and have offered our assistance as they work to bring the perpetrators to justice." The Department of State [issued an April 21 travel advisory](#) warning that,

Terrorist groups continue plotting possible attacks in Sri Lanka. Terrorists may attack with little or no warning, targeting tourist locations, transportation hubs, markets/shopping malls, local government facilities, hotels, clubs, restaurants, places of worship, parks, major sporting and cultural events, educational institutions, airports, and other public areas.

U.S. Ambassador to Sri Lanka Alaina [Teplitz told reporters](#) that the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation and the military are supporting the investigation into the bombings. The United States and Sri Lanka also halted a series of [Cooperation Afloat and Readiness Training \(CARAT\) exercises](#) that were underway off the coast of Hambantota prior to the Easter attack.

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