

Could Sri Lanka avert attacks?

SRI LANKA TERROR ATTACK

2 Muslim brothers are hotel suicide bombers

Muslim brothers carried out two of the hotel suicide blasts in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, part of a wave of bombings that killed more than 320 people, police sources told AFP yesterday. The brothers, sons of a wealthy Colombo spice trader, blew themselves up as guests queued for breakfast at the Shangri-La and Cinnamon Grand hotels in the capital, the source said. The sources also revealed that a fourth hotel was targeted in the string of bombings, but the attack failed. The brothers, whose names have not been revealed, were in their late twenties and operated their own "family cell", an investigation officer said. But it was not clear what ties they had to the other bombers involved in the devastating attacks against three high-end hotels and three churches. The pair were key members of the Islamist National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ) which the government has blamed for the attacks, the official added.

Lanka shuts down all social media

Sri Lanka's decision to block social media following deadly suicide attacks highlights a growing distrust of online platforms, but critics said the move is likely to restrict the flow of important news and information as well as abusive content. The move comes amid growing frustration by governments around the world with internet platforms over the propagation of misinformation and incitements of violence. According to the digital rights group NetBlocks, Sri Lanka blocked Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Instagram, Snapchat, Viber, WhatsApp and YouTube following the Easter bombings targeting churches and hotels. By blocking Facebook, Sri Lanka also shut down the leading social network's "safety check" feature that enables users to communicate with friends and family after a disaster. SOURCE: AFP

CNN ONLINE

When a series of suicide bombs tore apart churches and hotels across Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, most of the country -- and the rest of the world -- was taken completely by surprise. But in the capital, Colombo, it was not a shock to everyone.

Some elements of the government here had known for weeks about warnings of a potential attack on churches and tourist destinations.

Intelligence services in India and the US told Sri Lanka of the threat in early April, officials said. One memo compiled by Sri Lankan security officials was so specific that it even gave a list of suspects. In the run-up to the holiest day in the Christian calendar, the warnings seemed to increase in frequency and urgency.

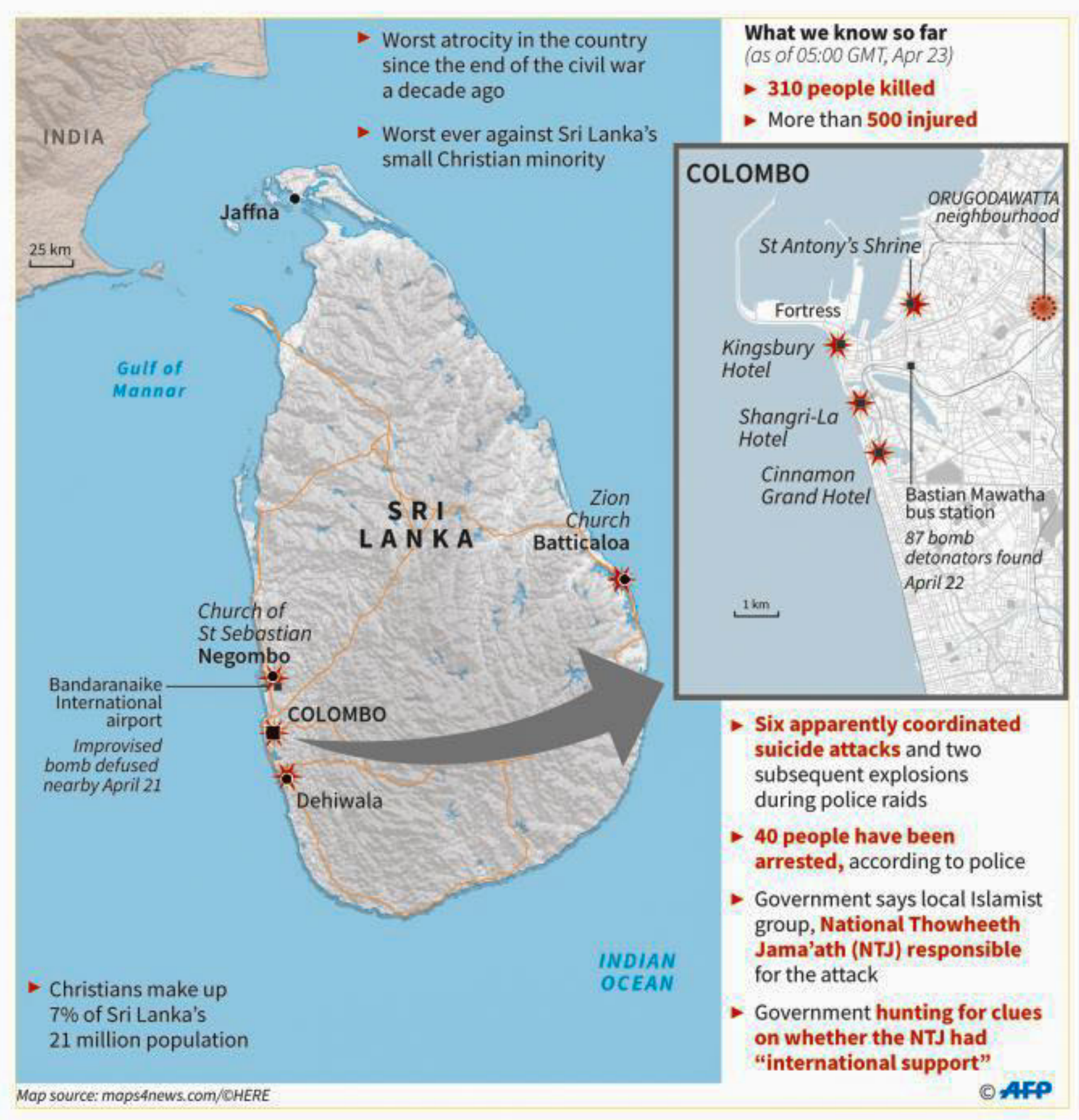
But none made any difference. When suicide bombers walked into three churches around Sri Lanka, and three upscale hotels in Colombo, they faced no enhanced security. As worshipers closed their eyes in prayer, as hotel guests lined up for breakfast, the attackers detonated their devices -- and the effects were devastating.

It was unclear on Monday why the red flags went unheeded. But Sri Lanka has

Report says India, US warned of attacks on churches, tourist spots

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been wracked by political divisions since a constitutional crisis last year, when President Maithripala Sirisena attempted to replace the incumbent Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, with a favored candidate. Wickremesinghe was reinstated in December after the intervention of the Supreme Court, but the government remains deeply divided. Now, there are fears that the political feuding could have provided a window for a catastrophic security lapse that could reverberate across the region.



The origins of what appears to be a spectacular security failure go back more than two weeks. On April 4, foreign intelligence agencies told Sri Lankan officials of a potential plot to launch suicide attacks against Christian churches and tourist spots, according to government spokesman Rajitha Senaratne. Five days later, on April 9, the country's Defense Ministry informed the Inspector General of Police of this alleged plot, and named a group believed to be behind the plan, the Nations Thawahid Jaman (NTJ). Unusually, the memo also included a list of suspects. On April 11, another memo, signed by Priyalal Dissanayake, the Deputy Inspector General of Police, was circulated widely to a range of security services and some government

ministries, according to Senaratne and a police source. That memo, a copy of which has been seen by CNN, laid out the threat and again contained a list of suspects. Foreign security services repeated their warnings in the days and hours before the attack, Senaratne told reporters on Monday. One warning came ten minutes before the blasts, he claimed -- although it was not clear whether he was speaking with precision. An economy minister, Harsha de Silva, said he later learned that those warnings came from Sri Lanka's nearest neighbor, India, and from the US. Their content? "Something terrible was to happen," he told CNN's Christiane Amanpour. In his interview with CNN, De Silva said the Prime Minister was "kept in the dark" about the warnings.

The group named in the memos as planning an attack, Nations Thawahid Jaman, has hitherto acted only in the margins, blamed for little more than defacing Buddhist statues.

According to Saroj Kumar Rath, a terrorism and security expert at the University of Delhi, NTJ has its origins in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu in the early 2000s.

Manoj Joshi, a fellow at Indian think tank Observer Research Foundation, said that NTJ had carried out protests at places like liquor stores in the past, but he wasn't aware that it had initiated any previous terror attacks.

Mainstream Muslim groups have said they tried to warn the Sri Lankan authorities about the potential danger posed by NTJ. But its relative obscurity has raised questions about whether it would have had the capacity to carry out such a sophisticated and coordinated attack alone.

Dhruva Jaishankar, a fellow in foreign policy studies at Brookings India, told CNN that while it was premature to speculate on which organizations might have been involved, the role of "a larger organization cannot be dismissed."

Jaishankar said there was a known presence of ISIS-linked groups in neighboring India, the Maldives, and Bangladesh -- as well as Pakistan and the Philippines -- but that there was little evidence of ISIS activity in Sri Lanka.

What seems clear, Jaishankar said, is that the assault had a religious motivation and was also designed to target foreigners. "These are people who wanted to hurt Sri Lanka's reputation," he said.

The coordination and planning of Sunday's attacks -- involving multiple high profile targets, suicide bombers and powerful bombs -- appears to have been intense, and must have been long in the works.

Sri Lankan authorities have already admitted to missing multiple warning signs. Now, a nation still reeling in horror from Sunday's bloodshed is waiting to see just how widespread the failure was, and how much of a role the country's dysfunctional politics played in it.



China unveils new destroyer

China showed off the first of its new generation of guided missile destroyers on yesterday as President Xi Jinping reviewed a major naval parade through mist and rain to mark 70 years since the founding of China's navy. Xi is overseeing a sweeping plan to refurbish the People's Liberation Army (PLA) by developing everything from stealth jets to aircraft carriers as China ramps up its presence in the disputed South China Sea and around self-ruled Taiwan, which has rattled nerves around the region and in Washington. Yesterday's parade featured 32 Chinese vessels and 39 aircraft, as well as warships from 13 foreign countries including India, Japan, Vietnam and Australia. A total of 61 countries have sent delegations to the event. The United States has sent a low-level delegation to Qingdao.

Half of Americans back stronger role of religion

Around half of Americans favor religion playing a greater role in US society, while 18 percent oppose that idea, according to a Pew Research Center study published Monday. France, Sweden and the Netherlands, meanwhile, posted almost opposite results: 47 percent, 51 percent and 45 percent respectively were opposed to religion playing a key role in society. Among the 27 countries surveyed in 2018, France (20 percent) and Japan (15 percent) were the countries with the lowest proportion of citizens favoring strengthening religion's role in society. Indonesia (85 percent), Kenya (74 percent) and Tunisia (69 percent) came out as the countries most in favor of a bigger place for religion. The study did not make a distinction between different religions.

Germany, Japan share borders

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan was trolled on social media after his comment suggesting that Germany and Japan share a common border and would not have "bad relations" because of common economic interests. In the viral clip, Khan can be heard talking about trade and how it can help strengthen ties between the two countries. In an attempt to explain his point further, he gives an example of Germany and Japan and how the countries improved their relations post WWII by setting up "joint industries". While many speculated that the PM confused Japan with France, many social media users were less sympathetic.

SOURCE: THE INDIAN EXPRESS, AFP

JADE MINE COLLAPSE

More than 50 feared killed in Myanmar

More than 50 people were feared dead after a landslide in northern Myanmar engulfed jade miners while they were sleeping, local police said yesterday, the latest deadly accident in a notoriously dangerous industry. Dozens die each year in landslides caused by jade mining, a poorly regulated industry rife with corruption and sandwiched between the country's borders with China and India. Local police described a freak accident in Kachin state on Monday night so big it created a huge "mud lake" that buried the miners as well as some 40 vehicles. Only two bodies had been recovered so far.



A man mourns at a grave of a victim at Sellakanda Catholic cemetery in Negombo, Sri Lanka, yesterday. Inset: A suspected suicide bomber (circled) enters St Sebastian's Church in Negombo on April 21 in this still image taken from a CCTV handout footage of Easter Sunday attacks released yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Congress 'can't impeach' Trump

US President Donald Trump said Monday that Congress "can't impeach" him over the findings of the Mueller report into Russian election meddling and his alleged attempts to hamper the investigation. Asked by reporters at a White House Easter event whether the prospect of impeachment worries him, Trump replied: "Not even a little bit." "Only high crimes and misdemeanors can lead to impeachment. There were no crimes by me (No Collusion, No Obstruction), so you can't impeach," Trump stated earlier on Twitter. Mueller's report has inflicted damage on Trump's reputation through stories of close aides maneuvering to stop the president from going too far in his attempts to slow down the probe. Even though the aides allegedly disobeyed him so that they could prevent more serious damage, Trump denied Monday that any sort of insubordination would be possible. "Nobody disobeys my orders," he said at the Easter event.



US President Donald Trump and the Easter Bunny wave during the annual White House Easter Egg Roll on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, DC, on Monday. PHOTO: AFP

Myanmar SC rejects appeal of Reuters reporters

Myanmar's Supreme Court yesterday rejected the latest appeal by two Pulitzer-prize winning Reuters journalists who were jailed for seven years on charges linked to their reporting on the Rohingya crisis, as hopes now turn to a presidential pardon. Reporters Wa Lone, 33, and Kyaw Soe Oo, 29, have been behind bars since their arrest in December 2017 under the colonial-era Official Secrets Act. They were convicted of possessing classified documents relating to security operations in Rakhine during a brutal military crackdown against Rohingya Muslims that forced some 740,000 to flee over the border into Bangladesh. The initial ruling in September was upheld by the Yangon High Court in January. On Tuesday, the reporters were not at the Supreme Court in the capital Naypyidaw to hear the ruling that once again went against them.

'CHOWKIDAR CHOR HAI'REMARK India SC issues contempt notice to Rahul Gandhi



THE HINDU ONLINE

Indian Supreme Court yesterday issued a formal criminal contempt notice against Congress president Rahul Gandhi for attributing the comment "chowkidar chor hai" to the court judgement of April 10, upholding the maintainability of the Rafale fighter aircraft deal case review petitions. A Bench, led by Chief Justice of India (CJI) Ranjan Gogoi, also ordered that the review petitions be listed along with the criminal contempt petition filed by BJP lawmaker Meenakshi Lekhi for Tuesday next (April 30). Gandhi, in his written response, had said the "chowkidar chor hai" [Watchman is a thief] comment was said in an atmosphere of vindication of the Court deciding to reopen the Rafale case despite government efforts to shut out new facts and documents published on the purchase of 36 jets. The Congress chief regretted how the political slogan unfortunately got "juxtaposed and intermingled" with the April 10 decision of the Court to review the Rafale case. The review petitions were filed against the judgement of December 14 upholding the Rafale jets' deal. Gandhi said the comment was made in a purely political context to counter the "misinformation campaign" that the Court gave the government a clean chit on December 14. Meanwhile, the citizenship ascertainment process in West Bengal will take a direction opposite to that in Assam, BJP president Amit Shah said here on Monday. "In the case of West Bengal, first the Citizenship Bill will be passed and refugees will be given citizenship and only then the NRC will be introduced," Shah said. The Bill would not be introduced for West Bengal alone, he added.

US to sanction allies over Iran oil trade

China yesterday warned that the US decision to impose sanctions on buyers of Iranian oil will "intensify turmoil" in the Middle East and in the international energy market. The White House announced Monday it was calling an end to six-month waivers that had exempted several countries -- including major importer China -- from unilateral US sanctions on Iranian oil exports. "China firmly opposes the US implementation of unilateral sanctions and its so-called long-armed jurisdiction," foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said at a regular press briefing. "The relevant move by the United States will intensify the turmoil in the Middle East and the turmoil in the international energy market." In seeking to reduce Iran's oil exports to zero, the Trump administration is targeting the country's top revenue earner in its latest no-holds-barred move to crush the economy and scale back the clerical regime's influence. Eight governments were initially given the six-month reprieve on oil sanctions that had been imposed last year by the United States. The exemption will now end on May 2. Greece, Italy, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan -- have already ended or heavily reduced their purchases from Iran. The other three are China, India and Turkey, with Ankara vowing to defy the US demands.

NEWSIN brief

New strong quake rattles Philippines

Philippine rescuers were scrambling yesterday to reach some two dozen people feared buried under a building near Manila that collapsed a day earlier in a deadly earthquake, as a powerful 6.4 new tremor hit the nation. The toll in Monday's quake rose to 16. More than 100 others were injured.

Bus falls into ravine in Bolivia; 25 killed

A bus fell 200 meters into a ravine, leaving 25 people dead after a collision involving two trucks, Bolivian police said on Monday. The bus was attempting to overtake a truck on Sunday night when it crashed head-on into another to the north of La Paz, police chief Yuri Calderon said.

Algeria sends richest man to jail over graft

Algeria's richest man Issad Rebrab has been detained in jail on the public prosecutor's orders, state media reported yesterday a day after his arrest as part of a corruption probe. Rebrab, the 74-year-old chief executive of Algeria's biggest privately-owned conglomerate Cevital, is "suspected of having made fake statements concerning the transfer of funds to and from abroad," AP reported. Forbes magazine lists Rebrab the sixth wealthiest in Africa, with a net worth of \$3.38 billion in 2019.

Trump to make state visit to UK June 3-5

US President Donald Trump will make a state visit to Britain June 3-5, just ahead of D-Day commemorations in France, officials said yesterday, as campaigners announced large-scale protests against him. Trump will be the guest of Queen Elizabeth II and will also hold talks with Prime Minister Theresa May during the trip.