

Lethal Bungling: Sri Lanka's Easter Bombings

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Asia-Pacific Research, April 23, 2019

Region: [South Asia](#)

Theme: [Justice](#), [Society](#)

The number of dead is bound to rise, already standing at more than three hundred. The bombs, worn by seven suicide bombers, struck at three churches during the period of Easter Sunday worship, and three hotels. As the dead were counted and the wounded accounted for, the situation through the glass darkly was a troubled one. Information relayed had either been ignored or discounted. In some cases, it never reached necessary recipients.

While the individuals behind the bombings were hardly forthcoming about their handiwork, there were suggestions as early as April 4 from Indian security sources that one group was readying to initiate various attacks. National Thowheeth Jama'ath, an Islamic group, had piqued the interest of police enough to lead to the identification of members and their addresses on April 11.

One of the suicide bombers, it transpired, had also been arrested some few months prior on suspicion of vandalizing a statue of Buddha. Such acts of serious desecration were not alien to the NTJ; the use of bombings on such scale was, however, not their forte.

On Monday, **Health Minister Rajitha Senaratne**, [confirmed](#) what had already been a fast held suspicion: even after the warning of April 4, the prime minister and his associates had been "completely blind to the situation."

The picture painted by the minister seemed a gruesome admission of defiance in the face of detailed warnings. Intelligence agencies had "informed, from time to time, starting from April 4, 48 hours before the attacks and finally ten minutes before the tragedy struck. They gave warnings about a possible attack on April 4 for the first time." From then on, the National Intelligence **Chief Sisira Mendis** kept the Inspector General Police (IGP) abreast of the "imminent attacks" having "actually informed that an organisation called 'Thowheed Jamath' planned suicide attacks and had even mentioned their names."

Scenes of confusion and dangerously comic dysfunction unfolded in the government. Despite various organs being informed about the threat - the ministerial security division (MSD), the judicial security division, and security divisions of former presidents and the Diplomatic Security Unit, there was a failure, [according](#) to Senaratne, "to warn the Prime Ministerial Security Division (PMSD) and the Presidential Security Division (PSD) of the attacks." When the PM attempted to convene a security council meeting, no one turned up. When the President had made a previous effort to do the same thing, there was a delay of 20 minutes. He had to "sit in the State Defence Minister's room for some time." Nor was the Tourism Minister, **John Amaratunga**, briefed. "Unfortunately, I did not know anything about it."

Efforts to minimise, contain and deflect have become standard fare, with blithe ignorance forming the central defence. Rich lashings of blame are also in full circulation. This gives the air of monstrous acceptance: we bungled, but haven't we before? Defence Secretary Hemasiri Fernando, on Monday, [felt](#) that the intelligence assessments had not warranted a serious, full security response, despite the level of detail supplied, and their frequency.

"Intelligence," he stated disingenuously, "never indicated that it's going to be an attack on this magnitude. They were talking about isolated incidents. Besides, there is no emergency in this country. We cannot request the armed forces to come and assist as we can only depend on the police."

Having claimed the received intelligence pointed to mere potential "isolated incidents" (the suggestion here is that a monstrous act, when seen as an isolated one, can be rationalised according to a security and ethical calculus; in short, more permissible), Fernando proceeded to normalise the entire episode.

"It's not the first time a bomb went off in this country. During the height of the war, when emergency regulations were in force and roadblocks installed at every two kilometres, bombs went off. Why are you trying to isolate this unfortunate incident?"

At the highest levels, the Sri Lankan government has suffered political sclerosis. **President Maithripala Sirisena** and **Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe**, have been waging wars cold and hot against each other for some time. When Wickremesinghe was re-appointed after being sacked by the cranky Sirisena in December last year, in turn replacing a cantankerous Mahinda Rajapaksa, the President [extolled](#) his own democratic credentials. While he held a personal dislike for his appointee, he also respected "the parliamentary tradition".

The post-attack reaction is also proving to be an unhinged affair. Sri Lankan authorities immediately imposed a social media blackout. Dazed and confused as officials are, the idea of not containing an agitated public as inquiries are conducted seemed a grave threat. Besides, a country bathed in the blood of decades of communal violence continues to teeter before the next provocation, the next inflammatory message of inspired retribution.

There was little pride in asserting that the group was "a local organisation", with all suicide bombers having been Sri Lankan citizens. But not wishing it to be an entirely indigenous affair, Senaratne wished to [speculate](#) that, "there was an international network without which these attacks could not have succeeded." Another source of blame had been identified.

As Fernando surmised, it would be foolish to put too much stock in future efforts on the part of the government. Yes, assistance was being sought from Interpol, the FBI and the Australian Federal Police. But he could not "take confidence with terrorism. No country in the world can assure that it's not going to happen. But we are trying our best." A brutally frank response, though hardly a cleansing exculpation.

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