

Sri Lanka's Muslim community fears backlash

The sudden, heightened scrutiny has caused concerns among members

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The Easter day attacks in Sri Lanka and the subsequent naming of a local Islamist radical organisation as the perpetrator have left the island's Muslim community in fear and panic.

Amid reports of a few stray incidents of attacks on Muslim-owned property in the last two days, the sudden, heightened scrutiny of localities where Muslim families reside have sparked serious concerns, according to leaders and members of the community.

"The Muslim community is equally outraged [by the blasts]," said Sri Lanka Muslim Congress Leader and Cabinet Minister Rauff Hakeem. In his view, the "warped ideology" of the radical group cannot get "even an iota of support" from within the community.

Belief in moderation Muslims, and in fewer instances Christians, have been at the "receiving end"



Last respects: Coffins of victims being carried to graves during a mass funeral at St. Sebastian's Church in Negombo, Sri Lanka, on Tuesday. • GETTY IMAGES

of violence in Sri Lanka in the last few years, he said, pointing to the spate of targeted, violent attacks unleashed by hard-line Sinhala Buddhist groups.

"But the [Muslim] community has always believed in moderation," he said, at the same time calling for introspection within the community on new cultural practices and foreign ideas.

But the space for conversations within the community may now shrink, fears Maarena Thaha Refai, founder-president of Al Muslim Aath, a 28-year-old organisation of Muslim Women. "Despite holding

diverse views, we were trying to talk about reforming our personal laws, reflect on our changing practices. It may become harder to have those discussions because something so big has hit us," she said.

Community leaders also fear that the recent jihadist killings might taint the overall image of Sri Lankan Muslims. "Even when we were targeted by the BBS (hard-line Buddhist organisation Bodu Bala Sena) we did not retaliate even once," Ms. Refai said.

Constituting about 10% of the island's population, Muslims in Sri Lanka are widely

perceived to be an enterprising community, successful in trade and as professionals. Though Tamil-speaking, they identify themselves as a separate ethnic group. Many of them are trilingual, speaking Sinhala, Tamil and English with equal ease.

"We have never had even an oral disagreement with Christians. What the bombers believed in and did was completely contradictory to the values of Islam," Ms. Refai said.

In addition to grappling with how a few members of the community were veering towards a radical path, Muslims worry about a possible

backlash, particularly in Kattankudy town, in the eastern Batticaloa district that is home to a sizeable population of Muslims and Tamils.

Base of Islamist group

Batticaloa, which witnessed one of the eight explosions, has also been identified as the base of the National Thowheed Jamaath (NTJ), said to be behind the bombings. Its leader Mohammed Zaharan was a resident there. "We feel a sense of inexplicable guilt. I don't know how to look into the eyes of my Christian neighbours with whom we have enjoyed cordial relations for so long. There is a lot of fear and panic that some may think we are also culpable," said A.L.M. Sabeel, a member of the Kattankudy Mosques Federation.

Following Sunday's attacks, there is heavy security all around the town and the police have been conducting frequent search operations in the area, he said. "[I] actually appreciate it. We will offer all cooperation to authorities," he said. The scrutiny, he said, might help the community identify and eliminate "such forces".

Not that they did not try purging radical elements earlier. For at least two years now, locals have tried to

draw the security services' attention to the NTJ and some "50-60 people" attached to it. "We reported their activities to the authorities, but sadly, no action was taken," said Mr. Sabeel.

According to Mr. Sabeel, Zahran left Kattankudy after a fallout with the *mawlawi* (religious scholar) two years ago, due to differences of opinion in the practice of Islam, and had been "in hiding".

The Muslim Council of Sri Lanka too made several complaints to authorities, pointing to Zahran and his attempts to spread radical ideas, the Council's President N.M. Ameen said.

With hard questions about their future and the recent memory of facing attacks, many in the community are disillusioned, leaders said. "To think that there was sufficient prior warning and yet no preventive action is baffling," Minister Hakeem said. The attacks, which had a massive human cost, could be used by some for their political gains, he cautioned.

"It is not enough to see who the perpetrators are, we must also be mindful of who stands to gain..." he added. "A terrorist attack is a threat not to some of us but all of us. We need a collective, national response to this."

India may send NIA team to assist in probe

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The government may send a team of the National Investigation Agency to Sri Lanka in the aftermath of bomb blasts that claimed more than 300 lives.

An NIA official on Tuesday said a decision on the issue was yet to be taken. Some government officials are also likely to visit Sri Lanka to meet their counterparts.

Given that earlier this month India had shared intelligence inputs on possible terror strikes at different locations, including the Indian High Commission

building there, a government source said the agencies would be extending all possible cooperation to the Sri Lankan authorities on unearthing the conspiracy. Security arrangements at the High Commission are also being reviewed.

"We keep working in close coordination with the investigating agencies in other countries on various issues, particularly terror-related cases. In November 2014, after the Burdwan blast, a four-member team of the NIA had visited Bangladesh to share information on the suspects," said a retired IPS official.

Hasina's 8-year-old relative among those killed

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
COLOMBO/DHAKA

An eight-year-old relative of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is among the 45 children who were killed in the devastating suicide bomb attacks in Sri Lanka on Easter on Sunday, media reports said on Tuesday.

Ruling Awami League leader Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim's grandson Zayan Chowdhary, who was reported missing after bomb-

ings in Sri Lanka, has died, the reports said.

The boy was having breakfast with his father Moshul Haque Chowdhary Prince at a restaurant on the ground floor of a luxury hotel in Colombo that came under attack. Mr. Selim's younger brother Sheikh Fazlur Rahman Maruf said that Zayan's body would be brought back to Dhaka on Wednesday, *The Dhaka Tribune* reported.

ELSEWHERE



Myanmar court rejects jailed reporters' appeal

NAY PYI DAW Myanmar's Supreme Court on Tuesday rejected an appeal by Reuters journalists Wa Lone, in picture, and Kyaw Soe Oo, both of whom were jailed for seven years on charges linked to their reporting on the Rohingya crisis, as hopes now turn to a presidential pardon. AFP

Saudi Arabia executes 37 on terror charges

RIYADH Saudi Arabia on Tuesday executed 37 of its citizens convicted of terrorism, three years after another set of executions that led to a break in relations with Iran. The executions were carried out in Riyadh, Mecca, Medina, Qassim, and in the Eastern Province, home to the country's Shia minority. AFP

More than 50 feared dead in Myanmar landslide

YANGON More than 50 people were feared dead after a landslide in northern Myanmar engulfed jade miners while they were sleeping, local police said on Tuesday. The freak accident in Kachin State on Monday night created a "mud lake" that buried the miners as well as some 40 vehicles. AFP

Congress subpoenas ex-White House counsel Don McGahn

Attorney was a key witness in Robert Mueller's investigation

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WASHINGTON

Former White House Counsel Donald F. McGahn II has been ordered to testify before the U.S. House of Representatives on May 21 and to submit documents to it by May 7. The House Judiciary Committee issued a subpoena to this effect on Monday, as political tensions in Washington escalate in the aftermath of the (redacted) Mueller report's release last Thursday.

Mr. McGahn was a star witness in Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential elections, with his name appearing 157 times in the 448-page report. Mr. McGahn's testimony has been especially key to the part of the investigation that dealt with whether President Donald Trump engaged in the obstruction of justice by trying to derail the investigation. In June 2017, Mr. Trump called Mr. McGahn and asked him to tell the acting Attorney-General at the time to fire Mr. Mueller as he had "conflicts of interest", the report said. Mr. McGahn says he did not acquiesce to the President's request.

The former White House



Former White House counsel Don McGahn • AP

Counsel was described as "a critical witness to many of the alleged instances of obstruction of justice and other misconduct described in the Special Counsel's report" in a statement released by Committee Chair Jerry Nadler.

Substantial evidence

"The Special Counsel's report, even in redacted form, outlines substantial evidence that President Trump engaged in obstruction and other abuses. It now falls to Congress to determine for itself the full scope of the misconduct," Mr. Nadler said.

The ranking Republican on the Committee, Doug Collins, said the subpoena was premature.

"Instead of looking at material that Attorney-General William Barr has already

made available, Democrats prefer to demand additional materials they know are subject to constitutional and common-law privileges and cannot be produced," a statement from Mr. Collins read.

The House Judiciary Committee has the power to start impeachment proceedings against the President. Mr. Barr will testify before it on May 2. Mr. Mueller has also been invited to meet the Committee in May.

Democrats divided

On Monday, evening House Democrats convened via conference call – their first huddle to discuss the Mueller report.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi told her colleagues, according to reports, to focus on committee hearings on the Mueller report rather than taking the impeachment route right now.

The appetite for impeachment varies across Democrats. Some have called for a cautious approach while others, including Democratic presidential candidates and Senators Kamala Harris and Elizabeth Warren, want to initiate impeachment proceedings against the President.

Kim to meet Putin in Vladivostok this week

Talks to focus on nuclear stand-off

REUTERS
SEOUL/MOSCOW

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and Russian President Vladimir Putin will meet on Thursday in the Russian Pacific port of Vladivostok to discuss the international stand-off over Pyongyang's nuclear programme, a Kremlin official said. The visit is part of Mr. Kim's effort to build foreign support, analysts said, after the breakdown of a second U.S.-North Korea summit in Vietnam in February meant no relief on sanctions for North Korea.

The details of the summit were confirmed by Yuri Ushakov, a Kremlin foreign policy aide. The main item on the agenda would be international efforts to end the stand-off over North Korea's nuclear programme, Mr. Ushakov told reporters.

"In the last few months the situation around the pe-



Flags of North Korea and Russia in Vladivostok. • AP

ninsula has stabilised somewhat, thanks in large part to North Korea's initiatives of stopping rocket testing and closing its nuclear test site," he said. "Russia intends to help in any way possible to cement that positive trend."

The North's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said on Tuesday the visit would happen soon, but did not elaborate on a time or location. Mr. Kim's chief aide, Kim Chang Son, was seen in Vladivostok on Sunday, according to South Korea's Yonhap news agency.

Trump to make state visit to Britain in June

His trip has been delayed many times

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
LONDON

U.S. President Donald Trump is to make a state visit to Britain on June 3-5, just ahead of D-Day commemorations in France, officials said on Tuesday, as campaigners announced large-scale protests against him.

Mr. Trump is a strong supporter of Brexit but has been highly critical of the way Prime Minister Theresa May has sought to implement the result of the 2016 referendum. Mr. Trump and First Lady Melania will be guests of Queen Elizabeth II, 93, becoming only the third U.S. presidential couple to receive the honour.

Mr. Trump will also hold talks with Ms. May during the trip, with the issue of post-Brexit trade ties looming large. "We do more together than any two nations in the world and we are both safer and more prosperous

because of our cooperation," Ms. May said in a statement on the visit. She said it would be "an opportunity to strengthen our already close relationship in areas such as trade, investment, security and defence, and to discuss how we can build on these ties in the years ahead."

The pomp associated with state visits will prove particularly controversial in Britain, where House of Commons Speaker John Bercow has already said he does not want the U.S. President to address Parliament.

Ms. May invited Mr. Trump for a state visit in January 2017 when she went to Washington just days after he took office.

An online petition to cancel Mr. Trump's state visit reached 1.9 million signatures in 2017 and the trip has been delayed several times since then.

Wealthy Sri Lankan brothers carried out 2 blasts

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
COLOMBO

Brothers from a wealthy Sri Lankan Muslim family plotted and carried out two of the Easter suicide blasts in Colombo, police sources said on Tuesday, amid growing questions on whether the attackers received foreign help.

The two sons of a Colombo spice trader were among suicide bombers who hit three churches and three

luxury hotels, investigators said. An attack on a fourth hotel failed and helped lead police to the Islamist group now blamed for the assault, they added in comments later confirmed by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The brothers, whose names have not been revealed, were in their late twenties and operated their own "family cell", an investigation officer said.

The pair were members of the Islamist National Thowheed Jamaath (NTJ) group, which the government has blamed for the attacks.

One brother checked into the Cinnamon Grand hotel and the other the Shangri-La on Saturday.

The next morning, at virtually the same time, they went to the hotels' Easter Sunday breakfast buffets and blew up explosives-laden backpacks, the officer said.

Another would-be suicide bomber was in a fourth hotel in Colombo, said an official source. "This man had also checked into the hotel the previous day," the source said.

But after the Shangri-la blast, staff became suspicious and the man was tracked to a residence near the capital. He blew himself up when confronted by police, the source said. Two bystanders were also killed.