

Radical cleric Hashim linked to blasts

Leader of the NTJ was seen in a video taking a pledge of allegiance to IS chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE
COLOMBO

For years, Sri Lanka's Muslim community warned authorities about a firebrand cleric. Now it seems Zahran Hashim may have played a key role in one of the worst attacks in the country's history.

A video released by the Islamic State group after it claimed responsibility for bombs that killed 359 people, appears to prominently feature Hashim.

The round-faced cleric is the only one of the eight figures whose face is uncovered. Dressed in a black tunic and headscarf, and carrying a rifle, Hashim is seen in the IS video leading seven people in a pledge of allegiance to the group's chief Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.

The other seven all wear the same black tunics but their faces are obscured by black-and-white chequered scarves.

Sri Lanka's government has accused Hashim indirectly, saying the Islamist group he was believed to lead – the National Thowheeth Jamaath – carried out the attacks. Hashim was identified, albeit with his name misspelled as Hashmi, by police as heading NTJ.

'A loner'

Hashim was a virtual unknown before the onslaught. He had attracted several thousand followers on social media sites, including YouTube and Facebook, where he posted incendiary sermons.

Hilmy Ahamed, vice-president of the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka, said he had gone to local authorities with concerns about Hashim three years ago. "This person was a loner and he had radicalised young people in the guise of conducting Quran classes," he said. "But



The departed: Relatives carry a coffin of a victim at a cemetery in Colombo on Wednesday. •AFP

nobody thought these people were capable of carrying out an attack of such magnitude."

Ahamed said Hashim, who has also gone by the names Mohamed Zahran and Moulavi Hashim, was around 40 years old and from the east coast region of Batticaloa.

"Zahran belonged to an average Muslim middle-class family. He was a drop-out," said Ahamed, adding that the cleric had studied at an Islamic college in Kattankudy, a Muslim-majority city in eastern Sri Lanka.

He was considered a menace by the local Muslim community and caused trouble at Kattankudy's Thowheeth mosque.

Local media said Hashim formed the NTJ in Kattankudy in 2014. There was still confusion Wednesday about whether that group, or a splinter organisation, carried out the Easter attack.

"There has been a group that has split from the main body of the NTJ," Deputy Defence Minister Ruwan Wijewardene said. "We believe that the leader of this group has also committed suicide in one of the attacks," he added, refusing to confirm if he was referring to Hashim or someone else.

Foreign groups behind attacks: U.S.

Ambassador says FBI helping probe

REUTERS
COLOMBO

The scale and sophistication of the Easter Sunday attacks on churches and hotels in Sri Lanka suggested the involvement of an external group such as the Islamic State, the U.S. Ambassador said on Wednesday.

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the coordinated bomb attacks on churches and hotels but gave no evidence to support that.

"If you look at the scale of the attacks, the level of coordination, the sophistication of them, it's not implausible to think there are foreign linkages," U.S. Ambassador Alaina Teplitz told reporters in Colombo.

"Exploring potential linkages is going to be part of (investigations)," she said.

Ms. Teplitz said the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation and the U.S. military were supporting the investigation. "Our hope is that as a result of our joint efforts

were going to roll up the perpetrators and collaborators, trace the linkages and be able to prevent this sort of thing from happening in the future.

Ms. Teplitz's comments came as Sri Lanka's junior Defence Minister, Ruwan Wijewardene, conceded that there had been a significant intelligence failure before the attacks, with reports of warnings of strikes not acted on and feuds at the highest levels of government.

Intelligence withheld Lakshman Kiriella, the leader of Parliament, said senior officials had deliberately withheld intelligence about possible attacks.

"Some top intelligence officials hid the intelligence information purposefully. Information was there, but the top brass security officials did not take appropriate actions," Mr. Kiriella, who is also Minister of Public Enterprise, told Parliament.

Top security officials told to resign

ASSOCIATED PRESS
COLOMBO

Sri Lanka's President has asked for the resignations of the Defence Secretary and national police chief, a dramatic internal shake-up after security forces shrugged off intelligence reports warning of possible attacks before Easter bombings, the President's office said on Wednesday.

It wasn't immediately clear who would be replacing them, but President Maithripala Sirisena said during a televised speech that he planned to change the head of the defence forces within 24 hours.

The Islamic State has claimed responsibility for the attacks.

'No intel yet linking blast to Christchurch'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WELLINGTON

New Zealand has "not yet seen" any intelligence reports linking the deadly bombings in Sri Lanka to last month's mosque massacre in Christchurch, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's office said late on Tuesday.

A Sri Lankan official on Tuesday said "preliminary investigations" had found that the bombings on Sunday were "in retaliation for the attack against Muslims in Christchurch."

The March 15 shooting on two Christchurch mosques killed 50 Muslims.

Hong Kong leaders jailed over pro-democracy protests

Umbrella Movement had called for free elections

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE
HONG KONG

Four prominent leaders of Hong Kong's democracy movement were jailed on Wednesday for their role in organising mass protests in 2014 that paralysed the city for months and infuriated Beijing.

Body blow

The prison terms are the latest hammer blow to the city's beleaguered democracy movement which has seen key figures jailed or banned from standing as legislators since their demonstrations shook the city but failed to win any concessions.

Nine activists were convicted earlier in April of at least one charge in a prosecution that deployed rarely used colonial-era public nuisance laws over their participation in the Umbrella Movement protests, which



One voice: Pro-democracy supporters at a candlelight vigil in support of jailed leaders in Hong Kong on Wednesday.

called for free elections to appoint the city's leader.

Their trial renewed alarm over shrinking freedoms under an assertive China which has rejected demands by Hong Kong protesters for a greater say in how the financial hub is run.

Two key leaders of the mass protests – sociology professor Chan Kin-man,

60, and law professor Benny Tai, 54 – received the longest sentences of 16 months in jail, sparking angry chants from supporters outside.

The jail terms are the steepest yet for anyone involved in the 79-day protest which vividly illustrated the huge anger – particularly among Hong Kong's youth – over the city's leadership.

U.S. is sending armed soldiers to Mexico border, says Trump

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

President Donald Trump said on Wednesday that the U.S. is sending armed soldiers to the southern border after Mexican soldiers recently "pulled guns" on U.S. troops, escalating his war of words with Mexico on immigration.

Mr. Trump was apparently referring to an April 13 incident in which Mexican troops reportedly questioned and pointed their weapons at two U.S. troops conducting surveillance on the border.



President Donald Trump.

now sending armed soldiers to the border."

Mexico's President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said his government would analyse the incident, take into account Mr. Trump's comments, and act "in keeping with law within the framework of our sovereignty."

"The most important thing is to tell (Mr. Trump) is that we are not going to fight with the government of the United States. We want a relationship of mutual respect and cooperation for development," he said.

IN BRIEF



Kim Jong-un in Russia for talks with Putin

VLADIVOSTOK North Korean leader Kim Jong-un said he was looking forward to his first talks with President Vladimir Putin as he arrived in Russia on Wednesday seeking support in Pyongyang's ongoing nuclear deadlock with the United States. "I hope this visit will be successful and useful," Kim said. AFP

U.S. not to attend China's Belt and Road Forum

BEIJING Washington will not send officials to a Beijing summit on Chinese President Xi Jinping's signature global infrastructure project, the U.S. embassy said on Wednesday. Leaders from about 37 countries are expected to attend the Belt and Road Forum from Thursday to Saturday, which Washington termed as a "vanity project". AFP

'Workers smoked at Notre Dame cathedral'

Contractor denies it as cause of fire

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
PARIS

Workers renovating the Notre Dame cathedral flouted a ban on smoking at the monument, a contractor admitted on Wednesday, while denying any link with last week's devastating blaze that ripped through the cathedral.

"There were colleagues who from time to time broke the rules and we regret it," a spokesman for scaffolding company Le Bras Freres told AFP, before adding: "but in no way could a cigarette butt be the cause of the fire at Notre-Dame".

Spokesman Marc Eskenaзи said some workers "had admitted in front of the police that they did smoke from time to time," confirming a report in the satirical newspaper *Le Canard Enchaîne*.

He dismissed the idea of a cigarette starting the fire,



The Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris that caught fire on April 15. •AP

saying "anyone who has ever tried to light a fire at home knows that it is not by putting a cigarette butt on an oak log that anything happens."

Notre-Dame's now mostly-destroyed roof was made of wood, and included some of the original beams erected in the 12th century.

French investigators are now trying to find the origin of the fire at one of Europe's most visited monuments.

Saudis who were executed mostly Shias

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE
DUBAI

At least 33 of the 37 Saudis executed by the kingdom in a single day belonged to the Sunni-dominated country's Shia minority, Human Rights Watch said on Wednesday.

The men were executed on Tuesday after being convicted of terrorism, according to the official Saudi Press Agency.

"Thirty-three we know for sure are Shias," HRW researcher Adam Coogole said.

The Interior Ministry said some of those executed were accused of "inciting sectarian strife", a charge often used in Saudi Arabia against Shia activists.

They were "convicted after sham trials that violated international fair trial standards relying on confessions through torture," Amnesty International said in a statement.

'U.S. sanctions won't go without response'

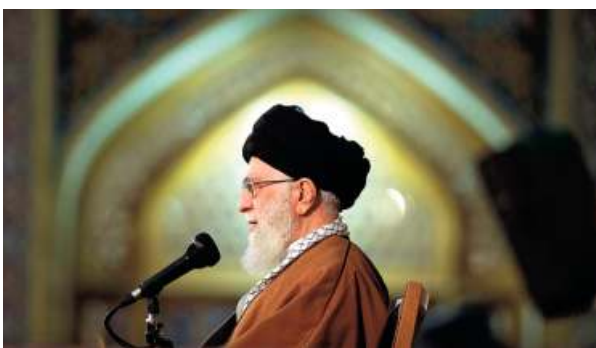
Iran's leader Khamenei castigates American move, says it will continue to export oil

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
TEHRAN

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Wednesday called the end of oil sanction waivers by the United States a "hostile measure" that "won't be left without a response".

"U.S. efforts to boycott the sale of Iran's oil won't get them anywhere. We will export our oil as much as we need and we intend," his official English-language Twitter account said, quoting from a speech he delivered to workers in Tehran.

The United States announced on Monday it would halt the practice of exempting countries including India, China and Turkey



Standing firm: Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has said that Iranians will not give in to U.S. pressure. •AFP

from sanctions on purchase of Iranian oil.

In May last year, U.S. President Donald Trump withdrew Washington from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal with world powers, which had gi-

ven the Islamic republic sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear programme.

Washington reimposed oil sanctions on Iran in November, but initially gave eight

countries, including several U.S. allies, six-month reprieves.

Five of the countries – Greece, Italy, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan – have already heavily reduced their purchases from Iran.

Iran has said the sanctions are "illegal".

"They (the U.S.) wishfully think they have blocked Iran oil sales, but our vigorous nation and vigilant officials, if they work hard, will open many blockades," Mr. Khamenei said.

Mr. Khamenei repeated his stance that Iran should move towards the sale of oil derivatives such as refined oil and petrochemical products instead of crude.