

# Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary resigns

Takes responsibility for intelligence lapse on Easter bombings; police arrest 19 more suspects

MEERA SRINIVASAN  
COLOMBO

Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary Hemasiri Fernando resigned on Thursday, taking responsibility for what the government earlier termed "a major lapse" in intelligence on the Easter attacks.

Mr. Fernando is the first official to step down after both President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said they were unaware of the imminent threat, though the security establishment had received prior intelligence. While Mr. Sirisena on Tuesday promised to overhaul the security structure, making key changes in 24 hours, the new Secretary is yet to be named.

Days after the deadly serial bombings gripped the island in shock and grief, police on Thursday con-



**Shocked and stunned:** Mourners at the funeral of a victim of the attack on St. Sebastian's Church. • GETTY IMAGES

ducted sudden checks in the city, including at prominent offices such as the Central Bank. Employees were asked not to leave the premises for about an hour in the morning and security forces conducted search operations based on a warning of a potential explosion, sources said. However, barring a blast at a

vacant plot near the magistrate's court in Pugoda town, 40 km from Colombo, there were no incidents. It is unclear how much headway investigators have made in the probe, but late on Wednesday, security forces, using Emergency powers, nabbed 16 persons with possible links to the blasts. Over 60 suspects are

already being interrogated. Authorities earlier named the National Thowheed Jamaath, a radical Islamist group, as the perpetrators. Investigators have traced its 139 members and are probing their possible links with the Islamic State that has claimed responsibility.

Meanwhile, mosques around the island have cancelled Friday prayers amidst persisting tension and fear within the community. Sri Lanka's Catholic churches have also decided to remain closed for "security reasons". The Army, Navy and Air Force have deployed additional troops on the streets. Following the attacks, Sri Lanka has suspended plans to grant visas on arrival to citizens of 39 countries. "Although arrangements were in place to is-

sue visas on arrival for citizens of 39 countries, we have now decided to hold it for the time being considering the security situation," Tourism Minister John Amaratunga said.

**Toll lowered**  
Two top government officials told Reuters that the death toll in the Easter Day attacks is around 100 fewer than the 359 originally thought.

"It could be 250 or 260. I can't exactly say. There are so many body parts and it is difficult to give a precise figure," Anil Jasinghe, the Director General of Sri Lanka's health services, said. Ruwan Wijewardene, the Deputy Defence Minister, said the death toll had been revised down to 253 due to inaccurate figures provided by the morgues.

# Scared Muslim refugees in Negombo flee homes

They came fleeing persecution in their countries and are now being treated as adversaries

MEERA SRINIVASAN  
COLOMBO

Days after a deadly bomb attack shook Negombo, killing over a hundred people praying at the St. Sebastian's Church, a new, unexpected conflict has heightened tensions in the coastal town. Hundreds of refugees who live in Negombo, some 40 km north of Colombo, have been forced to leave their homes and seek shelter in nearby mosques and police stations, following a sudden hostility from a section of locals.

A mixed ethnic town, Negombo is home to a sizeable number of Catholics and fewer Muslims, and hun-

dreds of refugees who fled persecution in their countries. Over 1,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, hailing from countries including Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran, live in the town, with government and UNHCR support. They have enjoyed cordial ties with the local community.

## Blow to coexistence

However, the Easter attacks delivered a huge blow to their coexistence with the locals. Struggling to cope with the bombings, some locals now see the refugees as 'Muslims' and therefore, adversaries. Many of the refugees are from the Ahmadi-



An Ahmadi Muslim refugee child at a community centre in Pasyala, Sri Lanka. • AP

yya Muslim, Christian, Shia and other religious minorities in their own countries, according to activists working in the area.

"House owners have asked their refugee tenants to leave immediately. Hundreds of them have no where to go, they have sought shelter at mosques and a police station, with very minimal facilities. They have been made refugees all over again," said Human Rights activist Ruki Fernando. Incidents of refugees' property being damaged by locals and physical assaults have also been reported, activists said. Responding to this, some of the residents have come together to form 'Unity of Negombo Citizens'.

"It is very difficult to understand what has hap-

pened... We all have a big responsibility to ensure that our relationship with our neighbours is not affected," said Sister Renuka, who is part of the initiative. "There are extremists in all religions and it's important not to generalise. What we need now is solidarity among all of us," she said at a press conference.

Khalid Mahmud of the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama said the organisation "vehemently condemns" the bombings as an "inhuman, heinous and shameful" act. "At such a time, we must stand with our Christian brothers and sisters," he said.

# Ex-Vice President Joe Biden announces White House bid

Joins a field of 19 Democratic presidential hopefuls

SRIRAM LAKSHMAN  
WASHINGTON

Former U.S. Vice-President Joseph R. Biden Jr. announced on Thursday that he will run for the office of President next year.

Mr. Biden's move, announced via a video, has been anticipated for months. The six-term former Senator from Delaware joins a galaxy of 19 Democratic presidential hopefuls, including women and progressives, as well as Hispanic, Asian, African-American, gay and millennial candidates.

Mr. Biden has made two previous bids for the White House (in 1998 and 2008). After losing his 2008 bid, he went on to serve — for two terms — as Vice-President in the Barack Obama administration. The "Obama-Biden Democrat", as Mr. Biden has described himself, has consistently emerged as the frontrunner in opinion polls on Democratic candidates, followed by Senator Bernie Sanders, a self-described democratic socialist from Vermont.

As Vice-President, Mr. Biden helped push for same-sex marriage, ending sexual assault and violence against women and for more stringent gun laws.

## Core values

"The core values of this nation... our standing in the world... our very democracy... everything that has made America, America... is at stake. That's why today I'm announcing my candidacy for President of the United States," Mr. Biden said on Thursday.

"If we give Donald Trump eight years in the White House, he will forever and



U.S. ex-Vice President Joe Biden. • AFP

**The core values of this nation, our standing in the world, our very democracy, is at stake**

fundamentally alter the character of this nation. And I cannot stand by and watch that happen," he added.

Mr. Biden toyed with the idea of a bid in 2016, but did not ultimately join the race, as his 46-year-old son Beau's death from brain cancer took a toll on him and his family. He has since said that he believes he could have won against Mr. Trump.

Mr. Biden's video announcement included a clip of white supremacists marching through Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 and a counter-march and clash (which resulted in one casualty).

Mr. Biden said that he "knew the threat to our nation was unlike any" he'd ever seen in his lifetime when President Donald Trump had said that there were "very fine people on both sides" in the Charlottesville context.

In a crowded field of Democratic candidates, Mr. Biden, an establishment can-

didate from the centre, is expected to focus his campaign theme around projecting himself the party's best bet against Mr. Trump, rather than slotting himself into the Democratic political and policy spectrum, which has increasingly moved left.

Mr. Biden is, however, also a white male — one among several factors that could put him at an advantage, especially with blue-collared white voters, but may also potentially challenge his path to the White House.

Last November's midterm elections saw a record number of women elected to Congress, including young, progressive candidates and those from religious minorities.

## Under the scanner

In March, Mr. Biden's manner of physical interaction with women came under the scanner as several former colleagues and associates complained that he made them uncomfortable.

Mr. Biden acknowledged he had made people uncomfortable but stopped short of an apology. Mr. Biden has also been criticised for pushing for a tougher criminal justice system in the 1990s, which resulted in African Americans being disproportionately penalised and has become a campaign issue for Democrats. He has also faced criticism for his handling of sexual harassment allegations made against Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas during the latter's confirmation hearings in the 1990s.

Mr. Biden, the son of a steel worker from Pennsylvania, is expected to hold his first major fundraising event in the State on Monday.

# 'N. Korea needs security guarantees'

Putin meets Kim, says the assurances need to be 'international'

REUTERS  
VLADIVOSTOK

Russian President Vladimir Putin said after holding his first face-to-face talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un on Thursday that U.S. security guarantees would probably not be enough to persuade Pyongyang to shut its nuclear programme. Mr. Putin and Mr. Kim held a day of talks on an island off the Russian Pacific city of Vladivostok two months after Mr. Kim's summit with U.S. President Donald Trump ended in disagreement.

The talks between Mr. Putin and Mr. Kim did not appear to have yielded any major breakthrough.

But Mr. Putin, keen to use the summit to burnish Russia's diplomatic credentials as a global player, said he believed any U.S. guarantees might need to be supported



**First meet:** Russian President Vladimir Putin with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Vladivostok on Thursday. • AFP

by the other nations involved in previous six-way talks on the nuclear issue. That would mean including Russia, China, Japan and South Korea as well as the United States and North Korea, a long-standing format that has been sidelined by unilateral U.S. efforts to broker a deal. "They (the North Koreans) only need guarantees about their security. That's it. All of us to-

gether need to think about this," Mr. Putin told reporters after talks with Mr. Kim.

"...I'm deeply convinced that if we get to a situation when some kind of security guarantees are needed from one party, in this case for North Korea, that it won't be possible to get by without international guarantees. It's unlikely that any agreements between two countries will be enough."

# Never told McGahn to fire Mueller: Trump

REUTERS  
WASHINGTON

U.S. President Donald Trump said on Thursday that he had never ordered his White House counsel at the time, Donald McGahn, to fire Special Counsel Robert Mueller, as described in the Mueller report.

"As has been incorrectly reported by the Fake News Media, I never told then White House Counsel Don McGahn to fire Robert Mueller, even though I had the legal right to do so. If I wanted to fire Mueller, I didn't need McGahn to do it, I could have done it myself," Mr. Trump tweeted.

The Democratic chairman of the House judiciary panel Jerry Nadler has issued a subpoena for Mr. McGahn to testify and provide documents to the committee.

## ELSEWHERE



### Raqa assault killed more than 1,600 civilians

The U.S.-backed assault to drive Islamic State from its Syrian capital Raqa in 2017 killed more than 1,600 civilians, 10 times the toll the coalition itself has acknowledged, Amnesty International and the monitoring group Airwars said on Thursday. • REUTERS

### 9 killed in Taliban ambush on security convoy

The Taliban ambushed a security convoy in western Afghanistan's Anardara district, killing nine policemen, officials said on Thursday. According to a councilman, Abdul Samad Salehi, the ambush took place as the convoy was heading to defuse a roadside bomb on Wednesday. • AP

# Kiev passes law strengthening Ukrainian language use

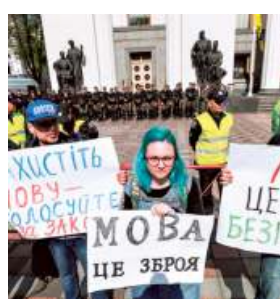
The move is likely to rile Russian-speaking areas of the country

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
KIEV

Ukraine's Parliament on Thursday passed a law enforcing the use of the Ukrainian language in official settings, a move likely to rile Russian-speaking areas of the country and Moscow.

Lawmakers approved the measure, which also increases the quota for Ukrainian-language television and radio programming, just days after Russian-speaking Volodymyr Zelensky was elected President.

Officials at all levels as well as doctors, teachers, lawyers and others, will have to speak Ukrainian or face fines. The law will not apply to private communications or religious rites, media reported. The law will not be en-



A rally outside Ukraine's Parliament seeking passage of the language law. • REUTERS

forced for three years as centres are set up around the country to support the learning of Ukrainian language and culture, MP Nikolai Knyazhitsky told the Interfax-Ukraine news agency.

Outgoing President Petro Poroshenko on Twitter called the vote a "historic event", comparing it to the

regeneration of the Army and the creation of a unified Ukrainian Orthodox church.

## Criminalising 'neglect'

President-elect Zelensky, a comedian who has played the role of President in a Russian-language drama but until now has had no political experience, often speaks in Russian. The law makes "public humiliation or neglect" of the Ukrainian language a criminal offence.

The document said that "attempts to introduce official multilingualism in Ukraine" is unconstitutional.

The Bill was approved a day after Russia made it easier for people living in eastern Ukraine's separatist territories to obtain Russian passports, drawing swift condemnation from Kiev.