

'Anti-Muslim riots a possible trigger'

Sri Lankan officials believe that communal tensions could have motivated the Easter attacks suspects

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

The spate of anti-Muslim violence in Sri Lanka in recent years could have been a reason for more youth to turn radical and mobilise, according to a top Sri Lankan military intelligence source.

"While screening records of conversations among the suspects, we found references to the communal tensions in the recent past. They have spoken of the need to retaliate. We believe those tensions could have been a motivation," the source, playing a key role in the investigations, told *The Hindu* on Friday. While authorities are probing different angles to the suspects' possible links to the Islamic State, which has claimed the attacks, they are simultaneously examining the youths' local context and environment that may have contributed to their veering into a radical path.

The official, who asked not to be named, was referring to the incidents in March 2018 around Kandy city in the Central Province, when violent mobs of reportedly Sinhalese youth identified and attacked several Muslim-owned shops. Rows of shops were set ablaze. At least two Muslims were reported dead in the violence, while shop owners reported losses to the tune of millions. Despite locals alerting the police, little action was taken to contain the violence or damage, Muslim people and community leaders complained at that time.

Old fears

Even as he strongly condemned the "cowardly and barbaric" Easter attacks, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress Leader Raulff Hakeem urged citizens to be mindful of



Keeping vigil: A soldier stands guard in front of St. Anthony's Shrine in Colombo on Friday, following a series of bomb blasts targeting churches and luxury hotels on Easter Sunday. ■ AFP

"agents of disharmony and destabilisation", and not to fall prey to "sinister designs".

For many like him, the attacks instantly sparked fears of a backlash, amid fresh memories of targeted attacks in Kandy, just a year ago, and other anti-Muslim attacks in recent years, led and backed by hard-line Sinhala Buddhist groups, particularly the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and its militant monk-leader Gnanasara Thero.

Three years ago

The trend began around 2012, barely three years after the Sri Lankan armed forces defeated the LTTE, bringing the country's three decade-long war to an end. Reactionary groups among Sinhala Buddhists campaigned against the Hijab and then sought a ban on Halal certification, forcing shops to stop selling meat labelled according to Islamic guidelines. A few Muslim-owned chains were attacked. In 2014, mobs attacked homes and properties of Muslims living in the

southern town of Aluthgama. Ensnared clashes claimed at least four lives. To many, it seemed that Muslims — who make up about 10% of Sri Lanka's population — had emerged a new adversary to hard-line sections of the majority Sinhala-Buddhists. The Muslims had not retaliated in any of those instances.

Treading cautiously

That is perhaps why some in Sri Lanka are treading this moment, following the ghastly attacks carried out by a radical Islamist organisation, rather cautiously.

Several Christian leaders, including the Archbishop of Sri Lanka Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, who have vehemently condemned the attacks have simultaneously called for peace and calm, often explicitly making a distinction between "brothers" in the Muslim community and the attackers. Appreciating the vulnerability of the Muslim community, in the wake of attacks they have faced in the past few years, some leaders are repeatedly

pointing to the community's own disapproval of a section's radicalisation or violence. Tamil National Leader M.A. Sumanthiran told parliament earlier this week that "the Muslim people, to their credit, have repeatedly complained about these miscreants" to authorities, but to no avail.

Religious and civil society organisations too are repeatedly calling for solidarity among different communities. The Women's Coalition for Disaster Management in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious Batticaloa district has said: "We have to work together in order to prevent the already strained ethnic relations from growing into full blown splits between communities that have always coexisted in our region."

A statement by Jaffna-based Christians across denominations said: "We will never place any responsibility on our brothers and sisters of any community for the dastardly and cruel acts of a few."

Police hunt for 140 with alleged IS links

REUTERS
COLOMBO

The Sri Lankan police are trying to track down 140 people believed to be linked to the Islamic State (IS), which claimed responsibility for the Easter Sunday suicide bombings that killed 253, as shooting erupted in the east during a raid.

Muslims in Sri Lanka were urged to pray at home after the State Intelligence Services warned of possible car bomb attacks, amid fears of retaliatory violence.

And the U.S. Embassy in Sri Lanka urged its citizens to avoid places of worship over the weekend after authorities reported there could be more attacks targeting religious centres.

Archbishop of Colombo Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith told reporters he had seen a leaked internal security document warning of further attacks on churches and there would be no Catholic masses this Sunday anywhere on the island. The streets of Colombo were deserted on Friday evening, with many people leaving offices early amid tight security.

President Maithripala Sirisena told reporters some Sri Lankan youths had been involved with the IS since 2013. He said information uncovered so far suggested there were 140 people in Sri Lanka involved in the IS activities. "Police are looking to arrest them," he said.

BRI has entered a new era of transparency: Xi

'China will work with others to write new global trade rules'

ATUL ANEJA
BEIJING

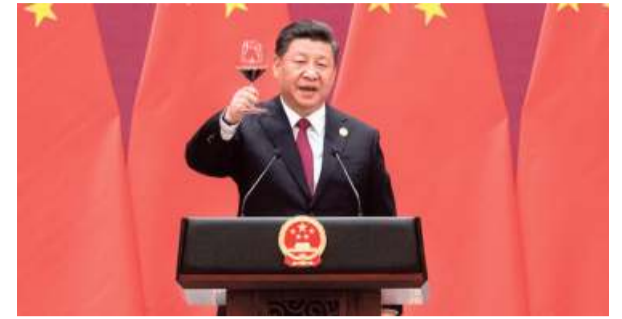
China on Friday announced that the financial model for funding projects under its flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) had been revamped, countering criticism that its mega-connectivity undertaking was opening "debt traps" for enhancing its geopolitical influence.

"We have also formulated guiding principles of financing the development of the Belt and Road and published debt sustainability framework for participating countries to provide guidance for BRI financing cooperation," Chinese President Xi Jinping said in his keynote address at the second Belt and Road Forum (BRF).

Mr. Xi's opening remarks highlighted the subtext of rivalry with the U.S. in setting the global agenda. In the presence of 37 country heads, chief of the International Monetary Fund Christine Lagarde and Secretary-General of the UN Antonio Guterres, as well as representatives of scores of nations, he docked the BRI with a new phase of globalisation, anchored by China and its partners.

India has decided to skip the BRF in opposition to the BRI's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). New Delhi has noted that it is an infringement of its sovereignty.

Mr. Xi stressed that China "will work with others" to write new rules of international trade within the framework of the World Trade Organization (WTO). "Rules and credibility underpin the



President Xi Jinping proposing a toast during the welcome banquet for leaders attending the Belt and Road Forum. ■ AFP

effective functioning of the international governance system. China is an active supporter and participant of the WTO and will work with others to develop international economic and trade rules of higher standard."

China has been accused of funding unsustainable projects under BRI, which could be leveraged for extending Beijing's political influence in geopolitically sensitive countries such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives, which skirt important shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean.

Zero tolerance

But countering the charge of China having a hidden agenda, Mr. Xi said: "In pursuing Belt and Road cooperation, everything should be done in a transparent way. We should have zero tolerance for corruption."

He added: "We also need to ensure the commercial and fiscal sustainability of all projects so that they will achieve the intended goals as planned."

Mr. Xi stressed that the BRI projects would encourage participation by multilateral and national financial

institutions and encourage joint ventures in third countries. They would seek the involvement of "multiple stakeholders", for projects pursuing a "people-centered" approach focused on "job creation" and countering poverty.

Lending scheme

"We will continue to make a good use of the Belt and Road special lending scheme, the Silk Road Fund and various special investment funds, develop Silk Road themed bonds and support the multilateral cooperation centre for development finance in its operation," he said.

The BRI, he said, would pursue "high quality" schemes attuned to "international rules and standards" covering the procurement, tendering and bidding processes.

Unveiled in 2013, the BRI is a giant land and maritime connectivity project, driven to revive the Ancient Silk Road. It covers Eurasia and Africa, building a network of expressways. Ahead of the BRF, Italy has become the first G-7 country to formally join the BRI.

'Qatar's exit visa system to end this year'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
DOHA

Qatar is set to abolish its controversial exit visa system for all foreign workers by the end of 2019 the UN's International Labour Organization said on Friday.

"Last year, the exit visa was eliminated for the majority of workers, this year, that will be extended to all remaining categories of workers," said ILO's Houtan Homayounpour, head of the labour agency's project office in Doha.

In September 2018, Qatar approved legislation to scrap the "kafala", or sponsorship, system which required that foreign workers obtain permission from their employers to leave the country. In October, it went into force for all but 5% of a company's workforce — reportedly those in the most senior positions.

Mr. Homayounpour said the system "will officially be eliminated" by the end of 2019.

China, Russia pose threat to U.S.: FBI

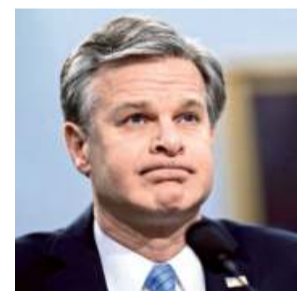
Agency chief describes China as most significant 'intelligence collection' threat

SRIRAM LAKSHMAN
WASHINGTON

FBI Director Christopher Wray described China as the most significant "intelligence collection" threat. His comments were made at a discussion at the Washington offices of the Council on Foreign Relations, a think-tank.

"No country poses a broader more severe intelligence collection threat than China," Mr. Wray said, adding he was seeing increased instances of "blended threats", a combination of cybercrimes and espionage. "Economic espionage dominates our counter-intelligence programme today."

"China has pioneered a societal approach to stealing innovation in any way it can from a wide array of businesses, universities and organisations. They're doing it through Chinese intelligence services, their state-owned enterprises, through ostensibly 'private' companies, through graduate students, through researchers,



Christopher Wray

through a variety of actors all working on behalf of China," Mr. Wray said.

On Thursday, the U.S. Trade Representative said it was keeping China on a 'priority watch list' of countries that are of significant concern to the U.S. in terms of their inadequate protection of IP. China's IP laws are a contentious topic and have featured in the trade talks between the two countries. The U.S. is also aggressively working with allies in trying to keep China out of dominating the building of global 5G network infrastructure such as by taking action

against Chinese tech giant Huawei.

Russian interference

Mr. Wray described Russia as a "very significant" threat in response to a question on Special Counsel Robert Mueller's characterisation of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election as "sweeping and systematic".

"I think everybody has their own adjectives... I do think Russia poses a very significant counter-intelligence threat, certainly in the cyber arena, certainly [in] what we call the 'malign foreign influence territory', certainly in their presence of intelligence officers in this country," he said.

Mr. Wray is a Trump appointee and his comments are in contrast with those from several senior administration officials, who have tended to play down the role of Russian influence on the campaign.

Mr. Wray said malign foreign influence has conti-

nued "pretty much unabated" through the use of fake news, propaganda, false personas to sow divisiveness and undermine Americans' faith in democracy. This was in response to a question on the scale and nature of the foreign influence threat between the 2016 presidential election and 2018 midterm elections.

However, Mr. Wray said there was no material impact or interference with election or campaign infrastructure in 2018.

On the Sri Lanka bombings of Easter Sunday, Mr. Wray said the FBI had sent personnel over to assist in the investigation to work with its partners in Sri Lanka. "You always hear this phrase about 'connecting the dots' in the terrorist arena, but a lot of the terrorist plots of today are more compact, involving fewer people, less complicated attacks, shorter period of time, which means fewer dots to connect in the first place."

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
TEHRAN

A prisoner swap offered by Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif is only for the United States and would not involve Britain, the Foreign Ministry spokesman was quoted as saying on Friday.

"The offer does not concern the Britons," Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi said in remarks published by

the semi-official ISNA news agency. "It is only related to Iranian and American prisoners," he said.

On Wednesday, Mr. Zarif proposed that Iranians jailed in the United States or held in other countries on extradition requests issued by the Americans could be swapped for foreigners imprisoned in Iran.

"I put this offer on the table publicly now: exchange

them, all these people that are in prison inside the United States, on extradition request from the United States, we believe the charges against them are phoney," Mr. Zarif said at the Asia Society in New York.

"The United States believes the charges against these people in Iran are phoney... let's have an exchange," Mr. Zarif said as he participated in a UN session.

IN BRIEF



U.S. acting in bad faith over nuclear talks: Kim

VLADIVOSTOK
Kim Jong-un has accused the U.S. of acting in "bad faith" in talks on its nuclear arsenal, North Korean state media said on Friday as he left Russia following his first summit with President Vladimir Putin. The Korean Central News Agency reported Mr. Kim had told Mr. Putin that the U.S.

adopted a "unilateral attitude in bad faith" at a summit with U.S. President Donald Trump in Hanoi. "Peace and security on the Korean peninsula will entirely depend on the U.S. future attitude, and the DPRK will guard itself for every possible situation," Mr. Kim was quoted as saying. ■ AFP

U.K. court extends Nirav Modi's remand

To remain in custody till the next hearing in the extradition case on May 24

VIDYA RAM
LONDON

Diamond merchant Nirav Modi will remain in custody till the next hearing in the extradition proceedings against him on May 24 as his legal team failed to make a further application for bail before the court in London.

During the brief procedural hearing on Friday, Mr. Modi — the main accused in the \$2 billion Punjab National Bank fraud case — appeared by a video link from Wandsworth Prison in south London.

Emma Arbuthnot, the Chief Magistrate of Westminster Court, set May 24 for the next procedural hearing (Mr. Modi has to be produced before the court every four weeks) and May 30 for the first case management hear-



Mr. Modi has been remanded in HM Wandsworth, one of Europe's largest prisons.

ing, for which Mr. Modi will be brought in person.

There was no further attempt to push for bail, following the unsuccessful application made before Judge Arbuthnot in March, at which the prosecution accused Mr. Modi of threatening to kill a witness and des-

troying evidence in an effort to curtail his case. Judge Arbuthnot had accepted the arguments, saying she was denying bail because of the risk he would fail to surrender to the court and his lack of community ties.

No time limit

Mr. Modi would have been entitled to make a third bail application if there had been a substantial change in circumstances for the application. However, no such application was made during the hearing. Mr. Modi has also so far failed to lodge an appeal at the High Court, which would have provided another avenue for him to attempt to gain bail. There is no time limit on this application though.

Mr. Modi has been re-

manded in HM Wandsworth, one of Europe's largest and most overcrowded prisons. His case took an unexpected turn in March, after police arrested him following a tip-off by an Indian-origin clerk at a bank in central London. He had recognised Mr. Modi following the wave of publicity around the case. Mr. Modi's legal team had been in touch with the Metropolitan Police's Extradition Unit to arrange for him to hand himself over voluntarily by appointment the following week.

Last year, the inspectorate of prisons in the U.K. published a scathing inspection report on conditions in the prison in which it warned about issues ranging from the availability of illicit drugs to overcrowded conditions.