

Prayers held near iconic Colombo church

St. Anthony's shrine, which was attacked last Sunday, has been popular among people of different faiths

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

Seated on a foldable, blue chair outside his shop on Colombo's Jampettah Street on Sunday morning, Mohamed Buhari was looking ahead, his gaze firmly fixed on the shrine less than 50 metres in front of him. "I was sitting right here last Sunday too, at the same time, when I suddenly heard a blast and saw flames erupt from there," he said, pointing to the white Colonial building's top.

The nearly-two-century-old St. Anthony's shrine here was one of the churches attacked in the serial bombings last Sunday, which killed over 250 people across three churches and many hotels, mostly in and around Colombo, and in the eastern city of Batticaloa.

As dozens of worshippers gathered at the shrine for the special Easter service last Sunday, Mr. Buhari was sitting there, thinking of his wife who had passed away less than two weeks earlier.

"I just could not understand what was going on," said the 69-year-old garment trader. He had left Thanjavur in India when he was 20, to work here in Kochchikade, as the locality is known. It became his home for life. "Hearing the sudden noise, residents rushed outside tried taking the injured people in three-wheelers, buses, or whatever vehicles we could find," he recalled.

Televised Mass

With persisting security concerns, the Archbishop of Colombo cancelled all church services and instead held a Sunday Mass at his home that was televised live. However, dozens gathered outside St. Anthony's shrine, singing hymns and lighting candles, exactly a week after the horrific attacks. Rows of



A week later: Devotees praying outside the St. Anthony's shrine in Colombo on Sunday. ■ AFP

Police raid headquarters of NTJ

REUTERS
COLOMBO/KATTANKUDY

Sri Lankan police raided the headquarters of National Thawheedh Jamaath (NTJ), the hard-line Islamist group suspected to be behind the Easter attacks, a Reuters witness said, as Sunday Mass was cancelled due to

flags in black and white were put up along the street, as if to register grief, protest and solidarity at once.

An old Catholic church, St. Anthony's shrine, located in Colombo's busiest market place, has for years been hugely popular among worshippers from different faiths, including Hindus and Muslims.

"April 21st was my little grandson's birthday. Had he been here and not gone to India for his holidays, his parents would have certainly taken him to the church that

fears of further attacks.

Armed police in the town of Kattankudy searched the headquarters of the National Thawheedh Jamaath (NTJ) and detained one man at the premises, a Reuters reporter at the scene said. Police did not comment.

On Saturday, the

day, like every other year. Thank god the child escaped this," said Vijayalaksmi Thambirajah, who lives in a cramped alleyway adjacent to the shrine.

Many families like hers, though *saivam*, as Sri Lankan Hindus often identify themselves, are regulars at the church. "Every Tuesday, many of us go to the Shiva temple nearby and then come to the Anthony's shrine."

Even legends around the shrine, which celebrated its 175th anniversary in 2010, re-

government banned the NTJ under new emergency laws.

Police suspect the bombings were carried out by two local Islamist groups, including the NTJ. Around 10,000 soldiers have been deployed around the island as the authorities hunt for more suspects.

fect diverse influences, including from India. When the Dutch arrived in Sri Lanka in the 17th century, Catholicism, which their predecessor coloniser – the Portuguese – spread, came under serious threat, according to popular narratives. A priest by name Fr. Antonio, from Cochin, is believed to have arrived here at that time, disguised as a merchant.

Helping locals, mainly the fisher community, he is said to have received wide support and drawn more people

towards Catholicism. Those attached to the church believe that it was his Cochin-trader image that possibly inspired the locality's name, Kochchikade.

Fr. Antonio's statue, usually placed inside the shrine, was kept outside on Sunday, at the entrance of the church. Scores of people stood facing the statue, their hands joined in prayer, tears rolling down their cheeks. The church they frequented was now across a row of rigid barricades and armed security personnel.

"It was Fr. Antonio who dedicated this shrine to St. Anthony's. His statue survived the blast and we wanted devotees to be assured," said Fr. Jude Fernando, administrator of the church.

"It is still unbelievable... what do I even say," he said, even as cleaners struggled to clear the debris and wash off blood stains inside. "I was right at the front when the blast occurred at the rear. I escaped so narrowly."

Disbelief and helplessness were common refrains on the Sunday after. The usually bustling Pettah had quietened. Most shops were closed, and only a handful of people were out, buying essentials from roadside stalls.

For people of the area, the attacks were not only shocking, but also difficult to comprehend. People of all religions live here and have been trading with each other for years.

"We buy, we sell, we trade. And trade has no religion," Mr. Buhari said, adding: "in any case what trade, what business now!" "We all know that all lives have to go one day. Death is not the issue. But no one has the right to take another human life in such a gruesome way. It is outrageous," Mr. Buhari said.

1 killed in U.S. synagogue shooting

Gunman posted a hate-filled letter moments before attack

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
POWAY

A teenage gunman who wrote a hate-filled manifesto opened fire at a synagogue in California on Saturday, killing one person and injuring three others including the rabbi as worshippers marked the final day of Passover, authorities said.

The shooting in the town of Poway, north of San Diego, came exactly six months after a white supremacist killed 11 people at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue – the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in U.S. history.

San Diego County Sheriff Bill Gore said those wounded included the rabbi as well as a minor and 34-year-old man who were injured by shrapnel. A 60-year-old woman died from her wounds.

No prior arrest record

Mr. Gore identified the suspect, who was arrested after fleeing the scene, as John Earnest, 19, and said he had no prior arrest record. He said Earnest burst into the Chabad of Poway synagogue – where there were around 100 people – shortly after 11.20 a.m. local time and opened fire with an assault



United against hate: A candle-light vigil at the Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church, California, on Saturday, for the victims of the synagogue shooting. ■ AFP

weapon that appears to have malfunctioned, preventing him from inflicting more harm. Mr. Gore said an off-duty border patrol agent who was at the synagogue at the time of the shooting opened fire on the gunman as he was fleeing, striking his car but missing the suspect.

The man was eventually apprehended by a San Diego police officer who had been monitoring dispatch radio and raced to the scene, San Diego police chief David Nisleit said.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu condemned the "atrocious" incident, calling it "an attack at the heart of the Jewish people". Mr. Gore said authori-

ties were examining Earnest's social media activity and establishing the authenticity of an anti-Semitic open letter he apparently published on a far-right message board hours before the attack. The manifesto is similar to one posted on the same message board by the white supremacist behind the March 15 mosque attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand that left 50 people dead.

The hate-filled letter lauds the Christchurch shooter's actions and that of the Pittsburgh shooter and claims responsibility for a fire at a mosque in California a week after the Christchurch shootings.

In Indonesia, 272 election officials die due of fatigue-related illnesses

REUTERS
JAKARTA

Ten days after Indonesia held the world's biggest single-day elections, more than 270 election staff have died, mostly of fatigue-related illnesses caused by long hours of work counting millions of ballot papers by hand, an official said on Sunday.

The April 17 elections were the first time the coun-

try combined the presidential vote with national and regional parliamentary ones, with an aim to cut costs. But conducting the eight-hour vote in a country that stretches more than 5,000 km proved to be both a Herculean logistical feat and deadly for officials.

As of Saturday night, 272 election officials had died, mostly from overwork-relat-

ed illnesses, while 1,878 others had fallen ill, said Arief Priyo Susanto, spokesman of the General Elections Commission (KPU). The Health Ministry issued a circular on April 23 urging health facilities to give utmost care for sick election staff, while the Finance Ministry is working on compensation for families of the deceased, Mr. Susanto added.

ELSEWHERE



Exiting NPT an option before Iran, says Zarif

TEHRAN
Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has said leaving the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is one of the "many options" Tehran has to retaliate against U.S. sanctions, state media reported on Sunday. "The Islamic republic has many options... (leaving) the NPT is one of them," Mr. Zarif said in remarks to Iranian reporters in New York. ■ AFP

Ukraine leader offers passports to Russians

KIEV
President-elect Volodymyr Zelensky dismissed an offer by Vladimir Putin to provide passports to Ukrainians, and pledged instead to grant citizenship to Russians who "suffer" under the Kremlin's rule. Mr. Zelensky offered to "give citizenship to representatives of all nations that suffer from authoritarian and corrupt regimes. ■ AFP

Corridor linking India, Myanmar no longer under BRI framework

South Asia is now covered by three other major projects

ATUL ANEJA
BEIJING

India's decision to skip the Belt and Road Forum (BRF) may have led to the exclusion of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor from the list of projects covered by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) umbrella.

In an annex tagged with the Joint Communiqué of the Leaders' Roundtable of the BRF, which concluded in Beijing on Saturday, the Chinese Foreign Ministry website has not listed the BCIM as a project covered by the BRI – the giant connectivity initiative spearheaded by China to revive the ancient Silk Road across Eurasia and Africa.

Instead, South Asia is covered by three major undertakings – the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC); the Nepal-China Trans-Himalayan Multi-di-



Chinese President Xi Jinping. ■ AP

mensional Connectivity Network, including Nepal-China cross-border railway; and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

India's non-participation

Citing "sovereignty" concerns, India, for the second time, did not participate in the BRF, as the CPEC passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).

The 2,800-km BCIM corridor proposes to link Kunming in China's Yunnan pro-

vince with Kolkata, passing through nodes such as Mandalay in Myanmar and Dhaka in Bangladesh before heading to Kolkata.

Significantly, a report titled, "The Belt and Road Initiative Progress, Contributions and Prospects," released by the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative on April 22, did list the BCIM as a BRI project. Last September, the BRI had got a high octane boost when Myanmar inked an agreement with China to establish the CMEC. The 1,700-km corridor provides China yet another node to access the Indian Ocean.

The CMEC will run from Yunnan Province of China to Mandalay in Central Myanmar. From there it will head towards Yangon, before terminating at the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the Bay of Bengal.

UAE gives birth certificate to girl born to Hindu father, Muslim mother

Country breaks away from marriage rules for expatriates

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
DUBAI

The UAE government, probably for the first time, has given birth certificate to a girl born to a Hindu father and a Muslim mother, setting aside the country's marriage rules during its 'Year of Tolerance', according to a media report. As per the marriage rules for expatriates in UAE, a Muslim man can marry a non-Muslim woman but a Muslim woman cannot marry a non-Muslim man.

Sharjah-based Kiran Babu and Sanam Saboo Siddique, who got married in Kerala in 2016, faced an unusual situation when their daughter was born in July 2018, the *Khaleej Times* reported. "I

have an Abu Dhabi visa. I get my insurance coverage there and got my wife admitted to Medeor 24X7 Hospital in the emirate. But after the baby's delivery, the birth certificate was rejected as I am a Hindu," Mr. Babu said. "I, then applied for a no-objection certificate through the court. The trial went on for four months but my case was rejected," he added. Mr. Babu said that since his daughter had no legal documents, he pinned his hopes on the amnesty period.

'Year of Tolerance'

The UAE has declared 2019 as the 'Year of Tolerance' to bridge the communication gap between different cul-

tures. "Those days were stressful and the amnesty was a window of hope. The Indian Embassy helped with the provision of an outpass. But the baby was denied immigration clearance as there was no data or registration number to prove her birth," he said. Mr. Babu said that Indian Embassy counsellor M. Rajamurugan supported them through the process.

He again went to court and, this time, his case was approved. The couple was given the birth certificate of their daughter Anamta Aceline Kiran on April 14, a day before the festival of Vishu. "I am told that this is the first case where the rule has been amended," he said.

Spain's snap election sees good turnout

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
MADRID

Spaniards flocked to vote on Sunday in a tense snap general election that could see the far-right make a dramatic entrance in Parliament.

Opinion polls give outgoing socialist Premier Pedro Sánchez a win but without the necessary majority to govern alone, meaning he will have to seek alliances in a political environment that has soured since Catalonia's failed secession bid. After a tense campaign, voter turnout as of 6 p.m. stood at 60.75%, up from 51.21% at the same time in the preceding polls in 2016, election authorities said.