

Sirisena replaces police chief

Also picks new Defence Secretary, blames officials for failing to pass on information

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

President Maithripala Sirisena on Monday appointed a former Army commander to the post of Defence Secretary and named a new police chief as part of his promised effort to overhaul Sri Lanka's security establishment in the wake of the Easter blasts that killed over 250 people.

General S.H.S. Kottegoda was appointed the Secretary of Defence, after Hemasiri Fernando resigned from the post. While taking responsibility for the attacks, Mr. Fernando had said, "there was no failure" on his part.

President Sirisena also named Deputy Inspector-General Chandana Wickramaratne as the acting police chief. The incumbent Pujith Jayasundara, who Mr. Sirisena had earlier asked to resign, was on Monday asked to go on "compulsory leave" after he "refused to resign", official sources said.

As per Sri Lankan law, the Inspector General of Police (IGP) can be removed from the post only with a parliamentary resolution backed



A united front: Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, Archbishop of Colombo, Venerable Kirinde Assaji Thero and Muslim leader Mowlavi Nusrath Nowfal at a vigil on Sunday. • REUTERS

by a majority and based on a subsequent inquiry by a committee. Mr. Sirisena, who addressed media heads last week, squarely blamed the Defence Secretary and the IGP for "failing" to pass on the information to him.

Intelligence lapse

As Sri Lanka tries to come to terms with the serial bombings on April 21, serious questions on the apparent

lapse on intelligence sharing loom. The country's security forces and agencies have come under the spotlight, especially after President Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said they were not aware of the prior warnings of likely attacks that, both leaders said, officials knew about.

On April 4, India is said to have shared highly descriptive information on the

threat with Sri Lankan authorities. Meanwhile, security forces are continuing their search for the remaining suspects and possible cache of weapons or explosives.

Prime Minister Wickremesinghe said on Sunday that most suspects have either been "killed or arrested". Over 100 suspects had been arrested so far.

All suspects listed in a "wanted list" publicised by the police recently have been identified, local media reported on Monday. Two of them were believed to have been killed in Friday's overnight gun battle or the subsequent explosion early on Saturday, following which security forces found 15 bodies in the eastern Ampara district.

On Monday evening, the Army Headquarters announced that all Army, Navy, Air Force and police areas within the Western Province, where Colombo is located, and Puttalam District, in the North Western Province, were being placed under a newly-formed 'Overall Operational' command.

Socialist Party wins Spanish election

Short of absolute majority, Sánchez's PSOE will have to forge alliances to rule

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
MADRID

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's Socialists have won snap elections, without the necessary majority to govern solo, in a fragmented political landscape marked by the far-right's entry into Parliament. The results raise the spectre of another period of instability for Spain, with Mr. Sánchez depending on alliances with hostile rivals in an environment that has soured since Catalonia's failed secession bid in 2017.

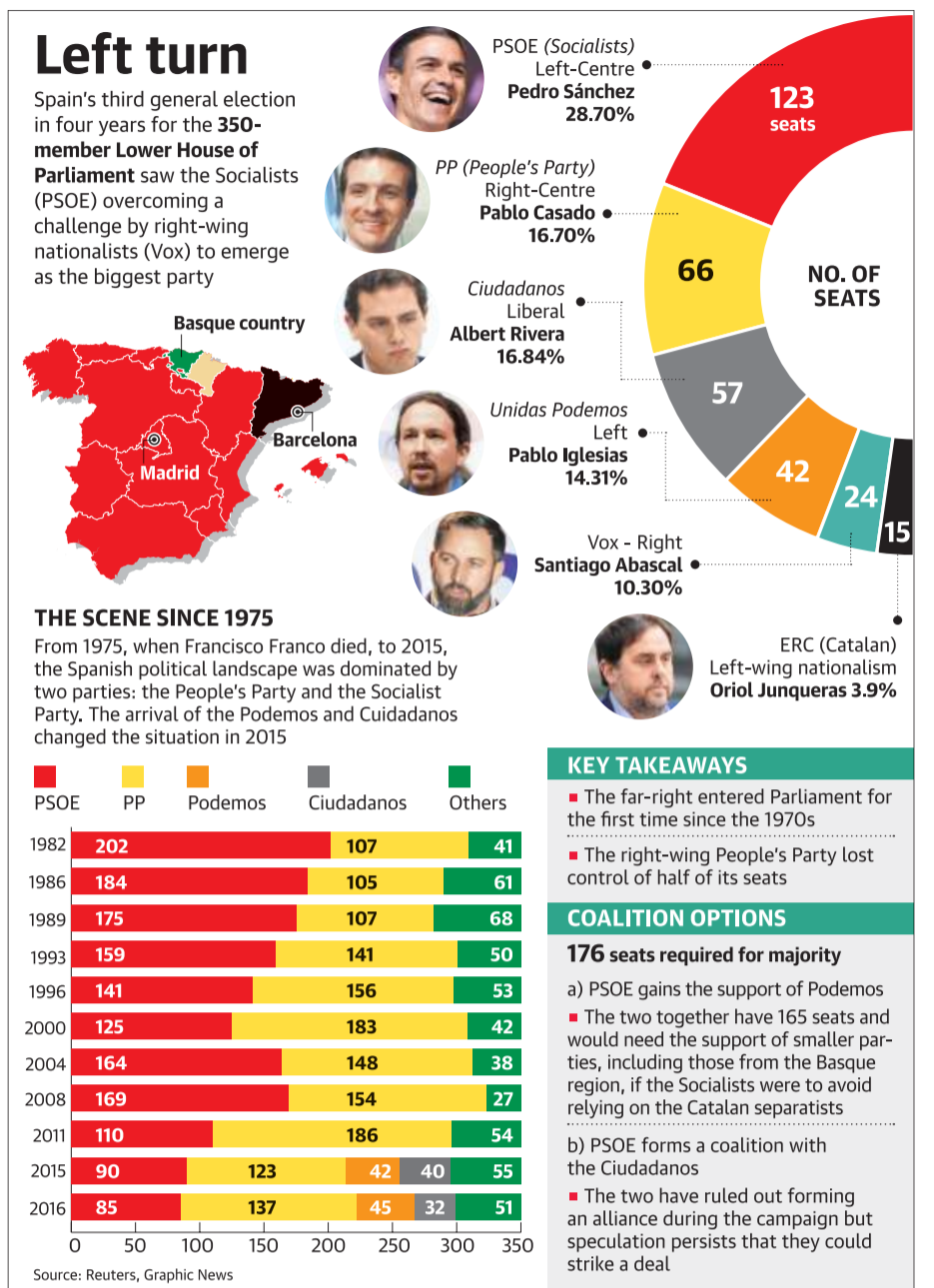
A significant development was the rise of the ultra-nationalist Vox party, which garnered just over 10% of the vote in a country that has had no far-right party to speak of since the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975. Mr. Sánchez's Socialist Party (PSOE) got 123 lawmakers out of 350, or close to 29% of votes – short of an absolute majority but much better than the 85 seats it got in 2016.

"The Socialists have won the general election and with it the future has won and the past has lost," he told cheering supporters from the balcony of the party's headquarters in Madrid, claiming victory late on Sunday.

The big loser was the conservative Popular Party (PP), which got 66 seats compared to 137 in the previous election.

Possible alliances

Mr. Sánchez, who came to power in June after ousting conservative Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy in a no-confidence vote, could seek to forge alliances with far-left Podemos and smaller groupings like Catalan separatist parties, as he had done over the past 10 months. He could also try to cosy up to centre-right Ciudadanos, which



Ban on veils in Sri Lanka sparks concern

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

Sri Lanka has banned veils citing "security" reasons following Easter attacks, but the decision has sparked a host of concerns within the Muslim community. President Maithripala Sirisena said that the ban was in the interest of national security and public safety, so that individuals were easily identifiable.

In this instance, "veils", Sri Lankan activists note, imply *burqas* that some Sri Lankan Muslim women

wear, though the official announcement doesn't name the attire specifically.

The All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU), the apex religious body of Islamic scholars, has issued a directive to the Muslim community urging members to refrain from wearing the veil. "We were not responding to the government's ban, we independently reached out to the community keeping in mind the current situation," said Ash-Sheikh Fazil Farook, ACJU media secretary. However, what is effective

a *burqa* ban will have to be seen both in the context of the current moment as well as in the broader context, cautions Mareena Thaha Refai, founder-president of Al Muslim Aath, an organisation of Muslim Women.

The timing of the ban is significant, in her view. "It comes at a time when we are dealing with a national tragedy. Any opportunity to express our solidarity with our Christian brothers and sisters... is crucial at this point," she said. All the same, the possible repercussions of such a move, which some are reading as an attack on civil liberties, is cause of worry, observed Ms. Refai. No suspect or suicide bomber was found wearing a *burqa*, so "there is no direct correlation," she said.

Seen in the specific context of the aftermath of the blasts, the ban does not seem unreasonable to her. "At the same time, if there are moves to prevent us from wearing the *abaya* [full-length dress] or the headscarf, we will surely resist that," she told *The Hindu*.

ELSEWHERE



Catalan leader banned from EU polls

MADRID
Election authorities have banned Catalonia's former President Carles Puigdemont, who fled Spain in 2017 after a secession attempt, from running in EU polls, his party said on Monday. Together for Catalonia issued a statement accusing the Electoral Commission of wanting to "silence and push aside" Mr. Puigdemont. AFP

38 killed as floods worsen in Mozambique

PEMBA
Heavy rain battered northern Mozambique on Monday as residents and relief workers confronted the widespread devastation wrought by Cyclone Kenneth, the strongest cyclone to ever hit Africa, which killed 38 people and destroyed thousands of homes. AFP

IS releases 'Baghdadi video'

Man claiming to be the IS leader praises attacks in Sri Lanka

BEN HUBBARD
BEIRUT

The Islamic State (IS) group released a video on Monday of a man it said was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the group's mysterious and reclusive leader, which would mark the first time he has showed his face while addressing his followers since the early days of the terrorist group's rampage through Iraq and Syria.

In an 18-minute video released by an IS media group and distributed by the SITE Intelligence Group, the man identified as Baghdadi sits on the ground in an Arab-style sitting room, speaking calmly to a group of unidentified followers with an assault rifle at his side.

Loss of 'caliphate'

He acknowledges that the group has lost its so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria, a territory the size of Britain that it ruled as an extremist proto-state.



The man purported to be Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a screengrab of the video. • AP

But he said that the group's battle with the West and its allies was far from over.

"Truthfully, the battle of Islam and its people with the crusader and his people is a long battle, and the battle of Baghouz finished and manifested in it was the brutality and savagery of the nation of the cross toward the nation of Islam," the man said, his beard greayer than when he addressed his followers from a mosque in the Iraqi city of

Mosul when the group was near the summit of its power. "At the same time, it showed and manifested the courage, fortitude and persistence of the nation of Islam."

First video since 2014

According to SITE, the video was the first time Baghdadi has been shown in a video since July 2014, when he gave a sermon in Mosul.

In the video, SITE says, he praises the attackers who carried out the bombing attacks in Sri Lanka last week, saying they were revenge for the loss of Baghouz, the IS's last territory in Syria, which it lost to U.S.-backed forces a month ago.

The IS group claimed responsibility for the Sri Lanka attacks, which killed over 250 people. While Baghdadi has not been seen in several years, he has been heard from. In August, the IS released an audio recording said to be of him. NY TIMES

Ultimatum given to Netanyahu

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
JERUSALEM

Israel's Attorney-General has given Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu until next week to confirm that he wants a formal hearing to defend himself before corruption charges are filed against him.

In a letter made public on Sunday evening, Avichai Mandelblit told Mr. Netanyahu's lawyers that if he wants to exercise his right to defend himself before possible indictment, he must notify authorities by May 10. The hearing itself must then take place no later than July 10. Mr. Netanyahu's lawyers have been protesting non-payment of their fees and are refusing to collect the case files until they are paid, the letter said. Mr. Netanyahu, who won a fifth term in office, faces the prospect of becoming the first sitting Premier to be indicted.

4 killed in Burkina Faso church attack

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
OUAGADOUGOU

Gunmen killed four worshippers and a pastor in the first jihadist attack on a church in Burkina Faso, security and local sources said on Monday, in the latest violence to rock the west African nation.

Sunday's raid took place

in the small northern town of Silgadi near Djibo, the capital of Soum province.

"Unidentified armed individuals have attacked the Protestant church in Silgadi, killing four members of the congregation and the main pastor," said a security source. It was the first attack on a church since jihadist

violence erupted in Burkina Faso in 2015.

Burkina Faso has suffered from increasingly frequent and deadly attacks attributed to a number of jihadist groups, including the Ansarul Islam group, the Group to Support Islam and Muslims and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara.

Afghan 'grand assembly' begins

4-day event will discuss govt. position on talks with Taliban

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
KABUL

Thousands of politicians and officials from across Afghanistan gathered amid tight security in Kabul on Monday to discuss the war and U.S. efforts to forge a peace deal with the Taliban.

More than 3,000 people have been invited to the rare "loya jirga", which is being billed as the largest in modern Afghan history, in a bid to set possible conditions under which they might accept a peace settlement.

The loya jirga – literally "grand assembly" in Pashto – is being held as the U.S. and Taliban are discussing a possible foreign troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.

"We want to specify the main lines for the negotiations with the Taliban," Mr. Ghani said at the start of the



Opening day: Afghan President Ashraf Ghani at the grand assembly in Kabul on Monday. • REUTERS

four-day summit. "We want clear advice from all of you."

Mr. Ghani's government hopes the high-stakes meeting will set out Kabul's conditions for any deal, including the continuation of the Constitution and the protection of women's rights, the media, and free speech. Mr. Ghani had invited the Tali-

ban but the insurgents refused.

In the past, the Taliban have blasted rockets at a tent hosting a loya jirga. In a statement, the Taliban vowed that any decisions or resolutions made at a loya jirga are "never acceptable to the real and devout sons of this homeland".

Bangladesh police kill 2 linked to 2016 café attack

Militant hideout in Dhaka raided

REUTERS
DHAKA

Bangladesh security forces on Monday killed at least two people suspected of belonging to an Islamist militant group behind a deadly café attack in Dhaka in 2016, police said after a raid at a tin-shed hideout in the capital.

Police cordoned off the area after receiving information about the presence of suspected members of Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh, a home-grown militant group that killed 22 people in the café attack.

"When our forces knocked on the door, the residents of the house fired at our people instead of opening it," Mufti Mahmud Khan, director of the legal and me-



Security personnel blocking a road near the militant hideout in Dhaka. • REUTERS

dia wing of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), told reporters.

"Then members of the RAB responded. There is still huge amount of explosives and our special force are trying to remove it."

Mr. Khan said three people, including the owner of the house, had been detained for questioning.