

A small town shaken by threat of terror

In Sainthamaruthu, where suicide bombers triggered an explosion, locals are living in perpetual fear

MEERA SRINIVASAN
SAINTHAMARUTHU

“Is the font okay?” a young man at the computer asked M.I. Abdul Majeed, showing him a printout that read, ‘for security reasons, visitors are requested to park their vehicles outside the mosque’.

“That’s perfect. Let’s put up this message on all three gates,” said Mr. Majeed, secretary of the Jumma mosque in Sainthamaruthu, located in the southeastern Ampara district.

On Wednesday, more than a week after Sri Lanka’s Easter attacks, administrators at this mosque were on high alert. One of the serial explosions had occurred in neighbouring Batticaloa district, some 45 km north. Within days, locals realised that the threat was even closer. It was in their midst, as was evident when security forces rounded up a house in this town in the early hours of April 27.

Following an overnight gun battle with suspects, in which three alleged jihadists were killed, troops found 15 bodies inside a house where, officials said, at least three suicide bombers triggered explosions. Six children and three women were among the dead, while authorities later identified three men as the father and two brothers of Zahran Hashim, who is believed to have led the serial bombings on April 21.

Tip-off to police
“They were people from Kat-tankudy living here as tenants. We didn’t have the slightest idea that they were terrorists. The moment some people in the locality



The house in Sainthamaruthu, Sri Lanka, where at least 15 people were killed during a raid last week. • GETTY IMAGES

sensed something suspicious,” they alerted the police,” said Abdul Rafeek, a member of the municipal council in nearby Kalmunai town. His point on locals tipping off the police would be repeatedly made by many here, in different ways.

Until the Easter blasts, the following gunfire and bloody explosions that jolted Sainthamaruthu, the small town was focussed on its own problems, especially its 30-year-long-demand for a separate urban council.

The 100%-Muslim town, which is home to some 25,000 people, has been demanding that it be given a separate local body to develop infrastructure and local governance.

“All Muslim parties promised us that they would get us an urban council, but none actually did,” said Y.M. Hanifa, president of the mosque. Losing faith in their political leadership, members of

the mosque backed nine independent candidates in the last local authority elections. “All of them won,” Mr. Hanifa said, with evident pride.

The members were elected to the nearby Kalmunai Municipal Council, the next best to having their local body.

Tsunami colony
“We moved here, into this tsunami settlement built by the government in 2008. Our own homes, boats everything was gone,” said Aboobakkar Aisha, 58, recalling how “even the war or the tsunami” didn’t affect the community as much as the recent incidents did.

It was on the lane parallel to hers that the suspects had taken a home on rent. “We had no idea that people in our midst had such motives. If our people had not alerted the police, all of us would have become suspects in the eyes of the military. That

would have made our lives miserable,” she said.

The attacks and the subsequent responses of the government have already brought other consequences to the community, particularly women.

In addition to heavy policing and perpetual fear, locals feel trapped in the settlement that is made up of rows of tightly packed homes along hard, concrete roads.

“After the government banned face veils, my daughter can’t go out. She can’t even go to the madrasa without wearing it,” said S.M. Fazmia, 30, pointing to how the controversial *niqab* ban – which other Muslim women have challenged on grounds of civil liberties and lack of consultation – had, in this case, restricted women’s mobility.

Those attached to the mosque also flag new, urgent concerns, like keeping radicalisation at bay.

“We know radicalisation had no place in our multi-ethnic context. Let alone its ideological appeal, it is practically very hard to follow that doctrine and coexist with others here. The community is clear on that,” said Mohammed Ismail Mohammed Sadaath, a former lecturer of political science.

Different religious and ethnic groups have coexisted in the past.

Muslims’ links, especially with Tamils, was mostly through education and trade, according to Mr. Hanifa, 83. “My teacher was a Tamil, most of my students were Tamil,” the retired school principal said.

More attacks feared, say Sri Lanka officials

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
COLOMBO

Sri Lanka bolstered security on Friday with fears of attacks against bridges in the capital as the Prime Minister vowed to hunt down any remaining Islamic State (IS) extremists behind the deadly Easter bombings.

Sri Lanka’s minority Muslims, meanwhile, held Friday prayers under tight security, condemning the jihadist attacks.

Islamist extremists were believed to be planning further attacks, authorities said, this time against several bridges and flyovers in the city as well as police stations.

The warnings came as Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said some of the conspirators in the April 21 bombings of three hotels and three luxury hotels may still be at large.

Police confirmed they had instructed stations around Colombo to deploy additional officers and asked the Navy to deploy more vessels on rivers following the leak of police intelligence warning bridges were at risk of attack.

Authorities had information about a small group of radicals who may be trying to stage more strikes, said Health Minister and government spokesman Rajitha Senaratne.

Labour, Tories suffer losses

Liberal Democrats, Green Party make gains in local elections

VIDYA RAM
LONDON

Britain’s two major political parties suffered heavy losses in local elections that took place across England and Northern Ireland this week, in a development that some attributed to their stance on Brexit, while others saw it as a continuation of the fragmentation of politics that had been under way before the Brexit referendum, but saw a temporary halt after it.

The heaviest losses were suffered by the Conservatives, who had lost over 510 Councillors in seats up and down the country by early afternoon, while Labour had lost over 70. Substantial gains were made by both the Liberal Democrat and Green parties, which have gained over 300 and 60, respectively, by early afternoon.

Significantly, among the biggest gains made by the Liberal Democrats was in the city of Chelmsford, which voted to leave in the 2016 referendum. The Liberal Democrats are the largest political party in favour of a new public vote on Brexit, and the party has inevitably seen the results as an endor-



Liberal Democrat leader Vince Cable. • GETTY IMAGES

sement of that strategy. “Three-party politics is back,” declared the party’s leader Vincent Cable. “In big cities and rural England – in both Leave and Remain areas – we have shown ourselves the strongest campaigning force and the big winners of the night.”

UKIP’s losses
Also notably, the UKIP, the heavily pro-Brexit party, also suffered net losses across the country, though made some gains such as in the heavily ‘Leave’ voting northern town of Sunderland. The Green Party, which is also campaigning for a second referendum, saw its gains as partly reflective of the growing concerns about climate change, manifested through school strikes, the rise of the

protest movement ‘Extinction Rebellion’ and the declaration of a climate change emergency by Parliament.

While Labour acknowledged that the results fell short of expectations, its shadow Chancellor John McDonnell suggested that the message being sent was “Brexit-sort it”. “Message received,” he tweeted. Jeremy Corbyn also insisted that the swing towards Labour “in many parts of the country” showed they could win seats in a general election whenever that takes place. Labour has long been pushing for a general election as the right route out of the Brexit impasse.

The results will intensify pressure on both Prime Minister Theresa May and Mr. Corbyn, with both parties facing criticism for the decision to take part in talks to attempt to find a route forward on Brexit. While some Conservatives fear that the talks will force Ms. May to bow to Labour demands on customs union membership, many Labour supporters believe that Labour could end up endorsing the Conservatives’ vision of Brexit.

Pak. uses terror as a tool against India: ex-CIA official

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
WASHINGTON

Pakistan, obsessed with India as a perceived existential threat, has “created terrorist groups to be a tool” in its struggle against its neighbour, a former top American spymaster has said.

Former CIA acting Director Michael Morell, in a podcast discussion with former Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell and former U.S. Ambassador to India Ri-

chard Verma on Thursday, alleged that Pakistan is one of the most dangerous countries in the world. “What they don’t realise is that it’s impossible to keep those terrorist groups under control. And that eventually comes back to bite you... I believe that Pakistan... maybe the most dangerous country in the world,” said Mr. Morell, who played a key role in the raid that killed Osama bin Laden.

Jail sentence given to Assange disproportionate, says UN group

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
GENEVA

The 50-week jail sentence given to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange for breaching a British court’s bail conditions seven years ago is “disproportionate,” the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention said on Friday.

Mr. Assange will serve the nearly one-year jail sentence while fighting a separate attempt to extradite him to the United States.

The UN working group noted that the Swedish allegations – the initial offence that triggered his British arrest – had been withdrawn and that the original bail terms should therefore have been nullified.

It noted too that he had been given near the maximum 12-month sentence available in the U.K. for breaching bail conditions.

The group is “deeply concerned about... the dispro-

portionate sentence imposed on Mr. Assange”, it said in a statement. It accused Britain of extending “the arbitrary deprivation of (his) liberty”.

The experts took further issue with Mr. Assange’s detention at the Belmarsh high-security prison. “This treatment appears to contravene the principles of necessity and proportionality envisaged by the human rights standards,” the panel said.

Pak. SC turns down Sharif’s plea for ‘permanent bail’

His interim bail gets over on May 7

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
ISLAMABAD

Pakistan’s Supreme Court on Friday dismissed a petition of ex-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif for permanent bail on medical grounds, saying there was no immediate threat to his life.

Mr. Sharif, 69, was granted a six-week interim bail by the top court on March 26 to undergo medical treatment and he filed the petition on April 27 for permanent bail as he was suffering from acute anxiety and depression that may lead to “sudden death”. A three-member bench headed by Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khosa, which heard Mr. Sharif’s petition, also rejected his plea seeking permission for treatment in the U.K.

After hearing the arguments and seeing the medical report, the bench turned



Nawaz Sharif. • AP

down the petition by observing that there was nothing new in the medical reports that suggested immediate threat to his life.

After the rejection of petition, Mr. Sharif would have to go back to jail on May 7 when the six-week bail term gets over.

Mr. Sharif has been serving a seven-year prison term at Lahore Kot Lakhpat Jail since December 24, 2018.

Kim murder: Vietnamese suspect freed

REUTERS
KUALA LUMPUR

A Vietnamese woman who spent more than two years in a Malaysian prison on suspicion of killing the half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un was freed on Friday, her lawyer said. Doan Thi Huong, 30, was charged along with an Indonesian woman with poisoning Kim Jong-nam by smearing his face with liquid VX, a banned chemical weapon, at Kuala Lumpur airport in 2017.

Malaysian prosecutors dropped a murder charge against Ms. Huong last month after she pleaded guilty to an alternate charge of causing harm.

In a letter, she thanked the governments of Malaysia and Vietnam, as well as those involved in her trial and imprisonment, for “all the support”.

ELSEWHERE



Barr asked to submit full Mueller report by Monday

WASHINGTON
House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler, in picture, on Friday offered Attorney-General William Barr a last chance to hand over the full version of Robert Mueller’s report, before moving to hold Mr. Barr in contempt of Congress. Mr. Nadler set a 9 a.m. Monday deadline. **REUTERS**

Trump, Putin discuss possible new n-accord

WASHINGTON
U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke for more than an hour on Friday, discussing the possibility of a new nuclear accord, North Korean denuclearisation, Ukraine and the political situation in Venezuela, the White House said. **REUTERS**

Don’t ask us to put down arms, Taliban tells U.S.

Group responds to Khalilzad’s tweet

REUTERS
KABUL

The U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan should stop calling on Taliban militants to lay down their arms and tell the U.S. to end the use of force instead, the Taliban said on Friday.

Zalmay Khalilzad entered a sixth round of talks with the group in Qatar this week. “In our opening session, I underscored to the Talibs that the Afghan people... want this war to end,” he tweeted. “It is time to put down arms, stop the violence, & embrace peace.”

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid issued a series of sharp tweets in response. Mr. Khalilzad “should forget about the idea of us putting down our arms”, he said. “Instead of

such fantasies, he should drive the idea home (to the U.S.) about ending the use of force and incurring further human and financial losses for the decaying Kabul administration.” He said the U.S. must stop repeating failed strategies. “It would be better if [Khalilzad] musters the courage to call a spade a spade, not a gardening tool & accept the current realities.”

In Kabul, President Ashraf Ghani renewed his appeal to hold direct talks with the Taliban and called for an agreement on a ceasefire.

“The Afghan government is ready to announce a ceasefire if the Taliban show readiness in this regard,” he said at the closing ceremony of a ‘loya jirga’ (grand assembly).

Guaidó calls for protests at military bases

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
CARACAS

Venezuelan Opposition leader Juan Guaidó on Thursday called for peaceful demonstrations at Army bases, days after a military uprising in support of his bid to oust President Nicolás Maduro fizzled out.

The latest appeal came after Mr. Maduro called on the armed forces of the crisis-racked nation to oppose “any coup plotter”.

In a tweet, Mr. Guaidó asked supporters to gather for peaceful demonstrations



Opposition leader Juan Guaidó. • AP

on Saturday at military bases in a bid to get soldiers to “support the Constitution”.

Meanwhile, Venezuela’s Supreme Court ordered the re-arrest of influential Oppo-

sition figure Leopoldo López – who made a dramatic appearance alongside Mr. Guaidó on Tuesday after he was freed from house arrest.

Mr. López has since taken refuge at the Spanish Embassy. Madrid has said it would not hand Mr. López over to Venezuelan authorities.

U.S. President Donald Trump warned in an interview that Washington has “lots of options”. “There’s always a tipping point” for military intervention, he said, while adding: “I’d rather not do that.”