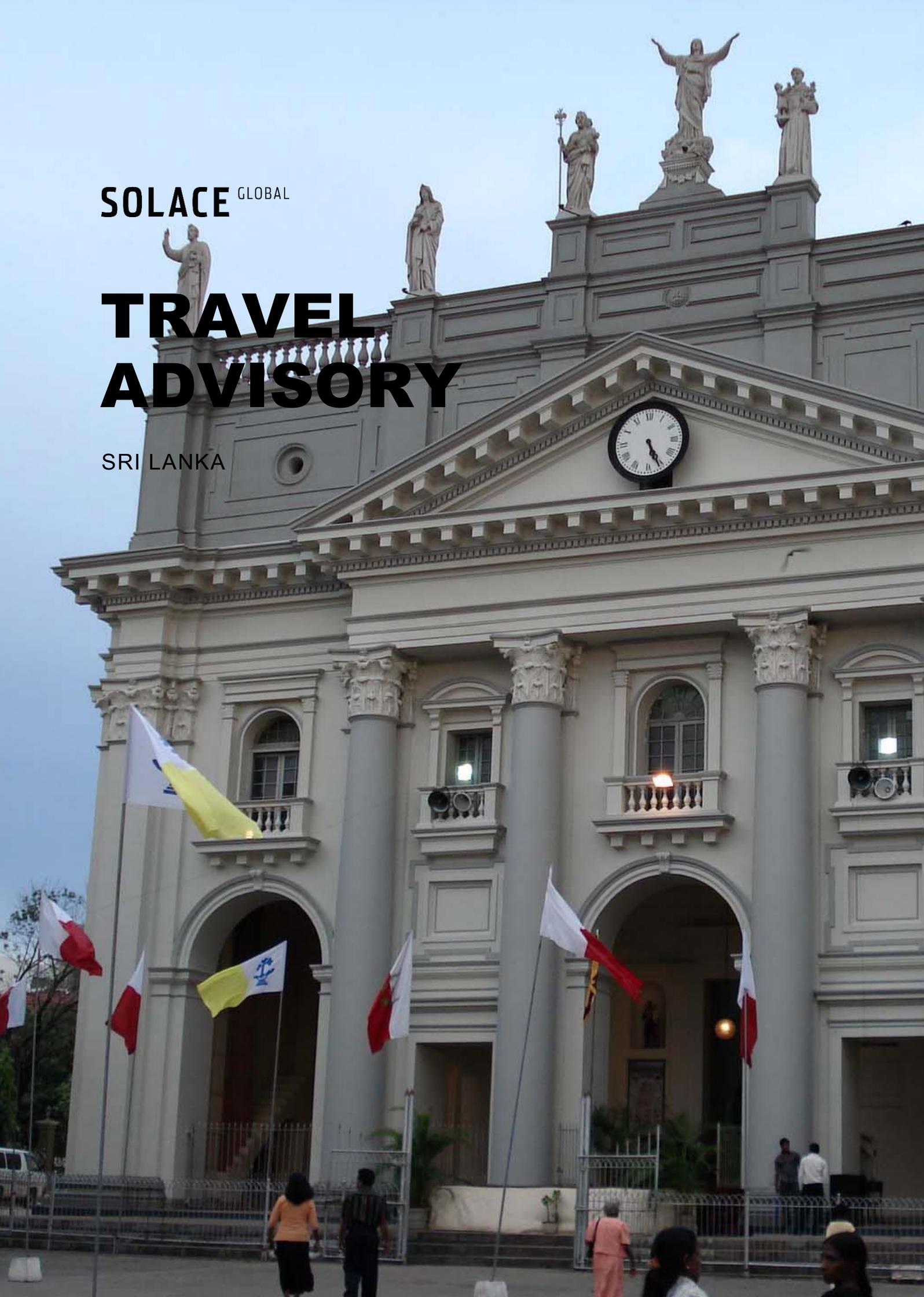


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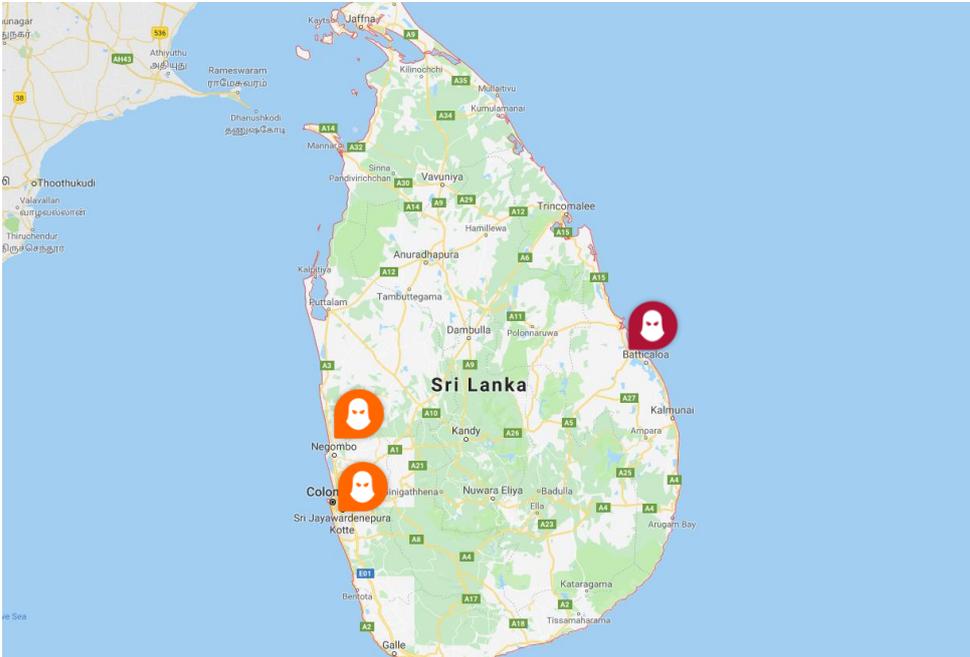
TRAVEL ADVISORY

SRI LANKA



SRI LANKA COUNTRY (HIGH)

Deadly terror attack that killed hundreds is claimed by ISIS



KEY EVENTS



SRI LANKA: High travel risk



Risk of Terrorism: **HIGH**



Risk of Civil Unrest: **MODERATE**

Countrywide: Heightened security measures are in place nationwide in the aftermath of a series of coordinated blasts that killed over 300 people. The attack targeted churches and luxury hotels in several cities in the country and a local Islamic militant group is believed to be responsible.

KEY POINTS

- On 21 April a series of coordinated bombing took place at 8:45am local time in the cities of Colombo, Negombo and Batticaloa, targeting churches and luxury hotels. The explosions killed 321 people, of which 38 were foreign nationals.
- The Sri Lankan government declared a state of emergency and shut down social media platforms, fearing an emergence of sectarian violence in the aftermath of the attack. There are also suspicions that the ongoing political crisis might have prevented the government from responding to the terrorist threat, which was highlighted by foreign intelligence operatives weeks before the attacks.
- On 23 April the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the bombings, claiming that the strike was in retaliation to the anti-Muslim shooting that took place in New Zealand on 15 March.

SITUATION SUMMARY

A series of coordinated bombings targeting three churches and three luxury hotels took place on 21 April, Easter Sunday, in the cities of Colombo, Negombo and Batticaloa. The first 6 blasts, exploding around 8:45 am local time, were aimed at maximising casualties, targeting people gathering for Easter mass and breakfast in the hotel restaurants. Two more bombs exploded later in the afternoon in Colombo, in a tragedy that increasingly looks like a large-scale jihadist terror attack. It was the deadliest strike suffered by Sri Lanka since the end of the 26-year-long civil war against Tamil separatists, marking the end of a decade of relative peace and hope for a future of security, democracy and rule of law. The attack comes in the context of a state weakened by massive foreign debt, great political instability and a delicate transitional period.

According to the Ministry of Defence Ruwan Wijewardene the death toll as of Tuesday 23 April, officially the national day of mourning, is at 321, of which 38 foreigners, including British, U.S., Australian, Turkish, Indian, Chinese, Danish, Dutch and Portuguese nationals. Over 500 people have been wounded.



Security has been heightened across the islands, with the affected areas being closed off and subject to permanent military presence, while the security operations and investigations continue. At the time of writing, the police have detained approximately 40 people, which are currently under interrogation, mostly from Sri Lanka but also including one Syrian national.

In the aftermath of the attack, the government declared a state of emergency and instigated a curfew from 8pm to 4am. It also initiated a social media shutdown until the end of the investigations, reportedly due to their role in spreading misinformation regarding the attacks, as well as security operations that are currently ongoing. The government also fears a resurgence of communal sectarian violence across the country and sees social media as a potentially radicalising platform.

The terrorist threat appeared to remain active during the day after the attack, as the police forces continued to discover and disarm explosives or suspect devices in several locations in Colombo. A vehicle was destroyed in a controlled detonation by the EOD unit just outside St. Andrews Church, which also intervened in Kollupitiya railway stations in Colombo for an unattended package found on a train.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

On Tuesday, ISIS claimed official responsibility for the attack through its news agency Amaq, without giving any evidence and claiming the attack was a retaliation to the attack in New Zealand. ISIS supporters had already honoured the Easter Sunday attacks on their media channels, framing it as rightful revenge for the anti-Muslim shooting that took place on 15 March in Christchurch as well as the war in Syria. Sri Lankan authorities consider local radical Islamist group, the National Tawheed Jamath, as responsible for the terror attacks: this was also indicated in an intelligence memo warning the government of the plans by the militants to strike churches, apparently informed by foreign intelligence services.

The national Security Forces conducted a raid on all location known to house National Tawheed Jamath, although the group never officially claimed responsibility. However, due to the sophistication in the planning and execution of the attack, counter terrorism experts widely believe that they received international assistance. In a country where synchronised terrorist attacks are a rare occasion, the large-scale bombing carried out within a 30-minute time frame, its size and sophistication have been described as something more akin to the ISIS campaigns in the Middle East. This assessment is only reinforced by the fact that the National Thawheed Jama'ut group, while being a radical Islamist group in Sri Lanka, is known for its violently anti-Buddhist sentiment, which it expressed mostly through acts of vandalism. The radical change in their target choice represents a strong and sudden shift from their modus operandi. Finally, the capability of the National Tawheed Jamath, a small minority even within radical Islamic groups, to conduct a coordinated attack in various parts of Sri Lanka, build those explosive devices and indoctrinate suicide bombers is considered doubtful when assessing their previously known resources.

WAS THERE AN INTELLIGENCE FAILURE?

The government increasingly seemed to have failed to pre-emptively react to the terrorist attack, although the Police and the Intelligence services were reportedly informed of the threat on 4 April by Indian and American intelligence operatives. The tip-off detailed the plans by National Thawheed Jamaath to carry out a terror attack on the churches and it reportedly did not reach the top officials in the government, fatally preventing any counter-terrorism operation.

The chief of the Sri Lankan intelligence service wrote a report on 9 April, which was never received by the Prime Minister, detailing the available information, including a partial list of names of the perpetrators. The cohesion of the governing bodies and heads was subsequently scrutinised, since it became apparent that a political feud between the President and the Prime Minister could have played a role in the inability to respond to the threat, since the latter was prevented from joining intelligence briefings provided by the Security Council since last year. In fact, in 2018 Sri Lanka suffered a constitutional crisis during which President Maithripala Sirisena threatened a power grab on 26 October by dismissing the Prime Minister, replacing him with Mahinda Rajapaksa and later attempting to dissolve the Parliament. While the decision was ultimately overruled by the Supreme Court and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was



reinstated in December, the ramifications of the constitutional crisis were severe, creating a fracture within the executive powers that might have been seen by militant groups as a favourable environment to carry out insurgent and terrorist acts.

ISLAMIC STATE PRESENCE IN THE REGION

South East Asia has experienced a rise of Islamic terrorism and this latest attack could represent another step forward for the Islamic State in the region. The IS is successfully growing pockets of affiliates in Indonesia and the Philippines, where in 2017 Islamic militants temporarily succeeded in establishing a caliphate in the city of Marawi, on the island of Mindanao. However, a year later the fight against militant groups and religiously-motivated terrorism is not over, as on 27 January 2019 the IS claimed responsibility for a deadly church bombing in Jolo, killing 23 people attending the Sunday mass.

Indonesia has also seen a rise in Islamist terrorism, with the latest coordinated attack targeting three Christian churches taking place in Surabaya in May 2018 and leaving a dozen people dead. The bombing was carried out by six members of a radicalised family affiliated to an IS cell known as Jamaah Ansharut Daulah.

There is, in fact, a growing fear that IS has been increasingly shifting its focus away from the Middle East and towards South-East Asia, where Muslim sentiment is often linked to violent separatist movements and radicalised groups. Experts consider this a threat that is inherently regional in nature, as the porous nature of the borders and the archipelagos allow the different cells to share resources, arms and know-how.

CIVIL WAR AND SECTARIAN VIOLENCE IN SRI LANKA

The island of Sri Lanka is no stranger to violence and suffered through over 26 years of civil war, from 1983 to 2009. This war was largely fuelled by a desire to establish a sovereign independent Tamil state by the Tamil population in Sri Lanka. Over 100,000 people died in the war in repeated insurgency campaigns by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, also known as the Tamil Tigers) against the Sri Lankan government. The war was focused on the rivalry between the island's two largest ethnic groups the Sinhalese and Tamil. Soon after Independence in 1948 the then government started discriminating against the Tamil minority through adverse legislation and cultural discrimination. For example, a law was introduced in 1948, which displaced a large number of Tamil people, encouraging their deportation to India. In the 1950's the Sinhalese language was made the official language of Sri Lanka after it replaced English. A resurgence of Tamil culture and their continued exclusion from the political process in the 1980's led to the outbreak of violence and, while war was largely focused on the systematic exclusion of the Tamil population from the political process, it did have a religious dimension.

Terrorism and terror-like tactics have a long history in Sri Lanka. The LTTE (Tamil Tigers), a largely Hindu ethnic group, often used car bombs and IED's against Muslims minorities within the northern Tamil area on the island. Tamil Tiger attacks were large scale and often killed over 100 people. The minority Catholic population was historically excluded from the conflict and rarely targeted by militant action, suggesting that the Easter Sunday terror attack does not respond to traditional insurgency and that it might be a response to some newer outside influence. The involvement of the Islamic State would be coherent with the sudden interest in Catholic targets and international targets, which otherwise appear a non-conventional choice for local militants.

Sri Lanka is a very diverse country with dozens of sub-ethnic and religious minorities, suggesting that a clear-cut religious or ideological cause for violence can be difficult. The history of conflict on the island is often called ethno-nationalist terrorism, which excludes religion altogether: this would mean that the recent attack on a number of Catholic Churches, if truly planned and perpetrated by IS, could be the signal for the start of a whole new period of religious related violence on the island.



HIGH TERRORISM RISK



SECURITY ADVICE

- Consider minimising movement this evening until the situation has stabilised and adhere to all police instructions.
- Expect additional security throughout the city and the wider country, especially around mosques and other potential targets; adhere to all instructions given.
- Avoid large gatherings or religious events in the upcoming days, as they are most likely to be targeted by follow-up attack.
- Avoid affected areas and high-value landmarks, such as religious, military and government buildings, as well as luxury hotels and main transport hubs, as they could be targeted by follow up attacks.
- A state of emergency is currently in place in Sri Lanka: heightened security measures, such as controls and check points, are likely to be implemented. Visitors should exercise care and follow instructions by law enforcement.
- There is a curfew in place from 8pm to 4am. All travellers in country should follow the restriction. If travelling to and from the airport, make sure to carry all identity documents.
- Visitors should be aware of the ongoing social media blackout until the investigation is concluded and should arrange alternative methods of communication.
- Areas in the proximity of the attack sites will be closed off and additional security measures implemented.
- While air travel has not been limited, additional checks are to be expected at airports and major transport hubs.
- Monitor media and police sources for any additional information.
- Employ additional security around religious sites and other possible targets globally due to the possible risk of reprisal or copy-cat attacks.



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