

An Inside Report From Sri Lanka's Traumatized Church

While members of Zion Church gathered last Sunday to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, children were meeting for a Sunday school lesson in another part of the building. At one point, their teacher asked the kids if they were willing to die for their faith. Every hand went up.

The teacher then led the children to the main sanctuary for morning worship. Suddenly a powerful bomb went off, sending chairs and body parts flying. "Half of the children died on the spot," says the Sunday school teacher. The assistant pastor's 10-year-old son was killed, along with nine other children from Zion.

Violence is nothing new for Christians in Sri Lanka, but the horrific bombings that happened on April 21 leave a permanent scar. At least 321 people died in six blasts—three of which targeted churches during Easter services. Sri Lanka's government announced on Tuesday that suicide bombers affiliated with ISIS carried out the attacks.

A video released by ISIS on April 23 said the bombings were in retaliation for the March 15 attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. The video, which showed photos of three of the alleged suicide bombers, included this chilling message: "This bloody day is our reward to you."

I talked this week with a friend of mine in Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital, to understand how local Christians are handling the trauma after the Easter bombings. For security reasons, I'll call my friend Rahish.

You say Sri Lanka's church is no stranger to violence. Can you explain?

Rahish: We endured a civil war that lasted 30 years. It ended in 2009. Yet Sri Lanka ranks 44th on the 2018 Open Doors World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian. Christians here have been repeatedly targeted. Last year, there were 67 reported attacks on Christians between January and September alone.

Did you know any of the victims or any of the pastors affected by this week's bombings? What are they saying?

Rahish: I knew the pastor of Zion Church. I was there doing humanitarian work in 2004 when the tsunami hit Sri Lanka. They are dealing with so much pressure now. There is so much trauma because they lost so many children in their congregation.

What is the mood after the bombings? Are Christians in Sri Lanka living in fear?

Rahish: Yes. They are in fear for their lives. There is also lingering uncertainty due to rumors of bombs being planted in other public places.

Reports say the group responsible for the bombings is tied to the Islamic State terrorist network, or ISIS. Yet Muslims are a small percentage of Sri Lanka's population. Are Muslims in your country aggressive or militant?

Rahish: Muslims in Sri Lanka are increasing in number, but they are a minority. Most Muslims in Sri Lanka are very peaceful, with one exception. Last year there were clashes between the majority ethnic group, the Sinhalese, and Muslims.

The government has not always been supportive of Christians. Do you feel supported now by the government?

Rahish: The government has not taken adequate actions regarding recent incidents of persecution. Last week, the Methodist Church in the city of Anuradhapura went through a lot of persecution. A Palm Sunday service had to be stopped

due to stoning, yet police took a long time to respond to complaints made by the church leader.

We are especially grieved after learning that our defense secretary had been alerted that the Easter bombings might take place. Even though the government knew something might happen, they did not warn any of the churches or our citizens. It was a huge lack of responsibility by our government to protect its people. Yet at this time as people of God we must model forgiveness.

How will this incident affect missionaries coming in and out of the country?

Rahish: I don't think it will affect missionaries. But it is in their hands, whether they will let fear keep them away from Sri Lanka.

How are you asking global Christians to pray right now?

Rahish: Prayer is what we need. We started a 24-hour prayer chain asking the Lord that the intelligence units will be able to uncover the hidden work of terror. The prayers of Christians around the world have already made a huge difference. Many of the bombs planted by the terrorists have now been diffused.

Please pray for the church of Sri Lanka to be strong in the face of this suffering. Pray for the plots of the enemy to be uncovered and for any remaining bombs to be found and dismantled. Pray for the government to take responsible action to bring about justice. And pray for an end to this terror in Sri Lanka. We believe what the enemy meant for evil the Lord will turn around for good.