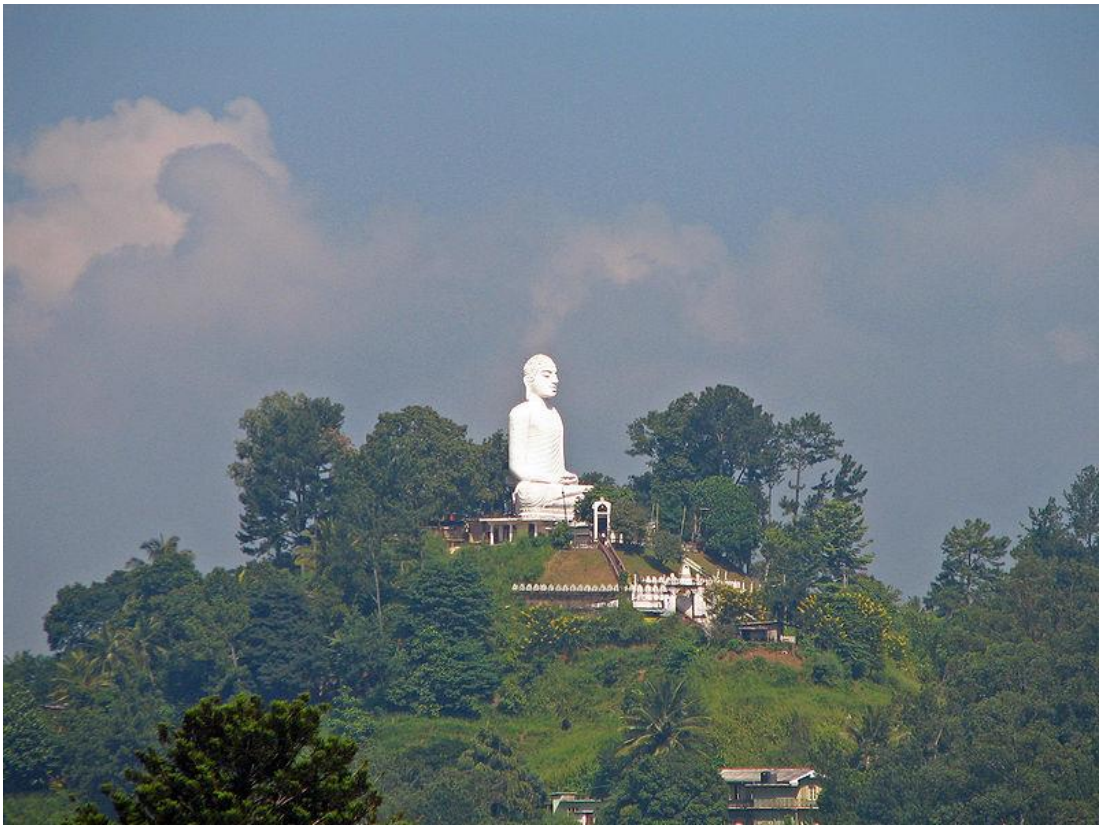
Sri Lankan Easter Attacks



By Dr. John Bruni
Founder & CEO
SAGE International Australia

Let's begin with the truism of the modern age. All successful terrorist attacks ARE failures of intelligence.

This should not shock us. We live in a world that is constructed by people for people. Our institutions are therefore imperfect, this in spite of the herculean efforts by governments and private enterprise to add multiple layers of security to our airports, other critical infrastructure, national symbols, places of worship and public spaces.

Therefore, the other truism is – some states have better mechanisms for countering security threats than others.

Sri Lanka's body politic is very much a wounded beast. Traumatised by years of civil war (1983-2009), once this conflict ended, the country was weakened and exhausted both at the political level and at the public level. Politically, parties and personalities, confident that their one and only existential crisis had ended, fell prey to petty infighting. The public, grateful that their sons and daughters were no longer press-ganged into military (or paramilitary) service or being targeted by state or non-state groups alike, became complacent and apathetic. It is ironic that 'peace' let Colombo the Sri Lankan people drop their guard. Intelligence services, even after having received warnings from foreign sources that local Catholic churches may be targeted by terrorists, did not heed the warnings.

While the dragnet following on from the Easter Bombings by Sri Lankan authorities was quick and the government apologetic to its people for the way it allowed warnings for this latest atrocity to slip under its radar, many questions remain unanswered. Most important of which is who is responsible for the Easter Bombings?

It has been suggested that local Muslim radicals, the little-known group National Thowheeth Jama'ath carried out the attack. It is interesting to note that National Thowheeth Jama'ath, prior to the Easter Bombings, was known as a minor public nuisance engaged in vandalising Buddhist statues. Somehow, if indeed this group was responsible for carrying out one of the world's worst acts of terrorism, which so far has claimed almost 300 lives and wounded over 500 people, this represents an enormous shift in organisational motivation and capability. The coordinated use of suicide and IED bombings against multiple targets across the country is reminiscent of Tamil Tiger attacks during the civil war, in the country that helped pioneer and perfect suicide terrorism during the 1980s. Muslims, while a minority within the largely Buddhist country, roughly live in and around Tamil areas. This attack, while now in the international spotlight as another 'jihadist atrocity', may well have been inspired by events in the Middle East – media reports now suggesting that there is an ISIS connection. Whether this turns out to be true, this complex attack comes from a country with a history of complex terrorist assaults against civilian and military targets.
The rush to conclusions is understandable.

The Sri Lankan government is panicked that it ignored foreign warnings of an impending terrorist attack. Some 40 foreign nationals were killed as part of this assault. Finding someone to blame under these circumstances is natural. But the rush to condemned without evidence may not serve victims or even Sri Lankan authorities well. It is better to let investigators do their job and sift carefully through the debris of this tragic attack in order to firmly establish responsibility. The stakes are high. If there is indeed a Tamil association to these attacks, will the idea that the attacks were inspired by ISIS be enough for the Singhalese majority to not seek out revenge against all Tamils? In a country still fractured by the aftermath of civil war and a fragile peace, this possibility must be considered by Sri Lankan authorities.

Image Credit

Buddha in Kandy, Sri Lanka Wikimedia Commons, author – McKay Savage

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