

Unspeakable grief: 5 members of 1 family killed in Sri Lanka

By Shonal Ganguly
The Associated Press

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka — The dark wooden coffins, sitting side by side, attested to one family's unspeakable grief.

The Gomez family gathered to say a final farewell to five loved ones — a son, a daughter-in-law, and three young grandsons — brutally killed as they attended Easter Sunday Mass at Colombo's St. Joseph's Shrine.

"All family, all generation, is lost," said Joseph Gomez, the family patriarch, as tears welled in his eyes. Dozens of family members and neighbors were gathered in his simple home, where the sound of hymns sung by mourners gently wafted in the background and candles flickered beside three coffins. The bodies of two of the grandsons have yet to be recovered.

Across Sri Lanka, a national day of mourning was held as families began to lay to rest the more than 320 victims of the bomb blasts that struck a half-dozen churches and hotels in the island nation.

For the Gomez family, the loss was unfathomable: A 33-year-old son, Berlington Joseph; the young man's



31-year-old wife, Chandrika Arumugam; and their three boys, nine-year-old Bevon, six-year-old Clavon, and baby Avon, who would have turned one next week. A funeral card with a photo of the family clutched in his hands, the elder Gomez wailed: "I can't bear this on me, I can't bear this."

"My eldest son, my eldest son," he sobbed as he laid bouquets of red roses and brightly colored daisies on the largest

coffin. Next to it was a tiny coffin, a photo of little Avon tucked into a wooden frame nearby.

The coffins, draped with long white tassels, were then carried to a Colombo cemetery and lowered into side-by-side graves.

At St. Joseph's Shrine, dozens of mourners gathered outside, lighting candles and praying in unison for the victims of the blasts as heavily armed

APPALLING ACT. Wasanthi, a member of the Berlington family, weeps over the grave of Bevon, who was killed in the Easter Sunday bombings in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The near-simultaneous attacks on April 21 at churches and luxury hotels are the South Asian island nation's deadliest violence in a decade. (AP Photo/Eranga Jayawardena)

soldiers stood guard.

At St. Sebastian Church in Negombo, a funeral service was held for victims killed there as they worshipped, led by Cardinal Malcom Ranjith. The church was heavily guarded by hundreds of army, air force, and police troops, and soldiers were deployed every 15 feet along the streets of the city some 20 miles north of Colombo.

Throughout the country, people observed a three-minute silence for the victims of the near-simultaneous attacks at three churches and three luxury hotels, and three other related blasts, the deadliest violence to strike Sri Lanka in a decade.

The Sri Lankan government blamed the attack on National Towheed Jamaar, a little-known local Islamic extremist group. An Islamic State group also claimed responsibility, though it provided no proof it was involved and has made unsubstantiated claims in the past.

Sri Lanka lifts social media ban imposed after Easter blasts

By Bharatha Mallawarachi and
Krishan Francis
The Associated Press

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka — Sri Lanka has lifted a social-media ban that was imposed after the Islamic State (IS)-claimed Easter bombings, a sign of security easing even as a cabinet minister said he and others had received intelligence that they could be targeted by the same group in possible new attacks.

President Maithripala Sirisena ended the blocking of Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and other popular sites, but asked the public to "act in a responsible manner" on social media, according to a government statement.

The government had said it was seeking to curb the spread of misinformation when it blocked social media in the wake of the April 21 bombings at churches and luxury hotels that killed 253 people.

Sri Lankan officials warned that suspects linked to the bombings are still at large, and on April 30, Sri Lanka's health minister, Rajitha Senarathna, said he and seven other government ministers had been identified by intelligence officials as targets of possible additional suicide attacks, by the same Islamic State-linked group of Sri Lankan militants.

Senarathna said he stayed at home in late April upon the officials' request. He declined to provide additional information about the source or type of intelligence.

At the same time, some of Sri Lanka's South Asian neighbors investigated possible activities in their countries inspired by the Easter attack.

In India, the country's National Investigative Agency said it had arrested a 29-year-old Indian man who identified himself as a follower of Mohammed Zahran, the Sri Lankan militant who officials say led the Easter attacks.

Investigators said in a statement that Riyas A., also known as Riyas Aboobacker, was plotting a similar suicide attack in the southern Indian state of Kerala. Three other people were brought in for questioning about suspected links to IS, according to the statement.

During a search of their homes, digital devices including mobile phones, SIM cards, memory cards, pen drives, diaries with handwritten notes in Arabic and Malayalam, and untitled DVDs and CDs with religious speeches were seized, the statement said. The digital material was



CURBING MISINFORMATION. Blood stains are seen on the wall and on a Jesus Christ statue at St. Sebastian's Church after a blast in Negombo, north of Colombo, Sri Lanka, on Sunday, April 21, 2019. In an attempt to curb the spread of misinformation, Sri Lanka blocked Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and other popular social media. The ban was in place for more than a week. (AP Photo)

being forensically examined.

Investigators did not provide any details about Aboobacker's alleged plot but said he admitted during questioning that he had followed Zahran's vitriolic online speeches and videos for more than a year.

Authorities initially blamed the Easter attacks on Zahran and his followers. Then the Islamic State group on April 23 released images of Zahran and others pledging their loyalty to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the group's shadowy leader.

In another video, a man said to be al-Baghdadi praised the suicide bombings in Sri Lanka, calling them "part of the revenge" that awaits the west. It was al-Baghdadi's first filmed appearance in nearly five years.

Authorities in Bangladesh were investigating the Islamic State group's claim of responsibility for an explosion in the capital that injured three police officers.

Police said a "very powerful" crude bomb thrown by unidentified assailants at a shopping complex in Dhaka injured two traffic officers and a community police officer.

According to global terrorism monitor SITE Intelligence, IS claimed the attack on "apostate policemen" without producing evidence.

Meanwhile, the Catholic Church's top official in Sri Lanka said the government's ban on the *niqab*, a black veil made of thin fabric, often with a small opening for a

Muslim woman to see through, was a good security step, but didn't go far enough to protect the faithful from another attack.

Human-rights group Amnesty International said forcing Muslim women to take off their veils could be "coercive and humiliating."

"At a time when many Muslims in Sri Lanka fear a backlash, imposing a ban that effectively targets women wearing a face veil for religious reasons risks stigmatizing them," the group's deputy South Asia director, Dinushika Dissanayake, said in a statement.

"They will be forced out of public spaces to stay at home and will be unable to work, study, or access basic services."

Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, the archbishop of Colombo, has been a vocal critic of the government's apparent failure to share near-specific intelligence on the Easter plot and some of the suspects involved.

Ranjith said reports from Negombo, where around 100 people were killed on Easter Sunday in a bombing at St. Sebastian's Church, indicated that Sirisena's pledge to have Sri Lankan security forces check every household in the country wasn't being upheld.

"We are still not satisfied," Ranjith said. "There is a fear among the people that this is only a camouflage, just hoodwinking everybody."

Associated Press writers Ashok Sharma in New Delhi and Julhas Alam in Dhaka, Bangladesh, contributed to this report.

On first day as Japan's emperor, Naruhito vows to pursue peace

By Mari Yamaguchi
The Associated Press

TOKYO — Emperor Naruhito inherited the sacred sword and jewel that signalled his succession and pledged in his first public address to follow his father's example by devoting himself to peace and sharing the people's joys and sorrows.

Naruhito, the first modern emperor to have studied abroad and the first born after Japan's defeat in World War II, formally succeeded to the Chrysanthemum Throne at midnight after his father Akihito abdicated.

"When I think about the important responsibility I have assumed, I am filled with a sense of solemnity," Naruhito said in his address.

While noting his father's devotion to praying for peace, Naruhito said he'll "reflect deeply" on the path trodden by Akihito and past emperors. He promised to abide by the constitution that stripped emperors of political power, and to fulfill his responsibility as a national symbol while "always turning my thoughts to the people and standing with them."

"I sincerely pray for the happiness of the people and the further development of the nation as well as the peace of the world," he said.

Naruhito is considered a new breed of royal, his outlook forged by the tradition-defying choices of his parents. Emperor Emeritus Akihito devoted his three-decade career to making amends for a war fought in his father's name while bringing the aloof monarchy closer to the people. Naruhito's mother, Michiko, was born a commoner and was Catholic educated. Together, they reached out to the people, especially those who faced disability, discrimination, and natural disasters.

Naruhito was presented with the Imperial sword and jewel, each in a box and wrapped in cloth, at a morning ceremony that marked his first official duty.

His wife and daughter, Empress Masako and 17-year-old Princess Aiko, were barred from the ceremony, which only adult male royals — his brother, now Crown Prince Fumihito, and his uncle Prince Hitachi — were allowed to witness.

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