

# Hundreds killed during Easter Masses at churches in Sri Lanka

At least 200 people were killed in explosions Easter morning, detonated in churches other sites across Sri Lanka. Hundreds more are reportedly injured.

At 8:45 a.m. local time on April 21, explosions were detonated during Easter Mass at churches in the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo, and in Negombo, a city 320 kilometres to its north.

At the same time, a bomb exploded at a service at the evangelical Zion Church in Batticalo, on Sri Lanka's east coast.

St. Anthony's Shrine was the Catholic church targeted in Colombo, and St. Sebastian's is the Catholic parish in Negombo.

Pews were shattered by the blast at St. Anthony's Shrine in Colombo, and floors and ceilings were covered in blood. The shrine is the most well-known Church in Sri Lanka, and is designated the country's national shrine. The first chapel on the Church property was built during Sri Lanka's Dutch colonial period, when Catholicism was mostly forbidden on the island.

There were also explosions Sunday morning at three luxury hotels in Colombo, and explosions outside a zoo and a private home Sunday afternoon.

Sri Lanka's prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, called on Sri Lankans to remain "united and strong" in the face of "cowardly attacks on our people today."

No group has claimed responsibility for the attacks, but a police spokesman said seven people have been arrested in connection with them, according to the Associated Press. Some reports suggested that an additional six suspects were later arrested.

In recent weeks, there has been concern that Sri Lankans who had been part of the Islamic State could become a threat, as they have begun returning to the country from the Middle East, according to the BBC.

The country has been plagued with periodic violence since its 26-year civil war concluded in 2009.

Sri Lanka is an island nation in the Indian Ocean, southwest of the Bay of Bengal; its population is more than 21 million. More than 70 per cent of Sri Lankans are Buddhists, roughly 13 per cent are Hindus, almost 10 per cent are Muslims, and fewer than eight per cent are Christians.

There are 1.5 million Catholics in the country, constituting the overwhelming majority of the Sri Lanka's Christians.

In a January 2015 visit to the country, Pope Francis urged peace and reconciliation among the country's rival factions.

"In this difficult effort to forgive and find peace, Mary is always here to encourage us, to guide us, to lead us," the pope said Jan. 14, 2015, at the Our Lady of Madhu shrine in Sri Lanka's Mannar district.

"Just as she forgave her son's killers at the foot of his cross, then held his lifeless body in her hands, so now she wants to guide Sri Lankans to greater reconciliation, so that the balm of God's pardon and mercy may bring true healing to all."