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Sri Lanka minister: Easter bombings a response to New Zealand attacks

Sri Lankan government says it has information that the nine bombings in and outside of Colombo that killed more than 300 people were carried out "by an Islamic fundamentalist group" in response to the Christchurch attacks. Defense minister blames "weakness" within country's security apparatus for failing to prevent the attacks.

by Associated Press and Israel Hayom Staff Published on 2019-04-23 13:20 Last modified: 2019-04-23 13:22

Sri Lanka minister: Easter bombings a response to NZ attacks

A Sri Lankan family mourns next to the coffins of their three family members, all victims of Easter Sunday bombing, in Colombo, Sri Lanka, Tuesday | Photo: AP

Sri Lanka's state minister of defense said Tuesday that the Easter attack on churches, hotels and other sites in the South Asian nation was "carried out in retaliation" for the shooting massacre at two New Zealand mosques last month, according to a statement.

The minister, Ruwan Wijewardene, told Parliament the government possessed information that the series of bombings in and outside of Colombo that killed more than 300 people were carried out "by an Islamic fundamentalist group" in response to the Christchurch attacks. He did not provide evidence or explain the source of the information.

Wijewardene blamed "weakness" within Sri Lanka's security apparatus for failing to prevent the nine bombings at churches, luxury hotels and other sites.

"By now it has been established that the intelligence units were aware of this attack and a group of responsible people were informed about the impending attack," he said. "However, this information has been circulated among only a few officials."

As Sri Lanka's leaders wrangled in the aftermath of an apparent homegrown terrorist attack and massive intelligence failure, security was heightened Tuesday for a national day of mourning and the military was employing powers to make arrests it last used when the devastating civil war ended in 2009.

The six near-simultaneous attacks on three churches and three luxury hotels and three related blasts later Sunday were the South Asian island nation's deadliest violence in a decade. Wijewardene said the death toll from the attack now stood at 321 people, with 500 wounded.

Word from international intelligence agencies that a local group was planning attacks apparently didn't reach the prime minister's office until after the massacre, exposing the continuing political turmoil in the highest levels of the Sri Lankan government.

On April 11, Priyalal Disanayaka, Sri Lanka's deputy inspector general of police, signed a letter addressed to the directors of four Sri Lankan security agencies, warning them that a local group was planning a suicide attack in the country.

The intelligence report attached to his letter, which has circulated widely on social media, named the group allegedly plotting the attack, National Towheed Jamaar, said it was led by Zahran Hashmi, and was targeting "some important churches" in a suicide terrorist attack that was planned to take place "shortly." The report named six individuals likely to be involved in the plot.

On Monday, Sri Lanka's health minister held up a copy of the intelligence report while describing its contents, spurring questions about what Sri Lanka police had done to protect the public from an attack.

It was not immediately clear what steps were taken by any of these security directors. Disanayaka did not answer calls or messages seeking comment.

Among the 40 people arrested on suspicion of links to the bombings were the driver of a van allegedly used by the suicide bombers and the owner of a house where some of them lived.

Heightened security was evident at an international airport outside the capital where security personnel walked explosive-sniffing dogs and checked car trunks and questioned drivers on roads nearby. Police also ordered that anyone leaving a parked car unattended on the street must put a note with their phone number on the windscreen, and post offices were not accepting pre-wrapped parcels.

A block on most social media since the attacks has left a vacuum of information, fueling confusion and giving little reassurance the danger had passed. Even after an overnight curfew was lifted, the streets of central Colombo were mostly deserted Tuesday and shops closed as armed soldiers stood guard.

Sri Lankan authorities also Tuesday planned to brief foreign diplomats and receive assistance from the FBI and other foreign intelligence-gathering agencies.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said he feared the massacre could unleash instability and he vowed to "vest all necessary powers with the defense forces" to act against those responsible.

Authorities said they knew where the group trained and had safe houses, but did not identify any of the seven suicide bombers, whose bodies were recovered, or the other

suspects taken into custody. All seven bombers were Sri Lankans, but authorities said they strongly suspected foreign links.

Also unclear was a motive. The history of Buddhist-majority Sri Lanka, a country of 21 million including large Hindu, Muslim and Christian minorities, is rife with ethnic and sectarian conflict.

In the 26-year civil war, the Tamil Tigers, a powerful rebel army known for using suicide bombers, was finally crushed by the government in 2009 but had little history of targeting Christians. Anti-Muslim bigotry fed by Buddhist nationalists has swept the country recently, but there is no history of Islamic militancy. Its small Christian community has seen only scattered incidents of harassment.

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Kushner: 'Deal of the century' will require painful concessions

Trump adviser and son-in-law said Israeli elections, Ramadan all a factor in determining timing of the deal; criticized passed efforts for focusing only on two-state solution

Ynet|Published: 04.23.19 , 22:56

Jared Kushner, son-in-law and adviser to US President Donald Trump issued some comments Tuesday on the much talked about "deal of the century" being proposed by the administration to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "Both sides will have to make difficult concessions," he said. Kushner also said that the deal was set to be announced last year but the Israeli elections changed the timing.

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Kushner criticized the Two-state paradigm along with previous efforts to reach an agreement. "If people focus on the old traditional talking points, we will never make progress. The Arab peace initiative of 2002, which I think was a very good attempt but if that would have worked it would have made peace a long time ago," Kushner said. "We will do something different."

He maintained that the administration's approach was unique and that they studied all the previous attempts, how and why they failed.

Regarding timing, Kushner said that the deal would likely be announced only after the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. He also congratulated Prime Minister Netanyahu on his election victory and added that the coalition building process was also a factor.

"Our focus is really on the bottom up —which is how do you make the lives of the Palestinian people better? What can you resolve to allow these areas to become more investable," Kushner said. "We deal with all the core status issues because you have to do it, but we have also built a robust business plan for the whole region. I think that the two together have the opportunity to push forward," adding that Israel's security is of primary importance but that both sides will have to make compromises.

Kushner also said that he believes that the proposal will not be accepted easily on both sides but that ultimately, they will see that it will improve their lives in a practical manner. "Let's see if the leadership on both sides have the courage to make progress."

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Netanyahu: We'll name a Golan town after Trump

Vacationing with his family during Passover, PM announces intention to name a town in the strategic plateau after **a president much-appreciated in Israel**

Itamar Eichner, Itai Blumenthal|Published: 04.23.19 , 20:30

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced Monday that he intends to name a town in the Golan Heights after US President Donald Trump.

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"A few weeks ago, I attained the official recognition by President Trump recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights for all eternity," Netanyahu said during a family trip to the northern region. "There is a need to express our gratitude by naming a town or settlement in the Golan Heights after Donald Trump; I will bring it for government approval in the near future."

Netanyahu family in the Golan Heights (Photo: GPO)

Netanyahu family in the Golan Heights (Photo: GPO)

Last month, Netanyahu visited Trump at the White House where the president signed a declaration recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the strategic plateau Israel captured from Syria during the 1967 Six Day War.

The prime minister was on vacation with his wife Sara and children Yair and Avner in the Golan region. They visited Nahal Sa'ar and Nimrod Fortress, rode jeeps and visited Mt. Hermon as well.

Avner Netanyahu takes a selfie with his parents
Avner Netanyahu takes a selfie with his parents

PM with security forces
PM with security forces

While covering the prime minister's trip, reporters noticed that his security detail has been outfitted with anti-drone rifles.

Security guard carrying anti-drone rifle
Security guard carrying anti-drone rifle

The device uses radio waves to disrupt the drone's remote-controlled radio communication, causing the drone to drop to the ground or leave the area.

From company catalog
From company catalog

The device appears to be manufactured by the Chinese company HIKVISION which sells its product to law enforcement agencies throughout the world. Its technical specifications indicate that it can operate along a wide range of frequencies, has a range of one kilometer, a 9X zoom telescope and rechargeable, durable lithium batteries.

On the slopes of Mt Hermon
On the slopes of Mt Hermon

In 2017, a State Comptroller report warned about the threat posed by flying drones toward security sensitive sites and individuals and that a solution should be implemented.

The Netanyahu family arrived in the North on Monday and visited an ancient synagogue in Kfar Nahum (Capernaum) and the Gamal Reserves. At night they stayed at a hotel in Tiberias.

While hiking along Nahal Sa'ar, they met dozens of Israeli families enjoying their Passover vacation and many cried out in joy at the sight of the prime minister. Some sang "Bibi, king of Israel."

פרסום ראשון: 04.23.19

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Jared Kushner

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Source: White House adviser says peace plan to be unveiled by early June

Jared Kushner apparently urged a group of ambassadors in a closed meeting to keep an 'open mind' about the so-called 'deal of the century,' which will be published after Israel forms a government and Palestinians mark the end of Ramadan

Reuters|Published: 04.17.19 , 19:58

White House senior adviser Jared Kushner urged a group of ambassadors on Wednesday to keep an "open mind" about President Donald Trump's upcoming Middle East peace proposal and said that it will require compromises from both sides, a source familiar with the remarks said.

Kushner said the peace plan is to be unveiled after Israel forms a governing coalition in the wake of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's election victory and after the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which ends in early June, the source said. "We will all have to look for reasonable compromises that will make peace achievable," Kushner said, according to the source, who asked to remain unidentified.

Kushner, one of the main architects of the peace proposal and who is married to Trump daughter Ivanka, spoke to about 100 ambassadors from around the world at Blair House, the presidential guest home across the street from the White House. He spoke as part of a State Department series of speeches.

The proposal has two major components: A political piece that addresses core political issues as the status of Jerusalem, and an economic part that aims to help the Palestinians strengthen their economy.

Unclear is whether the plan will propose outright the creation of a Palestinian state, the Palestinians' core demand.

Jared Kushner
Jared Kushner

During his remarks, Kushner pushed back on the idea that the Trump peace plan was mostly about centered around the economic package, saying the political component is "very detailed," the source said.

"He said the plan will require concessions from both sides but won't jeopardize the security of Israel," the source said. "It requires everybody approaching the plan with an open mind."

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The White House had no comment.

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