

INTERVIEW / **CARD. RANJITH**

«Sri Lanka, Intelligence and Islamists unite against Christians»

WORLD

21_04_2023



**Nico
Spuntoni**



The blood-splattered statue of Christ has become a symbol of the widespread persecution of Christians in the world. That famous image from the church of St Sebastian turns four years old today. It was Easter Day on 21st April 2019, when a series

of explosions in Sri Lanka killed 272 people and injured 500. The majority of those struck down were Catholics who had gathered for mass that festive Sunday in the churches of St Anthony's in Colombo and St Sebastian's in Negombo. Since then, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, the combative Metropolitan Archbishop of Colombo, hasn't ceased to pressurise the local authorities, accused of not revealing the whole truth, about the matrix of those attacks. The hand behind the massacre in the churches (the Protestant Zion Church in Batticaloa was also hit, as well as hotels) has been identified as Islamist terrorism, but allegedly the motive was not religious hatred, nor was it revenge for the attack on two mosques in New Zealand, as claimed by the Sri Lankan Defence Minister Ruwan Wijewardene. Cardinal Ranjith is not only convinced of this, he continues to demand the truth and justice for the victims despite criticism from government forces. The Daily Compass interviewed him on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the vicious attacks.

Your Eminence, after four years, what is your assessment of the investigations that have been carried out to date?

Disastrous. Attempts have been made to attribute the attacks to the Islamic community, but this was not the case. The truth is that the responsibility lay with a group of Islamic terrorists manipulated by the Sri Lankan intelligence services in order to support the candidature of the former president deposed last year, Gotabaya Rajapaksa. It seems that some security chiefs were involved, so we want the whole truth because 272 people lost their lives in that attack and there were almost 500 injured, some of whom will never be able to return to a normal life. We want to know the truth and we want thorough investigations to find out who did it and why.

Is it true that the police failed to prevent the attack despite being informed in advance? You recently filed a writ of summons with the Court of Appeal on this.

Yes, because the Indian intelligence services had warned our security services four times about this danger and they considered this warning only as information, not as a threat, and did not get adequately organised to protect civilians. Everyone knew: the former president, the former police chief, and the former defence minister. All these bigwigs knew there was a threat of attack but took no action to prevent a massacre.

Why did the Christian communities in particular end up as targets?

No one knows at the moment. At first, it was claimed Isis was responsible and then that it was a response to the attacks on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. But now there is increasing probability that the Easter 2019 attack was not an Islamic attack. It is becoming clear that it was an Islamic terrorist group that previously worked with Sri

Lankan military intelligence. This collaboration with the military dated back to the civil war because these Islamist groups spoke Tamil and were therefore used as sources of information on the revolutionary Tamil Tigers movement. Therefore they had close links with military intelligence.

But for what purpose?

The military intelligence, in turn, had close links with a presidential candidate, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who was later elected in the November elections. There is evidence to suggest that all this was designed to create an anti-Islamic phobia in Sri Lanka to create a conflict between Christians and Muslims and intercept the votes of the former in support of the nationalist candidate.

Now that Gotabaya Rajapaksa has been deposed and there is a new president Ranil Wickremesinghe, can't the truth about those events emerge?

No, because the change has not led to anything. The majority in parliament is still in the hands of the party that belongs to the Rajapaksa family. So even now, evidence continues to be concealed and all responsibility for the attacks continues to be attributed exclusively to Muslims. But it is very unlikely that this was the case.

You make serious allegations and have also often been criticised at home. Are you not afraid?

No, I cannot be afraid. We have faith in the Lord and we, His representatives, must have the courage to stand on the side of those who suffer, those who have the least opportunity to fight the systems that ruin opportunities for equality and concord among peoples.

Today is the fourth anniversary of that massacre. Over the years, you have been close to the families of the victims and the survivors. Is there a story that continues to strike you that you would like to mention?

There is a lady about 74 years old who was very active in the church. She was hit by the bomb and was completely paralysed. Her husband has to do everything for her but she is a woman of great faith and when we talk to her, our faith is strengthened.

Then there is another younger lady who was paralysed by fragments of the explosives that entered her head and spine and who later also lost an eye. She has two children and lost one in the bombing. Now her husband has left her as he no longer wanted her because of her disability. She was a dance teacher, now she cannot do anything at all. But she is a woman of great faith and courage. Thanks to our help, she had an artificial eye implant, found new accommodation and a nurse to look after her.

We know these people well but often cannot find the words to support them because

the wounds and losses they have experienced are actually less severe than those they have to endure spiritually and mentally.

What practical help do they receive?

We as a local Church have done a lot, then help has also come from all over the world. They send us funds because we need to support these families, these people, especially for medical and nursing care. Even the Holy Father has sent us great help, a beautiful gift. Four years have passed, but we continue to help. There is a need: there are children without parents for whom we have created the possibility to provide for their schooling. For example, there is a family where the wife died in the explosion, leaving behind a small child only a few months old. We gave the widowed husband all the support we could, but he was devastated and committed suicide. Now, as well as the youngest child, he has left two other daughters alone. The Church through Caritas has been building houses for those who, no longer able to work or having lost parents and husbands, found themselves without a job and without the money to pay a rent.

What should we expect from the commemoration of this fourth anniversary?

We have asked all the people of Sri Lanka to join in the remembrance. The wonderful thing is that so many people will participate on this day, not only Catholics, but Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and all those who live in the country and want truth and justice. Because it is time to really know what happened and who is behind this tragedy. On that day, people who had a happy life suddenly found themselves, like a bolt from the blue, losing everything or almost everything.

Is there still room for hope in the memory of this tragedy?

The president who was elected on the basis of the lie built on this tragedy was in power for only a short time. For the first time in Sri Lanka, an elected president was deposed by a popular uprising consisting of millions of people who took to the streets. This to me is an indication that the Lord is doing justice for what happened. We must trust in Him.