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2. **Show evidence of a close reading.**
3. **Write a 1+ page reflection.**

Sri Lanka Bombings: Police Warned that Churches Were Targets

Source: *New York Times*, April 21, 2019

As Christians in Sri Lanka gathered on Sunday morning to celebrate Easter Mass, the culmination of Holy Week, powerful explosions ripped through three churches packed with worshipers, leaving hundreds of victims amid a havoc of splintered and blood-spattered pews. In what the police said were coordinated terrorist attacks carried out by a single group, bombers also struck three hotels popular with tourists. At least 207 people were killed and 450 others injured, a police spokesman, Ruwan Gunasekera, said.

News of the bombings, the largest attack on South Asian Christians in recent memory, rippled out all Easter morning, interrupting celebrations across the world. Pope Francis, after celebrating Mass in St. Peter's Square, said the attacks had "brought mourning and sorrow" on the most important of Christian holidays.

- The bombings began around 8:45 a.m., and targeted Roman Catholic houses of worship — St. Anthony's Shrine in Colombo, the capital; St. Sebastian's Church in Negombo; and Zion Church in Batticaloa — along with three luxury hotels: the Shangri-La, the Cinnamon Grand, and the Kingsbury, all in Colombo.

- At least seven suspects were held in connection with the bombings, Sri Lanka's defense minister, Ruwan Wijewardene, said. He said that suicide bombers had been behind the explosions.

- A top police official alerted security officials in a advisory 10 days ago about a threat on churches. But it was unclear what safeguards, if any, were taken. And on Sunday, reflecting frictions within the government, the prime minister pointedly said he had not been informed.

- Sri Lanka temporarily blocked major social media and messaging services, including Facebook and WhatsApp, to curb misinformation, according to the president's secretary, Udaya Seneviratne.

- At least 27 of the dead were foreigners, several of them American, the authorities said. Other victims were British, Chinese, Dutch and Portuguese nationals, according to official reports.

Seven are arrested in connection with the blasts

Ruwan Wijewardene, the defense minister, said that seven people had been arrested and identified in connection with the attacks. The government also said that suicide bombers had set off the explosions.

"We believe these were coordinated attacks, and one group was behind them," Mr. Wijewardene said. He urged the news media not to report the names of the attackers or to make them "martyrs."

Three officers were killed while hunting for the attackers at a housing complex in the Colombo suburb of Dematagoda, officials said. The police said they had found explosives inside one of the apartments and that a fire had broken out between officers and the suspects inside the building. One suspect detonated explosives during questioning by the police inside a home in the suburb. Officials at the site said they believed the attacks had been planned there. As the authorities questioned members of the group, another suspect escaped, and was being sought by a circling helicopter.

Mr. Wijewardene said that police units had been put on alert a week ago by the force's chief inspector, Pujith Jayasundara, about potential attacks on churches. It was unclear what steps had been taken to safeguard against attacks.

Sri Lanka shuts down social media

Sri Lankan officials also temporarily blocked several social media networks, including Facebook and Instagram. Users also reported being unable to access the messaging services WhatsApp and Viber. The government set a nationwide curfew from 6 p.m. Sunday to 6 a.m. Monday.

Though Sunday's attacks have no known link to social media, Sri Lanka has a troubled history with racial violence incited on the platforms. Its ban was an extraordinary step that reflects growing global concerns about social media.

Last year, Sri Lanka briefly blocked social networks after viral misinformation and calls to anti-Muslim violence, circulating largely on Facebook, were blamed for a wave of riots and lynchings. Government officials had repeatedly warned Facebook, which also owns Instagram and WhatsApp, that the posts could lead to violence. Though the company promised to hire more moderators and improve communication, the episode left officials wary of the social media giant.

Other countries, such as India, have periodically blocked social media during spasms of violence linked to the platforms. While researchers have blamed Facebook for inciting racist attacks in a range of countries, including

Germany, the risk is thought to be higher in places where trust in the local authorities is lower and histories of communal violence are more recent.

The growing concerns threaten Facebook's long-term business model, which relies on near-constant growth in developing markets, particularly in Asia. Sri Lanka's ban on social media on Sunday represented an escalation in the global backlash against social media companies because the move appeared to be pre-emptive. Rather than trusting in Facebook and other companies to police their networks for hate speech or incitement that could arise as a result of Sunday's attacks, the government was treating the platforms as too dangerous to remain online.

The prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, called for people not to believe false information circulating online. The Sri Lanka Red Cross also said in a tweet that online rumors that its building had been attacked were false.

Wounds of past violence are still fresh

Sri Lanka's civil war ended 10 years ago, but memories of urban carnage are still fresh, particularly for residents of the capital. During the conflict, brutal bombings of airports, bus stations, banks, cafes, and hotels were not uncommon.

The Cinnamon Grand, one of the hotels targeted on Sunday, had been blown up before, in 1984, when it was called the Hotel Lanka Oberoi.

The Roman Catholic Church in Sri Lanka traces its roots to the arrival of the Portuguese in the early 1500s and the subsequent influence of Portuguese, Dutch and Irish missionaries. Sri Lankan Catholics make up a significant minority of the country's population, accounting for roughly 6 percent of the country and centered largely in the Colombo-Negombo area.

In 1995, Pope John Paul II traveled to Sri Lanka to canonize Joseph Vaz, an Indian-born priest and missionary.

Thousands of people greeted the pope's motorcade as it traveled from the airport in Negombo to Colombo.

Meenakshi Ganguly, the South Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said that given Sri Lanka's long history of ethnic and religious violence, including a nearly three-decade civil war that ended only in 2009, it was premature to jump to conclusions about whether radicalized Muslims might have played a role in the assault.

But the scale of the attacks and the death toll on Sunday were unprecedented, even by Sri Lanka's bloody standards, Ms. Ganguly said. "In three decades of war, this scale of attack has never happened," she said. "In terms of serious, religion-based violence, we haven't really seen that."

Foreigners, including Americans, were caught in the carnage

As the Sri Lankan news media reported that 35 foreigners were among the dead, the Foreign Ministry said in a statement that 25 unidentified bodies were believed to be foreign citizens, and that nine other foreigners were missing.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said several Americans had been killed. "The United States condemns in the strongest terms the terror attacks in Sri Lanka," he said in a statement. Three Britons, three citizens of India, two people holding joint American and British citizenship, two Turkish citizens and a Portuguese citizen were among the dead, the Foreign Ministry said.

The Dutch foreign minister, Stef Blok, said that one citizen from the Netherlands had died, and the Turkish ambassador to Sri Lanka, Tunca Ozcuahdar, told the news channel TRT World that two Turkish engineers were among the victims.

Chinese citizens were among the dead, too, according to news reports.

Nineteen foreigners were receiving treatment for injuries at the Colombo National Hospital, the Foreign Ministry said.

World leaders condemn the bombings

Pope Francis, after celebrating Easter Mass in St. Peter's Square, said, "I want to express my affectionate closeness to the Christian community, struck while it was gathered in prayer, and all the victims of such cruel violence."

He added, "I entrust to the Lord all those who were tragically killed."

Possible Response Questions:

- What are your thoughts about the bombings? What questions does it raise?
- What are your thoughts on the banning of social media in Sri Lanka? What are the dangers of social media in the United States?
- Pick a passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.