

Item 3.2

Vale Sri Lanka Easter Bombing Victims

File No: S051491

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

Easter is the most sacred festival on the Christian calendar, a time when Christians around the world gather to commemorate the resurrection of Christ and its message of hope and life.

On Easter Sunday 21 April, 2019, this message was shockingly violated by a series of coordinated terrorist suicide bombings on three Christian churches in Sri Lanka and three luxury hotels in the commercial capital Colombo. A housing complex in Dematagoda and a guest house in Dehiwala were attacked with smaller explosions later that day.

At least 253 people have died, including over 40 foreign nationals and three police officers and around 500 people were injured.

The first church to be bombed was the Catholic Shrine of Saint Anthony in Kotahena, Colombo, followed by the Catholic Church of Saint Sebastian in Negombo, where at least 93 people reported at St. Sebastian's were reportedly killed. A protestant church in Batticaloa was also bombed, with over 300 people being admitted to hospital following the explosion. According to a BBC report, the suicide bomber had attempted to enter the church under the guise of filming it, but was prevented from doing so because a service was underway. He instead detonated his bomb in the churchyard, killing many children attending the attached Sunday school.

Three 5-star hotels on the central Colombo beachfront were bombed at around the same time. Guests, mainly foreign tourists, were having breakfast in the Table One Restaurant on the third floor of the Shangri-La Hotel when the bombers attacked. Another bomber joined the breakfast buffet queue in the Taprobane restaurant of the Cinnamon Grand hotel and detonated explosives strapped to his back as he was about to be served. The Kingsbury Hotel was also attacked.

Many international political and church leaders condemned the attacks and expressed their sympathies for the victims and their families. Religions for Peace International, the world's largest and most representative multi-religious coalition, spoke for many when it said:

“We cannot allow the misuse of religion and violent extremism to weaken our shared hope and commitment to peace and reconciliation.”

The Sri Lanka bombings occurred just over five weeks after the horrific shootings in Christchurch New Zealand. What is most chilling was that in both cases, many innocent people were killed while they were engaged in acts of worship. It is equally chilling that both acts of terrorism were motivated by extremism, by beliefs rooted in an absolutist worldview fuelled by intolerance, a lack of respect for the beliefs of others, and a failure to recognise our common humanity.

Following the bombings, an Australian organisation dedicated to extending the understanding, prevention and treatment of major stress and trauma expressed its grave concern that “these types of killings are becoming more common around the world”.

This organisation, the Australasian Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, said that these killing are rapidly communicated “through technologies to all – bringing such hate crimes into people’s daily lives.”

I join with the Society in its stance “against all forms of hate speech that attempts to place divisions between communities and religious groups.”

“Acts of terror against civilians represent the worst manifestation of a larger use of language and ideology to divide and to deny our common shared humanity regardless of birth, culture or belief.”

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

- (A) all persons present in the Chamber stand for one minute's silence to mark the lives of the persons who died as a result of the horrific suicide bombings in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, 21 April 2019; and
- (B) a letter, under the Lord Mayor's signature, be conveyed to the Mayors of Columbo, Batticaloa and Negombo and expressing Council's sincere condolences for the deaths of their citizens.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor