

Statement to parliament: Sri Lanka terror attacks: Foreign Secretary statement to the House

Today, the flags in Downing Street and on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are flying at half-mast following the horrific Easter day terrorist attack in Sri Lanka. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on the attack and the UK Government's response.

On Sunday, multiple terrorist suicide bombings were conducted across Sri Lanka. Six explosions occurred simultaneously—three in churches conducting Easter day services in Colombo, Negombo and Batticaloa, and three more in hotels in Colombo popular with foreign visitors. Information is still coming in, but we know that over 300 people have been killed, and we know that at least eight of those, sadly, are British nationals. They include mother Anita Nicholson with her 14-year-old son Alex and 11-year-old daughter Annabel, teenage brother and sister Amelie and Daniel Linsey, and retired firefighter Bill Harrop with his wife, retired GP Sally Bradley. The whole House will want to pass on our deepest sympathies and condolences, as we digest a truly heartbreaking situation.

I spoke to James Dauris, the British high commissioner in Colombo, earlier this afternoon, and I want to put on record my thanks to him, his team and all the employees of the British Council for their dedication in extremely testing circumstances. One locally employed British Council employee is in hospital with his wife, both with serious injuries, and our thoughts are also with them and their family. Our travel advice has been updated and remains the best source of information for any British nationals or family members who have concerns about the situation.

Yesterday, I spoke to my counterpart, the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, to express my thanks for the work of the emergency services in Sri Lanka, as well as to pass on our condolences to all the bereaved families. I also discussed what further support the UK might be able to offer. Her Majesty the Queen, the Prince of Wales and other members of the royal family have sent messages of condolence to the President and people of Sri Lanka, and the Prime Minister is expected to speak with Sri Lankan Prime Minister Wickremesinghe later today.

These attacks were a primitive and vile attempt to sow division between people of different faiths. Religious tensions have caused some of the bloodiest battles in human history, and it is sombre and sobering that even in the 21st century attempts continue to set believers of different religions against each other. Our response must be to deny the perpetrators the satisfaction of dividing us by being united in our condemnation of the attacks and united in our support for religious tolerance—surely one of humanity's greatest achievements. Just as after the equally horrific attacks on the two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, we must respond by bringing

people together; that is the exact opposite of what the perpetrators intended.

It has to be said that the sheer brutality of the attacks was stark. One pair of attackers, after detonating their first explosives in a hotel, waited for people to try to escape before detonating a second device. The device destroyed by security services at Colombo airport was most likely designed to target fleeing civilians. The attack was complex, tightly co-ordinated and designed to cause maximum chaos, damage and heartbreak.

The UK will never stand by in the face of such evil. Today, we stand in solidarity with the Government and people of Sri Lanka, who have made enormous strides towards stability and peace following the conclusion of the civil war almost exactly 10 years ago. The Metropolitan Police counter-terrorism command has dispatched a team of specialists to Sri Lanka, including family liaison officers, to support the families of British victims and assist with the repatriation of deceased British nationals. A recent programme run by Interpol involved the training of 30 Sri Lankan forensic specialists and police officers by UK experts in disaster victim identification. We hope that that will be of additional support.

The Government of Sri Lanka have declared a state of emergency as the investigation continues. More than 20 arrests have been made, and there are likely to be more people who were involved in the planning of this attack still at large. A large amount of improvised explosive device material has been recovered, including 87 low-explosive detonators that were recovered from a bus station. There are no verified claims of responsibility as yet. So far, 40 arrests have been made, and counter-terrorism activity continues. The Sri Lankan Prime Minister and President have both said publicly that there will be a thorough investigation into the incident and whether information was handled correctly, and it is important to let that process follow its course.

To attack Christian worshippers at Easter, which is a celebration of peace and the holiest day in the Christian calendar, betrays in the attackers an absence of the most basic values of humanity. Just two days ago, the Prime Minister and I both noted in our Easter messages the dangers facing Christians around the world, 300 of whom are killed every month. In response to such acts, we must redouble our efforts to protect the freedom of religious minorities to practise their faiths, wherever they are. For that reason, the FCO has asked the Bishop of Truro to do an independent report into what more can be done to protect persecuted Christians around the world.

The British Government will continue to give their wholehearted support to the people of Sri Lanka, and I am sure the House will join me in once again expressing our deepest sadness and sympathy to everyone who has been affected by these monstrous attacks.

I commend this statement to the House.