

Roadside bomb kills Sri Lankan priest known as human rights activist

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka - A Jaffna diocesan priest active in promoting human rights was killed April 20 by a roadside bomb on the way back to his church after celebrating Mass in a parish substation.

Father Mariampillai Xavier Karunaratnam was driving the car and reportedly died instantly of head wounds in the explosion on a road about 50 miles south of Jaffna, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News. The jungle area, known as the Vanni, is under the control of the rebel group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

An unnamed layperson traveling with Father Karunaratnam was critically injured and was taken to a hospital.

A church official at the bishop's house in Jaffna said the Tamil priest was killed while returning for lunch at Our Lady of Good Health Parish in Vavunikulam, a farming village. He had celebrated Mass at the church in Mankulam, about 7 miles away.

The priest's body was taken to nearby St. Theresa's Church in Kilinochchi; thousands flocked to pay their respects. His funeral and burial in Vavunikulam were to be April 22.

Both government forces and the Tamil rebels have denied responsibility for the priest's death. According to a state report, the Tamil rebels should be held responsible for the killing because it happened in their area of control. The Tamil rebels claim government forces are at fault.

Father Karunaratnam was founder and chairman of the North East Secretariat on Human Rights and offered trauma counseling to war victims and those who suffered after the 2004 tsunami. He looked after cases of displaced people in the Kilinochchi area.

The human rights group handles human rights violations against ethnic Tamils in the north and east, where the ethnic minority community is concentrated.

Born April 12, 1951, in Jaffna, Father Karunaratnam was ordained a priest in 1989. In addition to his work with the human rights group, he chaired an umbrella group for nongovernmental organizations in Jaffna and filed stories for the church-run Radio Veritas.

Speaking from Jaffna by telephone, Father Justin Gnanapragasam, diocesan vicar general, told UCA News the priest's death is "a great loss to all people and the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka." Father Gnanapragasam spoke on behalf of Bishop Thomas Savundaranayagam of Jaffna, who was in Canada on an official visit.

Father Gnanapragasam said the late priest "raised his voice every time there was any (human rights) violation."

James Singarayar, 67, a retired Catholic teacher, told UCA News Father Karunaratnam was "a guardian and a strength for the victimized."

A representative of the local Caritas, the Catholic Church's social services agency, told UCA News by telephone that "people are shocked and are mourning silently."

However, it is unlikely that priests or religious will be able to attend the funeral, as the only transport route from Jaffna to Kilinochchi is closed, said Father Ainsley Roshan, secretary to the bishop of Jaffna. The route between Kilinochchi and Jaffna has been closed since 2006.

The Tamil rebels launched their struggle for a separate Tamil state against the Sinhalese-led government in 1983. The violence has greatly affected the Jaffna Diocese.

Another diocesan priest, Father Thiruchelvam Nihal Jim Brown, 34, disappeared in 2006. The layman who accompanied him, Wenceslaus Vincens Vimalathas, a father of five, also remains missing.

In the neighboring Diocese of Mannar, Father Nicholapillai Packiaranjith and his driver were killed last year when a land mine exploded next to their car while they were transporting relief supplies.