

Vatican official: Easter attacks were an act against all of Sri Lanka

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka — One of the Vatican's top officials visited Sri Lanka to show solidarity with Catholics still reeling from the Easter suicide bombings that claimed more than 250 lives and injured more than 400.

Cardinal Fernando Filoni, prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, said May 22 that it was time to focus on rebuilding the nation, reported ucanews.com.

The cardinal condemned the April 21 bombings on a handful of luxury hotels and churches in Colombo and Negombo by local extremists affiliated with the Islamic State group.

"What happened on Easter Sunday was not only an act against a few people or a religion, it was an act against the people of Sri Lanka," he said.

Cardinal Filoni served as the apostolic nuncio of Sri Lanka from 1981 to 1983. He flew to Colombo after a trip to Thailand to celebrate the 350th anniversary of the church's mission to the country.

While visiting the national shrine of St. Anthony in Colombo, he spoke to some of the bereaved family members from the Easter attacks, reported ucanews.com.

"I am here first of all to bring you all closer to Pope Francis," he said at the venue where the first of the coordinated blasts took place. It is now being reconstructed with the assistance of the Sri Lankan navy.

The papal representative's itinerary included stops at all three major cities targeted by the terrorists, including Batticaloa on the eastern side of the island nation, and meetings with various priests and civil and religious personalities.

At St. Sebastian Church in Negombo, which suffered the heaviest casualties, he was due to take part in a groundbreaking ceremony for a new cemetery chapel.

The cardinal also joined a foundation stone-laying event for a museum where relics of St. Anthony will be placed. The building will include a soup kitchen that will provide free meals to nearly 200 people of all faiths on a daily basis. The Sri Lanka Ports Authority, the government institution that runs the harbor, donated the land. The navy will handle its construction.

Cardinal Filoni said it is time for people of all faiths to work together to make Sri Lanka stronger and more united.

He told a group of workers from the navy that “your hands are building a mission where people praise God” and described the new church they were building as “a house of hope for all religions.”

Referring to St. Anthony’s shrine, Cardinal Filoni said it “was not only a shrine for Catholics, but for Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians. It is like a house for this big family of Sri Lanka.”

“And we wish that this will remain in the future a home for all. A house without doors, without windows — open. It is open to everybody who would like to come here to find the open arms of Jesus, or the blessing of St. Anthony, and a moment of peace for their soul, their mind, their problems, their defeats,” he said.

The cardinal said the shrine in the heart of the capital would forever be seen as a house of martyrs.

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