News
Ministry



A person mourns near the grave of a suicide bombing victim at Sellakanda Catholic cemetery April 23, 2019, in Negombo, Sri Lanka. (CNS/Reuters/Athit Perawongmetha)



by Thomas Scaria

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Editor's note: *Global Sisters Report's new series, Hope Amid Turmoil: Sisters in Conflict Areas, offers a look at the lives and ministries of women religious serving in dangerous places worldwide. The news stories, columns and Q&As in this series will include sisters in Ukraine, Nigeria, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Nicaragua and more throughout 2023.*

On Saturday afternoons, Niranjalee Yasawaradana kneels down before three crosses in an open ground, talking for hours or sometimes crying, a practice she has continued for the past four years.

Her husband, Sampath Wickramaratna, and two daughters — Nethmi and Vishmi — are buried there along with more than 100 others who were killed on Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019, at St. Sebastian's Church in Katuwapitiya, a suburb of Negombo, Sri Lanka, near the nation's capital of Colombo.



Niranjalee (who prefers to use her first name) combines this graveyard visit with a Saturday evening Mass in the same church, where her entire family had perished in the terrorist attack. She said she has been able to overcome her anger over their deaths with the help of a sister who has served as a counselor, one of hundreds helping survivors of the blasts.

Approximately 272 people, including more than 50 children, were killed, and 500-plus injured on that day in separate suicide bomb attacks on three churches and

three luxury hotels in Sri Lanka.

The largest casualty — 116 deaths, mostly Sri Lankan Catholics — occurred in Negombo's St. Sebastian's Church, followed by St. Anthony's Shrine in Colombo, with 55 deaths. Some 47 foreigners were killed in successive blasts in three hotels in Colombo.



Niranjalee Yasawaradana, a widow who lost her husband and two daughters in the 2019 Easter bombing, prays before their crosses on her Saturday weekly visit to the mass burial grounds at St. Sebastian's parish church in Negombo, Sri Lanka. (Courtesy of Niranjalee Yasawaradana)

The attacks were linked to ISIS and were carried out by nine suicide bombers attached to a little-known Sri Lankan Islamic militant group, National Thowheeth Jama'ath (National Monotheism Organization).

"My husband and children were well prepared for Easter with fast and prayer during Lent, not knowing Jesus would call them back on that special day," Niranjalee told Global Sisters Report in March, a month ahead of the bomb attacks' fourth anniversary.

The 48-year-old widow, her head shaven and scalp bearing injury marks, had survived the attack but remained unconscious for nearly two weeks in a hospital.

"The only thing left behind is these crosses with their pictures on them," she said, her eyes reflecting anger. She now lives with two pet dogs that were gifted to her to keep her occupied.

Niranjalee said she managed to get over her anger after long hours of counseling with Sr. Manoranji Murthy of the Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

Murthy told GSR that when she first met Niranjalee, she refused to cook or take care of herself. "She asked me for whom she should cook," recalled the 33-year-old nun with a degree in psychology. The woman took two years to return to normalcy, she added.

Murthy is among some 200 sisters from more than 20 congregations involved in helping the victims of three separate church attacks recover from their trauma and lead a normal life, said Fr. Manjula Niroshan Fernando, who took charge of St. Sebastian's Church a week after the bomb attack.

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A clergyman prays over the casket of 13-year-old Dhami Brindya during her burial in Negombo, Sri Lanka, April 25, 2019, four days after suicide bomb attacks on churches and luxury hotels. (CNS/Reuters/Athit Perawongmetha)

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Sr. Manoranji Murthy, a member of the Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help and one of the counselors who accompany the survivors of the bomb attacks (Thomas Scaria)

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Fr. Manjula Niroshan Fernando, the parish priest of the St. Sebastian's Church, Katuwapitiya in Negombo, Sri Lanka (Thomas Scaria)

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Niranjalee Yasawaradana, a widow who lost her husband and two daughters in the Easter bombing in 2019, stands in front of her house at Negombo, Sri Lanka. (Thomas Scaria)



Niranjalee Yasawaradana, who lost her entire family in the 2019 Easter bombing in Sri Lanka, shows photos she has in her home. (Thomas Scaria)

All women's congregations based in Colombo and southern Sri Lanka are involved in the healing ministry, Fernando said, adding that he is still working hard to keep his more than 1,600 families (the country's largest parish) united as a community.

Each family was assigned a nun, who is assisted by professional therapists whenever necessary.

Sri Lanka has 33 women religious congregations with more than 2,280 active and 165 contemplative nuns, said Oblates of Mary Immaculate Fr. Roshan Silva, who heads the Conference of Major Religious Superiors of Sri Lanka. The country also has 25 men's congregations with 788 priests and 165 brothers, who also help in the healing ministry.

Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Dhayalini observed that the nuns involved in the interventions at times developed stress and trauma themselves, but they largely overcame the crisis through sharing with other members, prayer and meditation.



The renovated St. Sebastian's Church, in Katuwapitiya, a suburb of Negombo, Sri Lanka, was hit by a suicide bomber during the Easter service on April 21, 2019, killing more than 100 parishioners, including 32 children. The parish priest, Fr. Manjula Niroshan Fernando, observed a low presence of devotees in the church campus after the Easter bombing. The church still has police security. (Thomas Scaria)

Though they were all from different congregations and stayed at various convents around Negombo, "we supported each other in managing our own stress," Dhayalini said, adding that the Easter bombing crisis ultimately resulted in strengthened inter-congregational ties.

The Colombo Archdiocesan Family Apostolate assigned Niranjalee to Murthy when the woman was still in the hospital bed.

"Since then, I am frequently in touch with her," the nun said. "She regularly sends me morning greetings and calls me whenever she needs my presence." Building their initial rapport, she added, took several weeks, as it was very hard for the

victims to accept the reality. Indeed, the apostolate asked therapists to just "accompany them in their struggles, agonies and pain in the first days before getting into any counseling sessions," Niranjalee said.

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Dhayalini cared for a Buddhist and his Catholic wife whose 22-year-old daughter and 16-year-old son were killed when the church roof tiles fell on them. Their mother escaped with minor injuries.

She found the couple inconsolable and angry; they were "able to reconcile with the reality only after they were taken to Pope Francis when he prayed over them last year."

The couple were among some 100 affected families whom the Colombo Archdiocese took to Rome for a meeting with the pope as part of the healing ministry.

According to Vatican News, Francis told the visitors and roughly 3,500 Sri Lankan Catholics working in Italy on April 25, 2022, that he felt a closeness with the survivor families and urged Sri Lankan authorities to get to the truth behind the bomb attacks. The pope donated 100,000 euros to distribute among the survivor families.



Hasaru Shenal survived the 2019 suicide bomb attack on St. Sebastian's Church but lost his mother, who did not survive. Shenal is pictured showing his photo with Pope Francis; a photo of his mother is behind him. (Thomas Scaria)

Hasaru Shenal, who was in the delegation, said the meeting with the pope helped revive his faith in Jesus and overcome his grief over losing his "ever-smiling and loving mother" in the Katuwapitiya church attack.

"Now, I serve as a Sunday school teacher for children like me who have lost their dear ones," the 21-year-old told GSR. He and his father are among 14 families that received new houses from the government, which the church built on land they also provided.

"We have experienced the love and support of the entire Catholic Church in Sri Lanka," said Priyantha Jayakodi, Shenal's father, standing near a smiling photo of his wife.

Shenal, who was unconscious in the hospital's intensive care unit for two weeks, said he and his friends were initially scared to sit for Mass in St. Sebastian's Church.

Hasaru Shenal, seated with his father Priyantha Jayakodi, recalls when his mother was killed in a suicide bomb attack that killed over 100 people April 21, 2019, at St. Sebastian's Church in Negombo, Sri Lanka. (Video by Thomas Scaria)

Dominican Sr. Sirima Opanayake, who manages her congregation's school at St. Sebastian's, said she had lost seven students in the bombing. "It was a traumatic experience for teachers and students," she told GSR.

Opanayake coordinated a team that counseled students, teachers and parents for four months before they could restart classes.

The school built a memorial for the seven students and set up a scholarship in their names for poor children. Showing the students' pictures in the memorial hall, Opanayake said the school will commemorate them on the fourth anniversary.



Dominican Sr. Sirima Opanayake, the principal of Ave Maria Branch School in Negombo, Sri Lanka, shows the pictures of the seven students killed in the Easter bombing at St. Sebastian's Church. (Thomas Scaria)

Opanayake's students were among the 32 children killed in the attack at St. Sebastian's Church. St. Anthony's Shrine in Kochchikade, Colombo, lost 10 children, and the evangelical Zion Church in Batticaloa (about 200 miles northeast of Colombo) lost 14 Sunday school children in the Easter bombing among their 31 total deaths. Some 176 children lost one or both their parents in the attacks, said Fr. Lawrence Ramanayake, director of Seth Sarana Caritas Colombo.

Salvatorian Sr. Kanchana Silva Pulle handled two families: one of them was a Muslim husband and a Catholic wife who lost their 14-year-old daughter. She recalled the parents telling her about their only daughter — who at the time was preparing for baptism — dreaming about angels coming to take her to heaven a day before the tragedy.

Pulle said the nuns initially experienced rejection from the distraught survivors, but "we walked with them in their crisis," at a time when survivors naturally felt "agitated and angry, frustrated and depressed." Winning the trust of those affected, Pulle said, "was a very tough time."

"We have been involved in their lives from the very day of the tragedy and the funeral of their loved ones till now," she said, adding that she also participated in the funeral of the Muslim children.

The people now show "the same concern for us," Pulle told GSR, highlighting the stress and fear she too felt throughout those early days.

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Salvatorian Sr. Kanchana Silva Pulle, a counselor who accompanied survivors of the 2019 Easter bomb attack in Sri Lanka (Thomas Scaria)

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Priyantha Jayakodi, left, and his only son Hasaru Shenal stand before a photo of his wife, who was killed in the 2019 Easter bombing. (Thomas Scaria)

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St. Anthony's Shrine in Kochchikade in Colombo city, renovated after the 2019 Easter bombing (Thomas Scaria)

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  People tie a cross to a rope during Lent, a new practice that began after the 2019 Easter bombing at St. Sebastian's Church, most often done by relatives of those killed in the blast. (Thomas Scaria)

Fernando said that, because young people in his parish seemed unable to cope with the stress and loss, he organized an exposure program for them with their counterpart in Mannar, a northern diocese that experienced civil war from 1983-2009.

Shenal, who now conducts leadership programs for the youth in his parish, said the exposure helped them learn to live with hope, and understand that they are not the only victims of terror attacks.

The parish priest of St. Sebastian's Church said there was no discrimination among Catholics and Protestants in the healing programs that the church supports, nor among other religions. The church's teams have engaged with victims of other church attacks in Sri Lanka, including a Protestant church in Batticola in the north. "Even the money donated by the pope was distributed to Protestant chuch members

in Batticola," Fernando said, adding that sisters have worked with Muslim and Buddhist victims, as well.

Christians account for about 7% of Sri Lanka's more than 21.65 million population, with Catholics being the majority of Christians. Buddhists make up about 70%, Hindus 12%, and Muslims 10%, according to the 2012 census. Most victims of the bomb blasts were local Catholics.



Nethmi and Vishmi, two daughters of Niranjalee Yasawaradana, with their father Sampath Wickramaratna just before the Easter Mass April 21, 2019, at St. Sebastian's Church. All three died in the suicide attack during the Mass. (Courtesy of

Niranjalee Yasawaradana)

Fernando said the main worry now is the elusive justice for the survivors, although the nuns and others have done whatever possible for their socioeconomic and psychological needs.

"But when we are approaching the fourth anniversary, justice remains a mirage for the victims," he bemoaned.

In an Easter message on the fourth anniversary of the church attacks, Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe asserted his commitment to bring justice to the Easter bomb victims.

Though all the suicide attackers (who were proved to be associated with ISIS) died in the bombings, police quickly arrested around 200 people in connection with the Easter attacks, including a Muslim political leader arrested about two years after the incident. The government also banned 11 Muslim groups in Sri Lanka.

Ramanayake, the priest who also coordinates the rehabilitation of the survivors from the archbishop's residence, said Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith has pressured the government to "reveal the truth and do justice to the victims."

The survivors from the Katuwapitiya church have filed 182 cases seeking compensation from the government, while the Colombo shrine survivors have filed 104 cases.

According to Al Jazeera, the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka in January held the then-president and four others responsible for the failure to avert the bomb attacks and directed political leaders and top officials to compensate the victims with 310 million rupees ($847,300) from their personal funds.

The archdiocese has also filed a Supreme Court petition to bring justice to the masterminds behind the attacks, Ramanayake told GSR. The trial, however, is still underway.

Niranjalee blames a political conspiracy for the slow progress of the investigation, believing that the government's security forces could have averted the tragedy if it had heeded the warnings from intelligence agencies, given several days before the attack.

"I will fight till I get justice," she said.

This story appears in the **Hope Amid Turmoil: Sisters in Conflict Areas** feature series. View the full series.