

## **Pope, top Sunni imam condemn Sri Lanka bombings**

*Francis denounces 'cruel violence' of Easter Day attacks at churches and hotels; head of Egypt's al-Azhar Mosque says terrorists' actions go against all religious teachings*

**By AP and AFP, *The Times of Israel*, 21 April 2019**



*Pope Francis waves to the faithful, after celebrating Easter Mass in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, April 21, 2019. (AP/Andrew Medichini)*

The head of the Catholic Church and the imam of Sunni Islam's leading mosque both condemned the Sri Lankan terrorist bombings Sunday that left more than 200 dead and hundreds wounded.

At the Vatican, Pope Francis denounced the "cruel violence" of the Easter Sunday slaughter of Christians and foreigners in Sri Lanka during his annual mass at St. Peter's Square. Francis skipped his homily during Easter Mass, but delivered his traditional "Urbi et Orbi" (To the city and the world) speech, highlighting conflicts in the Mideast, Africa and the Americas, and demanding that political leaders put aside their differences and work instead for peace.

"May the one who gives us his peace end the roar of arms, both in areas of conflict and in our cities, and inspire the leaders of nations to work for an end to the arms race and the troubling spread of weaponry, especially in the economically more advanced countries," Francis said from the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica, overlooking the flower-decked square below.

In a special appeal at the end, Francis lamented the "grave attacks" on Sri Lankan hotels and churches, which occurred just as the Christian faithful were celebrating Easter Mass, which marks the belief in the resurrection of Jesus following his crucifixion.



*Pope Francis greets Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, the grand imam of Egypt's Al-Azhar, after an Interreligious meeting at the Founder's Memorial in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, February 4, 2019. (AP /Andrew Medichini)*

“I want to express my loving closeness to the Christian community, targeted while they were gathered in prayer, and all the victims of such cruel violence,” Francis said. “I entrust to the Lord all those who were tragically killed and pray for the injured and all those who are suffering as a result of this dramatic event.”

In Cairo, the spiritual leader of Egypt’s Al-Azhar Mosque, the Sunni Muslim world’s foremost religious institution, condemned the “terrorist” attacks in Sri Lanka. “I cannot imagine a human being could target the peaceful on their celebration day,” said Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, the institution’s grand imam.

“Those terrorists’ perverted disposition goes against the teachings of all religions,” he said in comments published on Al-Azhar’s Twitter account.

More than 200 people were killed and hundreds wounded following near-simultaneous blasts at Sri Lankan churches, where Christians were celebrating Easter Sunday, and at several hotels frequented by foreigners.

“I pray that God grants patience to the families of the casualties and recovery to the injured,” added Sheikh Tayeb.

In February, Pope Francis and Sheikh Tayeb signed a document on “human fraternity for world peace,” hailed by the Vatican as an “important step forward in the dialogue between Christians and Muslims.”



*Blood stains are seen on the wall and on a Jesus Christ statue at the St. Sebastian’s Church, after blast in Negombo, north of Colombo, Sri Lanka, on Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019. (AP Photo)*

Two Muslim groups in Sri Lanka condemned the attacks. The Muslim Council of Sri Lanka said it mourns the loss of innocent people in the blasts by extremists who seek to divide religious and ethnic groups. The All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, a body of Muslim clerics, said targeting Christian places of worship cannot be accepted.

Muslims make up about 10 percent of Sri Lanka’s population of 23 million. No one has claimed responsibility for what Sri Lankan officials have described as a terrorist attack by religious extremists.