THE DAILY tribune

TUESDAY, APRIL 23, 2019

QUOTE OF THE DAY

VISION WITHOUT ACTION IS MERELY A DREAM. ACTION WITHOUT VISION JUST PASSES THE TIME. VISION WITH ACTION CAN CHANGE THE WORLD.
JOEL A. BARKER

The tragic familiarity of the Sri Lar

A country once split by ethnic hatreds is now a target for Islamic ter

RANDY BOYAGODA

The series of suicide attacks on churches and hotels in Sri Lanka on April 21, which has left nearly 300 dead and hundreds injured, is more than just a national or religious tragedy. For members of the Sri Lankan diaspora, including Catholics like me, who have family connections to the very places and parishes that were attacked, the country's tribulations are no longer terrible, local and hard to explain to people unfamiliar with its unsettled history. Now they are terrible, local — and familiar.

Much of the world knows the outlines of Sri Lanka's historic troubles — a three-decade civil war, fought along ethnic lines and punctuated by hundreds of suicide bombings carried out by the Tamil Tiger terrorist organisation. But broad international interest in the island nation, and familiarity with its struggles, has largely been confined to the story of its civil war, which ended in 2009, and, at most, to ongoing, uneven reconciliations and renewals that have played out since then.

Now a new, shared context has emerged: All evidence so far suggests that the attacks were carried out by locally based Islamic terrorists.

The attackers knew their targets well, and seem to have chosen them for maximum symbolic value.

St Anthony's, in the capital city of Colombo, is a national shrine, whose turn-of-the-19th-century origins are associated with the persecution of local Catholics by the country's then-colonial Dutch rulers.

It has long been a place frequented by travellers — domestic and foreign, Catholic and non-Catholic — before they begin journeys around the island. On my last family trip to Sri Lanka, with four overtired, overheating children in the back seat, our driver took a maddeningly inefficient route out of the traffic-clogged big city just so he could first pray for the intercession of St Anthony for a safe trip.

The second prominent church that was attacked, St Sebastian's, is in my mother's place of birth, Negombo, a stout fishing town north of the capital. Negombo is nicknamed "Little Rome" because of its robust Catholic culture, which dates to 16th-century Portuguese colonialism.

Every January St. Sebastian's plays host to an island-famous festival in honour of its namesake saint. Days and nights of prayer, procession and merrymaking are enjoyed by churchgoers alongside friends and neighbours.

Significantly, this was true before, during and after the civil war. I noted as much to a cousin and her husband a few years ago, after I visited the church and attended the festival with them and their children. They cited this as evidence of the country's baseline religious pluralism, which I appreciated as a source of strong and meaningful contrast to its deep-cutting ethnic divisions. Will that still be the case at next year's Feast of St. Sebastian?

That depends on what these attacks portend — whether the global currents of religiously inspired terrorism overwhelm the island's long-standing experience with pluralism.

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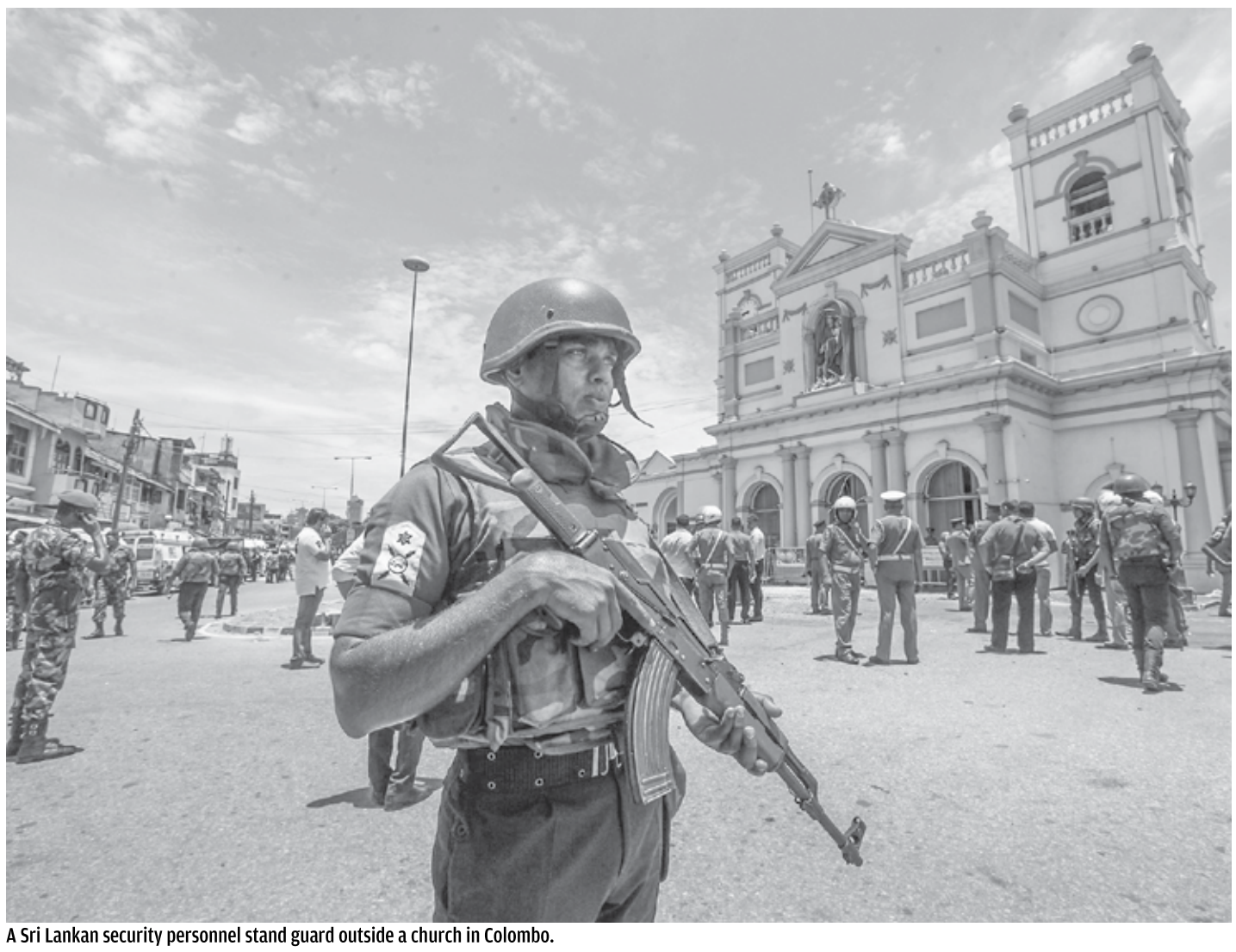


A Sri Lankan security personnel stand guard outside a church in Colombo.

Climate's troubling unknown unl

Environmental changes occur regularly; climate change significantly accelerc

WILLIAM B GAIL

Donald Rumsfeld famously popularised the term "unknown unknowns" in a 2002 news briefing when describing the challenges of linking Iraq to weapons of mass destruction. Troublingly, climate change may also be strewn with such unknowns, and they pose daunting tests for how we face the future.

One is choosing among policy alternatives. Should we minimise tomorrow's risks now by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, or save money today and spend it on adapting to the effects of planetary warming once threats emerge more fully, like rising seas or prolonged droughts? The policy debate increasingly tilts toward adaptation.

But we can't adapt to perils from unknown unknowns. In such cases, adaptation will largely fail; only mitigation will be effective.

The National Climate Assessment released last fall provided an updated scientific summary of the "knowns." The simple version was this: Earth is warming, humans are largely responsible, ecosystems are changing in response, and the effect on societies will be large.

The report also characterised the known unknowns, as Rumsfeld might put it — those things we know at a fundamental level but about which we seek greater certainty. They include how much Earth will eventually warm, how rapidly oceans will rise, where and when weather extremes and water shortages might occur, and whether potential tipping points (like the collapse of Antarctic ice sheets) will, in fact, occur.

Unsurprisingly, the report carefully limited speculation about unknown unknowns: the many initially small environmental shifts that are potential consequences of the changing climate. What will actually emerge is largely unknowable because of the highly unpredictable nonlinear response to the warming of Earth's complex and adaptive physical and ecological systems.

Yet credible speculation on climate's unknown unknowns is sorely needed by policymakers. Future generations will be affected by today's policy decisions, whether the underlying science is complete or not. The basics are simple: The more we warm our planet, the more likely it is that deeply surprising environmental changes will ensue.

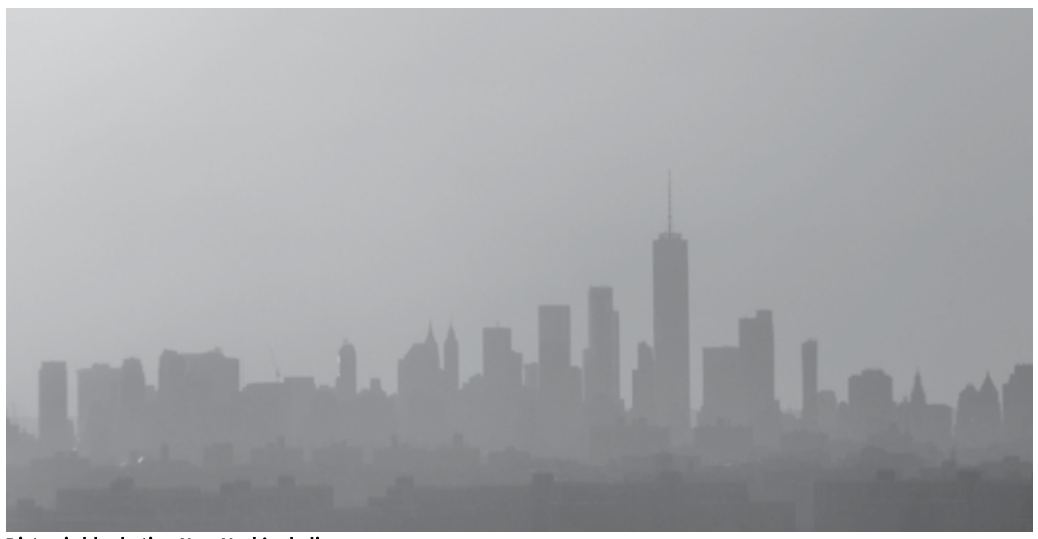
Most of these smaller environmental changes should be manageable, readily addressed through adaptation. Inevitably, however, a rare few will most likely evolve and expand until they threaten our security, health or economy. We lack the ability to predict which are which. This is the curse of unknown unknowns. Nevertheless, things we can credibly imagine should accentuate our concern for what we are unable to imagine.

Perhaps a routinely ice-free Arctic summer, altering polar ocean life in subtle ways, sets off an unpredictable cascade of complex changes throughout the global ocean ecosystem, devastating fisheries. Maybe agricultural pests adapt to climate change stresses by evolving novel and frequently changing abilities to destroy crops, leaving farmers struggling to keep pace and feed populations. One unsettling risk is that mutant diseases — like Zika and Ebola today and the 1918 flu epidemic that killed 50 million people — could emerge more often because of altered evolutionary competition in a changing climate, each a greater medical challenge than the last.

Environmental changes occur regularly; climate change significantly accelerates the process. Should warming progress too far, society risks being overwhelmed by the growing rate at which disruptive events could occur. Each new threat is likely to emerge and proliferate differently, undermining adaptation's effectiveness.

Some threats might be so startling and strange that our imaginations would struggle to comprehend them even after they arise. Timely response efforts would be frustrated by poor kno what is occurring anc tain the threat.

Though climate ch to produce clearly attr ples, Zika hints at th future. Within a few s transformed from an i disease into a medic body saw it coming. societal consequenc with childbearing upe



Dirty air blanketing New York's skyline.

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