

MEDIA RELEASE

The latest Channel 4 film on Sri Lanka

The central allegation made in the latest film on Sri Lanka broadcast by Channel 4 is that the Easter Sunday suicide bombings of 21 April 2019 carried out by Islamic extremists had been deliberately facilitated in order to create the conditions to get me elected to power in November 2019. This charge hinges on claims made by one Hanzeer Azad Maulana, an applicant for political asylum in Europe, that he had introduced Maj General Suresh Sallay (who is best known for his past role as the Director of Military Intelligence) to the principle suicide bomber Zaharan and his brother Zainee Moulavi in February 2018. Maj Gen Sallay has been described as one of my loyalists. However, he is a career military officer who has served under many Presidents and all military officers are loyal to the State and not to private individuals. I too was a former army officer, and like him, I too served under different governments. After leaving the position of Defence Secretary in 2015 and until I was elected President, Maj Gen Sallay and I had no contact at all.

Maj Gen Sallay had informed Chanel 4 that he had been removed from the position of Director Military Intelligence and was serving in Malaysia as Minister-Counsellor from 2016 to December 2018 and that he had not been in Sri Lanka at the time this meeting is said to have taken place. Furthermore, from January to November 2019 he was in India following the National Defence College course and during this entire period from 2016 to 2019 he was not operative within the defence or security structure of Sri Lanka. After Maj. Gen. Sallay was removed from Military Intelligence in 2016, he never served in that organisation again. It was only after I became President that he rejoined the intelligence apparatus as the head of the State Intelligence Service from December 2019 onwards. Hence this story about Maj Gen Sallay meeting the suicide bombers in February 2018 is clearly a fabrication.

In order to bolster their claim that Military Intelligence was in league with the suicide bombers, the film alleges that when the police started investigating into the Vavunativu incident of 30 November 2018 where two policemen were killed and their weapons stolen and the discovery of explosives at the Wanathawilluwa safe house on 16 January 2019, the Military Intelligence had sabotaged the police investigations. All Sri Lankans are aware that the government of 2015-2019 persecuted the intelligence services and particularly the Military Intelligence and that quite a few of its members spent months and years in remand and in police custody during that period. Hence any claim that the Military Intelligence could sabotage police work during the 2015 – 2019 government, is plain nonsense.

The Presidential Commission of Inquiry into the Easter Sunday bombings has stated quite clearly that signs of a Muslim extremist build up were ignored by the government of 2015-2019. They stated that the revelation made by the then Justice Minister Wijedasa Rajapakshe on 18 November 2016 that 32 Sri Lankans had gone to Syria and joined the ISIS terrorist group and that foreign Islamic preachers were coming to Sri Lanka to propagate extremist teachings had been ignored. The Easter Sunday suicide bombers had held training camps from 23 to 25 March 2018 at a guest house in Lewella and more gatherings had been held in April and May 2018 at a guest house in Nuwara Eliya all of which had been reported to the police but had not been investigated.

Rilwan, the brother of Zaharan Hashim was seriously injured whilst experimenting with explosives in Kattankuddy in the early hours of 27 August 2018. Apart from the Vavunativu

and Wanathavilluwa incidents referred to earlier, there had been the vandalizing of Buddha statues in Mawanella in late December 2018 as well. As the Presidential Commission observed, the proper investigation of any one of these early incidents would have led to the early apprehension of the terrorists and the prevention of the suicide bombings. It was the police and not Military Intelligence that was in charge of these investigations. Apart from the fact that I was not in power during this entire period, like many members of the intelligence services and armed forces, I too was going from one police unit to another and from one court house to another from 2015 till I became President in November 2019 as a result of relentless government persecution.

One of the allegations made against me and my government in this latest film is that after becoming President, I ‘sabotaged’ the investigation by transferring officers carrying out the investigation. I assume that this is a reference to the former Director of the CID Shani Abeysekera. Leaked telephone recordings had revealed that he had conspired with a politician to influence the outcome of an ongoing criminal case in the High Court, and he could not be kept in a position of responsibility in the CID under any circumstances by any government. The police officers attached to the Presidential Commission to investigate the Easter Sunday attacks were not transferred after I came into power. In any case, there was a gap of nearly seven months between the Easter Sunday attacks and my coming into power, and investigations should have been carried out during that period. SSP Abeysekera was also one of those responsible for the negligence between 2016 and 2019 mentioned in the Presidential Commission’s report.

Chanel 4 states that when the report of the Presidential Commission to investigate into the Easter Sunday Attacks published its report, that I refused to make it public. That is an outright lie. Everyone in Sri Lanka knows that it has even been tabled in Parliament. Last year, when some people started linking me to the Easter Sunday bombings, I instructed Ambassador Mahinda Samarasinghe in Washington to explore the possibility of obtaining FBI/CIA assistance in investigations into the Easter Sunday bombings. On 7 April 2022, Christopher A. Landberg of the Bureau of Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State wrote to Ambassador Samarasinghe stating the following:

“Thank you for raising with us Sri Lanka’s request for an independent investigation into the Easter Sunday attacks... In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, and continuing to the present day, the U.S. government provided assistance in the investigation and prosecution of those responsible – to the point that the Department of Justice filed a criminal complaint in January 2021 against those deemed responsible for the deaths of U.S. citizens. In light of that, even as we stand ready to continue providing support to your government, it would not make sense for the United States to conduct an additional investigation into the attacks...In terms of our cooperation on this case, I would like to highlight that the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has worked closely with Sri Lankan law enforcement, and in the week after the attack, deployed approximately 33 personnel to Colombo to assist Sri Lanka’s Criminal Investigation Department with all aspects of their investigation. These efforts included evidence collection, witness and victim interviews, and exploitation of digital devices...”

In this letter, Landberg also stated that if any additional requests were made by the Sri Lankan Attorney General they would be able to provide support from the two U.S. prosecutors, who were on the ground in Colombo at that time in April 2022. Earlier on 8 January 2021, the US Department of Justice had issued a media release stating among other things, that:

“...three Sri Lankan citizens have been charged with terrorism offenses including conspiring to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization (ISIS)... The men were part of a group of ISIS supporters which called itself ‘ISIS in Sri Lanka’. That group is responsible for the 2019 Easter attacks in the South Asian nation of Sri Lanka, which killed 268 people including five U.S. citizens, and injured over 500 others... Two days after the attacks. ISIS claimed credit for the terrorist acts, attributing the murders to “Islamic State fighters.”... The criminal case filed on Dec. 11, 2020, in the U.S. District Court in Los Angeles is the result of a nearly two-year investigation by the FBI, which assisted Sri Lankan authorities in the wake of the suicide bombings that targeted Christian churches and luxury hotels frequented by Westerners.”

This latest film by Chanel 4 is mostly an anti-Rajapaksa tirade aimed at blackening the Rajapaksa legacy from 2005 onwards and is a tissue of lies just like the previous films broadcast by the same Channel. To claim that a group of Islamic extremists launched suicide attacks in order to make me President, is absurd. Despite the politically motivated accusations being made against me by certain individuals, I have personally done everything possible to help the Roman Catholic community when I held government office. After the war ended, I helped in the restoration and reconstruction of the Madhu Church and the Church in Mullikulam. I also helped facilitate the arrangements to invite His Holiness the Pope to Sri Lanka and I headed the committee formed by the then government to organize the visit. I also played a key role in the construction of the Benedict XVI Catholic Institution of Higher Education in Bolawalana. I worked very closely with His Eminence the Cardinal during that period.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa

Seventh Executive President of Sri Lanka