

## Strategies to Face the New Threat of Terrorism

Professor Rohan Gunaratna

*Professor of Security Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*

Prof. Rohan Gunaratna, Professor of Security Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore delivered an illuminating presentation on 'Securing Sri Lanka, the Post Easter Sunday Threat Landscape' at the Defence plenary session of the International research conference 2020 of General sir John Kotelawala Defence University held on 15th October 2020.

Refereeing to the Easter Sunday attack in Sri Lanka, Prof Gunartane mentioned that "in the blink of an eye terrorists killed 267 innocent people and injured over 500 people in three hotels and three churches on Sri Lanka". He further mentioned that this attack symbolizes the threat that Sri Lanka and the region are facing today. He went on to say that today Sri Lanka is facing a much more sinister threat than the 30-year LTTE threat that was vanquished. He elaborated that while the insurgency in the North and East of the country was confined to a region, the new pace of threat is a nationwide threat considering the demography of the population from which the Islamic state continues to recruit.

Prof Gunaratna opined that we must never think of it as a one-off attack. It is not the final act of terrorism by the Islamic state in Sri Lanka. it is a persistent threat the region and the entire world is facing after the decentralization or the global expansion of the Islamic state from Iraq to Syria. He explained that it is a global extension from the loss of Iraq and Syria. Elucidating the point, Prof Gunaratna explained how Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the terrorist leader who was hiding for five years, appeared and claimed that the attack in Sri Lanka was a revenge on the loss of that large territorial state. – Saharan Hassims's devastating attack in Sri Lanka took place just one month after their main stronghold in Syria, Babu's-Selam was lost. In this backdrop, Prof Gunaratna explained the essential need for the world, region and Sri Lanka to reconfigure their military forces, law

enforcement authorities and intelligence services. Explaining that our security forces are still fighting the old war and that they are having the same old mind, Prof Gunaratna expressed the necessity of considering some new features of the currently existing and emerging threats.

Prof. Gunaratna shared five of those features so that KDU can provide the understanding and knowledge to our military, law enforcement agencies, and intelligence services without over- or under-reaction. First it is necessary to understand that the foundation or the base of the threat is religion. Elaborating the point further, he described how Muslims in Sri Lanka co-existed harmoniously with Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity for 1400 years. He explained that the beautiful form of Islam that prevailed was supplanted with a form of Islam from Pakistan and the Gulf after 1979 open economy, where other religions are not tolerated. The majority Muslims, the Sufis were ridiculed and vilified by the new strain of Muslims that came from the Middle East and from Pakistan. So, with the change of Islam, the Muslims too changed. They looked towards the East, they started to pray the way the Arabs did, they forgot their 1400-year Muslim heritage. The only way for Sri Lankan Muslims to protect themselves is to practice the beautiful form of Islam that harmoniously co-existed with Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism in Sri Lanka. That was a very moderate, tolerant form of Islam. The new form of Islam that came from Pakistan and the Gulf breaks the idles. That is why in December 2018 in Mawanella, so many Buddhist sites were attacked, and images were vandalized. So, you could see very clearly the impact of foreign intervention and of the new forms of Islam.

In this context, Prof Gunaratna highlighted the need to regulate the religious faiths and he mentioned that for this purpose, there must be a

common Muslim identity. There must be a body on top of All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, a secular body that will include a few religious leaders but largely dominated by Muslim professionals, academics, businessmen, visionaries to make sure that this foreign form of Islam called Islamism does not replace the beautiful form of Islam that existed in Sri Lanka.

Further he emphasized that if you permit Arab preachers and clerics from overseas to come and preach, they will certainly spoil the beauty and harmony of our nation. So he proposed that anyone coming from overseas need to be scrutinized, and it should be checked whether he has attacked another religion or a traditional Muslim or whether he has been very sensitive to opinions of other faiths. Tshai the first point, he said, is the regulation of the religious base.

Secondly, Prof Gunaratna pointed out the need to regulate on the countries and schools to which Sri Lankan Muslim youths go and study, and he opined that they should go more to Asian countries – to Indonesia, to Malasia and to Central Asia rather than going to the Middle East because those who go there they will bring middle eastern ideologies and propagate puritanical Islam. He expressed the idea that they should be sent to schools that produce champions of peace and not champions that advocate differences and separation.

Thirdly, he pointed out the need to develop a very strong cyber presence and the need for our military to create a cyber-directorate because Islamic state terrorists largely operate in cyber space. He expressed the opinion that we do not have real experts operating in the online domain in the security forces, police and intelligence services, and thus the need for KDU to rise to this occasion, especially under the present Vice Chancellor, to produce specialists who can counter the threat.

Fourthly, he pointed out the need to produce rehabilitation programmes and to promote moderation, toleration and coexistence in the Muslim community and between the Hindus, the

Buddhists and the Christians. He further said that we cannot allow extremist groups such as Bodu Bala Sena, Sihala Rawayaya etc. to operate. He emphasized on the need to deregister any groups registered as political parties based on religion or ethnicity. He pointed out that we should not allow anyone in robes, Muslim attire or Hindu attire to come to parliament. Supporting this point, he pointed out the need to follow the Thai constitution which does not admit religions in politics.

As the fifth point, Prof Gunaratna pointed out that our political leaders need to integrate our communities. Kaththankudi, what he called the grand zero of terrorism, has a 100% Muslim population. He stated that If Muslims are not going to mix with non-Muslims, we will have exclusivists living their own lifestyle and not as Sri Lankans. Therefore, there must be a programme to mix the communities. He mentioned that there are ten different ways to accomplish this, and he explained three ways to do so. The first way is appropriate urban and town planning to make sure that people are settled and resettled so that it will reflect harmony in the future. Secondly, he pointed out the need to have mixed schools instead of separate schools that exist today for Muslims, Tamils, Sinhalese, for Christians, Buddhists etc. Elaborating the point, he mentioned that we had many failures in the past and that is why the Easter Sunday attack happened. The expectation is that there should be a new generation of children without ethnic and religious prejudice because it is suspicion and prejudice that lead to hatred. Further he explained that fighting an Islamic state wave of terrorism is not men and women wearing black, carrying guns, breaking doors and killing and capturing people. Our armed forces will have to totally change, and regulating the religious base, having the necessary laws, maintenance of religious and ethnic harmony acts etc. need to be ensured. Anyone insulting other religions need to be arrested, Investigated, charged and prosecuted.

Prof Gunaratna speaking on our limitations, mentioned that we do not have the required cyber

capabilities. Saharan was able to meticulously plan and execute his attacks because the government of Sri Lanka, intelligence services, law enforcement agencies and the military forces did not build the core competencies to fight the modern wave of terrorism. He opined that even one year after Easter Sunday attack, we have not built these capabilities. So he appealed to the military, law enforcement agencies and intelligence service chiefs and their representatives at KDU to build these capabilities so that we will not suffer another terrorist attack.

He emphasized that this new war can only be won if the security forces are able to build the core competencies and if they have the willingness to work with religious, education and information agencies, and he emphasized that if we do not do this, we will be fighting a war for another 30 years in against Muslim extremists the same way we fought against the Tamil Tigers. Finally, he proposed to create harmony centers at provincial, district, town, and village levels and also at national level and to have harmony programmes where Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil people live together.

Prof Rohan Gunaratna concluded his presentation by paying tribute to KDU by mentioning that the Vice Chancellor of KDU is the best Vice Chancellor the country has ever produced and that KDU is the best university in the country as it is free from riots and ragging, and he expressed his opinion

that KDU could be a model for other universities in the country. Finally, he wished that KDU would soon be a globally recognized university with higher university ranking.

### Author Biography



Professor Rohan Gunaratna is a political analyst specializing in international terrorism. He is the former Head of the International Centre

for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. He served as counter terrorism instructor for GIGN, CTSO, D88, US NAVY SEALs, Swiss Federal Police, NYPD, and the Australian Federal Police, and conducted field research in conflict zones including Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Kashmir, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Colombia. Author and editor of 12 books including *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (Columbia University Press), Gunaratna is also the lead author of *Jane's Counter Terrorism*, a handbook for counter-terrorism practitioners. He also serves on the editorial boards of the journals *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* and *Terrorism and Political Violence*.