

'I had the perfect family': Woman who lost husband, kids in Sri Lanka bombings

25/04/2019 19:20 by admin

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Anusha Kumari weeps during a mass burial for her husband, two children and three siblings, all victims of Easter Sunday's bomb attacks, in Negombo. (AP/PTI)

Sri Lanka: Before the undertakers could move in, Anusha Kumari wrested herself away from her sisters and flung herself on the three coffins, wailing. In an instant, she was left childless and a widow when suicide bombers attacked churches and luxury hotels in and near Sri Lanka's capital of Colombo.

The toll was highest at St. Sebastian's Church in Negombo. Of the more than 350 people killed by the suicide bombings that the government blamed on Muslim extremists, about a third of them died at the church in the seaside fishing town while attending Easter Mass.

And perhaps no one lost more relatives than 43-year-old Kumari, whose daughter, son, husband, sister-in-law and two nieces were killed.

They were buried three days later near the church on vacant land that has quickly become a cemetery for the victims.

Kumari, who was injured from the blast, left the hospital to bury her family. Afterwards, she reclined in a cane chair at her home, hooked up to an IV dangling from an open window. Gauze bandages covered the bridge of her nose and her right eye. There was still shrapnel in her face.

A photo of her children was on the wall, while on the shelf were small statues of Jesus, Mary and St. Sebastian, an early Christian martyr riddled with wounds from Roman arrows.

She could see her son's drum kit on the upstairs landing, a gift from his father after doing well on exams, and a school portrait of her daughter. All day, relatives, neighbours and nuns wandered in and out of the large house, offering food, consolation and prayer.

Anusha Kumari holds portraits of her daughter Sajini Venura Dulakshi and son Vimukthi Tharidu Appuhami, both victims of Easter Sunday's bomb blast in Negombo. (AP)

"You won't believe it, but I had the perfect family," Kumari said. "In 24 years of marriage, my husband and I never argued. All four of us slept in the same room. Now I have lost everything."

Tears mixed with blood from her bandaged right eye.

"All these people, they have their own families. They'll go home and I'll be alone," she said.

A brother-in-law, Jude Prasad Appuhami, said his extended family, one of the oldest and most prominent in Catholic-majority Negombo, marked all the religious holidays and rituals at St. Sebastian's, a Gothic-style church patterned after Reims Cathedral in France.

On Easter, though, he wasn't in church with his 15 relatives because he had to drive a vehicle carrying a statue of Christ for a parade after Mass.

Appuhami arrived midway through the service and heard the blast from the parking lot. He rushed in and was overwhelmed by the sight of so much blood. One of his sisters-in-law, who survived, shouted for him to help their niece.

He found her with her eyes open, picked her up and rushed to the hospital, only to realize she was dead.

Appuhami's wife and 10-year-old daughter, sitting in an alcove to the left of the altar, escaped with minor injuries. His 17-year-old daughter, Rusiri, who was sitting at the front of the church because she was going to do a reading from Scripture, also survived, but she was left with nerve damage that makes eating painful.

Anusha Kumari during a mass burial for her husband, two children and three siblings, all victims of Easter Sunday bomb blast in Negombo. (AP)

On Wednesday, she struggled to grasp what she has seen.

"I don't know how to think of it. It's like a dream," she said.

During the funeral at the makeshift cemetery near St. Sebastian's, where mourners had to pass through security checks, a military drone buzzed overhead as the Rev. Niroshan Perera led prayers for the dead.

Perera, who grew up with Kumari's husband, Dulip Appuhami, and his siblings, recalled going as a boy with his friends and family to the church's well, where the faithful believed the water could cure them of diseases.

When the funeral ended, Perera encouraged everyone to go home quickly, fearing another attack.

Perera, who lost 16 relatives and friends in the blast, said he no longer trusted the Sri Lankan government to protect his flock.

- AP