

## Attack on the Scarborough Buddhist temple

**Incident:** Attack on the Scarborough Buddhist temple

**Target:** Toronto Mahaviharaya, Buddhist temple

**Location:** Scarborough, Toronto, Canada

**Date:** Saturday, 16 May 2009

**Time:** 4.30 a.m.<sup>1</sup>

### Incident

On 16 May 2009, the Toronto Mahaviharaya, a Buddhist temple in Scarborough in Toronto, Canada, was set on fire. The attack took place around 4.00am. The three resident monks who were asleep at the time of the attack, escaped unharmed. The monks and also patrons of the temple believe that the fire was the result of attack carried out by pro-LTTE Tamil groups living in Toronto.

### Target

The target of the attack was a Buddhist temple in Toronto which is patronized by Sinhalese Buddhists. In recent weeks, symbols associated with Sinhala-Buddhists from Sri Lanka have come under attack in Europe and North America in response to the escalating military operations of the Sri Lankan military against the LTTE. Bundara Seneviratne, vice president of the Toronto Buddhist Centre, said the temple has received threatening phone calls for weeks. A note posted to a door about two weeks ago referred to the ongoing Tamil protest downtown.<sup>2</sup> It is unclear if any security measures were taken at the temple, after it received these threats.

### Impact

The three resident monks at the temple escaped unharmed. However the building which housed the temple was burnt. According to fire investigators the estimated damage of the attack is about \$20-30,000.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Madaleine White, "Scarborough fire related to Sri Lankan conflict, monk says," *The Star*, 16 May 2009. Accessed at: <http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/article/635432>

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

## Group

The group responsible for setting the fire has not been identified. However it is believed that a pro-LTTE Tamil group might be responsible for the attack. According to Bundara Seneviratne, vice president of the Toronto Buddhist Centre, the temple had received threatening phone calls for several weeks prior to the attack. Furthermore, a note posted to a door about two weeks prior to the attack had referred to the ongoing protests by Tamils in Toronto.<sup>4</sup> There have also been similar attacks by suspected LTTE sympathizers in France and England. On 10 May, groups sympathetic to the LTTE attacked the Buddhist Centre at Le Bouget in Paris while on 14 May the Sri Siddhatissa International Buddhist Centre (also known as the Kingsbury Buddhist Temple in London) in the UK was attacked by suspected pro-LTTE groups.<sup>5</sup>

However, Senthana Nada, a spokesperson for the Coalition to Stop the War in Sri Lanka, denied the allegations that a Tamil group may have been responsible for the attack. He further stated that Canadian Tamils may support the LTTE as the group represents the aspirations of the Tamil people, but that the local Tamils in Toronto have solely been interested in peaceful protests and not in violence.<sup>6</sup>

## Tactic

Investigations into the fire are still ongoing but it is believed that this was arson attack. According to press reports, local police are looking at two bottles found near the door which they believe may have been filled with an accelerant.<sup>7</sup> The tactics used in the most recent attacks against the temples in Paris and London, the premises differed from this as the premises were vandalized which resulted in the breaking of windows etc. However, in January 2009, the Kingsbury Buddhist Temple in London was the target of an arson attack. Police have not made any headway in either of these attacks and no one was charged.<sup>8</sup>

## Assessment

It has not yet been confirmed whether this is in fact an incident of arson or not. However, if it is, and if the attack is linked to a pro-LTTE group, this may indicate that these groups are becoming more violent in their attacks against symbolic targets associated with Sinhalese Buddhists.

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<sup>4</sup>Madaleine White, "Scarborough fire related to Sri Lankan conflict, monk says," *The Star*, 16 May 2009. Accessed at: <http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/article/635432>

<sup>5</sup>"Suspected LTTE supporters set fire to Buddhist temple in Toronto," *The Colombo Page*, 16 May 2009. Accessed at: [http://www.colombopage.com/archive\\_091/May1242492378CH.html](http://www.colombopage.com/archive_091/May1242492378CH.html)

<sup>6</sup>Madaleine White, "Scarborough fire related to Sri Lankan conflict, monk says," *The Star*, 16 May 2009. Accessed at: <http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/article/635432>

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>Janaka Alahapperuam, "Suspected Tamil Tiger mobs repeat attack on Kingsbury Buddhist Temple," *Asian Tribune*, 14 May 2009. Accessed at: <http://www.asiantribune.com/?q=node/17510>

## **Projections**

With the military offensive against the LTTE becoming stronger in Sri Lanka, there have been continuous agitations by LTTE fronts groups in Europe and North America, calling for the international community to pressurize the Sri Lankan state to halt its military offensive. LTTE front groups have carried out protests in major cities, individuals have self immolated, as well as publicly attempted to target Sri Lankan missions in London, Oslo, Paris and the Hague in the Netherlands. There have also been a number of sporadic incidents where individuals of Sinhalese ethnicity as well as cultural symbols of the Sinhalese Buddhists such as temples have been targeted.

As said earlier the primary objective of the LTTE's international arm through the diaspora and civil society groups has been to put political pressure on the Sri Lankan government. However, other actions such as those targeting Buddhist temples and the Sinhalese individuals will do little to help the LTTE's case in the international arena. Hence, it is most likely that these attacks are the work of pro-LTTE fringe groups or individuals highly sympathetic to the LTTE, who are not necessarily acting on the directions of the LTTE.

Nonetheless, given that the LTTE has been defeated in Sri Lanka, such acts of anger and frustration by LTTE sympathizers could be expected to increase in areas with significant Sri Lankan Tamil and Sinhalese populations, such as Toronto. Hence, it might be necessary to improve security measure on other sites that are associated with Sri Lanka.