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## **From Counterterrorism to Recovery: Lessons from International Experience**

Panelists: Dr. Todd C. Helmus, Senior Behavioral Scientist, Rand Corporation;  
Mr. John T. Godfrey, Deputy Coordinator for Regional and Multilateral Affairs, Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, US State Department;  
Dr. Radhika Coomaraswamy, former Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict; and  
Dr. P. Nandalal Weerasinghe, Senior Deputy Governor, Central Bank of Sri Lanka

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Reported by Adam Collins and Malinda Meegoda \*

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## **Three key takeaways from the panel discussion titled From Counterterrorism to Recovery: Lessons from International Experience –**

- 1. The world is facing a new form of terrorism that is more nimble and diffuse than before, and is, therefore, more difficult to track and contain.**
- 2. Effective counterterrorism strategies require a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach that addresses the need to ensure security, while also protecting the rule of law, and addressing the root causes of violent extremism.**
- 3. Sri Lanka can draw lessons from the experience of other countries in addressing the evolving threat of terrorism, while also adapting policies to fit local conditions.**

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## **Introduction**

- The Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute (LKI) hosted a panel discussion titled ‘From Counterterrorism to Recovery: Lessons from International Experience’ on 10 July 2019, with the support of the US Embassy in Sri Lanka.
- The panelists were Dr. Todd C. Helmus, Senior Behavioral Scientist at the Rand Corporation; Mr. John T. Godfrey, Deputy Coordinator for Regional & Multilateral Affairs, Bureau Of Counterterrorism & Countering Violent Extremism, US State Department; Dr. Radhika Coomaraswamy, former Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict; and Dr. P. Nandalal Weerasinghe, Senior Deputy Governor, Central Bank of Sri Lanka. The discussion was moderated by Dr. Ganeshan Wignaraja, Executive Director of LKI. HE Ambassador Alaina B. Teplitz, US Ambassador to Sri Lanka and the Maldives, gave the closing remarks.
- The event was attended by over 150 people, including senior members of the diplomatic corps, senior representatives of the armed forces and police, as well as other government officials, and representatives of the media, think tanks, and the private sector.

## **Takeaways from the Discussion:**

### Strengthening Security

- New forms of terrorism as practised by ISIS have evolved from large scale, centralised and closely coordinated attacks used by Al Qaeda groups, to acts that are planned and carried by a small number of individuals, and are also more frequent. This makes them more difficult to track and contain.
- The US and North African experiences suggest that a complementary soft and hard approach is required to counter this emerging threat.
  - The hard approach should focus on strengthening conventional law enforcement, intelligence gathering, and coordination between border control agencies.

- The soft approach requires close engagement with community leaders to prevent radicalisation, mobilisation and recruitment, particularly of at-risk youth.
- This combination of approaches needs to be calibrated in such a way that minority groups feel that their best interests are accounted for.
- International experience suggests that programmes to counter violent extremism are more effective when they are conducted at the local level, particularly through civil society groups and non-governmental organisations.

### The Role of Social Media

- Following recent terrorist attacks in countries such as New Zealand, India and Sri Lanka, social media companies have become gradually more proactive at self-regulation, including removing groups and individuals propagating extremist ideology.
- Denial of access to social media, in the form of outright bans or blocks, during terror events may not be effective due to the presence of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). Furthermore, lengthy bans stifle the digital economy. Accordingly, regulation needs to be done in a limited and targeted manner consistent with democratic principles.
- In times of a terror-induced crisis, governments need to improve their mode of communication to maintain order, and to contain disinformation.
- Local capacity needs to be developed to aid individuals and institutions to judge the veracity of the information shared on social media.

### Governance

- Societies must be vigilant to ensure that democratic rights are not unnecessarily infringed upon in the name of counterterrorism. For example, the state of exception (the ability to transcend the rule of law) should not extend beyond what is needed during a crisis.
- There also needs to be a greater effort to distinguish terrorist combatants from civilians to prevent justice from being carried out arbitrarily.
- The experiences of Northern Ireland and South Africa suggest that the security aspect of counterterrorism efforts cannot operate alone. It must be accompanied by the political, economic and social policies to address the root causes of radicalisation and violent extremism.
- The key challenge is to build a greater sense of solidarity across religious and ethnic lines. This requires a fair and efficient justice system.

### Building an Economy Resilient to Shocks

- Terrorist attacks can have a significant negative impact on economic activity. For example, the 2002 bombings in Bali had a large impact on its tourism sector. The Easter Sunday attacks had a significant negative shock on the Sri Lankan economy. However,

there has been no major impact on financial markets or the government's ability to finance upcoming debt repayments.

- This kind of external shock demonstrates the importance of having business continuity plans in place to manage the immediate economic fallout. The Central Bank of Sri Lanka has maintained such plans since the bombing of its headquarters in 1996 and they are now institutionalised across the financial sector.
- It is also crucial that sufficient macroeconomic buffers are maintained to ensure fiscal and monetary policies can respond to unexpected events and ensure debt repayments.

### Implications for Sri Lanka

- Strengthening intelligence gathering, as well as procedures for sharing information, is crucial to address the evolving threat of terrorism in Sri Lanka. It should be combined with closer engagement at the community level to prevent radicalisation.
- Social media companies may need to consider allocating more resources to increase their oversight in countries like Sri Lanka, particularly in vernacular languages. Local media organisations also have an important role to play in ensuring they do not contribute to the spread of misinformation.
- Given that Sri Lanka has been reclassified as upper-middle income country, it must continue to undertake prudent macroeconomic management and gradually pursue necessary structural reforms. This will help ensure the economy is resilient to future shocks including possible terror-induced disruptions.

## Suggested Readings:

Wignaraja, G. (2019). *Five Key Policy Lessons from the Terror Attacks in Sri Lanka*. Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute. [Online] Available at: <https://www.lki.lk/blog/five-key-policy-lessons-from-the-terror-attacks-in-sri-lanka/> [Accessed 15 July 2019].

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Hussain, N. (2019). *4/21 and the Way Forward for Sri Lanka's Social Media Landscape*. Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute. [Online] Available at: <https://www.lki.lk/blog/4-21-and-the-way-forward-for-sri-lankas-social-media-landscape/> [Accessed 15 July 2019].

Helmus, T., and Klein, K. (2018). *Assessing Outcomes of Online Campaigns Countering Violent Extremism*. Rand Corporation. [Online] Available at: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2813.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2813.html) [Accessed 15 July 2019].

Collins, A. (2019). *Should Sri Lanka Stick with the IMF?* Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute. [Online] Available at: <https://www.lki.lk/blog/should-sri-lanka-stick-with-the-imf/> [Accessed 15 July 2019].

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