



## **Sri Lanka & Maldives 2016 Crime & Safety Report: Colombo**

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Theft; Hotels; Fraud; Burglary; Assault; Kidnapping; Rape/Sexual Violence; Murder; Financial Security; Religious Terrorism; Anti-American sentiment; Elections; Riots/Civil Unrest; Religious Violence; Floods; Landslides and mudslides; Employee Health Safety; Intellectual Property Rights Infringement; Drug Trafficking

South Central Asia > Maldives; South Central Asia > Maldives > Male; South Central Asia > Sri Lanka; South Central Asia > Sri Lanka > Colombo

3/30/2016

### **Overall Crime and Safety Situation**

Post Crime Rating: Medium

### **Crime Threats**

The majority of crimes against Americans and Westerners continue to be petty crime (pickpocketing, hotel room thefts, fraud, etc.); however, during 2015, an American residing in Colombo was the victim of a home-invasion robbery attempt. Suspects were arrested and face prosecution; the victim did not sustain any serious injury. This appears to have been a crime of opportunity.

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Street hustlers or “touts” are common around popular hotels, shopping areas, and other tourist sites and may be associated with petty crimes targeting foreigners.

Official statistics for 2014 indicate higher levels of serious crime in Colombo, Anuradapura, Galle, Gampha, Kalutara, Matara, Nugegoda, Ratnapura, and Tangalle (when measured by homicides investigated by the police). Within Colombo, the neighborhoods reporting higher levels of crime were: Borella, Bambalpitya, and Cinnamon Garden districts. Most violent crime occurs within the local community. In 2014, the preponderance of violent crime in Colombo involved (in order of frequency): residential break-ins and theft, stabbing, robbery, grievous assault, kidnapping, rape, sexual assault, and murder.

American businesses have reported instances of threats and intimidation over business dealings and labor disputes.

Credit/debit card fraud is a persistent threat. Several foreign nationals and organized groups have been arrested for complicity in these types of financial crimes. There have been reports of employees at reputable businesses (restaurants, chain grocery stores) wearing data skimming devices in their clothing and scanning a victim’s credit card or using other methods to steal credit card information. ATM skimming is another threat. The following websites provide more information on ATM skimming, to include photos of skimming devices:

<http://krebsonsecurity.com/2012/09/a-handy-way-to-foil-atm-skimmer-scams/>

[http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2011/july/atm\\_071411](http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2011/july/atm_071411)

<http://www.csoonline.com/article/555414/telltale-signs-of-atm-skimming>

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## Other Areas of Concern

A temporary restriction on foreigners traveling to the Northern Province was rescinded following the January 2015 presidential election, and there are no restrictions on foreigners traveling to any province in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan military checkpoints along major roads leading to the northern areas of the country have been dismantled.

Visitors should take particular care when travelling to the areas of the north and east that are former conflict zones. These areas may contain both marked and unmarked mine fields and unexploded ordinance, making travel outside of major roadways potentially dangerous.

## Transportation-Safety Situation

### Road Safety and Road Conditions

Vehicular traffic moves on the left. Traffic in urban areas is very congested. Narrow, two-lane highways combined with overloaded trucks, dangerously-driven buses, motorized trishaws (tuk-tuks), and motorbikes (and sometimes elephants, cows, ox carts, and bicycles) make driving challenging and dangerous. Despite efforts to improve them, some roads in the north and east (former conflict zones) remain in bad condition. One-way streets may not be clearly marked and occasionally change direction without notice. In 2015, the police continued efforts

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to enforce traffic laws more vigorously. Speed traps and traffic enforcement checkpoints are becoming more common.

Drivers are notoriously reckless, and vehicle accidents should be considered a principal threat for visitors. Travelers should drive defensively. In the event of an accident, crowds might gather and become aggressive, particularly if the accident involves a bus, tuk-tuk, or taxi. Many visitors opt to hire a car and driver.

### Public Transportation Conditions

Individuals choosing to hire a tuk-tuk should select one with a working meter; otherwise, it is advisable to agree on a fare beforehand to avoid arguments at the final destination.

Train travel is common and inexpensive. If using trains, visitors should keep a close watch on their possessions, especially in the economy class cars. There is a scam wherein Sri Lankans in Colombo will fill trains bound for the tourist areas and take all of the seats. They will then sell their seats to tourists and visitors for a profit and exit the train before it departs.

The Regional Security Officer (RSO) advises against the use of public buses, as they are often overcrowded, driven recklessly, and involved in serious accidents. Reports indicate a disproportionately large percentage of accidents are caused by public and private buses.

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## Terrorism Threat

Post Terrorism Rating: Medium

### Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

On May 19, 2009, the government announced that it had achieved victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE leadership did not survive the war, and there have been no terrorist attacks since 2009. Throughout its 26-year insurgency, the LTTE targeted security forces, government officials, and civilians with assassinations and suicide bombings at political rallies, government buildings, economic targets, and military installations. American citizens were never specifically targeted. In March 2014, police and local media reported the disruption of a small, pro-LTTE cell involved in spreading separatist propaganda in the Northern Province. Dozens of detentions and arrests stemmed from an incident that involved one police officer being shot by the alleged leader of the cell. The alleged cell leader and two associates were killed during a police/military manhunt near Vavuniya. Some civil society activists were arrested or detained in a crackdown that followed the investigation.

In September 2014, al-Qai'da announced the formation of a new branch, al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which could represent an elevated threat landscape in South Asia. The same month, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) released a recorded call for the killing of Americans (and Coalition members). The tape encouraged lone-offender and target-of-opportunity attacks. The transnational capabilities of select terrorist groups, ease of international travel, the availability of black-market weapons and explosives all require U.S.

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travelers to be vigilant in their personal security practices, especially at locations or venues frequented by Westerners.

In July 2015, media outlets reported the death of a Sri Lankan national in Syria by an air-strike while fighting as a member of ISIL. The media report stated this was the first known Sri Lankan to join ISIL.

In the Maldives, there has been only one recorded act of terrorism, a 2007 bombing in Sultan Park in Male that injured 12 foreign tourists. In September 2015, a small explosion occurred on the boat carrying President Yameen Abdul Gayoom. President Yameen was unhurt, but his wife and two others on the boat sustained injuries. Maldivian authorities declared that the explosion was a targeted attack on the President, but no evidence was ever released that would support the contention that the explosion was the result of an explosive device rather than an accident.

#### Anti-American/Anti-Western Sentiment

There have been no specific, credible threats (or attacks) directed against U.S. citizens or interests in Sri Lanka or the Maldives. In 2014, two Sri Lankan nationals were arrested (in India and Malaysia) amid Indian allegations that they were involved in a plot to strike U.S. or Israeli interests in southern India. In Maldives, reports have indicated a number of Maldivian nationals have traveled to Syria over the last two years to join ISIL. This could have an impact on anti-Western sentiment/activities if and when these individuals return to the Maldives.

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A significant spike in anti-U.S. protests and rhetoric coincided with the March 2014 UNHRC resolution calling for an international investigation into Sri Lanka's human rights record. Protests occurred in Colombo and in the Northern and Eastern provinces (Kilinochchi, Jaffna, Trincomalee, Muttur, Ampara). In July and August 2014, anti-U.S. protests also spiked following Israeli military action in Gaza. These demonstrations remained peaceful, though American and Israeli flags were burned on a few occasions. There were no large anti-U.S. demonstrations in Sri Lanka in 2015.

### **Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence**

Elections have been volatile periods in Sri Lanka. During the brief campaign leading to the January 8, 2015, presidential election, observers noted a spike in targeted political violence directed against opposition political figures, organizers, and supporters. Monitors tracked more than 50 acts of election-related violence, including one death. A strikingly peaceful transition followed the January 9 announcement of opposition candidate Maithripala Sirisena's victory. He was sworn in the same day without incident.

In the weeks preceding the August 2015 parliamentary elections, a similar spike in violence occurred. Notably, a drive-by shooting in Colombo targeted an opposition rally resulting in two deaths and several injured.

Post Political Violence Rating: Medium

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## Civil Unrest

Demonstrations in Colombo occur regularly. Most demonstrations are peaceful, resulting only in traffic congestion; however, some have ended in violence between the protestors and police/opposition groups. Some protests over political issues have resulted in violent clashes, gun violence, and casualties. In 2014, some demonstrations involved rock throwing, intimidation, and minor confrontations with police using water cannon and tear gas. While the majority of demonstrations are related to domestic politics, protests directed toward Western Embassies and international organizations are not uncommon. Common venues for demonstrations in Colombo are the Fort Railway Station, Viharamahadevi "Victoria" Park, Hyde Park, and surrounding junctions near Town Hall, such as Lipton Circus, Liberty Circus, and Pittala Junction.

In Maldives, the former president, Mohammed Nasheed, was arrested on terrorism-related charges in February 2015. This arrest led to a string of violent protests in Male. Later in 2015, the sitting Minister of Defense was also arrested on terrorism charges. In November 2015, President Yameen declared a 30-day state of emergency, but this declaration was rescinded after less than two weeks. Due to on-going political turmoil, there is the possibility of protest activity occurring in Male with little warning.

## Religious/Ethnic Violence

Sri Lanka is a country of 21 million residents, two national languages (Sinhala and Tamil), and four major religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity), with an approximate ethnic representation of 74 percent Sinhalese, 18 percent Tamil, 7 percent Muslim (comprised of Moor/Malay communities), 1 percent Eurasian. Ethno-religious tensions have sparked

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demonstrations and mob violence against places of worship. In June 2014, militant Buddhist monks and supporting mobs targeted Muslims in Aluthgama and Beruwala, near Bentota (southern edge of Western Province). A temporary curfew coincided with vandalism, arson, and physical attacks against Muslims (three killed) or their homes and businesses. The violence followed a rally by the militant Buddhist organization Bodu Bala Sena, which was reportedly prompted by an assault against a monk by Muslim youths days earlier. Places of worship, to include evangelical Christian churches and mosques, have been the target of lesser forms of harassment and intimidation.

## Post-specific Concerns

### Environmental Hazards

Each year, Sri Lanka is affected by severe flooding brought on by the northeast monsoon (October-December) and the southwest monsoon (May-July). The heavy rains can be unpredictable and do impact the hill country in the central regions. With road development and soil erosion, landslides are a concern.

In October 2014, a landslide destroyed approximately 65 homes in the Baddula district; at least six people were killed, and thousands were affected by flooding.

After three years of erratic weather that included periods of droughts and heavy rains, in December 2014, severe flooding affected 22 districts, destroyed approximately 6,400 homes, and killed 38 people.

Landslides may block roads including some of the major highways. Travelers should pay close attention to local news reporting and heed advice from the local government during

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adverse weather.

### Critical Infrastructure Concerns

Approximately 50 fatal industrial accidents and about 3,000 non-fatal accidents are reported annually. These were only reported figures; a large number of accidents are not reported. Approximately 60-70 percent of the industrial accidents were due to technological and mechanical defects (unsuitable machinery to fit the physical make up of Sri Lankans, defective parts, unguarded machines, damaged electrical cables, worn-out hoisting ropes etc.), while 30-40 percent are due to unsafe behavior. The boom in construction since the end of the war has contributed to a great number of construction-related accidents resulting in death or serious injury.

### Economic Espionage/Intellectual Property Thefts

Reports of economic espionage are rare; however, thefts of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) are a much larger problem. Piracy of sound recordings, movies, and software is widespread. Local agents of well-known U.S. and international companies representing recording, software, movie, clothing, and consumer product industries have complained that a lack of IPR protection is damaging to their business. Sri Lanka is a party to intellectual property agreements with the U.S. and the World Trade Organization. Infringement of IPR is a punishable offense under both criminal and civil law; however, enforcement remains a significant problem. Police occasionally raid counterfeit sellers, including counterfeit garment sellers, though it is rare for the police to act without a formal complaint and assistance from an aggrieved party.

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## Privacy Concerns

Privacy-related concerns involving Americans have been low. There have been few reported incidents of increased scrutiny or harassment of some Western travelers associated with civil society outreach or NGO activities.

## Personnel-Background Concerns

In recent years, media, police, and diplomatic reporting indicates that sexual crimes against women, including Western women, is a rising concern. While most reported incidents involved non-physical acts ("cat calls," leers, verbal harassment), there have been several serious incidents ranging from threats of sexual violence to groping and rape. Some incidents involved the surreptitious spiking of drinks. Western women have been targeted with varied levels of harassment/assaults at night clubs, hotels, and to a lesser degree on streets in Colombo. Incidents have also occurred at tourist beaches and smaller hotels in the Southern province. Sporting events can also be hostile or uncomfortable environments for foreign women, especially in economy seating areas. Several incidents involved suspects/aggressors associated with the politically-connected class, and some perceived to have a level of impunity. Women should be vigilant and use caution.

## Drug-related Crimes

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Sri Lanka has a small, but ever increasing, drug problem. The government remains committed to targeting drug traffickers and implementing nationwide demand reduction programs. Sri Lanka is not a significant producer of narcotics or precursor chemicals, but it is playing an increasing role as a transshipment route for heroin from Pakistan, India, and other locations. A 2013 seizure of 250kg of heroin (valued at approximately US\$19 million) at the Port of Colombo was unprecedented, and law enforcement disruption efforts continued a steady rate in 2014. Officials are addressing a modest upsurge in consumption of heroin, cannabis, and ecstasy. Penalties for illegal drug use and trafficking are severe up to and including death.

## Kidnapping Threat

Kidnappings occur infrequently and mainly within the local community. The motive is usually political or business-related rather than an organized kidnap-and-ransom enterprise. Victims and victims' families have also blamed kidnappings on security services (extrajudicial detentions or arrests, known as "white van" kidnappings). No American citizens have been victims of kidnapping.

## Police Response

Although allegations of corruption and politicization of security services has been commonplace, the Sri Lanka Police Service (SLPS) is becoming increasingly professional, specifically in their specialized units. However, police officers often lack resources/training, especially at the lower ranks. The RSO is aware of some instances where victims of a crime had to provide transportation for the police to respond to the crime scene and other incidents

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involving Americans that were not handled competently. There can be problems with communication, as police do not always speak English well. Response time varies and can be lengthy depending on the type of incident; police response to traffic-related incidents can be inefficient.

### How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

In cases of police detention or harassment, American citizens should attempt to take note of the badge numbers of the officers involved and notify the American Citizen Services (ACS) section of the Embassy as soon as possible. If detained by police, notify the Embassy as soon as possible. In some cases, the police have detained third-country nationals of Sri Lankan origin for extended periods and without consular notification. However, U.S. citizens of Sri Lankan origin have not reported encountering this problem. The ACS section of the Embassy can be contacted during business hours at (94) 11-249-8686 or via email at [ColomboACS@state.gov](mailto:ColomboACS@state.gov). After hours, please contact the Embassy duty officer at (94) 11-077-725-6307.

### Crime Victim Assistance

The emergency response line in Sri Lanka is 119. An additional police emergency line for Colombo is (94) 11-243-3333. Although emergency services personnel answer the number 24-hours a day, police responsiveness may vary.

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In Maldives, law enforcement assistance can be obtained by contacting the Maldives Police Service at 960-332-2111.

If you are the victim of a crime (including the loss or theft of a U.S. passport), you should contact the local police and the American Citizen Services section of the U.S. Embassy. For example, the Embassy staff can help you find appropriate medical care, contact family members/friends, and explain how funds may be transferred. Although the investigation and prosecution of the crime are solely the responsibility of local authorities, consular officers can help you to understand the local criminal justice process and how to find an attorney if needed.

#### Police/Security Agencies

The Sri Lanka Police Service (SLPS) fell under the Ministry of Defense. In 2013, it was moved to a new Ministry of Law and Order. Following the January 2015 presidential election, the SLPS shifted to the Ministry of "Public Order, Disaster Management, and Christian Affairs", which was subsequently renamed the Ministry of "Public Order and Southern Development." Through the Inspector General of Police, the SLPS report to the Additional Secretary for Public Order. The SLPS is comprised of approximately 60 functional divisions. The primary divisions and their purposes are as follows:

Inspector General of Police: The senior-most police official

Senior Deputy Inspectors General: One S/DIG is assigned to each of nine "ranges" to serve as the senior law enforcement official for each province

Criminal Investigation Division (CID): Serious and complex criminal investigations,

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country-wide jurisdiction

Police Narcotics Bureau (PNB): Illicit narcotics investigations and demand reduction activities

Special Task Force (STF): Elite police paramilitary unit, Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD), protective security, special weapons and tactics

Special Protection Range - President's Security Division / Prime Minister Security Division / Ministerial Security Division/ Judicial Security Division / Diplomatic Security Division: each specializes in protective duties

Terrorist Investigation Unit (TID): Terrorism investigations

The Maldives Police Service (MPS) was established under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Home Affairs in September 2004 with a limited number of officers. MPS is comprised of approximately 3,000 personnel stationed at their headquarters in Male and in 77 police stations across the archipelago. Some of the primary directorates or commands include:

Commissioner of Police: The senior-most police official

Professional Standards Command: Internal investigations

Central Operations Command: Male and Hulhumale city police

Divisional Operation Commands: Police presence in approximate 20 atolls

Crime Investigations: Drug enforcement, serious and organized crime, family and child protection, economic crime

Internal Security Command: Marine police, specialist and custodial operations

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Intelligence Directorate: Primary intelligence and counterterrorism department

## **Medical Emergencies**

### Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

#### Colombo

The Central Hospital: (94-11) 466-5500

Lanka Hospital: (94-11) 453-0000

Nawaloka Hospital: (94-11) 557-7111, 557-7208

National Hospital: (94-11) 269-1111

#### Galle/Karapitiya

Teaching Hospital (94) 91-223-2176, 223-2250

#### Trincomalee

General Hospital: (94) 26-222-4021, 222-2260

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Jaffna

Northern Central Hospital: (94) 21-221 9988

Teaching Hospital: (94) 21-222-2261, 222-7351

Male, Maldives

ADK (960) 331-3553

50-bed private hospital

Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital (960) 333-5335

250-bed government hospital

Available Air Ambulance Services

Pacific Flight Services, Singapore, (65) 648-3756: Pacific Flight Services owns two Lear jets and contracts with specialty medical teams in Singapore to respond to medical emergencies. Pacific Flight Services has a 24-hour call center.

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International SOS, Singapore, (65) 63-387-800: International SOS does not own any planes but contracts with other companies for the use of planes. The company has its own medical teams and a 24-hour call center.

### Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

For additional information on vaccines and health guidance, please visit the CDC at:  
[http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/sri-lanka?s\\_cid=ncezid-dgmq-travel-single-001](http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/sri-lanka?s_cid=ncezid-dgmq-travel-single-001) and  
[http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/maldives?s\\_cid=ncezid-dgmq-travel-single-001](http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/maldives?s_cid=ncezid-dgmq-travel-single-001).

### OSAC Country Council Information

RSO Colombo started a Sri Lanka OSAC Country Council in early 2012. The Council meets quarterly. The RSO has also created an OSAC Colombo Google Group to share information of a security nature with the group. If you are interested in joining Colombo's Country Council, please email [DS\\_RSO\\_COLOMBO@state.gov](mailto:DS_RSO_COLOMBO@state.gov). To reach OSAC's South and Central Asia team, please email [OSACSCA@state.gov](mailto:OSACSCA@state.gov).

### U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

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## Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

Embassy Address: 210 Galle Road, Colombo 3, Sri Lanka

Embassy working hours: 8:00 AM-5:30 PM, Mon-Thurs, and 8:00 AM-12:00 PM Fri

## Embassy Contact Numbers

U.S. Embassy Switchboard: (94) 11-249-8500

U.S. Embassy after hours: Marine Security Guard Post One: (94) 11-249-8888

Embassy Duty Officer: (94) 11-077-725-6307

Consular Section, American Citizen Services (Business Hours Only): (94) 11-249-8686

Regional Security Office: (94) 11-249-8738

RSO email: DS\_RSO\_COLOMBO@state.gov

Website: <http://srilanka.usembassy.gov/>

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Consular coverage for multi-post countries

The ACS Unit provides services to United States citizens visiting and residing in Sri Lanka and Maldives.

Nearby Posts

Virtual Post Presence Maldives: <http://maldives.usvpp.gov/>

Embassy Guidance

Register with the Embassy in person or online at <http://srilanka.usembassy.gov/registration.html>

## **Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim**

Scams

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Beware of tuk-tuk or taxi drivers offering “special” tours or access to festivals or gem shops. These are scams.

### Situational Awareness Best Practices

Keep a low profile and avoid obvious displays of wealth or national origin. Avoid carrying large amounts of cash, credit cards, or important documents. Carry a passport copy rather than the original and leave an itinerary with someone you trust. Avoid setting consistent patterns in your activities.

Travelers, especially women, should consider travelling with other people when possible and be particularly vigilant when traveling in areas not usually frequented by tourists. Walking in isolated areas alone should be avoided. Female travelers should remain vigilant in their personal security practices, especially at night.

If staying in a hotel, lock valuables in the hotel safe. There have been reports of thefts from many large hotels. While in hotels, lodges, or guest houses make sure to lock all locks on your doors and windows.

Avoid demonstrations and large gatherings of people. Keep the phone number of the U.S. Embassy and Embassy Duty Officer with you in the event assistance is required.

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Visitors are encouraged to use cash for routine transactions when possible. If a credit card is used, travelers should pay close attention to ensure it is not copied or photographed. Avoid using credit cards, especially if it involves the card being taken out of view. If you use an ATM, be on the lookout for skimming devices. Cover keypads with your hand. Monitor your accounts regularly and consider enrolling in online account monitoring.

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