
Kandy sans Tigers ready for Buddhist festival

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Rahul DassKANDY: The famous 17th century Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic is breathing easy for the first time in many years ahead of a pageant that draws hundreds of thousands of people to this sacred Buddhist town. For, the Tamil Tigers lie vanquished. "We are expecting nearly double the number of visitors to the annual pageant as the security has improved vastly following the defeat of the Tamil Tigers," said Pradeep Nilanga Dela, chief custodian of the shrine known as Sri Dalada Maligawa.

"Till last year we used to have about 250,000 visitors from all over the world for the pageant, but this year we hope to receive nearly 500,000 visitors." The event, known as the Esala Pehera, is one of Asia's most colourful. This year it will begin July 22 and end Aug 6 in Kandy, about 130 km from the capital Colombo. The temple had borne the brunt of a suicide attack by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) Jan 25, 1998. Parts of the temple - originally built under Kandyan kings - were destroyed and the roof was blown off. However, the sanctum sanctorum, where a relic believed to be the left upper canine tooth of Lord Buddha is kept, escaped unharmed. But Dela said the security situation has improved vastly after the crushing defeat of the LTTE in May this year. "We have reviewed the security of the temple and the security detail has been brought down. In the coming months, we will be monitoring the situation and security measures can be brought down further depending on the situation. "However, certain minimum standards of security have to be always maintained since the extremely important Buddha's tooth relic is housed here. We have safety measures in place for that," Dela told a group of journalists from India. According to legend, the tooth - from which the temple derives its name - was taken from the Buddha as he lay on his funeral pyre. It was smuggled to Sri Lanka in 313 AD from India. The colonial wars against the Portuguese and Dutch left it badly damaged. The original wooden structures were later replaced with stone. The temple receives nearly 10,000 visitors every day, but the numbers swell during the pageant when a replica of the relic casket is taken out in a procession. Colourfully dressed dancers, drummers and decorated elephants make it an event to remember. D.G.J.C. Gunasekara, a visitor who had come from Colombo, said he feels a lot safer now that the LTTE has been decimated. "I have come here with my wife. We feel that it is much better now."

W.A. Nihal Perera, 65, a taxi driver, said it was time for people to visit Kandy in large numbers. "Yes, it is very much safe. You can also go to Jaffna."

Pressed further, he says with a toothy smile: "No problem. LTTE is gone. What fear?" IANS (Rahul Dass can be contacted at rahul.d@ians.in) Courtesy: expressbuzz.com