

# IPRI Conflict Weekly

Research | Review | Forecast

*A brief review of conflict and peace processes across the world*

IPRI Conflict Weekly #62, 18 March 2021, Vol.2, No.11

## Gender Protests in Australia, Expanding Violence in Myanmar and Anti-protests bill in the UK

Avishka Ashok, Aparupa Bhattacharjee and Sourina Bej



Australian women assemble in thousands to protest against sexual violence and demand the removal of perpetrators (Image Source: NYT)

### Australia: Women fight against sexual violence

#### In the news

On 15 March, close to 80,000 people participated in the March4Justice protests, which took shape in 40 local events spread across Australia. The organization urged the public to sign a petition which demands four actions from the government: independent and timely investigation into all cases of gendered violence; complete execution of all recommendations in the Australian Human Rights Commission's Respect at Work report; lift public funding for addressing gendered violence; and enactment of a federal gender equality act that will audit parliamentary practices.



On 14 March, over 5000 women participated in the protests in Perth. Besides, Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Darwin, Adelaide, Hobart, Talbot and Wollongong also saw thousands of people protesting against the persistent sexual violence and inequality meted out to women and girls. They also demanded the dismissal of the perpetrators from Parliamentary positions. Brittany Higgins, the first plaintiff, also delivered a speech in Canberra and said, "We fundamentally recognize the system is broken, the glass ceiling is still in place, and there are significant failings in the power structures within our institution."

### Issues at large

First, the trigger behind the protests. Brittany Higgins, a former liberal-party political advisor, filed a complaint against a colleague who raped her while she was unconscious after being inebriated. She also spoke about how she was silenced, and the incident was covered up in the days to come when she tried to raise the alarm at her workplace. In the days after Higgins' complaint, three other women also raised their voice against the same individual. This triggered a movement of numerous women standing up to express their experiences in Australian schools, workplaces and social settings where they suffered sexual abuse. The recent protests are a reaction to the continued mistreatment of women and the government's inadequate response towards women who complained about sexual abuse.

Second, the dismissal of the case by the government. Even when women like Brittany Higgins come forward and talk about abuse, society tries to silence their voices to protect their interests. Higgins' initial complaints were ignored by the current Defence Minister, Linda Reynolds, who called her a "lying cow" in the wake of her revelation. The identity of the accused individual still remains to be unknown and is being protected by the media companies and former workplaces. When less than 10 per cent of the victims of sexual abuse worldwide seek legal assistance, the Australian government sends a dangerous signal to the perpetrators of crimes against women by their actions.

Third, Australia's worsening gender gap. According to the World Economic Forum, Australia ranked 15 in 2006 on the Global Gender Gap Index. In a matter of a decade, the rank plunged to 44 in 2020. Australia ranks 57 with regards to the political representation of women and 49 on the economic participation gap. Despite being in an equal league as other western countries in terms of infrastructure development and economic progress, Australia has been continually falling back on gender equality goals.

### In perspective

The March4Justice calls for a cultural change in the values and behaviour of society. Despite immense anger, instantaneous changes are hard to come by because of the patriarchal society. The Parliament's lackadaisical approach and reluctance to react strongly on the matter reaffirms the fundamental discrimination towards women in political and social institutions, which create a hostile, dangerous and unfriendly environment for women everywhere.



## Myanmar: Protests escalate and expand to include Chinese targets

### In the news

On 16 March, the Myanmar government sentenced ten civil servants to prison for joining the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). On the same day, the State Administrative Council (SAC) threatened pro-democracy protestors with the death penalty in townships under martial law.

On 14 March, a clampdown by the security forces killed more than 39 people, marking it the deadliest since the coup. The escalated violence has resulted in total fatalities of more than 200 as of 17 March. On 14 March, according to South China Morning Post, more than 32 Chinese owned factories in Yangon were put on fire by a group of protestors. On the same day, two factories run by Japanese retailers were set ablaze along with many hotels and restaurants that are owned by the Chinese. Given the current scenario, on 16 March, the Chinese State Council's state-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission ordered their state-owned enterprises in Myanmar to evacuate staff.

### Issues at large

First, the escalation of violence and strong resolve of the protestors. Despite the increasing numbers of fatalities and detentions, the protests seem to be escalating in both determination and dimension. According to the Irrawaddy, more than 600 police officers and several more fire officials have joined the protest. Along with the police officials, artists, media persons, students, trade unions, and farmers across the country have joined the movement. Protests have now been referred to as the spring revolution. To worsen the situation, the ethnic armed forces such as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) have renewed the fight against the Tatmadaw after a temporary truce due to the ongoing pandemic. Protestors are cautious and coordinated while protesting in comparison to the early weeks in February.

Second, the tensions between the Burmese and Chinese, despite the bonhomie at the governmental level. The tension between the local and the Chinese residing in Myanmar has been a source of conflict even before independence in 1948. The situation worsened with growing Chinese investments across the country since 2000 for three reasons: they were joint ventures along with the Myanmar military personnel; they only recruited local Chinese and brought their Chinese staff; and, they have shown no regards for the impact on the local environment and inhabitants. This persisting anti-Chinese sentiment flared up recently due to China's pro-military regime position in the UNSC and other forums. This could be a reason for the attacks on the Chinese factories, hotels and restaurants.

### In perspective

First, the growing anti-China sentiments could have a larger impact internally. There are more than 1.6 million Chinese residing in Myanmar. Since the 2015 election, internal political improvement has attracted an influx of Chinese into the country. There were anti-Chinese riots



in the past and during the 1930s and later in 1967; there were several deaths and injuries in these riots.

Second, in the coming months, Tatmadaw may have to deal with another trouble with the KIA. Besides the KIA, several ethnic armed groups are at loggerhead with the Myanmar military. The resurgence of these conflicts, along with the pro-democracy protests, will be double trouble for the regime.

## The UK: Restrictive anti protest bill passes second reading in Westminster

### In the news

On 16 March, the conservative government of the UK passed in its second parliamentary reading, the Police, Crime, Sentencing, and Courts bill. Also termed as the anti-protest bill, the proposed legislation aims to restrict groups to come together in large numbers and nosily protest in England and Wales. In the second reading, the first chance MPs get to vote on a proposed law; the bill was passed by 359 votes to 263. Since its introduction, the bill has come under heavy public criticism.

On 13 March, amid the criticisms against the bill, clashes between the police and the mourners at a vigil took place that led the British government to call for an investigation. The mourners assembled in a protest held in memory of Sarah Everard, a 33-year-old woman who went missing earlier this month and was allegedly murdered by a police officer of that same police force. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner said on 14 March, that she is "more determined" than ever to lead the organization, and is not considering resigning.

### Issues at large

First, the rationale and fallouts of the bill. The bill gives police the power to impose severe restrictions on protests if they suspect that the protestors "may cause serious disruption to the activities of an organization" or could cause "serious unease, alarm or distress" to a passer-by. This would eventually mean that every protest outside Parliament or anywhere in the country could come under restrictions. The bill also gives the Home Secretary the power to change the legal meaning of the term "serious disruption" by a statutory instrument, effectively sidestepping the Parliament. In the future, if the Home Secretary or one of her successors decides that a protest was illegal, they could unilaterally change the law.

Second, protests as a norm and the State's restrictive pushback in controlling the street disorder. From climate protest such as the Extinction Rebellion, Black Lives Matter (BLM) to anti-lockdown protests, the UK has experienced since 2020. While the protests have created space for assembly and expression, the BLM protest chose to attack systemic racism and shun white colonial history. Also, the protests during the COVID-19 pandemic saw street disorders and damage to colonial-era statues. Over the last year, the Conservative MPs have also spoken about this one-sided expression of civil liberties and free speech. Moreover, the decision to



pass the anti-protest bill had finally begun. The MPs have recalled that the public order legislation of 1986 is no longer fit to manage today's protests like that of BLM and Extinction Rebellion. The new bill will restrict the protestors' voices and make defacing statues and monuments punishable by up to 10 years in jail.

### In perspective

The proposed bill comes amid the second wave of COVID-19 cases, and any violation of the lockdown norms has become a concern for the State. The past protests have violated the COVID-time restrictions, and less power to the police had made them ineffective to control any acts of violation. Thus, the bill, by premising itself on ensuring public safety, has sought to provide a positive. Unilateral power to any security force, without a check mechanism, could often rob the expressive public space within a liberal democracy. One must be wary of how delicate the boundaries are in civil society and state relations.



## Also, from around the world

By Apoorva Sudhakar and Abigail Miriam Fernandez

### Peace and Conflict from East and Southeast Asia

#### Hong Kong: China passes resolution to ensure patriots' rule

On 11 March, China held the annual meetings of the National People's Congress (NPC), and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), commonly known as the Two Sessions. During the two sessions, a resolution to ensure that "patriots" rule Hong Kong was passed thereby ensuring more control over the city to Beijing. China saw the measure as a requisite to establish "democracy with Hong Kong characteristics." Following this, from 15 March to 17 March, symposiums and interviews were held in Hong Kong wherein officials from Beijing reiterated their commitment to the "One Country, Two Systems" principle.

#### Hong Kong: Less than ten police officers resign after refusing to pledge allegiance to Basic Law

On 15 March, Global Times quoted a Hong Kong daily reported that less than 10 police officers had resigned after they refused to pledge allegiance to the Basic Law, which is a mini-Constitution of the city. However, in an interview with the South China Morning Post, the Assistant Commissioner of Police said their resignation was no loss. He said, "It is not a pity at all. If they do not identify with the Hong Kong police or the government, their departures might be good for the force, the administration or even themselves."

#### Japan: Ten years of Fukushima disaster observed

On 11 March, Japan observed the tenth anniversary of the Fukushima earthquake and tsunami, which led to the nuclear disaster at the Daiichi Nuclear Plant in 2011. The Japanese Emperor Naruhito and Prime Minister Suga led a memorial in Tokyo and held a moment of silence at 1446 hours local time, the exact time at which a 9.1 magnitude earthquake had struck a decade back. The disaster led to more than 18,000 deaths and left nearly half a million people displaced.

#### Taiwan: The US approves export of sensitive technology, says Defence Minister

On 17 March, the Taiwanese Defence Minister said it had strengthened its deployments, especially on Itu Aba, Taiwan's main island in the South China Sea. He explained that Taiwan was preparing itself due to China's "expansionism." Further, he also said that the US had "approved the export of sensitive technology to equip Taiwan's new submarine fleet."

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### Peace and Conflict from South Asia

#### Sri Lanka: Government to ban the burqa and close 1,000 madrassas citing national security

On 13 March, Public Security Minister Sarath Weerasekara stated that the government would soon ban the burqa and close more than 1,000 madrassas, citing national security. The minister has signed off on the proposal which now requires cabinet and parliamentary approval. He said that the burqa "is something that directly affects our national security... this came to Sri Lanka only recently. It is a symbol of their religious extremism." On 16 March, a government spokesman stated that the ban was a serious decision requiring consultation and consensus and



that it would take time to consider the matter. which a top security official called a sign of “religious extremism.”

### **Sri Lanka: Government asks Amazon not to sell not sell flag-themed items**

On 14 March, Sri Lanka asked Amazon to take down clothes and doormats featuring the nation's flag from its site with the Sri Lankan Embassy in China issuing a statement saying, "The company which marketed the product on Amazon was requested by a letter from the embassy to immediately cease selling the doormats and any such products, misusing the Sri Lanka flag." This came two days after authorities raised concern against such Chinese-made products.

### **India: MHA cautions Northeast against a possible influx of refugees from Myanmar**

On 12 March, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) issued a word of caution to the four Northeast states of Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh to take appropriate action and maintain strict vigil at the borders. An official from the ministry said, "The states have been spoken to and written communication was also sent earlier addressed to chief secretaries of the concerned states in this regard. While we are seized of the situation unfolding in Myanmar, we cannot allow all and sundry to enter the country. The states have been advised to deal with the issue on a case-to-case basis."

### **Nepal: President calls for an all-party meeting**

On 16 March, the President of Nepal Bidya Devi Bhandari called an all-party meeting to discuss contemporary issues amid the ongoing political crisis in the country. Former premiers Baburam Bhattarai, Madhav Kumar Nepal and Jhala Nath Khanal boycotted the meeting, questioning her part in the nullification of the Nepal Communist Party (NCP).

### **Pakistan: Government orders inquiry into 'objectionable activities' during Aurat March 2021**

On 14 March, the Federal Minister for Religious Affairs stated that the government had ordered a probe into the issue of raising blasphemous slogans and display of objectionable banners during the Aurat March on 8 March. The minister said, "Whosoever is involved in the activity will be exposed and punished according to the law," adding that those responsible for photo-shopped banners on social media will also be taken to task. Previously, a video was posted on Facebook and Twitter which showed women chanting blasphemous slogans during the women's day march in Pakistan.

### **Afghanistan: Moscow conference set to boost the Doha peace talks**

On 17 March, Abdullah Abdullah, head of the High Council for National Reconciliation along with his 12-member delegation of political leaders and peace negotiators, left Kabul to attend the Moscow conference. A statement issued by Abdullah's office said, "We strongly believe that Moscow conference will boost the Doha peace talks and the upcoming Turkey conference on Afghanistan." Further, the US Department of State confirmed that the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad would also be attending the conference. The Moscow Conference scheduled for 18 March comes amid new developments in the reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan.



## Peace and Conflict from Central Asia, Middle East and Africa

### Armenia: Opposition demands end to martial law

On 15 March, opposition factions called on the government to end the martial law which had been implemented during the war with Azerbaijan in September 2020. A member of the opposition party, Prosperous Armenia said that the martial law "does not correspond to the current situation and is a serious obstacle to political developments." Another lawmaker said the Parliament could not initiate a no-confidence motion under the law. The opposition opined that martial law was in place now only for political purposes amid calls for the Prime Minister's resignation.

### Syria: 15 March marks ten years since uprising; UN calls for an end to war

On 15 March, Syria marked ten years of popular uprisings which demanded democracy and an end to President Bashar al-Assad's government; and later spiralled into a civil war. The war resulted in the displacement of more than 20 million people, including five million who fled to other countries, and around 400,000 deaths. The UN Special Envoy to Syria urged actors in the war to grab the window of opportunity to cease fighting. He cited an "unprecedented lull in the conflict" for the first time in 10 years, which could create an opportunity.

### Yemen: Blinken expresses concern over the humanitarian crisis

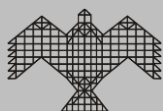
On 14 March, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with UN Special Envoy to Yemen Martin Griffiths and expressed his concern over the conflict in Yemen and the humanitarian crisis. The US Office of the Spokesperson said that Blinken had reiterated the US support for "a unified, stable Yemen free from foreign influence" and also conveyed that "there is no military solution to the conflict."

### Yemen: Fire in detention camp was caused by Houthis, says HRW

On 16 March, the Human Rights Watch said the fire in an immigration detention camp in Sanaa on 7 March was caused by unidentified projectiles launched by the Houthis, which killed nearly 60 people and injured more than 170. According to the witnesses that HRW quoted, "The migrants said the first projectile produced a lot of smoke and made their eyes water and sting. The second, which the migrants called a 'bomb', exploded loudly and started a fire." However, the Houthi spokesperson asked the HRW not to politicize or exploit the issue. He said, "The incident that took place was a normal result that occurs in similar incidents all over the world."

### Libya: Interim PM Dbeibah sworn-in

On 15 March, newly-elected interim Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah was sworn in, who will lead the country to elections in December. His appointment has been seen as historic as this is the first time a united government has been formed after the civil war broke out in 2014. He said, "This will be the government of all Libyans...Libya is one and united."





### **Niger: At least 58 killed in attack near Mali border**

On 15 March, unidentified armed men killed 58 people and injured one person, who was returning from the market, near the Mali border. No group has claimed responsibility for the attack; the government, meanwhile, asked the people to stay vigilant and has promised to relentlessly fight the criminality. On 17 March, UNICEF condemned the attack and said, "Six of the victims were children aged 11 to 17."

### **Mali: At least 33 soldiers killed in attack on a military post**

On 17 March, the army said at least 33 soldiers had been killed and 14 wounded in an attack on a military post by nearly 100 assailants near the country's border with Niger and Burkina Faso. The army said 20 of the assailants had also been killed. The army stressed on "the necessity of strengthening the fight against terrorism." Meanwhile, no group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

### **Nigeria: State Governor says abducted students are safe**

On 16 March, Aljazeera interviewed the Governor of Kaduna state, from where 39 college students were abducted on 11 March. The Governor said the students were safe and healthy but conveyed that the government was not willing to negotiate with the kidnappers this time and ruled out paying ransoms. He said, "We are now involved in a waiting game." He justified the government's decision: "The fact that you are carrying an AK-47 does not give you the platform to negotiate because if we do that, then we'll have to negotiate with every criminal in Nigeria and grant him or her amnesty."

### **Mozambique: Save the Children report reveals the beheadings of children as young as 11**

On 16 March, Save the Children said, "Children as young as 11 are being beheaded" in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province. Militants having links with the Islamic State are suspected to be carrying out the attacks. The report by Save the Children included witness accounts wherein mothers testified to the fact that their children, aged 11 or 12, had been killed by the Islamist militants. Currently, as many as 670,000 people have been displaced by the conflict in the province.

## Peace and Conflict from Europe and the Americas

### **Europe: WHO asks countries to continue using AstraZeneca**

On 17 March, the World Health Organization experts urged countries to continue using the AstraZeneca vaccine, however, saying that they were looking into the jab's safety after numerous countries suspended its use over health fears. Similarly, Europe's medicines control issued a statement saying, "At this time, WHO considers that the benefits of the AstraZeneca vaccine outweigh its risks and recommends that vaccinations continue." Previously, more than 10 European nations, including Germany, France, and Italy suspended the use of the vaccine over the reports that some people have suffered serious blood clotting issues.



### **Brexit: EU to take legal action against the UK over alleged Northern Ireland protocol breach**

On 15 March, the European Union began legal action against the United Kingdom over its alleged breach of the Northern Ireland Protocol by sending two formal letters. The letters said, "the UK must stop acting unilaterally and stop violating the rules it has signed up to." It added, "What we need to implement the protocol is mutual trust, and this kind of unilateral action that we see from the UK does not build trust." However, responding to the issue, the UK said that changing the duration of the grace period was "temporary", "lawful", and "part of a progressive and good faith implementation" of the Northern Ireland protocol.

### **The US: Surge in migrant children along the southwestern border**

On 16 March, the Homeland Security Secretary stated the border remains closed to most asylum seekers as the US processes the growing number of unaccompanied child migrants at the US-Mexico border. According to the BBC, the US is bracing for a 20-year high in numbers of migrants arriving at the southern border, including thousands of children who are being kept in government-run detention facilities. As of 14 March, the US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) agents were holding more than 13,000 unaccompanied children, mostly from Central America in custody.

### **The US: Derek Chauvin's lawyer seeks delay in the trial**

On 15 March, the lawyer for Derek Chauvin asked the judge to delay the trial and move it outside of the city after expressing concern that the City of Minneapolis's USD 27 million settlement with the family of George Floyd last week will tarnish his client. Further, concerning the jury, two jurors were dismissed on 17 March after they said news of a USD 27 million settlement with Floyd's family meant they could no longer be impartial. Meanwhile, Hennepin County District Court Judge stated plans of re-interviewing the remain seven of the nine jurors on the same matter.

### **Bolivia: Former interim president arrested amid the rise in political tensions**

On 13 March, Former Bolivian interim President Jeanine Áñez was arrested on 'terrorism,' 'conspiracy' and 'sedition' charges over the government's claims of a coup attempt against Evo Morales. The arrests took place after the Attorney General's Office issued arrest warrants the previous day against Áñez and five ministers from her former cabinet. In response, Áñez said, "In an act of abuse and political persecution the MAS [Movement Towards Socialism] government has ordered my arrest," adding, "It is accusing me of having participated in a coup that never happened. My prayers for Bolivia and for all Bolivians."



### Argentina: President attacked while visiting areas devastated by Patagonia forest fires

On 13 March, a group of protesters attacked the minibus carrying President Alberto Fernandez as he left a community centre in the town of Lago Puelo in southern Patagonia. Following the incident, Fernandez via Twitter said he is "sure that this violence is not shared by the Chubut people and by those who inhabit our beloved Argentina." The protesters are said to have attacked the vehicle to display their anger about mining projects in Chubut province being pushed forward by the local Governor Mariano Arcioni, who Fernandez supports.

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#### About the authors

Aparupa Bhattacharjee, Avishka Ashok, Apoorva Sudhakar, and Abigail Miriam Fernandez are PhD Scholar, Research Assistant, and Project Assistants at the School of Conflict and Security Studies, NIAS. Sourina Bej is an independent scholar based in West Bengal



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The International Peace Research Initiative (IPRI) is part of the Conflict Resolution and Peace Research Programme at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS).


The IPRI undertakes research on varied issues affecting a peace process and conflict regions every year. The research by IPRI is regularly published as issue briefs and analyses looking at larger trends in contemporary conflict regions in the world.

As part of its capacity building activities, the IPRI organizes Peace Lectures of eminent academicians, leaders and advocates of peace. The Young-IPRI platform is a network of young scholars working on peace initiatives and conflict resolution programmes across South Asia.

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