

Conflict Weekly

An initiative by NIAS-IPRI and KAS India Office

A brief review of conflict and peace processes across the world

02 June 2021, Vol.2, No.09

Continuing protests in Colombia, another mass abduction in Nigeria and a controversial election in Syria

Vishnu Prasad, Apoorva Sudhakar and Jeshil Samuel J



Street protests returned in Colombia, as the negotiations between the government and protesters failed. The UN has called for an independent investigation. (Image Source: BBC/Reuters)

Colombia: The protests continue

In the news

On 28 May, at least four people died in Colombia after police took on protesters who attempted to lift roadblocks. Protesters were back on the street after talks between the government and protest groups had broken down. On the same day, President Ivan Duque announced that he was deploying the military to the town of Cali, which had been hit by violence.

On 30 May, the United Nations called for an independent investigation into the number of casualties that had happened since the protests began on 28 April. UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet voiced 'deep concern' over the violence.

On 31 May, Colombian authorities announced that they were investigating ten police officers who allowed civilians to shoot at demonstrators in Cali.

Issues at large

First, the expansion of the protesters' demands. The agitation started on 28 April as a reaction to a new tax regime imposed by the President. However, a month later, these demands expanded to such an extent that the strike committee submitted a list of requirements that had to be met before they even came to the negotiating table. The issues have now grown to address Colombia's economic inequalities, police and health systems.

Second, the failure of both the government and protesters to negotiate. There was initially some light at the end of the tunnel, with both the Colombian government and the protesters seeming close to a consensus on a pre-agreement. However, these talks have since stalled, with both parties accusing the other of going back on the agreed conditions.

Third, the use of the military to clamp down on protesters. One of the reasons for the protest to spiral out of hand was the violent manner in which the initial strike was dealt with by the Colombian police force. But now, with Duque sending in the military, violent clampdown appears inevitable.

Fourth, the growing international condemnation of Duque's handling of the crisis. With the United Nations joining a growing chorus of international bodies calling for an end to violence against the protesters, the pressure is piling on Duque.

In perspective

Despite some positive developments, the chaos in Colombia looks far from over. With the coronavirus pandemic still raging on in the country, the government's loss of control in certain parts of the country, shortage of essential supplies and the violence unleashed by the police has made life difficult for the people.

It also remains to be seen if these protests will spread across South America. The economic inequalities that sparked the protests in Colombia hold true for most of South America. Multiple signs of discontent have been visible across the tournament in recent weeks with Brazil and Argentina seeing major protests and Chile witnessing a pushback against the government in a poll to elect drafters of a new constitution. In 2019, similar protests in Ecuador had spread quickly to the rest of the continent.

Nigeria: Another mass abduction grips Niger state

In the news

On 30 May, gunmen kidnapped hundreds of students from the above-mentioned school. The exact number of children kidnapped has not been confirmed. Aljazeera cites the Niger government's tweet, which said around 200 had been kidnapped; similarly, BBC quotes a school teacher who said 150 to 200 were kidnapped.

On 31 May, Premium Times reported that 11 of the total children abducted from an Islamic school in Niger state were released. The news report quoted Niger Governor's Chief Press Secretary said that the 11 were released because they "were too small and couldn't walk." Further, according to reports, "about 70 motorcycles, attacked 17 communities in Wushishi local Government Area where they shot several people while some women and children drowned as they tried to escape across River Kaduna."

On 29 May, the Kaduna Commissioner for Home Affairs and Internal Security confirmed that 14 students who had been abducted from the Greenfield University in April, were released; two others who had been kidnapped along with the students were also released.

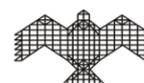
Issues at large

First, the increasing frequency of kidnappings. According to an Aljazeera news report, more than 700 students have been abducted since December 2020. Further, in several of the recent mass abductions, the kidnappers have kept the victims captive for more than a month, a change from the earlier abductions of recent times, which would last no more than two weeks.

Second, lack of clarity on ransoms. The state governments, on several occasions, have reiterated their policy to not pay ransoms. However, parents of some students pay ransoms by themselves. For example, Premium Times reported that for the release of the Greenfield University students in Kaduna, parents paid more than 40 million Naira.

Third, kidnapping as an industry. The Council on Foreign Relations explains that in the past, kidnappers targeted wealthy personalities in order to extract maximum money. However, the CFR cites data from an intelligence firm that shows that the targets now include those from the poorer sections of the society. In such cases, the victim's families may not be able to pay the ransom, "and victims are much more likely to be killed."

Fourth, failure of the government's response. Apart from claiming to not pay ransoms, various governments have also said they would not negotiate with the kidnappers. However, this strategy has backfired. In the Greenfield University abductions, the kidnappers had killed five students and had threatened to kill more if ransoms were not paid. This had led to protests across cities but with no avail.



In perspective

First, the uptick in the number of mass abductions indicates that the government failed to see the trend and prepare itself to prevent such incidents. Further, while the government has denied paying ransoms or negotiating, it does not seem to have any other strategy to address the issue. It also reflects the lack of urgency and willingness on the part of the government.

Second, parents resort to paying ransoms as they have no other choice to bring their children back to safety. However, this has emboldened the kidnappers to detain students for longer periods as well as demand more.

Syria: No surprises in the election, as Bashar al-Assad returns

In the news

On 26 May, Syria conducted its Presidential election despite heavy criticism and condemnation from the international community. Syrian ex-pats and refugees were allowed to vote a week earlier in Syrian embassies.

On 27 May, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was re-elected as President for the fourth time. He has been in power since 2000 and will hold office for the next seven years. Russia's President, Iran's President, Oman's Sultan and Hezbollah leaders congratulated President Assad on his victory.

Earlier on 3 May, Syria's constitutional court had selected two opponents to stand against President Assad in the elections. From 51 candidates, the court approved President Assad, deputy Cabinet Minister Abdallah Saloum Abdallah, and the head of the National Democratic Front (NDF), Mahmoud Ahmed Marei, to contest in the presidential elections.

Issues at large

First, the election process. This is the second election to be conducted since the Arab Springs movement swept the country in 2011. With 18 million Syrians eligible to vote in the presidential elections, there was a turnout of 78.6 per cent (nearly 14 million voters). The elections lasted for 17 hours in 12,000 polling stations around the country with no independent monitors. However, delegates from Iran, Russia and Belarus were reported to be present during the elections to monitor it. The head of the Syrian parliament, Hammouda Sabbagh, announced the results of the elections on 27 May. According to the results, President Assad had garnered 95.1 per cent of the total votes, establishing his presidency for the fourth time. The UN has not recognized the elections since the government did not adhere to the UN mandates set for elections.

Second, the major issues with the elections. The legitimacy of the elections was questioned by many as it did not follow the UN Security Council resolution 2254, which was unanimously passed in 2015. The recent election was dubbed as a sham by the US, UK, Germany, France and Italy when it was announced in April. Voters within Syria and outside faced condemnation for participating in the elections. Syrian ex-pats and refugees in Lebanon were pelted with

stones and beaten with sticks on the way to vote in Beirut. Students in Syria were forced to cast their votes by their universities with the threat of either being expelled or failed if they did not vote. Nearly eight million displaced citizens living in the rebel-controlled North-Western and North-Eastern parts of Syria did not cast their votes. The Syrian Democratic Council in its statement said: "We will not be part of the presidential election process and we will not participate in it."

Third, the weak opposition. Both the candidates selected by the government were not well known and did not have the same media coverage and presence as Assad. Abdallah Saloum won 1.5 per cent of the votes and Ahmed Marei of the NDF won 3.3 per cent. The NDF headed by Ahmed Marei is a small state-endorsed opposition party that has long been criticized for being an extension of the government.

In perspective

Despite the international backlash, the elections have confirmed Assad's reign for the next seven years. The legal and constitutional framework of Syria also favours Assad and his regime. The country is in desperate need of a strong and stable government that would fix the economic depression and social unrest (all of which Assad promised to do). Though it might not be the best option, a strongman like President Assad could bring much-needed stability.



Also, from around the world

By Apoorva Sudhakar and Abigail Miriam Fernandez

Peace and Conflict from East and Southeast Asia

China: Married couples now allowed to have three children

On 31 May, the Communist Party announced that married couples can now have three children thereby bringing an end to the two-child policy. The Party also decided to enhance workplace protection and increase maternity leaves to help couples. The move is expected to increase China's falling birth rate to prevent a demographic crisis. The New York Times said the decision is an acknowledgement that strict limits on births have put China's future at risk. As the population is ageing, the birth limits threaten "the industrial strategy that China has used for decades to emerge from poverty to become an economic powerhouse." However, the above-mentioned protections do not extend to single mothers.

Hong Kong: Legislature passes controversial electoral reform bill

On 27 May, the Hong Kong legislature passed an electoral reform bill that provides for increasing pro-China members in the legislative council. As per the bill, Hong Kong's national security department can conduct background checks on the candidates. Criticisms against the bill include that it would ensure that only those who favour Beijing's policies will be able to run for public offices. Further, the reform would increase the number of seats to 90; of these, 40 will be elected by a "pro-Beijing committee." The reform also entails that Hong Kong voters will only be allowed to directly elect 20 legislators.

South Korea: P4G summit concludes; 38 countries adopt Seoul Declaration

On 31 May, the Partnering for Green Growth and the Global Goals 2030 (P4G) summit concluded in Seoul. The summit paved the way for the Seoul Declaration which focuses on "sustainable and green efforts to fight climate change and hasten the COVID-19 recovery;" 38 countries adopted the same. On 1 June, the South Korean Environment Minister said: "Through the summit, South Korea pledged to the international society to support developing countries' green recovery and strengthened climate actions to achieve carbon neutrality." Similarly, the Foreign Minister outlined that South Korea would engage in partnership with leading nations to implement climate action.

The Philippines: DFA lodges diplomatic protest against Chinese presence in Thitu islands

On 29 May, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) issued a statement against the "continuing illegal presence and activities of Chinese vessels" in the Pag-asa or the Thitu islands. The diplomatic protest extends to the "incessant deployment, prolonged presence, and illegal activities of Chinese maritime assets and fishing vessels in the vicinity of the Pag-asa islands." The statement reiterated that The Philippines considers the archipelago within its sovereignty and jurisdiction.

Cambodia: US Deputy Secretary of State arrives amid crackdown on opposition

On 1 June, the US Deputy Secretary of State arrived in Cambodia during a regional tour. Reuters explains that her visit comes "amid an ongoing crackdown on opposition figures and against rights activists." Several rights groups have called on her to bring up these issues when she meets the Prime Minister. The Deputy Asia Director at the Human Rights Watch said: "Freedom of expression is under threat in Cambodia like never before, and now facing internet censorship and controls, so Sherman should demand an end to government censorship and persecution of its critics."

Myanmar: Chin National Front group signs agreement with NUG

On 29 May, Aljazeera reported that the Chin National Front (CNF) had signed an agreement with the National Unity Government (NUG) to "demolish the dictatorship and to implement a federal democratic system." The CNF is a rebel group consisting mainly of Christian Chin minority which had signed a ceasefire with the military in 2015. On 1 June, The Guardian quoted a spokesperson of the NUG who said that several communities are resorting to arms to protect themselves from the military crackdown. He said: "It is just the beginning. The situation will become out of control. Even if it is one man in a village, they will not just bow in front of these murderers. It is the whole country on the road to civil war." Meanwhile, on 27 May, The Irrawaddy reported that the Sagaing Region now had around 20,000 internally displaced persons; nearly 1,500 people fled the Myaung Township following a junta raid.

Myanmar: NUG to cooperate with ICJ on Rohingya genocide case

On 31 May, The Irrawaddy reported that the National Unity Government had vowed to cooperate with the International Court of Justice in the case against Myanmar where it is accused of a genocide against the Rohingyas. On 30 May, the NUG released a statement wherein it expressed concerns over difficulties faced by the Rohingyas, especially in Bangladesh. The Irrawaddy explains that the NUG is "considering accepting the exercise of jurisdiction by a separate international court, the International Criminal Court, over the killings, torture and other crimes against civilians committed by the Myanmar junta since the coup on 1 February."

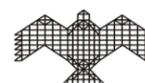
Peace and Conflict from South Asia

India: Delhi HC notifies Twitter over 'non-compliance' of new IT rules

On 31 May, the Delhi High Court issued a notice to Twitter on a petition filed against it for not complying with the new IT rules. The petitioner alleged that details of a resident grievance officer on Twitter's website was unable to be found, which is a violation of the new IT Rules, 2021 which came into effect on 25 May. Meanwhile, representatives of Twitter informed the High Court that it has complied with new rules and has already appointed a resident grievance officer on 28 May.

India: Farmers observe 'black day' marking six months of protests,

On 26 May, thousands of farmers observed "Black Day" across the country to mark six months of their protests against farm laws passed by the Indian government. Marches were carried in several cities and villages in Punjab, Haryana and at Delhi's borders. Further, leaders of



Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) stated that they were ready for a resolution through talks, however, the government must come up with a feasible proposal.

Bangladesh: Rohingya protest against living conditions in Bhashan Char

On 31 May, the police claimed that over a thousand Rohingya refugees have staged "unruly" protests against living conditions at Bhashan Char Island. Further, the police said that the protest coincided with an inspection visit by officials from the UNHCR, claiming: "The Rohingyas, who are there, became unruly the moment the UNHCR representatives landed (on the island) by helicopter today." Meanwhile, the UNHCR in a statement said: "The UNHCR delegation was able to meet with a large group of refugees and to listen to the various issues that they raised, which the delegation will further discuss with the Bangladesh authorities."

Pakistan: Two separate terrorist attacks in Balochistan

On 31 May, four soldiers of Frontier Corps (FC) were martyred in two separate terrorist attacks in Quetta and Turbat, districts of Balochistan. According to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), FC post near Pir Ismail Ziarat in Quetta was targeted by terrorists and in another incident, terrorists targeted an FC vehicle with an improvised explosive device (IED) in Turbat. Further, the ISPR said: "Such coward acts by inimical elements backed by anti-state forces and HIAs [hostile international agencies] cannot sabotage the hard-earned peace and prosperity in Balochistan."

Pakistan: ISI denies involvement in the attack on journalist

On 29 May, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting said that the ISI had denied any role in the attack on a journalist and "totally disassociated" from the same. The ministry said: "Such continued allegations against ISI show that the ISI is being a target of the fifth generation war under an organised conspiracy." Further, it stated that the ISI was cooperating with the investigation into the attack and had called for stern action against the perpetrators.

Afghanistan: Taliban accuses the US of seeking regional bases post-withdrawal

On 28 May, the Taliban in a statement accused the United States of seeking a military presence in the region, "especially in Pakistan," as part of its efforts to maintain surveillance in Afghanistan. The Taliban warned that such efforts will lead to "more bloodshed" in the country. Further, the Taliban claimed that the Doha agreement has been "repeatedly" violated by the US and that it has led to the continuation of violence in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, a key military base of US forces in downtown, the New Kabul Compound was handed over to the Ministry of Defense on the same day.

Peace and Conflict from Central Asia, Middle East and Africa

Armenia-Azerbaijan: Azerbaijani forces detain six Armenian servicemen

On 27 May, Azerbaijani Defense Ministry said that its forces had detained six Armenian servicemen who "attempted to cross into the territory of Azerbaijan..." Daily Sabah quotes the Ministry's statement which holds that the six "tried to mine the supply routes leading to the positions of the Azerbaijan Army on the border." On the other hand, the Armenian Defense

Ministry said that its forces were completing engineering works near the border regions where the six were captured.

Iraq: Mosul residents fear return of families with suspected IS links

On 28 May, The Economic Times published an AFP report which said that Mosul's residents were wary of dozens of families, with suspected links to the Islamic State, returning from Syria. This was the first repatriation from Syria's Al Hol camp and the Iraqi army escorted 300 people from the camp. A resident was quoted saying: "We are totally opposed to their return...Our future is dark and dangerous because the jihadists will live near us." Meanwhile, the Minister for Migration and the Displaced said: "It is the state's duty to receive repatriated Iraqis and settle them in existing camps before integrating them into their regions of origin."

Israel-Palestine: UNHRC to set up commission to probe rights violation in 11-day conflict

On 27 May, a special session of the UNHRC voted to launch a probe into the 11-day conflict that gripped Israel and Palestine in May. The forum adopted a resolution which provides for a permanent Commission of Inquiry that would "monitor and report on rights violations in Israel, Gaza, and the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem." Aljazeera quotes from the resolution that the Commission will look into "all underlying root causes of recurrent tensions, instability and protraction of conflict."

Israel-Egypt: Foreign Ministers meet in Cairo

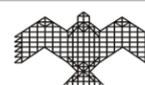
On 30 May, Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi arrived in Cairo to discuss a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. This was the first visit of an Israeli Foreign Minister in over a decade. He met with his Egyptian counterpart Sameh Shoukry; according to the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, Shoukry "stressed the need to refrain from all practices that lead to escalation, especially in the Palestinian territories." Further, the Shoukry also emphasised on a two-state solution and also drew Israel's attention to the sensitivity attached to east Jerusalem.

Egypt: Intelligence chief meets with Hamas leader in Gaza

On 31 May, the Egyptian General Intelligence chief met with a Hamas leader in Gaza. Arab News quoted a Palestinian official who said: "It is no secret that progress occurred before the last war on the issue of prisoner exchange, but it does not seem that the Israeli occupation is ready to move forward with reaching a new deal." Aljazeera quoted the same official: "We discussed several files, most importantly the necessity to oblige the occupation to stop its aggression on Gaza, Jerusalem, Sheikh Jarrah and all over Palestine."

Chad: Government accuses CAR of killing Chadian soldiers

On 31 May, the Chad government accused the Central African Republic of killing six Chadian soldiers at a border post. Chad claims that five of them were abducted and executed. However, a senior Chadian security official is quoted saying that CAR rebels were responsible for the attack and that they are most likely to belong to the Unity for Peace in Central Africa (UPC).



Mali: ECOWAS suspends Mali following the coup

On 30 May, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) suspended Mali from the bloc in response to the recent coup in the country. Though the regional bloc called for an immediate transfer of power to civilian leaders, it did not ask the newly appointed interim President, Colonel Assimi Goita, to resign. The ECOWAS also called for holding the presidential elections on the previously decided date, 27 February 2022.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo: At least 50 killed in two attacks in Ituri

On 1 June, Aljazeera reported that at least 50 people had been killed in attacks on two villages in the Ituri region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The military spokesman blamed the Allied Democratic Forces for the attack. The exact death toll has not been confirmed. A local MP said: "A very large number of attackers showed up, the assault was well targeted, they killed two local leaders ... we can't rule out that they were settling scores." Two officials said that camps for the displaced people had been attacked.

Peace and Conflict from Europe and the Americas

Russia-Belarus: Putin and Lukashenko meet in Sochi

On 28 May, President Vladimir Putin met with his Belarusian counterpart Alexander Lukashenko in Sochi where he called for closer ties between Russia and Belarus. Later, on 31 May, Lukashenko said that they had discussed oil and gas supplies, including compensation for losses resulting from the Russian tax manoeuvre, cooperation in customs and taxation, and the defence industry. Further, he said they also discussed the recent developments including, the response to sanctions, resumption of air service between the two countries, arrest of Roman Protasevich and Sofia Sapega.

Europe: The US and Denmark accused over spying row

On 1 June, BBC reported that several European countries have pressed the US and Denmark over reports that the Danish broadcaster DR said Denmark's Defence Intelligence Service (FE) collaborated with the US National Security Agency (NSA) to gather information from 2012 to 2014 on top European politicians. President Emmanuel Macron, after speaking with Chancellor Angela Merkel said: "This is not acceptable between allies and even less between allies and European partners." Meanwhile, Denmark's Defence Minister did not confirm or deny the report but said: "systemic eavesdropping of close allies is unacceptable."

Europe: NATO's defence and foreign ministers meet to prepare for June summit

On 1 June, NATO's defence and foreign ministers are meeting to prepare for the upcoming 14 June summit, which is to be attended by US President Joe Biden. On the agenda are the latest developments in Ukraine and Belarus and NATO's future ties with Russia. Further, the alliance's role in Afghanistan as it withdraws NATO troops is to be discussed. On 31 May, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said: "This is a pivotal moment for our alliance, and our collective security," adding, "In a more competitive and unpredictable world, we need transatlantic unity."

Brazil: Demonstrators hold nationwide protests against Bolsonaro's COVID-19 response

On 29 May, Brazilians staged protests against President Jair Bolsonaro's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic which has claimed more than 461,000 lives in the country. The protests were held in around 16 cities across the country with demonstrators holding signs which read: "Out with Bolsonaro" and "Impeachment now." The protests, organized by leftist political parties, unions and student associations, remained peaceful except in the northeastern city of Recife where police threw tear gas and shot rubber bullets.

Venezuela: Soldiers kidnapped during border clashes rescued

On 31 May, Venezuela's Defence Minister stated that the eight soldiers who had been captured in fighting on 23 April by FARC dissidents have been rescued. The minister via Twitter said: "At this moment, accompanied by an excellent group of military doctors, we are providing care to 8 courageous patriots, kidnapped by Colombian criminal groups, [who] were rescued today in the state of Apure." The soldiers were kidnapped by irregular Colombian armed groups during fighting between the Venezuelan Armed Forces and FARC dissidents along the Colombian border that has killed at least a dozen soldiers since March and caused thousands of civilians to flee to the neighbouring countries.

The US: Biden says he will bring up human rights abuse with Putin at Geneva summit

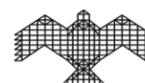
On 29 May, President Joe Biden said "I'll be meeting with President Putin in a couple of weeks in Geneva, making it clear that we will not -- we will not stand by and let him abuse those rights," adding: "It's time to remind everybody who we are," Meanwhile, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov said: "The Americans must assume that a number of signals from Moscow ... will be uncomfortable for them, including in the coming days." These statements come as Biden and Putin are set to meet in Switzerland on 16 June.

The US: Two mass shooting claimed the lives of three

On 30 May, two people were killed and at least 20 others were injured after a shooting outside a banquet hall in South Florida. According to the police, three people rolled out of an SUV and opened fire on the crowd outside. No arrests were immediately announced, as the police sort the community for help. The shooting took place about 24 hours after one person was killed and six others wounded in a drive-by shooting in the Wynwood area of Miami.

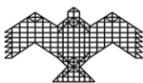
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About NIAS-International Peace Research Initiative (IPRI)

The International Peace Research Initiative (IPRI), initiated in 2018 at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), is a part of the Conflict Resolution and Peace Research Programme at the School of Conflict and Security Studies.

IPRI undertakes research on various issues relating to peace with special emphasis on radicalisation, sustainable peace, gender roles in peacebuilding and global protest movements. IPRI research are published as briefs, reports and commentary.



About Konrad Adenauer Stiftung

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is a political foundation. Established in 1955 as “Society for Christian-Democratic Civic Education”, in 1964, the Foundation proudly took on the name of Konrad Adenauer, the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. With 16 regional offices in Germany and over 120 offices abroad, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation is committed to achieving and maintaining peace, freedom and justice through political education. KAS promotes and preserves free democracy, social market economy, and the development and consolidation of the value consensus. KAS also focus on consolidating democracy, the unification of Europe and the strengthening of transatlantic relations, as well as on development cooperation.

KAS cooperates with governmental institutions, political parties and civil society organizations, building strong partnerships along the way. In particular, KAS seeks to intensify political cooperation in the area of development cooperation on the foundations of its objectives and values. Together with the partners, KAS makes a significant contribution to the creation of a global order that empowers every country to determine its own developmental priorities and destiny in an internationally responsible

About Conflict Weekly

The Conflict Weekly an academic endeavour to bring every Wednesday/Thursday a weekly analysis of the conflict and peace processes in the world; aiming to look at the larger peace picture. It is published by the NIAS-IPRI in collaboration with the KAS India Office.



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