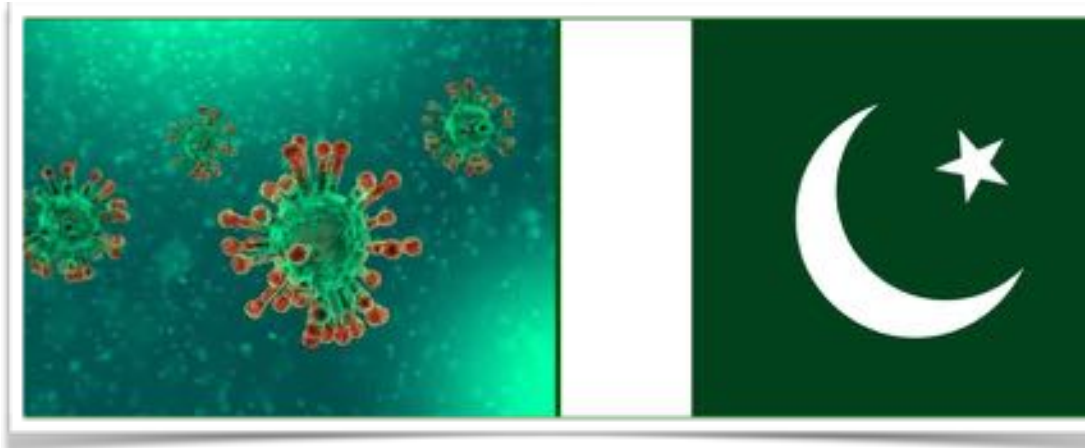


South Asia Conflict Monitor

monthly newsletter on terrorism, violence and armed conflict...



CONTENT

PAKISTAN and COVID-19 Pandemic: Is the Army Taking Advantage?

Country Briefs
News Roundup

[MARCH 2020]

AFGHANISTAN: 3-6

BANGLADESH: 6-8

INDIA: 8-11

PAKISTAN: 12-13

SRI LANKA: 13-14

PAKISTAN and COVID-19 Pandemic: Is the Army Taking Advantage?

NIHAR R NAYAK

Ever since the first Corona infected case was reported on February 23 in Sindh province of Pakistan and its spread to the other regions - Islamabad, Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK), the authorities asked for army's help to contain the spread of the virus. Instead of getting the virus directly from China, Pakistan got the infection when thousands of Pakistani pilgrims and businessmen returned from Iranian cities -- Mashhad and Qom, where the shrine of Imam Reza is located. Till that time, although hundreds of thousands of Pakistani students were studying in China and 60,000 Chinese nationals were working in 400 Chinese companies, including CPEC projects, in Pakistan, the Imran Khan government did not shut down the air services with China while Wuhan witnessed the rapid spread of Coronavirus since the mid-January by showing solidarity with Beijing (South China Morning Post, March 04).

Why the Army's help?

Unlike other countries, Pakistan did not declare full lockdown from the outset due to economic factors. In a statement, Prime Minister Imran Khan stated that "his government did not have the capacity to

take care of 25 per cent of the population which is under the poverty line if a lockdown was implemented." (Gulf News, March 22). However, one Pakistani analyst argues that "industrialists of this country are trying to convince the top leadership" against the full lockdown. Therefore, there were three objectives to engage the army. First, implementing partial lockdown by the provincial security forces was not possible. Initially, that was experimented. As the number of infected cases escalated to more than 700 cases with newer areas by March 23, the government asked for army's help for effective execution of the partial lockdown.

Second, since the army has been the most powerful and influential institution, the Imran Khan government wanted to neutralise the growing business lobby, which gives priority to their profit than national interest. The business houses lobby could not sustain against the government's decision once the army was involved.

Third, as seen in other cases, political classes in the developing countries often use state forces to keep themselves safe from public criticism; in case the crisis goes out of control and the tragedy escalates. In this case, Imran Khan knew that his policy towards containing the virus would not be successful with the partial lockdown. Therefore, by engaging the army no one would be critical to that. At the same time, the government could pass the bug on to the army to keep itself safe from public criticism.

Fourth, in the pretext of the Corona crisis, the army got an opportunity to undertake clandestine operations against the Baloch rebel groups, which was otherwise not possible during a normal period. Last but not the least, since the formation of the Imran Khan government, not a single important decision has been taken by the government without the approval of the army. It would be noted that in December 2019, General Bajwa was granted three years extension despite strong resistance from seven top army Generals and Supreme Court chief justice. From the army's point of view, this is an opportunity to take part in internal politics, while Prime Minister Imran Khan is being challenged both from his own party and the opposition parties on sugar scam issues. Amidst the Corona crisis, Prime Minister Imran Khan undertook a major cabinet and senior official level reshuffle on April 06, 2020. (Gulf News, April 06) The army was also not convinced of the way the Imran Khan government was handling the Corona crisis. In a statement on March 23, it said: "The threat we face is very different and the likes of which the world has not seen before". (Gandhara, April 07).

Is the Army taking advantage of the situation?

The role of the Pakistan Army in the internal and external matters is not new. Despite adopting Parliamentary democracy, the army has been playing a vital role in the formation and dissolution of an elected government in Islamabad. The Imran Khan-led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) coalition government is one of them. In 2018, the PTI was mandated to bring changes in the governance system, offer a corruption-free government and rapid economic development. After 20 months, the government has failed to keep its promises. The economic condition of the country is in bad shape. According to the latest report from the State Bank of Pakistan, the country's entire debt has "risen to Rs. 33.4 trillion" (around \$200 billion) (The Diplomat, April 15).

Moreover, since the PTI took the help of the army,

the later has increased its footprints in all aspects of the governance. For example, first, as the economic crisis deepened last year, Pakistan Army Chief General Bajwa had a meeting with top business leaders to fix the economic crisis. Second, the army played as a saviour of Imran Khan government while an anti-government protests march led by Maulana Fazlur Rehman, head of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F) party, carried out Azadi March (Freedom March) from across the country to Islamabad. The army then had warned that "Nobody would be allowed to create instability as the country cannot afford chaos"(The Nation, November 02, 2019). Third, as far as Pakistan's foreign and neighbourhood policy was concerned, the army was consulted extensively in Afghanistan peace process, highlighting J&K issues at the UN and strengthening diplomatic relations with China, Russia and the US. During the Afghanistan peace negotiation between the US and the Taliban, the top US' officials' and Taliban leaders had ensured to meet General Bajwa during their visits to Islamabad other than formal meetings with the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister of Pakistan. Fourth, the army was critical of the government's failure to contain the Coronavirus and it extended all possible support to implement the national lockdown, which was not taken seriously by the ruling party. A large number of religious leaders openly challenged national lockdown and asked people to join the Friday prayers.

Observations

Although the performance of Imran Khan's government has not been impressive over the last 20 months, there seems to be no imminent threat to that. Since the army is committed to not to allow any political instability in the country during the double crisis (economic and Corona) and at the same time, it has been acting as a 'de facto' ruler, it would prefer the continuation of this government with some modifications in the current governance structure. At the same time, the army's option for an alternative government to the PTI is limited due to leadership problems with the political parties like PML-N and the PPP. Most importantly, off late, Pakistan's relationship with the US has improved in the post-Afghanistan peace agreements. Therefore, the US would prefer the continuation of the current set up in Islamabad for the successful implementation of the agreement and political stability in Afghanistan.





AFGHANISTAN



After the historic peace deal between the Taliban and the US in late February 2020, Afghanistan once again faced difficulty in implementation of the agreement. Exchange of war prisoners was one of the most contentious issues as the Afghanistan government was not part of the deal. The government was thus initially reluctant to release around 15 most dreaded Taliban leaders as sought by the outfit and not before the beginning of the intra-Afghanistan talks. On the other hand, the Taliban believed that Ghani's decree about the release of the prisoners went against the provisions of the peace deal, signed between the United States and the Taliban. The delay in exchange of prisoners has been hindering the progress of the peace process, which is supposed to be the beginning of intra-Afghanistan talks as per the agreement.

As per the US-Taliban Qatar deal, the Afghanistan government would release 5,000 Taliban prisoners in exchange for up to 1,000 government detainees by March 10, 2020. The agreement also sought a commitment from the Taliban to prevent al-Qaeda and all other extremist groups from operating in the areas they control at present and restrain attacks on the government forces. Amidst this delay and uncertainty in implementing the peace agreement and also anticipating support of Iran to the Taliban and anti-Ghani factions, the US special envoy for Afghanistan peace Zalmay Khalilzad urged the Taliban to implement all clauses of the peace agreement. He stressed that the militant group should guarantee that their fighters would not join the battlefield after their release from gallows.

Despite the agreement, the level of violence remained high throughout the month due to fighting between the Taliban and the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. Media report claimed that there were more than a hundred attacks in Afghanistan since the United States and the Taliban signed the peace deal. The turf war for area domination continued throughout the month. A large number of Taliban were killed and arrested during the review period.

More importantly, the Afghanistan government continued to express its dissatisfaction over the peace process. Perhaps the internal political situation complicated the conflict further. The domestic political situation intensified with Ashraf Ghani becoming President for a second term. His main rival Abdullah Abdullah refused to recognise Ghani's win and held his swearing-in ceremony as a rival president. The 'tug of war' between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah to take over control of the government intensified after the President-elect (Ghani) dismantled the Office of Chief Executive (OCE) and Abdullah faulting the credibility and legitimacy of the new government. Abdullah Abdullah in a statement said that the National Unity Government 'ended' after his swearing-in ceremony, and that "soon the chief executive of the inclusive government will officially be introduced."

The ongoing internal political tension between Abdullah and Ghani, Iran's support to the Taliban and dissatisfaction of the Afghanistan government over the peace deal between the US and the Taliban without including it could affect the renewed peace process and political stability in Afghanistan in post peace deal period. The COVID-19 crisis would further complicate the peace process. More than 700 infections reported in Afghanistan. Some media reports indicated that both government agencies and Taliban have been working together to contain the Coronavirus in certain pockets. In this scenario, the newfound common enemies could work as a confidence-building measure to forget their bitter animosity and could set up a new road map for political stability and peace in Afghanistan. Then the question arises: Will the Taliban ever compromise with its ideology? Will Pakistan ever accept an independent Taliban government? Will Tehran and Moscow accept a US-led peace deal in Afghanistan?

MAJOR EVENTS:

March 01: Afghan President Ashraf Ghani says his government has not pledged to free Taliban prisoners, as stated in a deal reached by the US and the Taliban militants. Under the US and Taliban agreement 5,000 Taliban would be released in exchange for up to 1,000 government detainees by March 10, 2020. The deal also commits the Taliban to prevent al-Qaeda and all other extremist groups from operating in the areas they control. ([BBC](#))

March 06: The Islamic State group (IS) has claimed responsibility for the gun attack that targeted a ceremony attended by top politicians in Afghanistan's capital Kabul. In a statement issued on the same day, IS said two of its militants attacked a meeting attended by high-profile officials in Kabul's 6th District. The jihadist group claimed 150 people, including security forces, were killed or injured. The IS statement named the attackers as Ahmed al-Tajiki and Abdel Rahman al-Muhajir, claiming they used machine guns, hand grenades, RPG rockets and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). The incident occurred in the city's Hazara-dominated Dasht-e Barchi area when gunmen opened fire at a ceremony being to held to mark the death anniversary of Shia Hazara leader Abdul Ali Mazari. ([Reuters](#))



March 07: According to various Afghan media reports, there have been nearly 80 attacks in Afghanistan since the United States and the Taliban signed a peace deal in late February 2020. Despite the continued violence, the Taliban is due to hold talks with the government. ([Al Jazeera](#))

March 07: The Taliban says its peace pact with the United States does not alter the status of the insurgent group's supreme leader as the "lawful ruler" of Afghanistan, saying he is duty-bound by religion to establish an "Islamic government" after foreign "occupation" troops exit the country. The statement said: "As this 19-

year jihad (holy war) against the (foreign) occupation was waged under the command of a legal Emir, the termination of occupation agreement does not mean that his rule is absolved.” ([Voanews](#))

March 11: President Ghani has signed the decree that would facilitate the release of the Taliban prisoners in accordance with an accepted framework for the start of negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government. The release of prisoners is part of a deal signed by the United States and the Taliban last month that would allow US forces and NATO troops to withdraw from Afghanistan to end more than 18 years of war. Taliban spokesman had handed a list of 5,000 prisoners to the US and was waiting for all to be released. ([Aljazeera](#))

March 11: Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi voiced Tehran’s determination to restore sustainable stability to Afghanistan. The remarks by the Foreign Ministry official comes as Ashraf Ghani and his chief rival, Abdullah Abdullah, took the oath of office as the president of Afghanistan on Monday, plunging the fragile country into a new crisis. ([Tehran Times](#))

March 11: Turkey has expressed readiness to mediate intra-Afghan peace talks in case of a request, the country’s Kabul envoy said Tuesday. Speaking to Anadolu Agency (AA), Oğuzhan Ertuğrul said that the peace deal that was signed between the Taliban and the United States on February 29 is a crucial step for Afghanistan’s future and if there would be any request to do so, Turkey is ready to host the negotiation process. ([Afghanistan Times](#))

March 12: The Taliban do not accept a decree by President Ashraf Ghani on the release of the prisoners, sources close to the group said two days after Ghani signed an order to conditionally pardon and release Taliban prisoners to open the door for intra-Afghan talks. According to the sources, the Taliban believes that Ghani’s decree about the release of the prisoners goes against the provisions of the peace deal signed between the United States and the Taliban in Doha on February 29. The two-page decree – which was signed by President Ghani and was made public by the presidential press office said that all released Taliban prisoners will have to provide “a written guarantee to not return to the battlefield.”([Tolo News](#))

March 12: Russia warned that the emerging internal political crisis, exacerbated by two parallel inauguration ceremonies of Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah, could undermine the intra-Afghan talks. Commenting on parallel oath taking ceremonies, the Foreign Ministry of Russia said “We call on all responsible political actors of Afghanistan to adhere solely to common national interests, to focus their efforts on national reconciliation process, which should lead to end of the civil war and to rebuilding of peaceful, united and independent state, free of terrorism and drug-related crime.” ([The Khaama Press](#))

March 14: Military officials in Kunar province are warning of the potential recruitment of disaffected Taliban fighters by the Islamic State (Daesh) as a peace deal with the Taliban becomes more likely. Splits within the Taliban, religious radicalism and discontent with the possible deal could drive fighters to join ISIS-K and other terrorist groups. According to Abdul Sattar Mirzkawal Kunar’s governor, Pakistani intelligence service and the al-Qaeda network are recruiting Taliban commanders, and those who disapprove of the U.S.-Taliban peace agreement. ([Afghanistan Times](#))

March 15: The Afghan Security Forces have killed at least 14 militants in separate clashes erupted between them in southern Helmand and Zabul provinces. Three other Taliban fighters received injuries. Ahmad Jan Ahmadi, a military official in Zabul said the clash took place in Mullah Faiz village of the Mirzani district, where nine militants had been killed and three others wounded. An unspecified number of weapons were seized. ([Afghanistan Times](#))

March 22: Media reports say Taliban’s attacks have been continuing in at least 16 provinces since the Persian New Year began on March 20. Initial figures suggest that more than 60 security forces have been killed during the attacks, with the government condemning the attacks as violation of peace agreement by the Taliban. Ministry of Defense says that army is in “active defensive” position and has suppressed Taliban in the provinces of Zabul and Kunduz. ([Afghanistan Times](#))

March 23: The U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced a \$1 billion cut in U.S. aid to Afghanistan after he failed to convince Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his political foe to end a feud that has helped jeopardize a U.S.-led peace effort. The United States would continue backing Afghan security forces while continuing a phased “conditions-based” troop withdrawal as specified in a deal signed with the Taliban in Doha on February 29. ([CNBC](#))

March 23: A Taliban official has disclosed group's secret ties with Pakistani intelligence agency (ISI) in a letter to media. It reads that the writer had seen that ISI had open access to every member of the group's political office and Taliban representatives were seen walking freely inside the Pakistani Embassy in Qatar. The letter further reads that the Taliban members were not free of corruption and fraud. ([Afghanistan Times](#))



March 25: Islamic State -Khurasan (IS-K) terrorists killed 25 civilians in Kabul's Shor Bazar area. Three suicide bombers entered into Gurudwara Guru Har Rai's (Sikh place of worship) sanctuary area and started indiscriminate gunfire and bombing. One of the three attackers was identified as Abu Khalid Al-Hindi, an Indian from the State of Kerala. In a detailed statement on March 25, the jihadist group erroneously claimed that over 60 "infidels and apostates" were killed or wounded in the attack which was carried out to "avenge Muslims in Kashmir".

According to the IS statement, al-Hindi targeted worshippers inside the temple using a machine gun and hand grenades. He purportedly detonated two IEDs at Afghan security forces who later arrived at the scene. Afghanistan and Indian authorities initially suspected Haqqani network's hand in the attack. IS also released the image of the attacker in an article published on March 26 in its weekly newsletter al-Naba. (Hoop/ [Financial Express](#)).

BANGLADESH



Bangladesh did not witness any significant political instability and subversive activities by the Islamist groups in the review period despite their constant efforts to regroup, raise funds and continue training programmes. At the same time, the security forces continued their operations against the spreading and merger of smaller Islamist radical groups. The state security forces found a new link between the Islamic State (IS) and Neo-JMB. The Neo-JMB was also found responsible for a recent bomb blast in Sholoshahar area (Chittagong) targeting security personnel. The police also increased surveillance on revival and increased activities of the IS.

Despite an increase of the Covid-19 cases in Bangladesh, the security agencies maintained their surveillance on Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Ansar al-Islam, Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT) and Allah'r Dal with the support of external forces.

However, in a significant political development, Khalida Zia, chief of the BNP and former Prime Minister, was given conditional bail for six months on health ground. As per the bail condition, she cannot meet her son Tariq Zia. She is also debarred from holding any political rally or under-taking foreign trips. This indicates that the bail could be politically motivated because the ruling party did not want to take risk by keeping her in jail for a more extended period due to her fragile health. The government was apprehensive about any accident (death) inside the prison that could lead to mass mobilisation against the government. Another factor could be to test her popularity. BNP's grassroots structure has almost collapsed. There is intra-party severe factionalism over leadership. The acting General Secretary is not happy with the way the party is being run. The Zia family do not want to groom or promote a non-Zia leader as the party president. This has brought frustration amongst the second rung leaders of the party. Physically, Khalida Zia is not in a position to mobilise people and hold public

rallies. In the absence of a strong leader like Tariq Zia, the BNP will continue to struggle in the Bangladesh politics perhaps for a decade. In the security front, like Pakistan, the violent attacks on the media personnel and ruling party cadres by the religious extremists' groups increased in the review period. Role of Pakistani intelligence agencies to provide training to Rohingya would continue to remain as a major security and diplomatic challenge to the Bangladesh government.

MAJOR EVENTS:

March 01: Bangladesh police have arrested seven Al Qaeda linked Ansar al Islam militants from Dhaka and Pabna in two separate incidents on February 29. Five AAI militants were arrested in Dhaka City as they were trying to recruit fresh operatives, collect funds and had been propagating militant activities online. One of the arrested (Female) operative Rashida is head of Manikganj unit of the militant group. She got acquainted with Moazzim a Madrasa teacher (also one of the arrested militants), through Facebook while she was in Qatar in 2017. Another two were arrested from Pabna District in Rajshahi Division ([Daily Star](#)).

March 02: The counter terrorism officials has launched an investigation after the Islamic State group claimed responsibility for a bomb explosion in Chattogram's Sholoshahar area targeting police personnel. The blast occurred inside a traffic police box and injured three people, including two policemen in Sholoshahar Gate-2 area. This was the eighth attack after those in Dhaka and Khulna in 2019 ([Daily Star](#)).

March 07: Bangladesh police (Rapid Action Battalion) have arrested four Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) militants from Signboard area in Narayanganj District. The arrestees were identified as Sarkar, Mohammad Kausar Alam, Asif Imtiaz Mohammad Ribat and Hafez Rakibul Islam. The vigil in the country is stepped up following the Islamic State (IS) inspired JMB group had claimed an attack on police forces in south-eastern Bangladesh, allegedly wounding five policemen late February and in early March ([Daily Star](#)).

March 10: Bangladesh's elite police force the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) arrested the 'coordinator of Ansar al Islam, Abu Kaiser (Rony) from Bangshal area of Dhaka City. During interrogation, Police learned that Rony raised money, including crypto currencies, for the organisation on various past instances through Telegram and other online chat groups ([Dhaka Tribune](#)).

March 12: Intelligence agencies have informed that the Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) has been training Rohingya refugees at different places in Cox's Bazar. Reports say that Rohingyas being "easy targets" are being "motivated by militant outfits for their personal gains." According to reports, JMB gave 37 Rohingyas weapons training for five weeks and on February 18, seven of the 37 tried to kidnap Khaled Hossain, head of the Rohingya Shibir No. 6. Bangladesh Police, aware of it, cordoned off the area and in the gunfight that followed, four policemen were injured and four JMB leaders -- Nooruddin, Mohammed Tansh, Nahar Begum and Khaleda Begum -- were arrested. ([Times Now News](#)).

March 15: Four Neo-JMB) militants received death sentence for killing Jogeshwar Roy, a Hindu priest at Swanta Gouria Monastery, in Panchagarh District (Rangpur Division) in February 2016. A court in Rajshahi District handed down death sentences to Neo-JMB's Jahangir Hossain, Alamgir Hossain, Ramjan Ali and Rajibul Islam Molla. Among the death-row convict, Rajibul Islam is still at large and sentenced in absentia. The tribunal also acquitted three other accused in the case ([New Age](#)).

March 16: Three militants affiliated to the banned terrorist group Allah'ar Dal were arrested in Khulna City in Southwestern Bangladesh. They were Mohammad Rakib Hasan, Ashikuzzaman Ashikul and Shafiqul Islam. Islamist literatures, leaflets and books were recovered from them. According to police total of 12 Allaha'r Dal militants have been arrested from Khulna in last 10 months. ([Daily Star](#)).

March 18: Three Al Qaeda linked Ansar al Islam cadres arrested from different places in Bangladesh: two militants from Darussalam area of Dhaka City while another was arrested from Jaintapur area of Sylhet District. They are identified as Motahar Hossain, Murshidul Alam alias Murshid and Saifur Rahman ([Daily Star](#)).

March 19: The Bangladesh police (Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime) have arrested Neo-JMB women's branch 'second in command' from Dhaka city's Gabtoli area. She is identified as Shirina Khatun alias Tahsin Abdullah. According to CTTC sources, Shirina worked under the direction of Neo-JMB women's branch Chief Amani Khatun, who was arrested on February 5. After becoming second in command of Neo-JMB women's branch, Shirin had been working secretly to recruit new members online ([Dhaka Tribune](#)).

March 23: The Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) officials said the Neo-JMB group is using its women cadres to recruit online. This information came after the investigations and interrogations of Shirina Khatun, the second-in-command of Neo-JMB's female wing who was arrested on March 19 from Dhaka city's Gabtoli area. She was using three to four social media accounts for this purpose and in touch with fellow Neo-JMB operatives. To note here, Shirina worked under the direction of Neo-JMB women's branch Chief Amani Khatun, who was arrested on February 5 ([Daily Star](#)).

March 23: The police (Rapid Action Battalion) has arrested three JMB militants from Arambagh area of Dhaka. They are identified Ridwan Mahmud, Foyez Mohammad, and Mahin Foysal. They were found to be preaching and inciting extremism among students at various educational institutions. They also found to be lone wolf strikes ([Dhaka Tribune](#)).

March 24: Al Qaeda linked Ansar al Islam's so called 'wolfpack' unit leader Nazmul Hasan alias Osman Gani was arrested in Dhaka City. Nazmul Hasan created a group on messaging app Telegram in 2018 for the 'wolfpack' members and communicated with each other to plan assassinations in Bangladesh ([Daily Star](#)).

March 24: Counterterrorism unit officials have identified around a hundred social media accounts, whose users have allegedly showed interest in joining militancy or the war in Syria. A number of these users were waiting to have meetings with leaders of IS-inspired militant outfit "Neo-JMB". The CTTC unit unearthed the information after interrogating Shirina Khatun alias Tahsin Abdullah (23), the second-in-command of Neo-JMB's female wing, who was arrested from the capital's Gabtoli ([Daily Star](#)).

March 30: The Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) police have apprehended Muhib Mushfiq Khan, the online financier of the banned militant outfit Ansar-al-Islam from Rajuk Uttara Housing area of Dhaka city. A huge number of extremist books and electronic devices were recovered from his possession. Earlier, the RAB arrested several Ansar al Islam members, suspected to be suicide squad members of the group from Munshiganj, Sylhet, and Pabna between January 30 and February 13 ([Dhaka Tribune](#)).

INDIA



As the number of COVID-19 (pandemic) cases grew in India by the first week of March 2020, many restrictions and preventive measures were undertaken by the local administration. The pandemic has had a reverse impact on the anti-CAA and NRC protests, which were continuing across the country before the lockdown. Subsequently, after the imposition of the national lockdown by the central government from March 22, the number of violent activities by different rebel groups of the north-eastern part of India came down drastically except in Jammu and Kashmir and Maoists movement affected regions.

Despite the increase in Corona infected cases, the militant activities continued in Jammu and Kashmir. The security forces remained vigilant

against any attacks by armed terrorist groups like the LeT, JeM and the HM. The level of violence, especially attacks on civilians by the militants, went down. However, the militant groups' attempts to attack security forces continued. They also tried to provoke locals against security forces and New Delhi over negligence in providing medical equipment for the treatment of corona infected people. The increased violent activities of the new militant group called The Resistant Front (TRF), which J&K Police say is an offshoot of Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), became a new challenge before the security forces in the Valley. There were also reports about the increase in recruitments by several militant groups in the review period in south and north Kashmir. Besides, the border districts of the Jammu and Kashmir region continued to witness massive firings from Pakistan Army side, which has been interpreted by both the locals and security forces as an attempt from Pakistan side to infiltrate trained terrorists into Kashmir by taking advantage of the lockdown situation.

While the newly formed union territory, J&K, witnessed a moderate level of conflicts, the central, south and eastern parts of India saw a mix of arrests and killings of some left-wing extremist cadres in Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, and Jharkhand. In Odisha, the rebel groups declared unilateral ceasefire during the lockdown period. On the contrary, the Maoists continued their attacks on the security forces in Chhattisgarh. Media reports also indicated that the Maoists took advantage of the lockdown period for regrouping and holding meetings in the remote areas while law enforcing agencies were busy in managing corona crisis.

The J&K will continue to remain the most significant challenge before the security forces with the formation of TRF. In the rest of India, there are possibilities of communal violence due to continuation of prayers and congregations, especially in the Mosques. Furthermore, it seems that India will face new social and economic tensions arising from issues like unemployment, communalism and labour unrest, as the government prepares to phase-out the lockdown.

MAJOR EVENTS:

March 03: The Jammu and Kashmir-based al-Qaeda-linked Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGH) group confirmed the death of three members in a statement released on March 03. According to the statement they were killed following a gunfight with the security forces in South Kashmir's Tral on February 19. The slain militants were identified as Jahangir Rafiq Wani (Salman Farisi), Raja Omar Maqbool (Abid Khan) and Saadat Thokar (Huzaifa). The AGH gave rich eulogy to them by saying they had answered the call to jihad at a young age, sacrificing their life and families. The tribute noted their deaths came at a time of "hope and revolution", referring to the recent peace deal signed between the Taliban and the US and Hindu-Muslim violence in India. ([Kashmir Monitor](#), February 19; Telegram, March 03).

March 04: As many as 300 newly recruited youths took an oath to join the Naga Army of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) during the passing-out parade held at the General Field Training Headquarters near Camp Hebron in Nagaland. According to the official report, the recruits have been undergoing training for the last four months at its training headquarters covering foot drills, arms training, jungle survival along with political and spiritual classes. The months-long gruelling training also covered both mental and physical transformation apart from guerrilla warfare training. ([Eastmojo](#))

March 04: 10 people were interrogated by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka for conspiring with Islamic State (IS) terrorist Khaja Moideen and his associates to carry out unlawful activities for furthering the objectives of the ISIS in India. NIA had taken Pachaiyappan (resident of Kanchipuram), Rajesh (Chennai), Anbarasan (Salem rural) A Abdul Rahiman and Liyakath Ali (Salem city), Mohammed Haneef Khan and Imran Khan (Bengaluru), Mohammed Zaid (Kolar), Ejaz Pasha (Bengaluru) and Hussain Shariff to custody ([First India News](#)).

March 06: The Tripura government said it has identified 18 locations in eight districts to resettle the displaced Bru community people who had been living in relief camps in the state for the past two decades. Thousands of Bru community people have been living in relief camps in North Tripura district since 1997. They had fled Mizoram to reach the neighbouring state because of ethnic clashes. By now, the total number of these internally displaced people has risen to around 34,000. ([Arunachal Times](#)).

March 08: Two suspected Islamic State operatives were arrested in Delhi. The couple, identified as Jahanazaib Sami and his wife Hinda Bashir Beigh, have links to the Islamic State's Wilayat Khorasan and active on the Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Telegram among others. Sami came under scanner due to his activities on cyberspace which revealed his intention to carry out suicide attacks in the country. He was in association with senior ISKP members in Afghanistan also was in contact with Khurasan-based Huzaifa Bakistani, the slain Amir of Wilaya Hind. He admitted to have involved on various social media platforms calling on the Indian Muslims to unite and fight against the Indian establishment in protest against the CAA legislation. His wife Hina was also active on pro-IS social media platforms under the name of Catijah al Kashmiri/Hannabee and played a role of facilitator in spotting talents on cyberspace and further motivating them. ([India Today](#)/ [Live Mint](#))

March 11: Al-Qaeda-linked Ansar Ghazwat ul-Hind (AGH) has confirmed the death of two militants in Shopian in the southern part of Indian-administered Kashmir on March 09. AGH statement said Shabir Ahmad Malik (Abu Muaviya) and Amir Ahmad Dar (Zarrar Bhai) were killed by "Hindu polytheists" during an encounter. Abu Muaviya of Kulgam was the local AGH commander who joined AGH in May 2019 ; Zarrar was from Shopian who joined the group in August 2019. The latest AGH statement in Urdu and English-language was released by the group's official media, al-Hurr, via its channel on the messaging app Telegram. Indian media reported that two slain militants were from LeT group. (Telegram/ [Pioneer](#))

March 12: Popular Front of India (PFI) Delhi chief Parvez Ahmed and Secretary Mohammad Iliyas were arrested by the Delhi Police's special cell for alleged involvement in Delhi riots. Iliyas is a resident of Shiv Vihar, also contested in the 2020 Delhi Assembly polls from Karawal Nagar on a ticket from SDPI. ([News18](#))

March 14: Indian security agencies have red-flagged an Indonesia-based non-government organisation (NGO) with past links to the Falah-e-Insaniyat Foundation (FIF), the so-called charity wing of the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) terror group, for raising funds on cyberspace in the name of the Delhi riots. The money was to be ostensibly sent to Muslims who either lost their family members, were injured or lost their property in the February 24-25 riots that left 53 people dead and more than 500 injured. ([Hindustan Times](#))

March 16: Two Kerala women, Nimisha and Sonia Sebastian who fled the country to join Islamic State (IS) has expressed interest to return to their hometown, Thiruvananthapuram and Ernakulam respectively, after getting frustrated with the life in Afghanistan. Both were arrested in Afghanistan on November 15, 2019. Their husbands Eas and Abdul Rashid (militants of ISK) were killed in Afghanistan. Abdul Rashid was the ring leader of Kasargod (Kerala) unit of the IS. In a video released by StratNewsGlobal website, both the women expressed their wishes to return to India. ([The Week](#))

March 17: Islamic State (IS) militant Areeb Majeed who was arrested in November 2014 for having travelled to Iraq and then Syria to join the group granted bail by a special National Investigation Agency (NIA) court. Majeed , a war returnee travelled to the middle eastern countries with Fahad Shaikh, Shaheem Tanki and Aman Tandel under the guise of pilgrimage in May 2014 and joined the IS. All of them later went to Syria, where the other three are believed to have been killed, while Majeed came back to India via Turkey in November 2014.

March 17: A Delhi court extended the custody of the arrested couple Jahanjeb Sami and his wife Hina Bashir Beg with suspected links to the Islamic State's (IS) Khorasan. Both were arrested on March 8, for allegedly instigating anti-CAA protests in Delhi. The police arrested one their associate and co accused Abdul Basith on March 17. ([Outlook India](#))

March 19: The Uttar Pradesh Police in Aligarh have registered an FIR against an unidentified person who allegedly circulated pamphlets of a "fatwa" issued by Mumbai attack mastermind and Jamat-ud-Dawa chief Hafiz Saeed in the city. According to the FIR, the pamphlets were found in large numbers and it seems that there was an attempt to vitiate the atmosphere in the city. ([Outlook India](#))

March 19: According to Intelligence Bureau, the role of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in recent Delhi riots has come under the scanner of the agencies. The source said that the NGOs from Malaysia and Pakistan worked closely with those with India to spread a toxic propaganda. Money was pumped in and

social media handles were activated for this toxic spread. In Pakistan the charity wing of the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) played a crucial role in sending in the money. An amount of INR 2,500,000 (approx. 33000 USD) that came in a week after the Delhi riots is being investigated currently. In addition to this, the Twitter handles of these NGOs had been active in the aftermath of the riots. They were circulating riot images on these handles. Further similar images of the riots were also circulated on chat groups such as WhatsApp and Telegram. ([One India](#))

March 20: Tania Parvin, the 22-year-old woman who was arrested on March 19 from West Bengal Malayapur village (North 24- Paraganas District), found to be having links with Pakistan based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) terrorist group. She was also trying to honey-trap Indian soldiers using Facebook and WhatsApp. According to police she has been directly in touch with LeT operative in Pakistan though virtual platforms, using dark web.



March 21: Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent in its latest Nawa-i-Afghan Jihad magazine calls US-Taliban deal as victory and a magnificent one. It also devoted a whole chapter on Kashmir jihad and announced to change the magazine's name as Nawa-i-Ghazawatul Hind. According to the magazine, Kashmir will be the epicentre of AQIS jihad ([Matboatejihad](#))

March 23: 17 paramilitary forces personnel were killed in a ambush by the Maoists in Sukma district of Chhattisgarh. As many as 14 soldiers were injured in the attack. ([Live Mint](#))

March 23: The information about a newly formed terror group in Kashmir, The Resistance Front (TRF), also known as JK Fighters surfaced with the arrest of Six terrorists in Sopore, Jammu and Kashmir. During interrogation, the arrested militants revealed that they were working under a Pakistan-based person known by the name 'Andrew Jones' on Telegram messenger, whose WhatsApp ID is 'Khan Bilal'. The militants revealed that Jones is operating The Resistance Front (TRF) or JK Fighters. ([Orissa Post/IANs](#))



March 25: India and Kashmir focused pro-IS jihadist magazine Sawt al-Hind ('Voice of Hind') urged for terrorist attacks amid Covid-19 lockdown across the country. The latest edition of the English-language magazine, which was launched in February 2020 by the Kashmir-focused pro-IS jihadist group Jundul Khilafah, largely echoed the Islamic State's message released earlier to attack and free jihadi prisoners. In one of the feature entitled 'Coronavirus' the magazine asked the followers ("believers") in India to take advantage of governments and security forces' preoccupation with Covid-19 to "strike the kuffar [infidels]" and to show no mercy. "Allah has made this disease a source of chaos amongst the nations of disbelief, and their militaries and police have been deployed in their streets and alleys, thus

making them an easy target". "Use this opportunity to strike them... fill the streets with their blood". It portrayed Covid-19 as both a punishment from God to "infidels" and an opportunity for jihadists, saying the pandemic has brought "glad tidings for the believers". Voice of Hind was launched on February 24 by al-Qitaal Media Centre, one of three official outlets representing Jundul Khilafah. (Voice of Hind)

PAKISTAN



Despite the announcement from Prime Minister Imran Khan that Pakistan is no longer a terrorist haven, Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa witnessed moderate levels of violence in the review period. Balochistan leaders opposed the massive deployment of Pakistani Army personnel in the pretext of controlling COVID-19. In comparison to previous months, BLF attacks multiplied in the review period. The BLF undertook some 12 attacks on the Pakistani Army.

Politically, it seems that Prime Minister Imran Khan has failed to provide a unified leadership. The religious groups in Pakistan opposed the government's decision to disallow holding prayers in mosques. The Pakistan Army played a crucial role in implementing the lockdown. There were reports that the Army Chief took a unilateral decision in this regard without consulting the PM. The choice of the Army to take adequate measures to tackle the spread

of the COVID-19 indicated the failure of the civilian government in the country, thereby reasserting Army Chief General Bajwa's position. The Pakistan Army also played a crucial role in the peace process in Afghanistan. Most importantly, the opposition parties expanded their consultation process with different political parties to forge a joint alliance against Imran Khan government. Earlier, General Bajwa held a one-on-one meeting with Pakistani business houses to discuss a strategy to resolve the financial crisis in the country.

The law and order situation in Pakistan continued to worsen due to unabated attacks on the opposition political parties' leaders, religious minorities and media personnel. Both the economic and food crisis is looming large over the country as well.

MAJOR EVENTS

March 05: An audio message attributed to an Islamic State (IS) spokesman Sultan Aziz Azam in Afghanistan has warned that the group was on course for a "comeback" in the country, threatening to carry out "deadly attacks" particularly in the capital Kabul. The message in Pashto language comes in the context of IS suffering significant losses on the ground in Afghanistan at the hands of its jihadist rival the Taliban and Afghan government forces. He also criticised the Taliban for signing a peace deal with the US. IS portrays the Taliban's peace talks with the US as a betrayal of jihadist principles and has tried to use this to undermine its rival's credentials. Azam has acted as the spokesperson for IS in Afghanistan and was the man behind IS's Voice of the Caliphate radio broadcast in parts of Nangarhar. He was reported to have died in 2018 in a drone strike but last year re-emerged publishing an audio propaganda message. ([Voa News](#), Dec 27, 2018; Telegram (Pashto), March 06)

March 07: Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) has issued a statement mourning the death of al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (Yemen) leader Qasim al-Raymi. The statement with the phrase "O [Jerusalem] Aqsa, we are coming", was published on the website of al-Qaeda's media wing al-Sahab and matboatejihad.net. It was also disseminated by the prominent pro-al-Qaeda media group al-Hijrah Media via its channel on the messaging service RocketChat. AQAP had confirmed the death of al-Raymi in a message on 23 February and announced Khalid Batarfi as its new leader. al-Raymi's death was announced on 6 February ([Matboatejihad.net](#))

March 07: Pakistan based terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammad's chief Masood Azhar released new audio on February 29, calling US deal with Taliban a bid to 'escape Afghanistan'. Azhar, the mastermind behind several terror attacks in India, including Pulwama and Pathankot, has been declared "missing" by Pakistan before the crucial plenary Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in Paris. In the seven-minute audio, latest evidence that Azhar is alive and in command over JeM, he is heard taking a swipe at the US, saying, "Afghanistan ko dekhe le...40 saal main kaise balat guzar gaye. Soviet Union ka andhera, America ka andhera...Islamiya ki roshni...Europe main azaane goonji...fir Qatar ke shahr Doha main woh hua jiska tasavur kisi ko nahi tha.(in Urdu).(Look at Afghanistan, how the last 40 years have passed. First Soviet Union, then US tried to conquer...But what happened in Doha ...is unbelievable." Azhar then adds that he will ensure the world never forgets the Taliban and that there will be a dawn of Islam. Azhar regularly uses the JeM's Telegram account to release audios with messages ([Times of India](#))

March 09: Pakistan Army officer, Colonel Mujeebur Rehman, was killed during an encounter with terrorists in Tank District of Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Two terrorists were also killed in the operation. Colonel Mujeebur Rehman, was a resident of Bunji in District Astore of Gilgit Baltistan. Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan praised the security forces for conducting a successful operation in Tank and paid tribute to Col Mujeeb-ur-Rehman ([The News](#))

March 09: The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leaders, former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and former federal minister Prof Ahsan Iqbal, will expand their consultation process with different political parties leadership during the session of National Assembly here to pave the way for bringing in-House change so that free and fair polls could become possible subsequently within this year. The consultation will take place during the session days which is commencing today (Monday). The PML-N leaders had the first round of the meetings with the MQM groups in Karachi last week where future course of actions was discussed thoroughly. ([The News.com.pk](#))

March 09: Media reports have said that nearly 50 Pakistani fighters have been killed in military action by the Turkish Army and Syrian forces in Idlib in northwest Syria, the last major rebel stronghold of the country. The deceased fighters were likely belong to Zainebiyoun Brigade, a militant group that was placed on the US Treasury's financial blacklist in January 2019 and comprises Pakistani Shias fighting in Syria and Iran. According to media reports, Zainebiyoun Brigade has over 800 Pakistanis fighting in Syria. The group's fighters are allegedly trained by Iran's Quds Force, the military unit responsible for projecting Iran's influence via proxies across the Middle East. ([ArabNews](#))

March 12: Afghanistan media reports citing officials in Kunar province alleged that Al Qaeda with Pakistan's support is recruiting disaffected Taliban. Al Qaeda has begun recruiting Taliban fighters who disagree with the recently signed United States (US)-Taliban deal ([Tolo News](#))



March 29: Pakistan army have been deployed across the country, assisting federal and provincial administrations in ensuring enforcement measures for containment of COVID-19 with focus on public safety. ([Nation](#))

March 20: Pakistan militant groups voiced concerns over the present COVID-19 outbreak, terming it as 'torment' and 'wrath of god [Allah]. These groups urged people of Pakistan including Prime Minister Imran Khan to seek god's forgiveness for their sins and wrong deeds to avoid the calamity. The Jaish e Muhammed run portal Alqalam weekly has Urdu-language commentary on Covid-19 titled "Security Fortress Medina". The document stated that viral diseases like [the] coronavirus always breakout whenever people indulge in sins and wrong deeds. It called people to return to god and seek his forgiveness for their sins instead of fearing the virus and death. It said 'Muslim's belief is that... infinite... no

disease is contagious... without the command of Allah... no one has any disease... for which Allah commands" ([Al Qalam](#))

SRI LANKA



Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa dissolved Parliament six months ahead of schedule and called for elections on April 25. The country could face a severe constitutional and political crisis since the parliamentary polls cannot be held before the end of May 2020 due to the Coronavirus pandemic. As per the Constitution, a new Parliament should meet within three months of the dissolution of the previous Parliament. On March 31 the Election Commission of Sri Lanka informed the President regarding holding the elections by the end of May and requested him to allow the Commission to start preparation in this regard. Since elections cannot be held before that due to lockdown and in the absence of Parliament the government cannot take vital decisions in this crisis period, a large number of political leaders, including opposition parties, have suggested re-instating the Parliament.

Meanwhile, the Gotabaya government continued its pro-Singhala and anti-minority policy. This reflected from its recent decision of granting pardon and releasing an army officer who was sentenced to death for slitting the throats of Tamil civilians, including four children, during the ethnic conflict. Earlier, the government announced that it does not feel bound by the commitments made in 2015's UN Human Rights Council Resolution 30/1 and two other successive resolutions, 34/1 and 40/1, intended to encourage reforms and transitional justice.

The domestic political situation will remain fragile due to the forthcoming parliamentary elections. Major political parties are already busy negotiating the formation of alliances and counter-alliances. The new government's approach towards the Tamil and Muslim minorities could bring fresh tensions in the northern-eastern parts of Sri Lanka. The Gotabaya government will adopt pro-Singhala policy in light of the forthcoming elections giving rise to insecurity amongst the minority communities in Sri Lanka.

MAJOR EVENTS

March 02: The second interim report of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry appointed to probe Easter Sunday attacks (April 21, 2019) was handed over to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa at the Presidential Secretariat. The first interim report was handed over on December 20, 2019. The Commission was appointed by the former President Maithripala Sirisena on September 22, 2019 to investigate the series of attacks that took place on Easter Sunday (April 22, 2019) and to recommend necessary actions. The final report will be compiled following further investigations. ([President's Office](#), Lanka; [Colombo Page](#))

March 07: Security measures have been tightened across the North East Sri Lanka following the arrest of 'six former LTTE cadres on charges of planning to assassinate a prominent Tamil politician in the North. Last week, a German citizen, allegedly a former LTTE cadre was arrested for plotting to revive the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). ([Tamil Guardian](#))

March 29: The CID (Criminal Investigation Department) of the Sri Lanka Police arrested a key suspect in the April 2019 Easter Sunday terror attacks that killed about 270 people. The suspect had transported the suicide bomber to the Zion Church in Batticaloa. The suspect is believed to have directed the bomber of the St Anthony's Church in Colombo as well. The suspect has been residing in Mount Lavinia near Colombo. ([News18](#))

The South Asia Conflict Monitor (SACM) aims to provide in-depth analyses, country briefs, summary sketches of important players and a timeline of major events on issues relating to armed conflicts, insurgencies and terrorism. It also aims to cover the government's strategies on conflict resolution and related policies to tackle these risks and crises.

The South Asia Conflict Monitor is a monthly bulletin designed to provide quality information and actionable intelligence for the policy and research communities, the media, business houses, law enforcement agencies and the general reader by filtering relevant open source information and intelligence gathered from the ground contacts and sources.

The South Asia Conflict Monitor is scheduled to be published at the beginning of each calendar month, assessing events and developments of the previous month.

Editor: Animesh Roul (Executive Director, Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict, New Delhi)

Editorial Advisor: Nihar R. Nayak (Research Fellow, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), New Delhi)

Consulting Editor: Akanshya Shah

About SSPC

The Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict (SSPC) is an independent, non-profit, non-partisan research organization based in New Delhi, dedicated to conduct rigorous and comprehensive research, and work towards disseminating information through commentaries and analyses on a broad spectrum of issues relating to peace, conflict and human development. SSPC has been registered under the Societies Registration Act (XXI) of 1860. The SSPC came into being as a platform to exchange ideas, to undertake quality research, and to ensure a fruitful dialogue.

Published by: Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict. Post Box: 10560, JNU Old Campus, New Delhi-110067. Website: www.sspconline.org

We welcome your feedback. Email your comments at sspconline@gmail.com

For Annual (12 Issues) subscription details, contact the Research Coordinator at "sspconline@gmail.com".

Copyright © Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict, New Delhi

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without first obtaining written permission of the copyright owner.