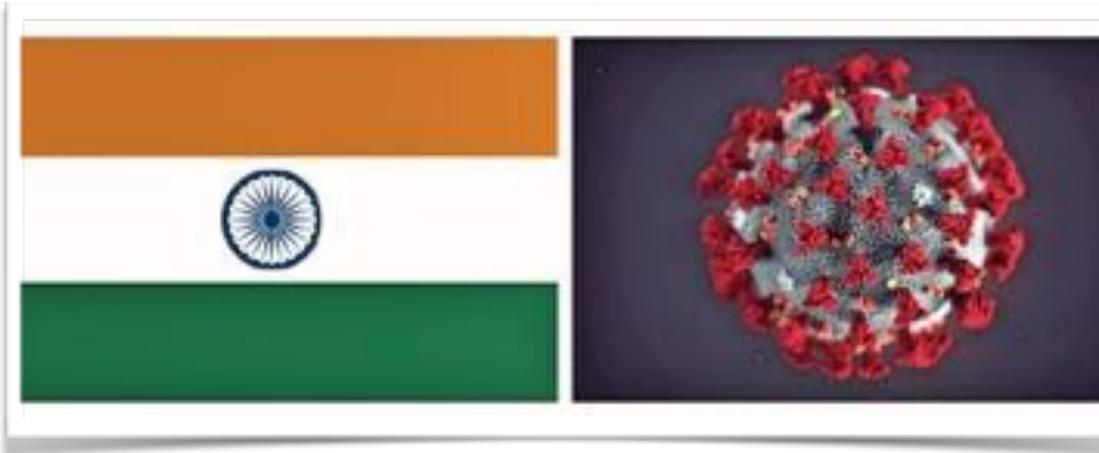


South Asia Conflict Monitor

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



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INDIA: Assessing Major Conflict Theatres amid COVID-19 Pandemic

NIHAR R NAYAK

While the COVID-19 has devastated health, economy and social sectors across the world with the death of millions of people, its impact is mixed in the low-intensity conflict regions. In case of India, more than one lakh people have been affected (at the time of finalising this report), and more than three thousand people have succumbed to the pandemic despite a nationwide lockdown imposed since March 23. Before the March-lockdown, India's three major conflict theatres – Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), Northeastern (NE) region and Left Wing Extremism (LWE) also known as Maoist/Naxalite affected areas - were witnessing violent incidents daily. Interestingly, the impact of the lockdown varied from one conflict theatre to another given the nature of conflicts - objectives, origin, support base and level of conflict, etc. For example, while the number of violent incidents increased in J&K, the level of military and political campaigning came down slowly in NE and LWE stronghold areas.

Jammu and Kashmir

When the Union Government abrogated Article 370 followed by declaring J&K a Union Territory (UT) on October 31, last year; the number of

terrorist attacks came down drastically. Around 25 militants were killed between August and December 2019. That might have happened due to the strong presence of security forces across the UT, the imposition of curfew and limited telephone and internet connectivity, onset of winter in the valley and the bordering regions, and introduction of a new administrative structure. Notably, the beginning of winter and extended drawn curfew played essential roles in curbing violence. As the limit and other restrictions were relaxed, followed by the onset of summer, J&K witnessed an increase in terrorist attacks. According to official sources, around 64 terrorists belonging to Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) were killed in counter-terrorism operations by security forces till May 03, 2020, while the terrorists killed approximately nine civilians during the same period. The number of fatalities was high in comparison to 2019 and 2018 when 152 and 215 terrorists were killed respectively. (*The Hindustan Times*, May 03, 2020)

Surprisingly, around 32 terrorists have been killed

in Jammu and Kashmir region during the COVID-19 lockdown period. Besides, according to government sources, 35 local youths have joined terror groups within the first four months of this year despite the national lockdown as against 119 in 2019 and 219 in 2018. ([Zee News](#), May 14, 2020) Local populace even participated in street protests in Pulwama against the killing of Hizb-ul-Mujahideen's (HM) local commander Riyaz Naikoo by defying COVID-19 restrictions.

The increase in violence along with the rise in the number of COVID cases in J&K indicated that first, the fear of virus could not stop highly radicalised cadres of the HM and LeT. Second, the local peoples' support to the militants remained intact despite lockdown and the presence of the deadly virus. The militants wanted to take advantage of the security and civil administrations' engagement in managing the COVID related issues. In this regard, the militants got support from Pakistan and sympathetic front organisations to accuse India of not taking enough action against the spread of COVID cases in J&K. Third, unlike other rebel groups in India, J&K militants can continue their activities by becoming less dependent on the local people. Lastly, they were under pressure from Pakistan and also under local weather conditions to perform. For example, since the onset of summer, the Line of Control (LoC) continued to remain tense, with 1,547 ceasefire violations between India and Pakistan in comparison with 3,168 and 1,629 ceasefire violations in 2019 and 2018 respectively. ([The Indian Express](#), May 06, 2020)

North-East Region

Unlike, J&K, the level of violence and operations of insurgency groups came down in NE regions. The region had already experienced a reduction in insurgency before the declaration of national lockdown due to peace negotiations with some insurgent groups and stringent actions against others by the security forces. Union Minister of State for Home G. Kishan Reddy said, "Compared to 2013, there have been 70 per cent reduction in insurgency incidents, 80 per cent in civilian deaths and 78 per cent in security forces casualties in 2019. As many as 1,824 insurgents surrendered between 2014 and 2019."([The Hindu](#), March 04, 2020)

Since the conflict of Northeast region is based on identity issue, except a few, the state government's efforts to reach out to the people through various social security programmes during lockdown period, prolonged national lockdown and

Coronavirus preventive measures disconnected the support base of the rebel groups. Due to the lockdown, the police presence has also increased and each village is placed under police surveillance. This disturbed the supply chain of the rebel groups, who are mostly dependent on the locals for food, funding and also ferrying of arms and ammunitions. The security forces worked as saviours by reaching out to the people with food supplies, medicines and other emergency requirements. At the same time, the security forces continued its operations against those insurgents who were not amenable to the peace negotiations.

Most importantly, in the case of NE insurgents, the trans-boundary lockdown or global lockdown due to COVID-19 (or simultaneous lockdown in Myanmar and Bangladesh) and strict vigilance at the borders restricted their movements. In the absence of human intelligence and limited mobility, the rebels depended more on mobile phones for intelligence gathering. That exposed them to state surveillance. For example, acting on India's request, on May 15, the Myanmar military handed over 22 leaders of the Northeast insurgent groups to the Indian government. ([India.com](#), May 15, 2020)

Left-Wing Extremism (LWE)

For the LWE groups, the lockdown period was a crisis as well as an opportunity. In terms of emergency, the LWE were vulnerable to COVID-19 lockdown than rebel groups of J&K and NE because their movement has been more people-centric than others. Moreover, it has been an ideological movement based on socio-economic issues. Therefore, the CPI-Maoist struggles to cope with the situation, given their over dependence on the local people. To note, CPI-Maoist is responsible for 98 per cent of violence and attacks on the state machinery.

During normal times, the CPI-Maoist purchases ration and other essential commodities mainly from village-level Haat or markets through their local agents. During this time, their supply of food and other necessary items were affected. For example, one media report indicated that in the Bastar region, one of the Maoists stronghold areas, the CPI-Maoist could not procure essential items as over 480 weekly haat bazars (local agri market) remained closed for the past three weeks. ([The New India Express](#), April 15 2020)

Similarly, Malkangiri-Koraput-Visakha Border (MKVB) division under the Andhra Odisha Border Special Zonal Committee (AOBSZC) of the CPI-

Maoist had reportedly offered a unilateral ceasefire, especially in areas under the MKVB. The Maoists justified the move by stating that the truce would facilitate the relief operations of the government in the remote areas to fight COVID-19. However, the fact was that the CPI-Maoist wanted to access the government ration supply in the tribal regions since the outfit's supply chain was depleting due to the lockdown. Since the state did not respond to the offer, the AOBSZC on April 24, 2020, called upon the people to join the struggle against the capitalistic forces, which it said is destroying the earth for their selfish goals. (The Hindu, April 24, 2020)

Interestingly, other CPI-Maoist divisions took advantage of the situation. On the pretext of spreading awareness about COVID-19 in the villages, some Maoists, especially from Bastar region reportedly recruited new cadres and instigated their local recruits to demand more ration. On May 10, the security forces killed one Maoist cadre who was trying to recruit villagers in the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra. (The Times of India, May 10, 2020) Media reports indicated that by taking advantage of lockdown period and due to less number of operations in the Area of Responsibility (AOR) of security forces, the Maoists conducted intensive recce in the Rajpenta and Chimilipenta areas in Chhattisgarh's Dantewada district to plant Improvised Explosive

Devices. There were also reports about the CPI-Maoist holding meetings in the Bastar region to regain strength. (The Outlook, April 16, 2020)

Observation

The lockdown during COVID-19 period has both advantages and disadvantages for the rebel groups. This pandemic could be a difficult time for them. But there are also instances of no significant impacts of lockdown on the rebel groups' operations. In the post-COVID period, the rebels might regain strength by taking advantage of economic slowdown and unemployment. It could be an ideal situation for both Maoists and Islamists. However, the survival of ideological and religious-based movements is more likely than the ones based on the socio-economic agenda in this kind of situation.



COUNTRY BRIEFS AND NEWS ROUNDUP: APRIL 2020



AFGHANISTAN



Despite an existing peace agreement between the Taliban and the US, the armed confrontations between the Taliban and Afghanistan security forces continued unabated in the review month. The intra-Afghanistan talks delayed due to misunderstanding between the Afghanistan government and the Taliban over the exchange of prisoners, which was a key element towards the intra-Afghanistan discussions and part of the ongoing peace process. One of the major contentious issues was the release of 15 Taliban leaders who were involved in “big attacks”. However, the stalemate over the prisoners’ exchange was partially resolved after a strong intervention and warning from the US to both the parties. Although the Taliban blamed the US and Afghanistan Army for escalating attacks on its cadres, the same later rejected a ceasefire offer made by President Ashraf Ghani during the Holy month of Ramadan. The Taliban rejected the ceasefire

calling it as ‘illogical’. It argued that if the ongoing peace process were implemented (entirely), it would take us to lasting peace and ceasefire, and, a separate ceasefire was not required while a large number of prisoners have been getting infected by the COVID-19. The Taliban also accused the government of delaying the prisoners’ exchange process.

On the political front, the bitter feud between President Ashraf Ghani and his rival Abdullah Abdullah continued. Former Mujahideen leader Abdul Rab Rasoul Sayyaf and other leaders tried to resolve the differences. After a series of negotiations, both leaders agreed that Abdullah would submit a future plan. Till this report was written, Abdullah Abdullah disclosed about progress in the political negotiations with President Ghani and said that there have been agreements in principle and that work is underway to finalise the details of the agreement between the two sides. It is believed that Abdullah could be appointed to lead the intra-Afghanistan peace talks with the Taliban while also getting a lion share of the government, including several high-ranking positions for his allies. The escalation of the conflict, despite having a peace deal, might harm the ongoing peace process. The COVID-19 could further complicate the peace process. A new truce between Abdullah and President Ghani might bring some solace to the fragile peace process. The peace process has been passing through a very delicate phase while the US has already started withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan.

MAJOR EVENTS:

April 04: To resolve differences between President Ghani and his electoral contender Abdullah Abdullah, a meeting of political leaders was held in the residence of jihadi leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Former President Hamid Karzai, jihadi leaders Karim Khalili, Mohammad Mohaqqueq and other political figures Sayed Ishaq Gilani, Sayed Hamed Gilani, Hajji Din Mohammad, Zarar Moqbel and Rahmatullah Nabil attended the meeting. Prior to meeting Ghani, the prominent politicians met Abdullah in his residence to discuss political solutions for the current crisis. ([Afghanistan Times](#))

April 05: Around 700 Afghan Sikhs have signed a letter to Indian Embassy to Kabul in which they have called for New Delhi’s help to leave their motherland after an Islamic State (Daesh) led the attack on their place of worship in Kabul. On March 25, IS-Khurasan militants stormed a Sikh temple (Gurdwara) in Kabul in which nearly 26 worshippers were killed. ([Afghanistan Times](#))

April 06: National Directorate of Security (NDS) of Afghanistan detained head of IS-K, or Daesh extremist group, Abdullah Orikzai, aka “Aslam Faroqi” along with his 19 fighters. He also claimed about Daesh’s deep ties with regional intelligence. Following the detention, five militants loyal to the Daesh group had laid down their arms in eastern Kunar province. ([Afghanistan Times](#))

April 06: The Taliban group announced that it had stopped negotiations with the Afghan government over the release of Taliban prisoners with effect from April 7. Suhail Shaheen, a spokesperson for Taliban's political office said the release has been delayed under one pretext or another till now. Therefore, our technical team will not participate in fruitless meetings with relevant sides starting from April 7. The Taliban delegation arrived in Kabul late last month to negotiate the release of 5,000 prisoners which was included in the peace deal between the United States and Taliban. ([The Khaamas Press](#))

April 08: After a strong warning from the US, the Government of Afghanistan has set free 100 Taliban prisoners. Reports suggest that the government has not freed fifteen Taliban commanders whom the Taliban demanded be freed too at the earliest. President Ghani said Tuesday Taliban prisoners would not be released on parole and that the process of releasing them would be time-consuming. The Taliban group had earlier demanded the release of 5000 Taliban prisoners as a prerequisite for the start of an intra-Afghan dialogue. ([Afghanistan Times](#))

April 12: Reciprocating government's actions, the Taliban freed 20 government prisoners in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar after the Afghanistan government released 300 Taliban prisoners since past week. Marking the first handover since the beginning of the peace process, the Taliban spokesman has said the handover will take place in coordination with the International Committee of the Red Cross. ([Afghanistan Times](#))

April 13: Local media claimed that a draft of a Taliban charter consisting of a list of rules, presumably intended as a guide for the potential future governance of Afghanistan, shared with by a senior government official. Titled: "The charter of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," the list of articles looks very similar to those of the former Taliban regime, which was in power in Kabul from 1996 to 2001. The charter, which calls for the establishment of an Islamic emirate, has 149 articles which include a broad range of topics covering how laws will be passed to the mandate for a white flag. ([Tolo News](#))

April 21: Local officials in the northern province of Badakhshan said that IS-K (Daesh) and affiliate groups are moving to establish a more robust military presence in the province so they can continue the war against the Afghan security forces. There are around 400 fighters linked with various 'terrorist groups' such as Daesh, the Tajikistan-based Ansarullah militant group, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, the Harkat-i-Islami Uzbekistan and the Uighur jihadists, and these fighters are operating in various parts of the province, but especially in the Khastak valley of Juram district. ([Tolo news](#))

April 24: Amid escalating violence in many parts of the country, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani – on the eve of Ramadan--appealed to the Taliban for a ceasefire, citing the special conditions of the countrywide spread of the coronavirus. Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen responded on Twitter saying the government's inattention to "thousands" of prisoners--who are especially vulnerable to the coronavirus--made Ghani's appeal insincere, and this and other factors caused a ceasefire improbable. ([Tolo News](#))

April 24: NATO issued a statement reiterating its call for a "comprehensive" peace agreement in Afghanistan and for "all sides" to "act urgently" to fulfil the commitments they have made to "lower violence." Referring to the current political crisis between President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, NATO said "Afghanistan's political actors must seize this opportunity for peace" and come together to form an "inclusive" government. ([Tolo News](#))

April 25: Afghanistan government sources reveal that 98 members of the Afghan security forces lost their lives in Taliban attacks in 14 provinces from April 18 to April 24. At least 70 others have been wounded and more than 10 security force members are missing. Separately, the Office of the National Security Council (ONSC) at a press conference disclosed that the Taliban has conducted an average of 55 attacks per day since the signing of the peace deal with the United States in Doha on February 29. The Taliban conducted 2,804 attacks from the beginning of March to April 19. The attacks left 789 civilians dead and wounded, and that "34 civilians were killed in Taliban attacks during the last week, and "62 others were wounded." ([Tolo News](#); [Tolo News](#))

April 28: The Taliban has for the first time appointed a Shia (Shi'ite) Hazara as the shadow district chief of the group. This move is seen as an attempt to attract the support of Hazara community in the country. The appointment comes as a surprise as the group persecuted the minority Hazara people on a large scale after gaining power in the mid-90s, particularly after massacring the Hazara people in Mazar-e Sharif city, the capital of Balkh in 1998. ([The Khaama Press](#))

BANGLADESH



Bangladesh security agencies' action against the radical groups continued in April 2020. During the operations, the Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) exposed a gang of the Ansar al-Islam militants (AAI). The al Qaeda linked AAI has been in the CTTC radar since November 2019, while the group was trying to merge their operations with another banned organisation, Neo-Jamaat ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (Neo-JMB). Despite the arrest of its several top leaders over the last six months, the group continued to propagate extremist ideology through social networking sites and recruited like-minded people. The AAI has been trying to establish contact between like-minded militants in other countries. Besides that, the security agencies also arrested members of the banned Allah'r Dal and Neo-JMB militants.

Bangladesh's consistent and continuous action against the radical Islamic groups has brought down number of terrorist activities drastically. The same policy will continue in future too. The radical groups' operations, meetings, fundraising, creating front organisation, etc. in Bangladesh is further affected due to nationwide lockdown due to COVID-19 since March 2020. Moreover, counter-insurgency cooperation between India and Bangladesh will further curtail free movements of the radical groups in the bordering regions.

MAJOR EVENTS:



April 02: RAB personnel arrested three militants of Ansar al-Islam from Rajshahi City Hat area in Rajshahi District. The arrestees are Yousuf Ali Sourav, Souvik Hasan Sourav and Shakil Khan. RAB recovered some "jihadi" books and training materials from their possession. The arrested militants disclosed that they had gathered for holding a secret meeting on carrying out subversive activities against the state. Some books on extremist ideology and training materials were recovered from them. ([Daily Star](#)).

April 12: Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS) has revealed that two key associates of Islamic State- Khorasan (ISK) chief Abdullah Orokzai (Aslam Farooqi) were arrested. One of them is a Bangladesh citizen identified as Mohammad Tanveer, who is a resident of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Another militant is identified as Ali Mohammad of Pakistan. Tanveer had been in charge of the technology system and was setting up communication among the IS-K leaders. He has been trained by Esa Punjabi, a resident of Punjab state

of Pakistan. The intelligence operatives in Afghanistan detained head of Islamic State of Khurasan (IS-K) Abdullah Orokzai alongside 19 other top members of the extremist group. Early this month the group has stormed a Sikh Gurudwara (Temple complex) killing 25 people and wounded several tens others. Pro-IS media Al-Battar gave prominence to IS's attack in the Afghan capital Kabul in March claimed to have "avenged Muslims in Kashmir". ([Afghanistan Times](#)).

April 21: The Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) arrested Muhammad Abdullah Al-Amir alias Ajmir, a militant of Ansar al-Islam (Al Qaeda linked group) from Kotwali area in Dhaka city. According to police, Amir kept in regular contact with various IDs supporting Ansar Al Islam, Gazwatul Hind through Facebook. He used regularly preach the ideology of those militant groups through his Facebook ID "Mujahid in Lone Wolf" and Telegram ID "Jihadi Soldier", joining various groups and channels. ([UNB Bangladesh](#))

INDIA



Except Kashmir, the number of violent incidents by the rebel groups in the North East (NE) region and Maoist affected regions came down drastically due to national lockdown since mid-March. Interestingly, the number of arrests and surrenders in these two conflict theatres increased; perhaps the rebel groups found it difficult to operate under a lockdown system. The rebel groups found difficulties in generating daily ration and organising village level meetings due to lockdown and also fear of getting infections if they come in contact with the common people. In fact, to cope with the situation, the Maoists groups' active in Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana offered unilateral ceasefire. The States did not respond to these offers finding that as opportunistic in nature.

Since the NE insurgency and left-wing extremism are mostly factored by socio-economic and identity issues, the same lost importance when the States reached out to the common people with various social security measures as happened during Corona lockdown period.

Surprisingly, the level of violence did not subside in Kashmir due to spring season and active support of Pakistan (firing at the border region) to infiltrate the militants. Since it has been an ideological and separatist movement, Corona related social restrictions did not affect them. Moreover, the militants and local people are adjusted with the lockdown system because they have been witnessing this kind of situation for a long time in the form of curfew and other restrictions. As the Government of India has been planning to ease the lockdown in the coming months, the operations of the rebel groups in their respective areas might increase.

MAJOR EVENTS:

April 01: Investigations into Kabul Gurdwara attack suggested that another Indian IS operative could have been involved in March 25 strike along with Muhammad Mohsin. The suspected individual was identified as Mohammed Sajid Kuthirulmual, a shopkeeper from Kasaragod, Kerala, part of the Kerala group which joined the Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan. The National Investigating Agency (NIA) registered a case under IPC and UAPA under the provisions of section 6(8) of the NIA Act and started an investigation into the Kabul attack. ([New Indian Express](#)).



April 03: India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) filed a supplementary charge sheet which stated that Burdwan blast accused Sahanur Alom was behind the Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) module busted in Barpeta District of Assam in December 2019. NIA Investigation has revealed that accused persons are trained members of JMB. They were recruited by one Sahanur Alom alias Sahanur Alam alias Doctor of Barpeta.

Alom was earlier arrested by NIA in Burdwan blast case on October 10, 2014. In the charge sheet, the NIA named two accused -- Hafizur Rahman and Azaharuddin Ahmed -- under charges of Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). The NIA had already filed charge-sheet against the five accused -- Hafizur Rahman, Yakub Ali, Sariful Islam, Mustafizur Rahman and Mohammad Hafiz Safikul Islam, on January 24, 2020. ([India Today](#)).

April 04: Four Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM) terrorists have been killed in an armed encounter with security forces in Khul Batpora area of Kulgam district of Jammu and Kashmir. The militants were identified as Shahid Sadiq, Waqar Itoo, Ajaz Naiko, and Ashraf Malik. ([The Hindu](#))

April 05: Maoists in Odisha have come out in support of the Government's decision to implement lockdown to prevent community transmission of the virus. As a part of the lockdown exercise, they have decided not to indulge in violence till April 10. Spokesperson of Malkangiri-Koraput-Visakhapatnam Border (MKVB) committee of the CPI (Maoist) organisation Kailasam said the outfit will not carry out any violence during this period unless security personnel attack them. However, he said that "If they attack us, we will be bound to retaliate." Separately, Civil rights activists have welcomed the ceasefire proposal, urging both the Centre and Telangana and Andhra Pradesh (AP) governments to respond positively. ([New India Express](#))

April 06: Five Indian soldiers were killed along the Line of Control (LoC) in Kupwara forests. The dead soldiers have been identified as Subedar Sanjeev Kumar, Havaldar Davendra Singh, Paratrooper Bal Krishan, Paratrooper Amit Kumar and Chhatrapal Singh. Several militants also killed while attempting to infiltrate across the LoC at Keran sector in Kupwara District ([PIB](#)).

April 07: The Islamic State's Indian province claimed the killing of two police officers in Bijbehara, Anantnag district in Indian Administered Kashmir. Kashmir local media reported a similar incident in Bijbehara where police personnel was killed in a grenade attack on a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) patrol. Last time on February 13, IS-India Province claimed attacks on a church and several police stations in Srinagar. (**Hoop Messaging Service**)

April 08: The Naga Hoho has appealed to the UN to ask Governments of Myanmar and India to stop a joint military operation, which is being conducted in the North-Western parts of the Naga Self-Administered Zone (SAZ) bordering India in Sagaing region of Myanmar. ([Murung Express](#))

April 11: Pro-Islamic State (IS) media group Al-Battar released an Audio-visual highlighting the group's recent attacks in Kashmir. The four-minute video, titled "The revenge of the Muwahideen [monotheists] against the Hindu polytheists". IS supporters circulated the message on various messaging apps such as Telegram and RocketChat. It highlighted what it described as crimes against Muslims committed by Indian security forces and Hindus in India and Indian-administered Kashmir. It also featured a clip of an Indian IS militant from an old propaganda video addressing the Indian government, vowing to attack and seek revenge for Muslims. Al-Battar also highlighted recent IS attacks in the group's self-proclaimed "India Province" branch. (**Telegram/ Al Battar/Screenshot**)



April 18: Media reports say the coronavirus-triggered nationwide lockdown has paralysed the supply chain of Maoists in Bastar region of Chhattisgarh, which is likely to impact their conventional warfare strategy in the coming days. It is observed that the Maoists have started snatching significant part of the ration distributed to villagers under the Public Distribution System (PDS) in Bastar division during the ongoing crisis. Notably, the state government has been providing two months (March and April) ration at one go free of cost to BPL cardholders across the state during the lockdown. ([Business Insider](#))

April 22: Another issue (No.3) of pro-Islamic State group (IS) magazine 'The Voice of Hind' was released. The magazine is published by the al-Qitaal Media Centre, an official outlet for pro-IS jihadist group Jundul Khilafah which is based in Indian-administered Kashmir. In one of the article "Preparation of Ghazwa-e-Hind" (battle of India) - urged IS militants across south Asia to carry out attacks on local governments. "We ask the Muslims in India and Pakistan to follow the footsteps of their Mujahideen brothers. What do you wait for? Do you wish to live the life of humiliation?" "Join hands with your brothers from the Islamic State and fight against the enemies of Allah collectively", the article incited. (Voice of Hind/ Telegram/ Full Text Available).

April 22: Four militants of Al Qaeda linked Ansar-ul-Gazwatul Hind (AGH) were killed in an exchange of fire with Security Forces (SFs) in Melhora village in Shopian district, Jammu and Kashmir. The dead militants were identified as Tariq Bhat, Basharat Shah, Wakeel Dar and Uzair Bhair. All these militants were formerly associated with Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM) and Lashkar e Taiba terrorist groups. Subsequently, the AGH released a statement via its media arm al-Hurr on the decentralised platform RocketChat. AGH, al-Qaeda's ally in Kashmir,

has previously criticised HM and LeT for acting on orders from the Pakistani government and not adhering to jihad or the establishment of full Shari'ah in Kashmir. ([Daily Excelsior](#)).

April 24: Two Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) terrorists were killed in an encounter in Kulgam of Jammu and Kashmir. While one abducted police constable Sartaj Ahmed Itoo was rescued, another was injured in the exchange of fire. ([The scroll](#))



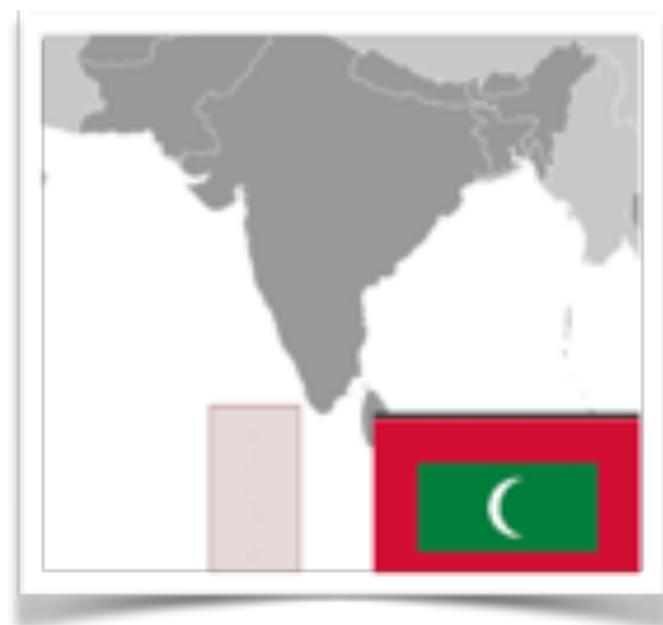
April 29: A fierce encounter at Melhora in Zainapora area in Shopian (J&K) resulted in the death of three Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGH) members including Burhan Majid Koka, the chief commander. The death of Al Qaeda linked AGH members came as a day after (April 28) two of his associates Nisar Ahmad Bhat and Bilal Ahmad Khan were killed in the encounter. (Daily Excelsior). The Al Qaeda linked AGH was emerged in July 2017 and has since struggled to make inroads in Kashmir. ([Quint](#))

School building outside the village when a joint team of security forces (personnel of Rashtriya Rifles, Central Reserve Police Force and Kulgam Police) launched an operation against them. ([Daily Excelsior](#))

April 27: Four militants of Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM) were killed in an encounter with security forces at Guddar in Kulgam District. The militants were in a School building outside the village when a joint team of security forces (personnel of Rashtriya Rifles, Central Reserve Police Force and Kulgam Police) launched an operation against them. The militants when confronted fired at the troops who retaliated leading to a gun battle in which they were killed. ([Daily Excelsior](#))

April 29: A fierce encounter at Melhora in Zainapora area in Shopian (J&K) resulted in death of three Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGH) members including Burhan Majid Koka, the chief commander. The death of Al Qaeda linked AGH members came as a day after (April 28) two of his associates Nisar Ahmad Bhat and Bilal Ahmad Khan were killed in the encounter. (Daily Excelsior). The Al Qaeda linked AGH was emerged in July 2017 and has since struggled to make inroads in Kashmir. ([Quint](#))

MALDIVES



The involvement of the Islamic State-inspired elements in the April 15 arson attack at Mahibadhoo in Alifu Dhaalu Atoll signalled the group's shadowy presence in the country. In clear terms, the IS claimed responsibility for the arson attack through its Al Naba weekly newsletter. It stated that "Boats belonging to the apostate Maldivian Government and its loyalists" were destroyed using "incendiary bombs." The Islamic State-India branch also in its Voice-of-Hind magazine praised Maldivian operatives as "O Lions of Khilafah in Maldives, indeed this is the just the beginning and you should prepare for the future operations". Despite the denials from the government agencies about the presence of jihadist elements on its soil, the recent explosions and early February 2020 stabbing incidents targeting foreign nationals, have exposed the country's attempt to overlook the threat from Islamic State and growing religious extremism. Ironically, Maldives Police Service in late April, as expected declared that their investigation had not

unearthed any substantial evidence linking the extremist organisation, Islamic State (IS), to the Mahibadhoo harbour

arson case. Repeated IS claims and calls to carry out more violence would incite the jihadi sentiments in the country in the coming months.

MAJOR EVENTS:

April 15: ISIS fanatics claim to have carried out a terror attack in Brit holiday paradise Maldives by using incendiary bombs to blow up boats. Site Intelligence Group reports the extremists have taken responsibility for explosions which tore apart five boats at Mahibadhoo harbour. A sea ambulance, four speedboats, and two dinghies docked next to each other were destroyed in the blaze. ([The Sun](#), UK)



April 17: The Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for a major arson attack in Mahibadhoo in Alifu Dhaalu Atoll through its Al Naba weekly newsletter. It stated that "Boats belonging to the apostate Maldivian Government and its loyalists" were destroyed using "incendiary bombs." Maldives Police Service (MPS) earlier announced a deliberate act of fire incident in the harbour at Mahibadhoo. in Alifu Dhaalu Atoll. Four speedboats, a sea ambulance, and two dinghy's docked adjacent to each other at the harbour

went up in flames in the fire on April 15. Two of the burnt speedboats belonged to a private company, while one was a police launch and the other owned by the Alifu Dhaalu Atoll council. Police chief CP Hameed said a criminal conspiracy couldn't be ruled out. According to him, the arson attack was carried out as an act of retaliation against authorities for recent investigations into drug trafficking and religious extremism. In February 2020, IS supporters also carried out a stabbing attack on foreigners and released a video claiming responsibility for the assaults and threatening more violence. ([Edition](#) / [Edition](#))

April 21: Unidentified persons have set ablaze a sewerage pump station operated by state utility firm, Fenaka Corporation, in Hithadhoo island of Addu City. The Islamic State claimed previous arson attack that took place on April 15 in Mahibadhoo in Alifu Dhaalu Atoll. A pro-Islamic State group (IS) magazine 'Voice of Hind' has also hailed the group's first attack in the Maldives and claimed that IS was also responsible for a stabbing attack there earlier this year. The magazine mentioned the "Lions of Khilafah in the Maldives, This is just the beginning, and you should prepare for future operations." It also claimed that IS militants in the Maldives had previously carried out a couple of attacks including an arson attack on a hotel (perhaps referring to the January 2019 fire at a luxury resort the Gili Lankanfushi). The VoH magazine is published by the al-Qitaal Media Centre, an official outlet for pro-IS jihadist group Jundul Khilafah which is based in Indian-administered Kashmir. ([Edition](#) / [Edition](#))

April 27: Maldives Police Service (MPS) claimed that it has prevented convicts in Maafushi Prison from carrying out an extremist conspiracy. In a press briefing, Assistant Commissioner of Police Mohamed Riyaz noted that during the operation, police officers joined Maldives Correctional Service personnel in inspecting the prison units and cells. Five mobile phones were snagged during the operation, alongside other equipment and books with scripts that encourage religious extremism. The case is under further investigation. ([raajje.mv](#))

April 30: A joint pre-emptive raid on Maafushi Prison in Kaffu Atoll was conducted to avert a possible terror attack in the country, as per the police chief Mohamed Riyaz. Some of the present inmates had been imprisoned in connection with recent terror attacks in Male' City. The authorities received intelligence that the inmates were planning to attack by outsiders that could disrupt the safety and security of the country. ([The Sun](#))

April 30: Maldives Police Service declared that their investigation has not unearthed any substantial evidence linking the extremist organisation, Islamic State (IS), to the Mahibadhoo harbour arson case of April 15. Assistant Commissioner of Police Mohamed Riyaz revealed that the five speedboats and two dinghies docked at Mahibadhoo, Alif Dhaal Atoll, were set ablaze by a group of people that arrived at the island via a dinghy in the early hours of April 15. ([Edition](#))

PAKISTAN



Despite some corruption charges against some cabinet ministers in the Imran Khan government, the PM managed to get control over the situation by undertaking a timely reshuffle in the cabinet. However, one of the significant challenges before the Imran Khan government was how to balance between mismanaging an increasing number of COVID-19 related issues and demands from the religious leaders to allow the mosques for religious gathering during Ramadan period.

From the security point of view, both Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) witnessed augmented militant activities along with the increase in COVID-19 related issues. The security forces received strong local resistance in Baluchistan because Baloch's felt that in the pretext of controlling the COVID-19 cases, the Imran Khan government has been trying to use forces against the Baloch rebels.

While Pakistan appealed for peace in neighbouring Afghanistan, at the same time, it does not want to have an early order in that region to keep its importance in the US' foreign policy in Central and South Asia. Pakistan may not be happy with the US' push for India's role in Afghanistan in post-US' troop withdrawal period. Instead, it will prefer to growing Chinese presence in that region.

MAJOR EVENTS

April 04: The Azad Jammu and Kashmir President Sardar Masood Khan criticised India in a statement that 'The Indian government must abandon its policy to make Kashmir its colony, and resolve the Kashmir issue following the wishes and aspirations of the Kashmiri people in the light of the UN Security Council resolutions.' ([Pakistan Observer](#))

April 05: A case has been registered against former Lal Masjid cleric Maulana Abdul Aziz and six others for disobeying a government order, spreading fear and inciting people against the state. According to the police, Aziz gathered people at Lal Masjid for Friday prayers despite a ban on prayer congregations imposed to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. ([Dawn](#))

April 10: Pakistan has demanded the hand over ISIS Khurasan leader who was recently arrested by the Afghan intelligence forces. The National Directorate of Security (NDS) in a statement said last week that the Special Forces of the directorate conducted a complex operation and arrested Abdullah Orakizai alias Aslam Farooqi, the leader of ISIS Khurasan. The statement further added that the NDS Special Forces also arrested 19 other top ISIS commanders during the raid including Qari Zahid and Saifullah alias Abu Talha Pakistani. ([The Khaamas Press](#))

April 11: Afghanistan has turned down Pakistan's request to hand over Aslam Farooqi, the Islamic State regional chief who according to Afghan authorities was captured in connection with a recent bombing at a Sikh gurdwara and several other terrorist attacks. ([Express Tribune](#)).

April 19: Four alleged militants belonging to Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) were arrested during an operation in the densely populated Gulistan-i-Jauhar area. The cell was apparently planning to launch terrorist attacks targeting the Pakistan Stock Exchange, City Courts and other public buildings in Karachi. An unspecified number of weapons were seized. ([Dawn](#))

April 21: According to a US media report, Pakistan removes 1,800 terrorists from terrorist watch list, including that of the 2008 Mumbai attack mastermind and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) 'operations commander' Zaki-ur-

Rehman Lakhvi. The newspaper claimed that the list which in 2018 contained about 7,600 names, has been reduced to under 3,800 in the past 18 months. About 1,800 of the names have been removed since the beginning of March 2020, according to data collected by Castellum. AI, a New York-based regulatory technology company. ([The News](#)).



April 23: The Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) expressed concern over the agreement reached between the state and the ulema about opening up of mosques for daily congregational prayers and Taraweeh during Ramazan and termed it “confusing” and “beyond any logic”. PPP’s central information secretary and MNA from Khairpur Dr Nafisa Shah in a statement declared that Prime Minister Imran Khan “will be held responsible if more lives are lost due to Covid-19 in the country”. ([Dawn](#))

April 22: Extremist and pro-jihadist group Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) has said that the Pakistani top civil and military leaderships are trying to woo their colonial masters for getting monetary relief. It added that Pakistan could effectively cope with the economic fallout from the novel coronavirus [Covid-19] pandemic. The Hizb ut-Tahrir's comment came after Prime Minister (PM) Imran Khan appealed to the international donors for providing debt relief to the developing countries. A commentary on the Hizb ut-Tahrir's website stated that Prime Minister Imran Khan and Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa would have called for the outright rejection of loan repayments if the Pakistani regime was sincere to the Muslims. ([HuT/Press Release](#))

SRI LANKA



The political stalemate over the parliamentary elections continued. The opposition parties demanded that the proposed election date should be postponed. Some opposition leaders have appealed before the Supreme Court to defer the proposed time. The leaders of opposition parties assured cooperation and urged President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to reconvene the Parliament to effectively face the challenge of COVID-19. The leaders of seven opposition parties including the main United National Party (UNP) issued a statement, not to draw any salary or attempt to defeat or thwart any of the government’s legitimate actions during this critical time. The opposition parties demanded this because earlier the Chairman of the National Election Commission postponed the elections till June 20 due to the Coronavirus pandemic. The election was earlier scheduled for April 25.

The minorities of Sri Lanka, especially the Muslim, feel insecure after arrests of more persons in the Easter attack incident recently. Even the Human Rights Watch (HRW) expressed concerns over recent arrests of Muslims. It said that Sri Lankan authorities should uphold due process rights and ensure that recently detained Muslim figures have proper access to lawyers. The Parliament elections are going to be a major issue in Sri Lanka in the post-COVID-19 period. Before this, the Gotabaya could adopt more anti-minority politics to appease majority Sinhalese voters for winning in the Parliament with thumping majority. Gotabaya’s party used similar tactics during the Presidential Elections.

MAJOR EVENTS

April 02: Two more suspected militants were arrested over Easter Sunday attack case and presently under interrogations. The police official said to the media that these two suspects were arrested following the questioning of the main suspect arrested over the suicide bomb attack on Zion Church in Batticaloa. One of the suspects, a resident of Gothatuwa, had involved in the attack on Cinnamon Grand hotel in Colombo and transported the suicide bomber to the hotel. The second suspect, resident of Mattakkuliya allegedly involved in the bomb attack of St. Anthony's Church in Kochchikade ([Daily Mirror](#)).

April 02: The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) has written to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa expressing its deep concern over the presidential pardon to former Army Corporal Sunil Ratnayake, who was convicted of killing eight civilians including three children. The HRCSL, in its letter to the President, said the granting of a presidential pardon to a person convicted and whose conviction was upheld unanimously by the Supreme Court sends a negative message that reinforces allegations of impunity and lack of justice for victims of violations in Sri Lanka. ([Colombopage](#))

April 12: President Gotabaya Rajapaksa recalling the “sorrowful memory of pain and loss”, said that his Government is committed to ensuring justice for the people who suffered. In a message to mark the celebration of Easter Sunday, the President said the Government is determined to ensure complete eradication of such tragedies from the country. ([Colombo Page](#)).

April 15: Total 197 suspects have been arrested so far for April 2019 Easter Sunday attack in Sri Lanka. Police Spokesman Jaliya Senaratne said that among those arrested were Riyad Bathuideen, brother of former Minister Rishad Bathuideen, and Attorney-at-Law Hejaaz Hisbullah. He also said that according to investigations, Riyad had had close connections with one suicide bomber. He had held discussions with the bomber in a hotel too. He added that the six suspects held positions at various welfare organizations and had funded the terror organisations. ([Daily News/MSN/ Colombo Page](#)).

April 21: Sri Lanka marks one year since Easter bombings that killed more than 250 people. The attacks were carried out by suicide bombers at three churches and three hotels in western and eastern Sri Lanka and later claimed by the Islamic State (IS) group. The police disclosed that the latest probes into the Easter Sunday attacks had revealed a second attack, which was planned following the 2019 bombings on April 21. ([Daily FT](#)).

April 22: The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) raised concerns about the arbitrary arrest and detention of lawyer Hejaaz Hizbullah in the conduct of their investigation of the Easter Sunday bombings. Lawyer Hejaaz Hizbullah was arrested by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) on April 14, according to the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and has since been kept in detention. ([Tamil Guardian](#); [ICJ](#))

April 23: Sri Lanka's police spokesman SP Jaliya Senaratne said that there was irrefutable evidence to link Hejaaz Hisbullah. He had been recently taken into custody by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), in connection with the April 2019 Easter Sunday suicide bombings. Responding to criticism of the lawyer's arrest, Senaratne told that Hisbullah had been taken in on charges of conspiracy and aiding and abetting in the Easter Sunday carnage, after comprehensive investigation. ([Lanka Web](#))

April 23: The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) has called upon the Sri Lankan authorities to respect human rights in the conduct of their investigation of the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings. It includes ensuring that investigations into the alleged involvement of Sri Lankan lawyer, Hejaaz Hizbullah, are conducted following due process and fair trial guarantees under international law. The lawyer was arrested by the Criminal Investigation Department of the Police (CID) on April 14, 2020, according to the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and has since been kept in detention. ([Colombopage](#))

April 24: The Human Rights Watch (HRW), has expressed concerns over Sri Lanka's due process in recent arrests of Muslims. It urged Sri Lankan authorities to uphold due process and ensure that recently detained Muslim figures including Attorney-at-Law, Hejaaz Hisbullah, have proper access to lawyers. He was one of six people, including the brother of a former Minister and a customs official, whom Police recently detained for their alleged involvement in the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings. Ramzy Razeek, a retired Government official who has a following on Facebook, was arrested on April 09 after decrying religious discrimination in a social media post. ([HRW](#); [Tamil Guardian](#)).

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.

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