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Weekend Express

Sri Lanka's International Newspaper

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Sunlight could explain glaring differences in COVID-19 death numbers

DUBLIN - Data from hard-hit countries such as Britain, Italy and the United States suggest sunnier areas "are associated with fewer deaths from COVID-19," according to scientists at the University of Edinburgh.

Published in the British Journal of Dermatology, the study said "higher ambient UVA [ultraviolet A radiation] exposure" is "associated with lower COVID-19 specific mortality."

The team compared deaths linked to COVID-19 in the US from January to April 2020 with UV levels for almost 2,500 US counties, before replicating the methodology for Britain and Italy. The three countries have reported some of the world's highest pandemic-related death numbers, both per capita and absolute, though fatalities dropped significantly during the summer months. Most countries in Asia and Africa have reported relatively low deaths per capita throughout the pandemic.

Paper co-author Chris Dibben said, "The relationship between COVID-19 mortality, season and latitude has been quite striking; here we offer an alternative explanation for this phenomenon." The researchers said they controlled for the possible impact of Vitamin D, which has been widely cited as a COVID-19 inhibitor and is called "the sunshine vitamin" due to the human body producing more of it when skin is exposed to sunlight.

"Sun exposure may reduce death from COVID-19 independently of vitamin D," the team said.

Other recent findings have lent weight to the theory that time spent outdoors diminishes the likelihood of Covid illness.

Irish health officials said on Monday only 0.1% of all the country's coronavirus cases could be linked to outdoor activity, much of which is nonetheless banned under the current third pandemic lockdown.

-dpa

Myanmar actor arrested as junta hunts 120 celebrities

YANGON - A leading Myanmar actor, singer and model who has backed the country's anti-coup protests was arrested on Thursday (8), his sister said, as the junta hunts more than 100 celebrities for supporting the movement.

The country has been rocked by daily protests since the military seized power on February 1, and the authorities have launched a bloody crackdown on dissent, with hundreds killed and more than 2,500 arrested.

Paing Takhon, 24 - a star in both Myanmar and neighbouring Thailand - has been active in the protest movement both in person at rallies and through his massive social media following.

"Some 50 soldiers with eight military trucks," came to arrest him from his mother's home in the North Dagon area of Yangon early Thursday, his sister Thi Thi Lwin posted on Facebook.

"As he's seriously ill, they arrested him calmly without violence. We do not know where he's taken," she added.

According to recent posts on his social media - where he had more than a million followers on Facebook and Instagram - Paing Takhon has been in poor health. However, his social media pages have been taken down, though it is not clear whether he did this himself. The Myanmar authorities have published a list of some 120 celebrities wanted for arrest, including singers Lin Lin and Chit Thu Wai, actors Phway Phway, Eindra Kyaw Zin and Pyay Ti Oo and model May Myat Noe. The celebrities are facing accusations of spreading dissent against the military, an offence that carries a three year jail term if convicted.

-AFP

Biden takes initial steps to address gun violence

WASHINGTON - President Joe Biden, calling gun violence in the United States "an international embarrassment", took a set of initial steps on Thursday (8) to address the problem, starting with a crackdown on the proliferation of so-called ghost guns, or firearms assembled from kits.

Acknowledging that more aggressive actions like banning assault weapons, closing background check loopholes and stripping gun manufacturers of their immunity from liability lawsuits would have to wait for action from Congress, he said it was nonetheless vital to do what he could on his own to confront what he called an epidemic of shootings that are killing roughly 100 Americans a day.

"We've got a long way to go - it seems like we always have a long way to go," Biden said during an appearance in the Rose Garden, after a spate of mass shootings, in Georgia, Colorado, Texas and South Carolina left 24 people dead and put the administration under intense pressure from the left to take action.

While the moves the president announced fall far short of the broad legislative changes long sought by proponents of making it harder to buy guns, especially semi-automatic weapons often used in mass shootings, they addressed narrower issues also of intense concern to many Democrats and supporters of gun regulations. The most substantive of the steps was directing the Justice Department to curb the spread of ghost guns. Kits for these guns can be bought without background checks and allow a gun to be assembled from pieces with no serial numbers.

Biden said he wanted the department to issue a regulation within a month to require that the components in the kits have serial numbers that would allow them to be traced and that the weapons be legally classified as firearms, with the buyers subjected to background checks.

-NYT



-Piero Cruciani/AFP/Getty Images

A farmer walks past apple trees that are covered with a layer of ice, after being artificially watered to protect them from the frost, at an orchard in La Palazzetta, Italy on Thursday (8). The ice coating is supposed to protect the delicate blossoms from cold temperatures and spring freezes that

have hit Italy this week following above-average temperatures just a few days earlier. Authorities said the frost had cut agricultural production in some areas by almost half, affecting apricots, peaches, strawberries, kiwis and some vegetables. While some farmers are freezing their crops, others

are lighting bonfires overnight to warm them, at some cost. Climate events including flooding and rapid shifts between sunshine and bad weather have hit national agricultural production and caused structural damage, causing losses of some 14 billion euros over a decade

Israel says will not cooperate with ICC war crimes probe

JERUSALEM - Israel on Thursday (8) said it had formally decided not to cooperate with an International Criminal Court (ICC) war crimes investigation into the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories.

The ICC's chief prosecutor announced on March 3 that she had opened a full investigation into the situation in the Israeli-occupied territories, infuriating Israel, which is not a member of The Hague-based court.

The ICC sent a deferral notice on March 9, which gave Israel and the Palestinian Authority a month to tell judges whether they are investigating crimes similar to those being probed by the ICC.

Had Israel informed the court that it was in fact carrying out its own probe into alleged war crimes perpetrators, it could

have asked for a deferral. A day before the deadline, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office issued a statement saying the government had agreed "to not cooperate with the (ICC)".

The statement said Israel would send a letter to the court "completely rejecting the claim that Israel commits war crimes".

The letter will also "reiterate Israel's unequivocal position that The Hague tribunal has no authority to open an investigation against it". The Palestinians, who have been a state party to the ICC since 2015, have welcomed the investigation and said they will not seek any deferral.

The world's only permanent war crimes tribunal, the ICC was set up in 2002 to try the humanity's worst crimes where local courts are unwilling or unable to step in.

ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda has said her investigation will cover the situation in the blockaded Gaza Strip along with the Israeli-occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem since 2014.

It will mainly focus on the 2014 Gaza War but also look at the deaths of Palestinian demonstrators from 2018 onwards.

Netanyahu, a vocal critic of the ICC, has said the decision to open the probe was the "essence of anti-Semitism" and declared Israel was "under attack".

However, Thursday's statement marked the first time Netanyahu had made it clear Israel would not directly engage with the ICC. The United States has also criticized the ICC investigation and voiced support for its ally Israel.

-AFP

Trending News

UK: Britain condemns "bullying" by the Myanmar junta after the country's ambassador to London was ousted in an extraordinary diplomatic coup.

Jordan: The kingdom is set to mark 100 years of survival, as the worst palace crisis in decades and the coronavirus pandemic threaten to overshadow any celebrations.

Iran: Tehran releases a South Korean-flagged tanker it seized amid a dispute over billions in frozen oil funds, and the vessel's captain.

USA: One person was dead and several in critical condition following a shooting at a business in Texas, just hours after President Joe Biden called gun violence an "epidemic" and unveiled plans to tackle the crisis.

Chile: The country's fisheries and aquaculture service says more than 4,200

tons of salmon have fallen victim to killer alga in the latest mass mortality event recorded in the world's second largest producer of salmon.

Australia: Canberra joins a growing number of countries halting the use of the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine for younger people over fears it can cause serious blood clots.

Turkey/EU: Turkey and the EU blame each other for seating arrangements that left European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen without a chair during a meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Ukraine: The US says it is increasingly concerned over Russian militarization along the country's border, as president Volodymyr Zelensky travels to the eastern frontline

Quote for Today

We are going to have peace even if we have to fight for it.

-Dwight D. Eisenhower

Word for Today

Cupidity [kyoo-pid-i-tee] -noun- eager or excessive desire, especially to possess something; greed

Today in History

2003 - Baghdad falls to US forces, ending the Invasion of Iraq, but results in widespread looting

Today is...

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BUSINESS

Govt. seeks Middle East funds to beef up BOP

COLOMBO – Sri Lanka is in a mission to the Middle East to secure funding to buffer the island's external payments, Central Bank Governor W. D. Lakshman said, as the island's balance of payments (BOP) was pressured by money printing.

"The present visit is to the Middle Eastern region and I think there would be more positivity within the next few weeks," Governor of Central Bank Lakshman told reporters in Colombo on Thursday (8).

Sri Lanka has fixed oil fuel prices in a long standing practice that hits the balance of payments with taxes being cut to widen non-oil consumption as global prices rise.

Meanwhile, Governor Lakshman said for upcoming bond repayments more non-debt inflows are expected but there were also contingency plans including the US\$ 1.5 billion equivalent Renminbi swap.

A billion dollar Sovereign Bond is set to mature in July, while a US\$ 693 million Development Bond held mostly by domestic investors is set to mature in May.

In March Sri Lanka's forex reserves dropped to US\$ 4.1 billion from US\$ 4.58 billion a month earlier amid liquidity injections.

Sri Lanka is expecting to finalize a US\$ 700 million loan from the China Development Bank shortly.

"There is a much delayed loan facility also coming from China Development Bank and there are positive signals for this to be realized soon," Lakshman said.

Central Bank officials also met Bangladesh Central Bank Governor as part of a delegation that accompanied Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa to the neighbouring country.

"In visits like this they would not provide concrete numbers but we are currently proceeding with the required discussions which will be followed up by a visit to conclude the agreement," he said.

He said an increase in foreign direct investment would increase non-debt

flows, but for contingencies there had to be some loans and swaps.

Analysts however say FDI does not belong to the government and in order to get hold of any dollar proceeds flowing to parties other than the State, either they have to be taxed or the government has to sell Treasury bills to take the savings from the banking system, pre-empting private credit.

But Sri Lanka's Central Bank has been injecting large volumes of liquidity to push credit and has also been financing the budget deficit with printed money ripping the balance of payments apart.

-economynext.com

Sri Lanka

Forex reserves drop to US\$ 4.1bn in March 2021

COLOMBO – Sri Lanka's forex reserves dropped to US\$ 4.1 billion in March 2021 from US\$ 4,583 million in February, the Central Bank said, as liquidity injections continued.

Sri Lanka's external sector "remains resilient despite some near term challenges," the Central Bank said in its April monetary policy statement where the policy corridor was kept unchanged at 5.5% to inject new money overnight and 4.5% to withdraw excess liquidity.

The rupee has also fallen below 200 to the US dollar.

"Although the Sri Lankan rupee experienced some volatility recently, the continuation of the existing restrictions on non-essential imports and certain foreign exchange outflows, among others, is expected to help cushion pressures in the domestic foreign exchange market," the Central Bank said.

"Gross official reserves were estimated at US\$ 4.1 billion (excluding the swap facility with the PBOC), with an import cover of 3 months, at end March 2021." The statement came as the Central Bank as agent to the Finance Ministry failed to sell 48% of a Rs 45 billion Treasuries auction.

During the week more liquidity has been injected through outright bill purchases.

"Meanwhile, the Central Bank and the government continue to engage with investment and lending partners to secure foreign financing and remain committed to honouring foreign currency debt service obligations on time," the statement said. Sri Lanka has said it has already paid US\$ 1.2 billion of US\$ 5.8 billion of maturing dollar denominated loans this year.

-economynext.com

US targets Myanmar gem company, seeking to deprive funding

MYANMAR - The United States on Thursday (8) slapped sanctions on Myanmar's state gem company, vowing to deprive the military junta of a key money-maker as it violently suppresses democracy protests.

The Treasury Department said it would block all assets and ban any transactions with the Myanmar Gems Enterprise, which manages the mining and marketing of the country's jade and other gemstones.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the United States was determined alongside allies to restore democracy and promote accountability in the country formerly known as Burma. "By imposing targeted sanctions on this entity, we are sending a clear signal to the military that the United States will keep increasing pressure on the regime's revenue streams until it ceases its violence," Blinken said in a statement. He said the United States would turn up the heat until the junta "releases all those unjustly detained, lifts martial law and the nationwide state of emergency, removes telecommunications restrictions and restores Burma to the path of democracy."

The announcement comes in the midst of a gem emporium called by the junta in

the capital Naypyidaw, with the ousted ruling National League of Democracy warning businesses not to participate. The State-run New Light of Myanmar reported Thursday that the emporium on its sixth day alone sold close to \$2.5 million worth of jade. Myanmar sold 825 million euros (\$980 million) in gems and jade through emporiums in 2017-2018, according to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, which promotes openness on natural resource exports. But 60 to 80% of gemstones from Myanmar are not declared, the initiative said in a 2016 study. Myanmar suspended gem emporiums last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The United States has already imposed targeted sanctions on leaders of the military who seized power on February 1, arresting civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi and launching a crackdown in which more than 500 people have died.

The latest action stops short of returning to a total US ban on the sale of Myanmar's prized jade and rubies as was in place when the military was last in power.

-AFP

Pakistani dates introduced to Sri Lanka



COLOMBO – Pakistani dates were introduced to the local market on Thursday (8), with a promotional event hosted by the Pakistani High Commission in Colombo. A number of leading importers of dates, as well as government officials from Department of Commerce and Export Development Board in Sri Lanka attended the event, which saw a variety of delicacies made with Pakistani dates being served. The event was organized by the High Commission of Pakistan, in collaboration with Ministry of Commerce and Trade Development Authority of Pakistan (TDAP).

High Commissioner Maj. Gen (Retd.) Muhammad Saad Khattak, highlighted the Government of Pakistan's policy of introducing non-traditional products such as dates through a diversified marketing approach, and urged Sri Lankan importers and business persons to choose Pakistan as their primary destination for sourcing high-quality dates at competitive prices. Asma Kamal, Trade & Investment Attaché, who delivered a detailed presentation on Pakistan's dates and its export potential, noted that Pakistan is ranked at 6th in dates production with an annual production of around 540,000 and ranked 8th for dates exports, in the world. She also highlighted the ongoing efforts for promotion of Pakistani dates by TDAP and the High Commission in Colombo, which had resulted in a sharp uptick in export volume to Sri Lanka in 2020.

-ENCL

Infotainment

Avurudu comfort for chic kids

Tropic of Linen (TOL), Sri Lanka's much loved luxury linen brand, has released its adorable Avurudu kids' collection, with cute 'redde & hatte' sets for little girls, and smart sarong-shirt combos for little boys. Designed with style and comfort for children aged 1-8 years, this year's line features vibrant and whimsical themes for every child's unique personality.

The kids Avurudu outfits have been created keeping ease-of-wear and use in mind. The chic cuts of the girls' 'hatte' tops that feature peek-a-boo heart shapes or crisscross backs, are complemented beautifully with pretty and playful 'redde' skirts in floral, nautical or tropical prints. These tops have also been thoughtfully designed for life beyond the season, and can be worn as cute crop-tops when paired with shorts, skirts, trousers, or pinafores. This versatility as well as adjustable waistbands are what make this collection one of the most comfortable options available.

For the mini gentlemen, Tropic of Linen has brought back their classic boys' shirts and tunics, featuring an assortment of collar types and long or short sleeve options to choose from – perfect for pairing with the many fun and dapper sarongs on offer.

Stay safe as you head out this festive season with TOL's elegant triple layer linen masks for kids and adults.



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IMF warns more funding needed to safeguard global economy

WASHINGTON - Warning that the recovery from the pandemic crisis is not yet over, the IMF on Thursday (8) called on policymakers to continue to spend money to shore up the global economy and ensure no one is left behind. Without that aid, and additional financing from both the fund and the World Bank, developing nations and the poor in many countries could struggle to rebound from the downturn caused by COVID-19, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said at the conclusion of its spring meeting.

Continued support is needed to "mitigate and heal economic scars," IMF managing director Kristalina Georgieva told reporters. "We want to make sure everybody has a fair shot to a better life." That means accelerating access to vaccines and taking advantage of the opportunity presented by the crisis to invest in green technology, which can create good paying jobs and address climate change.

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen joined the call, urging "significant" new spending to ensure a solid rebound from the damage inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the economic outlook has "improved significantly," especially due to substantial government support, "the job is not yet done, given high uncertainty and the risk of permanent scarring," Yellen said.

"I urge major economies to not just avoid removing support too early, but to strive to provide significant amounts of new fiscal support to secure a robust recovery," she said.

The IMF now projects global growth of 6% this year after the 3.3% contraction last year, and credited the \$16 trillion in global public spending during the pandemic with keeping the worst peacetime recession in a century from being three times as severe.

Yellen highlighted the \$1.9 trillion US aid package President Joe Biden signed last month, as well as his proposal announced last week to spend \$2 trillion on infrastructure and jobs.

Yellen said that with stimulus already boosting the recovery from the pandemic shutdowns, the US economy "could reach full employment as soon as next year," but many developing countries do not have similar resources to support their economies.

Georgieva warned about a "dangerous divergence" in low-income countries' prospects compared to rich nations, which could worsen if advanced economies like the United States raise interest rates sooner than expected.

She also praised the IMF members who agreed to allow the fund to issue \$650 billion in new Special Drawing Rights, an additional pool of IMF currency that will add to nations' reserves and boost their ability to access financing. The IMF is expected to present a proposal to its board in June, and Georgieva said the fund is working with rich nations to shift some of their share of those reserves to help aid developing nations, which "face a crucial policy transition from crisis to recovery."

The officials again stressed that ending the health crisis remains central to the economic recovery, and the closing statement from the IMFC, the fund's steering committee, lamented the "uneven access to vaccines."

The committee emphasized "the need for strong international cooperation to accelerate vaccine production and support affordable and equitable distribution to all." Yellen pledged US support for vaccine rollouts, including efforts to "make sure financing does not become an obstacle for global vaccination... and to work toward ensuring robust, equitable, and transparent vaccination deployment."

The crisis offers policymakers a vehicle to capitalize on the need for investments to accelerate green projects that can provide good-paying jobs.

"Government efforts to support the recovery need to take advantage of the opportunity to accelerate the transition towards a low-carbon economy and limit the long-term threat from climate change," said Angel Gurría, head of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Georgieva said those investments could create jobs in growing industries to replace those lost in sectors that are shrinking.

"Climate risks are growing, and they are substantial for macroeconomic and financial stability, climate action can generate green growth and green jobs," she said. The IMF and World Bank have also announced plans to intensify the focus on green investment and climate-friendly aspects of their lending programs.

-AFP

GLOCAL

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Reigning Mrs World released on bail over incident at Sri Lanka pageant

COLOMBO - Reigning Mrs World Caroline Jurie was released on bail after being arrested earlier on Thursday (8) on charges of using 'criminal force' during a fracas at the Mrs Sri Lanka pageant over the weekend.

The winner of the Mrs Sri Lanka pageant, Pushpika De Silva, filed a complaint against Jurie, after she forcibly removed De Silva's crown saying she was a divorcee and not qualified to win the title.

Jurie was arrested when she came to a police station to record her statement, Deputy Inspector General Ajith Rohana, said, adding that she was later released on bail.

Jurie's accomplice on stage, Chula Manamendra, named a co-accused, was also arrested and released on police bail. Rohana said she has been asked to appear in court on April 19, adding that both Jurie and Manamendra, a self-styled 'super model' had used criminal force on De Silva while yanking her crown and causing injuries to her scalp.

"We have released them subject to personal surety bail," Rohana said. Jurie forced the crown out of De Silva after a stunning announcement that she was not qualified to hold the title of Mrs. Sri Lanka 2020 because "she was divorced". De Silva had said she was living separately but not divorced. The crown was returned to De Silva on Tues-

day (6) at a news conference, after pageant organizers confirmed she was not a divorcee and apologized to her.

The official Mrs World Instagram account acknowledged De Silva's victory in a brief post with her photo on Tuesday.

The ugly scenes unfolded at the packed Nelum Pokuna performing arts theatre and in front of a live social media audience on Sunday (4) evening. The fracas broke out after chief guest Shiranthi Rajapaksa, the wife of the Prime Minister, had left the venue.

Jurie and Manamendra were accused of disrupting the high profile event and causing disrepute to Sri Lanka with what many saw as unbecoming behaviour.

The winner of the Mrs Sri Lanka contest goes on to compete in the Mrs World contest. Jurie, who won that competition in 2020 in Las Vegas, told media she will speak later.

De Silva meanwhile told reporters outside the Cinnamon Gardens police station in Colombo Thursday that she was ready to drop charges if Jurie made a public apology, but she had refused.

"I tried to end this out of court, but she has refused," De Silva said. "I can forgive, but not forget."

Organizers said they were claiming compensation from Jurie for damages to the stage and backstage dressing



-LAKRUWAN WANNIARACHCHI / AFP

Former Mrs. Sri Lanka 2019 and current Miss World Caroline Jurie (2L) leaves Cinnamon Gardens Police Station, Colombo, after being released on bail on Thursday (8) following her arrest on charges of assault over an on-stage fracas in which she pulled the crown off the head of the new 'Mrs Sri Lanka'

rooms where several mirrors had been smashed. Jurie has also been accused by organizers of bringing disrepute to the event.

The local franchise holder for the pageant, Chandimal Jayasinghe, said they were "deeply disturbed

and sincerely regret" the behaviour of Jurie. Social media calls have been mounting to strip Jurie of her 'Mrs World' title, with one meme calling for her to be rebranded as 'Mrs Under World'.

-Agencies/economynext.com

Govt. in talks to acquire seven million doses of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine

COLOMBO - Sri Lanka plans to purchase seven million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine next year, and discussions are under way with multiple manufacturers to acquire more vaccines, the Minister of Health told Parliament on Thursday (8).

Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi said officials were engaged in discussions with Pfizer Inc through the US Embassy in Sri Lanka with a view to signing purchase agreements.

"If the deal goes through, the vaccines will arrive next year," she said.

"We are also talking to Moderna and Johnson & Johnson through the embassy and, if the companies agree, we will sign agreements with them as well," she added.

The Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine is one of the two pioneering jabs the World

Health Organization (WHO) approved for emergency use, the other being the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine that is currently being used in Sri Lanka. The country uses the Covishield branded version of the AstraZeneca vaccine manufactured by the Serum Institute of India.

Minister Wanniarachchi said 924,687 people have been vaccinated from January 29 to April 6 and another 356,730 doses are in storage to be administered as the second dose from April 23 to June 06.

"We need 568,000 more doses of Covishield and we hope to receive another consignment of 500,000 from Serum after we restart the rollout on April 23," she explained.

-economynext.com

India-Sri Lanka agree to work together against terrorist entities

COLOMBO - India and Sri Lanka on Thursday (8) agreed to work jointly against terrorist entities including global terrorist groups and fugitives, wherever they are present and active, while emphasizing the need for sharing of real time intelligence and feedback.

The agreement was made during the first ever delegation level virtual Police Chiefs' Dialogue between the Police Chiefs of India and Sri Lanka, in what the Indian High Commission in Colombo said was a cordial and constructive environment that was "a hallmark of close and friendly relation between the two countries."

The Indian delegation was led by Director, Intelligence Bureau, while Sri Lankan delegation was by the Inspector General of Police.

A statement from the High Commission said police chiefs, while appreciating each other's ongoing action against drug traffickers and other organized criminals exploiting the narrow sea route between the two countries, also decided to strengthen the existing cooperation mechanisms, and designate 'nodal points' for timely and effective handling of existing as well as emerging security challenges.

It said the institution of Police Chief's Dialogue, assisted by the members of other security agencies on both the sides, will further enhance the existing cooperation between the police forces of both the countries and assist their efforts to ensure security of their people.

-ENCL

US envoy warns

Sri Lanka should be vigilant against 'nefarious actors' at China-backed Colombo Port City

COLOMBO - Sri Lanka has to be vigilant against unintended consequences of 'nefarious actors' who may try to misuse a China-backed Colombo Port City easy business rules as a permissive money laundering haven and tax leaks, US Ambassador Alaina Teplitz warned on Thursday (8).

Sri Lanka has unveiled draft legislation for a Colombo Port City Commission which allows for sweeping tax breaks, tax free salaries and to be an offshore financial centre.

Teplitz warned the Colombo Port City's planned ease of doing business rules may be perceived as a haven for money laundering. "Any legislation relating to port city has to be considered very carefully for its economic impact," she told reporters in Colombo in an online discussion.

"It also has to be considered very, very, carefully for unintended consequences. And of course among those unintended consequences could be creating a haven for money launderers and other sort of nefarious actors to take advantage of what was perceived as a permissive business environment for activities that would actually be illegal."

The Colombo Port City however would not be exempt from Sri Lanka's anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing law which was enacted under Western backed UN initiative.

Teplitz also warned against the Colombo Port City becoming a source of tax leaks, as the agency running the Port City would have extensive powers to exempt businesses from taxes of up to 40 years, though it is not a tax haven in the traditional sense.

Sri Lanka's tax revenues have plunged in 2020, she said raising concerns over debt and the fiscal path, credit downgrades and the ability of the government to provide vital public services to the people, while managing loss making state enterprises.

"I do recognize that the government of Sri Lanka wants to take advantage of the investment that has already been made in creating the Port City foundation," she said, but cautioned that the legislation really needs to be reflected to address the challenges and to be careful of what it might be to open doors to bad practice and unfair competition for the rest of the country."

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Temperamental weather forecast heavy rainfall amid extreme heat

COLOMBO - The sun will continue to shine directly above Sri Lanka till April 14 resulting in extreme heat, even as the rest of the island is forecast to experience heavy rainfall, the department of meteorology said.

High temperatures were recorded in Bolawatta, Wedeniya, Wattarama, Ambagamuwa, Digana, Mahawala, Galgamuwa, Ampara and Oluvil at 12:12 p.m. on Thursday (8).

"The sun, on its apparent march from the southern hemisphere to the northern hemisphere, will be directly over the latitudes of Sri Lanka from April 5 to 14," the Met Department said on its blog.

The phenomenon occurs twice a year: in March-April and August-September. This means from August 28 to September 7 this year the sun will again move directly above Sri Lanka's altitudes.

Sri Lankans have been experiencing extreme caution-level heat over the past several days.

Meanwhile, the National Water Supply and Drainage Board (NWSDB) requested the public to preserve water in the coming days due to prevailing drought conditions across the country.

NWSDB officials said the high temperatures as well as increased water consumption during the Avurudu festive season

makes it difficult for board to continue the same level of water supply.

People who live in higher elevations may experience low-pressure supply, the board said.

However, the intense heat notwithstanding, the met department has predicted thunderstorms and gusty winds in the days ahead.

In an advisory issued on Thursday, the Department recommended precautionary measures to minimize damage from temporary localized strong winds and lightning during thundershowers.

-economynext.com

By Imesh Ranasinghe

Pandemonium in Parliament over Ranjan's seat

COLOMBO - Pandemonium reigned in Parliament for a second day running on Thursday (8), as a heated exchange between Opposition MP, Field Marshal Sarath Fonseka, and former speaker Chamal Rajapaksa, escalated to name-calling, while fellow lawmakers traded colourful diatribes amidst a din caused by an impromptu musical rendition.

Speaker Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena suspended proceedings for five minutes as the chaotic back-and-forth reached fever pitch, with government and opposition MPs heckling each other over Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) MP Ranjan Ramanayake's freshly and controversially vacated seat.

Tensions rose as the Speaker told Parliament Thursday morning that the Secretary General of Parliament had acted in accordance with the Constitution when he informed the National Election Commission on Wednesday (7) that Ramanayake's seat had been rendered vacant owing to his extended absence.

Ramanayake is currently serving a four-year prison sentence over charges of contempt of court. The actor-turned-politician is accused of making disparaging remarks about the judiciary at a press conference in 2017.

Last week the Court of Appeal dismissed a petition filed by the Gampaha district MP seeking a writ order preventing the annulment of his parliamentary seat. The court held there was no legal basis in the petition.

Speaker Abeywardena, SJB parliamentarians have repeatedly alleged, had declined multiple requests from the party to allow Ramanayake to attend Parliament.

Responding to the Speaker's statement on Thursday, Opposition and SJB leader Sajith Premadasa said Ramanayake will be challenging the Court of Appeal's decision in the Supreme Court and urged the Speaker to recognise his colleague's right to contest the Appeal Court's decision.

"Ranjan has every right to appeal the decision and until the appeal process commences and an ultimate final verdict is provided by the Supreme Court, [he should retain his seat]," he said. "It is the decent thing to do, and it is the right thing to do, to ensure that he remains a Member of Parliament. Why are you all in a hurry to send this letter (to the Election Commission)? When we proposed a leave of absence, you were very quick to point out that the motion would be denied since a court case was ongoing," he said.

The Speaker maintained that the opposition's argument was baseless as the Parliament's secretary general's letter to the Election Commission was in line with the Court of Appeal decision and was not a violation of the Constitution. He recommended the SJB take another course of action instead.

"Without arguing and wasting time here, you should perhaps get an injunction order against the Election Commission," he told Premadasa, who retorted, "It's okay for a person who has been convicted of murder to enter Parliament - and I do believe that that member has the right to appeal, but that same right is not afforded to Ranjan Ramanayake. And you tell me that my argument is baseless," adding, "If you're interested in supporting the agenda of the government, of course you can say it is baseless."

Premadasa was referring to government MP Premalal Jayasekara, who was in death row for a murder allegedly committed in 2015 of a United National Party (UNP) supporter, and was sworn in as an MP in the 9th Parliament amid opposition protest. The Court of Appeal issued an interim order in September last year permitting the MP to attend parliamentary sittings. Responding to Premadasa, the Speaker said Jayasekara had filed a writ petition before the Court of Appeal asking for relief, an option he said is still available to Ramanayake.

"Let him go to courts and get himself cleared," he said.

"If you accept his right of appeal, why are you denying his Parliament membership? You are denying him a human right," charged Premadasa, to which the Speaker asked him not to mislead the country.

Premadasa claimed of a conspiracy within the House with the knowledge of the Speaker and government MPs to get rid of Ramanayake, an outspoken MP known for his controversial speeches in Parliament.

Field Marshall Sarath Fonseka recalling his own experience of fighting for his parliamentary seat in 2010 claimed that then Speaker Chamal Rajapaksa had tried to prevent him from entering Parliament during the eight months he was in jail, despite filing appeals in three separate courts.

The allegation was hotly denied by Rajapaksa, who counter claimed, "I was the one who permitted you to come to Parliament."

A war of words ensued, with a visibly irate Rajapaksa seemingly inviting Fonseka to fistfights outside the chamber.

"Nikan boruwata thamuse ge haiya pennanna enne. Booruwa thamuse, gahanawa parayata, eliyata enawa pennanna," he said. (Loosely translated: "You're just trying to assert your dominance. You're the donkey. I'll punch you. Why don't you come out and see.")

Chaos followed, with government and opposition MPs yelling the house down, forcing the speaker to suspend sittings for five minutes.

-economynext.com

INTERVIEW

By Leo Darshan

People need to know the truth in order to heal

US Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Alaina B. Teplitz, in a wide ranging and candid interview, talks about US – Sri Lanka relations amidst growing anti-West rhetoric, why there won't be a replacement for the cancelled MCC grant, what the UNHRC resolutions means in terms of Sri Lanka's commitment to upholding human rights and rule of law and why Sri Lanka needs to acknowledge the truth about the disappeared to ensure a peaceful and prosperous future.



US Ambassador to Sri Lanka Alaina B. Teplitz

- US Embassy

Excerpts of the interview

Question: Sri Lanka seems to be isolating itself from the West! How does this impact the US-Sri Lanka relations, particularly from an economic perspective?

Answer: As we all saw with the global pandemic, every country is interconnected, and interconnected, particularly, economically. There is no country that can survive economically if it is isolated, especially if its key markets are involved. The United States is Sri Lanka's largest export market. American consumers are responsible for approximately 180,000 Sri Lankan jobs. Economies depend on engagement.

For the protection of all countries, the protection of sovereignty and economic wellbeing, the United States supports free and open economic opportunity that provides a fair opportunity for businesses to compete and for countries to obtain best value from its contracts. American companies are not State-owned enterprises. They expect to compete for open tenders and win contracts based on their advanced technology and business practices. Unlike some other countries, the US explicitly forbids American companies from engaging in corruption; the US Foreign Corrupt Practices Act prohibits our companies from undertaking any shady activities. When American businesses come to Sri Lanka, they bring with them the highest standard of integrity and transparency.

We also welcome Sri Lankan investments in the United States. Ultimately, the strongest ties between our countries exist not at the government-to-government level, but among businesses and people.

Q: Amidst the growing anti-West rhetoric, what are your plans moving forward, specifically in terms of strengthening US ties with the Sri Lankan government and other State sectors?

A: There does seem to be an effort to create misunderstanding around US engagement with Sri Lanka. It's unfortunate and ultimately, it's Sri Lanka that suffers from the campaign. But we are not backing away from the relationship or our conversations with the government. The US-Sri Lankan relationship is more than 70 years old, and we understand it is a long-term commitment, a long-term friendship, that we are fostering.

One way we hope to deepen our partnership with Sri Lanka is to support its economic development. We work with the private sector and others to create jobs and future growth through small and medium enterprises. Two newly-launched USAID projects, the Private Sector Development project and the SriLanka@100 Platform, offer business mentoring, access to finance, and other capacity-building to sustain existing businesses, as well as to support the entry of new companies into the market, especially. Those owned by women and other marginalized populations.

Our support for Sri Lanka's progress includes efforts to make communities stronger. For instance, Samantha Sebanesarani, an Urban Councillor from Vavuniya, was concerned about long lines and reduced pharmacy hours at her local hospital. She at-

tended a series of US-funded trainings that provided women in leadership roles with in-depth knowledge of Sri Lankan laws. Sebanesarani then petitioned her hospital to allocate staff on a shift basis and succeeded in her advocacy. Ireshika Somapala, a mother of two from a village near Anuradhapura, participated in a six-month sewing and tailoring course that the United States funded. Somapala put her newly acquired skills to good use by sewing masks for the district's hospital and her community. She now works at a women-owned business at which Sinhalese and Tamil women work side by side. These are just two stories of how the American people are helping Sri Lankans improve their lives.

Another example of our commitment to building capacity is our multitude of programming at our American Spaces. We offer opportunities to increase English language skills, expand STEM interest and abilities, and enhance entrepreneurial interests, especially for rural women.

Q: Following the cancellation of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) development grant, is there any alternative grant offer by the US?

A: The proposed MCC development grant was offered in response to a request from the Sri Lankan government. Due to a lack of engagement, the proposal was withdrawn and the funds reallocated elsewhere. There will be no replacement for this development grant, which sought to address needs in transportation and land administration identified by Sri Lankan government ministries and academic research – a design effort that took several years to complete at American taxpayer expense.

Q: What kind of position will be taken by the US in Geneva about Sri Lanka in the future?

A: First and foremost, the United States supports Sri Lanka's efforts to fulfil its international and domestic human rights obligations and commitments. 'Geneva', a name that is now shorthand for the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), is about ensuring people globally are able to exercise their rights and that governments protect and respect those rights. When there is evidence or concern that rights are being violated, this becomes a subject for discussion at the UNHRC.

Since 2012, the United States has supported resolutions calling on Sri Lanka to address allegations of human rights violations, and we co-sponsored the resolution that was just passed on March 23. The current Government of Sri Lanka has continued some ongoing reconciliation processes initiated by the previous government, including the work of the Office on Missing Persons and Office for Reparations, and has announced some new measures in that direction, including a review of the PTA (Prevention of Terrorism Act) and a Commission of Inquiry to review the reports of previous domestic commissions of inquiry. Previous governments also made commitments that had yet to be fulfilled, such as establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission or a judicial mechanism

to investigate allegations of human rights violations. In the meantime, other human rights concerns have arisen. Ultimately, as a democratic friend of South Asia's oldest democracy, the United States looks to Sri Lanka to uphold democratic norms of governance and respect for rule of law, as well as to protect the rights of minority communities. I reject the idea that Geneva is about bullying Sri Lanka or subjecting it to some neo-colonial ambition. Rather, the recent resolution is a call to close the gap between the Sri Lankan government's commitment to international human rights principles and its implementation of those principles in practice. Even when the United States stepped away from the UNHRC for several years, we remained steadfast in our commitment to advancing human rights and to help Sri Lanka meet the commitments it set for itself.

President Biden has indicated a desire to return to membership in the Council. While the UN Human Rights Council is imperfect and needs reform, we believe it can be a constructive vehicle for addressing global human rights concerns.

Q: Families of missing persons are banking on the West helping them find out the fate of their loved ones. Can the West, and the US truly help these families?

A: I've met with families of the disappeared across the country – Tamil parents of the disappeared in the North, Sinhalese children of the disappeared in the South. Whether the victim disappeared due to the action of the government or other forces, this is an issue that touches every community, every ethnicity, every religion. Every family deserves answers about their missing loved ones. Governments have an obligation to their citizens to help provide those answers and the United States will continue to urge the Sri Lankan government to investigate, through an independently functioning and sufficiently resourced Office on Missing Persons and in collaboration with domestic and international organizations, reports of enforced disappearances. People need to know the truth in order to heal. Sri Lanka needs this truth to ensure a peaceful and prosperous future.

Q: What role can the US play in the reconciliation process and in ensuring ethnic harmony in Sri Lanka?

A: We firmly believe that a country can only achieve its full potential if there's a meaningful reconciliation process among its people and with that country's past. I say this with a lot of humility: every day in the United States we grapple with the legacy of our past and the hard realities of racism and discrimination we must still overcome. Americans are engaged in an ongoing dialogue about how to achieve equity and justice for all our citizens; we're also investigating what went wrong in the past, holding people accountable if necessary, and implementing new practices and laws to make our future better. We also believe in countries' responsibility to honour their international human rights commitments. Both Sri Lanka and the United States are signatories to the Universal Dec-

laration of Human Rights (UDHR) which enshrines the principle of human rights as both inherent and inalienable. The principles articulated in the UDHR and Sri Lanka's subsequent pledges to advance the UN Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 16, which aims to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies and equal access to justice," underscore our efforts to ensure and advance human rights in Sri Lanka.

Q: Sri Lanka is moving closer to China than other countries, depending on development projects at the cost of promoting democratic values. In your view, what are the perils of such a move, especially in terms of real development?

A: It's not about choosing one country over another. It's about the type of future Sri Lankans envision for themselves. Is a future in which democracy thrives, prosperity is based on fair and transparent economic practices, and nations are secure with mutual respect for sovereignty one that is desired? Moving forward, the United States looks to work with likeminded allies and partners to revitalize democracy around the world. We will combat new threats aimed at our democracies, including corruption. More broadly, we will continue to support countries in defending their right to make political choices free from coercion or undue foreign influence.

When US companies come here, they invest – in the people and the country. With US projects, you have Sri Lankans doing the work, you have Sri Lankans who manage the projects. They are not things where you might have imported labour that's competing with the Sri Lankan worker who might be – especially with the pandemic – looking for a job. And when US companies do business abroad, they work to the highest levels of accountability, creating projects that are financially and environmentally sustainable. This is what delivers results that benefit all Sri Lankans and not just a small, elite group. We value transparency and fairness. We eschew corrupt deals and adhere to high standards of environmental protection, innovation, and clean business practices.

Q: According to local and international media, the US is keen to have Sri Lanka join QUAD. Is it possible? And what are the benefits for Sri Lanka?

A: I'm glad you asked. There are lots of misconceptions about the Quad, which is just a name for a group of four countries – Japan, Australia, India, and the United States – that discuss cooperation to achieve greater peace, prosperity, and security in the Indo-Pacific. This on-going conversation actually started in response to the devastation wrought by the December 2004 tsunami – a tragedy that underscored the need for greater collaboration among Indo-Pacific nations. The Quad evolved into a diplomatic dialogue and is now a platform to advance our shared commitment to a free, open, and resilient Indo-Pacific. We're cooperating to ensure the Indo-Pacific is accessible and dynamic, governed by principles such as freedom of

navigation and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

While 'quad' by definition means 'four', it's a flexible concept that welcomes the engagement of like-minded countries throughout the Indo-Pacific. It is not an alliance or association so there is nothing for Sri Lanka to join in that sense.

Q: You visited the North recently. How would you describe post war developments in terms of rights, reconciliation, the post war aspirations...?

A: The United States supports a strong, sovereign, inclusive Sri Lanka in which all inhabitants benefit from good governance, protection of human rights, and the rule of law – and in which no community is marginalized or discriminated against. It concerns me that there remain so many issues to be addressed from the time of Sri Lanka's long civil conflict, such as what happened to disappeared and missing persons, fulfilment of political commitments like the 13th Amendment, and the full return of land to those who were dispossessed. I recognize that each of these issues is, in fact, a challenge – one that Sri Lanka must confront and overcome even if the process is uncomfortable. Thirty years of fighting against a terrorist organization produced tragedies for everyone – and now is the time to discover the truth about those years, deal with any wrong-doing, address underlying political issues, and promote healing. That's what reconciliation and accountability are all about. Independent institutions, such as the Office on Missing Persons and the Office for Reparations, can help if allowed to operate freely. Finalizing land returns is also crucial. The United States has committed over \$80 million dollars to support demining efforts to make land habitable and viable to provide livelihoods for people in the North and East, but more needs to be done to expedite returning land to the original inhabitants.

And we work with all Sri Lankans to this end. For example, I recently visited a project near Trincomalee funded by the United States in a mixed Sinhalese-Tamil community heavily impacted by the civil war. Community members have worked together to restore a critical, 5.2 km-long irrigation channel. The channel, used by the entire community for year-round farming and flood protection during the monsoon, was severely damaged and unused for 25 years. Members of both communities now cooperate to clear and maintain the channel, which has strengthened communal bonds and helped the families increase their incomes – a great demonstration of communities and individuals finding common cause and working together for everyone's benefit.

-Leo Darshan
is an Assistant
News Editor
at Virakesari
newspapers
published by
ENCL. His pas-
sion is defence,
diplomacy and
foreign affairs



HOT TOPICS

By Marlowe Hood

Biodiversity 'hot spots' devastated in warming world

PARIS - Unless nations dramatically improve on carbon cutting pledges made under the 2015 Paris climate treaty, the planet's richest concentrations of animal and plant life will be irreversibly ravaged by global warming, scientists warned Friday (9).

An analysis of 8,000 published risk assessments for species showed a high danger for extinction in nearly 300 biodiversity "hot spots", on land and in the sea, if temperatures rise three degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels, they reported in the journal *Biological Conservation*.

Earth's surface has heated up 1C so far, and the Paris Agreement enjoins nations to cap warming at "well below" 2C, and 1.5C if possible.

National commitments to slash greenhouse gas emissions - assuming they are honoured - would still see temperatures soar well above 3C by century's end, if not sooner.

So-called endemic species - plants and animals found exclusively in a specific area - will be hit hardest in a warming world.

From snow leopards in the Himalayas and the vaquita porpoise in the Gulf of California to lemurs in Madagascar and forest elephants in central Africa, many of the planet's most cherished creatures will wind up on a path to extinction unless humanity stops loading the atmosphere with CO2 and methane, the study found.

Endemic land species in biodiverse hot spots are nearly three times as likely to suffer losses due to climate change than more widespread flora and fauna, and 10 times more likely than invasive species.

"Climate change threatens areas overflowing with species that cannot be found anywhere else in the world," said lead author Stella Manes, a researcher at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

"The risk for such species to be lost forever increases more than 10-fold if we miss the goals of the Paris Agreement."

More and more scientists concede that capping global warming at 1.5C target is probably out of reach.

But every tenth of a degree matters when it comes to avoiding impacts, they say.

Some concentrations of wildlife are more vulnerable than others.

In mountain regions, 84% of endemic animals and plants face extinction in a 3C world, while on islands -- already devastated by invasive species -- the figure rises to 100 percent.

"By nature, these species cannot easily move to more favourable environments," explained co-author Mark Costello, a marine ecologist from the University of Auckland.

Marine species in the Mediterranean are especially threatened because they are trapped in an enclosed sea, he added.

Overall, more than 90% of land-based endemic species, and 95 percent of marine ones, will be adversely affected if Earth warms another two degrees, the international team of researchers found.

In the tropics, two out of three species could perish due to climate change alone.

The findings may impel conservationists to rethink how to best protect endangered wildlife.

Up to now, the main threats have been habitat loss due to expanding urban areas, mining and agriculture, on the one hand, and hunting for food and body parts to sell on the black market, on the other.

A key strategy in the face of this onslaught has been carving out protected areas, especially around biodiversity hot spots.

But these safe havens may be of little use in the face of global warming.

"Unfortunately, our study shows that those biodiversity rich-spots will not be able to act as species refugia from climate change," said co-author Mariana Vale, also from Federal University.

Even before the impact of global warming has truly kicked in, scientists have ascertained that Earth is at the outset of a so-called mass extinction event in which species are disappearing at 100 to 1,000 the normal, or "background", rate.

There have been five previous mass extinctions in the last 500 million years.

-Agence France-Presse



A woman stands next to a sign reading 'vaccine out of stock' at a COVID-19 coronavirus vaccination centre amidst rising virus cases, in Mumbai on Thursday (8)

By Ammu Kannampilly

India suffers vaccine shortages as virus surges

MUMBAI - Vaccination centres in parts of India turned people away on Thursday (8) and large parts of the country reportedly ran low on doses, just as infections rose at their fastest rate since the pandemic began.

A second wave has hit India with a vengeance in recent weeks, with a record 126,000 new infections in the past 24 hours, more than 10 times rates seen in February. About 1.8 million fresh cases have been reported since March 1.

The government is desperate to avoid a new lockdown but several regions have tightened curbs, with the current epicentre Maharashtra set to enter a weekend shutdown. Tamil Nadu on Thursday was the latest state to announce restrictions.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted after receiving his second shot on Thursday that vaccines are "among the few ways we have to defeat the virus". He urged others to follow his lead by getting vaccinated.

But the world's biggest vaccination program is reportedly experiencing problems having administered 87 million shots so far in a population of 1.3 billion people.

According to the Times of India, 10 states that are collectively home to more than 700 million people have stocks for only three or four more days including Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal. In Maharashtra, which includes megacity

Mumbai, the state health minister warned on Wednesday (7) that supplies would run out in three days unless replenished.

"We are having to tell people that since vaccine supplies have not arrived, they should go home," Rajesh Tope told reporters.

Major vaccination centres in Mumbai were running out of doses Thursday, with the huge Lokmanya Tilak Municipal General Hospital stopping inoculations altogether.

At a government-run vaccination centre in the Mumbai neighbourhood of Dharavi, India's largest slum, long queues formed.

Afrin Sultana Khan, in charge of the facility, warned it would only be able to vaccinate another 440 people - its daily average - before shutting shop.

"Obviously we are very worried," the doctor told AFP.

Retiree Rajesh Kumar, 68, awaiting his second dose at one of Mumbai's top private hospitals, told AFP his appointment was cancelled at the last minute.

"Any sensible government would have rushed vaccines to Maharashtra by now," he said.

A city official in IT hub Bangalore told AFP is set to run out of vaccines this weekend with a shipment of one million doses five days late.

Sources in Andhra Pradesh state told AFP has doses for only three more days. Two districts have already run out and vaccination centres were turning people away.

No new supplies are expected for a week.

However, federal health minister Harsh Vardhan said late Wednesday that many states were trying to "distract attention from their failures and spread panic among the people".

Allegations of shortages in Maharashtra were "utterly baseless", he said. "Vaccine supplies are being monitored on a real-time basis, and state governments are being apprised regularly about it."

Ajay Ghai, a senior health official in Uttar Pradesh, said "vaccine supplies are happening on a rolling basis and so is the replenishment. There is no shortage at all."

The head of India's Serum Institute, the world's largest vaccine maker by volume, said on Tuesday (6) that production capacity was "very stressed".

Poorer countries, as well as some rich nations, have relied heavily on Serum for supplies of the AstraZeneca vaccine but last month New Delhi put the brakes on exports to prioritize domestic needs.

"Perhaps shortages and possibility of future shortages are being amplified for political reasons, but it is undeniable that we don't have as many doses as we would ideally want to," public health expert Oommen C. Kurian at the Observer Research Foundation told AFP.

"It is not an India problem; it is a world problem."

- Agence France-Presse

By Nicholas Bogel Burroughs

Expert says

Floyd 'died from a low level of oxygen'

MINNEAPOLIS - A veteran lung doctor testified Thursday (8) that George Floyd's death was caused in part by Derek Chauvin's knees pressing against his neck and back, making it impossible for him to breathe, and that Floyd showed signs of a brain injury about four minutes before Chauvin lifted his knee from his neck. Dr. Martin J. Tobin, a pulmonologist and critical care doctor in Chicago, said in court that the combination of Chauvin's pressure, the handcuffs pulling Floyd's hands behind his back and Floyd's body being pressed against the street had caused him to die "from a low level of oxygen."

The testimony from Tobin on the ninth day of the trial of Chauvin, the former Minneapolis police officer who has been charged in Floyd's death, signalled a shift into a new phase in which medical testimony will be crucial. Chauvin's lawyer has suggested that Floyd died from the fentanyl and methamphetamine that were found in his system, but prosecutors argue that Chauvin had killed him by kneeling on him

for more than nine minutes and cutting off his air supply. Tobin was adamant that Chauvin's actions had caused Floyd's death on May 25. He pinpointed the exact moment, in the graphic bystander video of the arrest, in which he said Floyd had died, noting that his eyes had opened wide and then closed again. At that point, Chauvin's knee remained on his neck.

"You can see his eyes - he's conscious - and then you see that he isn't," Tobin said. "That's the moment the life goes out of his body."

The doctor also rejected the defence's arguments about drugs, saying that videos show Floyd breathing at a normal rate before he went unconscious, meaning any fentanyl in his system was "not having an effect" on his breathing.

"A healthy person subjected to what Mr. Floyd was subjected to would have died," Tobin said.

Eric J. Nelson, the lawyer for Chauvin, pushed back on Tobin's testimony during his questioning and suggested that Floyd could have died of an overdose. Tobin

agreed that fentanyl could have hindered Floyd's breathing if he had taken the drug in the minutes before police officers pushed him to the ground, but the doctor said Floyd had never gone into a coma, something he said would happen before a person dies of a fentanyl overdose. Nelson also sought to portray the medical care that Floyd received from paramedics as lacking, saying they had not inserted a tube down Floyd's throat until nine minutes after they arrived.

In his testimony, Tobin said he had determined that Chauvin had pressed his left knee on Floyd's neck for more than 90% of the time that Floyd was on the ground, and that he had kept his right knee on Floyd's back for the majority of the time as well. That pressure, combined with having his hands cuffed behind his back and pushed into the street facedown, had cut off oxygen and caused his heart to stop, Tobin said.

"He was being squashed between the two sides," he said.

-New York Times

By Stephen Castle

As old tensions resurface

Northern Ireland sees spasm of violence

LONDON - A bus hijacked, pelted with stones, then set on fire. Masked youths rioting, hurling missiles and homemade bombs. A press photographer attacked on the streets.

For almost a week, scenes of violence familiar from Northern Ireland's brutal past have returned in a stark warning of the fragility of a peace process, crafted more than two decades ago, that is under growing political and sectarian strain.

Amid a contested fallout from Brexit, politicians have pointed to different causes for an explosion of anger from parts of the Protestant, so-called Unionist or Loyalist, community that is determined to keep its link to the rest of the United Kingdom.

But analysts agree that six consecutive nights of violence, during which 55 police officers have been injured and 10 arrests made, mark a worrisome trend.

"I think it's very serious, it's easy to see how things can escalate and hard to see how things can calm down," said Katy Hayward, a professor of political sociology at Queen's University, Belfast.

In the febrile aftermath of Brexit, she added, Unionists "feel betrayed by the British government and feel that Northern Ireland's place in the union is very much under pressure as a result, so that sense of insecurity definitely raises the stakes."

Jonathan Caine, a Conservative Party member of the House of Lords and former adviser to six Northern Ireland secretaries, said the violence reflected dangerous tensions.

"By historic standards it is not out of control, but it could be and the reason is not just the reaction to Brexit," he said.

"There are deep-seated anxieties within the Unionist community and a perception that they have been left behind, that everything is geared not to them but to the Republicans," he added, referring to parts of the Roman Catholic population who favour a united Ireland.

With rioting by some as young as 13, the violence has shocked politicians, prompting condemnation from Prime Minister Boris Johnson of Britain and Northern Ireland's power-sharing executive, which Thursday (8) called for calm to be restored. On Thursday, bus drivers parked outside City Hall to protest an incident in which one of their colleagues had his vehicle hijacked and burned.

Though tensions have risen in recent weeks, it was an incident dating back many months that was the catalyst for the most recent violence, which saw rioters burning tires and garbage in the streets.

In June 2020, despite COVID-19 rules banning large gatherings, police allowed a funeral to go ahead following the death of Bobby Storey, who was considered the head of intelligence of the Irish Republican Army, an armed group dedicated to a united Ireland that waged a violent campaign against British forces during the troubles.

Among around 2,000 people who attended his funeral were senior members of Sinn Fein, a party that mainly represents Roman Catholic voters. The party was once seen as the political wing of the IRA but now plays a prominent part of the democratic power-sharing system in Belfast.

A decision last week not to prosecute mourners for breaking COVID regulations infuriated Unionists, sparking protests and prompting Northern Ireland's first minister, Arlene Foster, to demand the resignation of the police chief, Simon Byrne, over his handling of the funeral.

But tensions had also been building since Britain completed the final stages of Brexit on Jan. 1. That ended a system under which companies in Northern Ireland shared the same trade rules as those of Ireland, which remains part of the European Union.

During the interminable Brexit negotiations, much energy was devoted to preventing the need for checks on goods at Northern Ireland's highly sensitive land border with Ireland.

Under an agreement in a protocol struck by Johnson, Northern Ireland was given a special economic status that leaves it straddling the United Kingdom and the European Union trade systems.

However, it also imposes some new checks, particularly on goods flowing from mainland Britain to Northern Ireland - something that is anathema to Unionists who want equal treatment with the rest of the United Kingdom. Despite the deal he signed, Johnson promised that there would be no new "border in the Irish Sea" and, glossing over the looming difficulties, his government did little to prepare opinion in Northern Ireland for the changes.

Yet on Jan. 1, when the post-Brexit trade rules came into force, businesses faced new paperwork and some British companies stopped moving goods to Northern Ireland, causing some shortages on supermarket shelves. Amid rising tensions, checks on goods were halted temporarily after threats were made against customs staff.

-New York Times

Twitter spotlights Asia democracy movements with new emoji

SYDNEY - Twitter on Thursday (8) launched an emoji to mark one year since the first use of the 'Milk Tea Alliance' meme which has grown into a symbol of pro-democracy movements in Asia.

"To celebrate the first anniversary of the #MilkTeaAlliance, we designed an emoji featuring 3 different types of milk tea colours from regions where the Alliance

first formed online," the tech giant's public policy account tweeted in a thread on Thursday.

The hashtag - originating in the shared passion in Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan for milky tea - emerged as a symbol of support for democratic movements and concern over China's power in the region.

Twitter said that more than 11 million tweets have featured the

hashtag since it first appeared as a meme in April 2020, when it was used in response to online attacks by Chinese nationalists against a Thai celebrity who appeared to have slighted Beijing by calling Taiwan a country.

Taiwan is a self-governing democratic island off the south-east coast of mainland China, which claims it as a breakaway province. The use

of the hashtag has again increased since the February coup in Myanmar.

"During times of civil unrests or violent crackdowns, it is more important than ever for the public to have access to the #OpenInternet for real-time updates, credible information, and essential services," the social media giant tweeted.

-dpa

REALITY CHECK

By Salman Masood

Imran Khan links rape to how women dress

ISLAMABAD — An outcry has erupted in Pakistan after Prime Minister Imran Khan blamed a rise in rape cases on how women dressed, remarks that activists denounced as perpetuating a culture of victim blaming.

Khan made the comments on a live television show earlier this week when he was asked what the government was doing to curb an increase in sexual violence against women and children. Khan acknowledged the seriousness of the problem and pointed to the country's strict laws against rape.

"What is the concept of purdah?" he said, using a term that refers to the practice of seclusion, veiling or concealing dress for women in some South Asian communities. "It is to stop temptation. Not every man has willpower. If you keep on increasing vulgarity, it will have consequences."

The uproar was swift. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, an independent group, demanded Khan apologize for his remarks, which it called "unacceptable behaviour on the part of a public leader."

"Not only does this betray a baffling ignorance of where, why, and how rape occurs, but it also lays the blame on rape survivors," the group said.

Seeking to tamp down the anger, Khan's office issued a statement Wednesday (7) saying that the prime minister's remarks had been misrepresented.

"The prime minister spoke about the societal responses and the need to put our efforts together to eliminate the menace of rape completely," the office said in the statement. "Unfortunately, part of his comment, consciously or unconsciously, has been distorted to mean something that he never intended."

Khan's government has faced immense pressure to speed up justice for rape survivors after a series of assaults sparked demands for the death penalty to be applied to such cases. In December, the government passed a measure that said men convicted of rape could be sentenced to chemical castration.

There are few reliable statistics on rape in Pakistan, but rights activists say it is a severely underreported crime, in part because victims are often treated as criminals or blamed for the assaults. Thousands of protesters took to the streets last year after a top police official in the eastern city of Lahore said that a woman who was raped on a deserted highway was partly to blame for the attack.

To critics, Khan's comments this week reinforced misogynistic attitudes that made the problem worse for women.

"Victim blaming and policing women's clothing choices both perpetuate rape culture," said Laaleen Sukhera, a Lahore-based author and public relations consultant.

"Everyone and everything seems to be blamed except the actual perpetrators," she said.

Even Khan's first wife, Jemima Goldsmith, a wealthy British heiress, weighed in on Twitter. "The problem is not how women dress!" she wrote in one post. In another, she said that she hoped that Khan had been misquoted because the man she knew had different opinions.

Before he became prime minister, Khan was a cricket star and A-list celebrity who cut a glamorous figure and was known as a ladies' man. He married Goldsmith in 1995 and they divorced in 2004. But he became increasingly conservative in the mid-1990s after he entered politics, and has been accused of being overly sympathetic to the Taliban in recent years.

To women's rights activists, Khan's comments this week were only the latest example of the challenge they face in finding support for their causes in the deeply conservative society.

—New York Times



A man takes shelter in a soccer stadium in the north-western city of Idlib, Syria, on March 23, 2021. Millions of people displaced during Syria's 10-year war are impoverished, insecure and crowded into an area of the country's northwest controlled by a rebel group once linked to al-Qaida

By Ben Hubbard

In a Syrian rebel bastion

Millions trapped in murky, violent limbo

IDLIB — Among the millions of Syrians who fled as the government bombed their towns, destroyed their homes and killed their loved ones are 150 families squatting in a soccer stadium in the north-western city of Idlib, sheltering in rickety tents under the stands or in the rocky courtyard.

Work is scarce and terror grips them whenever jets buzz overhead: New airstrikes could come at any time. But the fear of government retribution keeps them from returning home. More than 1,300 similar camps dot Syria's last bastions under rebel control, eating up farmland, stretching along irrigation canals and filling lots next to apartment buildings where refugee families squat in damaged units with no windows.

"People will stay in these places with all the catastrophes before they go live under the regime" of President Bashar Assad, said Okba al-Rahoum, manager of the camp in the soccer stadium.

On a rare visit to Idlib province, examples abounded of shocked and impoverished people trapped in a murky and often-violent limbo.

Stuck between a wall to prevent them from fleeing across the nearby border with Turkey and a hostile government that could attack at any moment, they struggle to secure basic needs in a territory controlled by a militant group formerly linked to al-Qaida.

In the decade since Syria's war began, Assad's forces crushed communities that revolted against him, and millions of people fled to new lives of uncertainty — in neighbouring countries, Europe and pockets of Syria outside of Assad's grip, including the rebel-held northwest.

The Syrian leader has made it clear that these people don't fit into his conception of victory, and few are likely to return as long as he remains in power, making the fate of the displaced one of the thorniest pieces of the war's unfinished business.

"The question is: What is the future for these people?" said Mark Cutts, United Nations deputy regional humanitarian coordinator for Syria. "They can't continue living forever in muddy

fields under olive trees by the side of the road."

Throughout the war, the rebel-held northwest became the destination of last resort for Syrians with nowhere else to go. The government bussed them here after conquering their towns. They drove in with trucks piled high with blankets, mattresses and children. Some arrived on foot, with few possessions besides the clothes they wore.

Last year, an offensive by the Syrian government, backed by Russia and Iran, pushed nearly a million more people into the area.

Humanitarian organizations working to hold back hunger and infectious diseases, including COVID-19, have struggled to get enough aid into the area. And that effort could become more difficult if Russia, Assad's closest international ally, blocks a U.N. resolution up for renewal this summer to keep one border crossing with the northwest open for international aid.

Further complicating the international quandary over aiding Idlib is the dominant role of the militant rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS.

The group evolved from the Nusra Front, a jihadi organization that declared its allegiance to al-Qaida early in the war and distinguished itself by its copious use of suicide bombers against government and civilian targets.

Turkey, the United States and the United Nations consider HTS a terrorist organization, even though its leaders publicly distanced themselves from al-Qaida in 2016 and have since played down their jihadi roots. Those efforts were clear around Idlib, where flags, insignia and graffiti announcing the group's presence were absent, even though residents often referred to it cautiously as "the group that controls the area."

Unlike the Islamic State, the terrorist group that fought both rebels and the government to control an expanse of territory straddling the Syria-Iraq border, HTS is not pushing for the immediate creation of an Islamic state and does not field morality police officers to enforce strict social codes. During a tour of the

group's front-line positions, a military spokesman who went by the nom de guerre Abu Khalid al-Shami took reporters down a dirt staircase hidden in a bunker to a long, underground tunnel leading to a network of trenches and firing positions manned by fighters.

"The regime is that way, this way are the Russians, and the Iranian militias are over there," he said, pointing across green fields to where the group's foes were dug in.

Since last year, a cease-fire between Russia and Turkey has stopped outright combat in Idlib, but on one day last month there were three attacks. A shell hit a refugee camp; an airstrike ignited a fuel depot on the Turkish border; and three artillery shells struck a village hospital in Al Atarib, killing seven patients, including an orphan boy who had gone for a vaccination, according to the Syrian American Medical Society, which supports the facility.

While the area's displaced struggle to survive, others try to provide simple pleasures.

In Idlib, the Disneyland restaurant entices visitors to dine on salads and grilled meat, and to forget their woes with video games, bumper cars, air hockey and stuffed-animal claw machines.

The basement storeroom doubles as a shelter when the government shells nearby, and the terrace is enclosed with plastic sheeting instead of glass so that it doesn't shatter on diners if something explodes nearby.

The manager, Ahmed Abu Kheir, lost his job at a tourist restaurant that shut down when the war began, he said, so he opened a smaller place that was later destroyed by government shelling.

He opened another restaurant but left it behind when the government seized the area last year and he fled to Idlib.

Like all of Idlib's displaced, he longed to take his family home, but he was glad to work in a place that spread a little joy in the meantime.

"We are convinced that normal life has to continue," he said. "We want to live."

—New York Times

By Damien Cave

Amid harassment scandals, Australia plots a 'road map for respect'

SYDNEY — After two months of sexual harassment and assault scandals, including a claim of a rape inside Parliament House, Australia's conservative government agreed Thursday (8) to accept a series of recommendations that aim to prevent gender-based abuse and increase accountability for misbehaviour in the workplace.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison unveiled what he called a "road map for respect" in response to the recommendations from the country's Sex Discrimination Commissioner that would improve workplace culture in the public and private sectors.

His plan includes more education in schools and the promise of new legislation to end exemptions for judges and members of Parliament from the country's sex discrimination law. It would also allow victims to file complaints for up to two years after an attack.

Morrison's announcement comprises his most comprehensive effort so far to tackle a problem that has been festering for years in Australian politics, with women mistreated, demeaned or sexually harassed, usually without recourse.

A federal review focusing on Parliament's workplace culture has also just begun and may produce additional calls for reform as the demand for demonstrable change has continued to intensify.

Critics questioned whether the government's latest move would be enough. Noting that the initial report was published in March 2020, with much of its findings overlooked by Morrison's government until now, many women demanded more details and a clear timeline.

"It's going to take more than just words from this government to correct the impression that they don't care about these issues," said Louise Chappell, a political science professor at the University of New South Wales. "This is not going to go away." Emma Husar, a former member of Parliament with the opposition Labor Party, said the government was still delivering only "the bare minimum."

Polls have shown that Australian women in particular have lost trust in the government since a former Liberal staff member said in February that she was raped in a ministerial office in 2019. A flood of accusations against members of Parliament and employees at every level followed, along with marches for justice that drew tens of thousands of women to the streets of Australian cities. Morrison appeared Thursday to leave some wiggle room for himself and his Liberal Party. He said his government accepted all 55 suggestions laid out in the report "in whole, in part or in principle," leading his critics to question which measures would be put in place at the federal level, passed on to states or given little more than lip service.

Many of the recommendations, including the creation of a national sexual harassment research agenda and "respectful relationship" training in schools, could take years to develop. And some of the changes announced Thursday would simply bring Australia in line with other developed democracies — such as Britain, Canada and the United States — that have passed legislation in the past few years tightening workplace standards for lawmakers.

Chappell said the exemption for members of Parliament, for example — a carve-out in the sex-discrimination law also given to religious organizations — seemed especially outdated. She welcomed the prime minister's promise to ensure that lawmakers and the legal profession would no longer get special treatment.

"With all the cases we've seen so far, they have been able to act with impunity because they are not accountable in the same way that people outside Parliament are," she said. "There's been pressure to change that for many years."

But the complaint process is still not clear. When Morrison was asked what the consequences would be for a sexual harassment complaint against a lawmaker, he said that was not yet decided.

"There are many issues that we're still going to work through as we draft this legislation," he said.

Chappell said Morrison still seemed to be struggling with how far to go with policy and how to talk about the issue. In his news conference Thursday, he emphasized that to change the culture of disrespect in the workplace, all Australians needed to take responsibility, but not "in a way that sets Australians against each other."

"What does he mean here?" Chappell asked. "That women are being too strident? Is it possible to address sexual harassment without some level of confrontation? I don't think so."

—New York Times

Thai cave rescue, the sequel

Meditating monk saved from flooded cave after four days

BANGKOK — Thai rescue workers have freed a meditating Buddhist monk who was trapped inside a flooded cave for four days.

The monk, identified by rescuers as 46-year-old Phra Ajarn Manas, was on a pilgrimage from another province and had gone into the Phra Sai Ngam cave in Phitsanulok on Saturday (3) to meditate.

An unseasonal rainstorm struck on Sunday (4) and continued through to Tuesday (6), flooding

parts of the cave while he was inside, the local rescue unit said on its Facebook page.

Seventeen divers participated in the effort to find and free the monk from the spot, which could be accessed only by divers.

A video posted by rescuers shows the monk fitted with a diving mask making a 12-metre swim underwater.

The unit said local residents told them the monk was still trapped in-

side the cave on Tuesday afternoon. They went in looking for him but had to call off the operation after about an hour due to rising water levels.

They were concerned he may be "exhausted or unconscious because of not having food at all".

Pictures on the unit's Facebook page showed the monk on Wednesday (7) sitting inside the cave surrounded by rescue workers and having his blood pressure taken. "At

11:30 a.m. we successfully rescued Phra Manas out of the cave," the unit said.

One of the rescue workers confirmed in a phone call that the monk was out of the cave and receiving first aid.

Thailand made global headlines in 2018 with the high-profile rescue of 12 Thai boys and their football coach from a flooded cave in the northern town of Chiang Rai.

—Agencies

RETHINKING AMERICA

By Jesse Mckinley

Tight hugs and suggestive comments

Cuomo aide says governor groomed her for months before groping

ALBANY — A woman who has accused Gov. Andrew Cuomo of groping her in the Executive Mansion gave a fuller account in a published report Wednesday (7), detailing how she believed the governor had groomed her for months with a series of tight hugs and sexually suggestive comments.

She said in an interview with the Times Union of Albany that Cuomo asked invasive questions about her personal life, recalling that at one point last year, the governor told her, "Oh, if you were single, the things that I would do to you."

The groping incident followed later in 2020, said the woman, an administrative assistant who still works at the Capitol and who spoke on the condition of anonymity. In late November, she said the governor summoned her to his second-floor office at the Executive Mansion. The woman told the Times Union that Cuomo closed the door and reached under her blouse.

"He pulled me close, and all I remember is seeing his hand, his big hand," the woman said in the interview. Moments later, the governor grasped one of her breasts over her bra, leaving her "so confused and so taken aback."

She told the Times Union that she had told the governor, "You're going to get us in trouble," because she didn't know "what else to say."

"It was pretty much like 'What are you doing?'" she said, adding, "He said, 'I don't care.'"

Several current and former employees have lodged sexual harassment allegations against Cuomo in recent months, and other women have come forward with accounts of uncomfortable interactions with the governor.

The alleged groping in the Executive Mansion was the most sexually aggressive allegation, and it was forwarded to New York Attorney General Letitia James, who is overseeing an inquiry into sexual harassment claims against the governor.

In a text exchange with The New York Times on Wednesday, the woman confirmed the details that she told the Times Union, as well as the fact that she had spoken to investigators deputized by James.

She is one of several accusers who have been interviewed by the attorney general's investigators led by Joon Kim, a former acting US attorney for the Southern District of New York, and Anne Clark, a well-regarded employment discrimination lawyer.

A separate state Assembly investigation is also underway, with a broader mandate that also includes looking at Cuomo's handling of the state's nursing homes, where more than 15,000 people died during the pandemic. Both investigations are scheduled to take months to complete.

Many of the state's Democratic leaders have now asked Cuomo to resign, with some of those calls following the groping allegation.

Cuomo, a third-term Democrat, has repeatedly denied touching anybody inappropriately and pleaded with New Yorkers to await the outcome of investigations into his behaviour before passing judgment. On Wednesday, his personal lawyer, Rita Glavin, reiterated those points, saying "the people of New York know the governor" and noting his "40 years in public service and in the public eye."

"The attorney general's review of this claim and others, including evolving details and new public statements by complainants or their surrogates, must be thorough, fair and provide the truth," Glavin said.

-New York Times

By Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Carl Zimmer

CDC chief says

More contagious virus variant now dominant in US

WASHINGTON — A highly infectious variant of the coronavirus that was first identified in Britain has become the most common source of new infections in the United States, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Wednesday (7). The worrisome development comes as officials and scientists warn of a possible fourth surge of infections.

Federal health officials said in January that the B.1.1.7 variant, which began surging in Britain in December and has since slammed Europe, could become the dominant source of coronavirus infections in the United States, leading to a huge increase in cases and deaths.

At that point, new cases, hospitalizations and deaths were at an all-time high. From that peak, the numbers declined until late February, according to a New York Times database. After several weeks at a plateau, new cases and hospitalizations are increasing again. The average number of new cases in the country has reached nearly 65,000 a day as of Tuesday (6), concentrated mostly in metro areas in Michigan as well as in the New York City region. That is an increase of 19% compared with the figure two weeks ago.

Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the CDC director, who warned last week that she felt a recurring sense of "impending doom" said Wednesday

that 52 of the agency's 64 jurisdictions — which include states, some major cities and territories — are now reporting cases of these so-called "variants of concern", including B.1.1.7.

The number of deaths, however, continues to decline — potentially a sign that mass vaccinations are beginning to protect older Americans and other highly vulnerable populations.

"These trends are pointing to two clear truths," Walensky said. "One, the virus still has hold on us, infecting people and putting them in harm's way, and we need to remain vigilant. And two, we need to continue to accelerate our vaccination efforts and to take the individual re-



The Biden administration is trying to calibrate a policy that protects the democratic, technology-rich island without inciting a disastrous armed conflict

By Michael Crowley

Biden backs Taiwan, but some call for a clearer warning to China

WASHINGTON — If anything can tip the global power struggle between China and the United States into an actual military conflict, many experts and administration officials say, it is the fate of Taiwan.

Beijing has increased its military harassment of what it considers a rogue territory, including menacing flights by 15 Chinese warplanes near its shores over recent days. In response, Biden administration officials are trying to calibrate a policy that protects the democratic, technology-rich island without inciting an armed conflict that would be disastrous for all.

Under a long-standing — and famously convoluted — policy derived from the United States' "one China" stance that supports Taiwan without recognizing it as independent, the US provides political and military support for Taiwan but does not explicitly promise to defend it from a Chinese attack.

As China's power and ambition grow, however, and Beijing assesses Washington to be weakened and distracted, a debate is underway whether the United States should make a more specific commitment to the island's defence, in part to reduce the risk of a miscalculation by China that could lead to unwanted war.

The debate reflects a core foreign policy challenge seizing the Biden administration as it devises its wider Asia strategy. Be it the White House, the State Department or the Pentagon, which is reviewing its military posture in Asia, officials are re-evaluating core tenets of American strategy for a new and more dangerous phase of competition with China.

US officials warn that China is growing more capable of invading the island democracy of nearly 24 million people, situated about 100 miles off the coast of mainland China, whose status has obsessed Beijing since Chinese nationalists retreated and formed a government there after the country's 1949 communist revolution.

Last month, the military commander for the Indo-Pacific region, Adm. Philip Davidson, described what he sees as a risk that China could try to reclaim Taiwan by force within the next six years.

The United States has long avoided saying how it would respond to such an attack. While

Washington supports Taiwan with diplomatic contacts, arms sales, firm language and even occasional military manoeuvres, there are no guarantees. No statement, doctrine or security agreement compels the United States to come to Taiwan's rescue. A 1979 congressional law states only that "any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means" would be of "grave concern to the United States."

The result is known as "strategic ambiguity", a careful balance intended to avoid provoking Beijing or emboldening Taiwan into a formal declaration of independence that could lead to a Chinese invasion.

Biden administration officials, who are formulating their China policies, are giving special attention to Taiwan and trying to determine whether strategic ambiguity is sufficient to protect the increasingly vulnerable island from Beijing's designs. But they also realize that Americans may look unfavourably at new, faraway military commitments after two decades of bloody and costly conflict in the Middle East.

That is why Davidson raised eyebrows last month when he acknowledged under questioning, in a departure from standard government messaging, that the policy "should be reconsidered," adding, "I would look forward to the conversation."

"I think there's been a shift in peoples' thinking," said Richard Haass, a former director of policy planning at the State Department under President George W. Bush and now the president of the Council on Foreign Relations. "What you've seen over the last year is an acceleration of concern in the United States about Taiwan." He described a sense that "this delicate situation that appeared to have been successfully managed or finessed for decades, suddenly people woke up to the possibility that that era has come to an end."

Haass helped prompt a conversation on the subject last year after publishing an essay in September in Foreign Affairs magazine that declared that strategic ambiguity had "run its course."

"The time has come for the United States to introduce a policy of strategic clarity: one that makes explicit that the United States would respond to any Chi-

nese use of force against Taiwan," Haass wrote with his colleague David Sacks.

Haass and Sacks added that the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, may question the United States' willingness to defend its allies after four years under President Donald Trump, who railed against "endless wars" and openly questioned US relationships and security commitments. While more hawkish-sounding, a clearer pledge would be safer, they argued.

"Such a policy would lower the chances of Chinese miscalculation, which is the likeliest catalyst for war in the Taiwan Strait," Haass and Sacks wrote.

In recent months, the idea has been gaining traction, including on Capitol Hill.

Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., has introduced a bill that would authorize the president to take military action to defend Taiwan against a Chinese attack — making US intentions ambiguous no more. When Haass testified last month before a House Foreign Relations Committee panel on Asia, he was peppered with questions about how to deter the Chinese threat to Taiwan.

Although of limited value in territorial terms, Taiwan in recent years has gained a greater strategic importance as one of the world's leading producers of semiconductors — the high-tech equivalent of oil in the emerging supercomputing showdown between the United States and China, which faces microchip supply shortages.

Those factors combined have led the Biden administration to offer displays of support for Taiwan that some experts call surprisingly forceful.

When China sent dozens of warplanes over the Taiwan Strait days after Biden's inauguration in January, the State Department released a statement declaring the United States' "rock solid" commitment to the island. Biden raised the subject of Taiwan during his phone call in February with Xi, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken and national security adviser Jake Sullivan raised their concerns about the island during their meeting last month in Anchorage with two top Chinese officials.

-New York Times

By Bret Stephens

Biden should finish the wall

The most harrowing story I've read in The New York Times in recent days was Miriam Jordan's account of a car crash last month in Southern California involving a Ford Expedition that had come from Mexico, straight through a breach in the border wall. The Ford was crammed with 25 people when it hit a tractor-trailer rig on Route 115, 110 miles east of San Diego.

"Few of the survivors have been able to describe what happened next," Jordan writes. "The crunch of metal and glass, the bodies flung dozens of feet across the pavement. Twelve people died on the spot, a 13th at a nearby hospital."

Jordan follows the stories of the victims and survivors, and there's a heart-breaking sameness to them: people who have been driven by fear or want from their homes in Mexico and Central America, and who are willing to take grave risks and pay exorbitant sums to make it to the United States. These are not terrorists, gang members, lowlifes, benefit seekers or — except in their willingness to violate US immigration laws — lawbreakers. They are seekers of the American dream, worthy of our compassion and respect.

Yet those 13 people — along with others who have recently lost their lives in dangerous crossings — might not have met their grisly fate if the Biden administration's concept of compassion wasn't also an inducement to recklessness.

And they would not have been killed if a wall had been standing in their way.

That's a conclusion I've come to reluctantly, and not because I've abandoned my disgust with Donald Trump. Walls are ugly things: symbols of defensive, suspicious, often closed-minded civilizations. Walls are, invariably, permeable: Whatever else a border wall will do, it will not seal off America from unwanted visitors or undocumented workers — roughly half of whom arrive legally and overstay their visas.

Walls also cannot address the root cause of our immigration crisis, which stems from a combination of social collapse south of the border and the pull of American life north of it.

But a well-built wall should still be a central part of an overall immigration fix. It's an imperfect but functional deterrent against the most reckless forms of border crossing. It's a barrier against sudden future surges of mass migration.

It's also a political bargaining chip to be traded for a path to citizenship in a comprehensive immigration-reform bill. And it's a prophylactic against the next populist revolt, which is sure to overtake our politics if the Biden administration cannot competently control an elementary function of governance.

That deterrent is needed now. US agents apprehended 170,000 migrants along the southwest border in March, a 70% jump over February's numbers and the highest level in 15 years. Notwithstanding the administration's claims to the contrary, there is a crisis, led by a massive surge in child migration spurred by President Joe Biden's promises of a more humane policy than his predecessor's.

Some of this surge is seasonal. And some can be dealt with by building more shelters for unaccompanied minors and families, or speeding up the process of finding relatives or others who can take in unaccompanied children. But the administration would be foolish to suppose the surge will recede on its own. The years of relative economic prosperity in Mexico that, for a time, led to a net outflow of Mexican migrants from the US is over, thanks to a combination of drug cartels, a pandemic and the misgovernance of its inept populist president. Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua are failing states. A "Plan Colombia"-style package of security assistance could help. But it will cost billions and probably take a decade for its effects to be felt.

In the meantime, the United States risks a version of the European migration crisis of 2015. That's the one that contributed heavily to the Brexit vote, turbocharged the rise of far-right parties like France's National Front and the Alternative for Germany, and paved the way to Trump's election. There's little question that our own migration crisis is a political boon for immigration restrictionists. The wonder is why a serious Democratic administration would aid and abet their cause.

It's also putting the interests of comprehensive immigration reform further out of reach. Congress has not passed a significant immigration bill in over three decades. Biden came to office with an opportunity to get a bipartisan accord, but no Republican will sign on to legislation that widens the doors to legal immigrants, much less one that offers some form of amnesty to illegal ones, without a serious plan for border security. Nothing accomplishes that more visibly than a wall.

For Democrats, that's an opportunity to defuse the political bomb Republicans would love to plant right under them. And it's a job-creating infrastructure program to boot.

Will a wall solve all of our immigration problems? Hardly. It will take years to build, and some practical, regulatory and legal hurdles might be hard to surmount. But for anyone who hopes for America to remain a proud nation of immigrants, it has to be a part of the solution.

-New York Times

COMMENTARY



President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa greet Buddhist monks at the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya on August 9, 2020

- Tharaka Basnayaka/Nur Photo/AFP

By P. K. Balachandran

Who is scared of the PC polls?

The SLPP mired in a mess of governance by its impetuosity, lack of planning and internal consultation is likely to use nationalistic monks and security issues to derail the polls called for by the UNHRC and India

COLOMBO - While there is pressure on Sri Lanka from India and the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to hold the long-delayed Provincial Council (PC) elections, there are a number of political factors preventing the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government from holding the polls in the foreseeable future.

Government ministers have said the polls could be held at the end of 2021. But that seems more and more unlikely with every passing day.

Firstly, the de-limitation of constituencies for holding elections under the First Past the Post System remains a highly contested issue.

The Delimitation Commission's report had been defeated in Parliament in 2018 and it is unlikely another report will have safe passage. The ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) is itself divided on its recommendations.

Of course, Parliament can resolve to use the existing district-wise Proportional Representation System and hold the polls. But for this, there ought to be a will to hold the elections. The fact is, there is no will.

Centralizing and majoritarian forces led by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and top Buddhist monks, do not want Provincial Councils as they see them as being antithetical to national unity and a singularity of national purpose.

The conduct of the erstwhile Northern Provincial Council under the stewardship of Chief Minister C. V. Wigneswaran did not help build confidence in devolution of power.

The Council was mostly passing resolutions on human rights violations and the need for internal self-determination for the Tamils.

Precious little was done to formulate and implement development plans. The Council and its ministers were compulsively antagonistic to Colombo.

A police probe into the discovery of uniforms belonging to the newly-established environment police unit of the Jaffna Municipal Council, seen as being similar to the LTTE police uniform, and the arrest of two Muslim youth, allegedly for spreading Jihadist ideas through lecturers in the Eastern Province, give an indication of the spokes that are likely to be thrown up against holding polls.

In an open letter to the President and the Prime Minister, 14 leading Buddhist monks recently urged the two leaders not to conduct PC elections saying it would be "treacherous" to do so. They asked the government to give the country a new constitution as promised in the election manifesto. The monks and majoritarian politicians hope that government will use its two thirds majority in Parliament to foist a centralized constitution entirely devoid of devolution to the provinces and with no trace of the India-foisted 13th Constitutional Amendment.

The monks in their open letter said:

"Although the country had seen success in ending a war that terrorized the country after the sacrifice of the lives of many patriotic soldiers, we were not able to live in peace for a long time.

The people of this country have become the target of other acts of terrorism along with the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019. The real perpetrators of this dastard terrorist attack that had its roots in the Eastern Province with the connivance of international Muslim terrorism are yet a mystery. The threats of bigoted leaders and the unearthing of bombs and weapons recently in the Northern Province is an indication that terrorist activities from among the Tamil population are not fully eradicated.

"Hence, it is imperative the country should bring into being a new constitution that firmly establishes the unitary status of Sri Lanka.

The efforts of the present government to strengthen the Provincial Council system that has been forcefully and arbitrarily shoved on the people of this country, rather than bringing about a new Constitution that rectifies this situation, have resulted in much condemnation by the public.

"Making preparations to hold Provincial Council elections in haste, similar to the passing of the 20th Amendment to the Constitution, seems to be a hint that the promise placed before the people of the country to have a new constitution is only a facade.

"The recent UNHCR resolution passed in Geneva reveals the shameless attempts of the Western interests to annul the Prevention of Terrorism Act. In this regard, it is sad to note that there are sections within the government, the opposition and the NGO sector, that are hand in glove with various groups who are hell-bent on destroying our country.

"The short-sighted Cabinet decision to hold elections for Provincial Councils before getting the recommendations of the Committee appointed by this same government in regard to a new Constitution should be considered as a golden opportunity lost to rectify a wrong that is hindering the future path of progress of this country.

"If the Provincial Council elections are held as announced, the government will be legally bound to implement in full the 13th Amendment.

According to the provisions of the 13th Amendment, Provincial Councils are allowed to establish Provincial Police Forces and hold firearms, ammunition and other equipment.

Going by the past record, it is not difficult to predict how Chief Ministers will govern the provinces. Such behaviour was clearly evident from the former Chief Minister of the Northern Province C. V. Wigneswaran during his tenure as CM. Injustices were meted out to the Buddhists and Buddhist religious places purely driven by communal considerations. "If two such Chief Minis-

ters were to be elected, the establishment of a Provincial Council system according to the wishes of the people will become just a pipe dream.

It appears that the hasty decision taken by the government is for the sole purpose of obstructing and making it impossible to abolish the current Provincial Council system. It is apparent that the present move of the government is to satisfy requirements or conditions of external elements. We do not want a government that is guided and dictated by foreign governments and agencies."

In the Sri Lankan contest, the monks' letter will be enough reason not to hold the elections now or even later.

The government can keep on postponing the PC elections citing difficulties in formulating a constitution which is capable of getting two thirds majority in Parliament and 50% plus in the mandatory referendum. Constitution making has never been easy in Sri Lanka.

Postponing the PC elections will be in the interest of the ruling SLPP, the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the United National Party (UNP). The SLPP has made a mess of governance by its impetuosity, lack of planning and internal consultation. Its passion for imposing bans has made life hard for the common man. Jobs lost have not been retrieved, but prices have soared. Tourism is languishing. There is confusion even in procuring COVID vaccines, with the result, people are wondering if they will get their mandatory second jabs at all. If the polls are held now, victory cannot be assured as disillusionment is rampant in the urban areas, at least. It is said that agriculturists have been well-served, but Sri Lankan families are only partly rural and agricultural. Urban pressures tell on the rural population also.

As far as the opposition SJB is concerned, it is leaderless and rudderless with a weak leader in Sajith Premadasa. The UNP has been reduced to a rump.

But Mangala Samrawera is likely to give it a turbo boost if he continues in his current trajectory. UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe has deliberately chosen to be on the side-lines to watch the developments. UNP insiders say he sees a window of opportunity for the UNP in the coming days as the SLPP falters and accentuates disillusionment in the voting public.

Like the SLPP, the SJB and the UNP are also not keen on PC elections at this juncture.

About the Author

P.K. Balachandran is a senior Colombo-based journalist who, in the past two decades, has reported for *The Hindustan Times*, *The New Indian Express* and *Economist*



By Kassapa

Will the JVP remain the third party that never made it?

What ails the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)? The question needs to be asked because, fifty years after the party's charismatic but dogmatic leader Rohana Wijeweera staged his first attempt at grabbing control of the State on April 5, 1971, the JVP is not any closer to tasting power today.

Wijeweera, a medical undergraduate dropout who imbibed more of Communism than Medicine at Moscow's Lumumba University returned to Sri Lanka with dreams of replacing the 'Old Left' comprising the Lanka Samasamaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party (CP), personified by the likes of N. M. Perera, Colvin R. de Silva, Peter Kueneman and S.A. Wickremesinghe.

Wijeweera's first attempt at an insurrection was amateurish. He believed that youth armed with shotguns could wrest control of the country by overrunning dozens of Police stations. Predictably, the plan failed, leaving some 5000 youth dead and earning Wijeweera a sentence of life in prison. Then Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike's kinsman and right-hand man, Felix Dias Bandaranaike, successfully thwarted a 'coup' for the second time.

Wijeweera tasted freedom after just a few years in prison thanks to J. R. Jayewardene who operated on the principle that anyone who was Bandaranaike's enemy was his friend. Wijeweera did run against Jayewardene at the inaugural presidential election in 1982 and finished third. However, when ethnic riots engulfed the nation a year later, Jayewardene quickly seized the opportunity to ban the JVP which went underground, paving the way for the second JVP insurgency several years later. If the 1971 rebellion was amateurish, the 1989 attempt was brutal and ruthless.

That failed revolution cost the country an estimated 30,000 lives. Also murdered were United National Party (UNP) politicians, artistes, government officials and members of the armed forces, the latter targeted selectively in a singularly unwise move that alienated the masses from the JVP.

It was left to Ranasinghe Premadasa and his Man Friday, Ranjan Wijeratne, to clean up the mess which they did with equal ferociousness. Wijeweera himself was allegedly disposed of summarily without being subjected to the due processes of the law, after he was captured while posing as a planter at an estate in the cool climes of Ulapane, nestled between Gampola and Nawalapitiya. Of the Old Guard of the JVP, only Somawansa Amerasinghe survived and that too because he was related by marriage to Sirisena Cooray, a Premadasa loyalist.

The JVP then went underground again, emerging only after Chandrika Kumaratunga arrived on the political scene. Like Kumaratunga, Amerasinghe also returned to Sri Lanka from a self-imposed exile in Britain to revive his old political party. To his credit, he directed the JVP in a new direction, renouncing violence and opting for the ballot over the bullet.

Unfortunately, they were duped by Kumaratunga twice, first when Nihal Galappaththi withdrew from the presidential election in return for a promise of abolishing the Executive Presidency, one of the many promises Kumaratunga never kept.

They were duped again by Kumaratunga who bought time to continue governing by offering several ministerial portfolios to JVPers. At the time, Kumaratunga said she would do a deal "even with the devil", a thinly veiled reference to the JVP, which was widely believed to have ordered the assassination of her husband Vijaya.

The JVP's greatest success was when they secured nearly forty seats in government by cleverly nominating one or two members for each district on lists led by the SLFP at the 2004 general election. Even after gaining such a foothold on the legislature, they could not however translate that into lasting success.

If Somawansa Amerasinghe was successful in leading the JVP to the democratic mainstream and sustaining them there, he was also spectacularly unsuccessful in establishing the party as an alternative 'third force'.

The Old Left - the LSSP and the CP - was dead in all but name and had become appendages of successive Sri Lanka Freedom party (SLFP) led governments. There was growing disaffection with the then two leading political parties, the SLFP and the UNP. Yet, the JVP, which promised so much with their rhetoric, disciplined campaigns and corruption free candidates have failed to deliver at successive elections.

The mantle of party leadership passed on to Anura Kumara Dissanayake seven years ago after Amerasinghe retired. Dissanayake is more than a generation younger than Amerasinghe and was barely twenty years old when Wijeweera was killed, so his recollections of the horrors committed by the JVP in 1989 would, at best, be vague.

Under Dissanayake too, the JVP keeps clinging on to its 'also ran' tag instead of making a real impact on the political equation. The reason for that could be the JVP's murky past, its refusal to shift from archaic leftist ideology that makes it out of step with today's younger generation and a harking back to same policies and slogans of several decades ago.

While the JVP has renounced violence for the past thirty years and has practiced principled politics, it is also perhaps relevant that it is yet to offer its apologies to the nation for the atrocities it committed in 1971 and 1989. A significant proportion of the Lankan electorate remembers these events with great clarity and would think twice before entrusting the country's reins of power to the JVP. The leadership appears oblivious to this reality.

The party also needs to take a long hard look at the policies it swears by. Slogans of imperialist conspiracies and capitalist robber barons don't evoke the same sense of hatred as they did fifty years ago. The JVP must realize that having politicians not tainted with corruption itself won't win them votes or elections. That is the bitter truth of Sri Lankan politics. And unless the JVP opts for a radical reboot of its policies and acknowledges its errors in the failed insurrections, it is likely to remain the 'third party' that never made it.

- counterpoint.lk

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

By Pranshu Verma and Rick Gladstone

Reversing Trump

Biden restores aid to Palestinians

WASHINGTON/JERUSALEM — The Biden administration announced on Wednesday (7) that it would restore hundreds of millions of dollars in American aid to Palestinians, its strongest move yet to reverse President Donald Trump's policy on the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The package, which gives at least \$235 million in assistance to Palestinians, will go to humanitarian, economic, development and security efforts in the region, and is part of the administration's attempt to rehabilitate US relations with Palestinians, which effectively stopped when Trump was in office. In a statement on Wednesday, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the United States would provide \$150 million in humanitarian aid, funnelled through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, a vast agency created 72 years ago to assist displaced Palestinians.

Another \$75 million would be allocated for economic development programs in the West Bank and Gaza, and \$10 million would be for what Blinken described as peace-building operations carried out by the US Agency for International Development. "US foreign assistance for the Palestinian people serves important US interests and values," Blinken said. "It provides critical relief to those in great need, fosters economic development, and supports Israeli-Palestinian understanding, security coordination and stability."

The restoration of aid amounted to the most direct repudiation so far of Trump's tilt toward Israel in its decades-old conflict with the Palestinian population in Israeli-controlled territories. Much of the initial reaction from Israeli officials revolved around Biden's decision to resume funding to the relief agency, known as UNRWA, which provides assistance to about 5.7 million people of Palestinian descent in those territories and in neighboring countries. In 2018, Trump ended the aid as his administration increasingly reshaped American policy heavily in favour of Israel.

Gilad Erdan, the Israeli ambassador to the United States and United Nations, denounced the Biden administration's decision to restore funding to the agency, saying its activities were "anti-Israel and anti-Semitic" in nature.

"I have expressed my disappointment and objection to the decision to renew UNRWA's funding without first ensuring that certain reforms, including stopping the incitement and removing anti-Semitic content from its educational curriculum, are carried out," Erdan said in a statement. A senior Palestinian official welcomed the move but said the Palestinian leadership, based in Ramallah, still hoped Biden would reverse several other measures carried out by the Trump administration. "This is a positive, important and constructive step in the direction of rectifying Palestinian-American relations, which the Trump administration destroyed," said Ahmad Majdalani, the social development minister of the Palestinian Authority. "We believe it can be built upon by dealing with some other outstanding issues."

Sen. Jim Risch of Idaho and Rep. Michael McCaul of Texas, both Republicans, criticized the move in a joint statement, saying that "resuming assistance to the West Bank and Gaza without concessions from the Palestinian Authority undermines U.S. interests." They added that they would scrutinize the package to ensure it did not breach the Taylor Force Act, which prohibits the United States from providing direct economic aid to the Palestinian Authority until it stops payments to families of Palestinians who commit violence against Israelis or Americans. Ned Price, the State Department's spokesman, said Wednesday that the funding was "absolutely consistent" with U.S. law. He indicated that any aid going to the West Bank and Gaza would be done through "development partners" and "not through governments or de facto government authorities."

Khaled Elgindy, the director of the Middle East Institute's program on Palestine and Israeli-Palestinian affairs, said that the decision to restore funding to the agency was "a very positive development" and would set an example for other countries as they decide whether to commit funds to it. Despite that, Elgindy said that the move focused on reversing a Trump policy in the region — but did not yet appear to be part of a larger effort to advance the most difficult issues, such as discussions about a two-state solution.

"Their goal is to undo as much of the Trump legacy as possible," he said, "and hope that that's enough to sort of allow the issue to stabilize and not deteriorate."

- *New York Times*



Rabindranath Bhattacharya, once a member of Trinamool, is now running for the local assembly as a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party, in Haripal, India, March 23, 2021. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party is vying to dethrone a powerful politician in West Bengal and even a close race could demonstrate the growing reach of his Hindu nationalist movement

By Mujib Mashal

A fierce election tests Modi's campaign to remake India

NANDIGRAM — The challenger arrived with police vehicles, a band of drummers and the backing of the country's powerful prime minister. The crowd joined him in full-throated chants of glory to the Hindu god Ram: "Jai Shree Ram!" He brought a warning: If Hindus did not unite around him, even their most basic religious practices would be in danger in the face of Muslim appeasement.

In another part of town, the incumbent took the stage in a wheelchair, the result of what she said was a politically motivated assault. Although her injuries kept her from stalking the stage in her white sari and sandals as usual, she still regaled the audience with taunts for the opposition. And she had a warning of her own: Her defeat would be a victory for an ideology that has no place for minorities like Muslims.

The month-long election unfolding in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal is deeply personal. Mamata Banerjee, the state's chief minister for the past decade, is facing off against her former protégé of 20 years, Suvendu Adhikari. He and dozens of other local leaders have defected from her party and are now allied with Narendra Modi, India's prime minister. But the heated vote could indicate something broader: whether anybody can stop Modi's movement to reshape India's secular republic into a Hindu-first nation.

Modi's campaign is growing beyond its base in northern India, bringing him national and state victories. His Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has reduced the main opposition group, the Indian National Congress, to a shadow of its past glory, pushing the country toward becoming a one-party democracy.

West Bengal represents a test of Modi's Hindu nationalist reach. The state of 90 million people remains deeply proud of its Indigenous culture and tolerance of minorities. It is run by a strong regional leader with the heft and profile to challenge Modi directly.

Even if the BJP loses when results are announced May 2, a strong showing would help Modi signal that his party could be nearly unstoppable, said Vinay Sitapati, a professor of political

science at Ashoka University who has chronicled the rise of the BJP.

"They would have shown that the BJP is an all-India party, that our Hindu nationalism is capable of vernacular adaptation," Sitapati said. "And that is a powerful symbol."

Modi has put his brand front and centre. He has travelled to West Bengal about a dozen times for packed rallies even as coronavirus cases rise. His face is all over the place, leading one BJP worker to joke that he seems to be running for chief minister.

Modi and his lieutenants paint Banerjee as someone who has appeased Muslims, who make up about one-quarter of the state's population, at the expense of the Hindu majority. If she is re-elected, they say, she will turn West Bengal into another Bangladesh or Pakistan, where Hindu minorities are increasingly persecuted.

"If you don't stamp on Lotus," Adhikari said at a recent rally, referring to marking the logo of the BJP on local ballots, "how will we be able to even celebrate the birth of Lord Ram here?"

Banerjee's Trinamool Congress party has tried to frame the BJP as outsiders who do not understand her state's rich culture and have come to sow division. Her campaign slogan: "Bengal chooses its own daughter."

Much of her campaign is built on her reputation as a tart-tongued political street fighter. Sympathizers with the local Communist Party once even beat her head with metal rods. She trounced the Communists in elections nevertheless.

Last month, in the midst of a jostling crowd, a car door slammed on Banerjee's leg. She declared the incident a politically motivated attack, a contention her opponents have questioned. Still, her party has made her cast a symbol of a leader putting her body on the line for her cause.

Banerjee's iron grip over state politics looms over the vote. The BJP is trying to ride anti-incumbent sentiment fueled by her party's corruption scandals and the way its members have used extortion and violence to keep power.

But Adhikari and many of the BJP's local candidates for the state's 294-seat local assembly

were themselves, until recently, members of her party. After decades of heavy-handedness by the Communists and Banerjee, Modi's party began actively expanding in West Bengal only after he became prime minister in 2014, though its infrastructure is still lacking. One joke in the state holds that Trinamool will win a third term even if the BJP prevails.

Banerjee's success could depend on convincing voters that her party's bad apples now work for the BJP. The BJP's dependence on Trinamool defectors has also led to a revolt among local Modi supporters who saw their presence as an insult to their years of work in the face of intimidation by the same people now chosen to represent them.

One defector, an 89-year-old assembly member named Rabindranath Bhattacharya, said he had switched parties only because Banerjee did not nominate him to serve a fifth term.

"I changed my party, but I am not changed," Bhattacharya said in an interview at his house. Trinamool flags still hung from the trees and gate.

His candidacy moved hundreds of BJP workers and supporters to pressure Bhattacharya to step aside. They went on a hunger strike, painted over party signs and ransacked the home of the local BJP chief.

"We started here when no one dared speak as a BJP member," said Gautam Modak, who has worked for the BJP in the district since 2003. "He got the party ticket three days after joining the BJP."

Adhikari has said he defected from Banerjee's camp because she and her nephew and heir-apparent, Abhishek Banerjee, use other party leaders as "employees" without sharing power. Still, in recent rallies he has put greater emphasis on identity politics, ending with chants of "Jai Shree Ram!"

Voting took place Saturday (3) in the town of Nandigram, a lush agricultural area, and both candidates were there.

At rallies, crowds energized by their moment of power over sometimes abusive politicians braved the heat to listen, cheer and support. Turnout totaled 88%.

- *New York Times*

By Max Fisher

Myanmar's bloodshed reveals a world that has changed, and hasn't

Myanmar's rulers this week crossed a threshold few governments breach anymore: They have killed, by most estimates, more than 550 unarmed citizens of their own country.

Such massacres by government forces have, even in a time of rising nationalism and authoritarianism, been declining worldwide. This is the seventh in the past decade, compared with 23 in the 1990s, according to data from Uppsala University in Sweden.

And the violence in Myanmar was carried out by a sort of government that has grown rarer still: outright military rule.

Myanmar does not signify a return to an earlier era, experts believe, so much as an echo. Its violence hints at the ways in which the world has changed and has not.

Governments are more oppressive but, with a handful of exceptions like Syria, less likely to kill their own people at scale. Dictatorships are more common but less overt. And world powers have come to shun the government crackdowns they once encouraged.

Myanmar is unusual partly because it is a country out of time, resembling a bygone style of autocracy, but also for the ways in which it is unique.

And those traits, experts say, helped enable the February coup led by Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing and the subsequent crackdown on peaceful protesters. They also point to a long and difficult road ahead.

The Atrocity Formula

No two crackdowns are alike, each brought about by events and personalities particular to its time and place. But scholars have identified a set of factors that make a government likelier to kill large numbers of its own citizens. And virtually all are present in Myanmar.

Perhaps the most important warning sign: direct military rule.

Military rulers tend to be more aggressive in deploying troops to crush dissent. And unlike civilian autocrats, they have little reason to fear the troops turning on them, as happened when Romania's armed forces ousted the communist rulers who had ordered them to open fire on protesters in 1989.

But what most primes military rulers for violence, said Erica Frantz, a scholar of authoritarianism at Michigan State University, is their inexperience at ruling any other way. The country bears another serious risk factor: its civil war, raging against various ethnic militias since the 1940s.

Most militaries see themselves as protectors against foreign threats, with a strong taboo against committing violence at home. But civil war can break that taboo, normalizing the idea that deploying domestically is legitimate and making it easier to see fellow citizens as enemies. And it accustoms generals to the idea that their proper place is not guarding the borders but imposing order at home. Myanmar's military has considered this its role for decades; even when it allowed elections and limited civilian government in the years before the coup, it granted itself permanent seats in the Legislature.

But few factors predict future government massacres like past ones. And it has been less than four years since Myanmar conducted one of the bloodiest of the 21st century, targeting thousands of members of the country's Rohingya minority in what the United Nations and human rights groups called a genocidal campaign.

International outrage, though severe, did little to the leaders' calculus. And much of the domestic response to the Rohingya killings was supportive. Social media filled with praise for the campaign and the military officers who led it.

Once a military kills its own with impunity and even feels it benefited from the bloodshed, there is very little to stop it from doing so again.

A Different World

The era of armed forces rule peaked between 1960 and 1990, when dozens of countries around the world came under full or partial military dictatorships, many of them propped up by the United States or the Soviet Union. When the Cold War ended, that number collapsed to just a handful and has been steadily declining ever since, according to data maintained by One Earth Future, a research foundation.

Government-sponsored massacres became less frequent too. But a wave in the 1990s were mostly in countries that, like Myanmar, had histories of civil war, weak institutions, high poverty rates and politically powerful militaries: Sudan, Rwanda, Nigeria, Afghanistan, and Congo, among others. Although they largely failed to stop those killings as they happened, world leaders and institutions like the United Nations built systems to encourage democracy and avert future atrocities.

Myanmar, a pariah state that had sealed itself off from the world until reopening in 2011, did not much benefit from those efforts. The country also missed out on a global change in how dictatorship works.

A growing number of countries have shifted toward systems where a strongman rises democratically but then consolidates power. These countries still hold elections and call themselves democracies but heavily restrict freedoms and political rivals. Think Russia, Turkey or Venezuela.

Only 20 years ago, 70% of protest movements demanding democracy or systemic change succeeded. But that number has since plummeted to a historic low of 30%, according to a study by Erica Chenoweth of Harvard University.

Much of the change, Chenoweth wrote, came through something called "authoritarian learning."

New-style dictators were wary of calling in the military, which might turn against them. And mass violence would shatter their democratic pretensions. So they developed practices to frustrate or fracture citizen movements: jailing protest leaders, stirring up nationalism and flooding social media with disinformation.

Some Myanmar experts argue that the country's civilian leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, was pulling the government in this direction before the generals seized power for themselves.

- *New York Times*

By Patrick Kingsley and Rana F. Sweis

Breaking silence, Jordan's king says royal family rift is over

AMMAN — King Abdullah II of Jordan broke his silence Wednesday (7) night over the unusually public rift with his half-brother, Prince Hamzah, justifying the steps he had taken to curb his brother's contact with the outside world, while asserting that the prince's "sedition has been nipped in the bud."

In an open letter addressed to the Jordanian people that was read by a newscaster on television, King Abdullah wrote that Prince Hamzah had committed "to put Jordan's interest, Constitution and laws above all considerations," according to an

official translation of the letter released by the royal palace. The king added, "Hamzah today is with his family, in his palace, under my care." The prince had claimed that he was under house arrest. He has not been seen in public since the rift became public this past weekend.

On Sunday (4), the Jordanian government accused Prince Hamzah, a former crown prince, of having plotted to undermine the security of the country. Several aides and associates of the prince were arrested, and the prince himself was ordered to refrain from making public comments or

communicating with people outside the royal family.

The news shocked Jordanians and foreign allies alike. Jordan has historically been a pillar of stability in the turbulent Middle East, and the ruling family has rarely aired its disputes in public.

King Abdullah's letter constitutes the first time that the monarch himself has commented on the rift.

Prince Hamzah had previously distributed two videos about the situation, denying any involvement in a conspiracy but excoriating the Jordanian government and saying

he had been put under house arrest. In his statement Wednesday, the king spoke of his personal discomfort at his disagreement with Prince Hamzah. "The challenge over the past few days was not the most difficult or dangerous to the stability of our nation," he wrote, "but to me, it was the most painful."

He added, "Sedition came from within and without our one house, and nothing compares to my shock, pain, and anger as a brother and as the head of the Hashemite family, and as a leader of this proud people."

- *New York Times*

VIRUS FOCUS



The Muslim community remained and perhaps remains a recurring target of stigma, a convenient punching bag for the frustrations dealt by the pandemic

- I. Sujanekumar/ENCL

By Shashika Bandara

Where is kindness in our COVID-19 Health Policy?

Towards end of March, about two months into the pandemic, a TV program discussed the challenges of the pandemic response with politicians. A disturbing theme that was too prominent to ignore was the labelling of minorities as scapegoats for COVID-19. As a behind the scenes segment later showed the targeting was intentional. This was perhaps the opening scene of a series of actions and inactions related to stigma that have left a black mark on the COVID-19 response of Sri Lanka.

The lie that a select group of people was solely responsible for the spread of a disease is like wildfire burning through communities. It is reckless, damaging and hurts us all. One example is anti-Asian hate due to clear political scapegoating in the United States. In Sri Lanka, we have seen it causing damage to many communities. First the Muslim community, then the members of the Navy, the garment factory workers, returnees from overseas, the fishermen and the list goes on. At most instances each of these communities, often vulnerable and poor, were at the receiving end of blame and loss of privacy. The Muslim community remained and perhaps remains a recurring target of stigma, a convenient punching bag for the frustrations dealt by the pandemic. Media threw logs into the fire, social media poured fuel and confusion set in. The government perhaps dealt the worst blow, by forcing cremations of victims affected by COVID-19, a decision despite overwhelming scientific facts and remained in practice till February 2021. A year into the pandemic. Ten months since the mandatory policy was enacted.

The attempts at quelling stigma from government officials were a letter by the then Director General of Health Services Dr. Anil Jasinghe in April 2020, and another letter in October by

the Department of Information. Both politely requested media to adhere to better reporting etiquette. That is it. Two letters.

As fear, populist conspiracies, privilege of the few and pseudo-science harmed people, there was no meaningful policy action by the government. Stigma remains a factor.

So, you stop and ask the question, where is kindness in our health policy?

Yes, we need scientific evidence, economic calculations and social assessments for policy making but at the heart of health policy is the need to help those who are suffering. At the centre of health policy is humanity. We have strayed so far from this primary goal and what is worse is that we know that we can do better. Sri Lanka's public health system is considered a success in the region and among countries with similar gross national income levels. Our health system stands out because it is pro-poor, because our policies prioritize the vulnerable from vaccination coverage to saving lives of mothers. Without policy leadership that cared about the vulnerable and the dedication of healthcare workers none of those successes would have been possible.

Yet, we are failing now.

Although healthcare workers remain committed, our policies have failed us at combating stigma, countering harmful misinformation on COVID-19 related marginalization and public health guidance has become less prominent. After every cluster there is a vicious cycle of stigma that traps communities in between fear and seeking help. Think about it. How difficult the choice of testing for COVID-19 be if you feared you would be making your family or your community a target? Our COVID-19 related public health guidance is at times so sudden that it can

give you whiplash and leave you dazed with no explanation whatsoever. A sudden curfew that disappears as quickly as its issued. A threat is issued to the public who may have had plans before. So, you wonder: is there another outbreak? Who is to blame?

Right now, we are still in the middle of the pandemic. Vaccine inequity caused by the selfishness of high-income countries will continue to delay vaccine supply and in turn vaccination. Pandemic fatigue has set in. Thus, our focus on public health guidance and public health messaging that inform the public, counter populist conspiracies and builds faith is essential. And in this moment, it is perhaps the kindest action we can take from a policy perspective.

In the absence of kindness and care for the vulnerable as the guiding force for our public health policy – political determinants will run rampant and damage the trust built around our public health institutions. We see results of such damage in countries like Brazil. It is time we normalize kindness in our policies and in our actions as well. Normalize not pointing fingers and not being angry at someone for getting sick. And support our vulnerable communities whether it is prioritizing them at the vaccine line or whether it is providing enough monetary support for those who are struggling.

While the larger responsibility of ending stigma lie with the policy makers, responsibility of ending stigma also lies with us as citizens.

-Shashika Bandara is formerly a Policy Associate at the Centre for Policy Impact at the Duke Global Health Institute and is currently a Ph.D. candidate focusing on global health policy at McGill University. He tweets at @ShashikaLB. This article was originally featured on groundviews.org

By Benjamin Mueller, Monika Pronczuk and Matina Stevis Gridneff

UK calls for AstraZeneca alternative as EU finds 'possible link' to clots

EU finds 'possible link' to clots

Britain said Wednesday (7) it would offer alternatives to the AstraZeneca vaccine for adults younger than 30 as European regulators described a "possible link" with rare blood clots, a setback for the world's most widely used vaccine and a blow to the more than 100 countries relying on it to save lives amid a global surge in coronavirus cases.

The European regulator, the European Medicines Agency, stopped short of advising that use of the vaccine be curbed in the 27 European Union countries, saying that it was up to national authorities to decide who should receive which vaccine.

Until the announcement, Britain had never wavered in its use of the vaccine, making it a holdout in Europe even as many countries detected unusual, sometimes fatal, blood clots in some recipients. But evidence has mounted that very small numbers of Britons had also been afflicted, forcing the country to reduce the use in younger people of a vaccine that is the backbone of its world-beating inoculation program.

The concern over the blood clots has threatened the pace of vaccinations far beyond Europe. At least 111 countries of varying income levels have administered doses of AstraZeneca's shot, making it international aid groups' most potent weapon in the battle to reduce deaths in the vaccine-starved global south.

British and European regulators both said it was possible that the clots were linked to the vaccine, but that more investigation was needed. European regulators described the cases as a serious but "very rare" side effect.

As of Sunday, officials said, European regulators had received reports of 222 cases of the rare blood clotting in Britain and the 30-nation

European Economic Area (the European Union plus Iceland, Norway and Liechtenstein). They said that about 34 million people had received the AstraZeneca vaccine in those countries, and that the clotting problems were appearing at a rate of about 1 in 100,000 recipients. The condition can be treated.

European regulators said that as of March 22, they had carried out detailed reviews of 86 cases, 18 of which had been fatal.

The agency reiterated that the overall benefits of the vaccine still outweighed the risks, but urged that health professionals and recipients of the shot be cautious about symptoms like shortness of breath, chest pain or leg swelling.

Many European countries have restricted use of the vaccine in younger people because some scientists believe they are at higher risk of developing the rare blood clots. They are also at lower risk of severe COVID-19, raising the safety bar for any vaccine being given to younger people.

But the regulator said that it had not concluded that age or gender were a specific risk and that it would further investigate the issue.

"This case clearly demonstrates one of the challenges posed by large-scale vaccination campaigns," Emer Cooke, the agency's head, said in a news conference Wednesday. "When millions of people receive these vaccines, very rare events can occur that were not identified during the clinical trials."

"The risk of mortality from COVID is much greater than the risk of mortality from the side effects," Cooke added.

No other vaccine has stirred as much controversy as the shot made by the British-Swedish company, setting off spats with the bloc over cuts in supply, its efficacy and finally over rare,

but sometimes fatal, blood clots reported in some recipients.

Those concerns led several European countries to first restrict the use of AstraZeneca in older age groups, then suspend it over reports of blood clots, only to roll it out again last month after the European Medicines Agency issued a preliminary opinion that the benefits of the vaccine outweighed the risks.

As doctors reported a higher incidence of serious blood clots in younger people, some countries decided to stop administering the shot to anyone younger than 55.

Europe's concerns over the vaccine's side effects are also likely to threaten global inoculation efforts, with much of the developing world depending on the AstraZeneca vaccine to tackle the pandemic. The shot is the cornerstone of COVAX, a program designed to make vaccine access more equitable worldwide.

The vaccine appeared to be causing an immune reaction in which antibodies bind to platelets, activating them, German doctors and the European Medicines Agency have said. Those platelets, in turn, were causing the formation of dangerous clots in certain parts of the body, including in veins that drain blood from the brain, leading in some cases to a rare type of stroke.

Why the antibodies develop in these people is not known, doctors have said. Some component of the vaccine, or excessive immune reaction — or both — could be the cause, they said.

No pre-existing conditions are known to make patients more vulnerable to this clotting disorder after a vaccination, European regulators said.

-New York Times

By Kate Hodal

Amnesty International warns Hidden human rights crises threaten

post-COVID global security

Neglected human rights crises around the world have the potential to undermine already precarious global security as governments continue to use COVID as a cover to push authoritarian agendas, Amnesty International has warned.

The organization said ignoring escalating hotspots for human rights violations and allowing states to perpetrate abuses with impunity could jeopardise efforts to rebuild after the pandemic.

"We've seen the development of new legal tools to supposedly 'combat fake news' but which in fact repress freedom of expression, attacks against human rights defenders – particularly environmental defenders – the world over, and further repression of [minority] populations who have fallen off the agenda altogether," said Agnès Callamard, Amnesty's new secretary general.

"The voices and experiences of all these people must be at the heart of our reboot post COVID-19. If they are not, then the crises will multiply and the [current] system will perpetuate."

A number of under-reported crises were taking place across the globe that warranted immediate attention, said Callamard.

Amnesty's global report for 2020–2021, published on Wednesday (7), found that "fake news" laws in the Gulf, Hungary and Singapore were being used to silence criticism of governments and responses to the pandemic.

Singaporean authorities used the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, which forces online media platforms to carry corrections or remove content the government considers to be false – with penalties of up to 10 years' imprisonment or fines of up to S\$1m (£540,000), throughout 2020 against government critics and political opponents.

Activists in Western Sahara, which has been locked in a decades-long struggle for independence from Morocco, faced a number of interrogations and trumped-up charges for their human rights work, according to the report.

"Western Sahara has been living under oppression for many decades, but [the decision by Donald Trump] to recognise Morocco's sovereignty has simply escalated the repression," said Sahrawi activist Mohamed Elbaikam. "Activists are seeing their salaries cut off or frozen; they're being followed and targeted with trumped-up charges, their family members are threatened, their phones and internet connections are hacked, and some are being tortured and sent to prison without trial."

The human rights situation in the Philippines, already tenuous, worsened dramatically in 2020. In July 2020, the Philippines passed an anti-terrorism bill and its broad and vague definition of terrorism has since been used to target rights campaigners. The island nation is already the second deadliest country behind Colombia for human rights activists, according to the advocacy group Front Line Defenders. The vast majority of those killed in 2020 were working on environmental, land and indigenous rights, it said.

Amnesty's report painted a grim picture of the state of human rights around the world, with Callamard saying COVID-19 had "exposed and amplified everything that is wrong with our society".

Leaders had weaponized the pandemic by using it to ramp up attacks on human rights; vulnerable and elderly people died in their thousands in care homes; gender-based and domestic violence had increased in every region of the world; and global bodies such as the international criminal court and UN had failed to meet the human rights challenges omnipresent in 2020, she said. A number of governments around the world also used excessive violence to police the pandemic – including the Philippines, Nigeria and Brazil, where an average of 17 people were killed every day by police in the first half of the year, Amnesty's report claims.

A number of countries had continued crackdowns on freedom of expression in 2020. In nearly a third of all the countries Amnesty monitored, authorities had harassed or intimidated health or other key workers, with many facing reprisals, including arrest and dismissal, for raising concerns about safety or working conditions during the pandemic.

The report, which covered global human rights trends as well as those of 149 individual countries, also highlighted a marked increase in gender-based and domestic violence around the world, with many women and LGBTQ+ people facing barriers to protection and support due to restrictions on freedom of movement and lack of confidential reporting mechanisms.

Callamard said the pandemic had highlighted "the world's inability to cooperate effectively in times of dire global need".

"The only way out of this mess is through international cooperation," she said.

The report found that the world's most marginalised people, among them women and refugees, bore the brunt of the pandemic. Death, discrimination, unemployment and inequality were global themes: COVID-19 killed at least 1.8 million people worldwide in 2020, while 270 million were left facing acute food insecurity, many of them in squalid camps.

The report also highlighted the number of people who had been inspired to join protests against regressive policies, for example the Black Lives Matter protests in the US, the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria and virtual climate strikes.

-theguardian.com

HISTORY REVISITED



Royal Asiatic Society

By P. K. Balachandran

Christianity in Ceylon through the eyes of a Colonial official

James Emerson Tennent was Colonial Secretary in Ceylon from 1846 to 1850 and Acting Governor in April-May 1847. Tennent was not just an administrator, a Colonial master lording over obsequious natives. His keen eye and ear caught the nuances of the communities he was administering. His scholarship got him the Presidency of the Ceylon branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.

In *'Christianity in Ceylon'* published in 1850, Tennent traces the encounters with, and the challenges the religion faced from, entrenched faiths like Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and demon worship and how it tried to overcome the odds. He also writes on the Dutch attempt to root out Catholicism from Ceylon and the educational achievements of the American missions in Jaffna.

Contrary to the general belief that the Portuguese used violence to spread their religion in Ceylon, Tennent says: "There is no proof that compulsion was resorted to by them for the extension of their own faith or violence employed for the extinction of national superstitions." By 'national superstitions' he meant the other faiths. He then goes on to say: "The probability is that the priests and missionaries of the Portuguese were content to pursue in Ceylon the same line of policy and adopt the same expedients for conversion which had already been found successful by their fellow labourers on the opposite continent of India."

Both in India and Ceylon, the cultural tools used by the Catholic missionaries had proved to be more effective than coercion and violence. Another reason for the preference for cultural tools was that the Portuguese missionaries in India and Ceylon could not count on the support of the Portuguese State apparatus, which was necessary to use coercive methods.

"The amount of assistance from civil power, on which the Roman Catholic clergy could rely, did not ordinarily extend beyond the personal influence of the Captains-General at Colombo," Tennent says, qualifying that if at all there was State assistance these were "favourable and partiality exhibited by successive Governors to all who were willing to conform to their religion." Conversions were facilitated by what, in his view, was a characteristic disposition of the Sinhalese to be "obsequious" and "pliant" to those in power. But when the use of power exceeded limits people resisted in a variety of ways.

The might of the State did not work to the advantage of the Dutch because what they got, in reality, were fake adherents who lapsed into Buddhism or Hinduism the moment Dutch rule weakened. Tennent notes that adherence to Roman Catholicism was stronger as compared to Protestantism. Sinhalese Buddhists as well as Tamil Hindus found Roman Catholic forms of worship similar and congenial, making transition from one to the other or dual allegiance, much easier. On the contrary, the forms of worship in the Protestant churches, marked by "stern simplicity" were seen as being alien.

He goes on to elaborate: "Buddhism, like the ceremonial of the church of Rome, has to some

extent its pageantry and decorations, its festivals and its fireworks, its processions, its perfumes, its images, its exhibition of relics, its sacred vestments and its treasures of barbaric pearl and gold. It has its holy places and its pilgrimages in prosperity and health and votive offerings in calamity and disease. "The priests of both are devoted to celibacy and poverty, to mortification and privation.

Each worship has its prostrations and genuflections, its repetitions and invocations, in an ancient and to the multitude, in an unintelligible tongue. Both have their legends and miracles, their confidence in charms and in the assistance of guardian saints and protectors."

St. Francis Xavier had converted numerous fishermen on the Tuticorin and Mannar coasts, but he also noted large scale apostasy. This forced Jesuits in India to think of attuning Christianity to the local culture. They saw value in external conformity to local customs and practices "and a careful avoidance of any shock to their prejudices, religious and social."

Tennent notes the transition of the Jesuits was quite brazen in Tamil Nadu. The Jesuits "assumed the character of Brahmans of a superior caste from the Western World; they took the Hindoo names, and conformed to the heathen customs of this haughty and exclusive race, producing in support of their pretensions, a deed forged in ancient characters, to show that the Brahmans of Rome were of much older date than the Brahmans of India, and descended from an equally direct line from Brahma himself," he writes.

The Jesuits wore 'Kavi' or the orange robe and abjured animal food. They composed a Veda in which they insinuated Christian concepts in the phraseology of the Hindu sacred texts. They conducted pompous Therocart festivals with the image of Virgin Mary and the Saviour. This method secured multitudes of converts in South India and set the tone for Catholic missionary activity in Ceylon.

Tennent writes that Fr. Joseph Vaz's success in Ceylon in defiance of Dutch power was due to his image of being a Hinduistic ascetic (Sanyasi) clothed in rags, walking barefoot and sleeping on the floor.

"In Jaffna, he was seen and respected as a Brahman mendicant (he was actually from a Brahmin family in Goa). When, in 1704, Pope Benedict XV banned this trend, the number of nominal converts declined in India."

In Ceylon the Portuguese scored a major success when they converted the Kings of Kotte and Kandy. But these conversions were for political gain and not for salvation, Tennent writes, noting that the elite, and even commoners, converted following the conversion of the royals and that the converts had much to gain by being on the side of the new rulers. Buddhist monks, who disapproved the conversions, went away to Kandy, but they were not forced to leave, he notes, adding that the Portuguese allowed regular worship at the Kelani temple, which continued to attract pilgrims.

The situation radically changed when the Dutch replaced the Portuguese and began to propagate Protestantism with State backing and military power. Forced mass conversion was the order of the day and the principal targets were the Roman Catholics. No wonder, when the British took over from the Dutch, Protestant Christianity virtually disappeared from the Sinhalese population. But this posed a major challenge to British Protestant missionaries. "The natives could not be persuaded to listen to their addresses, and even after three years of discouragement, not one Sinhalese had admitted his distrust in idolatry," Tennent notes.

Resistance was particularly strong in the deep South. Despite the fact that Europeans had existed in Galle and Matara for 300 years, conversions were few. Buddhists would attend educational institutions set up by Missionaries and listen to the preaching, but very few would convert. Buddhist monks would invite missionaries to their temples for discussions, but change of heart was rare.

Many conversions in Ceylon were nominal and did not mean total alienation from Buddhism because Buddhists did not see conversion as a radical departure from their religion, believing there are many paths to salvation. The Tamils, on the other hand, found it harder to convert even nominally, as they were under the influence of rigid Brahmanism, which was hostile to other faiths.

Apostasy was less among Roman Catholics as compared to the Protestants. It was "infinitely smaller among the Roman Catholics than among the professors of any other Church in Ceylon," Tennent writes quoting a Wesleyan missionary as saying that the Roman Catholic converts, were "more detached from paganism, more regular in attendance at services and their conduct more consistent with the moral precepts of the Gospel." Tennent attributes this quality to the cultural liberalism of the Catholic Church in contrast to the cultural rigidity of the Protestant churches.

The European colonists' attempts to convert the Muslims met with total failure. "The more respectable Mahomedans met the offer of the tract with a dignified refusal; the lower classes rejected it with contempt; and to the present day, no decided conversions from Islamism have ever been made in Ceylon," Tennent writes. However, the Wesleyan mission reported a solitary conversion in the Fort area of Colombo in 1814. The Moor baptised was named Daniel Theophilus.

About the Author

P.K. Balachandran is a senior Colombo-based journalist who, in the past two decades, has reported for *The Hindustan Times*, *The New Indian Express* and *Economist*



By Scroll Staff

How the opening of the Suez Canal transformed Mumbai – and its sex trade

The city's port boomed and Eastern European women began to work in its brothels

On November 27, 1869, ten days after the Suez Canal had been inaugurated in Egypt, disaster struck the first ship headed to India laden with cargo. The Bombay Guardian reported mournfully that a ship called the Noel from Bordeaux had sunk in the Red Sea. "The barque came through the Suez Canal...bound for Bombay, with a cargo of wines," the newspaper noted.

But that didn't put a crimp on operations. The opening of the Suez Canal – connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea – revolutionized trade between Europe and India by cutting travel time from England to the subcontinent from more than three months to four or five weeks. Before this, ships had to sail around the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa.

Shortly after, a steamer from Glasgow called *The Stirling* en route to Mumbai made the passage through the canal in under 16 hours.

Since March 23, when a 400-metre-long shipping container called the *Ever Given* ran aground in the channel, blocking movement, the world has been reminded of the continuing importance of the Suez Canal.

The disaster has also been the opportunity to recall the excitement that greeted the opening of the canal just over 150 years ago – and how it shaped the city of Mumbai. Mumbai, with the most developed harbour on the west coast of the subcontinent, became the preferred destination for ships from Europe and was transformed into the Gateway of India.

An expanding network of railway lines connected the growing metropolis with the rest of the country.

The canal and the establishment of the Indo-European telegraph two years later meant that "India's products could move much more rapidly into consumption overseas and they could also be bought and sold on the basis of closed spot and forward contracts", said a report of the Bombay Chamber of Commerce and Industry. "The quicker movement of goods and the rising tempo of east-west trade mean there were valuable openings for the ancillaries of commerce – banking, insurance and shipping."

As travel between the continents became quicker and much more comfortable, among the spheres of Mumbai life that changed was sex work.

"Before the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the foreign prostitute from Eastern Europe was practically unknown in Bombay, and such immorality as existed was confined to women of Eurasian or Indian parentage," grumbled civil servant S. M. Edwards in his book *The Bombay City Police*, published in 1929.

But "once...the large European shipping-companies had established regular steamer-communication with India, and Port Said [in Egypt] had become a port of call and an asylum for the riff-raff of Europe", India was included in the orbit of the global sex trade, he said.

"The women usually arrive unaccompanied and of their own choice, and they are well over the age of majority before they first set foot on the Bombay bandar," Edwards wrote. "The 'mistress' of the brothel, who is herself a time-expired prostitute and has sometimes paid a heavy sum to her predecessor for the good-will of the house, feeds and houses the women in return for 50% of their daily earnings." By the end of the 19th century, Mumbai had the largest number of European sex workers of all Indian cities, writes Ashwini Tambe in her book *Codes of Misconduct: Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay*. "Women as far away as Poland came to work in its brothels," she notes.

Many of the European women worked in brothels in Tardeo, Grant Road and Byculla, where a section of Shuklaji Street came to be known as 'Safed gully' or 'white lane'. "Preserving racial purity and preventing miscegenation became a crucial political project," Tambe writes.

The existence of European brothels, Tambe notes, was driven by "three distinct imperatives for colonial administrators: providing sexual recreation for British soldiers and sailors, preventing interracial sex and preserving British national prestige".

She explains, "Although British administrators condoned brothels, they tried to ensure that brothel workers were not British as that could reflect badly on British womanhood."

-Scroll.in

SPORTS

COUNTER PUNCH

By The Line Judge

SLC on the dock as officials likely to face indictment

Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) formerly the Board of Control for Cricket in Sri Lanka (BSSCL) once upon a time was headed by distinguished gentleman such as Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, Junius Richard Jayewardene, Robert Senanayake, Maj. Gen. Bertram Russell Heyn, Dr. N. M. Perera and Gamini Dissanayake under whose watch Sri Lanka attained Test status. They were men of stature and integrity who belonged to the era when cricket was a gentleman's game. As administrators they selflessly dedicated their lives and even fortunes for the cause of the game.

Saravanamuttu who was head of the Ceylon Cricket Association from 1937-50 and the first president of the Board of Control for Cricket in Ceylon (1949-50), left a lasting legacy on the sport - the P. Sara Trophy - which was the premier inter-club cricket

tournament from 1949 to 1982. Fondly remembered for his association with the Tamil Union Cricket and Athletic Club, which he helped develop, he was president of the club from 1948 to 1951 and helped build the club's new ground, the Colombo Oval, which was renamed P. Saravanamuttu Stadium in 1977.

J.R. Jayewardene, the first Executive President of Sri Lanka, and former finance minister Dr. N. M. Perera, were two prominent politicians who headed the BCCSL. Another was former Army Commander Maj. Gen. B.R. Heyn, whose most famous feat was getting Sir Donald Bradman out on his last appearance in Colombo, in a one-day match between Australia and All-Ceylon on March 27, 1948. That was before Gamini Dissanayake batted eloquently for Sri Lanka at the International Cricket Council (ICC) to convince England

and Australia to grant the small island nation Test status. And not forgetting Ana Punchihewa, who transformed Sri Lanka into becoming world champions in 1996.

However, much water has flowed under the bridge and through the hallowed portals of the SLC headquarters at Maitland Place as the premier cricketing body continues to sink deeper into the abyss with the sport governed by officials who are neck deep in corruption. It is a malaise which has affected the performance of the national team despite having a first class school and club system that produced the likes Mahela Jayawardene, Kumar Sangakkara, Tillakaratne Dilshan, Muttiah Muralitharan and Angelo Mathews who filled the legend sized shoes of World Cup legends Arjuna Ranatunga, Aravinda de Silva, Sanath Jayasuriya, Roshan Mahanama and Asanka

Gurusinha. There is a sense of urgency to overhaul the existing structure, which was successful in the past but has been afflicted by the authorities going for quantity instead of quality in their ongoing quest to stay in power by hook or crook, doling out charity in the guise of development as a vote-buying tactic especially during an election year.

In the most damning indictment yet on the administration of SLC, the Parliamentary watchdog committee - COPE (Committee on Public Enterprises) - issued instructions to the Secretary to the Ministry of Sports, Anuradha Wijekoon, to take legal action against the former members of the Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) Executive Committee and its CEO Ashley de Silva, it has been reported.

Issuing a statement on Tuesday's (6) COPE hearing, the Parliament media unit stated that the committee's Chairman Prof. Charitha Herath had also instructed the ministry secretary to conduct an inquiry and submit its findings within three months. Prof. Herath stated that the assistance of the Attorney General could be obtained for this purpose.

It was reported that there had been an outlay of Rs 60 million by SLC for the purchase of rollers for cricket clubs, which the Auditor General had highlighted as "suspicious", with the distribution of the rollers to clubs possibly done with the intention of buying votes for the upcoming SLC election.

The statement also notes that COPE chairman Herath had pointed out that the reason for the massive collapse of cricket in the country was not the fault of the players but the weaknesses of the cricket administration.

The COPE probe was for the purpose of examining the Auditor General's report for the financial years 2017 and 2018 of SLC and its current performance.

The probe found that 123 of the 162 approved cadres of SLC were on contract, which was a matter of serious concern.

The Committee also pointed out that the posts of Head of Finance, Legal Officer, Information Technology Officer and Internal Auditor should be permanent positions.

When COPE questioned the non-recovery of Rs 29 million in revenue due for sponsorship of the South Africa-Sri Lanka Cricket tour in 2018, the Chief Executive Officer of SLC Ashley de Silva informed the committee that the CID had commenced an investigation into the matter. It was revealed that the money had been deposited in a bank account in the USA named 'Diamond Channel' and that the investigations were focused on how it happened.

It was further revealed at the meeting that Rs 30 million has been spent to take legal action against former head coach of Sri Lanka Cricket, Chandika Hathurusinghe, due to the shortcomings of his agreement.

Attention was drawn to the fact that Rs 132 million had been spent for the construction of a National Cricket Stadium and a Multi-Sports Complex in the Hingurakgoda area in Polonnaruwa, but that a title deed had not been obtained for the relevant land as yet.

Ironically, several former officials of the SLC ExCo were unable to attend the COPE meeting as their tenure had expired on Monday (5). Sports Minister Namal Rajapaksa finally relented and named a five-member management committee headed by Prof. Arjuna de Silva to run SLC until elections are conducted on May 20.

Their task would be to streamline the accounts, address legal aspects and be transparent during their short tenure. It remains to be seen whether they have the teeth to ring in changes.

-ENCL



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