



GLOCAL | PAGE 03



CHINA OWED \$385BN – INCLUDING  
'HIDDEN DEBT' FROM POORER  
NATIONS, SAYS REPORT

HOT TOPICS | PAGE 04



COMMENTARY | PAGE 07



HOW TO END SRI LANKA'S  
FOOD CRISIS

SRI LANKA FOCUS | PAGE 08

# Weekend Express

Sri Lanka's International Newspaper

Registered in the Department of Posts of Sri Lanka under No: QD/130/News/2021

## House delays vote on infrastructure bill as Democrats feud

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden's trillion-dollar bipartisan infrastructure plan suffered a significant setback late Thursday (Sept 30) night when House Democratic leaders, short of support amid a liberal revolt, put off a planned vote on a crucial plank of their domestic agenda.

Democratic leaders and supporters of the bill insisted the postponement was only a temporary setback. The infrastructure vote was rescheduled for Friday (Oct 1), giving them more time to reach agreement on an expansive climate change and social safety net bill that would bring liberals along.

But such a deal appeared far off, and the delay was a humiliating blow to Biden and Democrats, who had spent days toiling to broker a deal between their party's feuding factions and corral the votes needed to pass the infrastructure bill. Biden has staked his reputation as a deal-maker on the success of both the public works package and a far more ambitious social policy bill.

Given the distance between the Democrats' left flank and a few centrists on that larger bill, it was not clear when or even whether either would have the votes — and whether Biden's economic agenda could be revived. The House and Senate did pass — and Biden signed — legislation to fund the government

until Dec. 3, with more than \$28 billion in disaster relief and \$6.3 billion to help relocate refugees from Afghanistan. That at least averted the immediate fiscal threat of a government shutdown, clearing away one item on the Democrats' must-do list, at least for two months.

But that small accomplishment was overwhelmed by the acrimony on display within the president's party.

The infrastructure measure, which would provide \$550 billion in new funding, was supposed to burnish Biden's bipartisan bona fides. It would devote \$65 billion to expand high-speed internet access; \$110 billion for roads, bridges and other projects; \$25 billion for airports; and the most funding for Amtrak since the passenger rail service was founded in 1971. It would also begin the shift toward electric vehicles with new charging stations and fortifications of the electricity grid that will be necessary to power those cars.

But progressive leaders for weeks had said they would oppose it until they saw action on the legislation they really wanted — a far-reaching bill with paid family leave, universal pre-kindergarten, Medicare expansion and strong measures to combat climate change.

-NYT

## Independent Commission says

### WHO 'should pay reparations to victims of sexual abuse by staff'

GENEVA - Survivors of sexual abuse by World Health Organization (WHO) aid workers during the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Ebola outbreak in 2018 should receive "substantive" reparations, the co-chair of an independent inquiry into the scandal has said.

Julienne Lusenge, a prominent Congolese human rights activist, said it was "essential" that the UN's global health body drew up a workable plan for reparations to respond to the "real needs" of women and girls who became victims of abuse. "The issue of reparations is very, very important," said Lusenge, executive director of the Fund for Congolese Women. "Babies were born; women were left unwell. So we think it's important to have a holistic program in which the alleged victims themselves will be the stakeholders."

In a damning report published this week, the independent commission found 21 of the alleged perpetrators of serious abuses, including a number of rape allegations, were employed by the WHO. The scandal led to 29 pregnancies, with some women later being forced to have abortions by their abusers, the inquiry found.

In total, the commission interviewed 75 alleged victims aged 13 to 43. The youngest survivor recalled being offered a lift home by a WHO driver in the small town of Mangina

in North Kivu. She said that instead of taking her home, the man raped her. She became pregnant and had a child, the report noted.

Lusenge and her fellow commission members called on the WHO to draw up a plan for making reparations to the survivors once the investigation had been completed. Many victims, they noted, had complained of receiving no help and being "left to deal with the physical and moral consequences" of the abuse on their own.

"So we are now waiting for the WHO to ... provide substantive reparations," Lusenge said on Thursday (Sept 30).

The report said some of the victims had suffered trauma as a result of the abuse, with some of the men administering abortion pills or injections to girls and women they had impregnated.

Other victims had seen their financial insecurity worsen as a result of the abuse and exploitation. Two said that, after their pregnancies became public, they had been forced to stop their studies.

On Tuesday (Sept 28), as the report was released, the WHO's director general, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, vowed that there would be "zero tolerance for sexual exploitation and abuse, and zero tolerance for inaction against it".

-The Guardian

## Locked down Sydney left leaderless after corruption resignation

SYDNEY - The leader of Australia's most populous state resigned Friday (Oct 1) amid a corruption investigation, leaving Sydneysiders - deep in months of lockdown - without a political leader.

New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian said she would leave Parliament after an anti-corruption body announced an inquiry into allegations against her.

"My resignation as premier could not occur at a worse time, but the timing is completely outside of my control," Berejiklian told media in Sydney.

"I do not want to be a distraction from what should be the focus of the state government during this pandemic, which is the wellbeing of our citizens. It always has been and always will be."

Berejiklian has been one of the most prominent faces of Australia's pandemic response, fronting cameras daily as the federal government was largely side-lined.

A state corruption watchdog is investigating allegations including whether she favoured a former boyfriend, then a Member of Parliament, in the awarding of grants in his electorate. The projects included funding for the Australian Clay Target Association

in and the Riverina Conservatorium of Music in Wagga Wagga, a small New South Wales town.

Berejiklian denied the allegations and said the inquiry into events that occurred between 2012 and 2018 had come "in the most challenging weeks of the most challenging times in the state's history".

Since late June, Sydney's over five million residents have been under stay-at-home orders, with plans to end the lockdown slated for October 11.

Daily case numbers have begun to decline from a peak earlier this year but the state is still reporting over 800 cases a day.

The conservative leader had helmed the state since 2017, including through Australia's worst bushfire season and the entirety of the pandemic.

Her approval ratings rocketed in late 2020 as the state managed to avoid the ravages of the first wave, but recent opinion polls had seen her support from voters dip after the arrival of the Delta variant and spiralling lockdowns.

Her replacement will be decided by members of the ruling Liberal party.

-AFP



A US Geological Survey (USGS) image showing the continuing eruption of Kilauea Volcano in Hawaii, fountaining at multiple fissure locations on the base and west wall of the crater, and a lava lake growing within Halema'uma'u on Thursday (Sept 30). Authorities

said Kilauea, one of the world's most active volcanoes, had begun erupting with lava fountains reaching the 'height of a 5-story building' appearing on the surface of the crater's lava lake 'on Wednesday (Sept 29). USGS said cracks first appeared in the

Halema'uma'u crater earlier Wednesday and very quickly gave way to the lava fountains, which at times exceed a temperature of 1,100 degrees Celsius. The eruptions that have regularly rocked Kilauea since the 1950s have made it a popular destination for tourists

-US Geological Survey / AFP

## Ethiopia expels UN officials leading aid response in Tigray

NAIROBI — Ethiopia ordered the expulsion of seven senior United Nations (UN) officials on Thursday (Sept 30), two days after the UN's aid chief warned that northern Ethiopia is sliding into famine because the government is blocking aid deliveries to the region.

Among those on the list of those ordered expelled were officials coordinating relief efforts and sounding the alarm about the humanitarian crisis in Tigray, the northern region that has been at war for nearly a year with the Ethiopian government.

At least 5 million people in Tigray urgently need help, but just 606 trucks have been allowed to enter the region since July 12, bringing barely one-tenth of the supplies needed to

avert a catastrophic famine, UN officials said. Aid workers accuse Ethiopian officials of using harassment and obstruction to constrict the flow of aid into a region controlled by Tigrayan rebel forces.

Trucks filled with food, medicine and fuel are stranded in the neighbouring Afar region, denied permission to move. On Thursday, Ethiopian officials forced 10 aid workers to get off a UN flight into Tigray, saying they lacked the necessary paperwork, said a senior aid official who did not want to be identified to avoid reprisals.

In a statement giving the UN officials 72 hours to leave, Ethiopia's Foreign Ministry accused them of "meddling in the internal affairs of

the country" and declared them "persona non grata."

UN Secretary-General António Guterres said he was "shocked" by the announcement and expressed his "full confidence" in UN staffers who deliver lifesaving aid in Ethiopia.

Nevertheless, UN officials appeared to hold out hope on Thursday that the Ethiopian authorities might walk back the expulsion order.

Stephanie Tremblay, a UN spokeswoman in New York who delivered Guterres' reaction at the regular daily news briefing, said discussions were underway between Ethiopian and UN officials "at various levels" and emphasized that their staff "has not left Ethiopia yet."

-NYT

## Trending News

**Sri Lanka:** Central Bank announces the removal of the 100% cash margins imposed on importation of non-essential items, with immediate effect.

**Japan:** After years of controversy, the Imperial Household Agency says Princess Mako will marry this month, but she will forego traditional rites and will not take a usual payment given to royal women marrying commoners.

**Georgia:** Ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili says he has returned from exile, despite a looming arrest, ahead of local elections in the Caucasus country.

**China:** Top state-owned energy companies are ordered to ensure there are adequate fuel supplies for the approaching winter, as the country battles a power crisis that threatens to hit growth in the world's number two economy.

**Australia:** Prime Minister Scott Morrison says the country will begin to reopen its borders next month; 18 months after citizens

were banned from travelling overseas without permission.

**Vietnam:** Ho Chi Minh City lifts a stay-at-home order that had kept its nine million residents indoors for three months and devastated business in the economic hub.

**EU:** A long-planned round of Australia-EU free trade talks is postponed, after fury over Canberra's decision to cancel a major French submarine contract.

**Israel:** Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and his Bahraini counterpart Abdullatif al-Zayani inaugurate the country's embassy in Manama, in a historic step for the two countries.

**North Korea:** State media says Pyongyang has test-fired a newly developed anti-aircraft missile.

**Philippines:** Election season kicks off with TV celebrities, political scions and at least one inmate expected to be among thousands of candidates vying for posts from president to town councillor.

## Quote for Today

Life without liberty is like a body without spirit.

-Khalil Gibran

## Word for Today

**Perfidy** [pur-fi-dee] -noun -deliberate breach of faith or trust; faithlessness; treachery

## Today in History

**1989** - Denmark introduces the world's first legal same-sex registered partnerships

## Today is..

## World Smile Day

A day that encourages you to take action to bring a few more smiles into the world

# BUSINESS

## Tea industry fears 40% crop loss in 2022, rubber wipe-out over fertilizer ban

**COLOMBO** – Sri Lanka's tea output could fall 40% in 2022 and rubber could be wiped out by leaf disease, threatening livelihoods and export revenues, if a fertilizer agro-chemical ban suddenly imposed this year is continued, industry officials warned.

"In 2022, all experts estimate that we will record a more than 40% reduction in tea exports," Bathiya Bulumulle, President of Sri Lanka's Planters' Association representing managers of commercial tea plantations and factories, who was re-elected for a second time said at its annual general meeting.

"With an immediate halt of the use of fertilizer and agro-chemicals, the consensus is that there will be severe crop losses, and as a result, a reduction in export revenues by as early as the end of this year," he warned.

Sri Lanka has banned imports of fertilizer saying US\$ 300-400 million was spent on it a year and that agro-chemicals caused non-com-

municable diseases. Up to now tea plantations companies have been using fertilizer already imported to the country. Crop losses have not been severe up to July, amid good rainfall though down from 2019.

"All this time we were managing with whatever the fertilizer issued by the government," Bulumulle said, but pointed out that it was too premature to tell what it is going to be in the future. "There may be a 30 to 40% reduction of crop early next year when there is no adequate quantity of fertilizer given to tea," he added.

Sri Lanka exported US\$ 1.2 billion of tea in 2020 and US\$ 1.3 billion in 2019.

The government at the moment has introduced liquid nitrogen. However its efficacy compared to urea based fertilizer is not yet known, planters said.

Usually, Sri Lanka's Tea Research Institute or Rubber Research Institute recommends fertilizer and

application volumes after study. Rubber is also hit by diseases and is under threat without adequate fertilizer.

"By the end of 2021, the industry expects an estimated 20% Year-on-Year reduction in output from rubber plantations due to disease," Bulumulle said.

A leaf disease (Pestalotiopsis) is spreading in the plantations. Already about 20,000 hectares are affected. Rubber plantation experts have said it has reached an epidemic level.

"This disease results in continuous fall of tree leaves so the Rubber Research Institute has instructed us to give additional dosages of fertilizer," Bulumulle explained.

The shortage of fertilizer is also going to hinder progress on replanting of rubber, given that the uptake of fertilizer is most crucial when rubber is in the nursery phase, Bulumulle said. The planters sounding the alarm say this could be as bad as the

"coffee blight of late 1800s" without fertilizer.

Sri Lanka was a prominent coffee producer in the late 1800s when a disease known as 'coffee rust' blight wiped out Sri Lanka's coffee plantations in the late 1800s.

By next year, planters predict that if crop falls companies will not be able to provide work for the staff.

About 120,000 work in the regional plantation companies. Similar plight will fall on smallholders the PA warned.

"For replanting too, the entire industry – including tea smallholders – who account for over 70% of total tea production, need fertilizer for their nurseries," Bulumulle explained.

"Without it, we cannot grow viable cultivars."

Planters also warned that once a market is lost, especially for tea, it cannot be regained.

**-economynext.com**

By Asanka Wijesinghe and Eleesha Munasinghe

### GSP+ withdrawal

## How would it impact Sri Lanka's economy?

**Sri Lanka's** preferential access to the vital European Union (EU) market faces fresh challenges after the European Parliament's special resolution adopted in June 2021. The resolution calls for an assessment on "whether there is sufficient reason, as a last resort, to initiate a procedure for the temporary withdrawal of Sri Lanka's GSP+ status".

The GSP+ is a non-reciprocal trading arrangement whereby Sri Lanka does not have to lower tariffs in return but is required to implement certain non-trade related conventions to benefit from preferential access. The GSP+ arrangement slashes import duties to zero for vulnerable low and lower-middle-income countries that implement 27 international conventions related to human rights, labour rights, environment protection, and good governance.

This article assesses the impact of a hypothetical withdrawal of GSP+ on Sri Lanka's exports to the EU: the largest single trading bloc, with the United Kingdom (UK), accounting for 30% of Sri Lanka's exports.

### The Impact

A possible withdrawal of GSP+ will increase the tariffs for Sri Lankan products up to the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) tariffs. Consequently, products coming from Sri Lanka will be more expensive in the EU market, directly reducing the export demand from Sri Lanka. However, Sri Lanka's competitors that continue to benefit from the EU's GSP will face zero preferential tariffs. Thus, in addition to the trade destruction effect, with the relative price of goods from Sri Lanka being higher, the trade will be diverted to those competitors. Using a partial equilibrium analysis, one can estimate quantifies these effects of GSP+ withdrawal. Assuming the UK will follow the EU lead, and Sri Lanka will face the lower bound of relevant MFN tariffs, partial equilibrium estimates show that Sri Lanka's exports to the EU will fall by US\$ 627 million. The simulations are done taking 2019 as the base year.

The worst-hit sectors would be apparel, tobacco, seafood and rubber sectors. The combined loss for the apparel sector will be as much as US\$ 494 million, and it is 79% of the total estimated trade loss. In addition, the seafood sector is deemed to lose US\$ 20 million or 17% of the sector's 2019 exports to the EU. Thus, losing preference to a vital market will be hard for the recovering seafood industry.

There are two caveats of an ex-ante impact assessment of this kind. The first is that the analysis is based on assumed elasticity. However, the assumptions are not overly restrictive. The second is that all the eligible exports from Sri Lanka do not utilize the GSP+ facility. Thus, the actual impact will be contingent upon the utilization ratio.

However, after Sri Lanka regained GSP+ preference in 2017, the utilization ratio increased, reaching 61.8% in 2019, improving from 55.1% in 2017. Therefore, the increasing utilization ratio makes the potential impact still significant.

Notably, there is a variation of the utilization rate within the sector. The apparel sector will be relatively resilient to a loss of preference as its utilization ratio was 52% in 2019. However, a loss of preference will halt any industry drive that aims to increase the utilization rate and then expand the market share in the EU. Further, the 2010 loss of GSP+ inflicted high costs to the industry. As seafood, rubber products, and footwear sectors utilize more than 90% of GSP+ preference, those sectors will be more vulnerable to the shock. Indeed, the difference between GSP+ preferential tariff and MFN tariff for seafood is higher -zero versus 7.5% respectively - aggravating the impact.

### Future Steps

The losses from GSP+ preference will be significant and heterogeneous across sectors. The GSP+ also opens the door for EU investments as outsourcing production to preference receivers is beneficial to the EU. In addition, sectoral losses may spill over to the overall economy exacerbating poverty and income inequality. Thus, avoiding such losses should be a political priority for policymakers. Less dependence on the EU market is a widely suggested strategy. Diversification is indeed beneficial when it is done for economic reasons. However, ad-hoc moves to diversify to escape from unresolved political issues will not do much good. The EU market is a high-end export destination for Sri Lanka. The quality improvements, product standards, and consumer preferences positively challenge the Sri Lankan exporters to improve product quality and competitiveness.

Additionally, a non-reciprocal preference for various products incentivises product diversification away from traditional exports into more complex products like electronic equipment, including semiconductors. Therefore, while Sri Lanka should work to secure the GSP+ resolving the current political issues and focus on fully utilising GSP+ preference in the short run. In the long run, as GSP+ is contingent upon income level, Sri Lanka will lose it someday, and as such should enter into reciprocal trade agreements with the EU and other high-end markets, including the US.

**-Asanka Wijesinghe** is a Research Economist at the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS) with research interests in macroeconomic policy, international trade, labour and health economics and **Eleesha Munasinghe** is a former research intern at IPS. She is currently an undergraduate (Economics and Finance) at New Castle University in UK

## India counters China in Sri Lanka with \$700 million port deal

**COLOMBO** - An Indian company entered into a \$700 million deal Thursday (Oct. 30) to build a strategic deep-sea container terminal in Sri Lanka, officials said, in a move seen as countering China's rising influence in the region.

The Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) said it signed an agreement with India's Adani Group to build a brand-new terminal next to a \$500-million Chinese-run jetty at the sprawling port in the capital Colombo.

"The agreement worth more than \$700 million is the largest foreign investment ever in the port sector of Sri Lanka," the SLPA said in a statement.

It said Adani will enter into a partnership with a local conglomerate,

John Keells, and the Sri Lankan government-owned SLPA as a minority partner.

John Keells said it will have 34% of the company while Adani will have a 51% controlling stake in the joint venture known as the Colombo West International Terminal.

The new container jetty will be 1.4 kilometres in length, with a depth of 20 metres and an annual capacity to handle 3.2 million containers.

The first phase of the project with a 600-metre terminal is due to be completed within two years, the company said. The terminal will revert to Sri Lanka ownership after 35 years of operation.

Plans to allow India into the strategic Colombo port goes back several

years, but they were scuttled in February when trade unions linked to the ruling coalition opposed giving New Delhi a partially built terminal within the port.

Later, the government asked Indians to build a brand-new terminal adjoining the Chinese-operated Colombo International Container Terminal (CICT).

Colombo is located in the Indian Ocean between the major hubs of Dubai and Singapore, meaning influence at its ports is highly sought after.

Two Chinese submarines berthed at the CICT in 2014, sparking concerns in India which considers neighbour Sri Lanka to be within its sphere of influence.

Since then, Sri Lanka has refused permission for more Chinese submarines to be stationed there.

In December 2017, unable to repay a huge Chinese loan, Sri Lanka allowed China Merchants Port Holdings to take over the southern Hambantota port, which straddles the world's busiest east-west shipping route.

The deal, which gave the Chinese company a 99-year lease, raised fears about Beijing's use of "debt traps" in exerting its influence abroad.

India and the United States have also expressed concerns that a Chinese foothold at Hambantota could give Beijing a military advantage in the Indian Ocean.

**-AFP**



**Daily Express**  
We are now online!

Click on  
**dailyexpress.lk**

And get a peek at what's going on in the world and in Sri Lanka

Get some reality checks, global perspective, Glocal news, comments and commentary and a whole host more...

Visit us..... stay for a while... and enjoy!

## Sri Lanka confident of US\$ 500 mn in tourism revenue through March 2022

**COLOMBO** – Sri Lanka's pandemic-hit tourism industry is confident of a strong resurgence and US\$ 500 million revenue for the financial year ending in March 2022, with at least 50,000 arrivals per month, industry representatives said.

"What we have observed in other destinations is that fewer the controls, the higher the arrivals," President of the Hotels Association of Sri Lanka (THASL) Sanath Ukwatte said on Thursday (30).

"However, even before this new relaxation and the UK's announcement on moving Sri Lanka out of the red list, our arrivals were increasing. We are quite confident that in this financial year (ending March 2022), we will be able to earn at least US\$ 500 million or a little bit more than that," he said.

The health ministry on Tuesday (Sept 28) announced it will relax COVID-19 restrictions for arrivals, waiving on-arrival PCR tests for fully vaccinated inbound travellers with a negative PCR report obtained 72 hours before arrival.

Before the relaxation, on arrival PCR tests were mandatory at a cost of about US\$ 40, with one-day quarantine until the reports were cleared.

Sri Lanka's peak winter travel season is from October till March.

"Winter travel is the peak [tourism] season for Sri Lanka. We are expecting a good growth of tourism traffic from October-November," Ukwatte said, adding that the industry is expecting arrivals anywhere between 50,000 to 70,000 per month from October.

Revenue from tourism plummeted to because the country's borders were closed since mid-last year.

Sri Lanka saw US\$ 6.8 million of tourism revenue in August compared to zero in the same month last year. The industry saw US\$ 32.8 million of revenue in the first eight months of this year compared to US\$ 681.9 million in the same period last year.

The island, popular for its diverse nature and golden sandy beaches, saw its peak tourism revenue of US\$ 4.38 billion in 2018 before falling to US\$ 3.59 billion in the next year due to the Easter Sunday attack.

Sri Lanka's arrivals have gradually picked up from only 100 arrivals per day since the country initially opened for Ukrainian tourists under a bio-bubble concept in December last year. The authorities also allowed Indian tourists from late August.

"Now that they can travel to Sri Lanka, we expect a good pickup and also there are inquiries coming in daily on accommodation availability for them to travel in the latter part of this year and early next year," Ukwatte said. "Most hotels have been shut down or are operating partially, so we have lost a lot of business and are on survival mode. Now things are changing, we need to reopen the hotels."

"Reopening a hotel is not an easy task. We have to refurbish the hotels. We have to get some working capital to do that, but the government too is not in a position. We understand that."

**-economynext.com**

GLOCAL

Daily Express Sri Lanka's International Newspaper

Express Newspapers (Cey) Pvt. Ltd., 185, Grandpass Road, Colombo 14, Sri Lanka Telephone: 0117 322 705 (Editorial) 0117 322 736 (Advertising) 0117 322 789 (Circulation) Email - editor.dailyexpress@encl.lk/weekendexpress@encl.lk Epaper - http://epaper.newsexpress.lk Facebook - News Express Sri Lanka

Tamil prisoners file Fundamental Rights petition at Supreme Court

COLOMBO - As many as eight Tamil prisoners in Sri Lanka's Anuradhapura prison on Thursday (Sept 30) petitioned the country's Supreme Court, seeking relief after a 'gun-wielding' prisons minister allegedly threatened them a fortnight ago. The prisoners stated that they fear for their lives, asking to be transferred to a prison in the Tamil-majority Northern Province. Jaffna parliamentarian and senior lawyer M. A. Sumanthiran will appear for them in the case, media reports said. On September 15, Lohan Ratwatte, who was State Minister of Prison Management and Prisoners' Rehabilitation, stepped down from the

portfolio amid enormous pressure, after allegations of his asking Tamil prisoners to kneel, threatening them at gunpoint, surfaced. Ratwatte is still a junior minister in the Rajapaksa administration, overseeing the Gem and Jewellery portfolio, although government critics have demanded that he be sacked from all positions, citing the reported incident that sparked much public outrage. In their petition, the prisoners revealed the minister asked the detainees to stand in a semi-circle and "ordered them to kneel before him". "He then started to abuse them in Sinhala saying that His Excellency the President had given him all the power in relation to

PTA prisoners and that he could either release them or shoot them dead. He had a pistol in his hand and appeared to be intoxicated," the petition stated. The minister's office earlier denied any wrongdoing on his part. The eight Tamil men - who have sought relief from the Supreme Court through Colombo-based lawyer Moahan Balendra - are in the remand following their arrest under Sri Lanka's infamous Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). Rights activists and Tamil political leaders have for long demanded repeal of the PTA, pointing to different governments' tendency to use the law to target dissidents or arbitrarily detain "terror-

ism suspects" for long periods without trial. Soon after the violent incident in the prison complex - allegedly involving the prisons minister - was reported in the media, the country's Human Rights Commission started a suo motu investigation. International human rights watchdogs were swift to condemn the minister's actions. Human Rights Watch said the incident reflected "the disregard for human rights that prevails under the administration of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and in particular the vulnerable position of people held under the PTA." -The Hindu

British envoy raises concern over 'high profile' cases with FM

COLOMBO - British High Commissioner to Sri Lanka Sarah Hulton has raised concerns over certain high profile cases cited in the on-going United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) when she met Sri Lanka's foreign minister G. L. Peiris, the foreign ministry said in a statement. The discussion had focused on several key areas impacting future bilateral relations between the two countries including the recent initiatives to foster and develop domestic reconciliation measures taken by the Sri Lankan government. "These included the work of the institutions dealing with national unity and reconciliation, missing persons, accountability and reparations," the foreign ministry said. "High Commissioner Hulton also raised concerns relating to certain high profile Sri Lankan cases that are of current interest and focus." The foreign ministry did not elaborate on the high profile cases, but said some of the issues were adverted to in the context of Sri Lanka's on going engagement with the UN Human Rights Council. At the UNHRC meeting in Geneva two weeks ago, Human Rights Commissioner Michelle Bachelet raised concerns over developments in judicial proceedings in a number of emblematic human rights cases. This included the Attorney General's decision to not proceed with charges against former Navy Commander Wasantha Karannagoda in the case of the enforced disappearances of 11 men in 2008 and 2009. Bachelet also said President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's recent pardon of former MP, Duminda Silva, who was convicted for killing a politician in 2011 and sentenced to, also risks eroding confidence in the rule of law and judicial process. Sri Lanka is facing pressure from the West and rights group to address alleged past human rights violations and the continued use of the decades-old anti-terror law, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The West has accused Sri Lanka of using the PTA to arrest ethnic minorities and dissenters. Concern has also been raised over deaths in police custody in the context of police encounters with alleged drug runners and criminal gangs. Attention has been drawn to two recent incidents: a state minister allegedly threatening 10 ethnic minority Tamil detainees held under the PTA at gunpoint while being forced to kneel, and the arrest of a Tamil MP who tried to commemorate the death of a former Tamil Tiger rebel. The foreign minister's meeting with the British envoy comes as a five-member European Union delegation is in Sri Lanka to review Europe's Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) trade concession. The foreign ministry said Peiris and Hulton also discussed enhanced trade and investment opportunities for UK businesses in Sri Lanka - especially new opportunities in the China-backed Port City development. Widening intra-Commonwealth trade and economic cooperation and related issues were also referred to, the statement said. -economynext.com



- J. Sujeewakumar/ENCL

Inmates at the Welikada prison stage a rooftop protest at the prison premises on Thursday (Sept 30) demanding a presidential pardon

Inter-province travel ban to continue

COLOMBO - Army Commander, and head of the National Operations Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak, Gen. Shavendra Silva said on Thursday (Sept 30), the inter-province travel ban will remain in place until further notice despite the nationwide quarantine curfew being lifted from Friday (Oct 1). Silva said no citizen would be allowed to cross the provinces and that army personnel will be deployed on all borders of the provinces, permitting entry only to essential workers and those employed in certain sectors including construction and tourism. The travel ban is being continued in a bid to prevent a further spread of COVID-19. State Minister of Transport, Dilum Amunugama, said inter-province train and bus services will also continue to be suspended for another two weeks till permission is granted by the health authorities. Amunugama said the transport ministry had been advised not to resume the train services as the carriages lack the require facilities to maintain the health guidelines and social distancing. -Xinhua/ENCL

"The Transport Ministry has been advised not to resume train services due to lack of seats in compartments, which may result in most commuters standing while travelling by trains," he said. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on Wednesday (Sept 29) instructed authorities to lift the six-week-long nationwide quarantine curfew on October 1, as the country had seen a decline in the number of new COVID-19 cases. A nationwide quarantine curfew came into effect on August 20 as Sri Lanka faced a third wave of COVID-19 infections triggered by the highly contagious Delta variant. The curfew however allowed workers in the essential service and several selected sectors to continue their work. Figures provided by health authorities showcased the curfew as being effective with a steady decline in the number of new infections and deaths. Sri Lanka has so far reported 517,377 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 12,906 deaths, with 912 new cases and 59 deaths reported on Thursday. -Xinhua/ENCL

India Foreign Secretary scheduled to visit Sri Lanka this month

COLOMBO - Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla is scheduled to visit Colombo early October, The Hindu reported on Thursday (Sept. 30), quoting official sources in New Delhi, as India and Sri Lanka seek to engage at high levels amid a perceived strain in ties. The scheduled visit comes 10 days after India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar met his Sri Lankan counterpart G. L. Peiris, on the side-lines of the UNGA session in New York. The high-level visit follows, Jaishankar's visit in January, when he told the leadership in Colombo that it was in "Sri Lanka's own interest" that the expectations of the Tamil people - for equality, justice, peace and dignity within a united Sri Lanka - are fulfilled. However, Ta-

mil and Muslim minorities point to continuing harassment by authorities, especially around memorialization and threats to land owned by civilians, in addition to the Tamil leadership consistently highlighting the long-pending political solution. In a statement on the recent bilateral meeting in New York, the Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry said Minister Peiris had brief Jaishankar about "the pragmatic and tangible action" taken by the government to resolve "residual matters after the end of the conflict in May 2009", referring apparently to contentious issues around truth, accountability and justice that the island nation's civil war-affected Tamils have been demanding for over a decade. -ENCL

Parties, tuition classes, congregational gatherings banned under new health guidelines

COLOMBO -The Ministry of Health on Thursday (Sept 30) issued new health guidelines imposing restrictions on several activities effective Friday (Oct 1) when the country comes out of the 6-week long quarantine curfew. The guidelines, scheduled to be in place for the next two weeks, ban unessential travel from 10:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m, parties and gatherings both indoors and outdoors, exhibitions, tuition classes and congregational gathering, and restrict the number permitted to attend weddings and funerals. The guidelines permit people to leave their homes only for employment purposes, to obtain healthcare and other essential services including groceries and medicine, while allowing banks, shops, supermarkets, pharmacies and shopping malls to operate with a limited number of people allowed inside at a given time. Dining-in at restaurants has also been banned for the next two weeks, while public transport within the province has been restricted to seating capacities. Tuition classes have been banned, the guidelines have permitted the opening of pre-schools with 50% capacity of the premises, and salons and barbershops to operate on an appointment basis, allowing a maximum of two people in at a time. The guidelines are to be reviewed after two weeks. -ENCL

while allowing banks, shops, supermarkets, pharmacies and shopping malls to operate with a limited number of people allowed inside at a given time. Dining-in at restaurants has also been banned for the next two weeks, while public transport within the province has been restricted to seating capacities. Tuition classes have been banned, the guidelines have permitted the opening of pre-schools with 50% capacity of the premises, and salons and barbershops to operate on an appointment basis, allowing a maximum of two people in at a time. The guidelines are to be reviewed after two weeks. -ENCL

Lanka Sathosa corruption

Media organizations condemn attempt to question journalists as shameless attempt to protect the corrupt

COLOMBO - The Media Organizations Collective has condemned the recent summoning of journalist for questioning by the CID over their reporting on the garlic fraud at the State-run Lanka Sathosa as a shameless attempt to protect the corrupt and prevent corruption being exposed. In a statement released to the media on Thursday (Sept 30), the Collective, comprising: Federation of Media Employers Trade Union, Free Media Movement, Sri Lanka Working Journalists' Association, Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum, Tamil Media Alliance and Sri Lanka Young Journalists' Association, has warned the growing tendency to intimidate journalists, irrespective of legal basis or mandate, could go beyond violation of freedom of expression into impunity and protecting the corrupt. The statement in full: The Media Organizations Collective considers the summoning of journalists of Lankadeepa, Divaina and The Island newspapers to the CID for an investigation, for reporting on the garlic fraud and other corrupt activities at the CWE, which was exposed by the former Executive Director of Consumer Affairs Authority, Thushan Gunawardena, who resigned from his post, as a shameless attempt to protect the corrupt and prevent the cor-

ruption being exposed. Instead of investigating the revealed corruption, the police, acting on the directive of Minister Bandula Gunawardena, summoned the journalists for an inquiry into the apparent alleged insult faced by the minister in an environment where the Criminal Defamation Act was repealed in 2002. Therefore, the Media Organizations Collective reiterates that there is a growing tendency to intimidate journalists by using the police to fulfil the interests of politicians, even in the absence of any legal basis or mandate. A group of officials had arrived at the Lankadeepa office despite the Prime Minister instructing them not to summon journalists to the CID for investigations into the incident. This took place on September 28, and the day is celebrated worldwide as the International Day for Universal Access to Information. The Lankadeepa editor had refused to provide information to the CID. Still, it was a severe offence to direct the police to hunt down journalists for political agendas and interests when exposed to fraud and corruption. The Media Organizations Collective is not satisfied with a simple apology extended regarding the incident by the Minister of Mass Media and Information. Media

is a guardian and a pillar of a democratic society and functions as the fourth government responsible for exposing fraud and corruption. In such a backdrop, The Media Organizations Collective is of the firm view that attempts to intimidate and hunt down journalists without conducting investigations and enforcing the law when media exposes such practises and incidents could go beyond the violation of freedom of expression into impunity and protecting the corrupt leading to a colossal ignorance of corruption and fraud. Therefore, we the Media Organizations Collective, strongly condemn such shameless acts of political expediency and pledge to stand in solidarity for the rights of aggrieved journalists collectively and protect the citizen's right to know the information and truth regarding fraud and corruption. Signed by: Secretary, Media Organizations Collective, Dharmasiri Lankapeli, President, Federation of Media Employers Trade Union, Convener, Free Media Movement, Seetha Ranjane, President, Sri Lanka Working Journalists' Association, Duminda Sampath, President, Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum, N. M. Ameen, Secretary, Tamil Me4dia Alliance, Kanapathipillai Sarvananda and Secretary, Sri Lanka Young Journalists' Association, Indunil Usgoda Arachchi.

Tamil leader appeals for housing for refugee-returnees

CHENNAI - An appeal has been made to the Government of India to design a housing project in Sri Lanka's Northern and Eastern Provinces for refugees who return from Tamil Nadu and for internally displaced persons. In a statement, K. Vigneswaran, who is heading Akhila Ilankai Tamil Mahasabha, a political body, and based out of Trincomalee in the Eastern Province, suggested that such a project be implemented over five years. Calling upon India to arrange for the transport of refugees by sea to the Trincomalee port, he said Sri Lanka's Resettlement Authority should be tasked with the transport of the returnees within the country and provision of temporary accommodation. The Resettlement Authority also should carry out the rehabilitation of the Kankesanthurai port and the Talaimannar pier. Vigneswaran, who served as the Secretary to the once-united North-Eastern Province's Chief Minister, Varadaraja Perumal, during 1988-90, wanted the Indian government to bring in investors for rehabilitation and development projects of the Resettlement Authority in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. As a priority, the investors would provide job opportunities to the refugee-returnees, depending on their skills, given that there were a large number of graduates, including engineering graduates, among them. He appreciated Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. K. Stalin's measures to improve the lot of refugees living in the State and said this should be taken as a "signal" for the Indian and Sri Lankan governments to resolve the issues in the voluntary repatriation of refugees. -The Hindu

Calling upon India to arrange for the transport of refugees by sea to the Trincomalee port, he said Sri Lanka's Resettlement Authority should be tasked with the transport of the returnees within the country and provision of temporary accommodation. The Resettlement Authority also should carry out the rehabilitation of the Kankesanthurai port and the Talaimannar pier. Vigneswaran, who served as the Secretary to the once-united North-Eastern Province's Chief Minister, Varadaraja Perumal, during 1988-90, wanted the Indian government to bring in investors for rehabilitation and development projects of the Resettlement Authority in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. As a priority, the investors would provide job opportunities to the refugee-returnees, depending on their skills, given that there were a large number of graduates, including engineering graduates, among them. He appreciated Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. K. Stalin's measures to improve the lot of refugees living in the State and said this should be taken as a "signal" for the Indian and Sri Lankan governments to resolve the issues in the voluntary repatriation of refugees. -The Hindu

This Newspaper supports the Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka - Rights of Readers - The Editor and the journalists of this newspaper respect the "Rights of Readers" and endeavour to follow the Code of Professional Practice of The Editors' Guild of Sri Lanka, which is implemented by the Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka. If you have a grievance against us, you are welcome to contact us directly and we will strive to provide redress to you. If you are not satisfied, you could complain to: The Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka (PCCSL) For further information contact: #96, Bernard Soysa Mawatha (Kirula Road), Colombo 5 Tel: 011 5353 635 Fax: 011 5335 500 E-mail: srockwood@pccsl.lk Web page: www.pccsl.lk

# HOT TOPICS

By Aurelien Breeden

## Ex-president Sarkozy convicted on campaign spending violations

**PARIS** — A French court Thursday (Sept 30) sentenced Nicolas Sarkozy, the former president, to a year of house arrest for illegally financing his failed 2012 re-election campaign by wildly exceeding France's strict electoral spending limits.

Sarkozy, 66, was president from 2007 to 2012, and although he is no longer active in politics and continues to be dogged by multiple legal entanglements, he is still an influential voice on the French right. Shortly after the verdict, his lawyer announced that Sarkozy would appeal the conviction, which puts the sentence on hold and leaves him free.

"I am only asking that the law be applied to me as it would be to any other citizen," he said in a statement published on Twitter later on Thursday.

It was the second of several legal cases pending for Sarkozy to end with a conviction in recent months, and the first time he was convicted for actions that he undertook while in office, further threatening to tarnish his legacy.

In March, he became the first former president in France's recent history to be sentenced to actual jail time after he was convicted on charges of corruption and influence peddling for trying to illegally obtain information from a judge on a legal case against him.

Sarkozy has appealed that conviction as well, and he is unlikely to spend time behind bars in the near future. Appeals could take years to go through the courts, and even if Thursday's sentence is upheld, the court that convicted Sarkozy said he would be able to serve it at home with an electronic monitoring bracelet.

Still, Sarkozy is now only the second former president in France's modern history to be convicted of a crime — Jacques Chirac was found guilty in 2011 of embezzling and misusing public funds when he was mayor of Paris.

The verdict against Sarkozy on Thursday came after a years-long investigation and a trial in May and June, both of which focused on his 2012 re-election campaign and on France's stringent electoral rules.

Under French law, spending on electoral campaigns is capped to ensure candidates compete on a level playing field. In 2012, the limit for presidential campaigns, per candidate, was about 16.8 million euros, or about \$19.7 million, in the first round of the elections, and about 5.7 million euros, or about \$6.7 million, on top of that in the second round for the two top vote-getters, who included Sarkozy.

But suspicions that his campaign had exceeded those limits arose after the election. Prosecutors began an investigation in 2014, causing turmoil within Sarkozy's political party.

Ultimately, prosecutors determined that the campaign had spent at least 42 million euros, or about \$50 million — almost twice the legal limit.

The case became known as the Bygmalion affair, named for the public relations and event planning company suspected of issuing false invoices to Sarkozy's political party for rallies that were actually for Sarkozy's presidential campaign. Prosecutors argued that the goal of the fraud was to hide the overspending from the electoral authorities.

Sarkozy has denied being aware of any false billing, and he was not charged with wrongdoing in that regard. Instead, the charges of illegal campaign financing relate only to the overspending, for which he has already paid a fine.

During the trial, Sarkozy rejected the prosecution's portrayal of a lavish campaign, suggesting that the false invoices had been used instead to enrich Bygmalion — led at the time by close friends of Jean-François Copé, the president of Sarkozy's party and one of the former leader's political rivals.

Sarkozy also claimed that in 2012 he had been extremely busy with his presidential duties and had barely been involved with the campaign's budgeting and logistics.

"I was president, head of the Group of 20, and in the campaign, I was directing political strategy," Sarkozy told the court in June. "Organizing rallies, the sound systems, the lighting — I had better things to do."

But prosecutors asserted — and the court agreed — that Sarkozy had neglected warnings from his aides, especially over a profusion of campaign events, some of them expensive, large-scale rallies. As a veteran politician with years of experience, they argued, he could not have ignored signs that spending was out of control.

"This was not his first electoral campaign," the court noted in its ruling.

-New York Times

By José María León Cabrera

## Prison riot in Ecuador leaves more than 100 inmates dead

**QUITO** — More than 100 inmates have died in the latest clash in one of Ecuador's prisons, the president said late Wednesday (Sept 29), as he declared a state of emergency that will give military personnel control of the facilities and put inmates in strict lockdown.

The riot at the Coastal Penitentiary, a crowded prison on the outskirts of Guayaquil, began Tuesday (Sept 28) morning in two maximum-security pavilions and led to 116 deaths and about 80 injuries, all involving inmates, President Guillermo Lasso said.

He added that the situation at the prison, a massive facility with nearly 10,000 inmates, was still not com-

pletely under control as of Wednesday evening.

"We are working to avoid further deaths," said Lasso, who called the episode "sorrowful." The emergency steps will bar inmates from gathering and socializing, he said, and subjects their correspondence to review.

It has been a deadly year in Ecuador's prisons. In all, gang wars behind bars have claimed more than 200 lives in 2021 — a number that has risen sharply in recent years. For instance, in 2018, there were only 15 such deaths.

Criminal gangs with ties to international drug cartels have increasingly vied for control of prisons where their most dangerous members and leaders



Egypt's new administrative capital, partly funded by the BRI, east of Cairo

By Helen Davidson

## China owed \$385bn — including 'hidden debt' from poorer nations, says report

AidData finds 42 low-to-middle income countries with 'belt and road' exposure exceeding 10% of GDP

**TAIPEI** — Researchers have identified debts of at least \$385bn (£286bn) owed by 165 countries to China for 'belt and road initiative' (BRI) projects, with loans systematically underreported to international bodies such as the World Bank.

The four-year study by US-based research lab AidData said the debt burdens were kept off the public balance sheets through the use of special purpose and semi-private loans, and were "substantially larger than research institutions, credit rating agencies, or intergovernmental organizations with surveillance responsibilities previously understood".

It found 42 low-to-middle income countries (LMICs) had debt exposure to China exceeding 10% of their GDP, including Laos, Papua New Guinea, the Maldives, Brunei, Cambodia and Myanmar. Laos had significant proportions of its debt classed by AidData as "hidden", the report revealed. The \$5.9bn China-Laos railway project is funded entirely with unofficial debt equivalent to about a third of its GDP.

The BRI was launched in 2013 as Xi Jinping's signature international investment program. Hundreds of predominately low-to-middle income countries have signed up for Chinese loans towards massive infrastructure projects, but it is now facing competition from the G7's 'build back better world' infrastructure initiative.

In the report, AidData examined more than 13,000 BRI projects worth more than \$843bn in 165 countries between 2000 and 2017. It found China's overseas lending had dramatically shifted from government-to-government loans during the pre-BRI era, to almost 70% now going to State-owned companies and banks, joint ventures, private institutions, and special purpose vehicles (SPVs).

This had led to extensive underreporting of repayment obligations — to an estimated \$385bn — because the primary borrowers are no longer central government institutions with stricter reporting requirements.

"These debts, for the most part, do not appear on government bal-

ance sheets in LMICs," the report said. "However, most of them benefit from explicit or implicit forms of host government liability protection, which has blurred the distinction between private and public debt and introduced major public financial management challenges to LMICs."

AidData said global organizations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund were aware of the problem generally but the report quantified the alarming scale.

Amid growing controversy around the initiative, and push-back from some governments that have sought to scrap or renegotiate projects, BRI lending has slowed in recent years, but the earlier debts remain. In 2019, Xi pledged to increase transparency and financial stability in the programme, and to have a "zero tolerance for corruption".

While hundreds of countries have signed up to the BRI, there have been long-running concerns about transparency, and suggestions that massive loans to high-risk countries were enabling 'debt book diplomacy' in some — but not all — regions, forcing them to cede ownership or control of major assets to Beijing in lieu of repayment.

However, the report noted asset seizure in lieu of repayment was only allowed in direct government loans, while the increasingly frequent arrangements made via SPVs and other semi-private mechanisms saw repayments taken from the revenue generated by the funded projects.

The shift towards the latter increased the risk to Chinese lenders, but the report said it was a "necessary work-around" if the lenders wanted to fulfil Xi's BRI goals, because many countries were already laden with debt and not officially able to take on much more.

"Many poor governments could not take on any more loans," AidData executive director Brad Parks told AFP. "So [China] got creative."

Peter Cai, a research fellow at the Australia-based Lowy Institute, said it would be difficult to enforce the debt repayments, particularly where there was

civil unrest or poor governance. "There's always a problem of enforceability," he said.

The report also found China had rapidly scaled up its provision of loans to resource-rich countries that have high levels of corruption, and 35% of BRI projects had faced issues of corruption, labour violations, environmental pollution and public protests.

"Beijing is more willing to bankroll projects in risky countries than other official creditors, but it is also more aggressive than its peers at positioning itself at the front of the repayment line (via collateralisation)," the report said, noting 40 of the 50 largest loans were collateralized, often against future commodity exports.

Russia secured loans and export credits worth \$125bn, mostly contracted by Russian state-owned oil and gas enterprises, collateralized with the proceeds from oil and gas sales to China. Venezuela secured \$86bn in non-concessional and semi-concessional debt from China's state-owned policy and commercial banks, mostly through loans collateralised against future oil exports.

AidData said a separate but related finding showed Beijing was disproportionately lending to countries that performed poorly on conventional measures of credit worthiness, in contrast to other international lenders, but demanded far higher interest rates with shorter repayment periods.

Cai noted the case of Pakistan, which Asia Nikkei reported had Chinese loans with average interest rates of 3.76%, compared with a typical OECD-linked loan's rate of 1.1%.

"A lot of banks wouldn't even lend to Pakistan. If you're able to secure a loan you have to pay the higher risk premium," he said.

China's foreign ministry said in a statement that "not all debts are unsustainable", adding that since its launch the BRI had "consistently upheld principles of shared consultation, shared contributions and shared benefits".

-theguardian.com with additional reporting by AFP

By Poppy McPherson, Ruma Paul

## Killing of top Rohingya leader underscores violence in Bangladesh camps

**DHAKA** — For years, Rohingya leader Mohib Ullah, one of the most prominent advocates for the persecuted Muslim minority from Myanmar, predicted he would be killed by the hardliners who regularly sent him death threats.

"If I die, I'm fine. I will give my life," he told Reuters in 2019 in his office in a bamboo hut in one of the Bangladesh refugee camps outside the port of Cox's Bazar. "If suddenly there's an 'accident', no problem. Every community worker gives his life at last."

On Wednesday (Sept 29) night, gunmen shot him dead in the same office where he held community meetings. In a video circulated on social media, his brother, Habib Ullah, who said he witnessed the shooting, blamed the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), an armed group active in the camps.

"They killed him as he is the leader and all Rohingya abide by him," Habib Ullah said in the video. Before opening fire, "they said he cannot be a leader of Rohingya and there cannot be any leaders for Rohingya," he said.

His account could not be independently verified. Mohib Ullah was known as a moderate who advocated for the Rohingya to return to Myanmar with rights they were previously denied during decades of persecution. He was the leader of the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights (ARSPH), which was founded in 2017 to document atrocities against Rohingya in their native Myanmar and give them a voice in international talks about their future.

Gunmen fired on Mohib Ullah, who was in his late-40s and was married with young children, after evening prayers, a police official told Reuters by phone.

"They fired five rounds of bullets and fled immediately. Our search mission is on to arrest the killers," added Rafiqul Islam, deputy police chief in Cox's Bazar. He said further that extra police had been deployed at the camps.

Representatives of ARSA, which portrays itself as an ethnic freedom fighter organization, could not be reached for comment.

The killing has ignited grief and anger in the camps, the world's largest refugee settlement, where some residents interviewed by Reuters say the murder is the latest evidence of mounting violence as armed gangs and extremists vie for power.

Saad Hammadi, Amnesty International's South Asia Campaigner, said the violence had been increasing.

"Armed groups operating drug cartels have killed people and held hostages. The authorities must take immediate action to prevent further bloodshed."

More than a million Rohingya live in the camps, the vast majority having fled neighbouring Myanmar during a military crackdown in 2017 that the United Nations has said was carried out with genocidal intent.

Myanmar denies genocide, saying it was waging a legitimate campaign against insurgents who attacked police posts.

"He (Mohib Ullah) was the voice of the Rohingya community," said a refugee, asking not to be named for fear of retribution. "He lived in fear but never gave up... Everyone is in fear. If a leader like him was shot dead, who else is safe? No one."

A close associate of the slain leader told Reuters in a message he feared for his life.

Mohib Ullah came to prominence after going hut to hut in the camps collecting evidence of abuses against Rohingya in Myanmar, including mass killings and gang rapes, that has been shared with international investigators. He spoke at the White House and U.N Human Rights Council, asking for Rohingya to be given more of a voice in their future.

One ARSPH leader told Reuters in 2019 Mohib Ullah was being threatened by ARSA, whose attacks on security posts in Myanmar's western Rakhine state preceded the army campaign that drove hundreds of thousands across the border.

Violent men claiming affiliation to ARSA and other armed gangs rule the camps at night, he and other refugees said, kidnapping critics and warning women against breaking conservative Islamic norms.

Several Rohingya have told Reuters in recent months ARSA and other armed gangs are behind the violence.

A close friend said on Thursday (Sept 30) Mohib Ullah referred to ARSA as the "night government" and had continued to move from place to place to avoid being targeted by them. He said the activist had asked for protection from Bangladesh authorities and the United Nations. ARSA, which couldn't be reached for comment, has previously denied responsibility for criminality in the camps.

UNHCR said in a statement on Thursday it was "deeply shocked and saddened" by Mohib Ullah's death and had "enhanced its staff presence in the camps to ensure that the Rohingya refugees have direct access to support services and can report their concerns".

Rafiqul Islam, the police official, said Mohib Ullah had not filed complaints about the threats or sought police protection.

"If he did, we could have considered that," he said. Bangladesh government officials did not respond to requests for comment.

Eva Buzo, an Australian barrister representing Mohib Ullah and other victims in international criminal cases against Myanmar, said she and others had pleaded with the U.N refugee agency and foreign embassies in Bangladesh to offer him protection.

She said he was given travel permits for brief visits — in 2019 he went to meet Donald Trump at the White House and to speak to the U.N Human Rights Council — but not when he needed to escape the camp.

Diplomats and UN officials, she said, "elevated Mohib Ullah as a moderate Rohingya leader and when he was receiving death threats no one was there to offer him protection."

-New York Times

-Reuters

# REALITY CHECK



-Hajira Maryam/Al Jazeera

Jaffar and Yamir, as well as their parents, were born in Pakistan

By Hajira Maryam

## Stateless and helpless

The plight of ethnic Bengalis in Pakistan

**KARACHI** – Kiran Jaffar and Kulsoom Yamir are teenage gymnasts in Pakistan's southern city of Karachi who are hoping to represent the country at international events.

But both know that, as things stand, they stand no chance of fulfilling that dream. They are stateless Bengalis in Pakistan. Without any official identification document, they can't move forward.

Jaffar, 15, and fourteen-year-old Yamir live in Machar Colony, one of Karachi's largest slums that is home to an estimated 700,000 people.

For these girls and their families, living within the streams of densely packed houses, unfinished roads and poor sanitary conditions as a part of their daily life.

Approximately 65% of Machar Colony inhabitants are ethnic Bengalis and more than half of them have no citizenship or are stuck in a process of getting one, according to Tahera Hasan, lawyer and director of the charity Imkaan Welfare Organization.

Yamir says she wants to "proceed in my life as a gymnast, perhaps even become a coach".

Jaffar, with her vivid smile, shares the same aim: "When I grow up, I want to be a professional gymnast and become a coach, teaching the sport to others."

"But our family is struggling to get an ID card, due to which going to a proper school and even something basic as having a bank account is very difficult for us," Yamir tells Al Jazeera.

The girls train at a learning and recreational centre called Khel (which means sport in Urdu) located in the slum. The centre provides a space through educational learning and sports to 170 underprivileged children, including Jaffar and Yamir.

Inside, the appearance of Khel is a contrast to the grim reality of the slum in which it is located – colourful walls, upbeat music, floor mats and balance beams.

Stateless Bengali, as well as Pathan children, wearing yellow tights and shirts, aged five to 15, rigorously perform acrobatic moves with the help of their coaches.

Jaffar and Yamir seamlessly conquer handstands, swift backflips, cartwheels, front and back walkovers.

"It was a great challenge to train these children as gymnasts," says coach Muhammad Furqan, who has been training the children for the past five years.

"All of them have grown up in extreme poverty. They have never even seen a park in their life. Living under such hardships, they don't know what compassion and gymnastics really is." Bengalis in Pakistan – an estimated two million – are the most discriminated ethnic community. Many of them have been living in the country even before the 1971 civil war, which led to the creation of present-day Bangladesh, previously East Pakistan. Even though they are born in Pakistan, ethnic Bengalis are deprived of any official recognition

and citizenship. They can't vote or have access to public health or government schools.

"They label us as aliens, refugees, foreign, depriving us of our rights," says Sheikh Muhammad Siraj, chairman of the Pakistan Bengali Action Committee who has been advocating and fighting legal battles for the rights of the Bengali community since 1993.

"We are stuck in a constant struggle to get recognition in this country. Many people in my community don't have ID cards and are stateless even though they have been living on this land even before the 1971 war. We are Bengalis, but we are Pakistani Bengalis," he says. Initially, many Bengalis who decided to stay back in Pakistan after the war were given the first manual ID cards, which were issued in the country in 1973 and onwards. But the main issue for the population started after the digitization of ID cards and the establishment of the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) in 2000.

"People started facing problems after the digitization process came into being," says Hasan, explaining that documentation requirements changed making it difficult for people to fulfil them.

Following digitization, the establishment of the National Alien Registration Authority (NARA) the same year – to register immigrants and foreign residents – let Bengalis fall into the category of aliens, despite them residing in Pakistan for decades.

"The implementation of NARA systematically began to discriminate against the Bengali-speaking population," says, Hasan, claiming that Bengali people with Pakistani passports and ID cards were forcefully given NARA cards, and later forced to take biometrics on NARA, automatically cancelling their citizenship." In 2015, NARA merged with NADRA but the issue regarding ID cards for Bengali citizens remained the same. Even though the most recent alien registry process, introduced by NADRA, aimed to facilitate the registration of non-natives and foreigners residing in Pakistan under the "alien" category, it is set to further discriminate against the rights of the Bengali community.

"The scheme completely ignores the right to have citizenship as granted under the birthright law. It violates that right," points out Hasan, while Siraj reminds authorities that "many Bengalis have been living in Pakistan since before 1971, have the right to vote and be legal citizens of the state". NADRA authorities did not respond to request for comment. In 2018, prior to his election win, Imran Khan promised to grant Bengalis in Pakistan national ID cards and citizenship.

"There are [Bengali] children who are born in Pakistan, and even their ancestors are living in the country for decades and are not getting citizenship despite birthright laws. This is exploitation and the issue must

be resolved," Khan said at the time. Three years on, the statements are yet to be realized. "Khan promised that if his PTI party wins, Bengalis will get ID cards," saying Siraj, claiming, "He did not fulfil his promise."

Jaffar and Yamir, as well as their parents, were born in Pakistan. According to Pakistan's Citizenship Act of 1951, any person born in Pakistan after the commencement of the Act has the right to claim citizenship.

None of Jaffar and Yamir's family members have ID cards. For them, competing at the national level or representing Pakistan in an international tournament is impossible. "Pakistan has one of the most progressive birthright laws. They are not discriminatory at all," acknowledges Hasan, but adds, "The main problem comes at the implementation level."

As a result, children suffer the most. Without any legal document confirming citizenship, they can't get admission to public schools. Their prospects of attaining proper education, or anything similar, are stymied.

"The children of our community are denied all rights. The children can't even go to state schools and get an education," says Siraj, while Hasan adds that "as the life of these kids hits a deadlock, without hope and no progress, [children] get trapped into undertaking unwanted activities". Since Jaffar and Yamir are not formally enrolled in a school, they get some tutoring at Khel, the centre, for two hours a day.

The pair is energetic, disciplined and determined. Their day starts early. They train strenuously as gymnasts until midday but also help their families with domestic chores before that. In the afternoon, they attend a local madrasa (religious school).

For Jaffar's mother, Khalida, the bureaucracy of getting an ID card has been tiresome. She's 40 and lost her parents when she was only five. "I've been in Machar Colony since my childhood. My parents were also born here. Yet, I still can't get an ID card," she says.

With meagre resources and a husband who works as a watchman, Jaffar's mother prays for the brighter days for the children, hoping for the day her daughter becomes a successful gymnast. The international community has taken no notice of the human rights violations taking place against the Bengali community in Pakistan, says social worker and lawyer Rana Asif Habib.

"Even international humanitarian organizations are failing to recognize this pressing issue," Habib says, noting that though Pakistan is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and also the United Nation Convention on the Right of a Child, the government is not complying with these international instruments and the Bengalis are still struggling.

-This article was originally featured on [aljazeera.com](http://aljazeera.com)

By Mike Ives

## The COVID crisis is now a garbage crisis, too

**ACROSS** Brazil, recycling plants stopped running for months. In Uganda, a junkyard is short on reusable plastics. And in Indonesia's capital, disposable gloves and face shields are piling up at a river mouth.

Surging consumption of plastics and packaging during the pandemic has produced mountains of waste. But because fears of COVID-19 have led to work stoppages at recycling facilities, some reusable material has been junked or burned instead.

At the same time, high volumes of personal protective equipment, or PPE, have been misclassified as hazardous, solid-waste experts say. That material often is not allowed into the normal trash, so a lot of it is dumped in burn pits or as litter.

Experts say a problem in both cases is that an early fear – that the coronavirus could spread easily through surfaces – has created a stigma around handling perfectly safe trash. Many scientists and government agencies have since found that the fear of surface transmission was overblown. But old habits die hard, especially in countries where waste disposal guidelines have not been updated and officials are still preoccupied with fighting fresh outbreaks.

"Because there isn't a route of transmission through recycling, say, we are still finding things being burned rather than recycled because people are scared" of surface transmission, said Anne Woolridge, who leads a group on health care waste for the International Solid Waste Association. "You try to educate the entire world's population in less than a year. It's impossible."

As for PPE, Woolridge said, the sight of gloves and masks littering the world would have been unthinkable before the pandemic. "But because everybody's saying anything to do with the pandemic is a medical waste, it's put pressure on the system," she said.

### Recycling shutdowns

Recycling rates dropped sharply around the world last year, in part because demand from manufacturers fell. In many countries where the recycling industry is

still driven by hand sorting, rather than machines, in-person work was suspended out of virus-related fears.

In Brazil, for example, the generation of recyclable material in cities rose 25% in 2020, primarily because of a spike in online shopping, according to Abrelpe, a national association of sanitation companies. But recycling programs in several cities suspended operations for several months, citing fears of surface transmission. That had clear human and environmental costs. A recent study found that during the suspension period, at least 16,000 fewer tons of recyclable material than usual were in circulation, representing an economic loss of about \$1.2 million per month for waste-picker associations.

### A Global divide

Recycling rates are inching back to pre-COVID levels in developed economies, said James Michelsen, a solid-waste expert at International Finance Corp.

"The numbers are getting back to normal, and we're pivoting away from a COVID discussion to one of, 'OK, let's get back to circularity, sustainability, plastics recycling,'" Michelsen said.

But in countries where recycling is driven by informal collectors, he added, lockdowns and outbreaks are still creating major disruptions.

Before a recent COVID outbreak hit Kampala, Uganda, hundreds of people would gather to pick through plastics at a city dump. They would then sell the plastics to middlemen, who later sold it to recycling companies.

But when the country went into a lockdown this summer, restrictions on movement prevented trucks from picking up trash in some districts. There were also fears of surface transmission; officials said COVID was surging because people had not been washing their hands.

### Proliferating PPE

Another challenge is the used PPE that has flooded the world since the early days of the pandemic. About 8 million metric tons of plastics already enter the ocean

every year, and experts fear that used PPE and other litter could make that situation even worse.

Most PPE is not hazardous, but many countries still classify it as such, said Michelsen. That means used gloves and masks are often lumped together with truly hazardous medical waste and either treated at great expense – a waste of money – or disposed of through other means.

"If you have high volumes coming out the back of your hospitals in these areas that don't have infrastructure, they're just going to set fire to it," Woolridge said.

The United Nations Environment Program estimated last year that health care facilities around the world were producing about 7.5 pounds of COVID-related medical waste per person per day worldwide. It said that in Jakarta, Indonesia, and four other Asian megacities, the rate of overall health care waste disposal had risen by about 500%.

Some of that waste inevitably ends up as litter.

### A Hunt for syringes

An emerging concern is that, as the flood of material creates new pressures on local authorities, syringes and other truly hazardous medical waste may end up in the wrong places.

In the world's poorest countries, that would pose a health risk to waste pickers. Tens of thousands of people already scavenge in landfills in Bangladesh, for example. But only three or four of the country's 64 districts have facilities to safely dispose of used syringes, said Mostafizur Rahman, a solid-waste expert in the capital, Dhaka. "These landfills are not secure or sanitary, so it's really concerning in terms of environmental health and safeguards," said Rahman, a professor of environmental sciences at Jahangirnagar University.

And because syringes and vaccine vials are a valuable commodity on the black market, criminal gangs have an incentive to steal vaccination gear and illegally resell it into the health care system.

-New York Times

By Anna P. Kambhampaty

## #DoNotTouchMyClothes

Afghan women protest Taliban restrictions on rights

**This** summer, Bahar Jalali watched anxiously as the United States withdrew its military from Afghanistan and the Taliban began to reassert control over the country. Women were told to stay home and to cover themselves – an early indicator that other rights, protections and services for women would soon be eliminated, including, this week, the right to attend Kabul University.

Jalali, a visiting associate professor at Loyola University Maryland, is a member of the Afghan Diaspora – born in Kabul, raised in the United States, but connected still to her home country, where she returned in 2009 to teach at the American University of Afghanistan. She left again in 2016 after surviving a violent attack at the University by the Taliban.

When reports surfaced this summer that, with the Taliban takeover, Afghan women were shredding their education degrees and that safe houses for women were closing their doors, she was distraught.

Then, on Sept. 11, she saw images of hundreds of women in Kabul wearing all black in full veils and long robes in a pro-Taliban demonstration. (The timing of the demonstration – on the anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks – along with the presence of Taliban fighters and official Taliban statements released afterward suggest that the demonstration was organized by the Taliban.)

"It confirmed my fears that our culture, our heritage is coming under attack," Jalali, 46, said in a phone interview. "One of the biggest concerns that I have, now that the Taliban are back in power, is Afghan sovereignty, Afghan identity, Afghan culture, Afghan heritage. Even before the Taliban came to power, 43 years of war really transformed our culture to the point where very important aspects of it are lost."

Compelled to speak out, she tweeted a photo of herself from 2005, wearing an emerald green dress with delicate embroidery – a traditional outfit that she wore for her first wedding. "This is Afghan culture," she wrote in the caption.

The tweet went viral, and soon, women across the world started sharing photos of themselves in their own traditional Afghan clothing, often with the hashtag #DoNotTouchMyClothes.

Jalali shared another photo, of her as a teenager in the United States in the 1990s, wearing a blue-and-gold Afghan kuchi, "a dress that the nomads of Afghanistan wore," she said. "Kuchi women wear this dress on a daily basis. It is their everyday attire."

Jalali wasn't expecting her tweets to go viral, but she now hopes that the hashtag can teach the world more about Afghan culture. "I'm just hoping that the world will see through these dresses that the real Afghan culture is colourful and vibrant and alive and animated and really meant to celebrate life," she said.

Zarifa Ghafari, an activist who became one of Afghanistan's first female mayors at age 26 in 2019 and had to flee the country in August, shared a photo on Twitter of the vibrant Afghan clothing she wore earlier this month for the Geneva Peace Talks. "With my traditional colourful dress and a powerful msg from every part of my country representing Afghanistan in particular Afghan women at #GenevaPeaceTalks," she wrote.

"It is important to create awareness and to show the true colours of women in Afghanistan," Ghafari wrote later, in an emailed statement. "Taliban are trying to erase women's presence – erase them from the walls, from the streets, from schools, from work, from government."

"We are so much more than a dress, an outfit," she wrote. But "my mother, grandmother and older generations have worn similar dresses with bright colours. This is our beautiful heritage, our rich culture, our joy of life."

In the 1990s, during the first Taliban rule, Afghan women's access to education, work and health care was severely restricted. Burqa coverings were mandatory, women weren't allowed to be seen in public without men and almost all female education was banned.

Since the Taliban seized power in August, they have tried to appear more flexible. Still, while schools have reopened for male students, a date for the return of female students has not been announced. In addition to requiring that women wear a hijab in schools, female students will not be allowed to study alongside male students, the Taliban's higher education minister, Abdul Baqi Haqqani, announced earlier this month.

"It's alarming to me because I feel like women will no longer have a role in society, and we'd lose all the progress we've made over the last 20 years since we took back control from the Taliban," said Marjan Yahia, 28, who was born in Kabul and moved to Canada when she was 6.

Yahia, now a part-time makeup artist and student in Virginia, also joined the social media campaign with an Instagram post that showed her wearing an ornate kuchi with coins and mirrors sewn into it.

It was a gift from her father, who bought it for her during a visit to Afghanistan, Yahia said. "The dress is special to me because it symbolizes freedom," she said. "Before the Taliban took rule in Afghanistan, women had the freedom to express themselves through clothing, and it's sad to see the freedom be taken away from them."

-New York Times

# RETHINKING AMERICA

By Luke Broadwater

Eyeing Jan. 6 rally planners

## Panel subpoenas 11 in Capitol riot inquiry

WASHINGTON — The House select committee investigating the Capitol attack issued 11 more subpoenas Wednesday (Sept 29), targeting allies of President Donald Trump who were involved in the planning and organizing of the 'Stop the Steal' rally that fuelled the mob violence on Jan. 6.

The subpoenas indicated that the committee was trying to delve deeper into their investigation of the rally, when thousands came to the Capitol as Trump tried to pressure Congress and his own vice president, Mike Pence, to overturn the election results. The pro-Trump group Women for America First organized the gathering at the Ellipse on Jan. 6, when an agitated audience listened as Trump made clear that he was furious with Pence for resisting his plan to undermine the election and that he wanted the crowd to go to the Capitol immediately afterward in protest.

It was there that they heard Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, call for "trial by combat" against Democrats to win the election.

The panel sent subpoenas to Amy Kremer, the chairwoman of Women for America First, which helped plan the rally near the White House on Jan. 6; Caroline Wren, a Trump fundraiser, who is listed as a 'VIP advisor' in a National Park Service permit for the event; Cindy Chafan, another organizer; Hannah Salem Stone, who managed logistics for the rally; and Justin Caporale, a former top aide to Melania Trump, the former first lady, who was listed as a 'project manager' for the rally.

The committee also sent subpoenas to Katrina Pierson, Trump's former national campaign spokesperson; Kylie Jane Kremer, the daughter of Amy Kremer, who was involved with the 'March for Trump' bus tour; Lyndon Brentnall, the owner of a Florida-based security company who was the 'on-site supervisor' for the rally; Maggie Mulvaney, a niece of former top Trump aide Mick Mulvaney, who is listed on the permit for the rally; Megan Powers, an operations manager; and Tim Unes, whose company was listed as the stage manager for the gathering.

Pierson, the House committee said, was reportedly involved in organizing the rallies on Jan. 5 and 6, and was in direct communication with Trump about them.

"You assisted in organizing the rally held at the Ellipse in Washington, DC, on Jan. 6, 2021, in support of then-President Trump and his allegations of election fraud," Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., and the chairman of the committee, wrote in letters accompanying the subpoenas. "President Trump spoke at the rally shortly before the attack on the Capitol, urging the crowd to 'fight much harder' and 'stop the steal.'"

The gathering quickly led to violence as rioters stormed the Capitol, where Congress was meeting to formalize Biden's election. They chanted "Hang Mike Pence," threatened to shoot Speaker Nancy Pelosi and forced lawmakers to evacuate the building. About 140 police officers were injured, and several people died in connection with the riot.

In addition to the Jan. 6 rally, Women for America First organized two gatherings at Freedom Plaza in Washington on Nov. 14 and Dec. 12, and two 'March for Trump' bus tours that generated interest and attendance at the events, the select committee said.

The subpoenas seek a range of records that include materials dealing with planning, funding and participation in the rallies and bus tours; social media activity of associated entities; and communications with Trump officials and lawmakers.

The subpoenas are the second batch that the panel has issued, after an initial tranche that focused on some of Trump's closest allies who were in contact with him before and during the deadly attack. The speed with which the committee is issuing the subpoenas indicates that it is moving aggressively on its investigation, without pausing to negotiate with key witnesses.

Thompson has said the panel plans to dig deeper into the pressure campaign Trump and his allies carried out to overturn President Joe Biden's victory, and to explore who encouraged militia and extremist groups to come to Washington before the assault.

The panel last week sought information from Mark Meadows, the former White House chief of staff; Dan Scavino, who was a deputy chief of staff; Stephen Bannon, Trump's former adviser; and Kash Patel, the former Pentagon chief of staff.

It demanded that the four men turn over documents by Oct. 7 and submit to depositions the following week.

-New York Times

By Joe Coscarelli, Julia Jacobs and Liz Day

## Britney Spears' father is suspended as her conservator

LOS ANGELES — For more than a decade, Britney Spears bristled behind closed doors at the court-approved control her father, James P. Spears, held over her life and fortune.

Now, for the first time since 2008, Britney Spears, 39, will be without her father's oversight, a Los Angeles judge has ruled, as the singer moves toward terminating her conservatorship altogether.

At a hearing on Wednesday (Sept 29), Judge Brenda Penny granted a petition by Britney Spears' lawyer, suspending James Spears, 69, from his position as overseer of his daughter's \$60

million estate — a move Britney Spears was pleading for, her lawyer said.

"This man does not belong in her life, your honour, for another day," Mathew S. Rosengart, who took over as the singer's lawyer in July, argued in court. "Please hear the plea of my client."

Lawyers for James Spears said the conservatorship should be ended instead, calling his record as conservator "impeccable." But after hearing from both sides, the judge agreed that suspending James Spears was in his daughter's best interest. "The current situation is not tenable," Penny said. The conservatorship was established in

2008, after James Spears sought control over his pop-star daughter's life and business, citing her mental health struggles and substance abuse.

Although James Spears had long maintained that the arrangement was voluntary and necessary to protect his daughter's well-being — crediting the conservatorship with saving her life and revitalizing her career — he filed earlier this month to end it entirely, citing Britney Spears' wishes and recent shows of independence. (Britney Spears said in June that she had not known she could move to end it.) But Rosengart, who had said in court fil-

ings that Britney Spears consented to winding down the arrangement, argued that James Spears was seeking to avoid having to turn over records from the conservatorship, including 13 years of financial information.

This month in 'Controlling Britney Spears', a documentary by The New York Times, a former security firm employee said that under the conservatorship, the singer was tracked by an intense surveillance apparatus that secretly captured audio recordings from her bedroom and material from her phone.

-New York Times



Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) walks between her office and the House chamber at the Capitol in Washington on Wednesday (Sept 29). The House moved on a bill to increase the debt limit on Wednesday, while the Senate prepared a separate spending bill to keep the government funded past a Thursday (Sept 30) deadline

-T.J. Kirkpatrick/The New York Times

By Emily Cochrane and Jim Tankersley

## Democrats move to avert shutdown

But divisions imperil Biden's agenda

WASHINGTON — Democrats prepared legislation Wednesday (Sept 29) to avert a government shutdown this week, but they were desperately trying to salvage President Joe Biden's domestic agenda as conservative-leaning holdouts dug in against an ambitious \$3.5 trillion social safety net and climate bill that carries many of the party's top priorities.

Congressional leaders moved to address the most immediate threat, working to complete a bill to prevent a government funding lapse at midnight Thursday (Sept 30). Yet after days of intensive negotiations to bridge bitter differences in their party over Biden's two biggest legislative priorities, the president and top Democrats appeared as far as ever from an agreement on their marquee social policy package, which the White House calls the Build Back Better plan.

That, in turn, was imperiling a \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure bill that was scheduled for a House vote Thursday.

The fate of the two measures could define the success of Biden's presidency, and the intense negotiations surrounding them have posed a test of his skills as a deal maker, which he highlighted as a calling card during his campaign for the White House. But after days of personal meetings with lawmakers in the Oval Office and phone calls to key players, Biden remained far short of a deal.

Dramatizing the challenge, Sen. Joe Manchin III of West Virginia, a leading holdout on the social policy bill, issued a lengthy and strongly worded statement Wednesday evening reiterating his opposition to the proposal as currently constituted, saying it amounted to "fiscal insanity."

"While I am hopeful that common ground can be found that would result in another historic investment in our nation, I cannot — and will not — support trillions in spending or an all-or-nothing approach that ignores the brutal fiscal reality our nation faces," Manchin wrote, denouncing an approach that he said would "vengefully tax for the sake of wishful spending."

The statement was the polar opposite of what Biden and top Democrats had hoped to extract from Manchin and other centrist critics of the bill by week's end — a firm

public commitment to eventually vote for the social policy measure, in order to placate liberals who want to ensure its enactment.

Instead, it further enraged progressives who were already promising to oppose the infrastructure bill until Congress acted on the larger social policy plan, which Democrats plan to push through using a fast-track process known as budget reconciliation to shield it from a filibuster. They have been pressing to push off the infrastructure vote until after votes on the reconciliation bill — or, at the very least, after the centrist holdouts provided a firm sense of what they would accept in that package.

"I assume he's saying that the president is insane, because this is the president's agenda," Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., leader of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, said of Manchin. "Look, this is why we're not voting for that bipartisan bill until we get agreement on the reconciliation bill. It's clear we've got a ways to go."

"I tell you, after that statement, we probably have even more people willing to vote 'no' on the bipartisan bill," she added.

The impasse left unclear the fate of the infrastructure measure. While a handful of centrist Republicans plan to support it, GOP leaders are urging their members to oppose it, leaving Democrats who hold a slim majority short of votes to pass the bill if progressives revolt.

"The plan is to bring the bill to the floor," Speaker Nancy Pelosi told reporters, returning to Capitol Hill after huddling at the White House with Biden and Sen. Chuck Schumer of New York, the majority leader. Asked whether she was concerned about the votes, she added, "One hour at a time."

She spoke shortly after the House passed legislation lifting the statutory limit on federal borrowing until Dec. 16, 2022, an effort to avert a catastrophic federal debt default next month when the Treasury Department says it will breach the current cap.

Senate Republicans blocked a Democratic effort to pair the increase with a spending bill to keep the government funded and are likely to oppose the House-passed bill, which was approved on a nearly party-line vote of 219-212 on Wednesday. But even as the debt ceiling remained unresolved,

Senate leaders scheduled a series of votes for Thursday morning on legislation that would keep the government open through early December and provide crucial aid for disaster relief efforts and Afghan refugees. The House was expected to take up the legislation soon afterward to avoid a shutdown Thursday night.

But much of the urgency Wednesday was focused on salvaging the president's agenda, after Biden and his aides cleared his schedule in an attempt to broker a deal among Democrats.

Some Democrats have complained this week that the president has not engaged in talks to their satisfaction. He welcomed groups of progressives and moderates to the White House last week, for example, but met with each separately, as opposed to holding a group negotiating session.

And efforts by Biden and his team to pressure Manchin and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, another Democratic holdout on the reconciliation bill, appear to have fallen flat. Officials have been working for days to persuade the pair to specify how much they would be willing to spend on the package, calculating that such a commitment would allay the worries of progressives now refusing to support the infrastructure bill.

"Joe Biden is the only president in American history to have passed a relief package of the significance of the American Rescue Plan with zero margin for error in the Senate and three votes to spare in the House," said Andrew Bates, a spokesperson for the White House, referring to the \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief package that became law in March. "He knows how to make his case, he knows how to count votes, and he knows how to deliver for the American middle class."

Biden held conversations with various lawmakers throughout the day Wednesday and planned to continue them Thursday, White House officials said.

Privately, administration officials said Biden was continuing to take an encouraging role with Manchin and Sinema, and not demanding they agree to anything immediately. Both senators have yet to publicly do so, even as liberal Democrats continue to publicly fume over the reticence.

-New York Times

By Charles M. Blow

## The mendacity of Joe Biden

Joe Biden, once again, disappointed many of the same Black voters who were his strongest supporters. How much of this can or should Black people stand?

I always have to start columns like this with an upfront stipulation: Having Biden in the White House is exponentially better than having four more years of Donald Trump, and in a two-party system, you must support one of the two parties' candidates. Protest abstentions are suicidal. Democrats who at least talk a more racially inclusive game are head and shoulders above Republicans who either court or abide open racists.

It's not that Biden hasn't advanced policies that benefit the African American community, efforts that the White House is quick to laud — as it should — when he faces criticism.

With that out of the way, there is still an appraisal of Biden at this point in his presidency — specifically as it relates to Black voters — that isn't kind.

The latest offence was the administration's disastrous mishandling of the Haitian migrant crisis at the southern border.

Yes, there were the outrageous images of agents on horseback herding the migrants like cattle, and there was also the administration aggressively deporting the migrants back to Haiti.

When I see those Black bodies at the border, I am unable to separate them from myself, or my family, or my friends. They are us. There is a collective consciousness in blackness, born of the white supremacist erasure of our individuality.

Your accomplishment is never your own but a credit to the race. Your sins are never your own but a stain on the race. In America, and throughout the diaspora, all Black people are linked together like a chain of paper dolls.

So it has been incredibly painful to witness the treatment of the Haitians, and it has been impossible not to recoil in disgust or burn with outrage. And to think, "This is happening on Joe Biden's watch."

When it was reported that then-President Trump called Haiti a shithole country, Biden responded on Twitter saying:

"It's not how a president should speak. It's not how a president should behave. Most of all, it's not what a president should believe. We're better than this."

But deporting these Haitians is worse, not better. The Biden administration — and Democrats in general — always seem to say the right things on racial issues, but too often their deeds come up short when measured against their talk.

As a justification for many of the deportations, the Biden administration invoked Title 42, which is a law that allows deportations based on supposed "health risks". The Associated Press pointed out, "The Trump administration invoked it in March 2020 to sweeping effect, prohibiting entry by virtually anyone from Mexico and Canada and essentially sealing the northern and southern borders." Isn't that ironic.

What's more, these particular migrants were being deported to a country many haven't been to in years. Many of them didn't leave Haiti in 2021; they left it years ago. And they were being deported into danger. Haiti has recently been devastated by an earthquake, flooding from a hurricane and the assassination of the president.

The administration's own special envoy to Haiti resigned last Thursday (Sept. 23), refusing to be part of the administration's "inhumane" expulsions regime, citing the fact that Haiti is so dangerous right now that even "American officials are confined to secure compounds because of the danger posed by armed gangs to daily life."

And yet the Biden administration refused to give any indication that it would stop invoking Title 42. The Washington Post reported on Sept 24. It seems to me that Biden tried to simultaneously eliminate the horrible optics the migrants present, and to do so as quickly as possible, and at the same time blunt the already loud criticism from Republicans that he is mishandling immigration and has an open-borders policy. (No wonder, then, that the migrant encampment beneath the Del Rio bridge has already been cleared.)

But those Republicans cannot be appeased. No matter what direction Biden takes, they will condemn it. So why not take the moral path, the righteous path, the ethical path?

The Haitian migrant crisis came as negotiations over federal police reform have collapsed and a law guaranteeing federal voting protections is still bogged down in Congress.

At a certain point, words ring hollow, even when they are the right words. At a certain point, success in one area fails to cover deficiencies in another. The Biden administration's handling of the Haitians was just wrong. It was also heart-breaking and disgusting.

No White House fact sheet about other policies that benefited Black people can cover that stain. These Black people were treated like animals because Biden was afraid of a Washington full of monsters.

As is too often the case, Black people become the political pawn, a weight around the ankle or a weapon in the hand. Our humanity is reduced to a calculation or a cause. We can be chased down by horseback-riding agents or flown out by weak-kneed presidents.

After Biden was declared the winner of the 2020 election, the Rev. Al Sharpton recalled for The Washington Post last week, he said, "Black America, you had my back, I'll have yours." Sharpton continued: "Well, we're being stabbed in the back, Mr. President. We need you to stop the stabbing — from Haiti to Harlem."

-New York Times

## COMMENTARY



Basil Rajapaksa, assumes duties as the Minister of Finance on July 8. Trade-union alliance and other mass organizations, as well as cabinet ministers and members of Parliament are protesting against the midnight LNG deal with US firm New Fortress Energy, and have called for its abrogation on the grounds that it threatens national political, economic and energy security

- J. Sujanekumar/ENCL

By Asoka Bandarage

## Midnight LNG deal with US firm raises hackles in Sri Lanka

On September 17, New Fortress Energy (NFE), a US-based energy infrastructure company, signed a momentous legal agreement with the government of Sri Lanka. The signing apparently took place in the dead of the night, at 12:06 a.m. and the foreigner who came for the signing swiftly returned to the US on a flight at 2:00 a.m.

The back-door deal allows NFE to build a terminal for liquefied natural gas (LNG) off the coast of Colombo. It also enables NFE to purchase, for US\$250 million, the Sri Lankan Treasury's 40% stake in West Coast Power (WCP), which owns the Yugadanavi 310-megawatt power plant in Kerawalapitya, a contributor to the national electricity grid.

NFE would have the right to build a new LNG terminal aiming to increase output to 700MW, with a target of 350MW by 2023. NFE will initially supply an estimated 1.2 million gallons (4.54 million litres) of LNG a day to the government, with expectations of significant growth as new power plants become operational.

This complex deal, involving a floating LNG terminal (also known as a floating storage regasification unit, or FSRU), power plants and energy sales estimated to be worth \$6 billion, is likely the largest contract the Sri Lankan government has ever made with a private company. It also threatens Sri Lanka with a loss of hundreds of millions of dollars, and a serious compromise of the country's energy security.

Interestingly, the chairman and chief executive of New Fortress Energy is Wes Edens, the American billionaire deemed the "new king of sub-prime lending" by the Wall Street Journal in 2015 (and a "slumlord" by community protesters in Milwaukee, Wisconsin). He is also a big donor to the US Democratic Party and a co-owner of the Milwaukee Bucks basketball team.

### Local opposition

In Sri Lanka, however, the trade-union alliance and other mass organizations, as well as several cabinet ministers and members of Parliament, are protesting the agreement. They are calling for its abrogation on the grounds that it threatens national political, economic and energy security.

The Ceylon Electricity Board Engineers' Union (CEBEU) is championing the resistance, and says the agreement violates the government's own National Energy Policy, approved in August 2019.

The policy clearly states in Strategy 3.1.2 that "considering the impact to the national energy security, operation of the first LNG terminal and LNG procurement shall be kept under state control."

The policy also states in 3.8.2 that the "procurement of plant, equipment, crude oil and other fuels as well as power purchase agreements and similar concessions, will be made through a streamlined competitive bidding scheme ensuring transparency and accountability." The CEBEU argues that the NFE's "unsolicited proposal" contradicts "the procurement policies

and principles" of the National Energy Policy and the Sri Lanka Electricity Act.

As CEBEU president Saumya Kumarawadu explains, the signing of the NFE agreement during the ongoing bidding process has completely disrupted the transparent and formal procedures to procure a LNG terminal facility and pipelines through competitive offers from other parties more favourable to Sri Lanka.

The CEBEU fears that the agreement would result in the Ceylon Electricity Board, the long-time provider of electricity to the country, losing its ability and mandate to supply the cheapest source of power under its least-cost operating guidelines.

The CEBEU has extensively examined the pricing formulas for LNG supply in the NFE agreement, and considers them "very much disadvantageous to Sri Lanka." It cites offensive conditions of the agreement, including:

- "Inclusion of very high Take or Pay (TOP) gas volumes than the actual minimum requirement of the country with strict conditions that NFE should be paid irrespective of whether the contracted volumes are consumed or not.

- "Contract term initially for five years with almost definite compelled further extensions.

- "Exclusive rights of supplying LNG to Sri Lanka electricity generation.

- "NFE being granted all tax exemptions/benefits/investment incentives available under Sri Lankan law."

As the CEBEU points out: "The main aim of NFE is not the mere US\$250 million investment in shares of WCP but the securing of multibillion-dollar LNG supply contract without a competition and with exclusive rights of supplying LNG to the whole country with undefined extended duration beyond five years with massive controlling power on the country's national security and energy security and with guaranteed exorbitant profits."

An August 2 press release by the National Joint Committee of Sri Lanka points out that the current government was elected into office with a massive mandate to safeguard national resources and strategic assets from neo-colonialism. The current economic crisis and external political pressure should not be excuses to sell the country for short-term political and economic expedience.

### NFE and LNG in global context

NFE is a global company with an expanding "network of liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals, power generation facilities and natural gas logistics infrastructure" around the world. With operations in North America, Europe, the Caribbean, Central America and Africa it has positioned itself to be the leader in the world's transition to LNG and to "light the world."

As in Sri Lanka, NFE presents its global LNG projects as "clean, cheap and safe alternatives to coal and oil." However, activists (and energy experts critical

of "green-washing") question its assumptions and practices. As the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) points out in its report "Sailing to Nowhere: Liquefied Natural Gas is not an Effective Climate Strategy," expansion of US-produced LNG "could have enormous environmental impacts and costs for decades to come."

LNG production involves extensive use of hydraulic fracturing ("fracking") – the process of injecting liquid at high pressure into subterranean rocks to force open fissures and extract oil or gas – and LNG processing can increase air pollution and contaminate water supplies, harming human and environmental health.

The Public Accountability Initiative, a non-profit organization that researches connections between corporate and government power, argues: "Financial firms like Wes Edens' New Fortress Energy are critical players in propping up the fossil fuel industry, which is responsible for our current climate crisis."

### Ecological alternatives

Social and environmental activists also point out that while NFE and other power companies seek to make huge profits from LNG, flooding energy markets in places such as Puerto Rico and others in the Caribbean with fracked gas will not build resilience.

Instead, they call for localized renewable energy sources, such as rooftop and community solar and distributed micro-grid technologies, which are more sustainable and more resilient to natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes than centralized fossil-generated power.

Sri Lanka, like Puerto Rico, is an environmentally challenged island that needs to heed these warnings. The recent environmental devastation off the coast of Sri Lanka caused by the explosion of the X-Press Pearl ship carrying toxic cargo should provoke similar demands for action. For example, strict regulations on the maritime transport of toxic substances, including LNG, are desperately needed to avoid further disasters.

If the Democratic administration in the US is genuinely committed to mitigating climate change, it needs to move away from the global export of dangerous and controversial LNG. Instead, economically struggling countries and regions like Sri Lanka and Puerto Rico need to be allowed, with their sovereignty intact, to develop truly clean, safe and cheap energy sources, such as solar and wind power, that uphold local and bioregional paths to environmental and human protection.

*-Asoka Bandarage PhD, author of Sustainability and Well-Being, The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka, and several other publications, serves on the boards of the Interfaith Moral Action on Climate and Critical Asian Studies and has taught at Yale, Brandeis, Mount Holyoke, Georgetown, American and other universities. This article was originally featured on asiatictimes.com*

## JVP leader smells scheme to whip up extremist sentiment in Sri Lanka

**COLOMBO** – Opposition lawmaker Anura Kumara Disanayake has expressed fears of a scheme to whip up communal disharmony in Sri Lanka using seasonal extremist elements to distract the public from multiple crises the country is facing.

The harbingers ('kasa kaarayo', or the whip crackers that herald the arrival of a Buddhist *perahera* pagant) who had taken centre stage in the run-up to the 2019 presidential election are back in the limelight after a prolonged silence, said Disanayake.

"The kasa kaarayo who had been in hiding are back to the fore. Remember, before the presidential polls, it was these kasa kaarayo that carried wanda (forced sterilization) doctors, wanda food and wanda clothes on their back. These people were nowhere to be seen lately. But suddenly they're back? Why?"

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader was referring to unsubstantiated, racially charged allegations that had targeted the country's Muslim minority in the years that followed the war with the separatist Tamil Tigers. Hardliner groups, some led by prominent monks, were at the forefront of spreading fears of an Islamic expansionism, if not total takeover of the Sinhala Buddhist state. Stories spread, particularly on social media, of alleged halalification, of fast food laced with substances that selectively render Sinhala patrons at Muslim-owned restaurants infertile.

In 2019, in the months leading up to the presidential election, a Muslim doctor at the Kurunegala Teaching Hospital was controversially accused of performing surgical sterilizations of women without their consent.

To date, no credible evidence has been presented to prove these claims, though an increasingly visible incidence of Arabization of the country's Muslim population, particularly in the island's east, has lent an air of legitimacy to some of these fears.

Recent anti-Muslim sentiment in Sri Lanka has also occasionally led to incidents of violence against the community, the latest being in the aftermath of the 2019 Easter bombings that were carried out by Islamist terrorists.

"There was an attack in this country that contributed to bringing the present administration to power. Suspicion is rising in society even to the point of wondering if the attack was a conspiracy for them to come into power," claimed Disanayake.

The Easter bombings, which killed 269 people and injured over 500, primarily targeted Sri Lanka's minority Catholics and Christians, with whom the majority Buddhist population has maintained largely cordial relations with, barring occasionally heated differences over what has been termed unethical conversions. Relations between the two communities further warmed in the wake of the April 2019 tragedy, with Buddhists rallying behind Archbishop Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith's repeated calls for justice for the victims.

Disanayake said the pain of the Catholic community over the absence of this justice is reflected in Cardinal Ranjith's pronouncements of late, which have taken an anti-establishment flavour. Ranjith has been increasingly critical of what he has claimed is the government's inability to find the alleged "masterminds" of the attack, though the authorities maintain that investigations have been and continue to be thorough.

"Certain groups are now being used to create a violent, charged, conflict situation targeting Catholic priests, particularly the cardinal, and Catholics in general," the National People's Power (NPP) parliamentarian claimed. "We can see that the failed leader is attempting to create another such conflict. So there is reasonable suspicion on whether this government is engaged in a bloody conspiracy," he added.

The Catholic Church recently called for an investigation into a claim attributed to a controversial Buddhist monk of an impending terrorist attack, while also denying a claim by the same monk that he had warned the head of the church in 2017 of an imminent attack.

The Archdiocese of Colombo in a statement released on September 16 said the claims, made by Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) general secretary Ven. Galgoda Aththe Gnanasara Thera on a television interview, were serious enough to warrant an inquiry.

According to the statement, the monk had claimed he had information on a terror plot similar to the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings that killed 269 and injured over 500. The monk had also said he knew who is behind the planned attack and where they're located, and that he had already written to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa about his findings.

However, the Archdiocese said, it was unclear whether any action has been taken by the authorities based on this information. The statement said the inspector general of police (IGP) is obligated to arrest anyone linked to the alleged plot.

"We request the IGP to take note of Ven. Gnanasara Thera's revelation about an impending terrorist attack and to take immediate action to prevent it," the statement said.

The Archdiocese then denied a claim by Gnanasara Thera that he had warned the Cardinal of an impending attack on the Catholic community as far back as 2017.

The monk had only spoken to the cardinal about "Islamic expansionism", it said.

"We state categorically that, until after the Easter attack, the defence authorities, intelligence, the police, Ven. Gnanasara Thera or anyone else had warned His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith of an impending attack against the Catholic community."

Earlier this week, a group of Buddhist monks also warned against attempts to bring about disharmony among communities, particularly targeting the Catholics.

Disanayake, meanwhile, wonders if a conspiracy is being hatched to divert attention from the various crises that have engulfed the country, from COVID-19 to a crippling forex shortage.

"People are wondering if they're trying something again as the economy is collapsing, when they don't have solutions to problems. The people must be on alert. We must not allow this country to be a victim once again of such a bloody conspiracy," he urged.

*-economynext.com*

By Asiff Hussein

## Yes to reforms, no to repeal

### Why the Muslim Personal Law needs to be retained

The Muslims of Sri Lanka have always felt very much part of the nation. The multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious environment of Sri Lanka with its tradition of tolerance and understanding of the other has contributed to this inclusive attitude in no mean measure.

As such, it is sad to see sinister attempts being made to deprive the country's Muslims of their personal laws which govern civil matters like marriage, divorce and inheritance. Other communities like the upcountry Sinhalese and Jaffna Tamils also have their customary laws in the form of Kandyan Law and Thesavalamai, but strangely nothing is spoken about repealing or radically reforming these legal systems.

These customary laws as much as Muslim Personal Law (MPL) have co-existed for centuries without creating any division or social discord. Personal laws, like language and other cultural markers, are very much part of all these communities, adding much vigour and vibrancy under the time-tested adage "Unity in diversity" that forms the very lifeblood of Sri Lanka. These customary laws, as much as the MPL, do not infringe on the rights of others. They never have and never will, which is why they have survived this far.

However, unlike the traditional usages, MPL has an added dimension, because it has a religious foundation. It is grounded in the Islamic faith and reflects religious obligations to one's family among other things. The fact that even the colonial rulers recognized the right to the personal laws without any obligation or commitment to do so, speaks much of the importance it holds in Muslim hearts.

To repeal it or radically transform it so that its entire purpose is lost will only serve to isolate and marginalize the country's Muslims, with its many social and political implications. After all, no Muslim would be willing to forgive or forget those who deprived them of a personal law that means so much to them.

This is not to say the MPL, as reflected in the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA) does not need reforms. It certainly does. This is why the Justice Saleem Marsoof (JSM) Committee was constituted – to come up with a final solution that would particularly address the rights and concerns of women. There is certainly a need to amend the MMDA such as requiring the written consent of the bride, recognizing her legal capacity to marry at her own discretion by appointing an agent in lieu of the nearest agnate guardian if she so chooses and enter into prenuptial contracts with her intended husband. Any reasonable Muslim would agree to such changes, because they are very much part of the Islamic faith as well.

However, there have been some very unsavoury developments of late that threaten to undermine the whole objective and purpose of MPL, which is to safeguard the institution of marriage and the family, the very foundation of a healthy society. Two such changes that were recently included in a cabinet decision in a very arbitrary manner and in total disregard to the sentiments of the community was to abolish polygamy and Quazi courts that adjudicate in the matter of Muslim marriages and divorces. These two proposals were never part of the JSM recommendations and has now come to a state where even those who wanted reforms are very much against the proposed changes, and with good reason.

Quazi courts are not law courts but quasi-judicial bodies that adjudicate on Muslim family law with a view to effect reconciliation between the parties. This is why it has been proposed to rename these as Muslim Family Conciliators. Their existence is not only important to the Muslim community due to religious and sentimental reasons, but also because they do not involve a costly and lengthy litigation process in matters like divorce, unlike conventional law courts. It is in fact, a very cost effective way to settle family disputes.

As for polygamy, this is something that has been part of Muslim law for centuries and is in fact embedded in the Islamic faith. It must however be stated that this is not an arbitrary right given to a Muslim male. It comes with many conditions attached including equal treatment of all co-wives. It could be best described as a concession to human nature that seeks to eliminate vices so common in today's society. It could also be viewed as a social mechanism to preserve the family since males who have recourse to it, would be less likely to divorce their first wives for reasons ranging from incompatibility to frigidity and infertility.

Furthermore, it offers a very viable solution to care for less fortunate women such as widows, divorcees, handicapped or the economically unprivileged who also have basic human needs as well as require financial support. A male who has the option of polygamy open to him, would be more likely to marry such an unfortunate woman, even if she were of a lower social background than his.

It is only those who live in a fantasy world blinded to the social realities others face call for a ban on polygamy. One often finds those who hold these views and make loud and bold statements against polygamy actually living a very comfortable and affluent life, caring nothing or little to understand the harsh realities of life which to many is a daily struggle.

We need to understand the Muslim community is one that takes care of family and is religiously obliged to do so. This is why you hardly find elders homes or orphanages within the community. Aged parents are taken in and lovingly cared for by their children, while orphans are adopted and taken care of by other kinsfolk. To deprive destitute women of the only handhold that holds out some form of relief to them within a socially acceptable and respectable arrangement that meets their most basic needs is unfair to say the least.

*-ENCL*

# SRI LANKA FOCUS



People stand in a long queue outside the Highland Milk Powder outlet in Colombo on September 16. A severe milk powder shortage in the country has led to serious rationing, with shelves in most supermarkets and grocery stores empty of powdered milk

- J. Sujeewakumar/ENCL

By Amita Arudpragasam

## How to end Sri Lanka's food crisis

Instead of forcing its citizens to starve, the government needs to enact structural reforms economists have been recommending for years

Last month, as the rupee depreciated and inflation rose, panicked Sri Lankans queued up for hours to purchase scarce supplies of sugar, rice, lentils, and milk powder. Sri Lanka depends on imports for essential goods, but it struggles to pay for them, especially given its history of weak export performance. Over the last few years, the problem has morphed into a full-blown sovereign debt crisis.

The country is expected to pay back US\$ 29 billion in debts over the next five years, and interest payments alone currently make up more than two-thirds of government revenue. Since March 2020, the government has imposed severe import restrictions to address the problem, setting off a dangerous chain reaction in the process.

First, the prices of basic commodities soared. As the public grew restless earlier this year, Sri Lanka's trade minister said the government would impose price controls and rationing for 27 essential food items. But the traders, who purchased these goods at higher rates, refused to release them into the market for less than what they'd paid. It was not long before there were shortages of several staples. On Aug. 30, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa invoked the country's public security ordinance to stop the hoarding. That act can only be exercised "in view of the existence or imminence of a state of public emergency." The country was thus in a state of emergency.

The new status is deeply concerning, as civil society groups have pointed out, since Sri Lanka has a long history of human rights abuses under emergency rule. Emergency regulations—which prevail over all law except the Constitution—have previously been used to shut down newspapers, imprison political opponents without trial or charge, and destroy evidence of possible extrajudicial executions. As the main opposition party said, the designation may move the country "further in the direction of authoritarianism."

Despite declaring a state of emergency in response to food-related shortages, the same government denied there is even a food crisis. The government line is shortages, if they exist at all, are only temporary. "People won't go hungry," insisted Sri Lanka's state minister of finance in an interview with Al Jazeera. But even if current food shortages are indeed temporary—a result of short-term price controls and hoarding—next year they could well be widespread and enduring due to controversial new policies.

On April 29, Rajapaksa announced that Sri Lanka would replace all chemical fertilizers with organic substitutes, a mammoth transition that has not worked in any other country. Rejecting advice to transition the country in a phased manner, the president banned a series of agrochemicals just days later. The policy—aimed perhaps at preserving foreign exchange and justified as a method to reduce — non-communicable diseases—is expected to have disastrous consequences.

Without fertilizer, paddy yields will plummet and Sri Lanka's tea industry—the country's second largest export earner—will be devastated. Without agrochemicals, leaf disease also threatens to lower yields in the rubber industry—another major export earner. Not only will the policy make it harder to afford necessary imports, but as domestic yields drop, it will also increase the likelihood of a more sustained food crisis.

Sri Lankan officials and policymakers continue to blame the COVID-19 pandemic for the country's faltering economy. Lockdowns and border closures have depressed global economic activity while foreign direct investment and capital have vacated emerging markets. For debt-ridden developing countries, the pandemic's economic fallout will be far worse than the 2008 financial crisis.

Challenging external conditions, however, do not exonerate Sri Lanka's policymakers. Credit agencies like Moody's Investors Service and S&P 500 have consistently downgraded the country, demonstrating low confidence in its ability to pay

back its debts. That's mainly because Sri Lanka's economic shortcomings are structural: a low tax-to-GDP ratio, prohibitive barriers to trade, a bloated public sector, and high costs of doing business. These deficiencies have existed for more than a decade, long before the pandemic.

Instead of addressing structural shortcomings, the government is making them worse. In 2019, it lowered taxes for the wealthy and increased tax holidays for corporations. In 2020, it made trade even more restrictive by imposing blanket import bans, which have created instability, shortages, and black markets. Import restrictions are at their highest since the 1970s, when the country was nearly a closed economy. Analysts are now drawing comparisons to that decade, which is the last time Sri Lanka saw shortages of essentials like rice, bread, and sugar.

Fifty years ago, Sri Lankan policymakers were also concerned about excessive international dependence—but understandably so. They were responding to the oil crisis, World War II, and a fall in rubber prices post-Korean War. Then-Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, whose mantra was "produce or perish", promoted self-sufficiency as a development strategy.

Along with her coalition partners on the left, Bandaranaike imposed import restrictions and severe austerity measures, including conditions on what people could eat. As unemployment and inflation soared, she introduced price controls to mitigate hunger and drew on emergency powers to repress protests. The rationing and queues that followed are an enduring part of Bandaranaike's legacy, and the fallout from those policies would inspire a decade of extensive economic liberalization.

After remarkable electoral success in November 2019, Rajapaksa embarked on a project similar to Bandaranaike's. His administration would promote "self-sufficiency" through the development of two million new home gardens—a strategy also used in the 1970s—and would ban imports of at least 16 different crops.

But Rajapaksa is doing the opposite of what development economists generally recommend. According to experts, countries should move away from low-productivity sectors, such as agriculture, into high-productivity sectors, such as information and communications technology. Even though 30% of Sri Lanka's labour force is employed in agriculture, the sector only contributes to about 8% of its GDP.

Nonetheless, the government continues to subsidize and expand agriculture. As farmers struggle to educate and transition their relatives into higher wage jobs, Sri Lanka's urban and middle classes romanticize the physical labour of the farmer, privileging the idea of *'gama-pansala weva-dagaba'* (village temple, irrigation tank shrine) or the village as the spiritual and productive heart of the nation.

Rajapaksa's isolationism, unlike Bandaranaike's in the 1970s, is shaped less by global economic events than by an aversion to the West and a cultivation of conservative support, which views international powers as a threat to Sri Lankan sovereignty.

After Sri Lanka's civil war ended in 2009, the government faced increased human rights scrutiny and international pressure. According to a United Nations investigation, for instance, Sri Lankan security forces may have committed war crimes or crimes against humanity aimed predominantly at the country's Tamil minority. In response, xenophobic rhetoric only intensified, including in Rajapaksa's 2019 presidential campaign.

The regime could stop the human rights abuses that have made foes of the country's long-time allies to focus instead on the economic reforms Sri Lanka so desperately needs. But instead, it continues to sow discord and traumatize minority communities.

For example, the government forcibly cremated Muslims and Christians who died of COVID-

ID-19, claiming without evidence that burials contributed to the virus's spread. It continues to intimidate journalists and protesters. As government representatives reiterated barren commitments on human rights and reconciliation at the UN Human Rights Council this month, Sri Lanka's minister of prison management broke into a prison and drunkenly forced Tamil inmates to kneel at gunpoint.

Continued human rights violations will come at a high cost for the Rajapaksa regime. In particular, Sri Lanka stands to lose its preferential trading status with the European Union. In June, the European Parliament passed a resolution addressing the dire human rights situation in Sri Lanka. It called on the government to review and repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA)—a draconian law that has been used to target, torture, and sexually abuse minorities. An EU delegation is in Colombo this week to review Sri Lanka's commitments under the trading arrangement, but it is unclear whether the Rajapaksa administration will make any progress toward amending the law.

A temporary suspension of Sri Lanka's preferential trading status would be a huge blow to its economy since the EU is Sri Lanka's second largest export market, absorbing 22.4% of its exports. Even without this suspension though, prices continue to rise.

Many Sri Lankans have had enough. In June, the public was infuriated when government-owned Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) announced a fuel price hike. Unable to protest due to the lockdown and selectively applied quarantine laws, citizens took to social media to register their frustration. Just two years ago, the Rajapaksa family's party slammed its predecessor's policy for increasing retail fuel prices.

Urging motorists to use fuel sparingly, Sri Lanka's energy minister tweeted, "The reality is that we are in a foreign currency crisis," on Aug. 17. It's as if the government was finally forced to acknowledge an economic crisis that has plagued the country for years. On Sept. 7, Sri Lanka's "severe foreign exchange crisis" was also acknowledged by Basil Rajapaksa, the newly appointed finance minister and younger brother of Gotabaya. "We admit that there has been unnecessary spending, waste, and corruption in the past, not only limited to a certain period but for a long period," he confessed in his surprisingly frank maiden parliamentary speech.

It's impossible to deny there's a problem. Every newspaper brings a new story of calamity—whether that's the biggest maritime disaster in Sri Lanka's history, a multimillion-dollar sugar scam, the destruction of Sri Lanka's rainforests, a fatal new wave of COVID-19, possible fuel shortages, or Sri Lanka's new state of emergency.

The combination of external crises and poor policy management may make Sri Lanka one of the first emerging markets to default post-pandemic. To recover from this crisis, Sri Lanka must do far more than acknowledge the scale of the problem.

Instead of forcing its citizens to starve, the government needs to enact structural reforms economists have been recommending for years. It must lift its suffocating import restrictions, raise taxes on those who can afford them, and encourage movement away from agriculture. And it must either abandon or slowly phase in its ambitious plan to switch to organic fertilizers.

Finally, the country must end human rights abuses, release political prisoners, and repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act—this time not only in the name of basic human decency but also to save its economy. To achieve that, either policymakers need a radically different approach or Sri Lanka needs radically different policymakers.

**-Amita Arudpragasam is a Sri Lankan writer and a graduate of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and Princeton University and this article was originally featured on foreignpolicy.com**

By Kris Thomas

## Why are Sri Lankan youth refusing a COVID-19 vaccine?

"It's pretty clear that Pfizer provides more immunity than Sinopharm. That was why I held back from getting vaccinated," a 24-year-old said on condition of anonymity. He was responding to questions on why he waited at least a month after Sri Lanka started vaccinating its youth population against COVID-19 before finally getting the jab himself.

Similarly, other young Sri Lankans, who have hesitated to obtain the Sinopharm vaccine that is currently being administered, referred to multiple "research papers" which they say show that the Pfizer vaccine provides better immunity than other vaccines.

An earlier decision by the European Union (EU) to not endorse vaccines manufactured in India, China, Russia and other developing countries has also played into their choices, even though at least 29 countries, including in the EU, revised their vaccine requirements in early September.

However, China-manufactured Sinopharm, which is most widely available in Sri Lanka, is still not accepted by the United Kingdom, United States and Australia. Sri Lankan youth who aspire to leave the country when the pandemic is over, for employment, education or other reasons, would rather obtain a vaccine that is more widely accepted internationally.

"I don't have any travel plans for now," the 24-year-old admitted, but added, "I'm curious to know what happens if you do go ahead with the Sinopharm vaccine and a year later, I want to travel to a European country, how would that work?"

Sri Lanka went into its fourth lockdown on August 20, and the government has been focused on speeding up the vaccination program so that restrictions can be lifted as soon as possible.

Despite this, the prevalent vaccine hesitancy among youth has proven to be a complication.

While some wait to receive the "best" possible vaccine, others have raised different concerns. Last week, an English language daily newspaper cited health authorities as saying there were fears the COVID-19 vaccine would cause infertility. This could be a direct consequence of a much larger issue: conspiracy theories, misinformation, disinformation and other fake news concerning vaccines that are propagated on social media. Local health officials themselves recently said they suspect that an "organized misinformation campaign" is to blame for the vaccine hesitancy.

Meanwhile, social media analysis carried out by Hashtag Generation, a youth-led organization advocating youth civic and political participation, has uncovered interesting — and also concerning — findings. The group has noted not only a recent rise in conspiracy theories (Moderna vaccine manufacturer is an agent of Satan), misinformation (claims those who received the Sinopharm vaccine can die from it), and disinformation ('vaccine may affect the reproductive system'), but also an increase in the promotion of local remedies and home-made 'COVID cures' among social media users.

Among these are individuals who have opposed a vaccine due to fear of a variety of side effects, from the usual body aches to contracting COVID-19 regardless of inoculation. In some extreme cases, vaccines are being propagated as a method to control the minds of those who receive it. Others have refused the vaccine for religious reasons, or by opting for locally concocted, yet unapproved remedies.

"The selection of vaccines was particularly discussed on social media," said Prihesh Ratnayake, a social media specialist at Hashtag Generation. "Since most European and Western nations, such as the US and Australia, are not accepting Chinese vaccines and the Indian versions of AstraZeneca due to geopolitical reasons or vaccine nationalism, people who wish to travel abroad, especially to Western countries, [have] waited for Sri Lanka to receive Pfizer or Moderna."

This 'wait' for better or more acceptable vaccines, as well as fears about side effects and efficacy due to misinformation or disinformation, has resulted in vaccination centres in several parts of the country receiving fewer visitors, despite an accelerated vaccination drive opening up for the youth on September 3.

According to the Deputy Director-General of Health Services, Dr. Hemant Herath, not even half the population between the ages of 20 and 30 has received their first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

"We are not happy with the rate at which those in the 20-30 age category are receiving their vaccine," he said, adding, "Even though the rate of inoculation is increasing, it is not satisfactory, compared to the rate of the other age group [30 and above]."

As of September 28 — four weeks since the country began vaccinating the 20-30 age group — only 48% of the age group has received their first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, Dr. Herath said. Only about 13% of those in the category have received both doses.

"They are the ones who have received it [the vaccine] earlier [before vaccines for the 20-29 age group officially began] because they could not have received both doses in the past four weeks," he explained.

This adds credibility to unconfirmed reports about a percentage of the youth who obtained their vaccines through various other channels, during the first phase of the vaccination process which focused on inoculating those above the age of 30.

However, there has been no official confirmation of that fact by the government, and none relating to an investigation into how vaccines set aside for one group — identified as more susceptible to the virus — were distributed to a separate group.

Meanwhile, the government is now reportedly considering a vaccine mandate. Whether this materializes or not, health authorities have emphasized that the solution to Sri Lanka's COVID-19 crisis lies in vaccination.

"None of the reasons put forward by those who have not received a vaccine are acceptable to the Ministry of Health," Dr. Herath said, "because why we are insisting on the vaccine is to protect themselves, as well as to protect their loved ones at home."

-This article was originally featured on **roar.media**

# IN MEMORIAM



Feminist icon and author Kamla Bhasin

By Kavita Srivastava

## Kamla Bhasin

# A life woven with love, cheer and fun – even in the face of adversity

**Boundaries** were meaningless to Kamla Bhasin. Wherever she went, she made an impact. Her spirit was what one would first connect with. Her laughter, her Buland awaaz (Sonorities), her singing, her slogans, her poetry, her style of communication mesmerized many. People were inspired by her, took her as their mentor and became friends with her.

Bhasin, who died on September 25, was a leading spirit of the women's movement, scripting amazing songs, capturing the various ideas and expressions of the movement – songs that travelled across India and the South Asian region.

The famous 'Azadi' slogan was crafted by Bhasin and the renowned Pakistani feminist Nighat Said Khan. Her rendition of it imprinted itself on how other movements now express their own ideas of freedom and their demands, renewing the power of this chant to take on fresh meanings. With pride she would say, see how the slogan has travelled to Jawaharlal Nehru University and Kanhaiya Kumar and the other students have transformed it.

Kamla Bhasin was born in Village Shahidawalli in Gujranwala district in the Punjab, just before Partition, on April 24, 1946. She was one of six siblings. After Partition, her father got a job as a doctor in Bharatpur, so the family moved to India. After going to school in various small towns and villages of Rajasthan, Bhasin came to Jaipur for her final years of school. She finished her college and university education in the city.

Her college and university friends remember her as a bouncy, sporty person (she was college sports captain) who was always full of fun. Her laughter filled the corridors. Bhasin studied economics and in 1967 went to Germany to do research. She returned to India to work in the area of water, adult literacy and child development in Sewa Mandir in Udaipur.

In Udaipur, she was known as motorcycle-wali: she drove a motorbike around the city and in villages for her work, something that people in those parts had not seen a woman do before. Scooters and mopeds yes, but not on motorbikes. By the mid-1970s, she was married and by 1980 had two children. She and her husband moved to Delhi. From being a small-town wali, Bhasin soon became a Dilli wali.

### Street activism

Bhasin's street activism began in Delhi as part of a collective led by Saheli (one of the first women's groups, formed in Delhi in the 1981). It was a period of churning. Protests against dowry deaths brought the women of Delhi out on the streets. Women had also been galvanized by the Supreme Court verdict in 1979 acquitting the police accused in the 1972 Mathura rape case. Feminists began to work on amendments to sections of the Indian Penal Code related to dowry.

In 1984, came the ruthless massacre of Sikhs in Delhi, in which mobs killed more than 3,000 Sikhs. These killings affected Bhasin deeply as she was married to a Sikh. It prompted her to participate more intensely in the initiatives around her.

Other key events unfolded: the undermining in 1986 of the Shah Bano verdict related to maintenance for divorced Muslim women; the anti-sati movement in 1987; the Bhanwari Devi gang rape case in 1992 that eventually led to the Vishaka guidelines listing protections against sexual harassment in the workplace. That year also saw the demolition of the Babri Masjid, which brought more violence and killings. The need for street action by people's movements was never-ending.

From these events emerged one of Bhasin's earliest songs: *Tod, Tod ke Bandhano ko Dekho Behne Aati Hain*. Forty years later, it has become the signature protest song for many women. Bhasin was a prolific poet. Over the years, Jagori, the organization she co-founded in 1984, has published several books of songs by Bhasin and other songs of the women's movement.

In the 40 years of raising two children, including one with special needs, participating in street action, teaching feminism, gender, patriarchy, masculinity, disabilities, writing books on these subjects and on women and the media, researching women's Parti-

tion narratives, working with the Food and Agriculture Organization, Bhasin did not tire. Even when she celebrated her 75th birthday on April 24, she was planning campaigns with all of us.

Her contributions are many. She started Jagori Women's resource and Documentation Centre with old-time friend and colleague Abha Bhaiya and other feminists. Even today, Jagori is a valuable resource for women in North India. The two also set up Jagori Rural in Himachal Pradesh's Kangra district.

Bhasin was among a first generation of Indian feminists who made connections with others in the subcontinent and forged South Asian movements for feminists. The seed of this idea was planted at a training program in Murree in Pakistan hosted by Nighat Said Khan and the Women's Action Forum of Pakistan.

### Building bridges

At that point, in the '70s and '80s, it was not easy to build bridges between Bangladesh and Pakistani women: the events leading up to Bangladesh Liberation had left many in Bangladesh angry with the Pakistani army for its war crimes. The regional platform stood in full support of the Women's Action Forum when it apologised to the women of Bangladesh for these crimes and their silence. A letter with hundreds of signatures was sent from Pakistan to Bangladesh.

Similar divisions exist between Indian and Pakistani feminists, since the official discourse labelling the other country as the enemy encourages ordinary citizens to start thinking of people across the border in hostile terms. It is a chasm that Bhasin and Nighat Khan managed to bridge.

To the south, Sri Lankan and Indian feminists in the 1980s were critical of the war crimes of both the Sri Lankan army and the Indian Peace Keeping Force in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan feminist movement had taken up this issue upfront, along with the ethnic hostility between Sinhala and Tamils. South Asian feminist collectives worked to ease these differences.

Nepal and India appeared to have an easier relationship, but the Indian state's patronising policy towards Nepal sometimes created friction.

In the end, it became clear that there could be an easy relationship between feminist groups, without being critical of the each other's state apparatus.

She also worked relentlessly towards peace between India and Pakistan, with activists like Syeda Hameed, Tapan Bose, Kuldeep Nayar and others. In 1999, the Women's Initiative for Peace in South Asia was born called. More than 70 Pakistani women led by the fiery human rights activist Asma Jahangir came to Delhi and Jaipur to interact with women for over a week. What a sight it was. In Jaipur, a few hundred people from the city came with their children to see what Pakistani women looked like.

Bhasin was a regular at the annual Wagah Attari border event, where Kuldeep Nayar, Justice Rajinder Sachar, Syeda Hameed and others led activists on August 14 to light candles on the Indian side of the border as Pakistani activists stood on the other side.

Her commitment to peace in this region was amazing. One of her last meetings was about seven hours before she passed away: she joined the online meeting of the Pakistan India Forum for Peace and Development from the ICU bed till she had to leave because a doctor wanted to examine her.

### Making music

My own association with her started way back in 1984, when I knew little about the women's movement or feminism. My work started out with the understanding of rural women's issues. Our work space was the Rajasthan government's Women's Development Program, which was a conglomerate of grassroots activists, researchers and social workers, some in NGOs, some in research institutions and some in the government.

It was a time when we thought that the urban feminists did not have much to contribute and initially we kept our distance. Then we started singing her songs. Rural women also had their own beautiful feminist songs. Bhasin and the women grew from each others' expressions. Very soon, Bhasin was

making songs that used the melodies of Rajasthani folk tunes.

Bhasin's persona, her songs, her understanding of feminism, patriarchy, gender and masculinity drew us together and we became friends. We started working together on campaigns collectively. One of our most significant tasks was working together in the executive of the Indian Association of Women's Studies from 1993 to 1996. Bhasin was the general secretary and I was a member and on the editorial board of the association's magazine.

In 2013, Kamla Bhasin and Abha Bhaiya started the One Billion Rising campaign with Eve Ensler, the American playwright, to end violence against women globally. The thrust was Strike, Dance, Rise. Massive mobilization began all over the country. We all rose year after year on V Day, the day for ending violence against women, on Valentine's Day, February 14, hoping to create a world woven with love and not hate. Violence against women could stop if love was brought centre stage.

One of her last plans that I worked with Bhasin was on building a campaign on women's property rights, in 2018. We aimed to build awareness amongst women that they had the right to ask for their share of family property and not relinquish that right to their brothers. It was a completely decentralised, democratic, and multifaceted campaign, typically Kamla style. Posters, slogans and songs were made by everybody under Bhasin's leadership.

### New directions

Over past three decades, the debate in the women's movement has moved from our universality and commonality of being women to intersectionality. This has not only transformed the discourse but also many times led to a break in dialogue. Bhasin faced questions from Dalit, trans feminists and other feminists on her views on the concept of intersectionality. For a person who believed in dialogue, this breakdown went against her grain.

In the lives of us feminists, there are no barriers between the personal and the public. It was the same with Bhasin. Our relationship grew stronger over the years, cemented by singing. Our songs changed over the years, from movement songs to other genres too. In the last three months of her illness, when she was between hospital and home, she insisted that I come to meet her. Every meeting involved eating and singing till late into the night, reading lyrics out of the books she had written.

One night over dinner, I asked her what she had been doing during the struggle against the Citizenship Amendment Act. She said that she went to three protest sites. Everywhere she went, she was asked to recite the 'Azaadi' chant. Just a few days before she passed away, she said that she wanted to write a book for children on Bilkis Dadi, the octogenarian who had been at the forefront of the protests in Delhi's Shaheen Bagh.

She wanted to talk about cancer and how we need to be healthy. She wanted more expressions about older people. She wanted to make posters of the wonder women who were her peers. One night at 3, a poster arrived on WhatsApp, asking our opinion about whether the sketches were any good. She had six such posters in mind.

Kamla Bhasin's was a life of sisterhood. Several friends came from afar to look after her in her last few months. At her cremation, many women friends and movement sisters were the pall bearers. They sang all through till she was consigned to the electric fire.

Cancer finally seized her body but not her spirit. She did say that she may lose the battle but that she would transcend into another world. Those of us who were her friends are convinced that wherever she is now, she is having fun with her daughter Meeto, her friends Nigar Ahmed, Asma Jahangir and Sonal Shukla and her brother Indu – those whom she described in one of her Facebook posts as her own.

Adieu Kamla. You will live on in all our hearts.

*-Kavita Srivastava is the president of the Peoples Union of Civil Liberties, Rajasthan and this article was originally featured on scroll.in*

By Sangat Sri Lanka

## A mentor to generations of feminists in Sri Lanka

We mourn the loss of Kamla Bhasin, feminist activist, writer, poet, mentor and friend who left us on September 25. Kamla has been a core part of influencing and collaborating with feminist movements in Sri Lanka since the 1980s.

SANGAT, the South Asian feminist network, was imagined and given life at a workshop of gender trainers held in Bangladesh and organized by the FAO-NGO Program in 1998. Since then, SANGAT has been working within Jagori, a feminist organization in New Delhi. Through SANGAT, Kamla taught and mentored hundreds of women over decades in their personal feminist journeys and as activists in movements across the region. For many people who became a part of the SANGAT network, through its courses that lasted from a few weeks to a month, she was instrumental in demystifying the basics of feminist thought and ideas. She made feminism accessible and demanded that we challenge ourselves and the powerful institutions that uphold patriarchal norms. The SANGAT month-long course expanded to include feminist courses run in languages such as Urdu and Tamil. The Tamil language course conducted over the years with EKTA India, Affected Women's Forum Akkaraipattu, Suriya Women's Development Centre Batticaloa and Women's Education and Research Centre Colombo has built a shared feminist network among Tamil speaking activists within Sri Lanka and with those in India for over a decade. She was the South Asia Coordinator for One Billion Rising.

Her deep and unshakeable belief in a South Asian solidarity led to the birth of lifelong friendships and collaborations across borders including with Sri Lankan feminist activists, artists, academics, writers and students. She was deeply committed to peace in South Asia and in Sri Lanka and was convenor of the Forum 1000 Peace Women. She was with the Women's Initiative for Peace in South Asia (WIPSA), Pak-India Peoples Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPPFD) and South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR).

Kamla was a prolific writer. She had the special knack of converting complex thought and theorizing into accessible language and formats. She would compose lyrics that she set to the tune of popular music from the region. She would create memorable, powerful slogans, which she then made illustrations of in posters, shouted out at protests and demonstrations and even in teaching spaces to motivate her students. Many of us continue to use these slogans, posters and her books. Among her writings are over 30 books on feminism and women's rights, including a much-loved book on feminist humour and hundreds of feminist songs that energized women's movements and resistance across the region. Some of her books on the basics of patriarchy and gender are translated into Sinhala and Tamil so they could reach a wider Sri Lankan audience.

She was a warm presence on her trips to Sri Lanka. She was energetic, ready to burst into revolutionary song or dance and deeply connected to the lives of people whose lives she touched here. She joined us in many demonstrations on her visits. On March 21, 2006, along with many workers and activists, she marched through the Katunayake Free Trade Zone area on a torchlight parade, our first 'Take Back the Night' agitation organized by the Mothers and Daughters of Lanka against street harassment of factory workers. In 2008, she came with a team of Indian activists and led the colourful and vocal people's SAARC demonstrations through the streets of Colombo. The protest was planned and organized by the Women and Media Collective to coincide with the SAARC summit to enhance people's voices demanding food security and calling on the SAARC countries to be accountable to the people of South Asia.

The last time many of us in Sri Lanka 'saw' her was at the memorial for Sunila Abeysekera over zoom on September 4, 2021 organized by the Women and Media Collective. She was weaker and disoriented. Nevertheless, she strongly declared, "Sunila is my best friend!" Then she asked insistently, in that typical Kamla way, "Did you sing Bread and Roses yet?" and when we said no, she declared that this was not an apt memorial for her best friend. Upon her loving insistence, we quickly lined up the video of Sunila singing Bread and Roses. That is how Kamla declared her love for her best friend – a special moment that we got to witness.

Kamla has mentored generations of feminists in Sri Lanka. She is one among the few across the ocean that maintained a sustained involvement here and with many sections of the Sri Lankan women's movements across region, language, ethnicity, class, and generations. To us, such teaching and consistent work over decades, beyond the hegemonic boundaries of the nation-states, is an inspiration.

In her last visit to Sri Lanka in 2019 she energized and gave her full support for the launching of a Sinhala language SANGAT course, which is to be coordinated by the Women's Education and Research Centre.

The Tamil and Sinhala language SANGAT feminist trainings and the One Billion Rising campaigns will continue her wonderful legacy and keep alive her dreams for a free, equal and just South Asia for all. She will live on in her songs that we will sing for as long as we can, translated into our languages, and with the passion and love that Kamla has left behind in all of us. Thank you Kamla. Rest in peace.

*-This article was originally featured on groundviews.org*

# SPORTS

## COUNTER PUNCH

By The Line Judge

# Filipino boxing legend Manny Pacquiao's legacy difficult to emulate

**Filipino** boxing legend Manny Pacquiao made the hardest decision in his life when he officially announced his retirement from the ring. It took a long time coming for boxing's only eight-division world champion whose career meandered along like a journeyman not befitting an icon after his epic 'Fight of the Century' against Floyd Mayweather Jr. in 2015. It must have been tougher than his loss to the unbeaten American Mayweather in Las Vegas.

From time immemorial, sports stars in general and boxers in particular have been in a quandary when to call it quits. Boxing is littered with great athletes who take one fight too many.

Former three-time heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali 'retired' after he avenged his previous defeat to Leon Spinks in 1978. Ali was lured out of retirement by an \$8 million offer to fight against his former sparring partner Larry Holmes two years later. Showing early signs of Parkinson's disease, Ali suffered a 10-round humiliation but still refused to retire and suffered a loss to Trevor Berbick in 1981.

Another former champion Mike Tyson also didn't know when to call it quits, being embarrassed in three of his last four fights to end his career on a low.

Roy Jones Jr. also should have retired for good when he won a heavyweight world title having begun his career as a junior middleweight. But after his historic 2003 decision win over John Ruiz, he lost eight times in 15

years and his record, and legacy, took a hit. Pacquiao's nemesis Mayweather, boxing's first billion-dollar fighter, made coming out of retirement a business. The 41-year-old retired for the first time in 2007 after he demolished British fighter Ricky Hatton in the 10th round. But he only stayed retired for two years as he returned to boxing for a scrap against Juan Manuel Marquez.

'Money' Mayweather won five world championship titles in two weight classes during his comeback and earned over \$600 million in just 10 fights — more than he had in his previous 39 bouts.

After he outclassed Andre Berto, a bout that earned him \$32 million, it appeared he would retire for good. He gave an emotional speech to his father and head coach, Floyd Mayweather Sr., before fighting the final round of his life. He did call the curtain on an illustrious career at 49-0 in 2015.

But it was not to be. A fighter who had beaten greats such as Shane Mosley, Miguel Cotto, Saul 'Canelo' Alvarez and Pacquiao laboured to a 10th round stoppage victory over Conor McGregor, the mixed martial artiste who had concussed many an opponent in the UFC. He pocketed \$275 million but came out poor in the eyes of the public with McGregor, a boxing novice landing 111 punches, more than any other opponent had landed on Mayweather before.

Mayweather eventually hung up his gloves at 50-0 retiring for the third time in 2017. It

remains to be seen whether Pacquiao would hang up his gloves for good.

"It is difficult for me to accept that my time as a boxer is over," Pacquiao said in a video posted on his Facebook page.

"Today, I am announcing my retirement. I never thought that this day would come. As I hang up my boxing gloves, I would like to thank the whole world, especially the Filipino people, for supporting Manny Pacquiao," said the 42-year-old.

Pacquiao won a flyweight world championship in 1998, finishing his 26-year, 72-fight career with 62 wins, eight losses and two draws. Of those 62 wins, 39 were by knockout and 23 by decision. He won 12 world titles and is the only fighter in history to win titles in eight different weight classes. He also held titles in four different decades ('90s, '00s, '10s and '20s).

"Thank you for changing my life. When my family was desperate, you gave us hope, you gave me the chance to fight my way out of poverty," Pacquiao said in the video. "Because of you, I was able to inspire people all over the world. Because of you I have been given the courage to change more lives." His retirement from boxing followed a chastening

defeat to Yordenis Ugas in Paradise, Nevada, on August 21. The younger Cuban boxer beat Pacquiao by unanimous decision, retaining his WBA welterweight title. It was Pacquiao's first fight in more than two years.

Pacquiao's long-time coach Freddie Roach who first met the Filipino as a scrawny super bantamweight in 2001, feared that his boxing days were numbered.

"I'm a little bit worried about it, yes," he told Boxing Scene. "I hate to see that day when he retires, but this could be it."

Pacquiao had hinted at retirement because he is setting his sights on a bigger political battlefield. Earlier this month, he accepted his political party's nomination and declared he will run for Philippines president in elections next May.

Pacquiao's rags-to-riches life story and legendary career brought honour to his Southeast Asian nation, where he is known by the monikers Pacman, People's Champ and National Fist.

He left his impoverished home in the southern Philippines as a teenager and stowed away on a ship bound for Manila. He made his professional boxing debut as a junior flyweight in 1995 at the age of 16, fighting his way

out of abject poverty to become one of the world's highest-paid athletes.

Eddie Banaag, a 79-year-old retiree, said Pacquiao was his idol as a boxer and he watched almost all of his fights. But he believes the boxing icon should have retired earlier.

"He should have done that right after his victory over (Keith) Thurman," Banaag said of Pacquiao's win over Thurman on July 20, 2019, in Las Vegas, Pacquiao's second-to-last fight. "It would have been better if he ended his boxing career with a win rather than a loss." However, Pacquiao believes he will always be remembered as a winner.

"I will never forget what I have done and accomplished in my life," Pacquiao said Wednesday (Sept 29). "I just heard the final bell. The boxing is over."

"Congratulations to Manny Pacquiao on a well-earned retirement," Timothy Bradley Jr, who went 1-2 in a trilogy with Pacquiao, told ESPN. "Thank you for being an inspiration to many in and out of the sport. Enjoy the next chapter of your life alongside your family."

Pacquiao should stay retired and rest assured that this will be a difficult act to emulate.

-ENCL

## KEEPING THINGS REAL AND CREDIBLE..!

Turning Points 2021

# Out NOW!



USD \$5  
LKR 500/-

GET YOUR COPY DELIVERED TO YOUR DOORSTEP

CALL : 077 7751021

A Year of Radical Political Imagination - By Nadya Tolokonnikova

A Chance to Repair the Cracks in our Democracy - By Joseph E. Stiglitz

Agents of mass distraction - By Sanjana Hattotuwa

Automation, Brexit: What Were We Thinking?! - By Russell Brand

I was the last one left - By Johnny FD

Why My Father Flew Seoul's Lockdown - By Hye-young Pyun

Give the AI Economy a Human Touch - Kai-Fu Lee

How Can a Dress Be Cheaper Than a Sandwich? - By Imran Amed

Geneva and the way forward - By Hilmy Ahamed

The Gotabaya Rajapaksa Presidency - By Dr. Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu

And many more, insightful, interesting and thought provoking articles from New York Times and Weekend Express

For details call:

## 011 7322789 | 077 7751021 | 011 7322743

By Catarina Demony

## Afghan girls' soccer squad find new home in

### Ronaldo's Portugal

**LISBON** - Leaving her homeland Afghanistan was painful, says 15-year-old Sarah. But now safely in Portugal, she hopes to pursue her dream of playing soccer professionally - and perhaps meeting her idol, star striker Cristiano Ronaldo.

Sarah was one of several players from Afghanistan's national female youth soccer squad who fled their country in fear after the Taliban hardline Islamist movement seized power in August. Portugal has granted asylum to the young footballers. "I'm free," she said, smiling from ear-to-ear as she visited Lisbon's landmark Belem Tower on the River Tagus with her mother and teammates. "My dream is to be a good player like Ronaldo - and I want to be a big business woman here in Portugal," she said.

She hoped to go back home one day but only if she can live freely. Her mother, who requested that Reuters did not use their surname, had experienced first-hand a previous era of Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001. She is less optimistic they will ever be able to return. Taliban leaders have promised to respect women's rights but under their first government, women could not work and girls were banned from school. Women had to cover their faces and be accompanied by a male relative when they left home.

A senior Taliban official said after the Aug. 15 takeover that women would probably not be allowed to play sport because it was "not necessary" and their bodies might be exposed. "The reason we took on this mission (to evacuate the team) was to ensure they can aspire and play the sport they love," said Farkhunda Muhtaj, captain of the Afghanistan women's senior national team, who flew to Lisbon on Wednesday to surprise the youth team players.

From her home in Canada, where she works as assistant soccer coach

at a local university, Muhtaj has been in touch with the girls throughout the evacuation process, codenamed Operation Soccer Balls. It managed to rescue a total of 80 people - the female youth team and family members, including babies.

They landed in Portugal on Sept. 19. When Muhtaj showed up on Wednesday (Sept 29) night, the girls were ecstatic. They hugged. Some could not hold back the tears.

"They been through so much, so many challenges," Muhtaj said. "They were just resilient and they were able to make it happen."

One relative, 25-year-old Zaki Rasa, recalled the chaos at the Kabul airport, where he spent three anguished days. He is now delighted to be in Portugal and wants to continue his studies. "There is some uncertainty about the future," he said. "The important thing is that we are safe."

-Reuters

By Matthew Futterman

## USA Bobsled and Skeleton is sued over brain injuries

**CALIFORNIA** - A former bobsledder filed a class-action suit against the sport's national governing body Wednesday (Sept 29), claiming the organization failed for decades to warn athletes about or protect them from brain injuries.

William Person, who competed for the United States from 1999 to 2007, filed the lawsuit in a state court in California against USA Bobsled and Skeleton, the organization that oversees those two sports in the United States. In the lawsuit, Person's lawyers argued that the bobsled organization knew as long ago as 1983 that the sport could cause serious brain injuries, which can lead to significant and irreversible medical conditions, but did not properly share the information with its athletes or adequately work to protect their health and safety.

Person and his lawyers asked the court to certify a class of plaintiffs who will seek compensation from USA Bobsled and Skeleton. They asked for that compensation to include a fund that will pay for intensive medical monitoring of former athletes as well as "the establishment of a Court-Supervised Compensation program for those individuals who have already been diagnosed, treated, and/or harmed (including death) by brain injury, including neurodegenerative and behavioural disorders and diseases."

A spokesman for USA Bobsled and Skeleton said Wednesday afternoon that officials had just received the complaint and were "looking into it."

In a statement released by his lawyer, Person said: "The number of sled athletes I trained and competed with that are currently dealing with brain injuries from our time bobsledding is incredible. Individuals who were tremendous competitors and athletes are living with depression, dementia, and some are taking their own lives."

Person is represented by Jason Luckasevic, a Pittsburgh lawyer who was involved with some of the initial litigation against the NFL in connection with its treatment of players later found to have chronic traumatic encephalopathy, also known as CTE. The degenerative brain disease is connected with both mild and severe traumatic brain injuries. The litigation ultimately led to a \$1 billion settlement with the league.

In March, Dr. Ann McKee, a leading neuropathologist and the director of Boston University's CTE Centre, found that Pavle Jovanovic, a former Olympic bobsledder who killed himself last year, had CTE. McKee has previously found the disease in the donated brains of scores of deceased football players.

Jovanovic hanged himself in his family's metal works shop in central New Jersey in May 2020 after years of suffering from substance abuse; symptoms associated with Parkinson's, such as uncontrollable shaking; and mood disorders. He was 43.

Later that year, The New York Times published a series of stories on former athletes in bobsled and skeleton who have struggled with similar symptoms. Jovanovic was the third

elite North American bobsledder to kill himself since 2013. In 2017, Steven Holcomb, who piloted the American bobsled known as the "Night Train" to the Olympic gold medal in 2010, was found dead in Lake Placid, New York, from an apparent overdose of alcohol and sleeping pills.

In recent years, an increasing number of current and retired athletes in sliding sports have said they suffer chronically from many of the same conditions that plague football players and other contact sport athletes. They deal with constant headaches, a heightened sensitivity to bright lights and loud noises, forgetfulness and psychological problems.

In a statement last year, Aron McGuire, chief executive of USA Bobsled and Skeleton, said the organization "takes athlete safety very seriously. We recognize that there are inherent risks in all sports. We emphasize education and prevention first when it comes to injuries, which includes brain injuries."

Officials said that the organization used the latest science, technology and protocols to monitor the health of its athletes and that it was trying to connect with former participants in the sport.

"We are actively working on expanding our alumni database and strengthening relationships with former athletes," McGuire said. "Our athletes matter to us well beyond their athletic careers. We want them to remain involved and to seek help if needed."

-New York Times