

South Asia Conflict Monitor

monthly newsletter on terrorism, violence and armed conflict



Anti-Shia Violence: Widening Sectarian Schism in Pakistan

Nihar R Nayak, April 19, 2021

Surprisingly the number of terrorist-related incidents in Pakistan has relatively gone down in recent months, but there is an increase in sectarian violence and atrocities on the minority population. The international community has expressed serious concern. Recently, the US State Department issued travel advisories to its citizens visiting Pakistan, citing terrorism, sectarian violence and COVID-19. It also asked its citizens not to travel specifically to Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces due to cases of terrorism-related incidents and kidnappings.

One would interpret that these advisories are routine exercise. However, it has some nuances given Pakistan's claim on control over internal armed conflicts and improvement in governance. The ground reality does not match its claims.

Media reports have indicated that the minorities have been subjected to various

forms of oppression in the country with the tacit support of the state. The Shia population is around 20 per cent of the total population of Pakistan. Sunnis are not only dominant but also the majority sect in Pakistan. A media report said four people, including two Shia Muslims, one Ahmadi sect member and a US citizen who renounced the Ahmadi sect, were gunned down in September 2020. In the same period, around 50 Shias were booked under a different section of the blasphemy law, which has been used as a tool to persecute the minorities.

Approximately 4,847 Shias were killed in sectarian violence between 2001 and 2018. Even in the late 1990s, many Shia intellectuals faced targeted killings in Karachi. Interestingly, the Barelvis, who are known to have greater sympathy for the Shias, also seem to have turned against them now. Although the ideological shift had started to become visible in early 2010, the

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[March 2021]

Barelvi Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), now joining the Deobandis against the Shias, is a more dramatic incident.

The gravity of the situation is indicated by the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Religious Affairs, Maulana Tahir Mehmood Ashrafi. Addressing a press conference at Muttahida Ulema Board (MUB) office in Lahore on February 15, 2021. He termed terrorism, extremism, sectarian violence and killings of innocent people anti-Islam. Ashraf's statement came while the number of sectarian violence has gone up across the country. Even Fawad Chaudhry, currently serving as the minister for science and technology in Imran Khan's government, conceded that sectarianism was an issue that was getting "out of hand". For example, the MUB has ruled in over 140 cases that the blasphemy laws were not misused in the last two years. The killing of 11 miners belonging to the Hazara community in Balochistan is another example of oppression against the minorities in Pakistan. Moreover, the unsavoury practice of takfir — declaring others non-Muslim (Shias and Ahmadis) — has witnessed explosive growth. Attack on Hindu temples and forced marriage of Hindu girls are common.

The origin of the sectarian resurgence started in 2017 when the Pakistani government began making concessions to the extremist Sunni Muslim groups. In 2017, TLP forced a law minister to quit over a perceived softening in the blasphemy laws.

The most organised and virulent anti-Shia Muslim campaign reappeared in September 2020 on social media by demanding that Shia Muslims be declared heretics. The hashtag "infidel, infidel, Shias are infidel" began trending. Then, in mid-September, some 30,000 people, organised by Sunni Muslim extremist groups, gathered in Karachi over two days to call Shia Muslims "unbelievers"

and "blasphemers" and called for their beheading. Later, similar reactions were expressed in other cities, including the capital Islamabad. Many people were seen chanting "Shias are Kaffir" (disbelievers) and holding banners of Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, a terrorist organisation linked to the killing of Shias over the years.

It is learnt that these anti-Shia campaigns were led by two hardline Sunni Muslim groups, Ahl-e-Sunnat-Wal-Jamaat (ASWJ) and Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). ASWJ was previously banned in Pakistan under the Anti-Terrorism Act, but the ban was lifted in 2018. However, globally, it is still considered a terrorist organisation. Despite that, in the 2018 elections, the ASWJ threw its influential backing behind 70 candidates from Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. The ASWJ and TLP were also allowed to run in the election, winning seats in parliament.

Moreover, even with their well-documented extremist positions over the past couple of years, TLP and ASWJ have been allowed to assemble, make public anti-Shia speeches, carry out rallies, run for political office and mobilise against the Shia community, ensuring their power and influence in Pakistan go from strength to strength.

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Picture: Karachi, July 2009, Reuters/HRW/Artistic representation]

Bangladesh: Free Speech, Extremism and Rule of Law

The freedom of speech, expression and civil rights in Bangladesh, especially for the Hindu, Christian or Buddhist minorities, were under severe stress between 2013-2015. Several secular, progressive and liberal scholars, writers, and bloggers died in the hands of Islamist extremists affiliated with Al Qaeda linked Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), which later morphed into Ansar-al Islam (AaI), Bangladesh.



After six years, it seems the rule of law has reign supreme in Bangladesh. On February 16, 2021, a special court in Dhaka sentenced five members of Ansar-al Islam to death and another person to life sentence for the brutal murder of secularist, science writer and popular blogger Avijit Roy in February 2015. The court observed that Avijit Roy laid down his life for the freedom of expression, and the murder aimed to throttle that. This was the second verdict by the court against Islamist zealots. On February 11 this year, the court had awarded a death sentence to the killers of Faisal Arefin Dipon, who was the founder publisher of Jagriti Prokashoni, which published books by Avijit Roy.

Although intolerance towards liberal thinkers and minorities has been continuing for decades, targeted incidents intensified from 2013 onwards with the emergence of a new breed of extremist groups such as ABT. The ABT was among the first extremist group in Bangladesh which exploited social media tools like Twitter and Facebook to spread its violent agenda. The ABT group was banned in 2015, but later it reappeared in Bangladesh as Ansar al Islam (AaI) and openly claimed its affiliation with Al Qaeda's South Asian branch. In March 2017, the government banned AaI and its affiliated groups. It was the seventh extremist organisation whose activities have been banned in Bangladesh.

According to Bangladesh security agency sources, the group has three vital wings: 'Dawa (preaching and proselytization), Asqari (armed wing), and Media and communications wing. Other important sub-sections are called 'Mashul', which plans and conducts attacks while the members executing the plan of attack are kept under the 'Manur' department. (Dhaka Tribune, April 8, 2017)

Interestingly, while the liberals celebrated the verdict, another radical outfit called Hefazat-e-Islam (HeI) demanded the release of all Ansar convicts involved in the killings of Avijit Roy and other bloggers. In a press release on February 19, 2021, the HeI demanded revocation of the death sentence by terming them as lovers of the Prophet. In October 2020, the HeI had carried out street protests against the French President's 'Islam in crisis' statement in the wake of the

beheading of a school teacher in Paris. The outfit also forced the Awami League government in 2013 to take action against some secular activists. Some media reports pointed out that the HeI had played a crucial role in suppressing liberal views and secular activists. Other radical groups only followed the HeI footsteps.

Therefore, even if the government takes action against Ansar al Islam or other radical groups, Bangladesh will continue to be challenged by the radical Islamist groups in one form or another. With intact external linkages and internal support networks, the state can only manage to contain them. Complete elimination could be impossible.

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Brief-2:

Myanmar coup: Implications in north-eastern region of India



More than 500 people, mostly civilians, have been killed and many protesters injured during the anti-coup protests that started in Myanmar on February 1, 2021. A large number of civilians and paramilitary personnel have fled to neighbouring countries, including India. On March 9, over seven dozen police and fire services personnel crossed over from Myanmar seeking shelter in Mizoram. The international community has expressed concern over the violation of human rights and the collapse of democracy in Myanmar. Some countries like the US and Britain have already imposed targeted sanctions against the government in the hope of pressurising the

generals to change course to end state violence against demonstrators.

Implication

Four Indian provinces share borders with Myanmar and also have close cultural and economic ties across the borders. Ever since the anti-coup protest begun, thousands of Myanmar civilians and some police personnel have crossed over to the Indian State of Manipur.

Similarly, around 1000 refugees from Myanmar have entered Mizoram. Earlier, both Manipur and Mizoram governments had extended support to the refugees coming from Myanmar. On March 9, in an interview with local media, Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh said that the “state is prepared to welcome any civilian who may cross over from Myanmar due to military atrocities. So all people, whoever comes, we will give shelter, we will serve them, we will protect them.” Similar support was expressed by the Mizoram Chief Minister, who said that it was the duty of his government to provide food and shelter to the Myanmarese, who fled their country to

take refuge in the state on humanitarian grounds.

Other than political reactions, the civil society groups, local people and some Members of Parliament in Mizoram and Manipur too have expressed sympathy towards the Myanmarese refugees and criticised New Delhi for its passive response. As per media reports, the protests in Aizawl was organised by Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP), an influential students' group in Mizoram. On March 20, MZP, along with other civil society groups, organised charity concerts. People donated more than 500,000 Indian rupees (\$6,900), according to an MZP office-bearer, to help those Myanmarese security officials and nationals who fled the coup. The NGO called Young Mizo Association (YMA), an influential community organisation, went on a house-to-house donation campaign to request food and shelter for the refugees. In February, several civil society organisations from Manipur also called upon the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) to take immediate action to protect the protestors.

The statements from bordering provinces have been a matter of concern for New Delhi because, as per the Indian Constitution and federal list(s)/laws, provincial government (s) do not have the right in foreign policy matters. As per the Constitution, foreign policy subject comes under the "union list". Moreover, the provincial governments have no power to grant "refugee" status to any foreigner as India is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention of 1951 and its 1967 Protocol.

The Union Home Ministry advised four north-eastern states (Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh) on March 13 to take appropriate measures against the influx of civilians and government officials from Myanmar. It urged them to take all precautions if they found anyone entering India or trying to sneak into the country.

Taking a U-turn, on March 26, the Manipur government instructed its five districts, such as Chandel, Tengnoupal, Kamjong, Ukhrul and Churachandpur, not to open camps to provide food and shelter to people fleeing the violence and "politely turn away" those coming from Myanmar. The government has also asked the NGOs not to take any such steps to help refugees. As a preventive measure, the government has further ordered to stop issuing AADHAR enrolments in these districts. However, the government has given instructions to the local authorities to provide medical attention to the people seeking refuge in case of serious injuries.

The Manipur government instructions came just a day before the celebration of the Tatmadaw Day military parade that India attended along with the other seven countries in Myanmar. There could be three primary factors for India's participation in the Military Day event. First, India does not want to displease the Junta, which had played a crucial role in dismantling North-East based terrorist camps in Myanmar. Second, India's critical voice might force Junta to tilt towards China. Third, since Myanmar is the link point between the South Asian and the East Asian countries, India's policy would be to engage with the Junta to push for its 'look east policy.'

Meanwhile, the Myanmar civil conflict will spread to some newer areas after Tatmadaw's (military) attacks on some ethnic armed groups, who are willing to extend support to the anti-coup protesters. There could be some retaliatory measures from the ethnic army side in the near future. In that case, more refugees will try to push into the Indian side from the bordering states of Manipur and Mizoram.

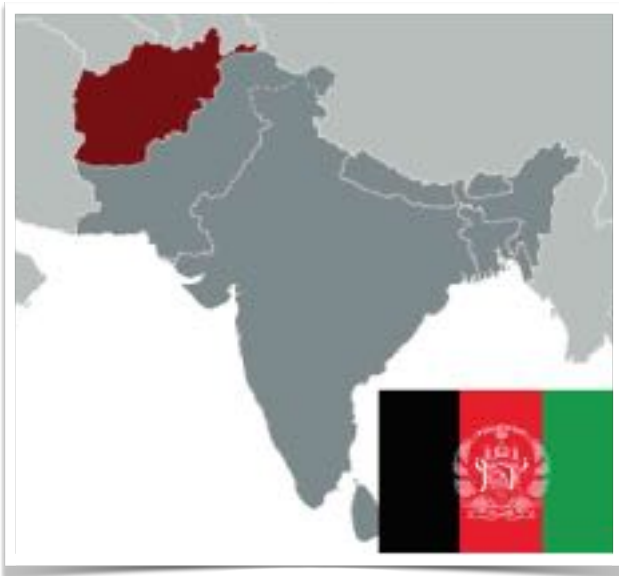
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COUNTRY BRIEFS AND NEWS ROUNDUP: MARCH 2021



AFGHANISTAN

MAJOR EVENTS:



March 02: Islamic State claimed deaths of three female journalists working for privately owned Enikas TV in Jalalabad, the capital of Afghanistan's Nangarhar province. IS statement said: "Soldiers of the caliphate shot dead three female journalists who worked for a media station aligned with the apostate Afghan government in District 4 of Jalalabad city." ([Gandhara](#))

March 08: Around 50 Taliban militants were killed and 14 others were wounded during counter insurgency operations by the Afghan security forces in different provinces across Afghanistan. The Afghan security forces conducted operations

against Taliban in Arghandab, Panjwae, Herat, Logar, and Zherai districts of southern Kandahar provinces. ([Afghanistan Times](#))

March 14: Islamic State group's Khorasan (IS-KP) branch issued warning to civilians against aiding government anti-terrorism efforts or working for government institutions and media outlets. The two-page letter in Pashto was released on the messaging app Telegram. The statement also invited Afghan people to join its ranks. (Telegram)

March 17: Russia, China, the US and Pakistan would not support return of Islamic Emirate system in Afghanistan in accordance of the UNSC resolution 2513 (2020). A statement also recognized the will of the Afghan people for peace, called for a reduction in violence from all sides and for the Taliban to not launch a 'Spring offensive', and reiterated calls for a negotiated settlement for the conflict. ([Afghanistan Times](#))

March 17: Afghanistan Ministry of defence sources said at least 63 Taliban insurgents have been killed and 21 others were wounded during anti-Taliban operations carried out by the Afghan security forces in the different provinces-Kandahar, Balkh, and Helmand-of Afghanistan since March 16. A total eight motorbikes, 36 IEDs, an unspecified amount of weapons, and ammunition were destroyed during the operations. ([Afghanistan Times](#))

March 22: The Taliban confirmed to have shared a three month (90-day) reduction in violence (RIV) plan with the US. Taliban spokesman

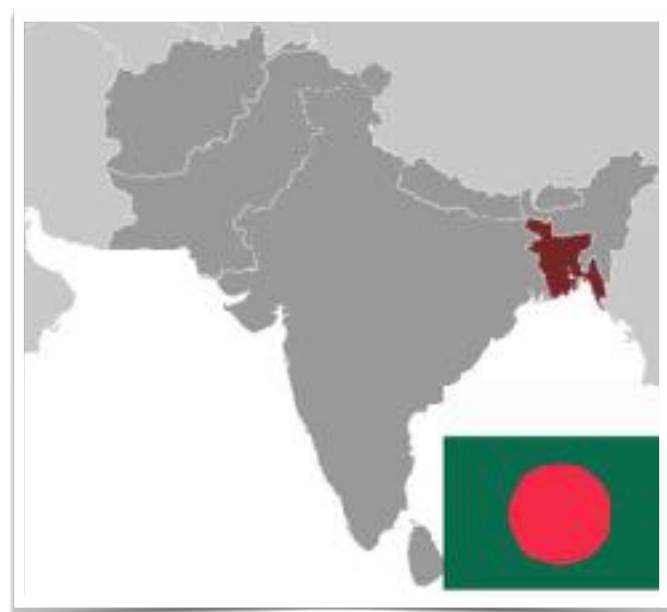
Mohammad Naeem told that the reduction in violence does not mean they are agreeing for a ceasefire yet, saying: "We proposed a draft in December, which involved all operations being reduced, but so far a final agreement has not been reached." This comes after US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin during an unannounced visit to Kabul - called for the violence to come down in Afghanistan. ([Tolo News](#))



March 31: The head of Takhar province's Ullema Council Mawlawi Abdul Samad Mohammadi died in a blast in Taluqan city. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has condemned the attack as well as another blast that targeted civilians in Balkh province. ([Tolo News](#))

BANGLADESH

MAJOR EVENTS:



March 06: According to sources in the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC), the banned Ansar- al Islam is secretly regrouping. The group is engaged in making recruitments through online platforms, including Facebook, targeting the impoverished people, even non- Muslim and transgender people, who would not ever come under suspicion of joining militancy. Aal's organisation capacity remain strong in Dhaka and Chittagong. ([Daily Star](#))

March 17: Police arrested two Neo-Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (Neo-JMB) militants identified as Shahidul and Emdad Ali with firearms from

Bharania village of Thakurgaon District. ([Dhaka Tribune](#))

March 23: A Dhaka court sentenced 14 Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI) militants to death who had attempted to assassinate Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina by planting a 76 kilogram powerful bomb at an election rally in Gopalganj's Kotalipara in July 2000. ([Daily Star](#))



হেফাজত ইসলাম
বাংলাদেশ

March 28: At least 10 people died and several injured during a series of anti-India protests organised by Islamist groups led by the Hefazate-Islam (HeI). The protest movements happened during Indian Prime Minister's two-day official visit to Dhaka to participate in Golden Jubilee celebrations of Bangladesh's independence. The HeI led protestors had attacked Hindu minorities, temples, and had damaged public property. ([Daily Star](#))

INDIA

MAJOR EVENTS:



March 04: Three security personnel of the 'Jharkhand Jaguar' of state police died and couple of others injured in an improvised explosive device blast in the forest area of Hoyahatu village in West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. The IED was planted by the Communist Party of India (Maoist), a left wing extremist group, which wants to bring political and social changes in India by an armed struggle. ([Times Now News](#))

March 05: A special National Investigation Agency (NIA) court in Delhi sentenced an Islamic State militant Imran Khan Pathan to seven years of

rigorous imprisonment. He was sentenced for conspiring to establish the IS organisation in India by radicalising and recruiting youths through social media platforms. He was in direct touch with senior IS militants Yusuf-Al- Hindi and Mudabbir Mushtaq Sheikh who were instrumental in the formation of IS linked Junood-ul-Khilafa-Hind in India. ([ANI News](#))

March 15: The NIA arrested three people, identified as Mushab Anuvar, Rahees Rashid and Mohammed Ameen after searches at eight locations in Kerala spread over the districts of Kannur, Mallapuram, Kollam and Kasargod. Sources said that the group has been running various Islamic State propaganda channels on different social media platforms such as Telegram, Hoop and Instagram for propagating violent Jihadi ideology of the ISIS and radicalising/recruiting new members. ([Hindu](#))

March 16: Security forces killed at least four Maoists in an encounter in forests in Chakarbandha Hill of Gaya district in Bihar. Three AK-47 assault rifles and an INSAS rifle have been recovered from the encounter site. ([Hindustan Times](#))

March 18: Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), Director General (DG), Kuldip Singh, informed that 226 terrorists were killed during operations in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) since

2020, while 296 were apprehended so far. “In J&K where the force works in close coordination with the state police and the Indian Army, 215 terrorists were neutralised in 2020 and 11 terrorists were killed this year,” he further added. ([Tribune India](#))



March 24: Five personnel of the District Reserve Guard (DRG) were killed and several injured in an IED blast by CPI (Maoist) in the Narayanpur district in Chhattisgarh. The attack happened while a bus carrying more than 20 DRG personnel crossing a culvert. ([Indian Express](#))

March 17: Voice of Hind (Sawt al-Hind), issue No. 14, a monthly English-language magazine published by a pro-Islamic State group (IS) in India called on jihadists to carry out attacks against specific targets in India, and not restrict

their activity to social media alone. In the cover article titled “The Irhabis [terrorists] who infuriated the pagans” the outlet called for individual or coordinated attacks on highways and railways across India, saying the vast transport network has many soft targets, potential for hit and run ambushes or attacks. Also, urged for attacks targeting pilgrimage trains, non-believers or luxury trains.

NEPAL

MAJOR EVENTS:



March 04: The Nepal government and the Netra Bikram Chand-led Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) signed a three-point agreement. As per the agreement all the CPN political issues would be addressed through dialogue, the CPN would carry out all its political activities in a peaceful manner and the Nepal government would lift a ban it had imposed on the CPN. The agreement also talked about releasing of CPN cadres from jail and withdrawing court cases against them. ([Kathmandu Post](#))

March 14: According to media reports at least eight persons were injured when a pressure cooker bomb exploded inside a government office at Lahan in Siraha district. The police said that they have recovered pamphlets published by the Janatantrik Tarai Mukti Morcha (JTMM) (Revolutionary), an illegal armed outfit led by Jaya Krishna Goit, from the blast site. The JTMM is an illegal armed group agitating for greater political and economic rights for the people of the Terai plains bordering India. ([Hindustan Times](#))

March 15: Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has started using its Nepal-based modules to send terror money to Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Officials associated with India’s security said the ISI is believed to have activated its modules particularly active along Indo-Nepal borders in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar as they have been asked to “use their Indian contacts” to send money to terror operatives in J&K. ([Tribune](#))

PAKISTAN

MAJOR EVENTS



March 07: Two police personnel were killed in separate attacks in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Security forces suspect that these killings might be done by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is trying to reorganise operations in Pakistan. ([Dawn](#))

March 08: Five Balochistan Liberation Army militants were killed in Splinji area of Mastung district in Balochistan. The counter terrorism department have recovered explosives, detonators, grenades, three Kalashnikov rifles, 100 live rounds, one remote control device and 13 battery cells from the incident site. ([Outlook India](#))

March 13: The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), threatened organisers of Aurat March (Women rally) who planned demonstrations to mark the International Women's Day in the country, accusing them of blasphemy and obscenity. The TTP statement said "We want to send a message to those organisations who are actively spreading obscenity and vulgarity in our beloved Pakistan [...] Fix your ways, there are still many young Muslims here who know how to protect Islam and the boundaries set by Allah." ([Express Tribune](#))



March 19: Islamic State group (IS) has released a video titled 'M'akers of epic battles' in the name of its Pakistan (Bakistan) Province. Just over 9 minute video threatened the country's Shia Muslims with more violence following a

deadly attack in early January when IS Pakistan militant claimed the killings of 11 Hazara miners in Pakistan's southwestern Balochistan province. IS has declared its so-called Pakistan Province in May 2019. (Telegram)

SRI LANKA

MAJOR EVENTS

March 10: Sri Lanka's Minister of Public Security Sarath Weerasekera told the parliament that the government had identified 11 extremist organisations which would be banned. "This attack (Easter Sunday, April 2019) has been influenced by extremism built up on Wahabism. We will ban 'Wahab' Institutions that promote 'al-wala wal bara' ideology that encourages hatred against non-Muslims," the minister said. He also said that steps were being taken to ban the burqa in the



interests of national security. The minister made these remarks when participating in the debate on the PCoI report on the 2019 Easter bombings. ([Morning Lanka](#))

March 11: Government of Sri Lanka along with the government of Australia have taken steps to launch a joint investigation into an Australian professor of Sri Lankan origin, Lukman Thalib. Thalib had reportedly helped Zahran Hashim to bring terrorists from the Maldives to Sri Lanka for training purpose. According to media reports, four terrorists from the Maldives had come to Sri Lanka four times and had trained with Hashim in Kandy under the directives of Thalib and his son. ([Cylon Today](#))

March 12: President Gotabaya Rajapaksa issued an Extraordinary Gazette Notification making provisions for the rehabilitation of persons arrested on the charges of extremist activities, in the country. The Gazette Notification says the Regulations may be cited as the Prevention of Terrorism (Deradicalization from holding violent extremist religious ideology) Regulations No. 01 of 2021. ([Colombo Page](#))

March 12: The Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) arrested Rashid Hajjul Akbar, the former President of Jama'ath-e-Islami organisation from Dematagoda of Colombo city on charges of spreading Wahhabism in Sri Lanka. According to the investigation, the suspect had written various articles about Wahhabism in the magazine 'Alhasanath' published by the Jamaat-e-Islami organization. ([NewsFirst](#))

March 26: The Criminal Investigations Department (CID) arrested two Islamic Madrasa (school) teachers, Mohammad Jawfar Lukman Hakeem and Mohammad Nasiruddin Mohammad Waseer for allegedly giving weapons training to students at a madrasa in Puttalam. ([Colombo Page](#))

March 29: Sri Lankan police arrested two suspected for promoting the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Jaffna. They are arrested on charges of operating a website and a YouTube channel promoting the LTTE and related terrorism activities. ([Colombo Gazette](#))

March 29: Issuing a statement, the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka wanted Islamic preachers, who promote religious extremism, to be banished from Sri Lanka. The Church further urged all citizens of the country to pressure those in power to act on this urgently and to mete out justice to all the victims of the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks. ([Colombo Gazette](#))



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

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

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

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