

CGS PEACE REPORT

an initiative of BPO

CGS
CENTRE FOR
GENOCIDE
STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF DHAKA



Volume 5, Issue 1
January-February 2021



**Crime and Violence
in Bangladesh:
An analysis from BPO**

**Protests in the
time of
coronavirus: the
global and the local**

**Protests related to the
COVID-19 Pandemic:
Regional & Global
Overview**

CGS PEACE REPORT
an initiative of
BPO- Bangladesh Peace Observatory



Volume 5, Issue 1
January- February 2021

BPO Advisory Board

Stop Violence Coalition
Bangladesh Police
National Defence College
ActionAid
Society for Environment and Human Development
The Daily Star
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Editor

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed

Editorial Board

Professor Amena Mohsin
Professor Delwar Hossain
Dr. Niloy Ranjan Biswas

Research Associates

Mr. Humaun Kabir
Mr. F. M. Arafat
Ms. Nadia Nur
Mr. Ashique Mahmud
Ms. Faizah Sultana
Ms. Sharin Fatema
Ms. Tasnuba Tazrin Shaon
Ms. Afnan Nur Bhuiyan
Ms. Hazera Khanam
Mr. Shah Mohammad Salahuddin
Ms. Tithy Mondal
Ms. Nasrin Jabin
Ms. Fatima Jurat
Ms. Mashiat Zafrin Heea
Ms. Sadia Afreen Proma
Mr. Arefin Mizan

Cover page photo courtesy: Mr. Rashed Sumon, *The Daily Star*

Disclaimer:

Unless otherwise stated, authors are responsible for the views expressed in their respective papers and interviews.

Contents:

From the Editor's Desk.....	1
Crime and Violence in Bangladesh: An Analysis from BPO	3
Violence Update: (January-February 2021)	3
Protests in the time of coronavirus: the global and the local	10
Protests related to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Regional & Global Overview	15
Annex	31

Figures:

1: Monthly segregation of Violent and Non-violent incidents.....	3
2: Top 15 districts in terms of number of clash.....	5
3: Motives of Fight Incidents	6
4: Comparison of the number of gunfights	7
5: Divisional segregation of the incidents and consequences in January-February 2021 ..	8

Tables:

1: Comparison of major violence types	4
2: Comparison of consequences in November-December 2020 and January-February 2021	4
3: Divisional segregation of incidents and consequences in terms of population: January-February 2021.....	9
4: A Comparison of global and local contexts of protests in time of Coronavirus ..	13

From the Editor's Desk

The right to protest against injustice is guaranteed in almost all religious texts. However, in some of the issues of injustice, it has taken the secular world centuries to have it legally codified, and that again, not always with universal success. May Day is a good instance of this. The protest at Haymarket Square in Chicago in May 1886 for an eight-hour workday came to be recognized only gradually. But even then, to date, only 52 countries have ratified the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention of 1919 that upholds the principle of the eight-hour working day. The non-compliance of many countries otherwise shows that legality alone will not guarantee the principle of work hours. This is not to discount the fact that the compliance countries also have failed to fully eliminate the practice of extended working hours, either because the state is too weak to enforce the principle or out of necessity to the state's economy. The only hope here is the annual return of May Day, also known as International Workers' Day, which is bound to energise the workers to take to the streets, if required, to enforce the principle in their respective countries.

Does war or pandemic make a difference to the right to protest? Absolutely not! But this is where non-violent protest needs to be distinguished from violent protest. Mahatma Gandhi made the best use of the right to non-violent protest when campaigning against British colonialism using a Gujrati word for it, *hartal* (work stoppage). Gandhi's non-violent policy, however, came from his conviction that the means (*upaya*) and end (*upaya*) must remain identical. If the goal is non-violent, then the means of getting it ought to be non-violent as well. Violent means can never bring lasting peace. True to his conviction, Gandhi stopped the anti-colonial agitation when it was at its peak because some non-violent protesters, after getting shot torched a police station and killed all of its occupants in Chauri Chaura in northern India in February 1922. Not all were impressed with Gandhi and questioned his policy of non-violence when humans come to face the brutality of colonialism, fascism, Nazism or genocide. Questioning Gandhi, however, does not rob the right of humans to protest *non-violently* against injustice. Even when injustice demands, violent protest can only make itself worth by remaining faithful to Nietzsche's words: "Beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself do not become a monster." History, of course, abounds with stories where humans have made a difference to life and living even when facing violence!

Covid-19 pandemic too saw protests of all kinds – from non-violent sit-ins to violent riots, looting and burning. Of course, not all were related to the coronavirus, ‘black lives matter,’ for instance. Still, the protest that took place around the world, including Bangladesh, during the Covid-19 pandemic unveiled that humans would stop at nothing, not even the fear of getting infected by the virus if injustices were meted to them, whatever the scale and depth of injustice may be. Maya Angelou certainly got it right when protesting against injustice:

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

11 May 2021

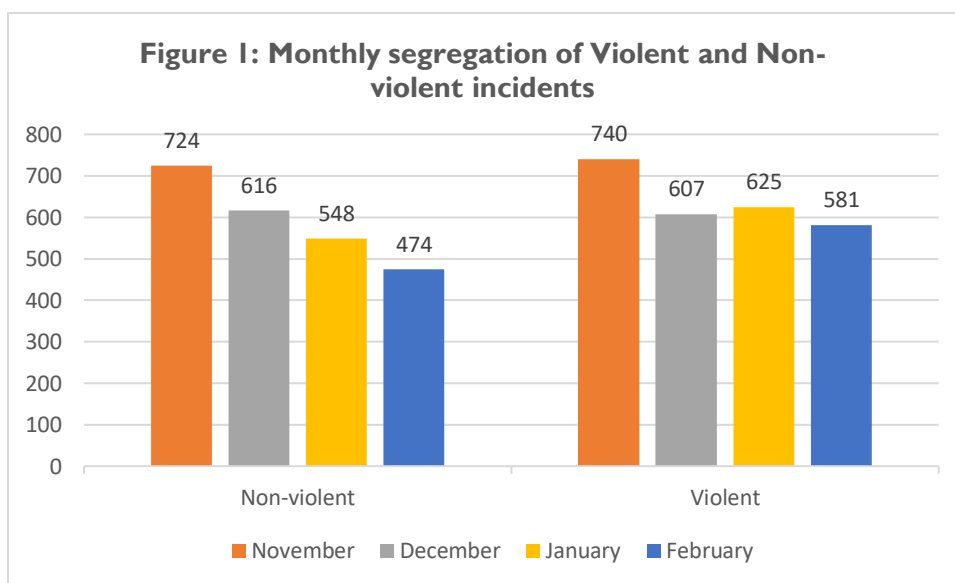
Imtiaz Ahmed
Professor of International Relations &
Director, Centre for Genocide Studies,
University of Dhaka

Crime and Violence Update in Bangladesh: An Analysis from BPO

Violence update (January-February 2021)

The Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO) brings together different streams of publicly available data on violence using news reports from prominent national and regional dailies. From January to February 2021, BPO has recorded a total of 1206 violent¹ and 1022 non-violent² incidents. Figure 1 shows the monthly segregation of

the violent and non-violent incidents of November-December 2020 and January-February 2021. Drawing a comparison between these two timelines, it is noticeable that non-violent incidents gradually decreased in recent time, whereas the violent incidents showed a slightly irregular trend.



According to BPO data, the overall number of incidents decreased by 17.1% in

January-February 2021 than the previous two months. Table 1 summarises the

¹ **Violent Incident:** According to BPO Codebook: The reported incident involved the intentional use of physical force by an individual or group against another individual or group, in a manner that resulted or could have resulted in death, injury or any other form of physical harm to persons or property.

² **Non-violent Incident:** According to BPO Codebook: The reported incident did not involve

the intentional use of physical force by an individual or group against another individual or group, in a manner that resulted or could have resulted in death, injury or any other form of physical harm to persons or property, e.g. Arrest, Peaceful Protest, Rescue and Recovery.

updates on major violence types that constitute most of the violent incidents. A brief description of each category is available in the Annex. The table depicts that incidents under some of the categories like Clash, Fight, Destruction of

property, and Gunfight have increased, and in other categories like Assault, Sexual Assault, Mob Violence and Gunfight have declined. Table 2 depicts the comparison of the consequences. The total number has declined for all the categories.

Table 1: Comparison of major violence types

Violence types	Nov'20	Dec'20	Jan'21	Feb'21
Assault	469	398	397	377
Sexual assault	164	91	102	86
Clash	56	44	60	52
Abduction/hostage	11	18	15	13
Fight	6	9	14	16
Destruction of property	4	11	12	6
Mob violence (large group assault)	5	5	4	3
Gunfight	1	5	4	4
Unclear	20	18	6	18
Other	3	7	6	3

Table 2: Comparison of consequences in November-December 2020 and January-February 2021

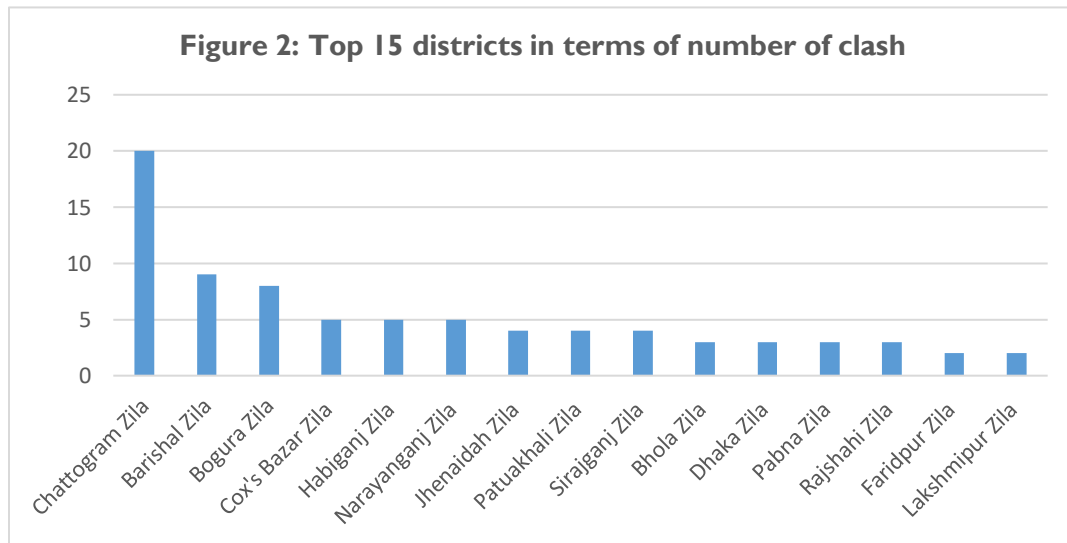
Consequences	Nov-Dec 2020	Jan-Feb 2021	Changes by Percentage
Total Killed	677	623	-7.98
Total injured	2687	2228	-17.08
Sexually Assaulted	276	210	-23.91
Abducted	59	50	-15.25
Arrested	4732	4146	-12.38

Understanding the high number of assaults

BPO enlists the inter-personal attacks carried out by different parties against one person/persons by other person/persons for various motives under the assault category. BPO recorded a total of 774 cases of assault in January-February 2021. The motives include domestic violence, dowry-related, land and other enmities related to economic factors, social-personal rivalry, attacks with criminal intent, suicide attempts, etc. Under the assault category, 145 cases of suicide and attempted suicide were reported, and in those cases, 147 people were killed, including 80 women. Besides, the recovery of unidentified dead bodies is also enlisted under this category.

Increasing number of clashes

The total number of clashes increased in January-February 2021 than November-December 2020. More clashes took place in January than in February (see Table I). In a total of 112 clashes reported in January-February 2021, 1432 people were injured, including 40 women. There are 16 reports of clashes injuring 25 people and over. The main motives of these clashes are election-related confronts, political tension between groups, social rivalry, control over land or natural resource, economic and business-related feuds, social and personal trivial matters, etc. Municipality elections in different phases were scheduled to be held on several dates in January and February^{3 4}, and there are 33 election-related clashes that



³ 'Second phase polls to 61 municipalities 16 Jan', The Prothom Alo, 2 December 2020, cited in- <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/politics/second-phase-polls-to-61-municipalities-16-jan>

⁴ '5th phase of municipality polls on Feb 28' The Dhaka Tribune, 19 January 2021, Cited in- <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2021/01/19/5th-phase-of-municipality-polls-on-feb-28>

reportedly took place in January-February 2021. Figure 2 shows the top 15 districts in terms of the number of clashes. Quite a few municipalities in these districts were expecting elections.

Slight upsurge in Destruction of Property

There are three more reported cases of destruction of property in January-February 2021 than November-December 2020. The motives of these incidents have changed significantly. There are nine reports of destruction of property related to the municipal election in January-February 2021, and in November-December 2020, there were only two incidents related to this motive.

Decrease in Sexual Assault

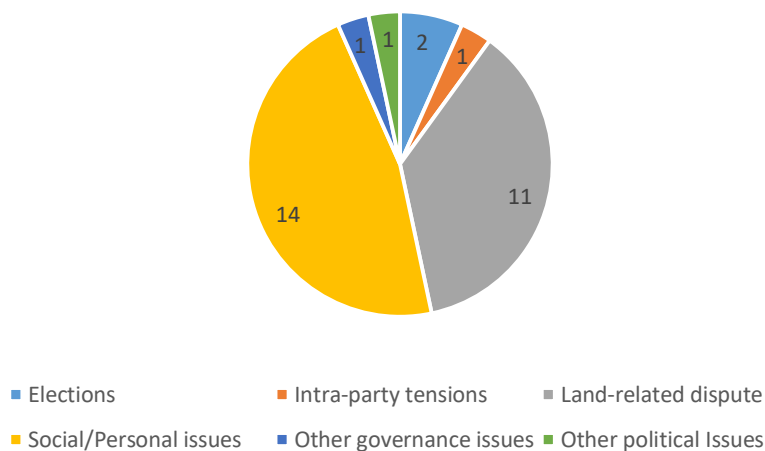
Incidents of sexual assault have decreased by 26.3% in January-February 2021. After

a jump in September-October 2021(521), the number of sexual assault declined by 51% in November-December 2020 and then it dropped again by 26.3% in January-February 2021. Out of 188 reported cases of sexual assaults, there were 21 gang rapes. The perpetrators of these offences were men of different ages, including a few minor boys, teasers, local miscreants, teachers, family members, relatives, etc. The majority of the victims are girls, and in six cases, boys were victims of sexual assaults.

Increase in Fight

The number of incidents of fights has doubled in January-February 2021 than November-December 2020. The major motives of these violent incidents are land-related disputes, social and personal feuds, etc. (see Figure 3).

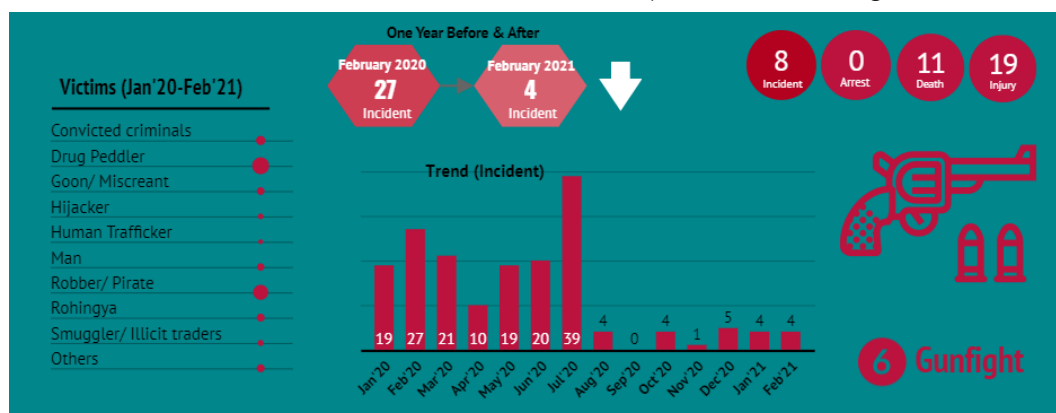
Figure 3: Motives of Fight Incidents



Low number of Gunfight persists

The number of gunfights went down since August 2020, and the number did not exceed one digit since then. The difference between the two seven-month timelines is clearly visible in figure 4 below. This analysis is taken from Peacegraphics,⁵ a monthly publication of BPO. In August, a retired Major of the Bangladesh Army was killed in a reported gunfight. This event might have influenced the sudden decline in Gunfight in August and onwards.

Figure 4: Comparison of the number of gunfights



graph illustrates that Chattogram, Dhaka, and Rajshahi are the first, second, and third respectively in terms of incidents and are second, first, and third respectively in terms of the death count. These three divisions are the most populous in Bangladesh.

But if the population ratio⁶ is applied to understand the incident prevalence and its consequences, then a different picture emerges. In that case, the Barishal division has the second-highest incident rate and death rate and the highest female death, injury rate and sexual assault rate. The Rajshahi division being the third in the

Violence-Population nexus

Figure 5 provides a spatial glimpse through the divisional distribution of the recorded incidents and their consequences. The

incident rate, has the same female death rate as the Barishal division. Having the highest death, injury, arrest number, and the second-highest incident number, Dhaka has lower rates than other divisions. (see Table 3).

⁵ Peacegraphics- a BPO e-Newsletter, 30 March 2021. Cited in- <http://peaceobservatory-cgs.org/#!/peace-highlights-info-gr-viewer> , Accessed on- 2 April 2021.

⁶ The population data is based on the Population & Housing Census 2011, Bangladesh by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. Cited in: <http://www.bbs.gov.bd/site/page/47856ad0-7e1c-4aab-bd78-892733bc06eb/Population-and-Housing-Census> , Accessed on 5 September 2020.

Figure 5: Divisional segregation of the incidents and consequences in January-February 2021

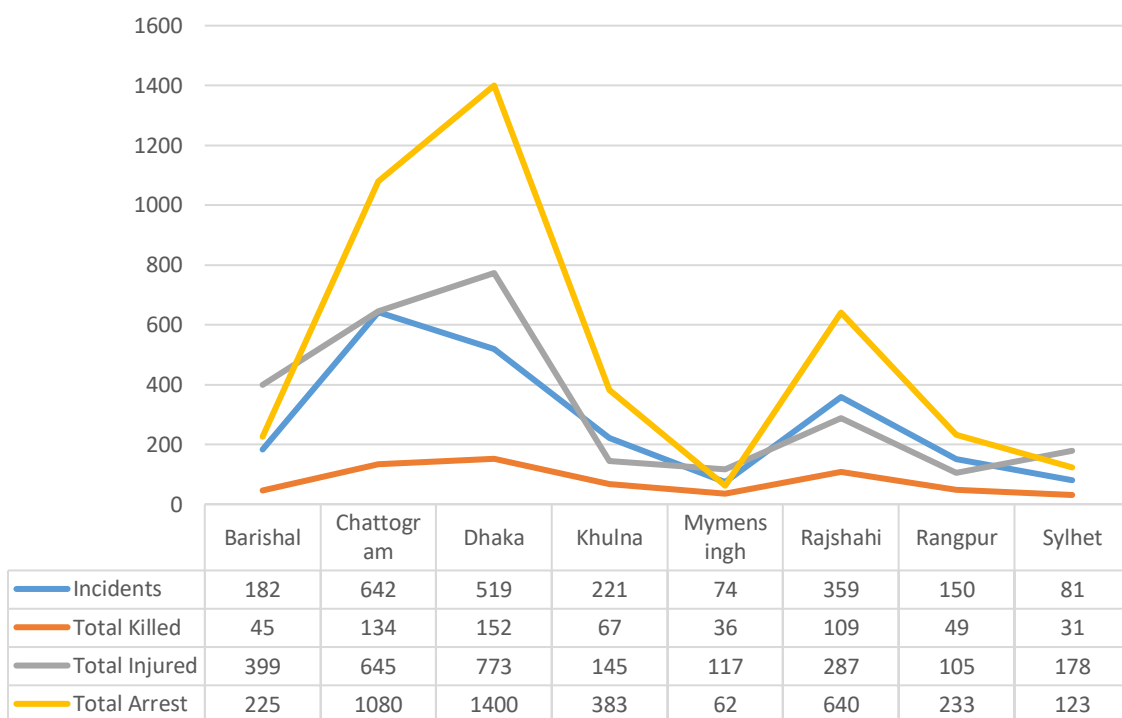


Table 3: Divisional segregation of incidents and consequences in terms of population: January-February 2021

Division	Incident	Rate by pop*	Death	Rate by pop*	Female Death	Rate by pop*	Injury	Rate by pop*	Sexual Assault	Rate by pop*
Barishal	182	2.19 (2 nd)	45	0.54 (2 nd)	20	0.24 (1 st)	399	4.79 (1 st)	21	0.25 (1 st)
Chattogram	642	2.20 (1 st)	134	0.46 (3 rd)	43	0.15 (2 nd)	645	2.21 (2 nd)	34	0.12
Dhaka	519	1.04	152	0.31	54	0.11	773	1.55	60	0.12
Khulna	221	1.41	67	0.43	18	0.11	145	0.92	24	0.15 (3 rd)
Mymensingh	74	0.65	36	0.32	10	0.09	117	1.03	13	0.11
Rajshahi	359	1.94 (3 rd)	109	0.59 (1 st)	44	0.24 (1 st)	287	1.55	30	0.16 (2 nd)
Rangpur	150	0.95	49	0.31	19	0.12 (3 rd)	105	0.67	15	0.10
Sylhet	81	0.83	31	0.32	9	0.09	178	1.82 (3 rd)	13	0.13

Protests in the time of coronavirus: the global and the local

Delwar Hossain*

The COVID-19 global pandemic has been raging the world as an unprecedented global public health crisis after the Spanish Flu of 1918-20. The COVID-19 has generated a new context of protests at two levels - global and local. As Coronavirus has transformed from an endemic in Wuhan, China, to a global pandemic in early 2020, protests of people on issues related to it became gradually global. A new spree of resistance, from refusal to comply with basic health rules to a food crisis, from crisis of health care facilities to vaccine availability, have marked public lives. The COVID-19 has overshadowed the causes and ramifications of other sources of protests such as politics, human rights, and cultural rights etc. In the United States in 1968, a person protested writing a letter to a member of the US Congress.⁷ Although the letter focused on civil and political rights in 1968, it remains relevant in the USA today. The protest in Brazil's Rio de Janeiro in 1904 was to oppose the mandatory introduction of vaccines to avoid pox; but in 2013 protest was held for completely different reasons - a political issue termed as Brazilian Spring.⁸ In general, the world has been witnessing

different forms of protests in the time of Coronavirus - opposing lockdown, health restrictions, lack of health facilities, and need for support and incentives.

What is protest? Conceptually, protest is linked with the dichotomy of freedom and domination in society.⁹ It has been closely linked with the practice of neoliberalism at national, regional or global levels over the past few decades. The shaping of globalisation in the post-cold war era has contributed to widespread discontentment in every society. There had been some consequential changes in society, like the expansion of commodification and the intensification of market forces that created a new context of protests in society. Meanings of protest are understood in several ways - dissent or objection; relatively extreme in the context; strongly felt; directed to some person or institution with power over one; and a sense of injustice. Protest could also be understood as a dichotomy of the subjective label versus objective phenomenon. As an imputed definition of action, the notion of protest competes with such alternative labels as 'crime' and 'riot' to define and explain certain

* Delwar Hossain, PhD is Professor of International Relations, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh.

⁷ Simon Hall, *American Patriotism, American Protest: Social Movements since the Sixties*, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, 2011, p. 3.

⁸ Lucas Melgaço and Jeffrey Monaghan, eds, *Social Movements, Digital Practices and Surveillance*, New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 3.

⁹ D. Miller, M. Rowlands, and C. Tilley, eds, *Domination and Resistance*, London: Routledge, 2005, pp. 14-18

collective acts, namely mass violence, looting, and disruption.¹⁰ Of course, there is a debate in such kind of understanding.

Protest is seen as a type of collective behaviour in which it can be planned or unplanned, articulate or inarticulate and episodic-like what is happening in Bangladesh and other parts of the world. Using the idea of the “movement” as the unit of reference, protest movements are contrasted with those of withdrawal, reform, and revolution.¹¹ Protest movements are set off from others by virtue of being “less permanent forms of collective action” and being “spontaneous, unplanned, and episodic”.¹² There are other traditions where protest is seen as nonviolent action or direct action. It is also perceived as collective action or contentious gathering. Other practices show protest as unorthodox, unconventional political behaviour, civil or political disobedience. Theories such as resource mobilisation, political process, crowd theory and grievance theory, and rational choice theory are also applied to understand micro and macro phenomena. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has a specific impact on protest in today’s world. Terming the current flows of information as Web 2.0, protest is seen widely as organised virtually.

Empirically, the present world has been witnessing a decline in the number of non-COVID-19 protests over the past year. One can see the rise of Covid-19 related protests, which have become a global phenomenon with wide diversity and contexts. In the 2010s, mass protests erupted in developed and developing countries alike. One estimate found that the incidents of mass protests increased by 12 per cent per year between 2009 and 2019, culminating in a significant number of demonstrations in 114 countries by 2019.¹³ Many of these protests were fuelled by, among other things – high and rising inequalities, insecure employment and lack of economic opportunities, inadequate public services and government corruption, as well as environmental degradation. During the first quarter of 2020, the number of mass protests declined drastically due to the COVID-19 crisis. In many countries, large-scale demonstrations and protests have become almost impossible. Data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, for example, show that protests in April 2020 were down 40 per cent from the same period in 2019.¹⁴

Coronavirus related protests had become a global phenomenon due to protests in the United States, Germany, and Spain in the backdrop of government restrictions on people's movement. From 2019 to

¹⁰ J. Lofland, *Protest: Studies of Collective Behavior and Social Movements*, New York: Routledge, 2017, pp. 1-10.

¹¹ Cited in Lofland, 2017, p. 5.

¹² Cited in Lofland, 2017, p. 5.

¹³ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Covid-19 and popular protests”, *Social*

Development Brief #11, May 2020, Available https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/05/SDB_11_Covid-19_and_popular_protests.pdf, Accessed on 25 August 2020.

¹⁴ <https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/>, Accessed on 28 August 2020.

2020 March, the number of global protests had drastically reduced.¹⁵ When the COVID-19 pandemic surfaced, leaders of the world's ten biggest democracies have seen their approval ratings climb by an average of nine.¹⁶ According to pollster Morning Consult, most strikingly, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson received a 25-point spike and US President Donald Trump a 5-point bump, despite criticism from experts. In the developing world, the divide between health and safety is not so clear-cut. In India, thousands of migrant labourers took to the streets to tell authorities they had not eaten for days. Two categories of protest are observable in the world scenario. One type of protest is against the government about anti-COVID-19 measures. The other is against inadequate economic and social steps by the governments to cope with the consequences caused by the Coronavirus.

In the Bangladesh context, there is a similarity with the global trend. In Bangladesh, the local context of protest during the pandemic period may be understood empirically based on data from Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO).¹⁷ Analysis of BPO data demonstrates several dimensions of protests –causes, regions, types, implications and actors. In a nutshell, BPO data of COVID-19 released in August 2020 had shown that from 26 April to 27 August 2020, there had been 279 incidents of protests. Division wise, Dhaka had the

highest number of protests, followed by Khulna and Rangpur. Although Chattogram and Rajshahi are bigger districts, the number of protests is lower. In May, the number of protests was much higher (109). It started to decrease in June 2020 and again increased in July by 88 in number. BPO also provided district-wise data about protests in Bangladesh. Dhaka (80) has the highest number of protests, followed by Gazipur (31), Narayanganj (22), Khulna (19) and Chattogram (11).

The causes of protests include a variety of issues. The highest number of protests is seen due to unpaid salaries and Eid bonuses. The second major cause was a demand for relief and government incentives that seemed very significant. From the distribution to the amount/quantity of its sufficiency, were the main causes of protests. The third reason that saw a higher number of protests was against the shutdown of garments factories. Readymade garments (RMG), as the largest sector of employment of low-income women, is critical for their livelihoods. It may be mentioned that global media have also widely covered the protests of RMG workers. Fourth, several protests relating to the payment of tuitions and the need for proper medical equipment were also seen. Fifth, notably, protests related to problems of health supplies were not that prominent. As a type or category, non-violent protests in numbers were

¹⁵ <https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/>, Accessed on 28 August 2020.

¹⁶ <https://qz.com/1828468/coronavirus-has-crippled-global-protest-movements/>, Accessed on 28 August 2020.

¹⁷ *Covid19graphics 18*, August 27, 2020, Bangladesh Peace Observatory, Centre for Genocide Studies, Dhaka University.

overwhelming as the number was 81%, and the rest were termed as violent protests.

As far as actors are concerned, protests were mostly organised by common masses termed as 'public' (51%), followed by garments workers (42%) and left-wing political activists (35%). Labourers (31%) and vehicle drivers (8%) also organised protests in support of their demands. The consequences of protests were observed in terms of fatalities or injuries and how they had harmed people. From January to August 2020, there were no fatalities. Several cases of arrests were seen, and the number of injuries was 345.

The analysis of protests in Bangladesh has indicated a number of factors. First, it has

brought about the regional distribution of protests where Dhaka, Khulna and Rangpur feature prominently. Second, as a time factor, the rising trend saw a peak from mid-April to May and continued in June. Third, in terms of the broad type of protests, they were mainly non-violent. Fourth, causes included labour rights (51%), demand for relief and government support (21%), medical supplies (14%), rent and tuition (5%), irregularities or corruption in relief distribution (4%), and bus price hike (3%). Fifth, the major actors involved in protests are the public (31%), garment workers (25%), left wing activists (21%), labourers (19%), and vehicle drivers (5%). Finally, the consequences are mainly observed in injuries of 387 people and arrests of 8 persons.

Table 4: A Comparison of global and local contexts of protests in time of Coronavirus

Issues	Global	Bangladesh/Local
Type	Both non-violent and violent	Mainly non-violent
Causes	Diverse, differences between developed and developing countries	Labour rights and relief supplies
Actors	Labours, social activists, political activists, youth	Workers, public, and youth
Forms	Both street and online	Mostly street based
Consequences	No fatalities	No fatalities

A comparison of protests between the global and local contexts can be drawn based on similarities and differences (Table 4). First, global level protests have been widely violent as they are largely linked with political conflicts. For example, political issues in Israel, South Korea, U.S.A., Brazil, India, Germany and South Korea also played important role in Coronavirus related protests. Particularly, in the U.S., the COVID-19 related protests have a strong link with the elections. Contrarily, protests in Bangladesh are less violent and mostly non-violent. Second, the causes behind protests at the global level are more diverse than those of Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, protests were mainly caused by labour rights issue and relief distribution. Third, regarding actors, in the global context, protests have been organised by a range of actors - labourers, social activists, political activists, and youth while in Bangladesh, it was primarily mobilised by the common masses, garments workers, and the youth. Fifth, about the forms of protest, Bangladesh experienced more street protests and less online; on the other hand, globally, protests are equally strong on the streets and online. Finally, there is a similarity in consequences of protests in terms of

fatalities. COVID-19 related protests have not caused any fatalities both locally and globally.

In conclusion, despite the differences in contexts and causes, both global and local forms of protests in the time of Coronavirus demonstrate some critical issues such as the linkage between the global and the local forms of protests; problems of governance; inadequate support and incentives by the governments; mistrust among people about public services; corruption and irregularities; crisis of public health system; and political issues. In this context, it is suggested that the public health system be strengthened, state-society relations be reimagined, local contexts and conditions be considered, and knowledge and database be strengthened. Finally, it is emphasised that concepts such as dominance, hegemony and resistance need to be localised for a better understanding of protests and responses at political and societal levels. Infra politics, as observed in the everyday struggle of people and individuals, needs to be articulated. Freedom and governance are critical ingredients in shaping protests in times of global disasters like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Protests related to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Regional & Global

Sadia Afreen Proma*

Arefin Mizan**

The COVID-19 pandemic, or the coronavirus pandemic, is an ongoing global pandemic caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus II. It has shaken up the entire world so fast that the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 20 January 2020, and later tagging it as a pandemic on 11 March 2020.¹⁸

As of 22 April 2021, more than 141 million cases have been confirmed worldwide, with 3.01 million deaths attributed to it, making it one of the deadliest pandemics in history.¹⁹ In Bangladesh, the total official cases up until now are 7.3 million.²⁰ In January 2021, two new high-risk strains of this virus originated in the UK and Africa,

were found in Bangladesh and 83 other countries. They are 70% more infectious than the previous one (the African variant being the more infectious between them).²¹

Initially, COVID-19 was compared to common flu with symptoms like headache, loss of smell and taste, nasal congestion and rhinorrhea, cough, muscle pain, sore throat, fever, diarrhoea, and breathing difficulties. But soon, it was evident that COVID-19 was much more fatal. Older people and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop severe illness.²² COVID-19 vaccine has become available to people after almost a year of

* Research Data Analyst, Bangladesh Peace Observatory, Centre for Genocide Studies.

** Research Data Analyst, Bangladesh Peace Observatory, Centre for Genocide Studies.

¹⁸ VERTIC.org. "Addendum to Fact Sheet 15 on National Implementation Measures for the International Health Regulations 2005 (IHR)", Published in MAY 2020. Cited in: https://extranet.who.int/sph/sites/default/files/document-library/document/FS15A_IHR_COVID19_EN_MAY_2020.pdf. Accessed in 11 April 2021.

¹⁹ Worldometers. Cited in: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>. Accessed on 22 April 2021.

²⁰ Worldometers. <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/bangladesh/>. Accessed on 22 April 2021.

²¹ "S Africa COVID variant more infectious than UK strain: Hancock", 4 January 2021. Cited in: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/4/s-africa-covid-variant-more-infectious-than-uk-strain-minister>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

²² World Health Organization. Coronavirus Overview. Cited in: https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

research in vaccine development. As of April 2021, 13 vaccines were authorised by at least one national regulatory authority for public use²³. Nearly 929 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine have been administered worldwide (based on official reports from federal health agencies)²⁴.

Governments and authorities worldwide have responded by implementing travel restrictions, lockdowns/quarantines, workplace hazard controls, and business closures. In different countries, people are practicing social distancing, wearing face masks in public, ventilation and air-filtering, hand washing, covering one's mouth when sneezing or coughing, disinfecting surfaces, and monitoring and self-isolation for people exposed or symptomatic.

The pandemic has caused the most significant global recession since the Great Depression in the early 20th century. It led to widespread supply shortages aggravated by panic buying, agricultural disruption, and food shortages. Millions of children are out of school across the world due to closures, combined with

increasing poverty, which have led to an increase in child marriage, reversing hard-fought progress on gender equality. The economic impact of the virus has led to large-scale job loss and financial uncertainties for millions worldwide. The increase in the incidence of intimate partner or domestic violence during lockdown periods is overwhelming worldwide. Misinformation has circulated through social media and mass media. The pandemic has raised issues of racial and geographic discrimination, health equity, and the balance between public health imperatives and individual rights. While COVID-19 is a physical health crisis, it has had devastating impacts on the well-being and mental health of individuals, families, and communities, as it is evident from the statistics that quarantine and self-isolation are also increasing levels of loneliness, depression, harmful coping mechanisms such as substance abuse.²⁵ ²⁶ In Bangladesh, too, COVID-19 has led to a rise in divisive narratives and incitement to violence, hatred, and hostility against various groups. Health officials, those infected with the virus and religious

²³ Gavi.org. The Vaccine Alliance. Cited in: https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork?gclid=CjwKCAjwvMqDBhB8EiwA2iSmPHphuoUGEG63aqkF6046Kb0G7P5rqCjQf6wpjP43VMln4NoMho90EhoCvi8QAvD_BwE Accessed on 11 April 2021.

²⁴ Our World in Data. "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations – Statistics and Research". Accessed on 22 April 2021.

²⁵ Stefania Chiappini et al. "COVID-19: The Hidden Impact on Mental Health and Drug Addiction" 29 July 2020. Cited in:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7403495/>. Accessed on 22 April 2021.

²⁶ Valentina Boursier et al. "Facing Loneliness and Anxiety During the COVID-19 Isolation: The Role of Excessive Social Media Use in a Sample of Italian Adults" 8 December 2020. Cited in: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2020.586222/full>. Accessed on 22 April 2021.

minorities are reported to be the primary victims.

Being faced with an unprecedented situation, people panicked, which caused turbulence and turmoil throughout the world. Governments and authorities had to act fast and quick and design new policies which did not get a chance to be tested if they were pragmatic or not. One also observed numerous protests on various counts. The factors included low pay or making workers work without pay, hazard pay, unsafe working conditions (due to poor social distancing or a lack of personal protective equipment), reopening business, reopening the school, tuition payment or access to education via digital mediums or access to the internet, anti-mask and anti-COVID-19 vaccination and inability to pay rent.

This write-up attempts to provide an overview of COVID-19 related protests at the global and the South Asian context. The primary objective is to shed light on the efficacy of the authorities and administration to handle the crisis.

Global & Regional unrest due to the lockdown measures

Regional and global responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have varied mainly in their scope, implementation and subsequent results. Thus, the nature of protests and demonstrations also varied a lot in different regions of the world. The

key factors leading to protests were more or less the same; economic and travel restrictions during lockdowns, terminating workers in factories, hazard pay or low pay, unsafe working conditions (for healthcare workers and other front liners; due to poor social distancing or a lack of personal protective equipment), inability to pay rent or utility bills, mismanagement in food and aid distribution, anti-mask or anti-vaccine sentiments, etc.

Protests Against Pandemic Restrictions & Lockdown

Since the beginning of the pandemic, a growing number of countries in the West have seen street demonstrations, protests, riots and strikes against pandemic restrictions and lockdowns. Some of these protests even turned violent.

Protests against government-imposed lockdowns in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States began in mid-April 2020 in many states of the US. The demonstrations were mainly led by politically conservative organisations and individuals who denounced the economic and social consequences of stay-at-home orders, company closures, and restrictions on personal travel and participation and demanded that their rights be respected. They urged states to be 'Reopened'; a conservative advocacy group even published a

“#ReOpenAmerica Planning Guide”.²⁷ The denouncement of the lockdown came from various sentiments, ranging from demands for stores to be reopened as the protesters wanted to go back to work. Trump and ‘Make America Great Again (MAGA)’ supporters insisted that the lockdown violated their constitutional rights.²⁸ According to some analysts, the emotions behind these ‘Reopen’ protests were both natural and manufactured, accusing a robust network of conservative backers behind these protests.²⁹ Some historians even compared it to the 1918 protest against pandemic restrictions by the Anti-Mask League.³⁰

In Europe, several European countries, including Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain,

and the United Kingdom, saw protests by the citizens against lockdown and pandemic safety measures.³¹ These protests were primarily driven by conspiracy theories and conservative sentiments, mainly linked to the far-right QAnon movement that started from social media.³² The protests demanded the removal of state control, loosening the lockdown rules and freedom of movement, some protesters even compared lockdowns and restrictions to dictatorships and surveillance states. Libertarian, anti-fascist, and anarchist groups in different European countries joined the anti-lockdown and anti-mask protests as well.³³ The demonstrations were essentially political and anti-establishment in nature. These resulted in violent clashes with the Police in many

²⁷ Anita Kumar, “Trump allies have their fingerprints on lockdown protests,” 21 April 2020. Cited in: <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/21/trump-allies-help-organize-lockdown-protests-198426>. Accessed on: 11 April 2021.

²⁸ Meagan Flynn, “Chanting ‘lock her up,’ Michigan protesters waving Trump flags mass against Gov. Gretchen Whitmer’s coronavirus restrictions,” 16 April 2020. Cited in: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/16/michigan-whitmer-conservatives-protest/>. Accessed on: 11 April 2021.

²⁹ Isaac Stanley-Becker & Tony Romm, “The anti-quarantine protests seem spontaneous. But behind the scenes, a powerful network is helping,” 22 April 2020. Cited in: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/inside-the-conservative-networks-backing-anti-quarantine-protests/2020/04/22/da75c81e-83fe-11ea-a3eb-e9fc93160703_story.html. Accessed on: 11 April 2021.

³⁰ Peter Lawrence Kane, “The Anti-Mask League: lockdown protests draw parallels to 1918 pandemic,” 29 April 2020. Cited In: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/29/coronavirus-pandemic-1918-protests-california?fbclid=IwAR3GYT5CXIGJaM0rj8VMj28rPA_CZI79M8x9gPkGW_x7Cr54YvVXy7FmkD0. Accessed On: 11 April, 2021.

³¹ Mohammed Haddad, “Mapping coronavirus anti-lockdown protests around the world,” 02 February 2021. Cited In: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/2/mapping-coronavirus-anti-lockdown-protests-around-the-world>. Accessed on: 11 April 2021.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ “Berlin police clear anarchist-occupied house Liebig 34,” 10 September 2020. Cited In: <https://www.dw.com/en/berlin-police-clear-anarchist-occupied-house-liebig-34/a-55211590>. Accessed on: 11 April, 2021.

places, and hundreds of people were arrested in different countries.

In South America, the sentiments behind protests were different. The protests mainly consisted of small business owners and workers who demanded to go to work during lockdowns and receive payments. Interestingly, some protests coincided with Argentina's days of National Importance. Such as the protests on 20 June and 9 July, the country's National Flag Day and Independence Day, respectively. Perhaps due to the patriotic sentiment, these protests mobilised a significant portion of the population. These South American protests were mostly against government decisions during the pandemic. Protesters deemed these decisions could potentially destroy the countries' agriculture and the economy. Other driving motives behind the protests were corruption and mismanagement in pandemic handling, hunger and lack of government aids promised earlier. These protests took place in various parts of the continent, including Brazil, Chile and Paraguay.

On the Eastern side of the world, some of the protests rested on different factors. Take Sri Lanka's burial ban for example, which barred COVID-19 victims from having a proper burial, imposed by the Sri Lankan government on April 2020. In the face of public outcry, the government decided to bury virus patients on a small island off the coast in the country's north. This decision was protested by a lot of locals on the island, and the Muslim population in Sri Lanka. After months of international pressure and protests by Muslim groups, Sri Lanka finally lifted its burial ban in February 2021.³⁴

In Hong Kong, protests against the extradition bill were already in full swing when the pandemic hit the streets. The pro-democratic camps adapted to the pandemic situation and repurposed their protest tactics to follow all the health protocols. Eventually, the pro-democratic group even arranged strikes to pressure the government for better public health policies including ban on all travelers from China during the lockdown. But these strikes were largely unsuccessful as the Hong Kong government rejected a full border closure with China.³⁵

³⁴ "Explained: Why the reversal of Sri Lanka's Covid-19 burial ban holds geopolitical significance," 27 February, 2021. Cited in: <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/why-the-reversal-of-sri-lankas-covid-19-burial-ban-holds-geopolitical-significance-7205997/>. Accessed on: 22 April 2021.

³⁵ Brian Wong, "What Hong Kong needs to rebound from two terrible years," 5 March, 2021. Cited in: <https://fortune.com/2021/03/04/hong-kong-protests-covid-19-economy-inequality-reconciliation-justice-brian-wong/>. Accessed on: 22 April 2021.



Anti-Vaccine Protests

Anti-vaccine activists in the United States banded together with small-business owners and far-right organisations as soon as California and the rest of the country prepared to roll out coronavirus vaccines, a move that some experts say would exacerbate public distrust of government at a critical time for public health.³⁶ The presidential transition was seen by the protest backers as a ripe moment to unite followers and supporters of the protest fueled by the anti-vaccine sentiment. There were disruptions, cases of sabotage and closure of vaccination sites by the

protesters all over California and other states.³⁷ Anti-Vaccine movements in the US also adopted the far-right lingo and symbols and slowly merged with the 'Reopen' movement's rhetoric.³⁸

Europe has been neck-deep in large scale protests since the start of the vaccine rollouts and the third wave. These protests gathered thousands of people in countries like Romania³⁹, Germany⁴⁰, Switzerland, Belgium, Finland, Austria and the United Kingdom. Many of these protests were charged with rumours and conspiracies about the COVID-19 vaccines and government mandates,

³⁶ Anita Chabria, "Anti-vaccine and alt-right groups team up to stoke fears of COVID-19 vaccine," 18 December, 2020. Cited In: <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-12-18/anti-vaxxers-team-up-alt-right-against-covid-19-vaccine>. Accessed on: 11 April 2021.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ "3,000 at Romania anti-vaccination protest amid COVID-19 rise," 07 March 2021. Cited In:

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/3000-at-romania-antivaccination-protest-amid-covid19-rise-romania-covid-bucharest-eastern-europe-b1813711.html>. Accessed on: 11 April 2021.

⁴⁰ "Anti-lockdown protests break out in Europe amid new COVID wave," 21 Mar 2021. Cited In: <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2021/3/21/anti-lockdown-protests-break-out-in-europe-amid-new-covid-wave>. Accessed on: 11 April 2021.

including the new lockdowns and travel restriction. Some of the anti-vaccine protesters were heard saying “Block vaccination” and “Freedom.” Placards read: “Parents, protect your children! Stop the fear!”⁴¹ “down with the mask,” and “Say no to forced vaccination.”⁴² Conservative and far-right political activists also hijacked the messages of these European anti-vaccination protests. There have been several clashes between the Police and the protesters. Some protesters vandalised vaccination centres and public properties during the protests.

Protests in South Asian Countries

South Asian countries are a potential breeding ground of unrest that might blow up at any moment amid food shortages, higher prices, extensive job losses and plunging remittances. Bangladesh, Pakistan and India are currently ranked the 10th, 13th and 19th highest risk countries globally, respectively, in Civil Unrest Index.⁴³ In terms of the Food Insecurity Index, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Pakistan are considered high-risk countries, while India stands in the medium-risk category.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² “3,000 at Romania anti-vaccination protest amid COVID-19 rise,” 07 March 2021. Cited In: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/3000-at-romania-antivaccination-protest-amid-covid19-rise-romania-covid-bucharest-eastern-europe-b1813711.html>. Accessed on: 11 April 2021.

⁴³ Miha Hribernik and Sofia Nazalya and Joseph Parkes. “South Asia at highest risk of civil unrest as

Such conditions make these countries highly susceptible to violent protests and demonstrations led by massive numbers of people.

Afghanistan

Strict lockdown measures were enforced in Afghanistan from the middle of March 2020. By April, police officers were deployed, and lockdown regulations were intensified, with strict penalties against the lockdown violators. Prior to the pandemic, the government of Afghanistan had already struggled to provide high-quality healthcare to Afghans due to a lack of infrastructure, insecurity, and continuing conflicts. With the unforeseen circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, the already weak healthcare situation got exacerbated beyond control.⁴⁵ Poverty and employment losses, arrests and closures of local small enterprises during lockdowns, mismanagement and unfair ration distributions had led to mass unrest and dissatisfaction. Six demonstrators clashed with security forces and were killed on 9 May 2020 in what will be later called the ‘Ghor Protest’ in Chaghcharan, Ghor

food insecurity bites”, 26 May 2020. Cited in: <https://www.maplecroft.com/insights/analysis/south-asia-at-highest-risk-of-civil-unrest-as-food-insecurity-bites/> Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Don Eliseo Lucero-Prisno III, Mohammad Yasir Essar, Attaullah Ahmadi, Xu Lin and Yusuf Adebayo Adebisi, “Conflict and COVID-19: a double burden for Afghanistan’s healthcare system,” *Conflict and Health*, 22 September, 2020.

Province, while protesting against the unfair food relief distribution.

Along with the protesters, two police officers and a local radio journalist were killed, and several others were wounded. Amnesty International demanded an impartial and thorough investigation into the “use of unnecessary and excessive force by the police” that resulted in the deaths of civilians.⁴⁶ Apart from the tragic Ghor Protest, there were some small scale, peaceful protests throughout Afghanistan. On 2 May, street traders protested in denouncement of the lockdown measures in Char Rahi Qambar Block area of Kabul.⁴⁷ May 2020 proved to be a tumultuous month for Afghanistan, as protests on 19 May at the Western Afghan city of Herat drew over 200 physicians and medical personnel over unpaid salaries for their services and lack of protective measures to alleviate their health risks.⁴⁸

India

Authorities in India have consistently stated that the Coronavirus crisis is under control in the country of 1.3 billion people. However, the worse pandemic

hotspots of the country saw many dissents and protests.⁴⁹

Migrant workers trapped in Mumbai due to the lockdown gathered at the city's Bandra Railway station to protest the coronavirus lockdown's extension and demanded the right to return to their villages during the first wave.⁵⁰ In April 2020, following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's televised announcement that the lockdown would be extended until at least the 3rd May, police in Mumbai baton-charged the protesting migrant workers. Thousands of jobless migrant workers protested at train stations, asking that the lockdown be lifted so they could return home. Small scale demonstrations were seen throughout different states of the nation by workers and other citizens protesting government failure to provide the promised food and aid during the lockdown.

On 8 May 2020, trouble ensued in Shahpur district in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, after the lockdown was broken by hundreds of people. According to police, a mob threw stones at them, prompting them to use

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ “Afghanistan: Ongoing protest reported in Kabul May 2,” 02 May 2020. Cited in: <https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/338261/afghanistan-ongoing-protest-reported-in-kabul-may-2>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁴⁸ “Afghan doctors protest over unpaid salaries amid coronavirus outbreak,” 19 May 2020. Cited in: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-afghanistan-health-idUSKBN22V25B>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁴⁹ “Anti-lockdown protesters clash with Indian forces,” 9 May 2020. Cited in: <https://www.nst.com.my/world/world/2020/05/591055/anti-lockdown-protesters-clash-indian-forces>. Accessed on: 11 April 2021.

⁵⁰ “India extends world's biggest lockdown, ignites protest by migrant workers,” 14 April, 2020. Cited in: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-southasia-idUSKCN21W0HI>. Accessed on: 11 April 2021.

tear gas and baton charges. Paramilitary soldiers from the Rapid Action Force (RAF) clashed with anti-lockdown protesters. At least 15 people were detained in the aftermath of this protest.⁵¹

Indian citizens have, for the most part, conformed to the rules, but there has been anti-mask and anti-vaccine protests in the country. Despite the smaller number of participants, dissenters have raised questions about precautionary measures against COVID-19. Anti-mask and anti-vaccine campaigns are gaining traction in India, with protests surging in many cities.⁵² Most of these protests are marred by misinformation. On 2 October, a group of demonstrators gathered on Mumbai's Marine Drive to voice their displeasure with the government 'mandate' on mask and vaccine, although no such mandate has been announced by the government. The shortage of vaccines in the vaccine centres also caused some protests against 'vaccine discrimination' here and there, most notably in Mumbai.⁵³

In Maharashtra, protesting the Indian government's new lockdown order, the Hotel and Restaurant Association of Western India (HRAWI) called for a silent protest where lakhs of restaurants participated with their employees holding placards outside the establishment following the safety protocols in April 2021.⁵⁴ The peaceful protest called for either the complete waiver on all statutory fees, utility bills and taxes during the lockdown, or otherwise proper compensation by the government.

Pakistan

When the entire world first recognised that a pandemic was imminent in February 2020 and Wuhan, the epicentre of the pandemic, went into complete lockdown, there were more than 1,000 Pakistani students staying in that region who could not come back to their country.⁵⁵ The concerned parents called on Pakistan's government to "bring back our children" from there in a demonstration on 16 February 2020 in Karachi. In the same

⁵¹ "Anti-lockdown protesters clash with Indian forces," 09 May 2020. Cited in: <https://www.nst.com.my/world/world/2020/05/591055/anti-lockdown-protesters-clash-indian-forces>. Accessed on: 11 April 2021.

⁵² "Inside India's Anti-Mask Movements: Why These People Don't Believe in Masks, Vaccine for Coronavirus," 06 October 2020. Cited in: <https://www.news18.com/news/buzz/inside-indias-anti-mask-movements-why-these-people-dont-believe-in-masks-vaccine-for-coronavirus-2937147.html>. Accessed on: 11 April 2021.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ "Maharashtra lockdown: Hotels, restaurants hold silent protest; jewellers urge for curbs' relaxation," 09 April, 2021. Cited in: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/apr/09/maharashtra-lockdown-hotels-restaurants-hold-silent-protest-jewellers-urge-for-curbs-relaxation-2287845.html>. Accessed on: 11 April 2021.

⁵⁵ Syed Raza Hassan. "Parents protest as Pakistani students stuck in China under coronavirus lockdown", 16 February 2020. Cited in: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-pakistan-idUSKBN20A0J9>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

week, several families held a similar protest outside the Chinese consulate in Lahore.⁵⁶

Like most countries, Pakistan's Higher Education Commission decided on going digital amidst the pandemic and resuming academic sessions via online classes. But this decision met with vociferous opposition from the students of at least 36 Pakistani towns and cities who live in the remote areas of the country – Gilgit Baltistan, Baluchistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the region that shares borders with Afghanistan in June 2020.⁵⁷ According to the survey done by the official Pakistan Telecommunication Authority in November 2019, apparently, only 36.2% of the country's population has internet access (mostly 2.5 G or EDGE).⁵⁸ The regions where the students took the road to protest lack internet coverage and access to electricity. The protesters frustratingly stated that this decision lacked compassion and empathy towards the underprivileged, insurgency-ridden students and, rather than easing the

discrimination and ensuring equal opportunities for all, only created more gap and served a small percentage of privileged students. In April 2021, parents took to the streets to stage peaceful demonstrations, demanding schools' reopening in several cities.

During a peaceful protest led by the doctors and nurses against the lack of safety equipment as they were facing an acute shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), ventilators and other medical facilities from the beginning of the pandemic, several doctors and nurses were arrested in Quetta on 6 April 2020.⁵⁹ ⁶⁰ ⁶¹ They claimed that the government was not showing solidarity with them by ensuring adequate numbers of protective gears.

Nearly 9% of Pakistan's GDP come from its textile and apparel industry. In different parts of the country, workers working in this industry took to the street and outside their workplace. They protested against their forced layoffs, workplace closures, and standard holiday bonus

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Ebad Ahmed. "Covid-19: As Pakistani universities moves classes online, students protest lack of internet access", 29 June 2020. Cited in: <https://scroll.in/article/965940/covid-19-as-pakistani-universities-moves-classes-online-students-protest-lack-of-internet-access>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Russell Seth Martins, Omaina Anis Bhatti and Asad I. Mian. "Violence Against Health Care Workers in Pakistan During the COVID-19 Pandemic", 19 October 2020. Cited in: <https://jamanetwork.com/channels/health->

<forum/fullarticle/2772156>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁶⁰ S. Khan. "COVID-19 in Pakistan: Why the government and doctors are at odds", 16 April 2020. Cited in: <https://www.dw.com/en/covid-19-in-pakistan-why-the-government-and-doctors-are-at-odds/a-53149990>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁶¹ The Guardian. "Pakistan arrests doctors protesting over lack of virus safety equipment", 6 April 2020. Cited in: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/06/pakistan-arrests-doctors-protest-lack-coronavirus-safety-equipment>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

suspension due to the pandemic. In March 2020, according to Pakistan Workers' Federation, at least half a million textile and garment industry workers were laid off in Punjab province alone.⁶² Two of the first incidents of protests regarding this issue took place in Karachi and Lahore in May 2020, where hundreds of agitated and overwhelmed labourers, including women, gathered outside garment factories to protest against their forced layoff in only a week before the International Labour Day, claiming that the factory owners were treating them as expendable commodities.⁶³

In Islamabad, thousands of government employees from all over the country protested against the price hike and 'anti-employee policies' of the government, in the 2nd week of October, 2020.⁶⁴

Myanmar

Myanmar is passing through a crucial time in terms of political unrest and a severe economic and food crisis that has been looming over the horizon since the pandemic started. Even before the political turmoil started, this country has been

reeling with the impacts of factory closures and remittance decline since April 2020. Over 1,000 garment workers went on a strike for paid leave in Yangon after the government declared lockdown and factory closures in March 2020, demanding labour rights, including the provisions of masks, hand sanitisers, and other health equipment.⁶⁵ Hunger trumped the fear of spreading the virus, and protesters out of despair took to the street by wrapping red bands around their forehead to show 'how red our blood is with rage'. For example, in March 2020, the Myan Mode garment factory permanently fired 520 union members and withheld their wages, under the pretext of the COVID-19 situation.⁶⁶ The union retaliated by organising protests and was able to secure the withheld wages for the dismissed workers. In February 2021, as the Clean Cloths Campaign gained momentum, garment workers all over Myanmar pledged to continue to demonstrate and carry on the strike to protest the military coup along with their treatment by the owners throughout the

⁶²Human Rights Watch Report on Pakistan, 2020. Cited in: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/pakistan>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁶³Sabrina Toppa. "Pakistan: As garment workers protest to demand wages, police shoot and threaten them", 26 May 2020. Cited in: <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/pakistan-as-garment-workers-protest-to-demand-wages-police-shoot-and-threaten-them/>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁶⁴Munawer Azeem. "Protesting govt employees converge on capital", 15 October 2020. Cited in: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1585140>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁶⁵Lorcan Lovett. "In Myanmar, Hunger Overshadows COVID-19 for Yangon's Poorest", 12 April 2020. Cited in: <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/in-myanmar-hunger-overshadows-covid-19-for-yangons-poorest/>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

pandemic, despite military repression and violence.⁶⁷

The UN Food Programme and IFPRI have predicted that a 'serious' economic crisis was about to hit the country following the coup that happened in February 2021 as the fuel price and food price are on the rise.⁶⁸ The price of principal staple food, rice, has increased by up to 35% in Kachin State.⁶⁹ The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) conducted a study in November 2020 that showed that income-based poverty increased from 16% to 63% between January 2020 and September 2020, thus taking a stark toll on the food security situation in Myanmar.⁷⁰

The coup deteriorated the already vulnerable situation as more and more people are taking part in the Civil Disobedience Movement. Many doctors and nurses from state hospitals joined in the civil disobedience campaign and went on strike and hiding, which added to the challenges already faced by Myanmar's struggling healthcare systems.⁷¹

Maldives

In the Maldives, the spread of the COVID-19 virus and the government implemented lockdowns spotlighted and exacerbated the miserable conditions of migrant workers living there, who constitute one-third of the resident population. Deceptive recruitment process, wage theft, passport confiscation, unsafe living and working conditions and excessive work demands have given a rise in job loss, unpaid leave, reduced salaries and forced work without pay. Out of desperation, workers started protesting, especially demanding the payment of their unpaid wages and access to food and other essential supplies during the lockdown. The authorities retaliated harshly by cracking down on them and tagged them

⁶⁷Clean Cloths Campaign. Live Blog, February 2021. Cited in: <https://cleanclothes.org/news/2021/february-2021-covid-blog>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁶⁸ Rebecca Ratcliffe and Agencies. "Food and fuel prices soar in Myanmar as coup exacerbates Covid-19 crisis", 16 March 2021. Cited in: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/16/myanmar-protests-bystanders-among-20-killed-by-security-forces>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰Rodion Ebbighausen. "Myanmar coup protests inflamed by poverty and coronavirus", 8 February 2021. Cited in: <https://www.dw.com/en/myanmar-coup-protests-inflamed-by-poverty-and-coronavirus/a-56500168>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁷¹Rebecca Ratcliffe and Agencies. "Food and fuel prices soar in Myanmar as coup exacerbates Covid-19 crisis", 16 March 2021. Cited in: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/16/myanmar-protests-bystanders-among-20-killed-by-security-forces>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

as ‘a threat to national security’.^{72 73 74}The Bangladeshi, Indian, Nepalese and Sri Lankan workers protested in Hulhumale’, Bodufinolhu island, principally for being forced to work without pay. The Police arrested 19 Bangladeshi expatriates in relation to the unrest at Bodufinolhu.⁷⁵ Police detained more than 80 migrant workers in July 2020 and deported them without even paying their owed salaries.⁷⁶

Nepal

Following the other countries of the world, Nepal also went on a nationwide lockdown in March 2020, resulting in thousands of migrant workers and cashless people working in informal sectors going back to their rural mountain villages from Kathmandu with no social security whatsoever. Like most other countries in South Asia, the Nepalese

government has been accused of mismanaging/mishandling the whole situation as they could not ensure enough quarantine centres for the Nepalese people who came back from other countries. Young people started a social media campaign roughly in June and organised peaceful non-political street protests under the banner ‘Enough is enough’ and were able to attract and gather nearly 200,000 online followers in about a week in front of the prime minister’s residence who demanded a better government response in handling coronavirus pandemic without any corruption from the top officials.⁷⁷ They were dealt with a harsh reaction from the government, who used riot police against them initially but were forced to give in by signing an agreement with the protest leader, lii on 9 August 2020.^{78 79}

⁷²Human Rights Watch. “Maldives: Covid-19 Exposes Abuse of Migrants”, 26 August 2020. Cited in: <https://reliefweb.int/report/maldives/maldives-covid-19-exposes-abuse-migrants>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁷³Human Rights Watch. “Maldives: Pandemic Response Exposes Inequities, Abuse”, 13 January 2021. Cited in: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/13/maldives-pandemic-response-exposes-inequities-abuse>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁷⁴Clean Cloths Campaign News. Live Blog, July 2020. Cited in: <https://cleanclothes.org/news/2020/july-2020-covid19-blog>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁷⁵Dhaka Tribune. “19 Bangladeshi workers arrested over unrest in Maldives”, 4 July 2020. Cited in: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/world/south-asia/2020/07/04/19-bangladeshi-workers-arrested-over-unrest-in-maldives>

[over-unrest-in-maldives](#) Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁷⁶ Human Rights Watch. “Maldives: Covid-19 Exposes Abuse of Migrants”, 26 August 2020. Cited in: <https://reliefweb.int/report/maldives/maldives-covid-19-exposes-abuse-migrants>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁷⁷Voice of America. “Young Protesters Force Nepal to Better Manage Virus Crisis”, 11 September 2020. Cited in: <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/young-protesters-force-nepal-better-manage-virus-crisis>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁷⁸Peter Gill and Janak Raj Sapkota. “COVID-19: Nepal in Crisis”, 29 June 2020. Cited in: <https://thedi diplomat.com/2020/06/covid-19-nepal-in-crisis/>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

⁷⁹ Aljazeera News. “How a high school dropout forced Nepal gov’t to act on



Navesh Chitrakar/Reuters



Nirajan Shrestha/AP



A protester in Kathmandu uses a hand sanitizer as he lies on the ground demanding better handling of the COVID-19 pandemic [File: Nirajan Shrestha/AP Photo]



The protesters say they will return to the streets if the government fails to keep its promises [File: Nirajan Shrestha/AP Photo]

Protesters in Nepal

Providing enough PPEs to the frontline health workers, better access to medicines, free treatment to COVID-19 patients, ensuring and increasing the gold-standard PCR tests, protection of patients and their families from public harassment by local authorities- were some of their demands that the government agreed to.⁸⁰

⁸¹ This is something extraordinary where

youth came forward to demand transparency and accountability from their government, and the government took it positively and acted upon it. The protesters have declared that they were keeping a close eye on their government and will not hesitate to take to the streets if the government failed to keep their promises in future.

pandemic” 11 September 2020. Cited in: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/11/how-a-high-school-dropout-forced-nepal-govt-to-act-on-pandemic>. Accessed on 22 April 2021

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Shraddha Pokharel. “Nepal’s Summer of Discontent”, 16 June 2020. Cited in: <https://thedi diplomat.com/2020/06/nepals-summer-of-discontent/>. Accessed on 11 April 2021.

Reaction of the Governments against the Protests

In a nutshell, public health measures taken by the governments has become a contested issue where the citizens' needs are not being aligned to governments' action. The protests are indicators of an ominous sign that conventional global politics is falling short to address the major issues of the society. The issue of distrust of authority is coming into the fore due to the spread of misinformation and corruption. Opportunistic behaviour of governments and authorities is also aggravating the financial and other devastation caused by this pandemic which is gradually enraging the citizens.

In Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Romania, Serbia, Poland, France and Britain, protesters demonstrated against the lockdown and pandemic health restrictions, mask and vaccination. These social protests are relatively rare in South Asian countries where poverty and uncertainty regarding income were the major triggers for most of the protests. Most people did not have any social safety net designed for them in these countries to reduce their economic hardships. So far, all these protests have

not been able to significantly change the policies and actions of government, except in Nepal. In many countries, it has been observed that governments used police and security forces to dismantle the demonstrations and protests by wielding the baton, water cannons, tear shells, rubber bullets and detaining and arresting the protesters. The determination of the protesters is also notable.

The governments and authorities responded by promising financial aid to workers and businesses affected by mandatory closures and launched the Emergency Cash Programmes. The governments also distributed Basic food packages to provide some assistance addressing the situation, for instance, the Pakistani government launched Ehsas (care) Emergency Cash Program to provide financial assistance of 12,000 Pakistani rupees (\$75) each to 12 million families affected by the coronavirus crisis.⁸² There were concerns about the programme outreach to the marginalized; and for most of them help did not come. Therefore, there was no other way other than protesting for their basic needs for the people living from hand to mouth.

⁸² Aamir Latif. "Millions of Pakistani laborers struggle amid COVID-19 lockdown", 30 April 2020. Cited in: [https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/millions-of-pakistani-laborers-struggle-amid-covid-19-lockdown/1824231)

[pacific/millions-of-pakistani-laborers-struggle-amid-covid-19-lockdown/1824231](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/millions-of-pakistani-laborers-struggle-amid-covid-19-lockdown/1824231). Accessed on 11 April 2021.

Conclusion

States and authorities must do better than what they are doing until now for the greater good. Livelihoods and the public health policy should not stand in opposition to each other. The government must act quickly and efficiently in response to disinformation with compassionate policies to support the basic necessities of the citizens. They should enforce public health measures in a sensitive manner. The COVID-19 Pandemic and the protests related to it underlined that the government and the private sector need to work together and rethink and refurbish the entire employment system in each country. It has become mandatory to carry out institutional reforms to protect the rights and safety of health care workers who are

in the frontline. Authorities and governments also need to address the inconveniences experienced by the migrant workers (internal and external) due to the country-wide sudden lockdown with compassion to mitigate their sufferings.

The culture and practice of accountability and transparency in every sector of the administration will make the situation a lot better by bringing down the probability of protests. It is evident that criminalising and politicising peaceful demonstrations by the authorities did not work well for most countries. Nepal is the best example of this. It demonstrates people's will and power and also hope for all of us.

Annex:

Some definitional clarification according to BPO Codebook.

Gunfight. Shootout opposing the police or security forces to criminals, militants or other irregular forces that do not match the definition of a non-state armed group.

Clash. Two-sided violence between groups, outside of the context of war or insurgency. *Example: supporters of rival political parties fight each other.*

Assault. One-sided violence by an individual or small group against another individual or small group. *Example: stabbing, shooting of someone by a perpetrator*

Fight. Two-sided violence between individuals or small groups. *Example: brawl between 3-4 people.*

Sexual assault. One-sided sexual violence, such as rape or attempted rape, by an individual or small group against another individual or small group.

Destruction of property. One-sided violence perpetrated with the intent of damaging property. *Examples: vandalism, arson.*

Mob violence (large group assault). One-sided violence by a mob or large group against an individual or a comparatively small and/or defenseless group. *Examples: lynching of a thief, looting of shops and houses owned by a religious minority.*



E-mail: cgs@du.ac.bd
Telephone: PABX 88-2-9661900, Ext. 4647

© 2021 Centre for Genocide Studies, University of Dhaka.

Supported by

