Conflict Weekly

An initiative by NIAS-IPRI and KAS India Office

A brief review of conflict and peace processes across the world

6 April 2023, Vol.4, No.13 & 14

Protests in Israel, Elections in Finland, and Kidnapping in Nigeria

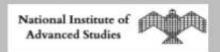
Rashmi Ramesh, Padmashree Anandan and Anu Maria Joseph



(Israelis protesting against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing government's plan for judicial overhaul in Tel Aviv.

Image Source: Ronen Zvulun, Reuters)





Israel: Protests intensify over judicial reforms

Rashmi Ramesh

In the news

On 3 April, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delayed the removal of Defence Minister Yoav Gallant due to intense opposition to the decision. On 26 March, the Prime Minister's office issued a one-line statement announcing his removal. He was the first senior member of the cabinet and the Likud Party to speak against the judicial overhaul. Massive protests followed the announcement in Tel Aviv. Protesters lit fires on the streets, and the main labour union, Histadrut Labor Federation announced a general strike, mounting pressure on Netanyahu.

On 27 March, Israel's President Isaac Herzog called on the ruling coalition to halt the plan for the "sake of the unity of the people of Israel, for the sake of responsibility." Netanyahu had pressure from his far-right allies in the coalition to go ahead with the plan despite the opposition. However, on the same day, he announced that this would be delayed and said: "Out of a sense of national responsibility, out of a will to prevent a rupture among our people, I have decided to pause the second and third readings of the bill." Following the announcement, the general strike was called off temporarily.

Issues at large

First, brief background and provisions of the bill. The bill was a major agenda during the November 2022 election campaigns and was initiated by the far-right coalition in January 2023. The coalition aims to reduce the judiciary's powers, which is seen as an institution hindering a strong religious government. If the bill gets passed in the Knesset, the review and powers of the Supreme Court could be significantly reduced. Additionally, a simple majority in the Knesset can override the judiciary's decisions, implying limited powers against the legislature and executive. The bill also gives power to the government to have a more significant say in appointing judges in all courts, including the Supreme Court.

Second, political responses and public protests to the bill. Discontent among the centrists has become evident. Thousands of protesters regularly gathered in Tel Aviv for more than 11 weeks, demonstrating against the bill for undermining democratic values. Media reports claimed that the gatherings over the last weeks were the largest in Israel's history and are said to continue to expand. Opposition parties and leaders, notably former Prime Minister Yair Lapid, participated in the protests. In February, Israel's Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara, in an official legal advisory to the justice minister, said that the cabinet should not go ahead with the judiciary overhaul, warning that it could hamper the checks and balances, giving unprecedented power to the government. An unexpected but consequential opposition to the bill arises from the reservists. They play an important role in the military service, which raises the concern that if Israel's judiciary is perceived as weak on the international stage, the soldiers may be exposed to trials in international courts in case of illegal military orders.

Third, Netanyahu's endgame. Prime Minister Netanyahu is ambitious about the judicial overhaul. Although he denies any wrongdoing, he is knee-deep in cases against him based on corruption, fraud, and breach of trust. With the bill, he seems to be aiming to safeguard his political career and attempts to stay in power for longer.



In perspective

First, gains from the protests. After eleven weeks of demonstrations, the protestors have not been at the losing end. In the initial weeks, the government stood firm and went ahead despite the strong public opposition. However, following intensifying protests, Netanyahu has announced a pause in the further process, indicating a space for compromise.

Second, Israel's political churn. Politically the country is polarized- one section of the population desires a more secular-pluralist state, and the other supports a strong right-wing government with a Jewish-nationalist outlook. The divide was evident when the parties failed to get a majority in the elections and unsuccessful attempts to gain consensus at the Knesset, followed by a record of five elections in five years. Thus, the current developments have once again exposed Israel's divide and political turmoil.

Third, shrinking democratic space within the institutions. The protesters, primarily the centrists, believe the judicial reforms will alter the quality of democracy in Israel. It will erode the independence of the judiciary, weaken it and henceforth question trust in the government's use of power. However, the protests mark a functioning democracy and a space to express views without being subjected to extreme control.

Finland elections: An unexpected turn towards the Right

Padmashree Anandan

In the news

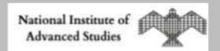
On 2 April, the right-wing National Coalition Party (NCP) was announced as the winner of Finland's parliamentary elections with a majority of 48 seats out of 200. The party leader, Petteri Orpo said: "We got the biggest mandate." He has promised to "fix Finland" and its economy.

The Nationalist Finns Party (NFP) secured 46 seats out of 200. Meanwhile, current Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Social Democrats won only 43 seats. After the results were announced, Marin said: "We have gained support, we have gained more seats (in parliament). That's an excellent achievement, even if we did not finish first today."

On 2 April, on forming a coalition, Orpo said: "I trust the Finnish tradition of negotiating with all parties, and trying to find the best possible majority government for Finland."

<u>Issues at large</u>

First, a brief note on the campaign, issues and election results. The major issues in the elections surrounded the pandemic, the cost of living triggered by the post-pandemic period and the Ukraine war. Apart from these, addressing the debt crisis, immigration and social benefits were focused on during the election campaign. The red-green coalition headed by Marin consisted of the Social Democratic Party, Centre Party, Green League, and Left Alliance. Comparing the election results of 2019 and 2023, except for the Social Democrats, which gained three additional seats, the rest had the lowest share in this election. The National Coalition and Finns Party won 38 and 39 in 2019 and secured 48 and 46 seates respectively in the 2023 elections. This opened a possibility for a coalition between the conservative and far-right.



Second, a possible coalition and its challenges. A probable coalition is the "blue-black" between the National Coalition Party and the Finns Party. Both have been previously in a coalition between 2015 and 2017. The challenge would be finding commonality in the issue of focus. While the Finns Party takes an anti-immigration stance similar to other right wing parties like the Brothers of Italy and wants to focus on climate change, the outlook of the NCP might differ as it prefers a "work-based immigration." This would create the next possibility of a "blue-red" alliance with the SDP. Although the NCP might consider it an option, the members of the SDP have not been positive about joining the far-right party.

Third, domestic priority over regional issues. During the election campaign, the promises and policy focus of the NCP focused on addressing the post-pandemic and the Ukraine war-affected economy. The ratio of debt, which increased from 66 per cent to 73 per cent, has raised public concerns, which is another focus of the NCP. With Finland's NATO membership being a historic event, the party's focus shifted to ensuring the sovereignty of Finland while maintaining support for Ukraine. Creating more employment opportunities is another focus of the party. Therefore, from a holistic point of view, the policy focus of the NCP seems to be more inward-looking, focusing on addressing domestic challenges. This has turned elections in its favour.

Fourth, Europe's growing electoral support for right-wing parties. Finland is not an exception; This phenomenon of right-wing parties gaining ground can also be observed in Sweden, France, Italy, and Germany, where the right-wing parties gained ground utilizing the pressure created by the pandemic. Issues including the cost of living, immigrants, health services, climate change, and unemployment were either triggered by the economic crisis followed by the pandemic. The right-wing parties have magnified the issues and been tactical in turning the issues into votes. In the case of France, and Sweden, although the left wing maintained an overall majority, a steady shift in the votes towards right-wing parties is evident.

In perspective

First, for the people, economic growth, cost of living and social benefits matter more than supporting Ukraine and joining NATO. Like any other European country, Finland's debt and economic burden due to a slow pandemic recovery and the Ukraine war have shifted the votes towards the conservative right. Although the outgoing Marin government received popular approval for successfully handling the pandemic, the increased debt per cent gathered discontent.

Second, the debate over the probable coalition exists, whether blue-black or blue-red. Finland's policy trajectory seems to be unexpectedly inclined to be towards the right. This is because, regardless of the NSP's coalition with the Finns or SDP, the policy agenda of the NSP puts the domestic agenda first. Although the party has a flexible outlook towards immigrants, unlike other right-wing parties in Europe, the NSP seems to share similarities with a right-wing party vision. Therefore, regardless of the coalition, Finland is heading towards the right.



Nigeria: A new wave of Kidnappings

Anu Maria Joseph

In the news

On 3 April, at least ten secondary school students were abducted by armed men in Kaduna state in northwest Nigeria. The victims belong to a government school in Awon. The state commissioner of security, Samuel Aruwan, said: "The exact location of the incident is yet to be ascertained but detailed reports being awaited will clarify whether the incident occurred within the school premises or elsewhere."

On the same day, two female students were abducted from a university hostel in Zamfara state. The armed men broke into the private hostel and locked up the guards before kidnapping the students.

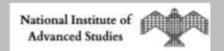
Issues at large

First, the record abductions in Nigeria. Kidnappings of students from schools have increased in frequency in northern Nigeria since 2014, when Islamist militants abducted over 200 schoolgirls in Borno state. According to a UN report in 2022, more than 1000 students were abducted in the northwest and northeast regions during 2020-21. In February 2022, nearly 300 schoolgirls were abducted in the Zamfara state. In May 2022, over 200 students were kidnapped from an Islamic school in Niger state. In April 2022, 14 students were abducted from Greenfield University. In August, 15 students were abducted from an agricultural college in the Zamfara states.

Second, perpetrators, reason and the act of kidnapping. Criminal gangs known locally as 'bandits' carry out kidnappings using motorcycles and keep victims in the forests and release them when the ransom is paid. Many groups belong to mostly ethnic Fulanis, including pastoralists and mercenaries from the region and neighbouring Chad and Niger. Some are displaced by decade-long violence, climate change and livelihood challenges. Another section is herders tired of their cattles being rustled who have found more alternative options for revenue. The bandits also include opportunistic criminals who exploit the vulnerabilities of the villagers. Some are said to be remnants of the Abubakar Sheku faction of Boko Haram in the northeast.

Third, weak government responses. The state has failed to build a sustainable security infrastructure. The governors have little influence over security in their state, as the federal government controls the police and the army. Lack of coordination between the above has made mass abductions a lucrative source of income. Various state governors occasionally tried negotiating with the bandits by paying ransoms as collateral, including expensive cars and other commodities. In 2022, the government introduced new currency notes and limited cash withdrawals partially to stop the abductions, which backfired on the economy.

Fourth, the threat of a regional spillover. In January, 50 women were abducted by the Boko Haram Islamist insurgent group in Burkina Faso. Although the victims were released later, the first mass kidnapping in the country has raised a new concern that it will be a tactic gaining ground by Islamist insurgent groups. Similarly, 19 soldiers were abducted by a rebel group in the Central African Republic in February.



Fifth, international apathy. In 2014, the Chibok girls' abduction attracted global attention bringing hashtags such as #BringBackOurGirls to the force. Following the incident, the UN special envoy for Global Education, Gordon Brown, announced USD 20 million for a three-year project. However, the global attention and efforts to curb other abductions remain insufficient.

In perspective

First, abductions have become indiscriminate in northern Nigeria, especially in the states of Kaduna, Zamfara and Niger. The spillover effect of the issue is vast. The bandits exploit the government's ignorance and ineffective policies. Corruption, incompetent leadership, and economic and political marginalization have left people, especially the youth, to seek abductions as an easy option to allocate money. Parents refuse to send their children to schools over security concerns. In 2022, UNICEF estimated that nearly 10.5 million children between the age of five and 14 are not enrolled in Nigerian schools.

Second, there has been a lull in abduction attacks in the past few months. However, the new events have raised the concern of a new wave of abductions. If so, addressing the issue will challenge the new government under Bola Tinubu.

Third, Insecurity in West Africa is currently in the worst shape. The threat of spreading abduction as a tactic is a larger concern. Sufficient international efforts are essential to quell the spillover effect.



Issues in Peace and Conflict This Week: Regional Roundups

Anu Maria Joseph, Akriti Sharma, Rashmi Ramesh, Harini Madhusudan, Ankit Singh, Femy Francis, and Padmashree Anandhan

East and Southeast Asia

China: Urges Japan to retract export restriction on chip manufacturing equipment

On 4 April, China expressed concerns over Japanese export restrictions on chip manufacturing equipment. The Chinese Ministry of Commerce accused Japan of following "wrong practices" and urged them to correct. It stated: "China will take decisive measures to safeguard its rights and interests if Japan insists on obstructing the chip industry cooperation between the two countries." This comes after Japan announced restrictions on the export of 23 types of semiconductor manufacturing equipment to China on 31 March.

Japan: Pushes for Bomb Shelter Bill

On 4 April, the Strait Times reported on Japan's push for the Bomb Shelter bill. This comes amid rising tensions in neighbouring regions related to the China-Taiwan issue and the exponential rise of North Korean missile testing. A ruling Liberal Democratic Party lawmaker and former minister for national resilience, Keiji Furuya, said: "Japan hasn't been involved in a war for 77 years, but what we've taken for granted since then no longer holds true."

North Korea: Embassy breacher not detained, the US being criticized for inaction

On 4 April, North Korea criticized the United States for not detaining the US citizen accused of breaching the North Korean embassy in Spain in 2019. On 3 April 2019, the North Korean embassy in Madrid marked the fourth anniversary of the incident where a group of men mouth-bounded the staff for hours before driving off with computers and other devices. They called the incident a "grave breach of sovereignty and terrorist attack." North Korea accused the US of supporting "daylight robbery" and encouraging terrorist activities.

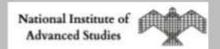
Philippines: Government announces four additional sites for military cooperation

On 3 April, the government of the Philippines announced additional four locations for the military bases to be accessed by US troops under an existing defence agreement to expand military cooperation. The Presidential Communications Office said that the sites chosen are, in a way, suitable and mutually beneficial to the US and the Philippines. As part of the cooperation, one site is situated near the disputed area of the South China Sea. China has expressed displeasure over the increasing US activity in the Philippines and accused them of escalating regional tensions.

South Asia

Pakistan: Legal experts praise SC verdict but foresee a confrontation

On 5 April, Dawn reported on the Supreme Court verdict on holding the Punjab election on 14 May. The legal experts have expressed that the verdict was in tune with constitutional priority but also carried a possibility of confrontation. A lawyer, Rida Hosain, stated that the constitution prevailed against all odds in the court. Lawyer Mirza Moiz Baig said: "Uncontroversial and there was, perhaps, never any doubt in this respect." The common fear expressed by the legal experts was over the possible "backlash" the verdict might incur. Additionally, they questioned the procedure and expressed apprehension over the



confrontation between the executive and judiciary.

Pakistan PTI clarifies the issuance of visas to Israel

On 3 April, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Senior Vice President Dr Shireen Mazari said: "Visas were issued to [Pakistani] citizens to practice their religion. There is a huge difference in travelling and doing trade between two countries without having diplomatic relations." In Pakistan, at the issuance of a passport, it mentions that "the passport is valid to travel any country, but Israel". On 4 April, senators from PTI sought an explanation from the government in the upper house of the parliament over trade ties with Israel. Regarding reports about exporting food samples to Israel, Senator Mohsin Aziz reminded the Senate about Pakistan's principle stand on Palestine.

India: China's repeated attempt to rename territories in Arunachal Pradesh rejected

On 4 April, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs rejected China's renaming of territories in Arunachal Pradesh. The MEA spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said: "Arunachal Pradesh is, has been, and will always be an integral and inalienable part of India. Attempts to assign invented names will not alter this reality." This is the third attempt by China to rename territories in Arunachal Pradesh. On 4 April, the US also opposed this attempt by China. White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre stated: "The United States, as you know, has recognized that territory for a long time and we strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to advance a territory claim by renaming localities. And so, again, this is something that we have long stood by a few things."

Bangladesh: Massive fire in the cloth market

On 4 April, a massive fire broke out in Dhaka's Banga Bazar cloth market. Around 600 firefighters were deployed to douse the fire. According to the Bangabazaar Shop Owners' Association as reported by Al Jazeera, around 3000 shops were affected by the blaze incurring huge losses to the shop owners. According to the officials, the cause of the fire is yet to be determined.

Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa

Caucasus: Armenia and Azerbaijan no longer towards definitive peace

On 3 April, it was reported that Azerbaijan continues to block traffic into Nagorno-Karabakh for almost four months. This move has left more than 120,000 Armenians stranded in the region. Recently, the country is said to have pressured Armenia by blocking the alternative movement route. In February, the International Court of Justice negated the Azerbaijan government's reasoning for the blockade and ordered them to end it. The blockade has begun to affect the local population with regard to food, healthcare, and energy supply shortages.

Israel-Palestine: Tensions at the Al-Aqsa

On 5 April, Israeli police forces stormed the prayer hall of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and attacked Palestinian worshippers for the second night in a row. Videos of the police armed with batons and tear gas grenades attacking the worshippers, including women, went viral on media platforms. The Palestinian Red Crescent reported that six Palestinians were injured during the attack. As a spillover effect, violence was recorded in East Jerusalem, where a 14-year-old boy was shot during clashes. Clashes also broke out in the West Bank, injuring 12 people after the Israeli forces hurled canisters with poisonous gas. There were reports of suffocation of citizens in Nablus due to the explosion of canisters. The attack on the Al-Aqsa prayer hall received condemnation from different ends, including the Palestinian Authority, Turkey,



Canada and the Arab League. The Arab League held an emergency meeting and condemned Israel's actions.

Syria: Israel air strikes in Damascus

On 3 April, Israel carried out airstrikes in Damascus, Syria's capital. Syria's state news agency, SANA, stated that the Syrian air defence forces intercepted incoming missiles, averting more damage. However, the strike killed two civilians. This is the fourth strike in a month, primarily targeted at the Iranian-backed groups in Damascus. Syria is now a battleground for regional rivalries unfolding between Iran and Israel.

Syria: US airstrikes on the IS

On 4 April, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) conducted a unilateral strike targeting the Islamic State (ISIL) senior leader Khalid Aydd Ahmad a-Jabouri. CENTCOM said he was "responsible for planning ISIS attacks into Europe and developed the leadership structure for the armed group." It also clarified that no civilians were raided or killed during the strike.

Ethiopia: EU call for a successful implementation of a ceasefire in Tigray to normalise ties

On 4 April, the European Union said that the Ethiopian government would have to carry out successful efforts for the implementation of the ceasefire agreement signed in Tigray to normalise its relations with the country. The EU foreign policy chief, Josep Borrel, said that the progress in Tigray is a rare example of good news today. The EU suspended budgetary support to Ethiopia, citing human rights abuses after the conflict broke out in November 2020. Earlier this year, EU officials demanded accountability for the widespread abuses committed by the warring parties during the conflict.

Kenya: Igad praises Ruto and Odinga for agreeing to hold talks

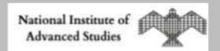
On 3 April, the East African bloc, Igad, praised Kenyan President Willam Ruto and opposition leader Raila Odinga for agreeing to hold talks to end the protests which have been going on for the past two weeks. Igad's Executive Secretary Workneh Gebeyehu stated that the decision would help "resolve differences on national issues through peaceful means and preserve Kenya's unity and constitutional order." The protests were against the rising cost of living and electoral reforms. On 2 April, Odinga called off the protests after Ruto agreed to hold talks.

Central African Republic: Abducted soldiers released

On 4 April, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said that 19 soldiers who were abducted by rebels in the Central African Republic have been released. The soldiers were abducted during a rebel raid in February. The previous month, an alliance of the rebel group, the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) was accused of an attack in a gold mine that killed nine Chinese workers.

Democratic Republic of Congo: Need for urgent humanitarian assistance in North Kivu, says Doctors without borders

On 4 April, Doctors Without Borders stated that urgent humanitarian assistance is needed in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. It said about a million people had been forced to flee their homes in North Kivu province the previous year following the M23 rebel violence. It added that most people live in dire conditions, and the aid workers are overwhelmed with increasing cases of measles and cholera.



Europe and the Americas

Finland: Turkey's parliament approves its membership into NATO

On 31 March, Turkey's General Assembly voted in favour of Finland joining NATO. It became the 31st NATO member to ratify after Hungary approved it on 27 March. According to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's party's legislator: "As a NATO member, we naturally had some expectations and requests regarding the security concerns of our country." Finland and Sweden, which jointly applied for NATO membership in May 2022, were blocked by Turkey and Hungary, citing the extradition of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), categorized as terrorists by the EU and the US. On 30 March, Finland's President Sauli Niinistö said: "Finland will be a strong and capable Ally, committed to the security of the Alliance." On the same day, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg appreciated Turkey's ratification on his Twitter feed: "I welcome the vote of the Grand National Assembly of #Türkiye to complete the ratification of # Finland's accession. This will make the whole #NATO family stronger & safer."

Russia: Wagner Group leader claims victory in Bakhmut

On 2 April, the head of Russia's Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, announced the success of capturing Artyomovsk (Bakhmut) by releasing a video from the city's administrative building. He said: "We hoisted the Russian flag with the inscription 'Good memory to Vladlen Tatarsky' and the flag of PMC Wagner on top of the city administration of Bakhmut." He added that the group had taken over the western districts. The Ukraine has not confirmed the development yet but reported on continuing losses for Russia in the battle.

Ukraine: Newly recruited get combat skills training in the UK

On 3 April, the Ukraine's General Staff of the Armed Forces reported on the ongoing training in the UK by the Norwegian National Guard. The newly recruited were trained in "combat skills." This is aimed at improving the security and capabilities of the armed force. On the same day, Ukraine's air force spokesperson highlighted the upper hand held by Russia in the war. To counter, Ukraine would need an F-16 multi-purpose aircraft to carry out targets in the air, ground and water (on the surface level). The spokesperson reported that the MiG-29 aircraft received from Slovakia and Poland are outdated, and that Ukrainian pilots who were already trained to use F-16 aircraft would represent an advantage.

Russia: Military blogger Vladlen Tatarsky killed in a "terrorist" bombing

On 2 April, a Russian military blogger popular for his daily reporting of the developments of the war was killed in St. Petersburg. He was also a part of the militia in 2014, Donbas. He was killed when an explosive device concealed in a gift statuette exploded during an event. More than 30 people were reported wounded. The woman who handed the gift to him has been detained and was identified as Darya Trepova, who is known to be a supporter of Alexey Navalny. She has been charged with a terrorist attack. President Putin awarded him the Order of Courage, and the Wagner Group listed him as their company's roster posthumously.

The US: Ex-President Trump indicted in hush money case

On 30 March, a Manhattan grand jury indicted Donald Trump after a probe into hush money paid to porn star Stormy Daniels, making him the first former US president to face criminal charges. Trump responding to the indictment stated: "This is Political Persecution and Election Interference at the highest level in history." Shortly after, Trump appealed to supporters to provide money for a legal defence. He has raised over USD two million through



his campaign. The national political landscape is undergoing a thrust.

The US: World Bank indicates one in six people worldwide affected by infertility

On 3 April, the World Bank published a report highlighting infertility prevalence rates of people from 1990 to 2021. As per the report, the lifetime prevalence of infertility is highest in the WHO western pacific regions and lowest in the WHO eastern mediterranean region. The report called on the governments to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights and improve infertility prevalence.

About the authors

Harini Madhusudan, Rashmi Ramesh, Ankit Singh and Akriti Sharma are Doctoral Scholars at the School of Conflict and Security Studies, NIAS. Padmashree Anandan is a Project Associate at NIAS. Anu Maria Joseph and Femy Francis are Research Assistants at NIAS.



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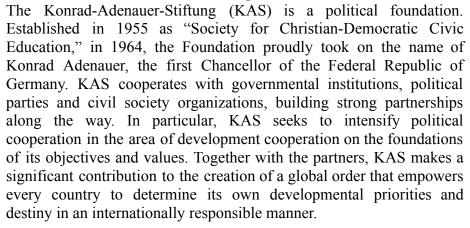
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The International Peace Research Initiative (IPRI), initiated in 2018 at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), is a part of the Conflict Resolution and Peace Research Programme at the School of Conflict and Security Studies.

IPRI undertakes research on various issues relating to peace with special emphasis on radicalisation, sustainable peace, gender roles in peacebuilding and global protest movements. IPRI researches are published as briefs, reports and commentary.

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About Conflict Weekly

The Conflict Weekly an academic endeavour to bring every Wednesday/Thursday a weekly analysis of the conflict and peace processes in the world; aiming to look at the larger peace picture. It is published by the NIAS-IPRI in collaboration with the KAS India Office.

Editor: D. Suba Chandran

Assistant Editor: Anu Maria Joseph

Editorial Team: Harini Madhusudan, Ankit Singh, Rashmi Ramesh,

Femy Francis, Akriti Sharma and Padmashree Anandan.