



Detailed News Articles: 21 May 2019

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1. [Moral ambiguity on the Rohingya](#)

Who are the Rohingya?

- The Rohingya are an ethnic group, largely comprising Muslims, who predominantly live in the Western Myanmar province of Rakhine.
- They speak a dialect of Bengali, as opposed to the commonly spoken Burmese language.
- Though they have been living in the South East Asian country for generations, Myanmar considers them as persons who migrated to their land during the Colonial rule.
- Hence, it has not granted Rohingyas full citizenship.
- According to the 1982 Burmese citizenship law, a Rohingya (or any ethnic minority) is eligible for citizenship only if he/she provides proof that his/her ancestors have lived in the country prior to 1823. Else, they are classified as “resident foreigners” or as “associate citizens” (even if one of the parent is a Myanmar citizen).
- Myanmar state, which was ruled by the military junta until 2011, has been accused of ethnic cleansing in Rakhine by the United Nations.
- It deported thousands of Rohingya to Bangladesh in the seventies and the citizenship law was also enacted by the junta.
- Sectarian violence between Rohingyas and Rakhine’s Buddhist natives began flaring up in June 2012, following the rape and murder of a Rakhine woman in a Rohingya-dominated locality. The riots, which were triggered as a result, went on for almost a month with casualties on both the sides.

What’s in the news?

- Experts opine that India’s abstention from voting on a UN Human Rights Council draft resolution, in March this year (2019), on the “situation of human rights in Myanmar” needs closer examination.

Editorial Analysis:

- The **UN Human Rights Council draft resolution** is co-sponsored by the European Union (EU) and Bangladesh.

What does the resolution talk about?

- The resolution “expresses grave concern at continuing reports of serious human rights violations and abuses in Myanmar”, particularly in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan States, and calls for a full inquiry into these by the Council’s own mechanism and the International Criminal Court (ICC).



- In its follow-up explanatory statement, India's permanent representative to the UN in Geneva, Rajiv Kumar Chander, said that it would "only be counter-productive" to support "extensive recommendations regarding legislative and policy actions" and "threatening Myanmar with punitive action, including at the ICC, to which that state is not a signatory".
- It is understandable that as a non-signatory of the Rome Statute, India would register its dissent against any punitive interventions by the ICC on another non-signatory country (Myanmar).
- However, critics opine that what is deeply unfortunate is India's continued diplomatic and moral passivity on the Rohingya crisis.
- Despite the Myanmar Army facing charges of serious war crimes, including genocide — according to a UN Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) and several other international human rights organisations — critics opine that India refuses to take a strong moral stand for the sake of maintaining cordial bilateral relations with Naypyidaw.

What the critics say?

- India continues to toe Myanmar's line on the issue, which harps on the "complexity" of the whole situation, lays emphasis on economic development rather than political rights for the Rohingya, lays stress on internal inquiries instead of international mechanisms, and even refuses to call the Rohingya community by its name.
- In fact, critics point out that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has not even publicly condemned the horrible atrocities that the Rohingya have faced at the hands of Myanmar's security forces.
- On his last visit to Myanmar in September 2017, Prime Minister Modi simply expressed concern at the "loss of lives of security forces and innocent people due to the extremist violence in Rakhine State".
- Critics point out that there was no reference to the excessive and arbitrary force used by security forces on Rohingya civilians in response to the "extremist violence".
- Experts opine that "Acknowledging that human rights violations have been committed, holding people accountable and reforming the Tatmadaw (Myanmar armed forces) is the only way forward."

India's Engagement:

- India, for its part, continues to maintain ties with the Myanmar armed forces (Tatmadaw), supplying them with combat hardware and imparting UN peacekeeping training.
- As a matter of fact, an edition of the India-Myanmar bilateral army exercise, IMBEX 2018-19, took place this January 2019 at Chandimandir.

(b) Arms and business ties



- According to the arms transfer database of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), India is one of Myanmar's top arms suppliers, and weapons sales includes military aircraft, artillery, naval vessels and reconnaissance equipment, armoured vehicles, anti-submarine torpedoes and missiles.
- One analysis by the Dutch advocacy group, Stop Wapenhandel (Stop Arms Trade), claims that India transferred combat equipment in violation of international embargoes.
- Critics allege that India's core logic here is to "modernise" the Tatmadaw with the intent of securing its 1,640-km plus border with Myanmar and forge a sustainable strategic partnership at China's doorstep.
- However, in this inflexible realpolitik approach, there is little space for end-user accountability and human rights.
- Critics point out that whether Myanmar is using some of its India-supplied weapons to maim non-combatant civilians in Rakhine State and other ethnic regions is a question that New Delhi has not asked so far. Further, Indian companies continue to invest in Myanmar, with several having direct links with Tatmadaw-owned businesses.

A Perspective through Dhaka's lens:

- India has so far refused to exert any pressure on Myanmar, instead choosing to balance ties with Dhaka and Naypyidaw by sending humanitarian aid to both.
- However, India's approach is being increasingly seen by Bangladesh, which is hosting nearly a million Rohingya refugees, to be tilted in Myanmar's favour.
- Bangladeshi journalist Humayun Kabir Bhuiyan argues that "Indian policy regarding the Rohingya crisis has always favoured Myanmar."
- He also flagged India's recent abstention as another sign of New Delhi's no-support for Dhaka on the Rohingya issue.
- Some experts point out that it is clear that if India continues to tacitly favour Myanmar at international forums, its much-valued bilateral ties with Bangladesh may suffer greatly.

A Prescriptive Way Forward:

- Experts opine that instead of just pushing one-time economic aid into Bangladesh and Myanmar, **India could have forged a regional 'compact'**, much like the Jordan Compact on Syria, to ensure sustained humanitarian assistance in addressing the short- and long-term needs of the displaced Rohingya population.
- This would have ensured uniform donor interest and better monitoring of where aid is going to. Instead, critics point out that India has deported (or refoiled) more than a dozen Rohingya refugees from its own territory back to Myanmar, in violation of international and domestic legal norms.



- Using the geo-economic leverage that it enjoys with Myanmar, India could compel Myanmar to bring the alleged perpetrators of war crimes to book or at least get a guarantee that such conduct would not be repeated in the future.
- However, New Delhi does not want to corner Aung San Suu Kyi, whose own relations with the Generals remain dicey.
- Critics point out that for now, India is happy to be in a stable, but morally tenuous, friends-with-benefit relationship with Myanmar. The victims continue to be the stateless Rohingya.

2. [Yemen's woes](#)

A Brief Look at History:

- Saudi Arabia, which shares a long border with Yemen, was wary of the rising influence of the Shia Houthis, who it sees as Iran-sponsored militia.
- The Saudis formed a coalition of anti-Houthi Sunni groups in Yemen and provided them with money and weapons, while its warplanes started attacking Houthi positions in March 2015. The war has dragged on since.
- Saudi Arabia started its Yemen military campaign in March 2015 with the goal of driving Houthis out of territories they captured.
- Four years of war have devastated Yemen. According to the UN, at least 7,000 civilians have been killed.
- Thousands of others have died due to disease, poor health care and malnutrition.
- The blockade Saudi Arabia imposed on Yemen steadily worsened the country's hunger problem and health-care crisis. Currently, the country is on the brink of a famine. It's a shame that even when the ceasefire was holding, the Saudis did not halt bombing Yemen.

Editorial Analysis:

- Experts point out that the withdrawal of Houthi rebels from three of Yemen's ports as part of the December 2018 ceasefire agreement should have been the basis for further talks to expand the truce to other parts of the country.
- However, while the withdrawal was under way recently, Houthis, who are reportedly getting support from Iran, carried out a drone attack on a Saudi pipeline, and in retaliation, Riyadh launched airstrikes on Sanaa, the capital city controlled by the rebels, killing at least six civilians, including children.
- Yemen now risks falling back to the pre-ceasefire days of conflict with fighting having broken out in parts of the government-controlled south.

A Perspective of Regional Trade:

- What makes the resumption of hostilities more dangerous is the regional angle.
- Tensions are on the rise in West Asia over the U.S.-Iran standoff.



- The U.S. had earlier warned against possible attacks by either Iran or Iran-backed militias against American interests or its allies in the region, and has deployed an aircraft carrier and a bomber squad to the Gulf.
- As a matter of fact, immediately after the pipeline was attacked, the Saudis blamed Iran for ordering it, an allegation which both Tehran and the Houthis have refuted.
- Whether Iran was actually behind the attack or not, the incident and the subsequent Saudi airstrikes show how the Yemeni conflict is entangled with the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Concluding Remarks:

- Saudi Arabia appears to be frustrated that it is not able to defeat the Houthis even after years of heavy bombing.
- The Houthis, on their part, continue to provoke the Saudis through cross-border rocket and drone attacks. The Yemenis are stuck in between.
- Experts opine that the way forward is the **Hodeida model**.
- The December 2018 ceasefire took effect in the Red Sea port city and both the rebels and government forces stuck to it till the rebels pulled out recently. Experts point out that **they should continue talks under international mediation and replicate the Hodeida model elsewhere in Yemen**.
- For this to be achieved, the Houthis should decouple themselves from the regional politics, and stay focussed on resolving differences with the government and rebuilding the war-torn country, while Saudi Arabia should get out of Yemen.

3. [The case against war on Iran](#)

Editorial Analysis:

- U.S. President Donald Trump has repeatedly spoken out against America's costly wars.
- Last year (2018), for instance, he called the 2003 Iraq war "the single worst decision ever made".
- Furthermore, during the presidential campaign, Donald Trump had promised to bring U.S. troops home.
- However, two and a half years into his own presidency, the U.S. is on the brink of another major war in West Asia, this time with Iran.
- Claiming to have intelligence that Iran could target its interests or the interests of its allies in the region, **the U.S. has already sent an aircraft carrier group and a bomber squadron to the Gulf**, which U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton called "a clear and unmistakable message to the Iranian regime".
- However, when asked if the U.S. is going to war with Iran, Mr. Trump replied, "I hope not."



- Having said this, the growing clamour for war both in Washington and in West Asia is hard to miss. Mr. Bolton, who is currently driving the Iran policy, is a well-known Iran hawk and has repeatedly called for regime change in Tehran.
- It is Israel that provided the intelligence inputs that set off the latest flare-up.
- As a matter of fact, a Saudi newspaper owned by Turki bin Salman, brother of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, carried an editorial last week calling for **“surgical strikes” on Iran.**
- As a matter of fact, a mysterious attack on four oil tankers off the UAE coast, and a drone attack on a Saudi pipeline that was claimed by the Iran-backed Houthi rebels of Yemen, worsened the crisis.
- **The situation in the Gulf is so dangerous now that a mere spark could trigger a full-blown conflict.**

A Look into Specifics:

- If the U.S. goes to another war in a region still struggling to recover from its past interventions, it will be morally calamitous and strategically ludicrous.
- Moreover, Iran does not deserve this treatment. **Iran signed an international agreement in 2015 to limit its nuclear programme in return for sanctions relief.**
- It fully complied with the deal until Tehran announced this month (May, 2019) that it would suspend some commitments made under the deal in protest against U.S. sanctions.
- It was Mr. Trump who violated the deal first by pulling the U.S. out of it last year (2018) and reimposing sanctions on Iran.
- Experts point out that in a better world, **Iran’s adherence to the agreement would have been appreciated and the country allowed to reap the promised benefits of the deal. Instead, the Trump administration punished it.**
- Secondly, if the U.S. goes to war, it will be a unilateral military action. It won’t get the approval of the United Nations Security Council as Russia and China remain steadfastly opposed to military action.
- Even the U.S.’s European allies, including the U.K. which supported the Iraq war, remain committed to the nuclear deal. **The U.S. might get the support of Saudi Arabia and Israel, but it is not certain whether even these countries would like to get dragged into a full-blown war.**
- A unilateral military action would further weaken international institutions and create more fissures in the Atlantic alliance.

Iran is not Iraq:

- It is also important to note that Iran is not Iraq. Nor is it Libya.
- The U.S. went to Iraq after a decade of crippling sanctions that it imposed and battered the country’s economy and military. Iraq was totally isolated.



- Arab countries had turned against Baghdad after the first Gulf war, Iran was its enemy, and Russia was still in retreat mode.
- The U.S., the U.K. and their allies marched to Iraq and toppled the Saddam Hussein regime in just a few weeks.
- Iran, on the other hand, is a country that lives in a state of permanent insecurity.
- It has always been battle-ready.
- It is important to note that **while Iran is not a strong conventional military force and is crippled by sanctions as well, Iranian policymakers were aware of these challenges.**

What Iran can do in the event of war?

- Iran adopted a 'forward defence' doctrine of expanding Iranian influence across West Asia through non-state militia groups.
- As a matter of fact, **Iran has Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shia militias in Iraq and Syria, the Houthis in Yemen, and the Islamic Jihad in Gaza.**
- In the event of a war, Iran could activate these groups, triggering multiple conflicts, drawing in several other countries.
- **This possibility makes even "a limited strike" on Iran dangerous.**
- Besides, Iran could block the Strait of Hormuz, which lies between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, through which one-third of the world's LNG and 20% of total oil production flows.
- That would be a drastic measure that could trigger a massive response from the U.S.
- However, war itself is a drastic measure and could cause extreme retaliatory action.

A Perspective on the U.S.'s war record:

- Next, the U.S.'s war record is not as great as is often presented to be.
- It is the world's pre-eminent military power not because of the results of the wars it has fought but because of its military might.
- It is ironic that the U.S. is escalating tensions in the Gulf at a time when it is negotiating with the Taliban to find a face-saving exit from Afghanistan.
- **When the War on Terror began, the U.S. promised to go after every terrorist in the world.**
- Seventeen years later, al-Qaeda is still alive, the Islamic State and other terror organisations are operating across the world, and the Taliban controls almost half the territory in Afghanistan.
- **In Iraq, the U.S. could easily topple the Saddam regime, but it failed to quell the post-Saddam unrest. As a matter of fact, Iraq slipped into a sectarian civil war.**
- It was from the mayhem in Iraq that the Islamic State rose.



- In Libya, the promise was liberation from Muammar Gaddafi's dictatorship when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (i.e., the U.S., France and the U.K.) intervened in 2011.
- Gaddafi was killed, but the country sank into chaos and is still to recover from it.
- In Syria, the U.S. made an indirect intervention and demanded President Bashar al-Assad's ouster until it was outwitted by the Russians.
- **The U.S. failed to get the desired outcome in all these countries. How will Iran be any different?**

Concluding Remarks:

- As U.S. President, Barack Obama seemed to have realised the challenges in Iran.
- That is why he attempted to curtail Iran's nuclear programme through diplomatic means.
- And he succeeded, until Mr. Trump came along and sabotaged it.
- President Trump says he wants talks with the Iranians, but he doesn't have a realistic programme for the same.
- If talks were his primary objective, the U.S. should not have withdrawn from the nuclear deal.
- Trump should have used the bonhomie created by the deal to expand ties and address concerns such as Iran's regional activism.
- If Mr. Trump truly wants to change the course, he should start with de-escalation and rein in his bellicose advisers.

4. [Eye on the monsoon](#)

Editorial Analysis:

- As India awaits the arrival of the annual summer monsoon, hopes are particularly high for normal rainfall that is so vital for agriculture, the health of forests, rivers and wetlands.
- **The India Meteorological Department has forecast normal rainfall of 96% of the long period average of 89 cm rain, with an onset date in the first week of June in Kerala.**
- It has also signalled a significant possibility of a deficit.

Significance of the Monsoon:

- The monsoon bounty is crucial for the 60% of gross cropped area in farming that is rain-fed, and represents, in the assessment of the National Commission on Farmers, 45% of agricultural output.
- Given the erratic patterns of rainfall witnessed over the past few decades and their possible connection to atmospheric changes caused by a variety of pollutants, the distribution of monsoon 2019 will add to the insights.



- **The southwest monsoon is a determinant of India's overall prosperity, and sustained efforts to make the best use of rainfall are absolutely important for farms, cities and industry.**

Areas that need a focus on a war footing:

- Considering that there has been a 52% decline in groundwater levels based on tests conducted last year (2018) over the previous decadal average, **State governments should have pursued the setting up of new recharging wells and made improvements to existing ones on a war footing.**
- Unfortunately, State governments have also lagged in building structures to harvest surface water and helping farmers raise the efficiency of irrigation.
- The approach to the farming sector, however, has been influenced more by the imperatives of an election year, and the Centre's biggest intervention was to announce a cash handout to specified categories of small farmers.

The impact of particulates:

- It is important to note that although **a normal summer monsoon over the subcontinent brings widespread prosperity, however, it does not guarantee a uniform spread.**
- This, as scientists point out, may be due to the effect of particulates released through various industrial and agricultural processes.
- Some of these aerosols suppress the rainfall and disperse it across the land, causing long breaks in precipitation, while others absorb heat and lead to a convection phenomenon that increases rainfall in some places.
- **Such evidence points to the need for India to clean up its act on rising industrial emissions, and burning of fossil fuels and biomass in order to improve the stability of the monsoon.**
- An equally key area of concern is freshwater availability for households, which, NITI Aayog says, account for 4% of available supplies, besides 12% used by industry.

Concluding Remarks:

- Urbanisation trends and the severe water stress that residents experience underscore the need for mandatory rainwater harvesting policies and augmented efforts by States to preserve surface water by building new reservoirs.
- Yet, unfortunately, **governments are adopting a commodity approach to the vital resource, displaying deplorable indifference to the pollution and loss of rivers, wetlands and lakes that hold precious waters. This is no way to treat a life-giving resource.**

Thank you!