

# SDGs FOR ALL

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SDGs FOR ALL

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## GEO-POLITICS AND SDGs FISHING IN TROUBLED WATERS ?



## IN THIS ISSUE

This month we do not really have a clear theme. But, with geo-political battles gathering steam around the world, we reflect on these battles, especially in the Indo-Pacific region with the choice of some of the stories.

For one of our project reports, we sent our Thai correspondent Pattama Vilialert to Laos to look at the new China-built railway that links landlocked Laos to China on one side and Southeast Asia via Thailand on the other. We explore what is in store for Laos from this large investment and whether it could bring prosperity to the country.

While India hype up its credentials to lead the Global South as a development success story, we bring you a report from Karnataka state in South India, where the state government has decided to give money instead of rice to the poor. We explore its significance and also raise the question whether India is facing a problem with food security?

From the Pacific, we have a story about Greenpeace's activist ship sailing the Pacific Ocean to gather evidence to be presented to the World Court next year in support of the Pacific-led case on the level of compensation that should be given to victims of climatic change.

Our African contributor Jeffrey Moyo brings an interesting African perspective on the BRICS summit in South Africa in August, where the BRICS leaders committed to address Africa's development needs.

From the Pacific, we have somewhat a hilarious story, about how the French President Emmanuel Macron, during a visit to the regions warn Pacific leaders of a looming threat of colonialism, while France still refuse to vacate its Pacific colonial territories.

The international media loves to talk about corruption in the Global South, but we bring you a story about how corruption works in the Global North. And from the Pacific we have a story about USAID coming back to the region and we question the motives for it. In the past couple of years we have talked a lot about Covid, but what about dengue fever which is as much a danger to lives, especially in the Global South's poorer countries? We have a story from Bangladesh about a latest epidemic.

In viewpoints, Somar Wijayadasa looks at the rise of BRICS, while Darini R Senannayake asks why France's Macron and the US are fishing in the Indian Ocean, and she has an interesting perspective on Sri Lanka's debt crisis and fake news that was peddled by the international media about it. And Fiji's deputy Prime Minister and an economics Professor Biman Prasad explains why the Pacific Islands are at a cliffs edge. And, Nigerian journalist and novelist Kola Kings brings us some interesting facts on why France and western powers want Niger's coup reversed.

Our special feature focus in this issue is written by Pakistani academic Hamid Ali Khan - who takes a look at the social media and trivialization of Pakistani society.

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**August 2023**

**Bringing You Stories and Issues Relevant  
To Achieving The SDGs in The  
Post-COVID Era**

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China-built trains in Laos. Photo Credit Laos-China Railway Company Limited

### **Will the Modern-Day Silk Road Bring Prosperity to Laos?**

By Pattama Vilailert

VIENTIANE, Laos — When a China-built high-speed railway began operations in December 2021, Laos joined the modern-day silk road project that opened itself to trade and tourism opportunities across Asia. But many in the country doubt whether the land-locked nation would reap full benefits.

“Since the Laos-China railway came into operation, tourist arrivals to Laos have increased. Most of them want to take the bullet train, especially Thai and Vietnamese, the two main visitors to our country, not to mention Chinese who come here to travel and do business,” Somphone Thammavong, a tourism official, told IDN.

But Sangphet Manivong, a Lao non-governmental organization staffer, was somewhat skeptical. “When Chinese tourists come to Laos, they stay in the hotels and eat in the restaurants that the Chinese run. Subsequently, the revenue does not go to the Lao people,” he complained.

“Also, in some areas like Boten on the border with China, where the Chinese own casinos and hotels, the Yuan is the main trading currency.” To overcome such concerns, Laos and China agreed in January this year to facilitate the direct exchange of the Lao Kip and the Chinese Yuan instead of having to make conversions via other currencies, as was previously the case.

The trains not only carry passengers from abroad but also shorten the travel time for Lao people, who have eagerly lapped onto train travel in a country without trains.

“It used to take me four hours by bus to Vang Vieng, but now it only takes me 55 minutes by train from Vientiane,” Vilaiphone Phommchanh, a 3rd year nursing student studying across the border in Udonthani, Thailand, told IDN. Her only complaint was to having to queue at the station because ticket sales open only 45 minutes before the train departs.

The railway is part of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013 to establish two new trade corridors—land and sea—linking East and Southeast Asia to Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. A total of 147 countries have joined BRI.

In May 2017, Laos and China signed the ‘One Belt One Road Master Plan’, which focuses on seven areas of

cooperation: Infrastructure, Agriculture, Capacity Building, Industrial Parks, Culture and Tourism, Finance and Banking, and Marketing.

The Laos-China Railway (LCR) is the top priority for the BRI cooperation between the two countries. At a speed of 160 km per hour, the 1,035-kilometre line connects Vientiane, the capital of Laos, with Kunming, the capital of southwest China's Yunnan province. The line then connects to China's national railway system, and at the other end (after the establishment of the rail connection across the bridge on the Mekong ), it will connect with the railways of Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore as part of the Pan-Asian Railway Network.

The train stretches 422.4 km within Laos and connects the northern border towns of Boten and Luang Prabang, and Vang Vieng, popular tourist spots, with Vientiane. The LCR will advance economic and social development in the region by improving access to markets and resources, creating jobs, and reducing poverty.

According to China Railway Kunming Group and the Laos-China Railway Co., by April 2023, the cross-border railway handled 14.43 million passenger trips and 18.8 million metric tons of cargo. Today, local and foreign passengers pack trains.

But this project is not immune to criticism from foreign and local critics who claim the railway has increased Laos's debt burden. Laos, which has ambitions to become the hydro "Battery of Southeast Asia," has borrowed heavily to develop its hydroelectric potential, and the railway project is estimated to have added another \$6 billion to its debts.

Half of the debts are believed to be to China, and according to the US research organization AidData, Laos' debt to China, including off-balance sheet items as borrowings by state-owned enterprises, amounts to 65% of GDP, one of the highest in the world.

"Laos is heavily in debt and has not been able to negotiate much to its advantage. Several fruits and vegetables and other things (from China) influx Laos by train," Sangphet told IDN.

Meanwhile, a May 2023 World Bank report<sup>1</sup> notes that while the Laos-China railway line and the new dry port have facilitated travel and trade flows, and natural resource exports have supported industrial activity, macroeconomic instability and external factors have undermined the recovery.



Chinese Street Barber in Vientiane. Photo Credit Pattama Vilailert

The need to service large external debts, high import prices, and limited foreign exchange contributed to a sharp fall in the value of the kip, causing high inflation and weakening income, consumption, and investment.

"Most skilled workers leave the country to work in Thailand and elsewhere; many foreign companies established in Laos have hired their own experts," said Noi Maliwan, co-founder of a private Lao SME Center. "Even for non-skilled work in a number of cultivated Chinese farms, Chinese are hired, although the Lao Labour Law stipulates that locals must be hired for such work. But foreign companies usually claim that Lao workers are not qualified."

Sanphet alleges that the Chinese tend to get privileged treatment in the country. "It looks to me like some privileges are given to the Chinese; some Chinese men marry Lao women to own land," he told IDN. "Chinese businessmen invest in banana farms so that Laos now has about 66,000 acres of banana farms and later transports them back to China on the Laos-China train, while Lao laborers working on the farm and their children are exposed to

pesticide residues," Sanphet added.

<sup>1</sup><https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/4d007846d90603cba830b0b2859cf9be0070062023/original/LaoEconomicMonitorMay2023.pdf>

Noi also said that the number of small and medium enterprises in agriculture has increased due to the train operation. However, they are not owned by the Lao people as they have no capital but are owned by Chinese investors. It is a scarce opportunity for Lao people to co-invest with the Chinese.

Noi noted that before Covid-19, the economy was not that bad, but now it is time to pay off the debt, which has led to a devaluation of the kip, making the Lao economy vulnerable. Additionally, she expressed concerns about Lao SMEs' inability to benefit from the railway.

"Many Lao SMEs in agriculture sell their products in the local market," Noi pointed out. "They also want to export their products by train but lack capital as government support is only available for a few SMEs."

Another Lao SME operator Bounthavy Inthavong (not her real name), agreed with that. "Currently, the cost of living in Laos is very high; even though World Bank and Asian Development Bank provide some loans through our governments, not many people qualify to get the loan."



Fresh local vegetables at local market. Picture Credit: Lao Aussie Fresh Market

Hommala Phensisanavong, an academic at Lao National University, is more optimistic about the potential of the railway to spur her country's economic development in the long term. "I see the advantages of Laos over the Laos-China train," she said, pointing to her enterprising students who have ordered shoes, bags and cosmetics, among other things, from China and had them delivered by train, which they then sell online."

"Besides, there is a high demand for Chinese-speaking staff, young people do not need to have a university degree, if they want to work, they may learn Chinese, and when they are proficient in the language, they are easily hired by Chinese companies in Laos," she added

"It is encouraging to see that there is hope for Laos to sustain itself through investment and growth in the agricultural sector. The Laos-China train offers a valuable opportunity to increase exports to China," notes Noi. But for this to happen, the Lao mindset needs to change, she argues.

"Lao government and people need to know what products are in demand and invest in growing and selling them. With continued efforts in this direction, Laos can achieve long-term sustainability and prosperity," Noi told IDN in a hopeful voice.

[Transmitted on 5 August 2023 by IDN-InDepthNews]

## **India's Karnataka State Has a New Approach to Feed the Hungry**

By Manjushree Naik

MANIPAL, India — With India facing the prospect of a grain crisis, the state government of Karnataka in southern India has come up with a novel approach to keep to election promises by giving the poor money to buy the grains.

The Karnataka Government's most ambitious programme, Annabhagya Yojana, provides the underprivileged with 10 kilograms of rice per individual each month – who holds a BPL or Antyodaya card, which indicates the family's poverty level.

Annabhagya Scheme was a pre-election promise made by the Congress Party, and after they won the





Beneficiaries of the Annabhagya Yojana standing in a queue outside the public distribution shop to collect the rice. Photo Credit: Manjushree Naik

government in the May 2023 state election, they were obligated to carry out the promise.

The main goal of launching the Annabhagya Scheme is to provide free grains to poor people struggling to feed their families. Only people living in poverty are eligible for free rice under the Scheme.

There is no limit on the number of family members; each family member will receive 5 kgs of rice per month per head. The Congress had promised in its election manifesto to distribute 5 kg of free rice to each member of families with the Antyodaya (people in the

bottom of the pyramid) cards, in addition to the 5 kg provided under the National Food Security Act since 2013.

Every month, an estimated 0.229 million metric tonnes of rice are required to supply 5 kg of free rice to the 44.2 million family members of Karnataka's 1.9 million Antyodaya cardholders. The Food Corporation of India (FCI) has refused to sell this rice to the state.

Due to FCI's refusal to sell rice, the state has been unable to obtain sufficient grains in time for the July 1 launch of the promised Annabhagya Yojana free rice scheme.

Thus, the Karnataka government has temporarily given 170 rupees (USD 2.05) per person per month beginning July 1 in lieu of the promised 5 kgs of rice. Since the launch, the government has so far credited 45.6 million rupees to 784,000 beneficiaries.

The money is deposited into the bank account associated with the head of the family's Aadhaar (biometric ID) number. Despite the fact that the state has 12.8 million ration cardholders, only about 9.7 million are currently eligible for the scheme.

According to a Food and Civil Supplies Department official (who did not want to be named), approximately 870,000 ration card holders who did not use the scheme in the previous three months are no longer eligible. Additionally, around 2.1 million cardholders are not eligible because they have not linked their Aadhaar to bank accounts, and a few do not have bank accounts.

According to the official, fair price shops will display the names of ration cardholders who do not have bank accounts or have not linked their bank accounts with Aadhaar. They will also assist with Aadhaar seeding or opening bank accounts in post offices.

Karnataka state—a major rice producer—has achieved food self-sufficiency for more than four decades, but this does not guarantee food security. Though having an abundance of food, hunger persists.

According to the 2019-21 National Family Health Survey (NFHS), a significant proportion of young children in India face food insecurity, raising concerns about their development and future well-being. To achieve SDG 2 of zero hunger, experts say that India must implement strategic initiatives to eliminate food insecurity and ensure affordable access to nutritious food for all

Annabhagya has enabled Basamma Gowdar of Bagalkot in the North Karnataka region to save her family from hunger. Basamma and her husband work as daily wage labourers with two small children, and the scheme has also saved them money. Due to insufficient rainfall, the couple who own a small plot of land

cannot cultivate. As a result, the couple goes to work daily, which is not guaranteed.

“Annabhagya has ensured that we have enough rice to eat two square meals a day”, Basamma told IDN. She believes that the money given to substitute rice is now helpful and that they can choose rice quality. “Previously, we took the quality of rice distributed through the public distribution system because we had no other option”, she added.

Food and Agriculture Secretary. M. T. Reju of the Karnataka Government stated that the scheme had helped the poor who would otherwise go hungry. “The goal of food security has been met,” he told IDN. He stated that since the scheme’s inception in July, the government has successfully reached out to 80 percent of the beneficiaries and expects to reach 100 percent by the end of August.

### **First-time financial transfers for food**

This is not the first time financial transfers for food grains have been made accessible. When it comes to financial transfers for food, this is the first of its sort in South Asia. There is a lot of effort to be made to ensure transparency through data cleaning and validation. Reju further stated that the cash transfer is made in the name of the woman, as outlined by the National Food Security Act. “The failure rate is quite low that there is widespread public and private acceptance,” he said.



Roadside fruit stall in India. Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne

Karnataka government minister Lakshmi Hebbalkar stated that the government has set up software to detect fraudulent accounts and other malpractice while recipients upload their ration card details to receive benefits.

Geetha Heeremutt of Kudalasangama stated that she previously lived in a joint family with her in-laws. She and her husband have relocated to Udupi in search of work. She is unable to upload her information because she has a joint ration card with her in-laws and they benefit from free rice. She thus must balance her husband’s and her own earnings for their food.

Another Karnataka resident Lakshmi Naik from Bhatkal believes that the amount of rice each individual receives is beneficial. She said that her family consists of five members: her husband, son, daughter-in-law, and daughter and that they receive nearly 50 kgs of rice every month, which is sufficient for the family. “The rice is of sufficient quality so we use it for cooking and occasionally use the excess rice to make Dosa and Idli (staple breakfast delicacies in India)”, she added.

Shivanna Koteekar, who works as a mason’s assistant, said that he, his wife, two children, and his mother all received the benefits. “We utilise the money we receive for the remaining five kilograms of rice to buy rice from grocery stores. The scheme is immensely useful”, he added.

In response to Karnataka’s accusations that it is being denied rice for its new Annabhagya scheme, Union Food Secretary Sanjeev Chopra said in a statement to the media that surplus grains, whether rice or wheat, in the Central pool should be shared by all states, not just one.

“Approximately 36 million tonnes of rice are distributed through the Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Ann Yojana (revised National Food Security Act, which is free to all beneficiaries),” he noted. “If all states begin to demand additional rice for the public distribution system beyond what the Centre provides, the total amount will be 72 million tonnes. The stock of foodgrains is 56 to 57 million tonnes,” Chopra stated.

[Transmitted on 21 August 2023 by IDN-InDepthNews]



Greenpeace Rainbow Warrior berthed in Suva harbour in Fiji. Photo Credit: Sera Sefeti

## Rainbow Warrior Sails the Pacific to Gather Evidence for World Court

By Sera Sefeti

SUVA, Fiji — International environmental campaign group Greenpeace’s Rainbow Warrior is currently sailing across the Pacific waters, calling at ports collecting evidence to present to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), also called the World Court, during a historic hearing in The Hague next year.

Rainbow Warrior staff and crew will be joined by Pasifika activists

sailing across the crystal blue waters of the Pacific, campaigning to take climate change to the highest court. Their latest six-week campaign voyage started in Cairns in Australia on 31 July and will call on Vanuatu, Tuvalu, and Fiji.

Currently, they are on a port call in Suva. Greenpeace Australia’s Pacific General Council member Katrina Bullock told IDN, “Part of what we really wanted to do during the ship tour was to bring together climate leaders from different parts of the world to talk and share their experiences because climate impacts might look different in different parts of the world.”

Staff and volunteers at Greenpeace’s iconic campaign vessel have been welcoming local people here, especially youth, to speak to their campaign staff about what they do and why climatic justice campaigns are important to save the pristine environment in the region that is facing a multitude of problems due to climatic change.

Bullock added that “everybody is sharing the same struggles, so we had Uncle Pabai and Uncle Paul (indigenous Torres Straits Islanders from Australia) who came with us to Vanuatu, where they joined up with some terrific activists from the Philippines who are also looking at holding their government accountable.”

“If we become climate refugees, we will lose everything – our homes, community, culture, stories, and identity,” says Uncle Paul whose ancestors have lived on the land for 65,000 years. “We can keep our stories and tell our stories, but we won’t be connected to Country because Country will disappear”. That’s why he is taking the government to court, “because I want to protect my community and all Australians before it’s too late.”

The two indigenous First Nations leaders from the Guda Maluyligal in the Torres Strait are plaintiffs in the Australian Climate Case suing the Australian government for failing to protect their island homes from climate change. They are training other Pacific islanders on activism to hold their governments to account.

The UN General Assembly on 29 March 2023 adopted by consensus a resolution requesting an advisory opinion from the ICJ on the obligations of States in respect of climate change. This opinion aims to clarify the legal obligations of states in addressing climate change and its consequences, particularly regarding the rights and interests of vulnerable nations (and people). It’s the first time the General Assembly has requested an advisory opinion from the ICJ with unanimous state support.

The resolution was youth-driven, and it originated with a law school students’ project at the University of the South Pacific’s Vanuatu campus and ultimately led to the Vanuatu government tabling it at the UN. This Pacific-led resolution has been hailed as a “turning point in climate justice” and a victory for the Pacific youth who spearheaded the campaign.



The ICJ is the principal judicial organ of the United Nations, entrusted with settling legal disputes between states. It entertains only two types of cases: contentious cases and requests for advisory opinions.

“We have been collecting evidence from across the Pacific of climate impacts to take to the world’s highest court as part of the ICJ initiative. We have also had the opportunity to mobilize communities and bring the leaders from all parts of the world together to share their experiences and do some community training,” Bullock said.

The Rainbow Warrior has a long history of daring activism and fearless campaigning and has been sailing the world’s oceans since 1978, fighting various environment destroyers and polluters. In 1985, the first Rainbow Warrior ship was sunk by a terrorist bombing at New Zealand’s Auckland port, allegedly by French security agents, because the ship and its crew were fearlessly campaigning against French nuclear testing in the Pacific.

Today’s Rainbow Warrior is a sophisticated modern sailing ship with a multinational crew that includes Indians, Chileans, South Africans, Australians, Fijians, and many other nationalities. This week they were sharing their stories (of environmental destruction) with local youth and children to take the fight further with the help of stories collected from people in the Pacific.

According to Bullock, the shared stories were filled with trauma and loss as they went from island to island. “We were in Vanuatu, and some of the women shared their experiences of what it was like after a cyclone to lose lots of herbal medicine and the plants that you rely on as a community, and what that means to them and why western pharmacies aren’t a substitute.”

The Rainbow Warrior activists were shown the loss of land and gravesites and collected many stories they believe will make an impact. While they are berthed in Fiji, students and community members were given guided tours on the boat and informed on their work – including how they navigate the high seas.

One such group was the students and teachers from a local primary school, Vashistmuni Primary School in Navua, who were excited and fascinated to learn about the work the Rainbow Warrior does. Their teacher said that while it is part of their curriculum to learn about climate change and global warming, “it was good to bring the kids out and witness firsthand what a climate warrior looks like and its importance; hopefully, they go back and take action in their local communities.”



Students and teachers from a local primary school, Vashistmuni Primary School on board Rainbow Warrior. Photo Credit: Sera Sefeti

For Ani Tuisausau, Fijian activist and core focal point of the climate justice working group here, her choice to take this up was personal. “I am someone who is constantly going to my dad’s island, so compared to how it was then to how it is now, it is different,” she told IDN. “There are some places where I used to swim; they are polluted; and then, of course, the sea level rises; I don’t want my kids growing up and missing out on the beauty of our beaches and what I experienced when I was younger”.

“For that to happen, there needs to be a change in mindsets,” argues Tuisausau, “and this is the best opportunity on board the Rainbow Warriors; they get to hear the stories of what is happening in the Pacific and compare and relate to what is happening in our backyard.” The Rainbow Warrior’s stories include intense stories and dignified climate migration but also the loss of culture and land. The team is confident that collecting these stories will give them a fighting chance at the ICJ. Bullock says that when she started with the Rainbow Warrior five years ago, she thought facts and figures were a way to change mindsets. “But now I realize that while facts and figures are important, stories are crucial because they touch hearts and move people to action”.

[Transmitted on 14 August 2023 by IDN-InDepthNews]

## BRICS Jumps to Africa's Rescue

By Jeffrey Moyo

HARARE, Zimbabwe — The three-day BRICS Summit from 22-24 August 2023 in South Africa has raised hopes across the African continent that a new deal for development aid to Africa could be taking shape that will be more fair and equitable. For decades, critics have pointed out that Africa has been paying more to the West than it gets in terms of development loans.



Photo: Collage of pictures from: brics2023.gov.za

After initial skepticism when it was formed in 2009, the BRICS, which includes Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, is now seen as a counterweight to Western powers' dominance of world institutions. It has gathered added importance following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Western financial sanctions against Russia that have negatively impacted what is now known as the 'Global South' that is seen to be represented by BRICS.

"The objective, irreversible process of de-dollarization of our economic ties is gaining momentum," Russian President Vladimir Putin, absent from the Johannesburg summit, said in a pre-recorded statement.

However, discussions concerning a common BRICS currency were not on the Summit's agenda. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, backed by Brazil's President Lula da Silva, had voiced support for a common currency among BRICS nations.

"Advancing the African agenda is a strategic priority for South Africa during its Chairship of BRICS," President Cyril Ramaphosa told the Open Plenary on 23 August.

According to Dilma Rousseff, the Brazilian President of the BRICS bank—the New Development Bank (NDB)—the BRICS countries are "good partners" for Africa. Rousseff said this in a speech at the BRICS summit in Johannesburg, adding that the NDB would finance physical and digital infrastructure projects in Africa—that could help to achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs).

At the South Africa BRICS summit, two African countries—Egypt and Ethiopia—were given the nod to join the bloc starting January next year, along with four other countries: Argentina, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

A perennial foe of Western countries due to criticism of its human rights record, Zimbabwe has also sought to join the BRICS bloc. Its Vice President Constantino Chiwenga represented the Southern African nation at the summit.

"As a country, Zimbabwe perceives how BRICS represents a formidable alliance that fosters a multipolar and inclusive world order. Joining this alliance will provide Zimbabwe with a unique opportunity to collaborate with like-minded nations and harness the benefits of collective strength," Chiwenga said at the summit.

Chiwenga added that Zimbabwe applauds BRICS' establishment of the NDB and the proposal to use local currencies between member states in the bloc and other countries in the south.

As such, he said at the BRICS summit, "Like other countries in the south, Zimbabwe hopes to benefit from the New Development Bank as an alternative source of funding for developmental projects."

Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema expressed hope that the bloc would be a game changer for African countries, particularly his own.



BRICS family photo in South Africa 2023. Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons

“We in Zambia see this as a real opportunity to address challenges we have kept on talking about for a long time and on many platforms. We need to reform the global world order in particular to address the inequalities associated with critical ingredients to development such as capital,” Hichilema said.

Participants in the summit discussed that interest rates should be relatively low for the loans obtained from BRICS’ NDB to place Africa on a better footing.

Debt Justice, formerly the Jubilee Debt Campaign (that campaigned for writing off African debts leading up to the year 2000)—had pointed out to G7 members before their summit last year that private Western banks charge a much higher rate of interest than bilateral loans such as from China—owe 35% of African debts.

African states expressed the desire for lending rates of NDB to be more affordable. “Lessons have been learned from the manner international institutions are structured, and we hope for a more democratic dispensation,” said Botswana’s Vice President [Slumber Tsogwane](#) in an interview with his country’s Daily News after attending the BRICS summit. Tsogwane represented his country’s President, Mokgweetsi Masisi.

But even as they attended the bloc’s summit, other African countries like Namibia chose to be cautious before they could join the bloc.

“We are just hearing that BRICS opened doors for new membership, so we need to find out the procedures before declaring anything. It’s something to consider if it will bring benefits to our local economy,” Namibia’s International Relations Minister, Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah told reporters before the meeting kicked off in neighbouring South Africa.

Yet Mozambique, like its Zimbabwean neighbour, expressed enthusiasm about the BRICS bloc. Filipe Nyuse, the Mozambican President, attended the summit.

“By joining these dialogues, Mozambique does so with the conviction that the BRICS can constitute yet another outstanding way to share interests and efforts through concrete actions, providing mutual benefits in an environment of complementarity and solidarity that characterizes the Global South in various matters of structuring interests of our States,” Nyuse told the BRICS summit.

In an interview with Xinhua news agency, Carlos Watson, a representative of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) in China, remarked that cooperation among BRICS countries and others is crucial for “a better outcome” in achieving the SDGs agenda by 2030.

“In the agriculture sector, this cooperation between and among countries of the Global South can act as a key delivery modality to catalyse agricultural development, food and nutrition security, rural development and poverty reduction,” he said.

China also supports developing countries to achieve their development goals per the UNSGDS.

Renowned lecturer at South Africa’s Tshwane University, Dr Ricky Munyaradzi Mukonza, applauded BRICS’s embrace of African countries.



“BRICS is good news for Africa because it provides a better home for their interests. This is particularly so when one looks at the continent’s economic interests as an organization that is meant to serve south-south relations,” Mukonza told IDN.

An academic at the University of Malawi’s Department of Political and Administrative Studies, Gift Sambo, said hopes are higher among African nations if they join BRICS.

“The high expectations among African countries on BRICS are understandable. There is a strong perception in the region that the possibility of striking fair trade deals is higher with BRICS than the terms associated with the Washington consensus. This is reinforced by the fact that the giant of African economies, South Africa, is a key member of the grouping,” Sambo told IDN.

Said Sambo, “it is expected that the region’s strong attachment with the BRICS is going to enhance Africa’s bargaining power in the global political economy.”

A Zimbabwean political analyst, Gibson Nyikadzino, also weighed in.

“The world political system is being reshaped and reorganized to counter the western dominant political, social and economic order and allow countries in the semi-periphery and periphery to amalgamate around goals of economic justice and equality,” Nyikadzino told IDN.

He added, “BRICS is giving an alternative to Africa about the potential that exists in South-South cooperation and economic possibilities to counter the dominant G7 and Western unilateral approach to the conduct of global affairs.”

According to analysts like Nyikadzino, “in BRICS, the numbers relating to economic activity, output and cooperation are good for Africa because of fair win-win cooperation being advocated by the bloc.”

[Transmitted on 29 August 2023 by IDN-InDepthNews]



Leaders attending the BRICS Summit in South Africa 2023. Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons



Prime Minister James Marape presenting a traditional eagle wooden spear with totems to French President Emmanuel Macron at Varirata Park today as a symbol of friendship. Image: PNG Post-Courier.

### **Macron Warns of New Colonialism in The Pacific, But Refuses to Abandon Overseas Territories**

By Ravindra Singh Prasad

SUVA, Fiji — French president Emmanuel Macron in a historic first visit to an independent Pacific state by a sitting French President, has denounced “new imperialism” in the region during a stop in Vanuatu, warning of a threat to the sovereignty of smaller states.

But, earlier, during a two-day stop in France’s colonial outpost New Caledonia, he refused to entertain demands by indigenous Kanak leaders to hold a new referendum on independence.

“There is in the Indo-Pacific and particularly in Oceania new imperialism appearing, and a power logic that is threatening the sovereignty of several states—the smallest, often the most fragile,” he said in a speech in Port Vila, Vanuatu’s capital on 27 July.

“Our Indo-Pacific strategy is above all to defend through partnerships the independence and sovereignty of all states in the region that are ready to work with us,” he added, conveniently ignoring the fact that France still has colonies in the Pacific (Oceania) that they refuse to let go.

Some 1.6 million French citizens live across seven overseas territories (colonies), including New Caledonia, French Polynesia (Tahiti), and the smaller atolls of Wallis and Futuna. This gives them an exclusive economic zone spanning nine million square kilometres.

Macron uses this fact to claim that France is part of the region even though his country is over 16,000 km from New Caledonia and Tahiti. As the US and its allies seek to counter China’s growing influence in the region, France offered an “alternative”, claiming they have plans for expanded aid and development to confront natural catastrophes.

The French annexed New Caledonia in 1853, reserving the territory as a possible penal colony. Indigenous Kanaks have lived in the islands for over 3000 years, and the French uprooted them from the land and used them as forced labour in new French plantations and construction sites. Tahiti’s islands were occupied by migrating Polynesians around 500 BCE, and in 1832 the French took over the islands. In 1946 it became an overseas territory of the French Republic.

China is gaining influence in the region with its development aid packages designed to address climatic change, empowerment of grassroots communities, and promotion of trade, especially in the fisheries

sector, under Chinese President Xi Jinping's new Global Development Initiative.

After neglecting the region for decades, the West has begun to woo the Pacific countries lately, especially after they were alarmed by a defence cooperation deal signed between China and Solomon Islands in April 2022, which the West suspect is a first step towards Beijing establishing a naval base in the Pacific.

In December 2020, there was a similar alarm, especially in Australia, when China offered a \$200 million deal to Papua New Guinea (PNG) to establish a fisheries harbour and a processing factory to supply fisheries products to China's seafood market, which is the world's largest. It created hysterical reactions in the Australian media and political circles in Canberra, claiming China was planning to build a naval base 200 km from Australia's shores.

A stream of Western leaders has visited the region since then while publicly claiming to help the small island nations in their development needs, but at the same time, arm-twisting local leaders to sign in to defence deals for their navies in particular to gain access to Pacific harbours and military facilities.

While Macron was on a five-day visit to New Caledonia, Vanuatu and PNG, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin were in Tonga and PNG, respectively, negotiating secret military deals. At the same time, Macron made the comments of a new imperialism in the Pacific.

Austin was at pains to explain to skeptical journalists in PNG that the US was not seeking a permanent base in the Pacific Islands nation. It has been reported in the PNG media that the US was seeking access to PNG military bases under the pretext of training PNG forces for humanitarian operations in the Pacific.

PNG and the US signed a defence cooperation agreement in May that sets a framework for the US to refurbish PNG ports and airports for military and civilian use. The text of the agreement shows that it allows the staging of US forces and equipment in PNG and covers the Lombrum Naval Base, which Australia and US are developing. There have been protests over this deal in PNG, and the opposition has threatened to challenge some provisions of it legally.

Blinken, who was making the first visit to Tonga by a US Secretary of State, was there to open a new US embassy in the capital Nuku'alofa on 26 July. At the event, he spoke about China's "problematic behavior" in the Pacific and warned about "predatory economic activities and also investments" from China, which he claimed was undermining "good governance and promote corruption".

Tonga is believed to be heavily indebted to China, but Tongan Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni later said at a press conference that Tonga had started to pay down its debt this year and had no concerns about its relationship with China.

Pacific leaders have repeatedly emphasised that they would welcome assistance from richer countries to confront the impact of climatic change in the region, but they do not want the region to be militarised and get embroiled in a geo-political battle between the US and China. This was stated bluntly by Fiji's defence minister at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore last year. Other Pacific leaders have repeated this at various forums since then.

Though the Western media reports about these visits to the Pacific by Western leaders as attempts to protect a "rules-based order" in the region, many in the Pacific media are skeptical about this argument.

Fiji-based Island Business (IB), in a report from the New Caledonian capital Noumea pointed out how Macron ignored Kanaks' demands for independence instead of promoting a new deal. Macron has said in Noumea that "New Caledonia is French because it has chosen to remain French" after three referendums on self-determination there. In a lengthy speech, he has spoken of building a new political status in New Caledonia through a "path of apology and a path of the future".

As IB reported, Macron's pledges of repentance and partnership rang hollow for many indigenous Kanak and other independence supporters. In central Noumea, trade unionists and independence supporters rallied, flying the flag of Kanaky and displaying banners criticising the president's visit, and as IB noted, the speech was "a clear determination to push through reforms that will advantage France's colonial power in the Pacific".



Predominantly French, conservative Caledonian citizens have called for the electoral register to be opened to some 40,000 French citizens who are resident there, and Macron has promised to consider that at a meeting of stakeholders in Paris in September.

Kanaky leaders fiercely oppose it, and they boycotted the third referendum on independence in December 2022, where the “No” vote won on a “landslide” which Macron claims is a verdict in favour of French rule there. Kanaks boycotted the referendum (which they were favoured to win) because the French government refused to accept a one-year mourning period for COVID-19 deaths among the Kanaks.

Kanaky independence movement workers’ union USTKE’s President Andre Forest told IB: “The electorate must remain as is because it affects citizens of this country. It’s this very notion of citizenship that we want to retain.” Independence activists and negotiator Victor Tutugoro said: “I’m one of many people who were chased from our home. The collective memory of this loss continues to affect how people react, and this profoundly underlies their rejection of changes to the electorate.”

In an editorial on the eve of Macron’s visit, PNG Courier newspaper sarcastically asked why “the serene beauty of our part of the globe is coming under intense scrutiny, and everyone wants a piece of Pasifica in their GPS system?”

“Macron is not coming to sip French wine on a deserted island in the middle of the Pacific,” noted the Courier. “France still has colonies in the Pacific which have been prickly contentious issues at the UN, especially on decolonisation of Tahiti and New Caledonia. France also used the Pacific for its nuclear testing until the 90s, most prominently at Mururoa, which had angered many Pacific Island nations.”

Noting that the Chinese are subtle and making the Western allies have itchy feet, the Courier argued that these visits are taking the geopolitics of the Pacific to the next level. “Sooner or later, PNG can expect Air Force One to be hovering around PNG skies,” it said.

China’s Global Times, referring to Macron’s “new colonialism” comments, said it is “improper and ridiculous” to put China in the same seat as the “hegemonic US”.



Pro-independence indigenous Kanaky people in New Caledonia. Photo Source: Peoples Despatch

“Macron wants to convince regional countries that France is not an outsider but part of the region, as France has overseas territories there. But the validity of France’s status in the region is, in fact, thin, as its territories there were obtained through colonialism, which is difficult for Macron to rationalize”, Cui Hongjian, director of the Department of European Studies at the China Institute of International Studies told Global Times.

“This is why he avoids talking about it further and turns to another method of attacking other countries to help France build a positive image in the region..”

Meanwhile, during his visit to the 7th Melanesia Arts and Cultural Festival in Port Vila, four chiefs from the disputed islands of Matthew and Hunter, about 190 km from New Caledonia, handed over to the French President what they called “peaceful demand” for independence.

[Transmitted on 1 August 2023 by IDN-InDepthNews]



## Ex-French President Charged as Influence Peddler : Held Racist Views Toward Africa

By Lisa Vives

NEW YORK — Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy has had anything but a stellar record since stepping down from office more than a decade ago.

The 68-year-old has already been convicted twice, once for corruption and influence-peddling involving attempts to influence a judge and another for breaking campaign spending limits during his 2012 re-election attempt.

But what Africans may remember most about the one term official are his speeches that left Africans

Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy will be tried in 2025 to hear evidence that he, along with 12 co-defendants, accepted millions of euros in cash from the regime of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi to finance his 2007 bid for the presidency. Source: photo 2023

dismayed if not horrified at his colonial views of the continent.

During his first visit to Africa after winning power, Sarkozy outraged public opinion in Senegal with allusions to colonialism and the suggestion Africa had failed to embrace progress.

Speaking at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar in what became known as the Dakar Address, he said “the African peasant only knew the eternal renewal of time, marked by the endless repetition of the same gestures and the same words. In this realm of fancy ... there is neither room for human endeavor nor the idea of progress.”

“The colonizer took, used, exploited, plundered resources [...]. They were wrong. [...] They were wrong but some were sincere”, he continued, adding “Your heartbreak and your suffering are ours and are therefore mine”.

He also invited Africa to make its own self-criticism—the present failures of the continent counterbalancing the wrongs of the colonizers. “Africa has its share of responsibility in its own misfortune: colonization is not responsible for the bloody wars that the Africans waged among themselves, the genocides, dictators, fanaticism, corruption and prevarication”.

In the most controversial passage, he suggested that the obstacles to the development of the continent should be sought within an African identity: “The tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history ... They have never really launched themselves into the future.”

Cameroonian scholar Achille Mbembe, professor at South Africa’s prestigious Witwatersrand university said the attitudes reflected in Sarkozy’s speech were worthy of the 19th century.

“Who gave him the right to talk about Africa and Africans in a manner of a master who has the habit of ill-treating his slave?” Mbembe said in an open letter to Sarkozy.

Alpha Oumar Konare, chairman of the 53-nation African Union Commission, labelled Sarkozy’s speech a “declaration of a bygone era”.

The speech drew criticism from politicians and intellectuals across Africa who denounced it as unacceptable and based on long-discredited stereotypes. For many, it was a throwback to France’s murky colonial past.

The former leader will be tried in 2025 to hear evidence that he, along with 12 co-defendants, accepted

millions of euros in cash from the regime of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi to finance his 2007 bid for the presidency.

The Paris Court of Appeals has already upheld a three-year prison sentence against Sarkozy, but it ruled that two years would be suspended and Sarkozy would wear an electronic bracelet instead of going to jail for the remaining year.

His predecessor, Jacques Chirac, was also convicted in a criminal trial for corruption but received a two-year suspended sentence in 2011.

Sarkozy, who has faced a litany of legal problems since his one term in office, has denied the Libyan allegations—the most serious he faces.

[Transmitted on 27 August 2023 by IDN-InDepthNews in association with Global Information Network]

## USAID Launches Pacific Mission to Assist in Achieving SDGs

By Kalinga Seneviratne



Dr. Samantha Power (pink in the centre with garland) with University of the South Pacific students. Photo credit: Kalinga Seneviratne.

SUVA, Fiji — The United States government’s overseas development aid arm US Agency for International Development (USAID) opened two new offices in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Fiji on 15 August, pledging to assist Pacific island countries in addressing the sustainable development goals (SDGs).

The last USAID office in the region was closed over 25 years ago. The haste at which the US re-established these offices with its Administrator, Dr Samantha Power—a former Harvard Professor—flying from the US to officiate in the ceremonies here in Suva and in Port Moresby in PNG has also got some skeptics in the region questioning its motives.

Island Forum’s secretary general Henry Puna—a former Prime Minister of Cook Islands—Power said USAID is setting up an office in the Pacific to help them to directly “listen, learn, and better understand” the challenges that the Pacific Island countries are facing.

Addressing Pacific’s youth at a ceremony at the University of the South Pacific (USP) here, also attended by the Pacific

“Our new mission here in Fiji and our office in Papua New Guinea—are not going to come in and impose our ideas or our solutions for the shared challenges that we face” she told an audience of students and academics from the region. USP is one of only two regional universities in the world largely funded by regional countries. She described the two missions as “reinvigorated (US) commitment to the Pacific Islands”.

At a number of times during her 20 minutes speech, Power emphasized that USAID only gives grants and they do not give loans.

“As we increase our investments here in the Pacific, I want to be very clear—and this is subject to some misunderstanding—so please, I hope I am very clear. The United States is not forcing nations to choose between partnering with the United States and partnering with other nations to meet their development



goals,” she emphasized.

“That said, we do want you to have a choice. It’s not a choice that we will make for you, but we want you to have options. We want Pacific Island nations to have more options to work with partners whose values and vision for the future align with your own.”

Though she did not mention China in her speech, this could be interpreted as a reference to their presence in the Pacific and the “rules-based order” the US and its allies claim to promote in the region. She immediately added to the above comments by pointing out that USAID only gives grants. “We are very interested in economic independence, and independence of choice and not saddling future generations with attachments and debts that will later have to be paid,” she pointed out.



Dr Power giving a media briefing after the address at USP.  
Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne

“And we will engage with you openly, transparently, with respect for individual dignity and the benefits of inclusive governance, the benefits of being held accountable by your citizens, and we will join you in seeking to combat corrupt dealings that can enrich elites often at the expense of everyday citizens,” noted Power.

Another area they would allocate funding would be training farmers in new techniques to grapple with changing weather patterns and encroaching salt water. She also announced the launch of a new initiative, a Blue Carbon Assessment, to quantify the true value of the marine carbon sinks across the Blue Pacific Continent.

Referring to Power’s comments about reinvigorating the US’s commitment to the region, Maureen Penjueli, Coordinator of the Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG), told IDN that this is a way to frame the US as a partner of choice by allowing the islanders to determine what is a priority in terms of their development.

“The US is not the only development partner that is suggesting this,” she added, “Australia’s recent Development Policy attempts to frame themselves is no different.” Referring to US ally Australia’s aid policies, she pointed out that for decades there has been accusation of tied aid, boomerang aid by many of our development partners—or how aid is an extension of foreign policy and therefore it is by its nature extractive—an iron fist in a velvet glove”.

“But its other implication is to subtly suggest that the US and its allies’ goals are unlike what China does, which is to ‘extract concessions’ through this relationship either through ensuring that Chinese companies get the contracts, Chinese labour is recruited (as well as) many other forms of accusation of Chinese engagement in the region,” Penjueli pointed out.

During an interaction with the local media after her speech, a local television reporter told Power that critics have been quick to say that the U.S. is ramping up support in the greater Indo-Pacific region because it feels that the American dominance is at risk. “How do you respond to such observation? And why should Pacific leaders choose U.S. diplomatic support over Chinese support?” he asked.

“Lots of experience around the world is the recognition that governance and human rights, and economic development go hand in hand. You can have economic development without human rights, but it’s almost impossible to have inclusive economic development that reaches broad segments of the population,” she argued.

“So, we really believe that a development model that values transparency, that ensures that private sector investment is conducted in a manner that benefits broad swaths of the population rather than like

a couple of government officials who take a bribe or pay a bribe.”

### **Grants at a time when others are pushing a very different model**

She also added that they give grants at a time when others are pushing a very different model, “which is much more about concentrating both political and economic power, which tends to stifle the voices of citizens to hold their leaders accountable, allows officials to do what they believe is right but without checks and balances”.

USAID is presenting the reopening of the two offices as a follow up to President Biden’s meeting with the Pacific leaders in Washington DC last year. Its Manila-based deputy assistant director of USAID, Betty Chung, has told Radio New Zealand that currently there are just two staffers in Fiji but by the end of the year, they hope to have 8 to 10 there, building up to about 30, also the USAID budget for the Pacific has tripled in the past three years.

In a joint press conference in Port Moresby, PNG Prime Minister James Marape has welcomed USAID’s renewed commitments to the region and said that Power’s presence completes what is President Biden’s 3D strategy—diplomacy, defence, and development—in the focus to revamp the US presence in PNG and the Pacific. He also referred to recent defence agreements signed with the US but said that it should not be a one-way relationship on how they relate to the US. He asked Power and UNAID to assist PNG in preserving their forest resources.

Pointing out that PNG is home to one-third of the world’s forests and 67 per cent of global biodiversity, Marape said that he has asked Power to take the message back to the US and particularly to Congress “who sometimes offer resistance to support to emerging nations”—to help PNG to preserve its forest resources to offset US’s “huge carbon footprint”.

Referring to Power’s undertaking that she came to the Pacific to listen, Penjueli says that people in the Pacific need to watch how USAID can translate this listening exercise into grant-making and in which areas and how they do it.

“For Pacific Island Governments I do believe that they are in a better place, this gives them more options to consider if they (foreign donors) support their own development needs particularly in the current context of a climate emergency, post-pandemic debt stress economies and an ongoing Ukraine war.”

[Transmitted on 18 August 2023 by IDN-InDepthNews]

### **Bangladesh Grappling with Severe Dengue Outbreak**

By Sohail Choudhury

DHAKA — Bangladesh is currently facing a significant challenge as it grapples with a dengue epidemic. Since January, hospitals in the country have reported a staggering 80,074 cases of dengue, with 2,046 new cases added in the latest daily count. The death toll has risen by nine in a 24-hour period, reaching a total of 373 as of Friday morning (11 August), according to the Directorate General of Health Services.



People infected with Dengue in Bangladesh. 10 July 2023. | Photo Credit: Twitter/@NewAgeBDcom. Source: Telesur

The outbreak has been particularly severe this year compared to previous years. In 2022, hospitals recorded 62,382 cases and a death toll of 281, which was the highest since the beginning of dengue hospitalizations in the 1960s. The situation was even worse in 2019, with over 100,000 dengue hospitalizations and an official death toll of 179.

A government-funded survey conducted before the monsoon season in Dhaka city revealed a troubling surge in *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes, which are known carriers of the dengue virus. This surge has contributed to the widespread transmission of the disease, marking the worst spread in the past five years.

Most of the deaths resulting from dengue have been attributed to hemorrhagic fever and shock syndrome, conditions associated with certain new variants of the virus previously unseen in Bangladesh.

The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that, from January 1 to August 7, 2023, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare of Bangladesh confirmed a total of 69,483 laboratory-confirmed dengue cases and 327 related deaths, with a case fatality rate of 0.47 per cent. A significant majority of these cases (63 per cent) and deaths (62 per cent) occurred in the month of July 2023. This surge in dengue cases is unusual in terms of its seasonality and the rapid increase compared to previous years.

Factors contributing to the higher incidence of dengue include an unusual amount of rainfall, high temperatures, and elevated humidity levels, leading to an increased mosquito population throughout the country.

The outbreak has affected all 64 districts in Bangladesh, with the Dhaka division experiencing a particularly high number of cases, especially in Dhaka city corporation. Other affected divisions include Chattogram, Dhaka division excluding Dhaka city, and Barisal. The Sylhet division reported the lowest number of cases with no deaths.

### **The high fatality rate of Dengue**

The report from WHO indicates that the case fatality rate (CFR) for dengue in 2023 is 0.47 per cent, higher compared to previous years. There are variations in CFR based on gender and age groups, with females having a higher CFR than males, and the older age group experiencing a higher CFR than the younger age group.

Regarding the serotypes of the dengue virus, DENV2, which was previously predominant in Bangladesh until 2018, has reemerged as the primary circulating serotype in this outbreak, potentially leading to more severe cases.

Efforts to combat the epidemic focus on vector control, given that there is no specific treatment for dengue. Integrated Vector Management (IVM) strategies are promoted by WHO to control the *Aedes* species mosquitoes, responsible for dengue transmission. These strategies include environmental management, source reduction, and the use of insecticide-treated nets.

Personal protective measures, such as applying repellents and wearing protective clothing, are recommended, particularly during dawn and dusk when the mosquitoes are active.

Due to the ongoing high number of cases and deaths, the peak not yet being reached, and the increasing geographical spread of cases, Bangladesh faces a 'High' dengue risk at the national level. Additionally, the emergence of DENV2 as the predominant serotype poses a significant concern.

Given the frequent population movement across the land border with India, as well as the country's receipt of international tourists, the risk of international disease spread is a concern. This epidemic highlights the urgent need for comprehensive measures to control the dengue outbreak, particularly through effective vector control strategies, early detection, and appropriate healthcare management.

[Transmitted on 12 August 2023 by IDN-InDepthNews]



## **UN May Seek Accountability for Saudi Killings of Hundreds of Migrants**

By Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS., New York — The United Nations has expressed serious concern over the killings of hundreds of migrants, mostly Ethiopians, crossing war-ravaged Yemen trying to reach Saudi Arabia.

“I think trying to stop migration using the barrel of a gun is intolerable,” UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on August 21.

Asked about the killings detailed in a new Human Rights Watch (HRW) report on August 20, Dujarric said: “We’ve seen the report, which I think is very concerning. It raises some very serious allegations. I know our human rights office has been aware of the situation, and has had some contacts, but it has been very challenging for them to verify the situation on the border.”

“I think it bears reminding because we have seen in many cases around the world cases of violence against migrants, against those seeking refuge and that human beings, whether they are migrants, whether they are refugees, asylum seekers, all need to be treated with dignity to have all their human rights respected in accordance with international law. And I think trying to stop migration using the barrel of a gun is intolerable” he said.

Asked if there should be an international investigation into the killings, Dujarric said: “Obviously, there are specific processes for these things, but there needs to be accountability.”

### **Eyewitness accounts of some of the killings.**

The report from Human Rights Watch provides eyewitness accounts of some of the killings.

The report accuses Saudi border guards of killing at least hundreds of Ethiopian migrants and asylum seekers who tried to cross the Yemen-Saudi border between March 2022 and June 2023.

Human Rights Watch said its research indicates that, at time of writing, the killings are continuing.

“Saudi border guards have used explosive weapons and shot people at close range, including women and children, in a pattern that is widespread and systematic. If committed as part of a Saudi government policy to murder migrants, these killings would be a crime against humanity.”

In some instances, HRW said, Saudi border guards first asked survivors in which limb of their body they preferred to be shot, before shooting them at close range. Saudi border guards also fired explosive weapons at migrants who had just been released from temporary Saudi detention and were attempting to flee back to Yemen.

It is estimated that approximately 750,000 Ethiopians live and work in Saudi Arabia. While many migrate for economic reasons, others have fled because of serious human rights abuses by their government, including during the recent, brutal armed conflict in northern Ethiopia, according to HRW.

Ethiopian migrants have for decades attempted the dangerous migration route – known as the “Eastern Route” or sometimes the “Yemeni Route” – from the Horn of Africa, across the Gulf of Aden, through Yemen and into Saudi Arabia.

“It is estimated that well over 90 percent of the migrants on this route are Ethiopians. The route is also



Ethiopians at the Bole Airport in Addis Ababa, on 30 March 2022, after their repatriation from Saudi Arabia. Photo Source: © EDUARDO SOTERAS / AFP/File.

used by migrants from Somalia and Eritrea, and occasionally other east African nations. In recent years, there has been an increase in the proportion of women and girls migrating on the eastern route,” the report said.

HRW said migrants and asylum seekers described their journey to the Yemen-Saudi border as rife with abuse and controlled by a network of smugglers and traffickers who physically assaulted them to extort payments from family members or contacts in Ethiopia or Saudi Arabia.

Among their recommendations, according to Cable News Network (CNN), HRW has called on the United Nations to establish an independent investigation into the killing against of migrants and asylum seekers.

The HRW report comes nearly a year after a group of UN experts<sup>2</sup> laid out allegations that they had received that Saudi security forces had killed as many as 430 migrants and injured 650 in cross-border shelling and shooting between January 1 and April 30, 2022.



Ethiopian refugees forced to share cells with over 300 others. Photo Source: Amnesty International

The experts said it appeared to be “a systematic pattern of large-scale indiscriminate cross-border killings.”

CNN said HRW had interviewed 27 people who described 28 separate explosive weapons incidents from the Saudi side of the border after they had crossed the border from Yemen into Saudi territory, sometimes lasting hours or even days.

Interviewees described being attacked by Saudi border guards, describing their uniforms and describing the explosive weapons being “like a bomb.”

“We were fired on repeatedly. I saw people killed in a way I have never imagined. I saw 30 killed people on the spot. I pushed myself under a rock and slept there. I could feel people sleeping around me. I realized what I thought were people sleeping around me were actually dead bodies. I woke up and I was alone,” Hamdiya, a 14-year-old whose name was changed to protect her identity, told HRW.

A Saudi government source told CNN that the “the allegations included in the Human Rights Watch report about Saudi border guards shooting Ethiopians while they were crossing the Saudi-Yemeni border are unfounded and not based on reliable sources.”



The glitzy image of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. Photo Source: Wikimedia Commons

The source, who requested anonymity citing longstanding norms around the government’s communications with the media, did not elaborate further.

[Transmitted on 23 August 2023 by IDN-InDepthNews]

<sup>2</sup> <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27562>



The United Nations map of countries that are yet to be decolonized. Photo Source: Wikimedia Commons

### UN Aims to Decolonize 17 Territories Still Dependent on Colonial Powers

By Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS, New York — The military coups in three former French colonies in West Africa—Burkina Faso, Mali, and most recently Niger—have turned the spotlight to one of the UN’s lesser-known mandates: the decolonization of “non-self-governing territories” (NSGTs).

Last May, a United Nations forum on decolonization, which took place in Bali, Indonesia, declared that top priority must be given to overcoming the many challenges facing the world’s 17 remaining NSGTs “to avoid undoing much of the progress achieved towards sustainable development and self-determination.”

When the UN was founded in 1945, some 750 million people, nearly a third of the world’s population, lived in “territories” dependent on colonial powers.

Today, according to the UN, fewer than 2 million people live under colonial rule in the 17 remaining non-self-governing territories.

The wave of decolonization, which changed the face of the planet, was born with the UN and described as the world body’s “first great success”.

The 17 non-self-governing territories include Western Sahara, Anguilla, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Island, Falkland Islands, Montserrat, Saint Helena, Turks and Caicos Islands, United States Virgin Islands, Gibraltar, American Samoa, French Polynesia, Guam, New Caledonia, Pitcairn, and Tokelau.

The struggle for independence or self-determination—whether in Palestine, Eritrea, South Sudan, or most famously, Algeria—was hard fought and largely one-sided, with small arms and hand-made bombs against fighter planes, combat helicopters, missiles, and battle tanks.

A major armed conflict between France and the Algerian National Liberation Front (NLF), from 1954 to 1962, which led to Algeria’s independence from France, represented “the bloodiest example of France’s colonial history on the African continent”, with approximately 1.5 million Algerians killed and millions more displaced in the eight-year struggle for independence.

While France was accused of using its air force to napalm civilians in the countryside, the Algerians were accused of using handmade bombs hidden in women’s handbags and left surreptitiously in cafés,



restaurants, and public places frequented by French nationals living in occupied territory.

In one of the memorable scenes in the 1966 cinematic Oscar-winning classic “The Battle of Algiers,” directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, which re-created Algeria’s war of independence, a handcuffed leader of the NLF, Ben M’Hidi, is brought before a group of highly partisan French journalists for interrogation.

One of the journalists asks M’Hidi: “Don’t you think it is a bit cowardly to use women’s handbags and baskets to carry explosive devices that kill so many innocent people [in cafés and nightclubs]?”

Responding with equal bluntness, the Algerian insurgent retorts: “And doesn’t it seem to you even more cowardly to drop napalm bombs on unarmed villages on a thousand times more innocent victims?”

“Of course, if we had your fighter planes, it would be a lot easier for us,” he adds rather sarcastically. “Give us your bombers, and you can have our handbags and baskets.”

Meanwhile, a video message from Secretary-General António Guterres last May urged a focus on “the aspirations and needs of the Territories on a case-by-case basis”—including innovative steps to “ensure the Territories have the resources and support they need to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), build resilience, and invest in their future”.

“New pathways for stronger cooperation between the Territories, administering Powers and key stakeholders” are needed to turn the tide on the many challenges the Territories are facing, the Secretary-General said, including “small islands on the frontlines of the climate emergency,” he said.

Starting in 1990, on the 30th anniversary of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples<sup>3</sup>, the United Nations has declared four consecutive international decades for the eradication of colonialism<sup>4</sup>.

The UN is now in the Fourth International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism (2021 – 2030).

Menissa Rambally (Saint Lucia), Chair of the UN’s Special Committee on Decolonization, known as the “C-24”, opened the 2023 regional seminar last June and declared its main theme “Innovative steps to ensure the attainment of the SDGs in the Non-Self-Governing Territories”.

“Such pathways are crucial to recovering from the impact of the pandemic on health care, education, and income that has been “far-reaching and unprecedented in the last 30 years”, she said.

Addressing a meeting of the UN’s Special Committee on Decolonization in February 2019, Guterres said decolonization helped transform the United Nations membership, propelling the Organization’s growth from 51 original members to 193 today.

Decolonization is one of the most significant chapters of the Organization’s history. But he pointed out this story is still being written, as 17 Non-Self-Governing Territories remain.

“Each deserves attention. Each still waits to attain self-government, in accordance with Chapter [XI] of the United Nations Charter, the 1960 Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, and relevant UN resolutions.”

*\*This article contains excerpts from a book on the United Nations titled “No Comment – And Don’t Quote me on That” available on Amazon. Thalif Deen, the author of the book, is Editor-at-Large at the Berlin-based IDN, an ex-UN staffer and a former member of the Sri Lanka delegation to the UN General Assembly sessions.*

[Transmitted on 14 August 2023 by IDN-InDepthNews]

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<sup>3</sup> <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/152/88/PDF/NR015288.pdf?OpenElement>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/history/international-decades>



Chinese President Xi Jinping in a family photo with other leaders at the BRICS-Africa Outreach and BRICS Plus Dialogue in Johannesburg, South Africa, on 24 August. Photo Credit: CGTN.

### **BRICS Summit: The “Legitimate Aspirations” of Developing Economies**

By Somar Wijayadasa

NEW YORK — On the final day of the historic BRICS Summit held in South Africa from 22 to 24 August 2023, its leaders unanimously adopted a wide-ranging document with 94 points—now widely known as the Johannesburg II Declaration<sup>5</sup>.

Since it is impossible to analyze and report on all the issues and areas covered by this magnificent document, I wish to highlight the salient points without any comments.

In its Preamble, the leaders reaffirmed their commitment to the BRICS spirit of mutual respect and understanding, sovereign equality, solidarity, democracy, openness, inclusiveness, strengthened collaboration and consensus.

It further states as we build upon 15 years of BRICS Summits, we further commit ourselves to strengthening the framework of mutually beneficial BRICS cooperation under the three pillars of political and security, economic and financial, and cultural and people-to-people cooperation and to enhancing our strategic partnership for the benefit of our people through the promotion of peace, a more representative, fairer international order, a reinvigorated and reformed multilateral system, sustainable development, and inclusive growth.

#### **Inclusive multilateralism**

In its section on “Partnership for Inclusive Multilateralism”, the leaders reiterated their commitment to upholding international law, including the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations (UN) as its indispensable cornerstone and the central role of the UN in an international system in which sovereign states cooperate to maintain peace and security.

The members expressed “concern about the use of unilateral coercive measures” —referring to sanctions and other threats—which they said are “incompatible with the principles of the Charter of the UN” as they produce adverse effects, particularly on developing nations.

They call for “promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms under the principles of equality and mutual respect”; support a comprehensive reform of the UN, including its Security Council, to make it more democratic, representative, effective, and efficient, and to increase the representation of

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<sup>5</sup> Photo: Chinese President Xi Jinping in a family photo with other leaders at the BRICS-Africa Outreach and BRICS Plus Dialogue in Johannesburg, South Africa, on 24 August. Credit: CGTN.

developing countries in the Council's memberships; and calls for a rules-based multilateral trading system with the World Trade Organization (WTO) at its core.

Under the section on "Fostering an Environment of Peace and Development", the leaders are concerned about ongoing conflicts in many parts of the world—including hostilities in Ukraine, and welcomed mediation proposals aimed at defusing the standoff—and stressed their commitment to the peaceful resolution of differences and disputes through dialogue ... and for the peaceful settlement of crises.



### **Commitment to a peaceful solution**

Regarding other issues on the international agenda, the document highlighted the commitment of BRICS to the peaceful resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue and the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. In addition, members unequivocally condemned terrorism, pledging to fight it in all its forms.

They stressed their commitment to multilateralism and to the central role of the United Nations, which are prerequisites to maintaining peace and security. They also stressed the imperative of refraining from coercive measures not based on international law and the UN Charter.

It emphasizes the importance of contributing to post-conflict countries' reconstruction and development and calls upon the international community to assist countries in meeting their development goals. They stressed the imperative of refraining from any coercive measures not based on international law and the UN Charter.

At the same time, the document stressed that BRICS supports the "legitimate aspirations of emerging and developing countries from Africa, Asia, and Latin America".

The leaders highlighted the commitment of BRICS to the peaceful resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue and the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. In addition, members unequivocally condemned terrorism, pledging to fight it in all its forms.

### **Mutually accelerated growth**

In the section under "Partnership for Mutually Accelerated Growth", the leaders expressed their belief that multilateral cooperation is essential to limit the risks stemming from geopolitical and geoeconomic fragmentation and intensify efforts on areas of mutual interest, including but not limited to trade, poverty and hunger reduction, sustainable development, including access to energy, water, and food, fuel, fertilizers, as well as mitigating and adapting to the impact of climate change, education, health as well as pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response.

They reaffirmed the importance of the G20 to continue playing the premier multilateral forum in international economic and financial cooperation that comprises both developed and emerging markets and developing countries where major economies jointly seek solutions to global challenges.

Also while recognizing that BRICS countries produce one-third of the world's food, the leaders reaffirmed their commitment to strengthen agricultural cooperation and promote sustainable agriculture and rural development of BRICS countries for enhancing food security both within BRICS and worldwide.

### **Partnership for sustainable development**

Regarding the Partnership for Sustainable Development, the leaders reaffirmed their call for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in its three dimensions: economic, social, and environmental, in a balanced and integrated manner by mobilizing the means required to implement the 2030 Agenda.

It re-emphasized the importance of implementing the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its Paris Agreement. It urged the developed countries to honor their



commitments, including mobilizing USD 100 billion per annum by 2020 and through 2025 to support climate action in developing countries.

The leaders recognized the fundamental role of primary health care as a key foundation for Universal Health Care and the health system's resilience, as well as for prevention and response to health emergencies.

The leaders believe that the High-level meeting on Universal Health Coverage (UHC) to be held at the UN General Assembly in September 2023 would be a critical step for mobilizing the highest political support for UHC as the cornerstone to achieving SDG 3 (good health and well-being).

In Deepening People-to-People Exchanges, the BRICS leaders reaffirmed the importance of BRICS people-to-people exchanges in enhancing mutual understanding, friendship and cooperation.

The leaders recognize that youth is a driving force for accelerating the achievement of sustainable development goals, and also acknowledged the critical role of women in economic development and commended the BRICS Women's Business Alliance.

In the section on Institutional Development, the leaders reiterated the importance of further enhancing BRICS solidarity and cooperation based on their mutual interests and key priorities to further strengthen their strategic partnership.

### **Six new members**

In conclusion, the Declaration points out that the BRICS leaders decided to invite the Argentine Republic, the Arab Republic of Egypt, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to become full members of BRICS from 1 January 2024.

The leaders commended South Africa's BRICS Chairmanship in 2023 and expressed their gratitude to the government and people of South Africa for holding the XV BRICS Summit.

Finally, Brazil, India, China, and South Africa extend their full support to Russia for its BRICS Chairmanship in 2024 and Russia's decision to hold the XVI BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia.

Commenting on the joint Declaration, Russia's President Vladimir Putin admitted that finalizing all the details was "not easy" and praised his South African counterpart Cyril Ramaphosa for his "remarkable diplomatic prowess" in helping to harmonize the agreement.

It is a unique masterpiece that encompasses almost all the burning issues and legitimate grievances of virtually all countries of the Global South – the gross injustices these countries and their people have endured over centuries of colonial domination and exploitation.

I must say that the Johannesburg II Declaration is truly a "declaration of a multipolar world".

*\*Somar Wijayadasa, an international lawyer, was a UNESCO delegate to the UN General Assembly from 1980-1995 and was the Director and Representative of UNAIDS at the United Nations from 1995-2000.*

[Transmitted on 30 August 2023 by IDN-InDepthNews]

*Editor's note: This is the third of a three-part article dealing with the BRICS Summit an issue of immense interest to our readers and a subject that affects all developing countries. For parts 2 and 3 refer to - <https://indepthnews.net/brics-summit-the-irresistible-move-to-a-multipolar-world-part-2/> and <https://indepthnews.net/brics-summit-the-foundation-for-a-multipolar-world-part-1/>*

## **Sri Lanka Back as Donor Darling Ignores the BRICS**

### ***France's Macron and the US Fish in the Indian Ocean***

By Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake

COLOMBO — Sri Lanka continues to swing wildly between being a 'Donor Darling' flooded with foreign 'aid' and 'advisors' on the one hand to a 'bankrupt' *pariah* or outcast on the other.



Newly formed Sri Lankan Marine Corps gets 241 years of experience in under a week. Credit: U.S. Marine Corps photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Jacob L.

Last year, the strategic Indian Ocean Island went from South Asia's wealthiest nation with the best social and human development indicators to a beggar—humiliated and shunned by the 'international community.' This was after staging its first-ever Sovereign Default due to a Eurobond debt trap and purported lack of US dollars.

The default triggered rapid rupee depreciation and instantly beggared citizens amid a distracting transnationally networked, remote-controlled 'Aragalaya' protest operation led by social media influencers. Ironically, there was a blockade on fuel shipments to the country amid the United States Marine's 'Sea Vision' training program for the Sri Lanka Navy.

Only India, the South Asian regional hegemon and good neighbor, was willing and able to help at the time. The narrative in the local and global corporate media echo chamber was that there was no fuel, food, fertilizer, medicines, or tourists to generate exorbitantly privileged and copiously printed US dollars to buy necessities. As the Rupee plummeted, newly appointed US-backed President Ranil Wickramasinghe promised famine and 15-hour power cuts by promoting fear, out-migration, and brain drain from the country.

Yet, miraculously, like the Phoenix risen from the ashes a year later, Sri Lanka is back, having taken *mana* from heaven in the form of an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan of just \$2.9 million to be disbursed over four years, that enabled the magical US dollars to flow again!

Last week, the island hosted the Indo-Pacific Environmental Security Forum (IPESF) at Colombo's Shangri La Hotel, which faces South Asia's busiest Port. More than 140 senior officers from foreign defense forces and top-level environmentalists from 28 countries in the Indo-Pacific took part' at the confab overlooking Galle Face, the Aragalaya protest site. The 4-day Environmental Security conference was hosted by the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), Sri Lanka Navy (SLN), and Sri Lanka Coast Guard (SLCG).

Although described as an 'environmental security' conference, the IPESF did not discuss the environmentally devastating impacts and economic costs of the global military business industrial complex, including 750 plus US military bases worldwide, their carbon emissions, and military exercises<sup>6</sup>.

Environmental impacts of military exercises and war, like the Nordstream pipeline destruction or stranding and death of Pilot Whales and Dolphins due to war games as sonar systems of aircraft carriers disorient large sea creatures, were NOT on the agenda.

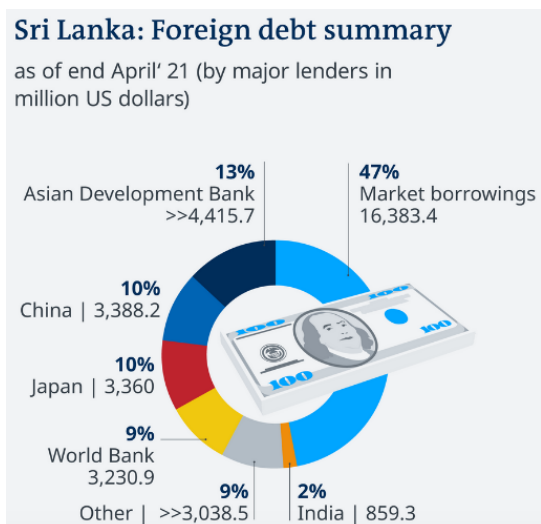
### **Climate Hypocrisy**

The environmental impact of the NATO war machine and ongoing wars in Ukraine and Africa were the elephant in the room at Colombo's Shangri-La Environmental Security Forum. Instead, trendy topics like Debt for Nature Swaps (DFNS), also called Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) bonds based on

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<sup>6</sup> US military pollution is the world's biggest climate change enabler: <https://earth.org/us-military-pollution/>

opaque carbon credit calculations, urbanization, ocean plastics, partnerships for climate resilience, data science in climate risk management, etc. were agenda items.



Sri Lanka's debt chart released by the Department of External Resources, Sri Lanka in 2021 – ignored by both foreign and local media – while spreading a fraudulent narrative of a “China Debt Trap”

Two weeks before the IPESF, on 28 July, French President Emmanuel Macron paid a midnight visit to Sri Lanka, where the OECD's Club de Paris, represents Eurobond holders who were primarily responsible for the default, was involved in ongoing IMF debt restructuring negotiations and Numbers Game that are set to deepen the country's debt bondage.

Macron, attempting to Greenwash Odious Debt and the most corrupt, opaque, and crime-ridden sector of the Western global financial system—Bond trading and derivatives—had been promoting the 'New Global Financing Pact,' launched last month in Paris. Based on opaque Carbon Credit calculations, the 'Anthropocene climate catastrophe narrative was used to market DFNS, or Green and Blue Bonds.

Predatory bond traders, principal among them BlackRock, have debt trapped over 55 countries in the Global South during COVID-19 lockdowns. Hence, anti-corruption activists in Sri Lanka had

called for an outright ban on government borrowing on Private bond markets, which caused the Sovereign Default worst economic crisis, and for the country to seek membership in BRICS and the New Development Bank.

Macron, facing a rout in West Africa, was fishing in Sri Lanka's troubled waters and promised to set up an office of the French Agency for International Development (AFD) in Colombo.

French fisheries fleets stationed in the Seychelles have been accused of over-fishing and Ocean Grabbing and impoverishing Indian Ocean littoral fisheries communities for decades.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, a Brookings Institution report pointed the finger at French fleets for depriving Somalian Fishers of their livelihoods and forcing them into piracy.

Hot on the heels of departing Macron, a Japanese Government team arrived in Colombo to shower aid on the Ranil Rajapakse regime and restart a rapid rail project. A couple of months before Macron's visit, CIA chief William Burns had paid a top-secret visit to the country, and the United States Ambassador at Large for Cyberspace and Digital Policy, Nathaniel C. Fick, was expected in Colombo from 17 to 23 August 2023, according to the Department of State. The Chinese were in

### Aid Dependence and a Corruption Pandemic

Is Sri Lanka, which sits on major global trade, energy, and Submarine Data Cable routes, back again as a 'donor darling'? The strategic island, long deemed an “unsinkable aircraft carrier in the middle of the Indian Ocean, clearly suffers from a geostrategic ‘Resource Curse,’ as well as aid-induced Dutch Disease and de-industrialization:

The Island, although rich in valuable marine resources and minerals including Graphite, Zircon, Titanium, etc., now depends on European Union GSP plus handouts to export underwear stitched by women and girls, who are working long hours in Free Trade Zone factories and servicing tourists to earn foreign exchange.

Since Independence in 1948, 'Aid' dependency has permeated and penetrated the government, military, business elite, policy-making, and civil society institutions, impeding industrialization and development,

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/mar/05/eu-accused-of-neocolonial-plundering-of-tuna-in-indian-ocean>



particularly the leveraging of valuable marine and mineral resources, including Graphite and Phosphates for fertilizer.

So, too, national law and order and investigative agencies and institutions have been penetrated and compromised due to dependency on foreign aid and experts and politicization. This has left the country vulnerable to transnationally networked crime, corruption, and being pumped, dumped, and destabilized during staged exogenous economic shocks sans proper investigations, analysis, and research.

Policies of promoting brain drain and skilled out-migration have exacerbated dependency on foreign aid, advisors, and consultants in a country already reeling from two years of COVID-19 lockdowns that had debilitated institutions and

### **Middle-Income Country Trap to “Make the Economy Scream”**

In 2019, the country was also pumped and dumped by World Bank ‘experts’ when Sri Lanka was upgraded to an Upper Middle-Income Country (MIC). MIC status rendered the island ineligible to access concessionary loans available to less developed countries.

During two years of economically devastating COVID-19 lockdowns, successive incompetent and corrupt Ranil Rajapakse regimes related business cronies borrowed from private capital markets and hedge funds like BlackRock that charge predatory interest rates because of the World Bank’s MIC trap—leading to the first-ever default in 2022.

Early in its post-colonial history, Ceylon/ Sri Lanka, caught in Cold War regional refractions, was subject to various exogenous political and economic shocks; the country’s first socialist Prime Minister, who set about nationalizing ports, airports, and plantations, was assassinated, and his successor faced a coup. Insurrections in the shape of ‘Jakarta Method’ operations, followed by a thirty-year globally networked ‘ethnic conflict.’

Then came the mysterious 2019 Islamic State (IS)-claimed attacks at Easter Sunday on tourist hotels and churches and Chinese investments to make the ‘economy and society scream’ and encourage the obdurately independent natives to accept the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), compact and the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), to enable US boots on the ground.

Amid the Aragalaya protest drama, default, and regime change operation last year, there were shades of President Nixon’s instructions to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to make Chile’s ‘economy scream’ as a prelude to the overthrow of democratically-elected Leftist President Salvador Allende and the installation of dictator General Pinochet in 1973 during the Cold War<sup>8</sup>

As protests unfolded, the newly installed pro-Washington Ranil Rajapakse regime predictably promoted the myth that “there is no alternative to the IMF” and further Eurobond borrowing and debt colonialism –seemingly in preparation for an IMF Firesale of assets.

### **Resilient in the Asian 21st Century?**

However, once again, the resilient island appears to be back in business and humming along, but this time, the pumping and dumping of Sri Lanka as a new hybrid Cold War ramps up in the Indian Ocean with remote Over the Horizon (OTH), cyber and economic war operations for Full Spectrum Dominance (FSD), by a crashing superpower seems different.

During the first Cold War, there was still space for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to declare the Indian Ocean as a



Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike, world’s first elected female Prime Minister – still widely respected in the country

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<sup>8</sup> <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB8/nsaebb8i.htm>

“Zone of Peace,’ free of nuclear weapons and foreign military bases—led by the world’s first female Prime Minister and a Socialist, Sirimavo Bandaranayke.

However, since the Sovereign Default last year, Sri Lanka has not only lost Economic Independence and Policy autonomy to the Washington Twins and colonial Club de Paris, ironically on its 75th year of so-called Independence after being pumped and dumped by the World Bank into an MIC Eurobond debt trap in 2019.

Sri Lanka has lost its voice and independent thinking due to an ill-conceived policy of Brain Drain promoted by the foreign ‘Force’ backed by the Ranil Rajapakse government. This, in the wake of COVID-19 lockdowns and hacking of national institutions and oversight mechanisms, is promoting (Digital) neo-colonialism, also apparent in the debt restructuring Numbers Games being played by the IMF’s experts and consultants, including Lazard, Clifford, and Chance.

Simultaneously, Sri Lanka is being carved up for an IMF Firesale of strategic assets (prime coastal and highland lands, energy, transport, and telecom infrastructure) to benefit Eurobond traders.

Few among the remaining local intelligentsia have thought to question the adequacy of the exorbitantly privileged and copiously printed US Dollar to measure the ‘wealth of nations’ as the world de-dollarizes. After all, the US has a deficit of \$32 Trillion and counting and was downgraded by one of its own rating agencies recently.

Perhaps Sri Lanka’s resilience and the quick turnaround this time also has to do with being flanked by Asian Giants, China and India, in what has been termed the ‘Asian 21st century,’ as the BRICS emerging economies overtake the traditional G7 economic heavyweights while de-dollarizing fast.

Ironically, while France’s Macron hardly sought an invite to the BRICS party in Johannesburg, South Africa, this week, Colombo’s Ranil Wickramasinghe has turned a blind eye to calls that Sri Lanka join the BRICS and New Development Bank.

*\*The writer is a social and medical anthropologist with international development and political-economic analysis expertise.*

[Transmitted on 23 August 2023 by IDN-InDepthNews]

## **Pacific Islands at a Cliff Edge**

Viewpoint by Professor Biman Prasad\*

SUVA, Fiji — The Pacific Islands are now at a cliff edge. As a region, as countries and as peoples, we face some of the hardest and cruellest choices.

*First* is the growing burden of the climate crisis. The climate crisis impacts all areas of life, livelihoods and human security. It is doing so with fierceness not seen before.



Deputy Prime Minister of Fiji, Professor Biman Prasad.  
Photo Credit: Parliament of the Republic of Fiji.

*Second*, and arising from the first, and for other reasons, the region as a whole has made some progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. Nevertheless, our region is largely falling behind. Several of the global goals are gradually getting out of reach altogether.

*Third* is the growing multi-dimensional and multi-sectoral vulnerabilities touching all aspects of human life. Its impacts are felt most acutely by women, by the disabled and elderly, and by our young.

Business as usual, more of the same and incremental improvements will be the surest way to disaster for the whole of our region. As our communities, our region struggles, this is a time to ask some hard

questions. Why - at a time when we are so vulnerable to this existential threat - must the region be subject to a new era of geopolitical contestation?

Why is there a growing divide between what our development partners say and what they do? They say they are with us on our existential threat. But there is a disconnect between this and the resources that they offer on the table.

Why is there a disconnect between what multilateral banks and global funds say and what they do? They know too well that the region's adaptation to climate change cannot be, must not be, financed through loans—soft or hard!

The region knows too well that there are no good and bad guys in the geopolitical contestation. All large economies are equally to blame for the state in which we now find ourselves.

In facing our existential challenge—this gravest challenge of our times—we must work from this premise that all that we have is ourselves, as individual citizens of the Blue Pacific and as countries that make up the Blue Pacific. This is not inconsequential. This is powerful and significant.

In order to turn our “smallness” into our strongest strength we must ask some hard questions of ourselves. Is our regional architecture fit for purpose in the context of the gravity of the challenges before us? Do we have in our institutions that make up the regional architecture what it takes to give to the region the policy frameworks and alternatives in real time? Do we have what it takes to implement policies and decisions at the pace and speed at which this is needed?

We cannot fail our children. Inaction, more of the same and doing nothing because this is too hard all essentially mean the same thing. They all mean that we will condemn our young to a future far worse than we had as children and for our grandchildren perhaps no future at all. This will not happen on my watch! This will not happen on the watch of the People's Coalition in Fiji. This must not happen on our watch as leaders of the Blue Pacific.

### **Looking for answers**

So where must we look for answers? First is that, in the speediest possible time, the whole of the PIF [Pacific Islands Forum] region must become a fully integrated region. Pacific businesses should be able to shape and expand market opportunities unrestrained—Fijian businesses operating in the North Pacific, PNG businesses operating in New Zealand, Samoan businesses expanding opportunities in Solomon Islands.

Second, full integration must mean that, in the speediest possible time, we must have visa-free travel arrangements between all members of the PIF family. This will be the surest way of expanding employment opportunities for our young. This will also be the surest way of responding to the continuous loss of skills and talents out of our region. A visa-free PIF cannot be a medium-term goal. It must be a short-term goal. The future of the Blue Pacific depends on integration, including, most importantly, free people-to-people movement.

Australia's initiative to introduce the Pacific Engagement Visa<sup>9</sup> or PEV, which will allow 3,000 Pacific Islanders every year to settle in Australia with their family, is a very welcome one. This visa brings Australia into line with New Zealand, which has long operated its very popular Pacific Access Category and Samoa Quota.

The PEV is superior in many ways to the temporary visa schemes that both Australia and New Zealand operate, especially since workers can bring their families and are not tied to a single employer, therefore greatly reducing the likelihood of exploitation.

The PEV is a significant and positive step in the direction of Pacific-wide visa-free movement, especially if the quotas are increased over time. In this context, it is very concerning that the legislation to establish the PEV has become stuck in the Australian Senate, and so the PEV, which was to be introduced July 1, has been delayed.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.forumsec.org/2022/05/27/remarks-australia-foreign-affairs-minister-wong-pacific-keynote/>





Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong introducing the Pacific Engagement Visa during a talk at the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) in May 2022 flanked by PIF Secretary General Henry Puna. Photo Source: PIF

We all hope that a way forward can be found so that Australia can deliver on this important initiative, especially since it has already been announced and expectations have been raised. It seems that the proposed lottery mechanism has become the sticking point in Australia. However, this is the mechanism used by New Zealand and widely accepted in the Pacific as fair. Any other approach used by Australia would raise suspicion in the region.

Third, the Pacific's combined diplomacy must be brought to bear on the universe of climate finance. The Pacific's financial needs to adapt their economies between now and 2030 runs into US\$10 plus billion. Fiji's Prime Minister has a razor sharp focus on this. So do I. Fiji's Prime Minister has made it quite clear—we must commence all our adaptation measures now. Our adaptation cannot be pushed into the future for lack of funds. For the window for adaptation is fast closing for all of us. The window for adaptation is closing at warp speed for our low-lying atoll states.

### **No more free rides**

The time for free rides in our partnerships with development partners has long gone. This is a time and moment to deliver finance on the scale and at the speed that is needed. This is not time for more policy commitments. This is not a time for talk. This is a time to deliver and deliver alone. If you are delivering on scale and at speed—you are with us. If not, you are against us. There is no ambiguity in the People's Coalition Government on this.

We have that opportunity to write a new chapter to our region's history. We are committed to the PIF 2050 strategy<sup>10</sup>—that is our North Star. We are firmly committed to giving hope to our young. However impossible the odds may look, our young should know that we will continue to put up a fight for our lives. We will advance our existential interests as one Blue Pacific that is united in vision and unambiguous in purpose.

I know that the weight is heavy on those who are called to lead today. Lead with determination we must. Every other option will be fatal.

*\*Professor Biman Prasad is the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning and National Development of Fiji. He was formerly an Economics Professor and Dean of the faculty of Business and Economics at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji.*

*This is an edited version of a speech delivered by Professor Biman Prasad at a seminar on 9 August associated with the Pacific Island Forum Economic Ministers Meeting in Suva, Fiji.*

[Transmitted on 26 August 2023 by IDN-InDepthNews]

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.forumsec.org/2050strategy/>



The commander of Niger's presidential guard General Abdourahmane Tchian. Photo Credit: Fars News Agency

### **Niger Coup Reflects Anti-French Sentiment in the Region**

By Kola King

LAGOS, Nigeria — Barely two weeks after President Bola Tinubu made his inaugural speech as the new Chairman of the Economic Community of West Africa, ECOWAS during the Africa Union, AU meeting held in Nairobi, Kenya on 16 July, where he excoriated coup plotters and military adventurers who torpedo democratically elected governments on the continent.

At the same time he waxed strong about defending democracy on the continent than soldiers in the Niger Republic, Nigeria's neighbour to the northwest, seized power removing President Mohammed Bazoum from office on 26 July, throwing the Sahelian nation into an uncertain future.

Tinubu who was speaking at the Fifth Mid-Year Coordination Meeting (5thMYCM) of the African Union (AU), the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), the Regional Mechanisms (RMs), and the African Union Member-States, had announced plans to strengthen the ECOWAS Standby Force to deter coups and combat terrorism in the sub-region.

"It is very clear that in the area of peace, security, and stability, our region is confronted with the twin challenges of terrorism and reversal of democratic gains through undemocratic changes of Government.

"To address these challenges, the ECOWAS Authority, which I have the honour to chair, has given directive regarding the enhancement of the role of the ECOWAS Standby Force for deployment to fight terrorism and undemocratic changes in government."

However, it appears as if the military adventurers in Niger are bent on poking their fingers in the eyes of a lion, as it were, by daring ECOWAS and the AU. The head of the presidential guards, Major General Abdourahmane Tchiani, emerged as the leader of the putschists. An officer with impressive credentials, General Tchiani, who is 59, had been named as the head of the presidential guard in 2011 by Mr. Bazoum's predecessor, Mahamadou Issoufou.

As is common with military governments, the junta later announced that Niger's Constitution had been suspended and that a new transitional body was taking charge of the executive and legislative powers.

General Tchiani joined the Nigerien military in 1985 and served in the United Nations peacekeeping operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and Sudan. He was mentioned in a

coup attempt in 2015, but denied any involvement and has been a strong ally of former President Issoufou, who named him general in 2018. He was also instrumental in suppressing an attempted insurrection aimed at truncating the swearing-in ceremony of President Bazoum into office in 2021 by some disgruntled elements in the military.

General Tchiani in his address to the nation had enumerated several grievances against the ousted government of Mohammed Bazoum, citing poor management of the economy and the fight against militants.

“We have decided to intervene and seize our responsibilities,” Gen. Abdourahmane Tchiani said on state television. “We can’t continue with the same approaches.”

“The current security approach hasn’t enabled us to secure our country,” he said.

While saying he appreciated the “support of our external partners”—an apparent reference to the United States and European countries—he also faulted Niger’s leadership for not partnering with the military juntas in neighboring Burkina Faso and Mali, which have moved close to Russia in recent years.

On planned attacks on Niger to free President Bazoum and restore him to power, the junta has vowed to defend Niger from any “aggression” by regional or Western powers. It has accused former colonial power France of planning military intervention.

The coup in Niger resonates with countries in the Sahel region of West Africa including Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso where there has been a contagion of coups and points to a shift away from the orbit of France, the former colonial master and alignment with Russia that has wormed its way into the hearts of many countries in Africa. In fact, there has been fervent anti-French sentiment in the Sahel countries of West Africa.

Over the years, Niger has faced growing insecurity amid the worsening effects of climate change, political instability, and armed insurgencies. Both the United States and France have troops in Niger. Also, the United States has two drone bases in Niger as well.



Uranium Mine in Niger. Photo Source: SciDev.net

Niger is the world’s fifth largest producer of uranium, which is mainly used to fuel nuclear power plants. The French industrial company Areva has been mining uranium from the area around the town of Arlit for the past 45 years. Greenpeace and local activists claim that this activity has contaminated the local environment and that this radioactive pollution has made local people ill. Areva strongly denies this allegation.

Source: SciDev.net

The paradox here, Niger, a resource-rich country of 26 million is considered one of the poorest countries in the world, according to the United Nations, which explains why it has also been a favored recipient of humanitarian aid and Western funding as the last bastion of democracy in the Sahel region. As one of the poorest countries in the world, Niger receives close to \$2 billion a year in official development assistance, according to the World Bank.

Moreover, it has been a key security partner of Western countries such as France, the former colonial power, and the United States, which both use it as a base for their efforts to contain a growing Islamist insurgency in West and Central Africa’s Sahel region.

Plus, Niger is a key partner of the European Union in helping curb the flow of irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. The EU also has a small number of troops in Niger for a military training mission.

In addition, the EU allocated 503 million euros (\$554 million) from its budget to improve governance, education and sustainable growth in Niger over 2021- 2024 according to its website. About 40 percent of Niger’s budgetary funding comes from France,

the EU and other developmental partners.

As things stand, the coup could spell an end to the provision of budgetary support and cooperation to the country as its European and development partners have signalled the immediate cessation of budget support, humanitarian aid as well as cooperation actions in the domain of security.

The Sahel has been in ferment for a long time due to growing activities of Islamist jihadist movements, hence the military takeover in Niger is the sixth in that region in less than three years, coming after Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mali, and threatening to radically alter regional efforts to fight Islamist insurgencies by groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Expectedly, the United States, the United Nations, and the West African economic bloc, ECOWAS, have all condemned the military takeover, and the French Foreign Ministry said in a statement that it did not recognize new leaders of Niger.

In a way, the toppling of President Bazoum has created shockwaves not only across the sub-region but reverberated across Europe and the United States due to the fact that Niger is home to strategic mineral reserves such as uranium, gold, and crude oil, among others and with France holding mineral rights for the mining of uranium which powers its nuclear power plants. France depends on Niger's uranium mines for about 15 percent of the resources to fuel its nuclear power plants.

Aware of the strategic importance of uranium to France's energy needs, already the junta has announced that it was suspending the export of uranium and gold to France and the United States of America with immediate effect. Niger is the world's seventh-largest producer of Uranium.

Since the overthrow of President Bazoum's government, ECOWAS has been in a flurry of activities and condemned in uncertain terms the military adventurers in Niger, saying it will not accept the brazen overthrow of a democratically elected government and asked the coup plotters to return to the status quo ante by returning to the barracks and restoring Bazoum to power.

No doubt Bazoum had enjoyed a chummy relationship with Nigeria since he was elected to power in 2021 succeeding former President Mahamadou Issoufou. Bazoum became president in 2021, taking the reins in Niger's first peaceful, democratic transition since it gained independence from France in 1960.

Meanwhile, West African leaders last Sunday gave the military junta in Niger one week to cede power, warning they did not rule out the "use of force," and imposed immediate financial sanctions.

The 15-nation Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) demanded the "immediate release and reinstatement" of Niger's elected president, Mohamed Bazoum, who has been held by the military since Wednesday.

ECOWAS announced the "suspension of all commercial and financial transactions between ECOWAS member states and Niger", which is part of the bloc, as well as halting energy transactions.

It said it was freezing Niger's assets in ECOWAS central and commercial banks and imposing a "travel ban and asset freeze for the military officials involved in the coup attempt".

"The same applies to their family members and the civilians who accept to participate in any institutions or government established by these military officials," said the statement, which was read out at the end of the crisis meeting by Nigerian president and ECOWAS chairman Bola Tinubu.

What could the events mean for Niger? The days ahead are uncertain and there's a sense of foreboding as ECOWAS seems poised to make good its word on the truncation of democracy by military adventurers in the sub-region. For Nigeria in particular a coup in neighbouring Niger is as though going to sleep with fire in the loft. More, the coup in Niger is like a malignant danger and it's unlikely Nigeria would tolerate a coup in its backyard. Still, the coup could further destabilize a poor country and nascent democracy. The events could also lead to a confluence of shockwaves in a region plagued by Islamists jihadists, poverty, and coups.

Now Niger's neighbours, Burkina Faso and Mali have warned that any military intervention against



Niamey would be considered a “declaration of war” against their nations.

The two countries issued the warning in joint statements read on their national broadcasters:

“The transitional governments of Burkina Faso and Mali express their fraternal solidarity... to the people of Niger, who have decided with full responsibility to take their destiny in hand and assume the fullness of their sovereignty before history,” the two countries said.

“Any military intervention against Niger would be tantamount to a declaration of war against Burkina Faso and Mali,” they warned, adding that such a move could result in “disastrous consequences” that “could destabilise the entire region.”

However, the way out of the current conundrum will suggest a diplomatic solution toward resolving the impasse rather than a military approach with its concomitant effects. All efforts should be geared towards dialogue in resolving this crisis. It is doubtful if a military solution will work in this regard for it could further stoke a wider crisis and create more problems than envisaged. In the first instance, Niger is home to over 300,000 Nigerian refugees fleeing their homeland from the Boko Haram insurgent and widespread banditry in the northwest. Outbreak of war would lead to large-scale humanitarian disaster.

The question is can we accommodate a fresh wave of refugees spilling into our borders in the event of a long-drawn-out war in Niger. For a nation still battling Boko Haram insurgents and bandits as well as the separatist tendency in the southeast region this will further compound our security situation. Indeed, ECOWAS should be wary of dancing to the drumbeats of the Western powers and should avoid turning our backyard into a flash point of crisis.

More importantly, in the event of war Niger could be turned into an ideological battleground between the East and the West. At the end of it all, Nigeria will be left to carry the can as other ECOWAS members lack the wherewithal for a war with Niger. In a word, we have more to gain by diplomacy and dialogue than getting gung-ho about military intervention in Niger. So, it’s incumbent on ECOWAS to act out of an abundance of caution.

\*Kola King is a Nigerian journalist and novelist. He worked for more than two decades as a reporter, correspondent and editor in major national newspapers in Nigeria. He’s the CEO and co-founder of Global South Media. He is the founder of Metro newsletter published on Substack. His novels- A Place in the Sun, and Queen Amina: Soldier on Horseback, was published and released in 2016 and 2021 respectively by Verity Publishers, Pretoria, South Africa. His writing has appeared in Kalahari Review, The Missing Slate Literary Journal, The New Black Magazine and Litro magazine. He earned a Bachelors degree in Mass Communication from the University of Lagos.

[Transmitted on 6 August 2023 by IDN-InDepthNews]

Last week’s coup in Niger sent shockwaves across not only Africa’s Sahel region, but the international community at large. Niger had been the last pro-Western holdout in a region known as Africa’s “coup belt,” fueling concerns the military takeover could destabilize the region and hurt longstanding counterterrorism efforts there. Yet the sight of Nigeriens waving pro-Putin protest signs and Russian flags has left many in the West feeling uneasy. These images provide a sharp contrast for a Western public that has frequently been told that Russian President Vladimir Putin is a “pariah around the world.” - Time Magazine

Read: <https://time.com/6301177/niger-african-support-russia/>

#### Putin: Russia Wants a Peaceful Resolution of Niger Crisis | Vantage with Palki Sharma



The important Russian factor in Niger coup – report from India’s ‘FirstPost’

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= kaeOLA34ZU>

### The Saturday Squad: Never Too Old to Make a Difference

A dedicated group of volunteers care for fellow residents in their neighbourhood in Singapore.



Source: Our Better World - <https://www.ourbetterworld.org/stories/days-of-our-lives-saturday-movement>



### Banking on food waste to help India feed struggling families

Nascent but thriving networks of food banks and school meal programs, often repurposing food that would have gone to waste, have sprung up across India, **helping to bolster food security in the country.**

Source: Devex - <https://www.devex.com/news/devex-dish-india-leads-the-way-on-food-banks-106068>

### How the UN is assisting Mauritius to secure its food systems

Mauritius' heavy dependence on food imports makes it vulnerable to global commodity and supply disruptions, but collaborative sustainable interventions are making a difference.



Source: African Renewal - <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/july-2023/how-un-assisting-mauritius-secure-its-food-systems>



### After UN, Three Nations Asks India To Resume Rice Exports

Singapore, Indonesia and The Philippines, key diplomatic partners of India, have appealed to New Delhi to resume rice exports to their nations, following India's decision to restrict export of nrbasmati rice to check rising prices.

Source: Mint - <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/after-un-body-3-nations-ask-india-to-resume-rice-exports-11692550714969.html>

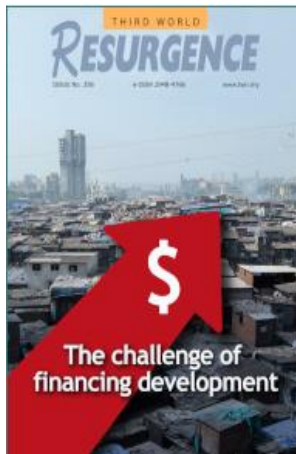
### WHO launches a new global initiative on digital health

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the G20 India presidency have announced a new Global Initiative on Digital Health (GIDH) at the Health Minister's Meeting of the G20 Summit hosted by India.

The new GIDH initiative (pronounced 'guide' for short) will operate as a WHO-managed network and platform to support the implementation of the Global Strategy on Digital Health 2020–2025.



Source: WHO - [http://tradedearabia.com/news/HEAL\\_412402.html](http://tradedearabia.com/news/HEAL_412402.html)



### Third World Resurgence Issue No.356 (2023/3)

#### Articles include:

- UN Financing for Development: The best chance to democratise global economic governance?
- A half-hearted effort: The G20's finance track
- Seeking a way out of the debt maze

Published by Third World Network, Penang, Malaysia

Link for more information:

<https://www.twn.my/title2/resurgence/2023/356.htm>

### Third World Economics Issue No. 777 (16-31 Aug 2023)

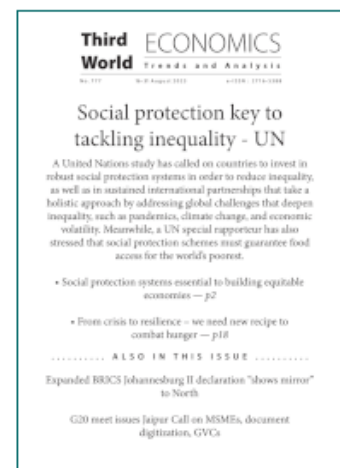
#### Articles include:

- Social protection systems essential to building equitable economies
- From crisis to resilience – we need new recipe to combat hunger
- Expanded BRICS Johannesburg II declaration “shows mirror” to North

Published by Third World Network, Penang, Malaysia

Link for more information:

<https://www.twn.my/title2/twe/twe.htm>



### Africa Renewal

*Africa Renewal is a United Nations digital magazine that covers Africa's economic, social and political developments. We cover the challenges the continent faces and the solutions to these by Africans themselves, including with the support of the United Nations and international community. Through the Africa Renewal digital magazine and social media platforms, webinars with youth groups, media relations, and other outreach and partnership efforts, we present a new narrative about Africa that showcases positive action and hope, while countering mostly negative stereotypical portrayals of Africa. We promote Africa's achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris climate change agreement and Africa's Agenda 2063. The topics we cover include sustainable development,*

*climate action, agriculture, youth voices, women's empowerment, health, the African Continental Free Trade Area and other regional integration efforts, technology and innovation, peace and security, economic development and more. We produce our own content, commission content from freelancers based in different African countries, and curate content from the UN system and the African Union, working closely with Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (OSAA), the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), and the African Union Development Agency(AUDA-NEPAD). It is produced 3 times a year.*

For More Information and downloading - <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/>



Screenshot of YouTuber Asad Ali from Asad Pendu Vlogs.

### **Impact of Social Media: Trivialization of Pakistani Society**

By Hamid Ali Khan

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan — The prevalence of social media has snowballed in recent years in Pakistan, ushering in a new era of digital interconnectedness. But with this technological advancement comes the unintended consequence of trivializing Pakistani society.

Social media platforms like YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, and Facebook have become integral parts of our society, drastically altering the way people communicate, consume information, and engage with each other—for example, instead of relying on radio or TV news bulletins for staying current on important political, social, and economic affairs and then having heated discussions on these happenings and events in barbershops, tea stalls, and other social gathering places.

However, in today's digital age, Twitter (now called 'X') has emerged as a prominent go-to platform for staying updated on the latest news and trends. Hashtags on social media replace traditional sit-ins and demonstrations for advocating political and social causes. One can even get arrested for creating or promoting a hashtag from their social media account. Similarly, TikTok has become a more democratic and easily accessible platform for entertainment and showcasing one's talent, such as acting, dancing, singing, fashion, and style, catapulting previously obscure people to fame and stardom overnight.

Instant gratification is the lifeblood of social media sites. Users frequently turn to flimsy material to immediately grab attention to gain validation through likes, shares, and comments—amusing and sensational posts searching for virility eclipse deep conversations and meaningful information.

As a result, important issues are diminished to fads, undermining Pakistani society's need for meaningful discourse and self-reflection. Social media's shortness and rapid speed have shortened people's attention spans, especially the younger generation.

Last year certain regions of the country experienced significant destruction and suffering from floods. The primary cause of these floods is likely related to environmental and climate change issues plaguing the country. However, the social media trends and discussions were more focused on shifting the blame onto the inefficiency of the politicians in power. This misplaced focus turned the public attention away from the environmental causes of the floods, and even then, the issue was replaced by something trendier and forgotten till the floods appeared again this year.

This pattern has led to a deterioration in critical thinking and reluctance to conduct in-depth analysis in Pakistan. Simple explanations of complex subjects are given in soundbites, omitting the subtleties needed for careful reflection.

Social media can amplify social and political issues, enabling movements for positive change. However, it



also has the potential to trivialize serious matters. Important debates can devolve into aggressive arguments, and sensationalism often overshadows substantive discussions. Consequently, significant societal issues risk being overlooked or forgotten amidst viral content.

We seldom see passionate debates on the ever-deteriorating situation of human and civil rights in the country, inequality, injustice, access to education, and the environmental damage caused by ever-increasing urbanization, oppression, and rights of marginalized communities.

The rapid spread of information on social media can be a double-edged sword. While it facilitates the dissemination of valuable knowledge, it also accelerates the propagation of disinformation and fake news. In Pakistani society, this can lead to misinformation about historical events, political matters, or cultural practices, further complicating the quest for truth and accurate understanding.

An example is the recent sexual exploitation and harassment scandal involving a public sector university. A few individuals, driven by their malicious ulterior motives and personal vendetta, used their influence to blow the issue out of proportion, resulting in a tarnishing reputation of the academia and particularly of the female students studying in higher education institutions. The propaganda created around the scandal spread the false impression that female students could only receive good university grades by offering sexual favours to their professors in return.

The worst part of this phenomenon is the role played by journalists-turned-YouTube bloggers—derogatorily called ‘YouTubers’ in the country— and pseudo-journalists running their Facebook news pages. The latter group particularly has no training or academic grounding in journalism. They do not understand the ethical and professional principles that guide trustworthy journalism. Their sole motive appears to be fame, power, viewership, and followership.

Often resorting to threats, exploitation, and harassment, they can be seen in police stations interviewing confined defendants and suspects, assuming the roles of investigators, prosecutors, and judges during these interviews. They often overlook the legal implications of these public interviews for the interviewees (confined defendants and suspects in this case). Regrettably, the police also support them in these damaging pseudo-journalistic endeavours, wrongly believing they are serving society by allowing such access of these pseudo-journalists to the defendants and suspects.

The sole motive of both groups—the journalists turned YouTubers and the pseudo-journalists—is to attract more viewers and increase their revenue. Many YouTubers in Pakistan, like elsewhere, earn money through views, advertisements, and sponsorships.

Some YouTube bloggers prioritize being the first to report on a topic over verifying facts. This haste to publish content can lead to inaccuracies, misinformation, and sensationalism. While traditional journalism at least follows specific ethical guidelines and standards, many YouTube bloggers may have different levels of accountability.

Certain YouTube channels may cater to specific ideologies or echo chambers. They might sensationalize trivial issues that resonate with their audience’s beliefs, leading to further division and misinformation.

Haqeeqat TV is one such example. This channel has 4.46 million subscribers. Some of the videos on the channel have garnered nearly two hundred thousand views. The channel thrives on exaggeration, fake news, religious and ethnic bigotry, ultranationalism, and hate.

It is also important to note that some YouTubers play an important role that mainstream media may gloss over. Pakistanis have to face the huge problem of human trafficking. One YouTuber Asad Ali, who has tried the illegal migrating route via Turkey and Iran to Europe twice, documented his second attempt through 104 minutes of footage on his YouTube channel Asad Pendu Vlogs<sup>11</sup> alerted others to the dangers. The success of his channel in raising such a social issue has contributed to many other channels that have cropped up addressing this issue<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/@teachvisa>

<sup>12</sup> <https://restofworld.org/2023/pakistani-youtubers-expose-dangers-illegal-migration-dunki/>

While freedom of expression is essential in a democratic society, the challenge is encouraging bloggers (or Vloggers) like these and stopping some bloggers who may misuse it by spreading sensationalized or misleading content without considering its potential consequences.

Rather than regulation (censorship), one of the crucial steps can be to implement media literacy programs in both educational institutions and online platforms. These programs should equip users, especially young audiences, with essential critical thinking skills. Through media literacy efforts, students and internet users may learn to spot and recognize false material.

They will learn the value of examining sources and how to differentiate between authentic and sensationalized content. By developing these abilities, people may use internet media with better discernment and comprehend the intricacies of the material

Collaboration between relevant authorities and content creators is essential to address sensationalized content and clickbait on social media in Pakistan. Combining regulation with self-governance ensures a focus on responsible content creation and fosters a credible and trustworthy online landscape for users in Pakistan.

Promoting positive role models among content creators (like the example of Asad Ali) is crucial in addressing sensationalized content and clickbait on social media platforms in Pakistan. By highlighting and supporting those who prioritize responsible content creation and actively contribute to positive change in society, we can set a standard for ethical and meaningful online engagement.

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Some of Pakistan's top You tubers.  
Photo Source: Bradri

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