

Regional Overview: South Asia 20-26 March 2021

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Last week in South Asia, domestic rebel groups clashed with security forces in Pakistan and India. The Indian and Pakistani army reaffirmed their ceasefire pact during a meeting. Incidents of electoral violence were reported in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Assam states in India shortly before the first phase of the state assembly elections. Elsewhere in India, farmers organized a nationwide strike and demonstrations against the recent agricultural laws. Meanwhile, in Bangladesh, the Indian Prime Minister's visit was met with violent demonstrations.

In **Pakistan**, domestic rebel groups launched attacks on security forces and civilians in Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Sindh province last week. On 23 March, Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claimed responsibility for a roadside explosion targeting a police vehicle that killed four civilians and injured at least 14 in Chaman town in Balochistan province. Chaman is a key border crossing between Pakistan and its neighbor Afghanistan ([Al Jazeera, 24 March 2021](#)). In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, four tribal Pashtun youths were allegedly killed by the TTP near an army camp. The attack triggered demonstrations by the tribal population, accusing authorities and militants of repressing the Pashtun minority and disregarding their rights ([Asian News International, 22 March 2021](#)). Meanwhile, in Kulachi city in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, purported TTP militants ambushed a patrolling police vehicle, injuring three officers. Last week, the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA), a lesser known Sindhi secessionist militant group, claimed responsibility for hurling a crude bomb at a paramilitary vehicle, injuring three people including two civilians and a paramilitary personnel.

In **India**, Naxal-Maoist rebels launched attacks against security forces and construction workers in Chhattisgarh state. Five police officers were killed and at least 14 more were injured in an IED explosion carried out by Maoists. The officers were returning from an anti-Maoist operation when their bus was targeted ([AP News, 23 March 2021](#)). Maoist militants abducted and killed a police officer and set ablaze vehicles engaged in road construction in two districts in the state. Chhattisgarh is known as the epicenter of Naxal-Maoist violence

where rebels attack security forces, demanding land and jobs for the poor rural and tribal populations (*for more on the Naxal-Maoist insurgency, see this [ACLED piece](#)*). In February, a panel consisting of members of political parties and civil society groups was formed to initiate peace talks between the Chhattisgarh government and the Naxal-Maoists. Releasing a statement on 12 March, the Naxal-Maoists expressed their interest in the peace talks, provided their conditions, including the lifting of the ban on the Communist Party of India (Maoist), were met ([India Today, 25 March 2021](#)). These latest attacks could impact the proposed peace talks.

Meanwhile, the Indian and Pakistani armies held a meeting to follow-up on last month's ceasefire agreement along the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) ([Daily Excelsior, 27 March 2021](#)). Both sides reaffirmed that peace will be upheld in the region ([Hindustan Times, 27 March 2021](#)). Since the joint statement issued on 25 February, no incidents of cross-border violence by state forces have been reported.

Elsewhere in India, electoral violence was reported prior to the state assembly elections in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Assam states. On 27 March, the first phase of state assembly elections were held in Assam and West Bengal. Prior to that, members and supporters of rival parties clashed, leading to the death of at least four people in West Bengal. Two members of the ruling Trinamool Congress Party (TMC) and two supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) died during three separate clashes between the two parties. While the BJP is the ruling party nationally, it is the opposition in West Bengal where the TMC governs. In Assam, BJP members reportedly attacked an Indian National Congress candidate. Frequent provocation between political rivals and attacks on candidates are commonplace around elections in India ([The Telegraph, 30 March 2021](#)).

In **Bangladesh**, the visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to celebrate 50 years of the country's independence sparked violent demonstrations ([AP News, 26 March 2021](#)). Some Bangladeshi Muslim and Islamist groups criticized Modi and his party for promoting Hindu nationalism and discriminating against Muslims ([AP News, 26 March 2021](#)). Five people died during clashes between demonstrating Muslim students and police in Chittagong division. Violence erupted between two groups of rioters in the capital city, Dhaka, when one group waved shoes as a sign of disrespect to Modi. Members of the Islamist advocacy group Hefazat-e-Islam clashed with police and vandalized government buildings in Chittagong division ([Deutsche Welle, 26 March 2021](#)). Meanwhile, the state assembly elections are set to begin in West Bengal state, which borders Bangladesh. The Indian Prime Minister plans to visit a Hindu temple in Bangladesh on 27 March that is sacred to the Matua community in West Bengal ([The Diplomat, 27 March 2021](#); [The Hindu, 26 March 2021](#)).

Lastly, Indian farmers called for a nationwide shutdown last week to mark four months of blockades outside the capital city and demonstrations against the new agricultural reforms ([Xinhua, 26 March 2021](#)). The call received a strong response in Punjab and Haryana states, where farmers blocked roads, rails, and highways. No incidents of violence were reported. So

far, farmer representatives and the central government have held 11 rounds of meetings, leading to an impasse over the legislation to deregulate the agricultural sector ([Hindustan Times, 26 March 2021](#)).



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