



**HONIARA
2002**



**HONIARA
2020**



MIDDLEGROUND

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TO OUR SUPPORTERS AND THOSE WHO HAVE JUST FOUND US,

We are in the thick of 2021 and SafeGround is excited to announce progress on our major projects. Devastating events in the Solomon Islands have drawn international awareness to the issue of explosive remnants of war (ERW) left over from World War II, to which SafeGround has long drawn attention. Whilst tragic accidents taking life and causing injury are a sad way to mobilise action, we really hope the Solomon Islands and other Pacific nations get the assistance they need to rid their countries of legacy weapons which continue to cause suffering. SafeGround hopes to continue its work in the Pacific. The Pacific is unfortunately a much forgotten entity in the mine action world. Sadly, the Solomon Islands experienced the harsh consequence of this as they lost two young men in the accident in Honiara early this May. Despite being a state member to the Mine Ban Treaty since the beginning, Solomon Islands has received little support to deal with its explosive legacy of war. SafeGround have received small grant from the International Campaign to Ban Landmines - Cluster Munition Coalition “Investing in Action” Programme to focus on building support for the universalisation of the Cluster Munition Convention. This project will focus on promoting the Convention on Cluster Munitions in the Pacific.

With the continued support from the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots Steering Committee we have continued to urge Australian policy makers to support calls for a new treaty to prohibit fully autonomous weapons. SafeGround has

engaged parliamentarians, attended a Roundtable at ANU College of Law and continues to reach out to grow the civil society network. If you, or an organisation you are involved with, is interested in our efforts please get in touch with us.

Our newer project ‘Support Survivors of War’ has a team of three interns researching the consequences of drone warfare on drone operators as well as civilians who happen to live in the area they attack and keep under surveillance. More broadly we are also assessing the mental health effects of military operations on serving ADF members.

Our journal Middle Ground has of course reached our second issue. We are also excited to be taking part in other initiatives within the peace community. We are writing a submission for Independent and Peaceful Australia Network’s [People’s Inquiry](#) into the Costs and Consequences of the US Alliance, emphasising the negative role this has had in particular, on disarmament policy. SafeGround is also looking forward to taking part in ‘[Raising Peace](#)’ in Sydney running from 19th September - 3 October, including International Day of Peace. We will be involved in some panel/seminar sessions so stay tuned for the program.

We hope you enjoy this issue of Middle Ground,

SafeGround Committee

June 2021

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

While scrolling one of my multiple news feeds, often time in bed escaping the morning, I find myself reading about stories all over the world: in Sheik Jarrah, the fight against COVID, Myanmar, or the US. I then often find myself lamenting the three month period we have between issues of MiddleGround. In that time the world seems to shake and shift uncontrollably, leaving us with an entirely different set of stories coming out of the major media outlets.

Whether this is the way it has been, or if because of our newfound hyper-connectivity we are just seeing more of the world than ever, I'm not sure. But as for the forgotten plights of those whose stories are no longer profitable, MiddleGround might just be finding its purpose in this big, old world.

This edition is exciting. Our little Quarterly is taking shape, with both student and professional submissions ranking amongst our articles in Edition 2. From a five year documentation of resistance in America from Joe Giordano, to a well executed photographic foretelling of Bangkok's watery future by photojournalist, Daniel Quinlan.

We hope you enjoy this edition, if you're back for more from Edition 1, welcome back. If you're a new reader, welcome. Thank you for being here with us.

In hope,

Rhett Kleine, Managing Editor

PARADISE LOST

By John Rodsted

On a sultry Sunday afternoon, a group of people gathered in a public park for a BBQ. The BBQ was to raise money for charity.

The day was hot and humid as they built a fire on the ground. The sky was threatening with rolling clouds, ominous signs of a possible tropical downpour. In the Solomon Islands you can almost set your watch by the time an afternoon storm will wet the land down.

The fire was going well as the 30 attendees crowded around ready for the cook-up. The skies darkened then split with a deafening roar. The heavens opened with the first clap of thunder, then rain came pouring down.

People scattered in all directions seeking shelter from the

rain knowing it would be short and fast and over very soon. The BBQ celebration would then resume.

A few people braved the downpour and tended the fire. The food would be ready when the rains stopped and sizzling seafood and meats would tempt all back to the gathering.

The final few stayed by the fire, laughing and joking, not letting a drenching halt their event. More thunder clapped and the wind howled. A massive crack rang out and all eyes looked skyward but this was not the source of that clap.

The fire had exploded and smoke rose from where the few were standing. No one was standing now. A howl of panic rang out and people ran to find carnage. A crater was now

Next page: The urban sprawl, Honiara, Solomon Islands. Top image from 2002, bottom image from 2021 Images from Google Earth.

where the BBQ had been and four bodies lay at different distances to it.

At first glance, one was already dead, bloody, lifeless, mutilated. Another three were screaming in shock and gore as they tried to seal holes ripped in their bodies, fingers clawing at the holes, minds not comprehending what had just happened.

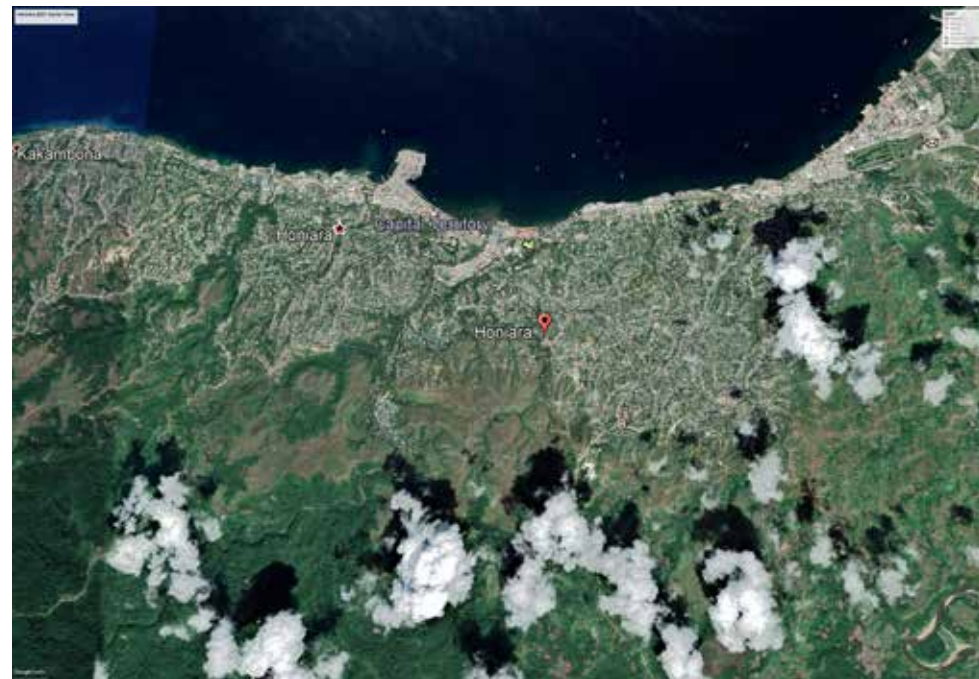
In the chaos, bystanders, taxis, medics, and police all play their parts in getting the injured to care. Confusion is left behind along with the crater and carnage and an eerie calm descends over the park.

The first police on the scene call for higher instruction and a vehicle from Hell's Point arrives. These are the Royal Solomon Island Police Force EOD team. EOD meaning Explosive Ordnance Disposal. They are highly trained officers with the dark speciality of bomb disposal and defusing.

Gently they approach the scene looking in all directions for both clues and danger.

There is a single crater. Debris fans out from this hole. The hole is measured, width, depth, a metal detector is swung and twisted bits of metal retrieved. The verdict is quickly and accurately determined. A 105 mm artillery shell had exploded causing this destruction.

This shell had not been fired by a terrorist but had lain buried in this park on the edge of Honiara since 1942. Then it was not a park but the epicentre of the opening salvos of World War 2 when the United States Marine Corps came face to face with the Imperial Japanese Army for the first time on land.





This page and next page: The urban sprawl. A zoomed in view of Honiara from 2002 and 2021.

Left image is from 2002, right image is from 2021 Images from Google Earth.

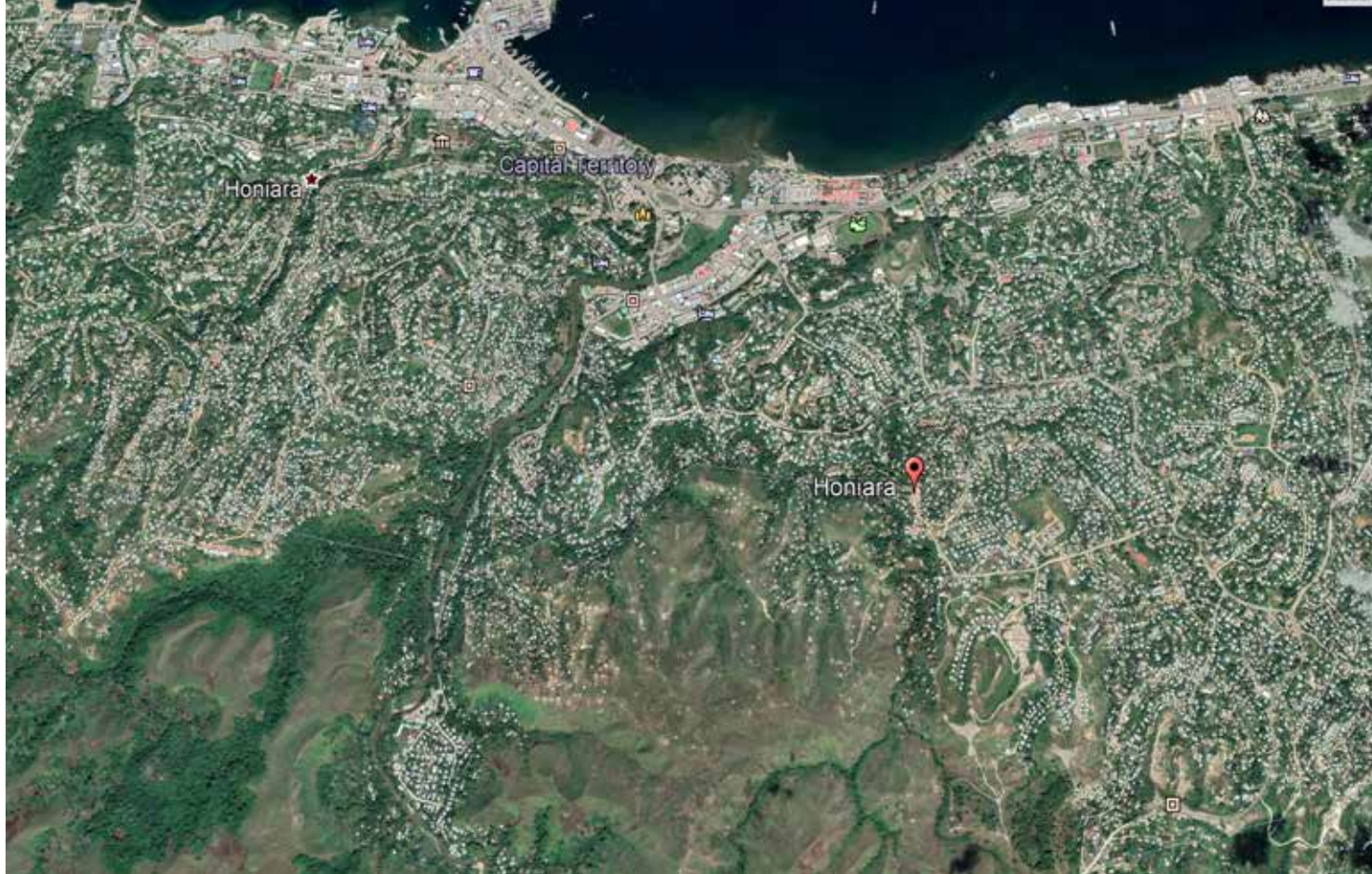
The fighting was fierce and bloody as the Japanese Forces were dislodged from this area and slowly squeezed west along the coast until they hit the western tip of Guadalcanal and off to the next islands. The smoke cleared.

Honiara, the now capital city of the Solomon Islands, didn't exist back then. It grew in situ around the asset both the Americans and Japanese wanted during the war, the new airfield. People came, businesses developed and housing began stretching along the coast and back into the hills, all of this being built over the battlefield.

The early days of Honiara were chaotic with a great amount of misfired and new munitions lying about. At the end of

the war in 1945 the remaining US troops were tasked with getting rid of what munitions remained before they could return home. This job was speedily undertaken and most were out of there within a year. Extensive clearance had not been executed.

The 105 mm artillery round that exploded on Sunday 9 May 2021 had been just below the earth's surface since 1942, full of explosive, ready, waiting for an innocent act to unleash its destructive power. That act came in the way of friends having a BBQ. Raziv Hilly was 29 years old, a community leader and engineer, when the last thing he did was poke a fire and all hell broke loose. Here he lost his life. Two of



his friends are in a critical condition and another has lesser wounds.

The Pacific is still greatly contaminated by munitions from World War II that either failed to detonate or were abandoned as the war moved on up the road. That doesn't make them now safe, just ready.

Is this an isolated incident or will it happen again? Of course it is not isolated and it will definitely happen again. The only difference is it might be on a remote beach or island from where the news will never escape.. Another dead villager to join those who went the same way before.

World War II ended 76 years ago. Let it be ended once and for all now. The world's wealthy nations must donate real budgets to create large-scale and meaningful clearance teams to deal with this legacy that spreads from a BBQ site in Honiara across the Pacific Theatre of War to Tokyo. Clear the problem of old munitions up once and for all, the end, and relegate this sorry chapter of our human history to the back pages of a dusty book where it belongs.

Enough carnage for the people of the Pacific Nations. Please write to your politicians and demand it so.

SINKING CITIES

By Daniel Quinlan

I couldn't believe it when I read that Bangkok was sinking by as much as 1-2 cm a year. At first I assumed it was a misprint and they must have meant millimeters but the same figure appeared in other stories. Later I pitched it to an editor and did a short news video on it but I couldn't get it out of my head.

It seemed so bizarre, a megacity, that is home to 8 million people could be underwater in 10 years. Part of the problem was caused by the amount of building that is weighing down on the marshy floodplain on which Bangkok sits, which has been made less stable by over-extracting groundwater. The other problem is coastal erosion and rising sea levels.

In 2011, Bangkok was hit by massive floods which cost the city 8 billion dollars and 800 lives. Areas of the city remained partially flooded for months and it gave a terrifying view of a possible future.

All photos: Daniel Quinlan

Of course life continued on... people fell in love and went to work, property prices kept rising. Everywhere you looked, cranes dotted the skyline, building more condos. It was hard to work out if people believed it was a nightmare that wouldn't happen because the threat was exaggerated or the problem would be fixed due to concerted action... or if most people choose to ignore it because it's beyond their control and slowly we are collectively sleepwalking towards disaster.

I had just moved to Bangkok for the birth of my first child after 5 years living in Cambodia. I was often awake at odd hours and when I was bottle feeding would sometimes watch the *Blue Planet* documentary series about life under water. The rainy season in Bangkok lives up to its name. Great storms buffet the city and flood the street and slowly my sleep deprived brain started to have visions of the city overtaken by fish and water. I kept thinking of a line from a poem by Slivia Plath that we



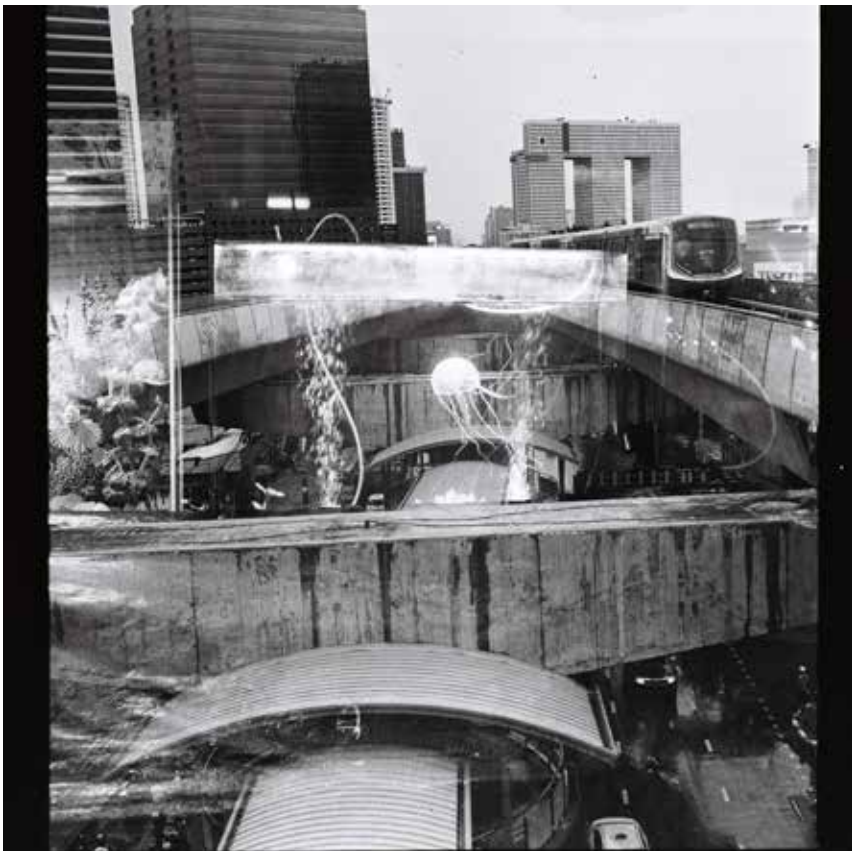
read in high school and how the future rises toward us “day after day, like a terrible fish”. It seemed to somehow capture the existential threat of climate change that looms in our collective future but is already becoming a reality in places like Bangkok.

I had recently been experimenting with double exposures and slowly things mixed together in my head, leading to this Sinking

City project. Initially I experimented with both digital and film but wasn't so happy with the digital results, which didn't have the dreamy feel I was after, so I started concentrating on film. It seemed to offer a way to create something that could allow me to make work that captured the strange, surreal nature of the situation in a way that related the uncertainty and strangeness and offered lots of creative possibilities.

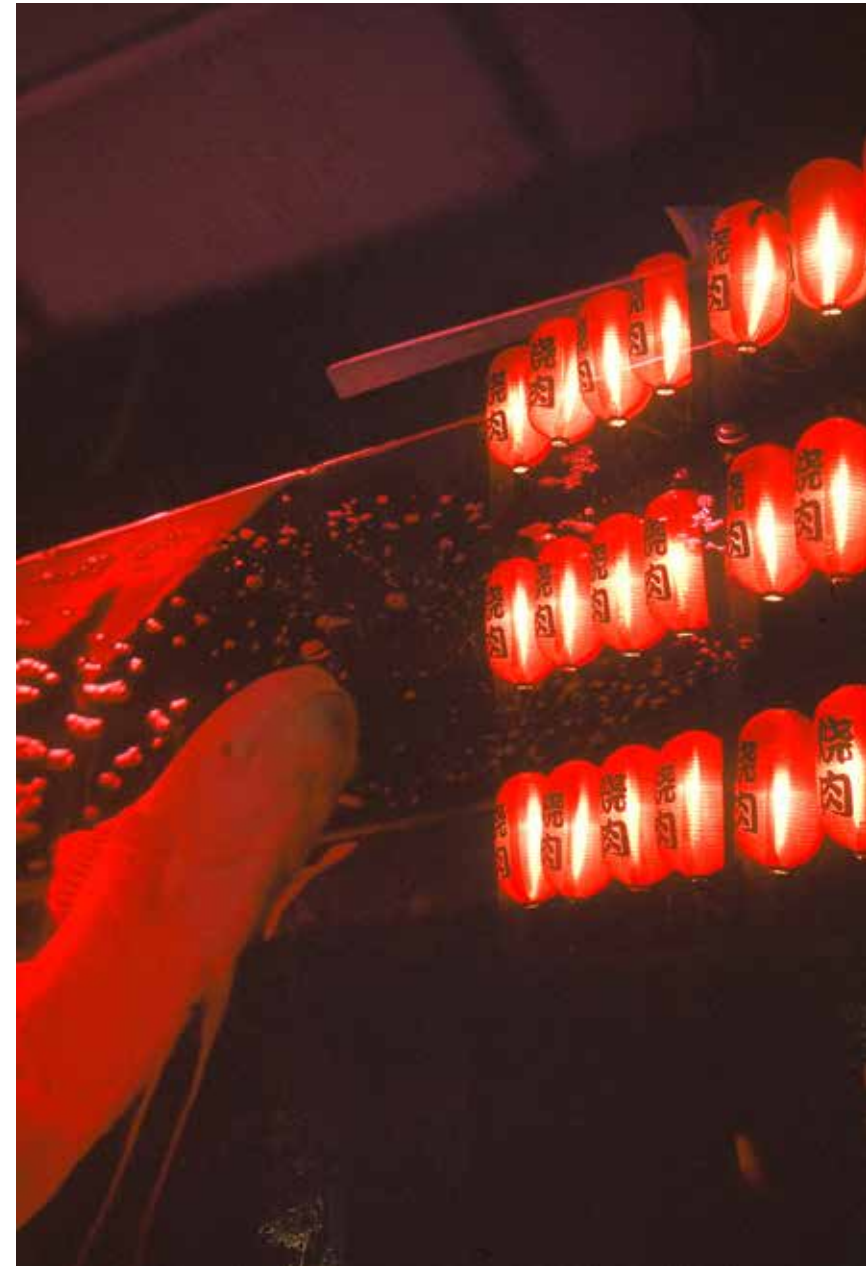


I also liked the challenge of thinking about exposure and light in a different way, and the slow pace of making and thinking about a picture. I also liked the possibility of layers and associations rather than just assorted and neatly arranged facts. I wanted to challenge myself to have the project reflect my personal reaction and feelings for a change, rather than just document the situation, which is the approach I'm more used to.









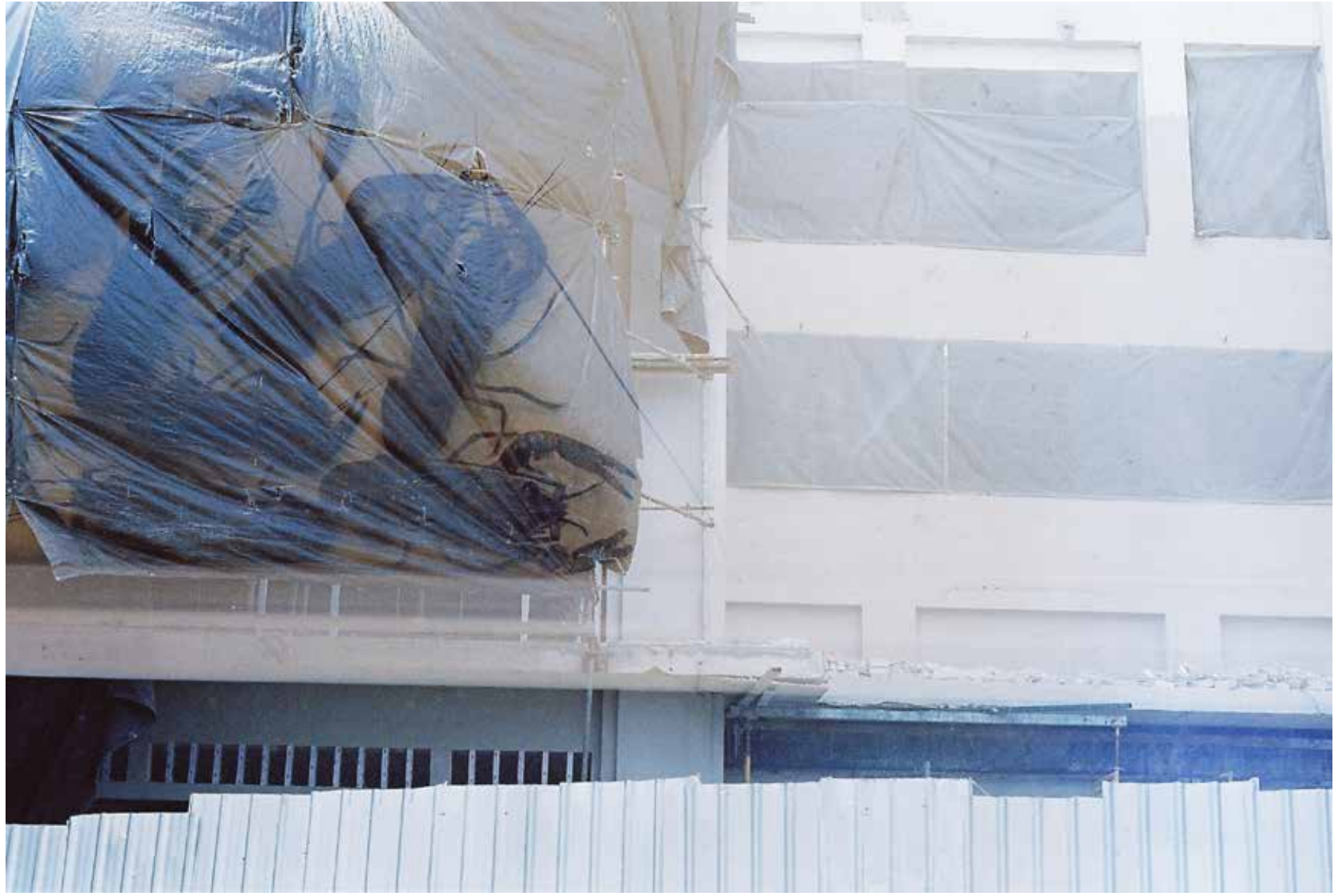




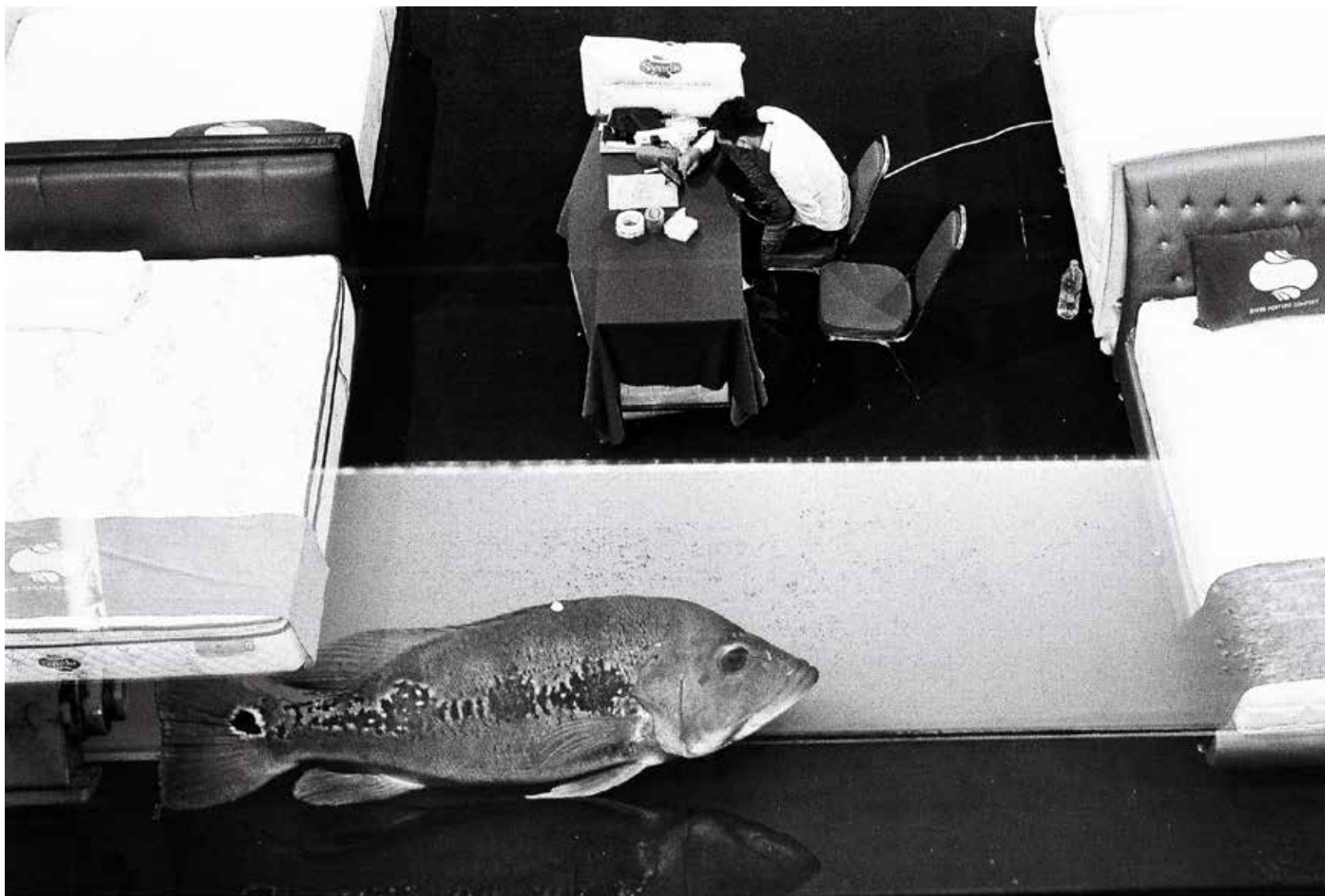














AUSTRALIA DRAGS ITS FEET ON AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS REGULATION

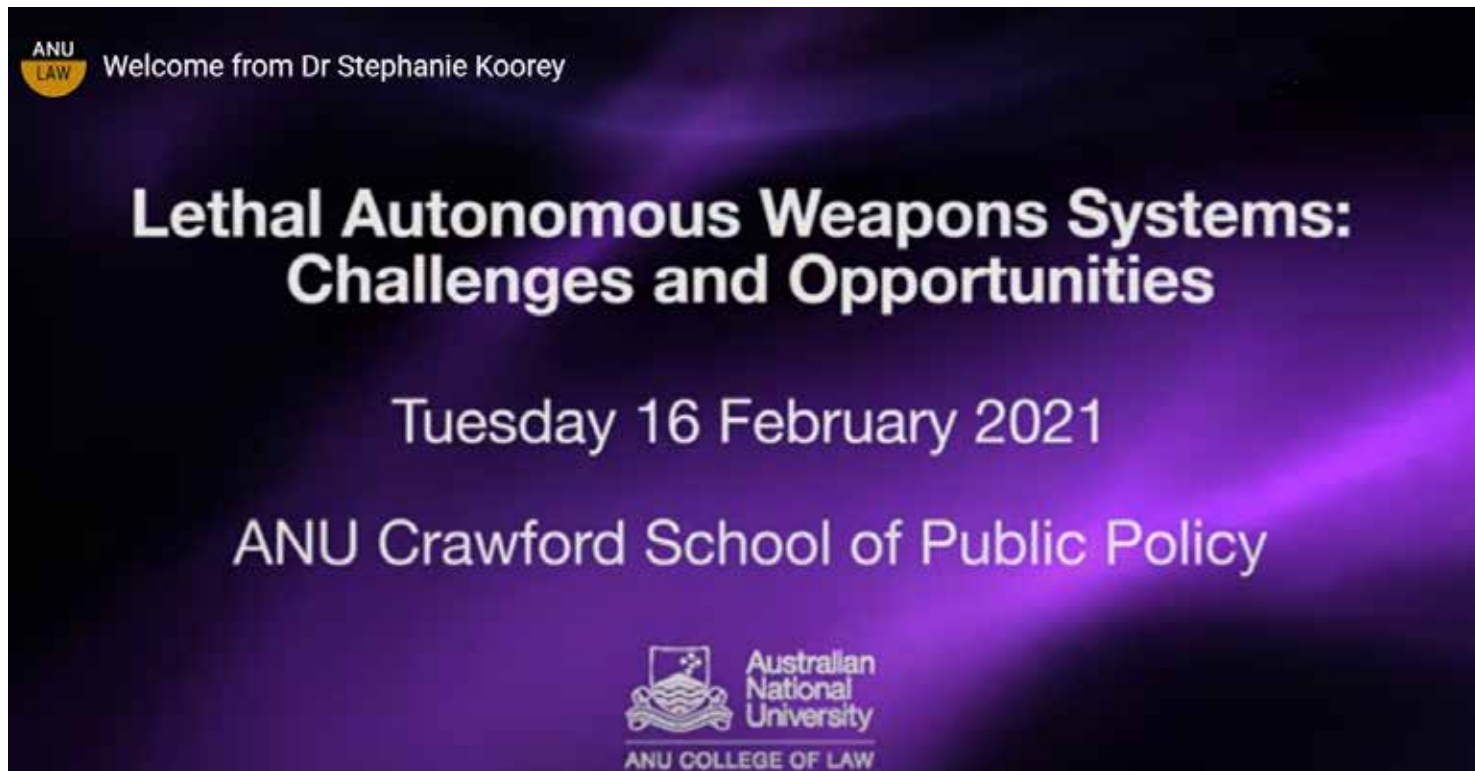
By Matilda Byrne

Fully autonomous weapons, those which select and engage targets in absence of human control, give rise to moral, ethical, legal and security threats. The efforts to introduce a ban on these ‘killer robots,’ also referred to as ‘lethal autonomous weapons systems’ (LAWS) continue to grow globally. World governments, civil society groups and the global public are concerned that without swift action, humanity will cross a moral red line.

Diplomatic discussions regarding LAWS stagnated as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic. However, meetings of the ‘Group of Governmental Experts’ who address this issue have been scheduled for 2021 but are still facing uncertainty. The Group is working towards recommending a “normative

and operational framework” at the end of this year. The only policy outcome to adequately respond to this urgent issue, is a legal instrument (such as a treaty) that combines prohibitions and positive obligations to preserve meaningful human control over the use of force.

The Australian Government has continued to assert that a ban would be premature. Fully autonomous weapons pose great risk and amid rapid global advancements and Australia’s own development of autonomous weapons, hard law which articulates the need for meaningful human control is essential to establish new norms. Innovation must be done with limits and delineation of what is and is not acceptable; morally, ethically and legally.



As a principled, global actor Australia should adopt a clear policy to maintain meaningful human control over autonomous weapons and rule out LAWS to guide its advancements regarding AI in defence. However, instead of a principled rejection of LAWS, we hear troubling comments such as, that with potential LAWS of the future there may be “broad comfort in the use of an ethical system.” This statement and other views of the Australian government were offered during a roundtable on LAWS

hosted by the ANU College of Law in March and captured by the [Chair’s Summary](#), a synthesis of the discussion which took place between government, Australian Defence Force, industry, civil society, international organisations and academia.

The *Chair’s Summary* highlights many of the risks seen to be ‘new and abnormal’ associated with LAWS. These include the problems of algorithmic bias, the ‘black box’ problem, opposing algorithms creating unforeseen feedback loops,

Welcome banner by Dr Stephanie Koorey of ANU College of Law for the Roundtable on LAWS, March 2021.

catastrophic consequences of machine error, compounded by high speeds, not to mention the issues with handing over life and death decisions to machines, reinforced by many attendees.

We welcome domestic initiatives such as developing a ‘system of governance’ related to the use of these technologies. However, they must also be informed by international norms, laws and regulations. Establishing new legal rules, as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) put it in their recent [position statement](#), is crucial for the international community and a needed step to address technological advancement to ensure limits on autonomy in weapons and protection of humanity.

As the Hon Dr Andrew Leigh MP put it in his speech to the House of Representatives in Parliament earlier this year:

Australia, however, has taken a somewhat opaque approach to lethal autonomous weapons, despite working on autonomous weapon systems...It is tempting to think that new technologies can just be used by the forces of light but, as past experience has shown, we need to regulate based on the assumption that the most nefarious actors and the most dubiously moral states will use such weapons. Those are the grounds for bans on poison gas and torture, and that’s the principle on which Australia should approach lethal autonomous weapon systems.

He called on the government to “engage more fully with the Australian people and the international community on the critical debate over the regulation of lethal autonomous weapon systems.”

Andrew Leigh’s Speech [Autonomous weapons systems are the modern landmines](#) also recalled UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres comment:

Hon Dr Andrew Leigh MP delivering his speech on fully autonomous weapons to the House of Representatives at Parliament House, official video, 23 February 2021.



For me there is a message that is very clear — machines that have the power and the discretion to take human lives are politically unacceptable, are morally repugnant, and should be banned by international law.

He then acknowledged the work of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots in Australia. Our civil society movement continues to work to raise awareness of this issue among the public, different groups and sectors of society and policymakers; highlighting the need for a new legally binding instrument and urging Australia to support the calls for negotiations. The Group of Governmental Experts’ upcoming session on June 28 has been postponed, with another session currently scheduled in August. However, countries have been invited to provide written contributions in the lead-up regarding what form the ‘framework’ should take. Regrettably we can’t expect Australia to join those leading efforts in suggesting a treaty-based solution, prohibitions on LAWS or obligations around meaningful human control, despite such regulation being critical and in our own interests.



For an overview focused on Australia's autonomous weapons development and role in diplomatic discussions to date see article from Middle Ground Issue 1 [*"SafeGround Calls For Red Lines Amid Australia's Autonomous Weapons Development"*](#)

If you or your organisation/group, community or members are interested in engaging with this issue, please get in touch. In 2021 we must keep the pressure building to ensure

meaningful human control over weapons use, bring about an international treaty and prohibit lethal autonomous weapons which would see humanity cross moral, ethical and legal red lines.

Picture taken from the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots nameplate at the Group of Governmental Experts meeting at the UN in Geneva in 2019.

**THE CASE FOR
A PEACEFUL &
INDEPENDENT
AUSTRALIA**

The Independent and Peaceful Australia Network (IPAN) is greatly concerned about Australia's continued involvement in United States-led wars. Australia is blessed by a remarkably defensible geography, and faces no credible threat of major attack, let alone invasion. Yet our military forces have been on deployment in US wars of choice in Asia, the Middle East and Afghanistan for decades. This involvement has come at great cost – to our soldiers, and to civilians, the infrastructure and the economy in those countries where the wars have raged – and in some cases still rage. In addition, there is a cost to the Australian economy, and to our international reputation.

IPAN invites you to participate in a national public inquiry into the costs and consequences of the Australia-US Alliance for the Australian people, and invites proposals in relation to measures that could assist in achieving a genuinely independent and peaceful foreign policy for Australia.

Primary aim: To facilitate a deep conversation and engagement with the broader Australian community in order to determine a path forwards towards a genuinely independent and peaceful foreign policy for Australia; to ensure a more just allocation of Australian government resources.

Secondary aim: To produce and promote a public report which outlines the views of those Australians who hold concerns about the US Alliance and which details the steps to be taken to ensure a genuinely independent and peaceful foreign policy for Australia.

This Inquiry will gather information and consider all of the possible costs and consequences of the Australia-US Alliance, including the economic, social, environmental and political impacts. The inquiry will be a way for organisations and individuals across Australia to contribute to a national conversation. The inquiry will be overseen by a panel of respected experts and community representatives who will receive written and verbal submissions and contribute to the publication of a final report to be widely publicised.

Submissions will be accepted during the period from 26 November to 31 July 2021, when organisations and individuals can deliver written submissions (where possible). Where submissions cannot be in writing, individuals/ organisations will be able to meet 1-1 with an assistant/ IPAN Coordinating Committee member and provide an oral submission.

The Terms of Reference for the Inquiry will be/are available on the IPAN Inquiry Website, and written submissions can be emailed to: inquiry@ipan.org.au

From August – October 2021, the Inquiry Panel will consider all submissions and will write up a report based on the seven themes of the inquiry. It is planned that the report will be finalised by the end November 2021.

IPAN trusts that the outcome of this inquiry will be a powerful and collective voice towards developing a genuinely independent foreign policy for Australia and a more just allocation of Australian government resources.

MODERN RESISTANCE IN AMERICA

By J. M. Giordano

I grew up in a lower middle class, white neighborhood and only attended community college. I saw Trump coming a mile away. What I didn't see coming was the enormous amount of resistance to him and the racist and brutal policies that followed him - or, having already been woven into the bloody fabric of American history, amplified. Police killings and brutality, outward racism, and sharp increase in white supremacist crimes were all part of Trump's gift to America's conservatives. But for

every action...people took to the streets across the US by the thousands. I started documenting the resistance movement during Trump's rise to power. I continue to do so.

J. M. Giordano has been documenting protests in America for the last five years. These are some of his photographs which act as a glimpse at modern resistance in the USA.



*Civil rights leader Congressman
Elijah E Cummings speaks at an
anti- trump rally in Baltimore.
©J. M. Giordano*



*Street medics help a victim of
a police pepper spray attack at
the Unite the Right 2 rally in
Washington D.C. on August 12.
©J. M. Giordano*



*BLM sign covered by police.
©J. M. Giordano*



*Federal police watch over a BLM
march in Washington.
©J. M. Giordano*



*Protestors run from police as
smoke from fires started by rioters
rise in the distance, in the wake
of Trumps Inauguration.
©J. M. Giordano*



*An anti-Trump protestor sweats
in a gas mask during the riots
following the Inauguration of
Donald Trump in Washington
.DC. Photo Joe Giordano.*



*A Baltimore activist leads a
march following the death of
George Floyd.
©J. M. Giordano*

AN EXPENSIVE JAB

By Siddhant Vashistha

Amidst [governmental failure](#) and mismanagement in the current second wave of Covid-19, and beyond the lack of oxygen, hospital beds and drug shortages, India has a bigger problem – vaccination. India has vaccinated only 8% of its population.

The free market farce

India's two major vaccine manufacturers have been [unclear](#) about their vaccine pricing. They have even increased the prices for the vaccines during a raging pandemic, while the poorest of this country struggle to afford one square meal per day. Both Bharat Biotech (BB) and Serum Institute of India (SII) have increased their vaccine prices to ₹ (rupees) 600 and ₹300, respectively, for states to buy the vaccine. Serum's Adar Poonawalla even went on to call the company's 100-rupee price reduction from ₹400 to ₹300 a "[philanthropic gesture](#)".

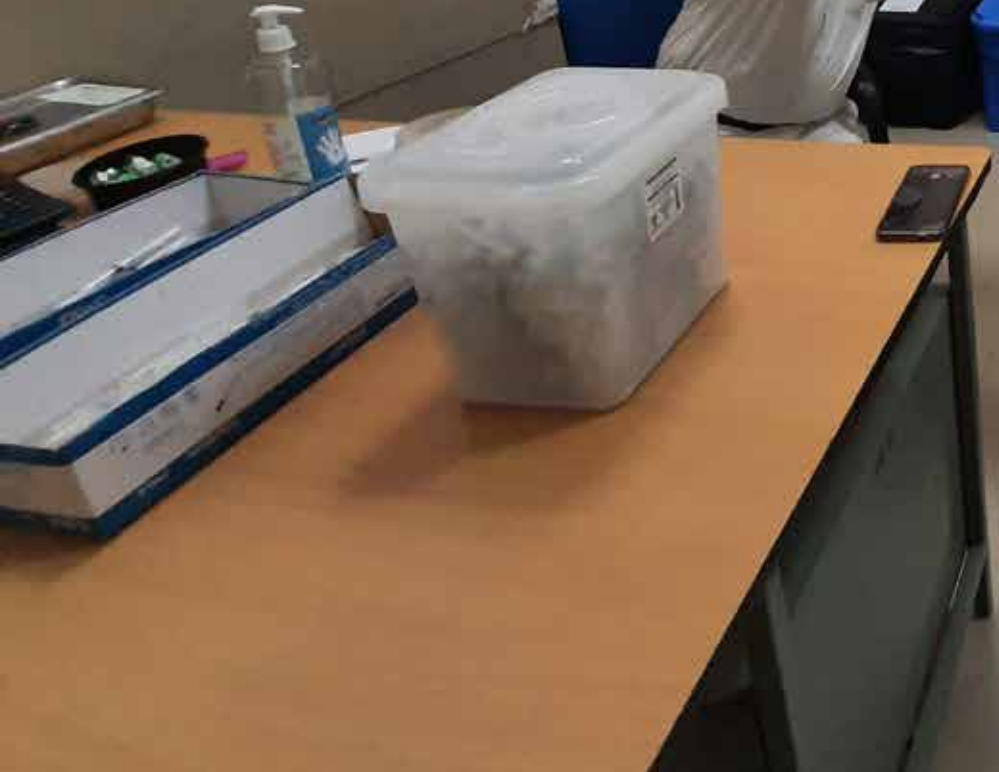
*Next page:
Vaccine clinics in India .
©Siddhant Vashistha*

The prices of BB's Covaxin will go as high as ₹1,200 in private hospitals.

The vaccine manufacturers have a similar rationale for this exorbitant pricing – expansion. To bring the ideals of the free market into a public health emergency is unbecoming for the country, not just because most Indians cannot afford the vaccine but the fact that the research done to make these vaccines was publicly funded.

Centre-State disparity

Moreover, the prices of the vaccines are [higher for the states](#) to buy. Although there are around [23 states](#) that have committed to providing free vaccines, there is a lot of uncertainty regarding the procurement of vaccines. The question of allocation of a certain number of doses (not enough for all) to states and then to private and government run hospitals is still [unanswered](#).





It leaves enough room for selling the vaccine on the black market and subsequent profiteering and exploitation. Clearly, the [wealthy states](#) will buy more vaccines, and this will also not be in accordance with the demands of the country. This is our own, homegrown version of vaccine inequality that has layers of states, income groups, and the Below the Poverty Line category in the bottom tier.

This is when the Centre (Indian Government) had collected [₹9,677.9 crore](#) through the PM-CARES fund as of May 2020. This goes on to show that the Centre has the capacity to fund a free vaccine for all if the PM-CARES fund is put to proper use. The tenets of cooperative federalism are at a sheer crossroads here as the states are obliged to pay ₹600 for a shot for which the Centre pays ₹150. Why should the Centre allow this exorbitant pricing by the corporates? The states do not have any bargaining power in front of the vaccine manufacturers either, whereas the Centre has plenty of it. This is in context to the Centre's [₹3,000 crore](#) aid to both

SII and BB to “ramp up production”, the same ramping up that made these manufacturers increase their vaccine prices to begin with.

The only thing that would make sense in this emergency situation would be to vaccinate everyone free of cost without getting into an argument about a “reasonable profit margin,” and with the [Centre's ₹350 billion budget](#) allocated for vaccination, this should not be tough.

This story was written in early May 2021. After much deliberation, pressure from the people, and chiding from the Supreme Court, a new vaccine policy was announced by PM Modi, which came into effect on June 21, 2021. Under the new policy the Central Government will procure 75% of vaccines and states do not have to buy separately from the manufacturers, leaving 25% to be bought by private hospitals. This will end the Centre-State disparity, relieving the state governments from buying at higher rates from the manufacturers.

*Previous page:
Vaccine clinics in India.
©Siddhant Vashistha*

PROLOGUE





By Kasun Ubayasiri

July 19, 2013: Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announces no asylum seeker arriving by boat will be settled in Australia.

March 29, 2017: 79 boats arrived in Australia between July 19, 2013, and July 27, 2014. Of the individuals on board, 1,596 were transferred to the Nauru Regional Processing Centre, 1,523 were transferred to the Manus Regional Processing Centre and 1,414 were issued with bridging visas in Australia. The selection is arbitrary, exercising an “non-delegable personal power” granted to the Minister.

March 1, 2019: The Medevac bill becomes law, paving the way for doctors to make medical rulings to evacuate refugees and asylum seekers detained offshore to Australia for urgent medical treatment. By the time the Law was repealed a year later, 192 detainees had been evacuated. They are detained primarily at the Kangaroo Point Alternative Place of Detention (APoD), and Melbourne’s Park Hotel APoD.

April 2, 2020: 120 Medevac refugees are locked up at the Kangaroo Point APoD when Queensland enters a hard COVID lockdown.

Previous page:

Kangaroo Point protest 2020-21.

©Kasun Ubayasiri



THE YEAR LONG PROTEST:

The men first made headlines the day Brisbane went into COVID lockdown, when they stepped out onto a balcony perched above Route 15 to Brisbane's Storey Bridge, holding handwritten pleas for freedom.

Quietly spoken protester Farhad Rahmati said it was impossible for he and his 'brothers' in lockdown to protect themselves when the compound was breached daily by 80 or 90 people, including security guards, cleaners and detention centre heavies.

"This is a big industry," the Iranian Kurdish civil engineer said over the phone in late April last year.

"We are in a corner and we are defenceless and the opponents have no mercy on us, just throwing punches."



*Kangaroo Point protest 2020-21.
©Kasun Ubayasiri*

*Previous page:
Kangaroo Point protest 2020-21.
©Kasun Ubayasiri*

“Detention itself has a high risk of depression, and you combine that with a pandemic and you feel like you are in a boxing ring,” he said.

To emphasise his point, he names those friends who’ve taken their own lives while tangled in the politics and red tape of being an asylum seeker in Australia.

Farhad is joined on the balcony by about two dozen fellow detainees – there are many more, 120 in fact, all men, all long-term inmates and all locked up in this repurposed Kangaroo Point motel after arriving in Brisbane under the MedeVac scheme months earlier.

Not everyone has access to the balcony, and those who don’t, peer through barred windows at the handful of socially



*Kangaroo Point protest 2020-21.
©Kasun Ubayasiri*

distanced people lined up outside the coffee shop on the corner opposite.

The men's 'balcony protest' has attracted the attention of refugee activists who are starting to trickle in, to stand on the footpath outside the APoD in solidarity with those locked inside.

Veteran crusaders and progressive lawyers are joined on the

roadside by young undergraduates in denim shorts and boots stretching their social justice chops.

Pro-refugee protestor Matt Shepard says he simply cannot sit back and do nothing.

"I keep coming here because some of the men inside are my friends, and even if they weren't, they shouldn't be locked up, and I don't want to be a spectator to misery like this," he said.



*Kangaroo Point protest 2020-21.
©Kasun Ubayasiri*

Within weeks the supporters' ranks have grown and police order them to disperse, citing COVID rules around gatherings and essential activities.

But the detainees' situation has not improved, and the protest must continue.

So in a cheeky move, the protesters develop an innovative

socially distanced strategy to campaign within the legal limits of Queensland's tough COVID restrictions.

They slip on their active wear, grab the nearest dog, bike or pram, and in what becomes known as the weekly 'exercise protest', walk, stretch and cycle around the detention centre all the while carrying signs of solidarity.



*Kangaroo Point protest 2020-21.
©Kasun Ubayasiri*

From mid-April until well into a chilly June, they trod the same path, learning the detainees' names and forging cross-fence friendships with each lap.

But then, late on the night of June 11, Border Force attempts to remove Farhad to BITA - the high security Brisbane Immigration Transit Accommodation centre in the

industrial wasteland adjoining the Brisbane Airport.

He's clearly become too vocal, too public and too accessible to sympathetic journalists.

Protestor Al Wicks is among a small group that rushes to the detention centre that night after receiving a 'red-alert' on the group's heavily encrypted telegram messenger service.



*Kangaroo Point protest 2020-21.
©Kasun Ubayasiri*

And they don't muck about.

Forming a blockade around the Border Force vans with their bodies, Wicks superglues their hands to the vehicle forcing the guards to return Fahad to his room.

But while the victory is sweet, it is short lived.

Wicks and another protestor are arrested, and Fahad is moved to BITA the following morning.

“They have been detained here illegally and immorally... and the one person we have contact with wants to silence him and wants to take him to a (high security) detention centre to

further silence him,” Wicks says.

It would be easy to suppose the puff went out of the protest at this stage, but the removal of Fahad possibly to the government's chagrin, seemed to galvanise the wider activist community.

The number of protesters now gathered around the APoD swells, and with COVID lockdowns relaxing, refugee advocacy groups and progressive organisations were free to call on members to join the defences and hold the line against further removals.



*Kangaroo Point protest 2020-21.
©Kasun Ubayasiri*

The protest changes, and gears to a general call for the 'KP120's' freedom and an end to seven years of detention limbo.

For the next 62 days the activists held a 24/7 blockade around the APoD with rostered shifts, meal rotas and checkpoints inspecting all vehicles going in and out of the compound.

It is loud, it is public and it is sustained.

It is megaphones on Monday nights, it is music on the footpath and dancing on the road, it is corflutes and recycled

grocery boxes adorned with messages of support and hand-drawn hearts, it is poetry recitals directed to the windows, sleeping bags and beanies during the bitter nights, cards played on milk crate tabletop ,and over the phone pastoral care.

"We need to keep putting pressure, we need direct action and we need to see these people freed," Wicks tells protestors on the first evening of the blockade.

Locked up inside the compound but heartened by the visible support Iranian refugee Abdullah Moradi, tells the gathering via phone "You guys are awesome!".



Kangaroo Point protest 2020-21.

©Kasun Ubayasiri



“We want to thank you all and we really appreciate your support.”

He would later tell The Guardian newsite how the protest changed his life inside the ‘KP prison’.

“Before I wanted to sleep, I used medication. Now I don’t use medication to sleep because I look at a lot of people around, even in the rain, they stay in front of my window and they support us,” he said.

The first major mass rally of this new protest phase gathered even more momentum than organisers expected, drawing about 400 people to the now heavily fortified compound.

Setting a defiant yet sombre tone, 120 pairs of shoes are placed around the complex – one for each man locked up inside.

Protestors also mark a minute of silence for every year the men have spent in immigration detention – seven minutes for seven years.

Like his ‘brother’ Abdullah, Amin Afravi says the protestors’ support gives him hope.

“We feel like people are behind us, so we are stronger, and we can fight for our freedom,” he says.

Weekly rallies and well-publicised disruptions continue for months, but the tide changes after plans for a mass sit-in on the Storey Bridge are quashed when Supreme Court Justice Jean Dalton issues an injunction prohibiting key protest organisers from mobilising.

It is a body blow to the movement.

It isn’t just that the organisers are sidelined, it’s the fear they’ll be in the dock for any protest activity on the assumption they organised by proxy.

So, the blockade is dismantled and it is whittled back to a

small but defiant vigil outside the ‘KP prison’ gates.

The activists continue to monitor vehicle movement in and out of the compound via their telegram forum until September 14, but by the end of Spring, the vigil is decidedly patchy, with a few snap actions, rush hour pickets and faith vigils punctuating the once bustling 24/7 landscape.

The local pizzeria that kindly left its toilets unlocked for the overnighters and provided pizzas for planning meetings has closed down; and in the absence of hands to hold them, ‘Free the Refugee’ protest signs have been taped or stapled to light poles and fences to remind rush hour drivers the war is not yet won.

The men on the balcony continue to hold their placards in the evenings when the traffic begins to crawl, but they are on borrowed time.

In a display of politics and sheer bastardry, detention centre authorities lock the balconies – effectively ending the daily protests and pushing the men out of sight.

They wave to their friends now through the windows, but it’s not the same.

A few weeks later however, three of them are released on bridging visas. Over the next few months, 50 more.

Two young bold lawyers have entered the scene, and in a sense, have picked up where the protestors left off.

With strategies that could turn the spotlight back on the KP120 – just as the government has managed to douse the glare of public protest, the lawyers are offering the men a new hope.

The detainees, emboldened by the support of the protestors – their new friends on the outside who ensured they were seen and heard, have found renewed courage to fight.

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Somali refugee Saif Ali Saif, who spent most of his life in refugee camps, would later say there was a different vibe inside the compound when the protests began,

“The government doesn’t want to admit protests work so they tighten conditions even more for us, but then the relief comes later from another side,” he says.

There is no doubt in his mind. The KP120 would have remained out of sight, out of mind, alone and without hope without the protesters.

“I am thankful for their amazing humanity and support.”

A little over a year since the protest began, the last of the Kangaroo Point medevac refugees are bundled into mini-



Kangaroo Point protest 2020-21.
©Kasun Ubayasiri

buses and spirited out of the city.

Their removal on April 16, 2021, brings the 379-day protest in and around the Kangaroo Point Central Hotel to an end.

The drab grey suburban motel that had been a virtual prison for a group of 'Medevac' refugees and asylum seekers, is now

vacant and on its way to being yet another non-descript motel in the outer-city.

As for the KP 'brothers' who remain in the purgatory of detention, their eight-year battle for their freedom continues.

<https://www.facebook.com/kp120multimedia>



Kangaroo Point protest 2020-21.

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THE TONLE SAP

By Abby Seiff

One morning, I pulled up a satellite map of Cambodia's Tonle Sap lake on my computer and clicked my way around it. The water was a milky brown and at various points I could spot its floating villages if I squinted and kept my eyes sharp. They looked even more precarious in this digital soup than they did up close. A few dozen homes here and there; pinpricks against the lake's great expanse. To live in a floating home is to live in a constant state of flux. The materials are all land-born: wood, corrugated aluminum, rubber tyres, plastic barrels and rope used in endless, ingenious ways. But beneath your feet: the constant feel of nothing. The steady roll of water reminding you at once how much and how little you have. 'We have this whole lake,' your home says with each gentle thrall to the tide. We have nothing.

*Previous and this page:
Feb. 17, 2020 - Kampong Luang,
Cambodia.
©Nicolas Axelrod / Ruom*



May 26, 2016 - Kampong Loung, Cambodia. A boat carrying goods is pushed up towards a storage barque. When the afternoon winds come from the east water levels drop on Kampong Loung making many floating homes only accessible by wading through deep mud.

©Nicolas Axelrod / Ruom

In a country full of poor, very poor, and totally impoverished people, most of those living on the massive lake feel they sit at the absolute bottom rung. If a farmer has a plot of land that is never quite yielding enough to survive on, that is constantly in danger of being grabbed by someone richer and more powerful — well, she has earth beneath her feet. She has collateral to

take out another usurious microfinance loan. She has a dirt path that leads to a small road that leads to a bigger one that leads to a school, a market, a health clinic.

The village of Kampong Prek sits near the mouth of a nameless river toward the lake's bottom half. The houses here are something of a marvel, how do they survive the tides and



wind? They have thin wood floors, lashed raft-like to tyres and blue 50-gallon barrels. The walls are salvaged wood or corrugated tin, layered with green tarp or strips of palm leaf tied neatly down — the shaggy coat patchy before long, threadbare and worn.

Visitors to the Tonle Sap's tourist-thronged floating villages

rarely make it as far as Kampong Prek. Here, just 63 houses float within shouting distance of one another. When the lake swells with rain they follow the water inland, always trying to hug a shore. To call it a village seems a stretch. There is no shop or school or boat repair, just a few dozen families trying very hard, and mostly failing, to get by.

Nov. 21, 2016 - Kampong Loung, Cambodia. Fish are unloaded into a waiting truck to be taken to wholesalers in Phnom Penh.

©Nicolas Axelrod / Ruom



*May 26, 2016 - Kampong
Loug, Cambodia. Floating fish
wholesalers market.
©Nicolas Axelrod / Ruom*

What ties people together the most here? A wild all-consuming desire to leave.

“If the government moves people who live here, in two or three years, you’ll see a lot of fish,” an aged fisherman named Mok Hien once predicted knowingly. “Before there were so many large fish here. Now, we can’t even find one.”

The Mekong river wends some 3,000 miles from its source at the mountain-ringed Tibetan plateau through the delta in Vietnam and out into the South China Sea. It runs through China and along the Golden Triangle linking Myanmar, Thailand and Laos before meandering along the border of Thailand and Laos, flowing into Cambodia, then arcing



toward Vietnam. Along the way, the Mekong feeds into countless tributaries both large and small, providing fish, fresh water, and irrigation to millions.

In the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh, one section of the Mekong splits off into a tributary called the Tonle Sap river which carves northwest toward its eponymous lake.

For half of the year, the Tonle Sap lake looks like an elongated figure of eight crossing the heart of Cambodia. At the peak of the six-month dry season, the lake covers about a thousand square miles, its edges demarcated by forests, grasslands, paddy fields, and red roads. During the rainy season, which runs from roughly May to October, all of that

May 26, 2016 - Kampong Loung, Cambodia. Water hyacinth are surrounded by a fishing net, the hyacinth are then removed from inside the net and the fish that were seeking cover are left trapped in the net.

© Nicolas Axelrod / Ruom



*Nov 22, 2016 - Kampong Loung,
Cambodia. Illegal fishermen
harvest their catch.
©Nicolas Axelrod / Ruom*

disappears. Viewed from a satellite, the lake's prodigious floodplains, which can cover 6,000 square miles, make it look as though half the country has vanished below some inland sea.

Scientists call that a monotonal flood-pulsed system, poets liken it to a beating heart. When the rains stop and the water

level in the Mekong drops, the lake flows into the Tonle Sap river. Come rainy season, it reverses course — the only river in the world to do so.

With the pulsation comes the fish, billions of them, representing more than 200 species. They migrate from higher reaches of the Mekong down through the Tonle Sap river and



into the lake. Across the globe, only a handful of countries, all many times the size of Cambodia, — boast larger inland fisheries. None rely on their lakes to the extent that Cambodia does. The fish, more than 500,000 tons of which are caught each year, feed the nation. They provide the main source of protein for as much as 80 percent of the population, and they

feed Cambodia's neighbors, which import thousands of tons each year as part of a \$2 billion industry.

The lake's double-movement does work for much more than its fisheries. Along with water, nutrient-rich silt is pushed into the floodplains, helping rice, the country's most critical staple, to flourish. The watershed undergirding the lake is a crucial

*March 29, 2017 - Prek Tol,
Cambodia.*

©Nicolas Axelrod / Ruom



Feb. 18, 2020 - Kampong Luang, Cambodia. Chan Noun, 37 years old, and her family prepare their boat for fishing in the early morning on the outskirts of the floating village. The boat is geared to scrape the bottom of the lake stirring up the shallow waters and catching anything in its path.

© Nicolas Axelrod / Ruom

source of groundwater for much of the country, protected, in turn, by the forests surrounding the Tonle Sap.

The system is a finely tuned ecological miracle. Pull a single thread and it will begin unraveling. We, as it turns out, are pulling all its threads at once.

All along the Mekong, Chinese-funded hydropower dams

are ballooning as the rapid economic growth of the region runs headlong into an electricity shortfall. On the lake, corruption has seen large trawlers ply protected areas, while desperate individuals increasingly take up their own small-scale illegal fishing. A changing climate, meanwhile, has led to devastating droughts in recent years.



Without fish, what is the Tonle Sap?

This is the question millions living on and around the lake are struggling to answer.

With climate change and breakneck development wreaking enormous havoc, the lake is now one of the most threatened

in the world. For those depending on it, the stakes couldn't be higher.

This excerpt is adapted from *Troubling the Water: A dying lake and a vanishing world in Cambodia*, forthcoming from Potomac Books.

Feb. 18, 2020 - Kampong Prak, Cambodia. Mok Thien in his floating home.

©Nicolas Axelrod / Ruom

*March 29, 2017 - Prek Tol,
Cambodia.
©Nicolas Axelrod / Ruom*

*Next page:
Feb. 18, 2020 - Chhnok Tru,
Cambodia. Fishers bring their
catches in to the mainland to
be sold and sent to markets in
Phnom Penh and other cities.
©Nicolas Axelrod / Ruom*





THE LAST OF THE KOLI?

By Rhett Kleine

By some accounts, the Koli bloodlines on the seven islands of Mumbai stretch as far back as the stone age. Their people fished the waters of Maharashtra long before Alexander's armies reached the tip of India or Asoka's empire swept across the subcontinent.

Generation after generation, the Koli have mended nets and hauled in their catches as the world around them changed. Great empires rose and fell around them like the ebb and flow of the tides. The Marata kings fought to keep the Mughals at bay, and the Portuguese traded the seven isles to the British as dowry for a princess.

These ancient mariners may have endured all this and more, but a century after the behemoth British land reclamation project that connected the islands into a single city, Mumbai's

Koli are now hemmed in by a towering metropolis that has corralled them into just 42 Koliwadās – a term that literally means 'a home that opens to the sea.' The Kolis, like the ocean around them, are struggling to survive on the edge of an ever-expanding metropolis.

Rivers choking with pollutants dribble into the sea on their doorstep, adding more plastic to the debris already floating on the surface of nearby bays and river-mouths once abundant with fish. The Kolis can only watch with trepidation, as precious fish breeding grounds disappear as wetland mangrove forests are cut down like weeds in a field, all in the name of development.

Yet, with their ancient gods by their side, the Koli remain resilient and are confident in their ability to weather this latest storm.

*All photos in the story
©Rhett Kleine*



Fishermen using creative techniques in peak hour at Sassoon Docks

Mahim Koliwada greets visitors with the sight of bundles upon bundles of fishing nets, and it takes a while to see the wooden boats underneath the tangle. Nestled among a mountain of these nets, an old man sits puffing the last bit of a beedi-cigar as he rhythmically untangles the threads to mend them. For a moment, it looks like the perfect fishing village. But not all is well.

The beach is covered with plastic waste. Beyond it, against the backdrop of the towering Worli Sea Link in the distance, boats gently rock back and forth upon the glassy surface of the dying bay.

Santosh Nijap has spent most of his life on this beach, like his father before him and his father before him, stretching back generation upon generation of Mahim Kolis.

With a Sai Baba pendant resting on his chest at the end of a heavy gold chain, neatly dressed Santosh projects the very image of a local businessman.

He points to a few of his boats bobbing around in the bay and it's clear he's done quite well for himself. But even he is struggling to make a profit fishing near the bay since the newly built Worli Sea Link effectively cut off the flow of fish.



A trawler comes in with the sunrise

“A lot has changed in Mahim Bay because of the infrastructure in the ocean,” he says, explaining how the mammoth structure has altered the current that used to bring fish into the shallower waters.

“There is a barrier (blocking) the easy flow of fish to the shores, because of the multiple pillars and concrete structures,” he says.

The six kilometre sea link that connects Mumbai's western and central suburbs to the old town in the south, may have been a panacea for traffic congestion in Mumbai but Santosh says it has done little for the Mahim Koliwada.

Santosh says the Kolis now have to venture even further out, past the Sea Link into rougher waters. He says some of the smaller boats struggle to handle the waves and many Koli have lost their lives. The only choice now is to use larger trawlers that can withstand the open sea, but that requires increased manpower.

Affordable labour for fishing is hard to come by in the ever-expanding metropolis that offers an array of employment opportunities.

“Since fishing is not very profitable now, the youth are not ready for that kind of physical labour, so we need to get workers from villages which are 120-140kms away from Mumbai like Palgarh, Poisar, and Dahanu.” That too comes at a heavy cost.

“We have to give them huge amounts of money which is a problem given the state of our income,” Santosh says. He says swapping Koli labour for outsiders is not profitable in the longer term. Santosh says what was profitable when



it was a family business, where the money stayed within the community, now struggles with wage labour pressures.

Even with the higher wages on offer, it's still a struggle to find reliable workers.

“When the workers go home for festivals like Diwali and Holi, sometimes (they) don't return back, and the boat owner has to go and bring back the workers from their villages,” Santosh says.

“Every time that happens you have to pay them an advance of almost 25-30 thousand rupees. So, one single trip to get these workers would cost an average boat owner almost 1lakh (100,000), given that even a small boat would need at least four workers to cover all the aspects of fishing successfully.”

Santosh says even that trickle of itinerant workers is fast drying up as new factories open in rural areas.

“These industries have more benefits and more income for the workers, which they choose over toiling at sea on a boat in an industry with a bleak future.”

In the fading light of the afternoon sun Santosh points to dozens of boats that have remained unused for months – their flags fluttering in the wind in one last act of defiance.

He says sometimes owners hang on to the vessels for two or three years before finally deciding to sell them off. He says most of his boats have been sitting in the bay, unworked, for months.

Santosh believes Mahim as a fishing village has perhaps five to six years left. It is a bleak fate for the Koli of Mahim but Santosh seems resigned to the change in the wind.

“We fear that fishing as a community business in Mumbai will die in the next decade, once this generation – who have seen their parents and grandparents fish like it's their religion – grow up and leave.”



A Koli sorts fish into baskets before its lobbed ashore, onto Sassoon Docks to be peddled straight away.

The Rangaon Koliwada on the northern end of Mumbai seems a breath of fresh air after Mahim. Yet even along this stretch of ocean with its empty beach fringed by lush mangroves, seemingly untouched by humanity, the sea's resources are under pressure.

In Rangaon, more than an hour's drive north of Mumbai Central, fishermen are facing the familiar difficulties of dwindling catches and increasing pollution.

A fisherman, hauling the last of his nets in for the day says it is getting harder and harder to make a living even this far out from the city. He laments the impending loss of his lifestyle as he deftly plucks fish from his nets. It is clear to see he has done this his whole life. His hands, with a hurried yet expert

motion untangle each fish and once untangled, not one fish slips from his grasp.

Behind him among the dunes are empty wooden shacks nestled in the high grass. They will become more inhabited as the fishing season advances, but for now, rotting in the elements, they are a portrait of yet another declining koliwada.

The now familiar story continues a short way down the road in the Vasai Koliwada. But there is more activity on Vasai beach. Massive boats are propped up by bamboo scaffolding, standing like silent sentinels, all along yet another shore strewn with plastic waste.

Shiva owns a couple of these boats, one of which is halfway through a fresh paint job in preparation for the annual pilgrimage to islands off the coast where the Koli believe their gods dwell. Behind Shiva, fishermen wend their way through the towering hulls on scaffolds, while others work on readying the great decks for the start of the fishing season.

"The waters are dying," he says, echoing a familiar lament. And he claims the biggest problem is overfishing.

"There were fifteen fishermen in the Koliwada when I started fishing about thirty years ago, now there are fifty," he says.

The Koli are a people moulded by the sea, like clay by a sculptor. Their reverence for the ocean is absolute. They understand the fragile balance between the ocean's capacity to give and sustain life, and its ability to rip life away.

Yet necessity, the desperate need to make a living and support their families, is pushing them to overfish and take more and more risks.

They have fished the seas for as long as their history is recorded. In that time, they have come to understand the power of the sea so when Shiva says goodbye to his family before a trip, he does not say he will come back, he simply

says that should he return in eighteen hours, he is theirs again, if not, he belongs to the ocean.

Shiva is hesitant to say it outright, but he says he doesn't believe his children will continue the Koli way of life. His brothers' sons are already working on oil tankers. He expects his children will do much the same.

"It is all right if they go to work on the oil tankers, because for as long as they are near the ocean... as long as they are connected in some way with the waters of their ancestors. They will always be Koli".



A canoe sits on the shore, a hovel for nets and lines

The narrow rambling streets of the Worli Koliwada are packed with hawkers in late January for the temple celebration marking Golphadevi's birth. The music reaches fever pitch as night falls and each household in the Koliwada brings their offerings

to the goddess. Dozens of small processions wend their way through the alleys accompanied by bands playing traditional instruments.

Inside the marble temple, people crowd into a small altar room to pay homage to their patron goddess. Golphadevi's statue at the end of the room, flanked by her reincarnations, Karmadevi and Singhadevi are covered in garlands of marigolds as the Kolis pray to her for a safe fishing season.

Golphadevi temple's chairman Vilas Worlikav is eager to talk about the community's ancient goddess and explains how faith in the goddess is growing. Perhaps it is because the Koli are facing tough times or that the goddess' reputation has transcended the Koli community, but the crammed alleyways of Worli are a testament to her growing popularity.

The Koli have looked to deities like Golphadevi and her reincarnations for hundreds of years to protect them at sea and safeguard their way of life.

According to Worlikav, she is hardly a passive or aloof goddess who merely listens to prayer in silence, she is an active entity.

It is soon clear what he means. Up the front of the temple priests place two tiny silver coloured balls on the shoulder of the goddess before devotees ask her questions. If the ball on the left shoulder falls first then the answer is a 'no' but if the right one falls it is 'yes'. The Kolis make life and death decisions based on her advice.

In Mahim Koliwada, on the other side of the bay from her temple in Worli, Santosh Nijap explains how the Koli dedicate their first catch of the year to Golphadevi, presenting it to her at her temple and asking her blessing for the year ahead.

"We usually go to the temples when the fishing year starts and pray for a good productive year ahead, some people also

make a wish or a vow of certain offerings they would give once their wish is fulfilled,” he says.

But Golphadevi’s blessings are not the only spiritual guidance the Koli receive, nor are prayers limited to fishing.

“People make vows for a range of reasons – for wanting or having a child, to getting a job or a large catch of fish,” Santosh explains.

The Koli deities are woven into every aspect of Koli life and there are almost as many ways to worship as there are deities themselves.

In Vasai, the Koli believe their deities live on two islands just off the coast, so the fisherfolk travel to both islands to pay homage and seek favour. But before they set sail to the islands at the start of the fishing season, they pull their boats ashore and repaint them.

On one of the islands, they sail to the shore and feast all day before returning, and on the other isle, they anchor the boats offshore and swim to the beach with their offerings, fearing that sailing too close might anger the gods.

And if you speak with Jitender Koli, who lives in the Dharavi Koliwada he will tell you of a local nature goddess who cannot be contained within a shrine.

“If you put a roof over her,” he says laughing, “she will break it!”

Which explains why there is no shrine for her inside Dharavi homes.



Koli sort out fish for drying on Vasai Beach

Davendra Kale is the village leader of Versova Koliwada. There has not been a single day where he hasn’t smelt the sea air in his nostrils or set his eyes upon the waters of the Arabian Sea. He would rather die than watch his ancestral seafaring culture disappear.

“We are Koli and we fish,” he says. “Fishing for the Kolis is something that they have done from the beginning of time.”

Versova sits on the edge of a small bay. It provides calm waters perfect for docking boats and more importantly calmer waters fishable even during the rainy season.

“We used to call this bay a lifesaver because its close proximity to the village and small size made it possible for us to fish even in the monsoons,” he says.

“It was enough to keep the income flowing in those difficult times.”

But Kale says life on Versova has changed in the last decade because of the industries on the other side of the bay and the increasing pollution and untreated water they release into the ocean. “It is becoming impossible to fish here today.”

“The biggest and most prevalent threat we have to fishing is the pollution and plastic we find in the ocean today... the fish which would come to shore in the past are not visible today,” he says.

“Even if we do get fishes near to the shore, we know that it is not the right kind or healthy kind that we would be able to sell.”

Davendra Kale and his fellow fishermen from the Koliwada have been trying to do what they can to clear plastic and clean up the waterways, but for every piece of plastic they recover, ten more pieces flow downstream or are discarded into the ocean.

There have been massive clean-up efforts made but every effort seems to be a drop in an endless ocean of plastic returning with each high tide.

“Back in 1996 when I started, we would go out for a day, or two-to-three maximum and come back with a catch that was sufficient for a week, but to get the same catch today we have to go much deeper into the sea and spend much more time on the boat sometimes even up to a week to ten days”.

Versova is a much larger Koliwada than most, it is much more commercialised which in turn brings a plethora of new problems.

Most of the boats docked on the busy port are multi-day trawlers that go out for days and weeks at a time to fish in the deeper ocean. It is a financial necessity that has upturned the fragile balance of the community.

“If one boat takes away the fish equivalent to ten boats, then it is putting ten families out of business,” Kale says.

Kale might yearn for a simpler time, but the reality of fishing now is pulling the Koli in the opposite direction, demanding bigger boats that can catch more fish. As well as the problem of overfishing, these multi-day trawlers come with higher operational costs.

Kale says back in the seventies the government supported the Koliwadadas by subsidising diesel and giving out loans to encourage Koli to buy trawlers. He says many people became reliant on the subsidies which have since dried up.

“The diesel prices when I started was about 8.50 rupees per litre, today the it is almost 64,” he says.

Despite the difficulties, fishing remains Versova’s lifeblood – at least for now.

The Koliwada turns into a bustling fish market for about two hours every day after the boats arrive in the late afternoon. Koli women in brightly coloured sarees line up behind upturned crates filled with fish and crustaceans, hauled in by the village’s men.

Davendra Kale wishes the enthusiasm of the fish markets were reflected in the aspirations of the Koliwada’s young people.

“They don’t see the profits anymore and they know it’s dying,” he says, but like many other Koli along the Mumbai foreshore he’s hoping the youngsters will at least find a way to hold on to their identity.

“We are obviously connected deeply to the sea because before anything else she is our sole source of income and we can’t think of staying alive without her,” he says.

“We cannot imagine a life without seeing the ocean every single day because that is what we have always done, that is the only way of living that Koli people know, with the sea in front of us.”



Dharavi is a concrete jungle, a labyrinth of urbanisation and overpopulation, and it has been Jitender Koli's home his entire life.

As his name suggests he is indeed a Koli, but like many of the Koli of Dharavi, he has never made a living fishing the ocean.

"Fishing has completely stopped here and has been for some time now," Jitender explains in crisp English.

"The nearest sea area to Dharavi koliwada has dried up and now acts as drainage channels for the industries nearby... hence its not the best environment for the fish to grow."

Jitender says his parents' generation were the last to fish from the Dharavi Koliwada, and that was back in the seventies. Gesturing towards his mother sitting next to him inside the tiled living-room, Jitender explains how she remembers seeing the rivers and the waterways of Dharavi dry up making way for industrial channels.

He says all the Koli ever needed were their boats, their houses and the water, but with the water gone and the boats no longer needed, the Koli of Dharavi were left with just their land.

"So, they began to do what they could and rented out their Koliwadas," he says

The fishermen became landlords, and subsequently the homes that once looked out to the water soon only opened to concrete and bricks and steel. There was no shortage of willing tenants, with Dharavi slum already bursting at the seams all around them.

"If the sea was to be cleaned today, we would go back to fishing happily," Jitender says, imagining a life he has only heard from his father.

He readily recalls stories of his father's life, fishing on the rivers, taking only what was needed, and he firmly believes the yearning for unsteady footing on a boat is in every Koli's blood. But in an urban jungle where the rivers have all but dried up, Jitender also knows it's a yearning for a bygone era, for a history long past.

The chaotic Sassoon docks on the southern tip of Mumbai are perhaps one of the best indicators of the health of fishing off the Maharashtra coast. Bathed in the early morning light, the dock is bursting with life long before the rest of Mumbai has stirred.

Ganesh Nakwa is the Chairman of the Welfare Association of the Fishermen of Maharashtra. He is also involved in various other advocacy and associative roles as well as his own responsible fishing-consumption start-up. Overall Ganesh speaks for more than 1800 boats in Maharashtra.

His conversations follow a familiar thread, a long list of problems plaguing the state's fishing industry. He says they are facing problems undreamt of by countless generations of Koli, from the mass destruction of habitat, pollution and climate change, to overfishing.

He believes nature has turned against the Koli, noting the increase in storm activity as proof.

"Usually a big storm like a cyclone would come around every three or four years," he says, and even then he claims it would cause only minor disruptions to the fish population.

But in 2018 alone there were four cyclonic storms, a trend continuing from the previous year. He attributes the increase to climate change.

Sassoon, represents the height of Mumbai's commercial fishing industry. It makes no pretence of venerating and caring for the ocean. It is as far as one gets from traditional fishing, where the Koli fish to sustain themselves and their community.

The boats that come to the Sassoon docks trawl the bottom of the ocean and take whatever they can. The nets are so small you can't even poke a finger through the holes which means even the tiniest of fingerlings are scooped up to cater to Mumbai's ever growing hunger for seafood.

"The demand for fish is always on the rise, as more people come to Mumbai. The greater the demand the greater the incentive for the Koli to fish," Nakwa says.

But overfishing depletes the fish stocks and makes fishing even more costly, so now stuck in a vicious cycle, the Koli continue to fish even more aggressively for shrinking profit margins.

"It is a completely unsustainable cycle," Nakwa says.

He says the fishermen know it's a problem but the stakes are so high that none of them want to be the one to stop net fishing and risk losing the profit.

"We were always self-sustainable, that was our life for thousands of years. But now because of all this development in our fishing areas we are losing this."

"Half the boats in Sassoon have already stopped fishing. Half of the remaining half are fishing at a loss," he says.

Nakwa claims at the current rate there will be no more fish at all for the Koli in five to ten years.

"Time to suicide basically then, huh."



Davendra Kale from the Vasai Koliwada

CELEBRATING PUNJAB, PUNJABI, AND PUNJABIYAT

By Shreya Kapoor

India has a rich history of musical and poetic movements that were explicitly political and iconoclastic in nature. The Bhakti and Sufi movements with prominent figures like Kabirdas, Meerabai, Basavanna, Khwaja Mouinuddin Chisti, Nizam-ud-din Auliya, Rumi, etc spoke of alternative value systems inclusive of the marginalised sections of society. The Bhakti movement arose in response to the orthodox caste and gendered hierarchy of those times. The movement was rooted in the desire for a social and religious order that was truly egalitarian, and did not divide society into high and low castes. The songs and poetry of Ravidas, Kabir, and Basavanna attacked the ritualistic nature of religion, and spiritually uplifted the ignored majority. Meerabai was also a prominent figure of the movement, and since she was a Rajput princess, she also helped uplift people materially. All three spoke against social injustice, and through her spiritual devotion Meera rejected the patriarchal norms of womanhood.

Similarly, Sufism involves a lot of Qawwalis, that is a form of music not meant for elitist court consumption. It has popular

appeal, and is sung in such a way that listeners eventually become active participants of the performance. Sufis also provided a range of social services to the lower castes, and were a mechanism for social mobility through conversion. Sufism's vision of the world was based on a highly evolved sense of religious pluralism. Even today, Nizam-ud-din Auliya's shrine in Delhi, Nizamuddin Dargah, is visited by people of all faiths throughout the year and is often involved in relief work during tragedies.

History shows us that whenever there is social upheaval within society, songs that profess that discontent of the masses are produced. These songs could be used as clarion calls, to describe atrocities, or to record the movement, but they all aim to directly or indirectly attract support for the cause. Music is inherently political, and in such times, the artists dial up the politicisation in their work. A well written, argumentative, news article may be read once- but a song is committed to memory and sung over and over to show one's dissent. And in today's India, where

the ruling BJP pushes its One Nation, One Identity, One Language, One Culture narrative; the assertion of one's regional identity or subaltern identity is in itself resistance against the State.

Examining why the Farmers' Protests are being reflected in Punjabi Music

Ever since the three Farm Laws that aim at the corporatisation of agriculture were passed, the protest movement, which started out in predominantly agrarian societies like Punjab and Haryana, has now spread to the rest of the country. As Punjab initially became the centre point of an intense protest over the three farm laws, a new wave took over Punjabi music- artists have started to explore issues related to farming in their music, leading to vociferous opposition to the three new farm laws. The involvement of small and major artists and cultural figures who trace their roots to Punjab- film actors, singers, comedians, NRI stars, etc has been very vocal. Pawanjot Kaur, writing for *The Wire* explains, "Punjab is predominantly an agrarian society. Almost all artists, big or small, come from farming backgrounds. Those who don't directly belong to the families of farmers have grown-up in the 'Khet, Kheti, Pind' (farm, farming, village) set-up of rural Punjab." Mainstream artists like Diljit Dosanjh started their careers singing Sikh prayer songs at gurudwaras. Kanwar Grewal, on the other hand, asserts that Punjabi artistes recognise the inter-generational work their families have put into the fields, and are thus connected intrinsically to matters of the soil (Kaur, 2020).

A look at the YouTube pages of most artists would make it clear to the viewer that as an industry, Punjab's music in the last 8 months is concerned with the Farmers' Protests in almost 90% of the cases. Many songs have over 4 million views on YouTube, and they mostly draw on Punjab's rich cultural history. In its effort to discredit the movement, and possibly taking offence at the common thread of anger against 'Dilli' that runs through these songs, Delhi based pro-government media has widely (and baselessly) claimed these songs push forward the secessionist ideology of Khalistan. The Government of India, through a legal request to YouTube, has got some songs banned- claiming it propagates 'Khalistani' propaganda. One of the songs banned in early February 2021, Ailaan, by Kanwar Grewal, has a chorus that goes like this: "Fasla da faisla kisaan karunga" - which translates to: farmers will make decisions about farming.

Historical anger against Delhi

Delhi has been the historical seat of power in the Indian subcontinent for the last 800 years. Punjabi songs often paint the farm laws as yet another in a long line of injustices perpetrated on them by Delhi. To do this, they draw heavily on the historical consciousness of Sikhs, that has always been spread through oral traditions and folklore- this is not something actively taught in schools. With the Mughals ruling from Delhi in the 18th Century, then the British Occupation in the 19th and 20th Century, the 1947 Partition, followed by the persecution by Independent India in the 1980s- this is the history that is being used as a background context to fuel the

movement's current momentum. Ranjit Bawa's Punjab Bolda compares the oppression of the protest to the oppression by the British: "*Rab na kare je gora fir aa gaya*" (Oh God, are the British back?). Sidhu Moosewala, one of the most popular Punjabi singers today, sings in Panjab, My Motherland: "*Keh keh ke balde laindal mainu Punjab kehnde aa/ Oh Dilli vi napp laindal Mainu Punjab Kehnde aa*" (I'll take revenge by speaking, I'm called Punjab/ I'll take care of Delhi, I'm called Punjab.) The video has visuals of Operation Blue Star, when the Indian Army stormed Harminder Sahab, the Sikh shrine in Amritsar. The song is clearly trying to equate the trampling of citizen's rights in the 1980s with what is happening today, by indirectly comparing one autocratic Prime Minister to another. However, the sentiment here is not of retribution, but of reminding the Centre of the misery its arrogance and past mistakes have brought upon the State. R Nait in Delhi-A sings, "*Delhi-ae Punjab naal pange theek ni*" (Delhi, it is wrong to fight with Punjab)- the underlying meaning here is not that Punjab will revolt if provoked, but a call to the Centre to uphold the federal structure of the country. Historically, Punjab has always resisted BJP's Hindutva politics, and many are of the opinion that since the BJP does not see Punjab as a votebank, it is indifferent to the resistance being put up. The narrative of Delhi using Punjab's land and people as per its convenience, without any real regard for their sentiments and livelihoods is what songs by Punjabi artistes capture and reflect.

However, it is important to note that Delhi in these narratives has always been used to refer to the seat of power, the centre of autocratic rule- never the people of Delhi. With the Farmer's Protest, an additional target has been added- national media that propagates government narratives and misrepresents and mislabels farmers. Ranjit Bawa sings in Punjab Bolda: "Dhakke Naal Dassi Jaande Attwadi Ajj Da/

National Media Vi Kehda Bhala Jach Da" (They've forcefully label us secessionists /Who says National Media is unbiased). The misrepresentation has been executed on such a large scale that protestors boycotted entire TV channels that refused to talk to them and let them report. The propaganda has been so vile and hurtful that you see posters that read "We are farmers not terrorists". Why are farmers being forced to prove their loyalty to the nation?

Using prominent Sikh symbols to defend Secularism

Although these songs generously employ the use of Sikh symbols, never do they steer into the territory of religious chauvinism. The intention is to use certain elements and teaching of Sikhism to motivate protestors. Moosewala's Panjab, My Motherland has lots of shots of flying hawks. Kanwar Grewal and Harf Cheema's Jawaani Zindabad (Long Live the Youth) video opens with a man with a hawk on his arm. In Sikh culture, keeping a hawk is seen as a sign of bravery. Hawks represent warriors, they are not the kind of animals one can enslave in cages. Unlike eagles and vultures, they don't feast on decaying flesh- they hunt down an animal, kill it, and then eat the flesh. This fierce independence, assertiveness, and self-reliant nature is a hallmark of Sikhism, one that is reflected through the visuals and the music. The song blends Sikh symbols and teachings with visuals of many different farm union flags, student unions, labour unions and mottos- representing the myriad but united viewpoints and perspectives in the protest.

This representation assumes great significance for by asserting the nuances of participation it is a stark contrast to the BJP narratives of singularity. Visuals of Muslims serving biryani to the protestors also shows how the farmers gathered around Delhi are opposing the Modi government's ideology in every respect. Farmers from different backgrounds- Turbaned Sikhs, Nihang Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, landless farmers- standing shoulder to shoulder uphold secularism.

Not an old man's movement

Visuals showing the enthusiastic participation of young and old women counter Hindutva's denial of agency to women, the participation of young and old men engaging in tasks like cutting vegetables and cooking challenge Hindutva's crisis of masculinity. Posters that read, "I am a farmer's daughter and I speak English", challenge mainstream media's classist and gendered narratives about who is perceived to be a real farmer. It counters the patronizing view of many government supporters who say these people cannot be farmers because they don't fit their image of an old malnourished man in tatters. Youngsters in Punjab have been supporting the protests by making it a part of the most important event in their life-their wedding. They refuse gifts and ask people to donate to the protests instead, the usual Punjabi pop wedding songs are replaced by Punjabi protest music. With a picture of a man who has attached farmer union flags to his car instead of the 'just married' sign, Bawa sings in Punjab Bolda: "*Ese nu tan kehnde khoon khola Jawaani da/ Viyaun gya munda laake jhanda kisaani da*" (This is what we call the fiery blood of the youth, the young boy took a farmer union flag to his wedding). For

instance, Grewal, 35, has been at the protest site since Day 1. His songs have captured the imagination of the protests, and have given voice to its purpose and idealism. As someone who has embraced the Sufi way of life that stresses the oneness of all faiths, his commercial career from its inception has been full of spiritual songs that speak against divisiveness and hatred. He often asks crowds to join in as he sings in order to keep up the momentum. One will see him making speeches that target the youth and caution them against any violence, as that will discredit the movement.

The unanimous opposition to corporate encroachment on agriculture effectively denies the government equating nation to corporate interests. The farmers are standing up for not just their livelihoods, but the livelihoods of the entire lower and middle class because they are also fighting for the public distribution system. By refusing to give up control of agriculture they are also fighting against the acceleration of climate change- corporates like Adani and Ambani have no interest or stake in mitigating climate change. Punjabi artistes, are using their art to transform society- the songs are groovy without making one forget the seriousness of the struggle. Punjabi has always been a very assertive language that does not shy away from saying and portraying things as they are. The assertion and celebration of Punjabiyat is a resistance movement in itself.

AUTHORS & STORY SUMMARIES

Paradise Lost covers the recent explosion in Honiara, Solomon Islands due to unexploded bombs left over from World War 2. This story highlights the still present need to demine pacific islands who are plagued by the remnants of the war.

John Rodsted acts as SafeGrounds Pacific Islands Program Coordinator and was a part of the Nobel Peace Prize winning International Campaign to Ban Landmines. With over 25 years of experience working in mine action, John is both a member and official photographer to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

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Sinking Cities is a photographic essay on the rising water levels in Bangkok. Shot over a year, Quinlan has used double exposure photography to visually capture how the city of Bangkok is significantly sinking each year, with some parts of the city possibly underwater by 2030.

Daniel Quinlan is an award winning photographer and videographer based in Southeast Asia. Since 2009, Daniel has lived and worked in Nepal, Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar. Prior to becoming a freelancer he worked for

two years as a full-time video journalist for *The Phnom Penh Post*.

*

Australia drags its feet on autonomous weapons regulation is an account of Australia's current laws and discussions around fully autonomous weapons and their moral, ethical and legal threats. World governments, civil society groups and the global public are concerned that without swift action, humanity will cross a moral red-line.

Matilda Byrne is National Coordinator of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots - Australia based at SafeGround. She urges Australian policy makers to ensure meaningful human control over the deployment of lethal force, regarding the weaponisation of artificial intelligence within the Australian defence context.

*

Modern Resistance in the USA covers five years of protests in America from the personal perspective of Baltimore based photographer Joe Giordano.

Joe Giordano is an award-winning photojournalist based in Baltimore and co-host of the photojournalism podcast, 10 Frames Per Second. In 2015 he was short-listed for the National Gallery's Outwin Boochever Portrait Prize.

*

An Expensive Jab looks at the crisis in India around management of COVID and the distribution of vaccines to the population.

Siddhant Vashistha is a third-year student of journalism. He's an environmentalist at heart and loves to debate ideas. He also enjoys observing the dance of nature.

*

Prologue is an in-depth investigation of the Kangaroo Point protest movement in Brisbane. Ubayasiri looks into the progress of the movement and the small wins for some, trapped in the detention system.

Dr Kasun Ubayasiri is a senior lecturer and Program Director of Journalism at Griffith University, Queensland Australia. His research focuses on the role of journalism in Human rights including environmental rights, news media in armed conflict, and media censorship and its impact on democratic accountability.

*

Tonle Sap is a photo essay excerpt from Seiff's book 'Troubling the Water: A dying lake and a vanishing world in Cambodia' which investigates the Tonle Sap in Cambodia and its grim future.

Abby Seiff is an American journalist with 15 years of experience reporting and editing in Asia. Her writing and photography have appeared in Newsweek, Time, the Mekong Review, the Economist, Al Jazeera, Pacific Standard and more.

*

Last of the Koli looks at the Koli; Indian indigenous fishermen who call the Maharashtra coastline home. Their religion, livelihood and identity are inexplicably tied to the sea they fish upon. After millenia, the Koli are watching their way of life slip away. From overfishing, to shifts in fish populations already seen with early onset climate change. They are quickly needing to sink or swim in an ever changing India.

Rhett Kleine is a photo and text-based journalist. Rhett recently acted as assistant managing editor for The Argus before coming on for the founding of MiddleGround. His work aims to strike a deeper chord, telling the stories of individuals and tying them into national and global stories - pairing contextual information with a dedication to evoking empathy, and connection with those he documents.

*

Music and the Farmers Protests looks at India's rich history of musical and poetic movements that have aligned with political movements, such as the current Indian farmers protest.

Shreya Kapoor is a student at Christ University in Bangalore India. She has worked in various capacities such as presenter, scriptwriter, cameraperson, and journalist. She also co-authored a research paper titled "Misrepresentation of Mental Health in Indian English Newspapers."