

BANGLADESH ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE (BEI)

A Brief Highlights on Contemporary Issues of South Asia ||
Updated from May 14, 2021 –May 20, 2021 ||

SOUTH ASIA: COVID-19 CRISIS AT A GLANCE

The COVID 19 cases in Afghanistan are steadily rising as both the infection rate and the death rate have significantly increased. The total number of cases since the outbreak of the epidemic has reached 64,575 around the country. Though **Bangladesh** is in a slightly better position compared to its neighbors, in terms of its infection and death rate, the new cases are still adding to its total. The total death toll reached 12,211 whereas the total infection reached 7,82,129. The overall infection rate of Bangladesh stood at 13.64 percent and the death rate became 1.56 percent as of May 18, 2021.

Bhutan's total Covid-19 infection has reached 1,286 and its active coronavirus case was 140 as of May 19, 2021. A total of 1,155 people have been recovered.

India has reported 2.67 lac fresh Covid-19 cases with a total 4,529 death toll on 20 May which indicates a relatively low infection rate compared to the last few weeks but a record single-day death toll has been counted since the pandemic, which is still a major concern for the country. However, the infection rate has been declining around 200 districts for the last two weeks. The Drugs Controller of India approved the 2-deoxy-D-glucose drug to severe coronavirus patients.

Myanmar witnessed a decrease in the number of new cases. There are 1,43,158 active cases and the number of deaths reported is 3,216. It is reported that ongoing political unrest has been affecting the health care system heavily. **Maldives's** Health Protection Agency has confirmed that the cases are rising in the country. The country has 18,843 active cases as of May 20, 2021.

Nepal's Covid-19 tally has reached 464,218 with 9,198 new cases as of May 20, 2021. The country so far has used 2,397,000 doses. China's Sinopharm vaccine will be administered as the second dose from May 16, 2021, to May 25, 2021.

Pakistan's current infection rate is 8.8% with a total infection case of 89031. The death toll has reached 19,987 with 804,122 recovery cases till May 20, 2021. **Sri Lanka** has also been facing a rising trend in infection rate with 30000 active cases currently during the third wave of the pandemic. The country has already tightened quarantine laws, imposed travel restrictions from 21st to 28th May 2021. The border will also be closed for inbound passengers from 21st to 31st May 2021.

ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT: REPERCUSSIONS IN SOUTH ASIA

BANGLADESH urged the UN Security Council to take up the issue of violence and breach of security in the occupied land of Palestine and work for a durable solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Bangladesh also expressed deep condolences to the victims of recent atrocities. Earlier, Bangladesh strongly condemned the attacks on innocent devotees and civilians at Al- Aqsa mosque compound.

INDIA at the UN Security Council called for an immediate de-escalation of the hostilities between Israel and Palestine on May 15, 2021. India's permanent representative to the UN said that India would strongly support the just Palestinian cause and be committed to the two-state solution.

MALDIVES' Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdulla Shahid attended the virtual meeting of the executive committee of the OIC. In his statement, he condemned the violation of international laws and relevant UN resolutions by the Israeli forces and added that a two-state solution must be established to bring peace & stability in the region.

PAKISTAN's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi urged the international community to put pressure on Israel to end its aggression against the Palestinians and to take concrete steps for a solution to the Palestine issue. The foreign minister arrived in New York on Wednesday evening on a Palestine peace mission and attended an emergency meeting of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), called by the Organization of Islamic Corporation (OIC) and the Arab League.

SRILANKA's Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa released a statement expressing concern about the recent conflict between Israel and Palestine. He said that Sri Lanka would always remain committed to the legitimate demand of statehood by Palestinians and urged both sides to be reasonable and end their disputes through negotiation.

AFGHANISTAN:TROOPS WITHDRAWAL CONTINUES BY USA; PARLIAMENT WANTS USA TO Assess the Ground Realities before WITHDRAWAL

The lawmakers in Afghanistan had called on the United States and NATO-member countries to evaluate the security situation in Afghanistan before pulling out their troops. "We respect the decision for unconditioned foreign withdrawal, but we demand they evaluate the situation in Afghanistan before their military withdrawal," lawmaker Mir Haidar Afzali said. He called the unconditioned foreign drawdown as a matter of concern, despite expressing confidence over Afghan forces' capability. Afzali urged that the international community might require to continue cooperation with the Afghan defense and security forces in their fight against terrorist groups. He said that the Afghan army and police would still require training and arms to get more strength.

President Ashraf Ghani's security adviser has recently said that Afghanistan would prefer the presence of the American forces on the soil of Afghanistan for a few more years. National Security Advisor, Hamdullah Mohib made the remarks in an interview with the CBS News. His remarks revealed a contradiction with Ghani's speech who had earlier said that his administration offered the U.S. to leave the country. Ghani in a gathering earlier said that he asked U.S. former President Donald Trump to withdraw troops from Afghanistan.

Sources:

<http://www.afghanistantimes.af/parliament-wants-us-to-assess-afghanistan-situation-pre-withdrawal/>

<http://www.afghanistantimes.af/contrast-s-in-ghani-mohib-statements-over-u-s-withdrawal/>



|| WEEKLY NEWS HIGHLIGHTS ||

AFGHANISTAN: 30 PERCENT SURGE IN TALIBAN ATTACKS ON AFGHAN FORCES, CLAIMS PENTAGON; TALIBAN HOLD TIES WITH AL-QAEDA

The US Department of Defense revealed that the Taliban have increased attacks on the Afghan forces and civilians and have been maintaining close ties with the Al-Qaeda. Accordingly, the Pentagon had depicted in a report that the attacks on Afghan forces had increased by 37 percent compared to the same period last year. It further mentioned that 11,551 attacks had been carried out in the first quarter of 2021, while the number was 10,431 last year. According to the report, the attacks have increased against Afghan security and defense forces since the Taliban signed a peace deal with the United States in February 2020 under which the Taliban vowed not to target the US and other foreign forces based in Afghanistan. It also added that Al-Qaeda had been building trust in the Taliban and strengthening bilateral ties with that militant group. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) also said that this militant group had been strengthening ties with the Al-Qaeda terrorist network. He also mentioned that Taliban insurgents had launched big offensives in the first three months of the ongoing year.

Sources:

<http://www.afghanistantimes.af/30-pc-surge-in-taliban-attacks-claims-pentagon/>

<http://www.afghanistantimes.af/taliban-hold-ties-with-al-qaeda-to-continue-killing-of-afghans/>

BANGLADESH: || TRADE AND INVESTMENT HIGHLIGHTS || GOVERNMENT APPROVES BANK COMPANY (AMENDMENT) BILL 2021

The cabinet has approved the draft Bank Company (Amendment) Bill 2021 in a virtual meeting on May 17, 2021, chaired by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The amendment was required to control default loans and to ensure good governance and stability in the financial sector. The amendment was done as the Bank Company Act 1991 does not have a clear definition of the deliberate defaulters and actions against them. The draft law has cleared these issues and added some new provisions i.e. proper management and recovery of the weak bank companies, action against vulnerable banks, and reform and merging of banks. In addition to a criminal offense, the proposed law has provisions for a huge amount of fines for officials engaged in irregularities.

Source:

<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/national/govt-approves-bank-company-amendment-bill-2021-1621256198>

BANGLADESH BANK ALLOWS BANKS TO OPEN TEMPORARY ACCOUNTS TO FACILITATE FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT (FDI)

The Bangladesh Bank allowed foreign investors to open temporary non-resident taka accounts and temporary foreign currency accounts to facilitate foreign direct investment (FDI) in Bangladesh with an aim to helping the inflow of FDI in the country. The goal of this arrangement is to ease doing business in the country. Previously, banks were allowed to open accounts through online applications via selected different entities. In addition to this, Bangladesh Bank also mentioned that the banks would not be able to appoint their former MDs as independent directors at their respective boards according to the Banking Company Act 1991. The central bank also instructed the banks not to appoint their MDs, Deputies, and Additional MDs as advisers and consultants within five years since their retirement.

Source:

<https://today.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/trade-market/bb-allows-banks-to-open-temporary-accounts-to-facilitate-fdi-1621269817>

BANGLADESH: USA WANTS TO PRODUCE ITS COVID-19 VACCINE IN BANGLADESH

The US Government has been exploring the possibilities of producing the Covid-19 vaccine at Bangladeshi pharmaceutical companies. State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh Md. Shahriar Alam said it on May 17, 2021, after a meeting with US Ambassador to Bangladesh H.E. Mr. Earl Miller. Meanwhile, USA Ambassador said his country had been actively considering Bangladesh's request for 4 million Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine jabs from the USA. On the other hand, the Health Minister of Bangladesh said the administering of the Chinese Covid-19 vaccine would begin on May 25 or 26, 2021. In addition, the Health Ministry spokesperson confirmed that Bangladesh would receive 1,06,000 doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine on June 2, 2021, under the Covax scheme.

Sources:

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/05/17/us-wants-to-produce-its-covid-19-vaccines-in-bangladesh>

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/05/17/vaccine-delivery-miller-says-us-actively-considering-bangladesh-s-request>

INDIAN VARIANT DETECTED IN DHAKA; BANGLADESH EXTENDS LOCKDOWN TILL 23 MAY

The Indian Covid-19 variant B.1.617 has been found in two patients at a hospital in Dhaka City. The director of the hospital confirmed the news on May 14, 2021. Earlier on May 08, 2021, six cases of Indian variant were detected in Jessore. Meanwhile, the government decided to extend the ongoing restrictions on public movement till May 23, 2021.

Source:

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2021/05/15/indian-covid-variant-detected-in-dhaka-hospital>



|| WEEKLY NEWS HIGHLIGHTS ||

INDIA: GOVERNMENT WARNS WHATSAPP TO SCRAP THE 2021 PRIVACY POLICY

Instant messaging platform WhatsApp may face legal action in India by May 25, 2021, if it does not send a satisfactory reply to a notice sent by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology asking the company to withdraw its latest privacy policy update, ministry officials said. In a communication sent to WhatsApp asking it to withdraw the new privacy policy, the IT ministry of India said, "The changes to the privacy policy and the manner of introducing these changes including in FAQ (frequently asked questions) undermines the sacrosanct values of informational privacy, data security and user choice for Indian users and harms the rights and interests of Indian citizens."

This is the second communication by the IT ministry to WhatsApp asking to withdraw its controversial privacy policy. In January, the ministry had written a letter to Will Cathcart, the global Chief Executive Officer of the instant messaging platform, asking that the latest privacy and policy update be withdrawn. In March, the IT ministry had taken a similar stand before the Delhi High Court, where through an affidavit it had said WhatsApp must be barred from rolling out its new privacy policy as it violated several existing IT rules. The updated policy terms were first announced by WhatsApp via in-app notification, asking users to agree to those by February 8, 2021, or lose access to their accounts. Following protests by both users and privacy activists, WhatsApp had on January 15, 2021, announced that it was delaying the implementation of the changes to May 15, 2021.

Source:

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/technology/breaking-govt-tells-whatsapp-to-withdraw-privacy-policy-serves-seven-day-notice/articleshow/82764158.cms>

MYANMAR: NATIONAL UNITY GOVT SEEKS TO CONSULT WITH ROHINGYA LEADERS

Myanmar's National Unity Government (NUG), a coalition of pro-democracy forces and claimed to be a parallel government, has recognized the importance of consultation with the Rohingya leaders in their effort to oust the military regime and build an inclusive federal democracy. At a virtual meeting with the Asian journalists, Dr. Sasa, NUG minister of international cooperation mentioned the atrocities and violations of human rights by the junta and announced that human rights issues would be prioritized in their aspired federal government. He called the governments and especially the ASEAN leaders to recognize NUG. He acknowledged that the Rohingya repatriation has thin chances during the junta reign. He further added that NUG would engage representatives from all ethnic communities in the future governance system of the country.

Earlier in April 2021, the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights (ARSPH), a community-based organization of Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar, had appealed to include Rohingya representatives in the newly formed NUG. Meanwhile, The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) stated that the 2020 election was not as fair due to the pandemic. However, the election observer body acknowledged that the poll reflected mass opinion and thus the claim of the junta was unjustifiable. US, Canada, and the UK had already imposed coordinated sanctions on the military regime and related entities as part of punitive measures to bring an end to the violence propelled by the junta.

Sources:

<https://www.thedailystar.net/myanmar-coup/news/myanmars-rebel-govt-seeks-consult-engage-rohingya-leaders-bid-topple-junta-regime-2092885>
<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/rohingya-crisis/2021/04/19/appeal-for-rohingyas-to-be-included-in-myanmar-national-unity-government>
<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/myanmars-election-reflected-peoples-will-monitoring-group-says-2021-05-17/>
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/17/us-canada-and-uk-impose-new-sanctions-on-myanmar-military>

MYANMAR: HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE FOR DISPLACED MYANMAR NATIONALS IN BANGLADESH

In the context of the outbreak of the pandemic and the political upheaval in Myanmar, the prospects of Rohingya repatriation are being delayed. The donors at the conference in Geneva on 18th May 2021 pledged to sanction \$340m for the Rohingyas and the host community in Cox's Bazar which is only 35% of the total requirement. In the Joint Response Plan (JRP) for 2021, the Government of Bangladesh along with the UN and other humanitarian agencies sought \$ 943m for 880,000 Rohingya refugees and 472,000 Bangladeshis in the vicinity. The US announced to provide \$155m and the Republic of Korea has announced \$4 million in assistance for the 2021 Joint Response Plan (JRP). In an interview before the conference, UNHCR chief Filippo Grandi stated that while repatriation is the ideal solution, however, the funds must be mobilized to create livelihood options for the Rohingya community as well, since it is risky to make a population dependent on aids.

Sources:

<https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/dealing-rohingya-crisis-donors-pledge-340m-year-2094633>
<https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/un-seeks-943m-deal-rohingya-crisis-2093421>
<https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/4-m-south-korean-aid-rohingyas-2095353>



|| WEEKLY NEWS HIGHLIGHTS ||

NEPAL: KP SHARMA OLI APPOINTED AS PRIME MINISTER FOR THE THIRD TIME

KP Sharma Oli, Chair of CPN-UML was appointed as Prime Minister for the third time as per article 76(3) of the constitution. Earlier the President had called on parties in the lower house to form a coalition government as no party has a majority in the 275-member house. In response, parties failed to claim to form a coalition government. Member of the National Assembly Home Minister Mr. Thapa was reappointed on April 18, 2021, hours after the upper house was informed about his suspension by the Maoist Centre's party members for joining CPN-UML.

Source:

<https://kathmandupost.com/national/2021/05/17/writs-filed-at-supreme-court-demanding-prime-minister-oli-retake-oath-of-office-and-secrecy>

NEPAL: ANNUAL BUDGET DUE ON MAY 29, 2021; PRE-BUDGET DISCUSSIONS IS YET TO BE CALLED

The government of Nepal must present the annual budget on May 29, 2021, this year, as per the constitutional provisions. KP Sharma Oli was appointed as the Prime Minister of Nepal on May 14 because he is the leader of the largest party—CPN-UML—as per Article 76 (3) of the constitution and therefore must seek a vote of confidence in the House of Representatives within 30 days. To win a vote of confidence, he will need the support of the Janata Samajbadi Party, the fourth largest party in the lower house. But as he is yet to get a vote of confidence—and the support of a divided Janata Samajbadi Party is not a given—it is unclear how the annual budget of the government's income and expenditure will be presented. According to sources privy to the matter, if Prime Minister Oli can garner support from the Janata Samajbadi Party, he will summon the House session and present the budget and also seek a vote of confidence. If not, the budget will come through an ordinance. A Cabinet meeting on May 17, 2021, was expected to call the budget session of the House but the decision was not made although the matter was discussed in the Cabinet.

Source:

<https://kathmandupost.com/politics/2021/05/18/oli-mulling-budget-through-ordinance-as-his-vote-of-confidence-in-parliament-remains-pending>

PAKISTAN: EXPORTS TO CHINA ROSE BY 31 PERCENT

Adviser to Prime Minister on Commerce and Investment Abdul Razak Dawood said that Pakistan's exports to China had increased by 31 percent over the past nine months. The Second Phase of the Pakistan-China FTA (FTA-II) became operational on 1st January 2020. He said that MOC is glad to share that during Jul-Apr 2021 Pakistan's exports to China have increased by 31% to USD 1.951 Billion from USD 1.491 Billion in the corresponding period last year. The exports increased by USD 459 million during this period. This shows that Pakistan's FTA-II is working for which the credit goes to exporters. He encouraged the exporters to aggressively utilize the tariff preferences in FTA-II.

Source:

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1623977/export-s-to-china-rose-by-31pc-says-dawood>

[N.B: In compiling this weekly news update, BEI has attempted to include the most relevant news accounts from the past week concerning South Asian Region. From time to time, news beyond South Asia has also been included if it finds relevance on any issues to the region. We recognize that some developments may have been overlooked, and that some sources may not be viewed by all as credible or balanced. Inclusion of a news story and its summary does not constitute any kind of endorsement or position taken by BEI, and the text and positions included in the above are solely extracted from various news articles published in the print media in various countries in South Asia and beyond. If you have any comments or feedback for us regarding this digest, please email at bei@bol-online.com. For more information about BEI and our work, please visit <https://www.bei-bd.org/>]



|| WEEKLY NEWS HIGHLIGHTS ||

BEI WATCH ||

Ongoing Activities

WEBINAR ON EASE OF DOING BUSINESS: STATUS OF 2021

A webinar on “Ease of doing business: Status of 2021” jointly organized by the International Business Forum of Bangladesh (IBFB) and the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) on 17 May, 2021. The webinar discussed various components involved with doing business in the country compared with other south Asian and OECD countries as Bangladesh set a target to achieve double digit ranking by the World Bank. BIDA Director Jiban K Saha Roy presented the keynote paper highlighting several reforms already have been done and others are in the pipeline to make businesses easier in the country. Experts also shared some experiences, critically reviewed the challenges in obtaining licenses and stress for increasing trade facilitation, reduction of customs tariffs and supplementary duties to turn Bangladesh into a regional transit and an investment hub. They also observed that despite reforms in service deliveries, complaints and hassles are still on rise.

Experts also suggested focusing on the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal (BBIN) initiative to promote connectivity and ratify the Transports Internationaux Routiers (TIR) convention without delay. Humayun Rashid, President at the IBFB moderated the session and Ambassador M Humayun Kabir, President, BEI delivered an address of welcome while Md Sirazul Islam, Executive Chairman, BIDA participated as Guest of Honor.

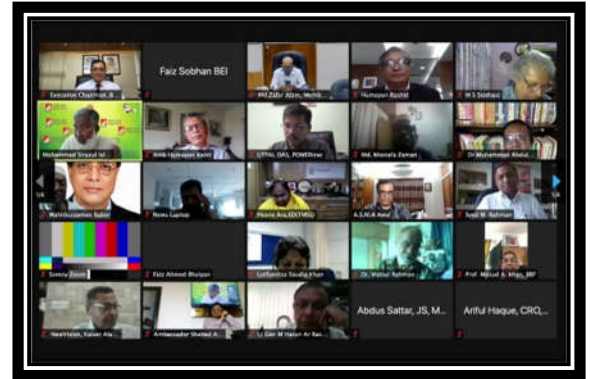


Image 01: Participant discussion session during Webinar



Image 02: Ambassador M Humayun Kabir, President, BEI delivering welcome speech.

NEWS COVERAGES: AT A GLIMPSE

The Daily Star

Implement reforms to improve ease of doing business:
Bida

