

BANGLADESH ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE (BEI)

A Brief Highlights on Current Issues of South Asia ||
Updated from May 21, 2021 –May 26, 2021 ||

SOUTH ASIA: COVID-19 CRISIS AT A GLANCE

Afghanistan has been facing a surge in new cases and death rates to the virus. The Afghan health ministry recorded 840 new infections and 19 deaths on 26 May 2021. Bangladesh has also been facing a slightly increasing trend both in infection and death toll compared to the last couple of weeks. Moreover, the fear of spreading black fungus is creeping in. The daily positivity rate climbs to 10.08% and the total death toll reaches 12,441.

Bhutan reports 16 new coronavirus cases on average each day. Total 1,411 infections have been taken place in Bhutan whereas 1 fatality so far has been observed.

On May 25, India reported the lowest Covid-19 cases since April 14, 2021, as the country posted 1,96,427 new coronavirus cases and 3,511 deaths. The country's overall caseload now stands at 26.95 million and the total death toll is 3,07,231

The Maldives witnessed a rise infection rates and fatalities numbering a total of 58,345 cases and 144 deaths as of May 25, 2021. The government has increased curfew hours, introduced household permits via a mobile app to control the movement of citizens. Each member from a household is allowed a pass.

Myanmar reported a descending rate of infections with a total case of 1,43,296 and a death toll of 3,216. Accordingly, testing for CV19 has plummeted and the vaccination program is uncertain owing to the political situation in the country.

Nepal is still faced with a surge in Covid-19 infection. The countrywide death toll has now reached 6,700. The number of active cases stands at 117,261 as of May 25, 2021.

Pakistan reported 905,852 positive cases. To date it has reported 20,400 deaths with 823,157 recovered patients As of May 25, the positive rate of infections is 4.8%,

Srilanka reports 14,990,270 total active cases and 349002 deaths. However, the Health Ministry denies the presence of 'Black fungus' in this country.

SOUTH ASIA: COVID-19 VACCINE UPDATES

Afghanistan: COVAX shipped 468,000 doses of the Covishield vaccine, from the Serum Institute of India to Kabul. Afghanistan is the first country in Central Asia to receive the vaccine via the COVAX.

Bangladesh has, to date, administered at least 97,89,875 doses of Covid vaccines. The country vaccinated 3% of its population. India has already started importing Sputnik V from Russia as its ambitious target of vaccinating 300 million people by the end of July 2021 is slowed by shortages.

Maldives has an agreement to buy 700,000 doses with Astra Zeneca in Singapore and the process of sourcing 200,000 doses of the Sputnik V vaccine from Russia.

Myanmar's government has stated that the Oxford-AstraZeneca is being used, however, ethnic military groups are using Sinovac-Biotech vaccines supplied by China.

Nepal has an estimated 1.5 million people waiting for the second shot of Covishield, with supplies also held up by the Indian export ban. It is now getting through dwindling numbers of Sinopharm jabs given by China.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister (FM) Shah Mahmood Qureshi sought US help for arranging coronavirus vaccines for Pakistan as the country could not get the supply committed under COVAX, owing to excessive global demand. Sri Lanka, with a population of 21 million, has about 115,000 vaccine doses left and has slowed its inoculations to 15,000 a day as it also negotiates with other countries, officials said. As per the last update, Sinopharm jabs are ongoing. A shortage of Oxford Astrazeneca deprived 3000 vaccine seekers of receiving the second jab. However, community-level inculcation of Chinese Sinopharm vaccines has been started in the country. Bhutan administered about 4,82578 doses of Covid vaccine and 31.6% of Bhutanese have already been vaccinated.

ISRAEL-HAMAS IN GAZA AGREE TO CEASEFIRE: REACTIONS IN SOUTH ASIA

Bangladesh: Bangladesh urged the UN Security Council to work for a durable solution to the Israel Palestine conflict during a virtual meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Executive Committee. Foreign Minister Dr. AK Abdul Momen has said there would be no change in Bangladesh's position towards Israel as it still does not recognize Israel. The statement came as Bangladesh removed the words "valid for traveling except Israel" from its new passport. According to Foreign Minister, the changes in the Bangladeshi passport have been made in line with global standards.

India: The country maintained a "balancing act" on the Israel-Palestine conflict during the UN Security Council meeting. Unlike government policy, many people in India have expressed their solidarity with the people of Palestine.

Pakistan: A bomb blast at a pro-Palestinian rally left at least seven people dead and 14 injured in Pakistan's restive southwestern Balochistan province on 21 May 2021. The explosion occurred at a rally organized by the Jamiat Ul Ulema-i-Islam-Nazaryati (JUI-N). Thousands of people rallied across Pakistan in support of Palestinians, hours after a ceasefire was announced between Israel and Hamas.



|| WEEKLY NEWS HIGHLIGHTS ||

SOUTH ASIA: || TECH HIGHLIGHTS || WHATSAPP SUES INDIAN GOVERNMENT OVER 'MASS SURVEILLANCE' INTERNET LAWS

WhatsApp has sued the Indian government over new internet laws which the company says will "severely undermine" the privacy of their users. The new IT laws, which have been described as oppressive and draconian, give the Indian government greater power to monitor online activity, including on encrypted apps such as WhatsApp and Signal. Under the laws, encryption - which keeps communications on the app private and inaccessible to outside parties - would have to be removed from WhatsApp in India and messages would have to be put into a "traceable" database. The government would then be able to identify and take action against the sender if any content was ruled "unlawful". The move marks one of the first times that WhatsApp, an encrypted messaging app owned by Facebook, has filed a lawsuit against a national government.

Source:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/india/exclusive-whatsapp-sues-india-qovt-says-new-media-rules-mean-end-privacy-sources-2021-05-26/>

HUAWEI TO SUPPORT SOUTH ASIA TO CULTIVATE 100,000 DIGITAL TALENTS

Huawei will support South Asian countries - Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal- to cultivate 100,000 digital talents over the next five years in cooperation with the governments, universities, and industrial partners in five years. Huawei spokesperson came up with the development at the Digital Talent Regional Summit 2021 held virtually on 20 May 2021, said in a press release. Themed "Cultivating a Talent Ecosystem for Inclusive Digital Prosperity," the summit brought together ministers and scholars from the three countries, experts and representatives from UNESCO and the ICT industry, to explore collaborative initiatives for closing the digital skill gaps and facilitating the digital transformation in the post-pandemic economic recovery. State minister for information and communication technology Mr. Zunaid Ahmed Palak, and UNESCO country representative Bangladesh Beatrice Kaldun, shared their insights.

Source:

<https://en.prothomalo.com/corporate/local/huawei-to-support-south-asia-to-cultivate-100000-digital-talents-in-5-yrs>

AFGHANISTAN: AFGHAN, TALIBAN DELEGATION TO RESUME PEACE NEGOTIATIONS IN QATAR; TALIBAN BLAMES KABUL FOR DELAYING PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

The Afghan and Taliban negotiators are supposed to resume the stalled peace talks soon in Qatar, said the State Ministry for Peace. Afghan and Taliban teams held an informal meeting in Qatar after the Eid festival. Subsequently, the next conference on Afghan peace was expected to be held in Turkey after Eid, but Kabul says the exact date of the conference is still to be finalized, despite the full readiness of all parties to attend the meeting.

Taliban said that negotiations would be held once both sides agree. Afghanistan and the Taliban started negotiations on peace in Qatar in September 2020, but the talks had been stalled since January 2021.

Both the Taliban and the Government accused each other of delaying the talks. The Taliban has recently accused President Ashraf Ghani's administration not to respond immediately. On contrary, the government earlier accused the militants of being reluctant to engage in negotiations. President Ashraf Ghani said earlier that there would be no more excuse to continue violence as the foreign troops are now preparing to exit.

Sources:

<http://www.afghanistantimes.af/taliban-blame-kabul-for-delaying-peace-negotiations/>

<http://www.afghanistantimes.af/afghan-taliban-delegation-to-resume-peace-negotiations-in-qatar/>

AFGHANISTAN: USA TO REMAIN IN REGION AFTER AFGHAN WITHDRAWAL, SAYS PENTAGON; AUSTRALIA TO SHUT KABUL EMBASSY

The Pentagon says that it will continue its military presence in the region after the troop's withdrawal from Afghanistan. A spokesman for the U.S. Department of Defense, John Kirby said that "Just because we are removing our troops and ending our military presence in Afghanistan doesn't mean the U.S. is walking away from the region. There's still going to be a robust United States presence in the Middle East, in the Central Command area of responsibility," he added.

Australian officials say that the country will shut its embassy in Afghanistan this month as the international troops withdraw, triggering fears of deteriorating security situation in Kabul. Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison has raised concerns about the deteriorating security situation in Kabul and vowed the embassy would reopen once the circumstances would become normal. Though he has previously promised Australia would continue supporting Afghanistan through its diplomatic presence, cooperation on development, and continued people-to-people links.

The officials of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade will visit Afghanistan from other residential posts in the region. The ministry of foreign affairs of Afghanistan says that it respects the decision made by the Australian but hoping that the closure of the embassy would be a temporary decision. The Taliban pledged to provide a "safe environment" to foreign diplomats after Australia announced it would shut down its embassy in the context of the deteriorating security across the country.

Sources:

<http://www.afghanistantimes.af/u-s-to-remain-in-region-after-afghan-withdrawal-says-pentagon/>

<http://www.afghanistantimes.af/australia-to-shut-kabul-embassy-amid-fears-of-deteriorating-security/>



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BANGLADESH: || TRADE AND INVESTMENT HIGHLIGHTS || BTRC AMENDS INTERNATIONAL GATEWAY GUIDELINES

On 19 May 2021, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) amended the guidelines for International Gateway (IGW). Now, as per the guidelines, IGW licenses will be able to exchange calls through the TDM (Time Division Multiplexing) interface as well as the IP (Internet Protocol) interface. Earlier, IGW licensees used only the TDM interface but they can now use IP technology with the advent of 4G. No doubt, it will enhance the capacity of BTRC as TDM based equipment is rare in the market whereas, IP-based equipment is cheaper and available. The amended guidelines also included changes in signaling, connectivity, and space coding. Source:

<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/trade/btrc-amends-international-gateway-guidelines-1621575144>

GOVT ALLOWS COMPANIES TO SPEND SLIGHTLY MORE ON PROMOTIONAL EXPENDITURE

The National Board of Revenue (NBR) is going to reset the bar on promotional expenses from 0.5% to 1% in the coming budget for FY22 to draw foreign investment and encourage new entrepreneurs. Particularly, new and small companies which need more to spend on promotional activities have been suffering the most for the low capital on promotional expenditure. Businesses say increasing of cap on promotional activities is not enough for FMCG manufacturers, telecom operators, the apparel industries, pharmaceuticals, and multinational companies. General Secretary of Bangladesh Foreign Investment Chambers of Commerce and Industry said, despite increasing promotional expenditure, the cost of doing business would remain high in Bangladesh.

Source:

<https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/budget/companies-can-spend-slightly-more-promotion-249883#.YKuzHAUvrEI.facebook>

BANGLADESH: PROTHOM ALO JOURNALIST ROZINA GETS INTERIM BAIL; OFFICIAL SECRETS ACT GOES AGAINST NEW LAWS, CONSTITUTION- OBSERVES COURT

The senior investigative reporter of the Prothom Alo, a leading Bengali newspaper, Ms. Rozina Islam, arrested by police on 17 May 2021 under the Official Secrets Act 1923, was granted bail by a Dhaka-based lower court. The Official Secrets Act that was used against Ms. Islam is being questioned by civil society as it directly contradicts the Rights to Information Act (RTI), Public Interest Information Disclosure Act, and the spirit of the constitution. The near century-old Official Secrets Act lost its effectiveness as RTI and laws related to information enacted recently. Section 3 and 5 of the Official Secrets Act directly violates the fundamental rights guaranteed under article 39 of the constitution. The British rulers made the law in 1923 is no longer relevant in the present context. Source:

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/op-ed/2021/05/25/op-ed-what-is-wrong-with-keeping-colonial-laws>

BANGLADESH: THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED NATION GENERAL ASSEMBLY VISIT TO BANGLADESH

The President of the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Volkan Bolzki, had a two-day official visit to Bangladesh from 25th to 26th May 2021. During his stay, he visited HE Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at Gonobhaban, Foreign Minister Dr. AK Abdul Monem, and Rohingya camps at Cox's Bazar. Bolzki highly appreciated the remarkable progress of the country for promoting gender parity, women empowerment, facilitating a strong voice over the climate change issues, and graduating to LDC and other aspects to achieve SDGs. The contribution of the Bangladesh army to the UN peacekeeping missions was exalted. He praised Bangladesh's generosity and assistance to the Rohingya refugees and admired the secured setting of Bhashanchar, a temporary residence for Rohingyas. At his visit to Rohingya camps, Bolzki watched over the works of the UN and met with the Residential Coordinator of the UN and the UNHCR Representatives in Bangladesh.

Source:

<https://unb.com.bd/category/Bangladesh/bangladeshs-efforts-for-rohingyas-in-bhashan-char-an-example-to-the-world-unqa-president/70854>

BANGLADESH: BANGLADESH BANK TO PROVIDE \$200 MILLION LOAN TO DEBT-RIDDEN SRI LANKA

The Central Bank of Bangladesh is giving \$200 million to Sri Lanka as a loan from its foreign exchange reserve through a currency swap deal. Through this currency deal, the country becomes a lender for the first time in response to a request for liquidity support from Sri Lanka at a time when Sri Lanka is at risk of defaulting by the rating agency. According to the international treasury investment guideline, Bangladesh Bank can invest its foreign exchange reserve in high-rated bills and bonds of different countries like US treasury bills. As per the deal, Bangladesh Bank will provide the fund at 2% interest and the deal will be for one year. After getting the full amount throughout the one year, Sri Lanka will pay back the loan in three months.

According to the deal, Sri Lanka will exchange their currency with the Bangladesh Bank equivalent to the number of dollars they will be given. There will be a government guarantee too. The country has also obtained funds through such swap deals from India and China.

Source:

<https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/bangladesh-becomes-lender-first-time-250924>



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INDIA: INDIAN FOREIGN MINISTER ON FIVE-DAY VISIT TO USA

External Affairs Minister of India S Jaishankar landed in the USA on 24 May 2021 to discuss issues related to COVID and bilateral relations with the US administration. Jaishankar will be in New York until May 26, 2021, and is expected to meet with the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, after which he will travel to Washington DC for his bilateral meetings with the USA administration.

Issues related to the procurement of business will be the prime agenda during the meeting between Foreign Minister Jaishankar and the US administration.

Source:

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/jaishankar-to-meet-blinken-un-chief-during-us-visit/article34617518.ece?homepage=true>

MYANMAR: MYANMAR JUNTA THREATENS TO DISSOLVE NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC LEAGUE

The Junta-appointed chief, Thein Soe of the Union Election Commission announced that the panel would consider dissolving the registration of Aung San Su Kyi's party, the National Democratic League for the acts of voter fraud in the November 2020 elections. The statement came after a meeting with pro-junta political parties on 21 May 2021. A statement of the EU's executive commission condemned the proposal and added if the regime proceeds with the proposal it will defy the people's will. Foreign Minister of Japan Toshimitsu Motegi at a media conference said that they will consider suspending all development assistance including the ongoing projects in Myanmar if the situation does not improve and added that they support the democratization of the country. The United Nations expressed deep concerns about the ongoing violence in the country and urged the international community to step forward to address the conflict. Earlier, the United States had sanctioned members and associates of the military junta.

Meanwhile, ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi appeared in a court hearing on 24 May 2021 - her first public appearance since the military coup in February this year. She was allotted only 30 minutes to discuss her case with her legal team. Her lawyer informed the press that Suu Kyi said, "NLD evolved out of people and will exist as long as the people support it."

Sources:

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-to-dissolve-national-league-for-democracy.html>

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/myanmar-junta-appointed-electoral-body-to-dissolve-suu-kyi-party/article34612859.ece>

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/eu-denounces-myanmar-juntas-electoral-body-plan-to-dissolve-suu-kyi-party/ar-AAKhWwx>

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/Japan-ready-to-freeze-all-Myanmar-development-aid-Motegi>

MALDIVES: INDIA ANNOUNCES TO OPEN ITS FIRST CONSULATE IN MALDIVES

India approved the establishment of its first consulate in the Maldives at a meeting of the Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 24 May 2021. The counselor service is expected to inflate the diplomatic and economic relations between the countries. The initiative has been undertaken following the 'Security and Growth for All in the region initiative' and the 'Neighborhood First' policy of India. The Indian government acknowledged the linguistic, cultural, religious resemblance between the two nations in conjunction with the economic ties.

However, the Maldivian Foreign Ministry stated that they will review and decide about the establishment of diplomatic missions according to the Vienna Convention and the local laws.

Sources:

<https://english.sun.mv/66915>

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-approves-opening-of-first-consulate-in-the-maldives-101621943470902.html>



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NEPAL: PRESIDENT OF NEPAL DISSOLVES PARLIAMENT, NEW ELECTION IN NOVEMBER, 2021

Nepal plunged into fresh political turmoil on 22 May 2021 as President Bidya Devi Bhandari dissolved parliament and fixed general elections in November 2021 amid a worsening Covid-19 outbreak. The presidential announcement stated that neither the caretaker Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, nor opposition leader Sher Bahadur Deuba had been able to demonstrate a majority to form a new government by the deadline set by Bhandari. "The president has dissolved the House of Representatives and ordered the first phase of general elections on 12 November 2021 and the second phase on 19 November 2021," a presidential statement issued after midnight said. It said the decision had been made on the recommendation of the cabinet headed by caretaker Prime Minister Oli, whose December 2020 dissolution of parliament sparked weeks of protests and was reversed by the Supreme Court as unconstitutional in February 2021.

Before dissolving the House, President Bhandari dismissed the claim made by Sher Bahadur Deuba, the Nepali Congress president, to form a new government. In doing so, she, however, also said the claim made by Oli also was insufficient. Experts raised the question that Bhandari could have asked if the signatures of 149 lawmakers provided by Deuba to stake a claim to the government were authentic. As Mr. Oli was automatically not qualified to lay claim as a running prime minister, no constitutional provision would allow an incumbent prime minister to seek to become prime minister.

Source:

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/world/south-asia/2021/05/22/nepal-president-dissolves-parliament-new-election-in-november>

PAKISTAN: PAKISTAN MAY GIVE AIR, GROUND ACCESS TO USA AFTER WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN, SAYS PENTAGON; PAKISTAN'S FOREIGN OFFICE DENIES THE STATEMENT

The Foreign Office (FO) of Pakistan has denied the presence of any US military or airbase in Pakistan. In a statement issued late Monday night, FO spokesperson Zahid Hafeez Chaudri said: "There is no US military or airbase in Pakistan, nor was any such proposal envisaged. Any speculation on this account should be avoided." The spokesperson added that Pakistan and the US had a framework of cooperation in terms of Air Lines of Communication (ALOC) and Ground Lines of Communication (GLOC) in place since 2001. "No new agreement has been made in this regard," he said.

The FO statement comes after a Pentagon official said that Pakistan had allowed the US military to use its airspace and given ground access so that it can support its presence in Afghanistan. David F. Helvey, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Affairs, told the US Senate Armed Services Committee last week that the United States would continue its conversation with Pakistan because it had a critical role in restoring peace to Afghanistan.

Source:

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1625604/no-us-military-or-air-base-in-pakistan-fo>

SRI LANKA: SRI LANKA CHOOSES REMOTE ISLAND FOR BURIALS OF THE COVID-19 VICTIMS

The government of Sri Lanka has designated Iranathivu island in the Gulf of Mannar for the burial of the Covid-19 victims. The minority Muslim and Christian population who makes about 9.7% and 7.4% respectively expressed their discontent about the decision as the selected place is 300 km away from the capital. The government however justified the place to be ideal as it is thinly populated. The government previously forced minorities to cremate their dead as a measure to prevent the virus from contaminating the groundwater.

However, the government conceded last week as it faced criticism from the International Community and the World Health Organization which pointed out that there is no scientific evidence that cremation prevents infection.

Source:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56249805>

[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/>]

