

## || WEEKLY NEWS HIGHLIGHTS ||

### BANGLADESH ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

|| Brief Highlights on Current Issues of South Asia ||

|| May 27, 2021 – June 02, 2021 ||

#### SOUTH ASIA: COVID-19 CRISIS: AT A GLANCE

Afghanistan reported 1,045 new cases of coronavirus with 33 deaths as of June 01, 2021. The total tally of deaths had reached 3,007 since the outbreak of the virus. The government had announced closures of schools, universities, and other educational institutions for the last two weeks.

On 1 June 2021, Bangladesh reported 36 deaths and 1,710 fresh cases due to Covid-19. As of 1st June, the total death toll reached 12,619, and total infections calculated 8,00,540.

Bhutan, on June 01, 2021, reported no death as the country had seen only one death since the outbreak of covid-19. However, the country witnessed 08 new covid cases on the same day which increased the total number of infections to 1,620. Though the infection and death rate in India has been declining, the country recorded 2,795 new deaths and 1,27,510 fresh cases due to coronavirus on 1 June 2021. The total death toll now stands at 3,31,895 and the total infections have reached 2,81,75,044.

The Maldives recorded 64,396 cases with a death toll of 160 as of June 01, 2021. Whereas, Myanmar also recorded confirmed cases of 143,629 with a death toll of 3217 as of June 01, 2021.

Nepal's covid-19 toll reaches 7,454 with 68 more deaths. 5,285 new infections have been recorded on June 01, 2021, by the Ministry of Health and Population. Local media revealed that the highly infectious Indian variant was responsible for the current surge throughout the country.

Pakistan announced 922,824 confirmed positive cases till June 01, 2021, with a current positivity rate of 3.7%. The total death toll became 20850 to date. Sri Lanka recorded 189,241 confirmed total cases with a death toll of 1484 as of June 01, 2021.

Source: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

John Hopkins University

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## SOUTH ASIA: COVID-19 VACCINE UPDATES

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Afghanistan reported that China had pledged to deliver 700,000 COVID-19 vaccines to Afghanistan. According to the Ministry of Public Health, 280,000 members of the Afghan security forces, more than 120,000 doctors and health workers, and 560,000 civilians have already been vaccinated as of June 01, 2021. It has been claimed that the vaccine has shown 91 percent effective results on people who are infected with COVID-19, according to the Health Ministry.

In Bangladesh, a total 41, 56,170 people have been vaccinated as of June 01, 2021, which is 2.55% of the country's population.

In Bhutan, a total 4, 82,716 people have been vaccinated to date which is 31.6% of the country's population.

In India, total 4, 32, 58,810 people have been inoculated under the vaccination program till June 01, 2021, which is 3.17% of the country's population.

The Maldives administered 476,305 doses till June 01, 2021. The number of people fully vaccinated is 166,490.

Nepal receives 8, 00,000 Chinese vaccines on May 31, 2021. Total 290,000 people have taken the first jab of the Chinese vaccine while over 250,000 people have taken second doses as of first June 2021.

Pakistan receives the first batch of Pfizer Covid vaccines through Covax on May 28, 2021. The country also has started the production of a homemade single-dose COVID-19 vaccine, named PakVac. The country will produce three million doses per month of the vaccine that has been developing by the National Institute of Health (NIH), Pakistan, with the help of a Chinese vaccine company CanSinoBio. While developing the vaccines, the country will comply with the World Health Organization's (WHO) standards, reports Gulf News.

## || BUSINESS AND INVESTMENT HIGHLIGHTS || BANGLADESH: GOOGLE, AMAZON TO REGISTER WITH NBR FOR VAT

Global tech giants, Google and the e-commerce company Amazon have finally got Value-added Tax (VAT) registration from the National Board of Revenue (NBR) ending a two-year stalemate over the issue. NBR in July 2019 made conditions for tech giants to either set up an office in Bangladesh or appoint agents so that government can collect VAT on services or advertisements provided by them to local firms. However, tech giants were unwilling to set up an office here and they were not interested to pay indirect tax through agents on the ground of their data privacy. In early 2020, NBR decided to allow

these companies to get direct VAT registration without opening local offices here to bring them under the tax network. Singapore-based Google Asia Pacific Pte and Amazon Web Service Inc. Seattle signed up for VAT registration last week. PWC Bangladesh will work as a local consultant for the two US-based global companies.

Source: <https://www.tbsnews.net/videos/google-amazon-registered-here-what-does-it-mean-bangladesh-253234>

## BANGLADESH-MALAYSIA FREE TRADE AGREEMENT BACK ON THE TABLE

On 26 May 2021, The Bangladesh- Malaysia Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BMCCI) hosted a virtual discussion on challenges and opportunities over the signing of the Bangladesh- Malaysia Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Economists' suggested that this free trade agreement if signed would get an advantage to import of low-cost industrial materials for promoting domestic export markets. Commerce Minister, Mr. Tipu Munsif said Bangladesh has been working on the agreement and would sign the deal with Malaysia. Experts said in the virtual meeting that instead of taking the revenue loss issue between Bangladesh and Malaysia into consideration, Bangladesh should sign FTA with Malaysia to

attract investment, raise export and ensure jobs of Bangladeshis in Malaysia. In January 2015, Bangladesh and Malaysia agreed to sign a bilateral FTA but progress had not been done as expected. The Commerce Minister of Bangladesh, diplomats, economists, experts, exporters, and importers from both countries attended the event. Source: <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/fta-malaysia-back-the-table-2099609>

## TECH HIGHLIGHTS: FACEBOOK TO TAKE ACTION AGAINST USERS REPEATEDLY SHARING MISINFORMATION

On May 27, 2021, Facebook declared that it would take "stronger" action against people who repeatedly share misinformation on the platform. Facebook will reduce the distribution of all posts in its news feed from a user account if it frequently shares content that has been flagged as false by one of the company's fact-checking partners, the social media giant said in a blog post. It added that it would also launch ways to inform people if they are interact-

ing with content that has been rated by a fact-checker. Whether it is false or misleading content about Covid-19 and vaccines, climate change, elections, or other topics, the company is making sure fewer people see misinformation on the Facebook app.

Source:

<https://www.thedailystar.net/toggle/news/facebook-take-action-against-users-repeatedly-sharing-misinformation-2099833>

## AFGHANISTAN: KABUL, TALIBAN TO RESUME PEACE NEGOTIATIONS IN QATAR

The Afghan government and the Taliban are now set to resume peace negotiations soon in Qatar, which have remained stuck for over the last five months, to try and end nearly two decades of war in Afghanistan, officials told on 27 May 2021.

An Afghan peace delegation flew to the Doha, the capital of Qatar, on May 27, 2021. The two sides would resume dialog based on a detailed agenda that had already been discussed previously, aiming to produce a fruitful result for the people of Afghanistan. In a preparatory meeting held a few days ago, both Kabul and the insurgents had emphasized speeding up negotiations and recommencing them soon. Taliban's political affairs spokesperson Mr. Naeem Wardak also confirmed the rebels' willingness to restart talks.

The intra-Afghan negotiations, which had kicked off on September 12, 2021, came on

the back of the historic peace agreement signed between the United States and the Taliban in Qatar in February 2020. As per the deal, Washington agreed to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan by April 2021 – with the deadline subsequently postponed to September 2021 - in return for the insurgents committing to drastically reducing violence and participating in negotiations to end the Afghan war. However, the talks had stalled in January, 2021 as the Taliban insisted on the fulfillment of some of the conditions of their agreement with the US, such as the release of around 7,000 additional prisoners and the removal of their leaders' names from the blacklist of the United Nations.

Source:

<http://www.afghanistantimes.af/afghan-negotiators-to-fly-to-qatar-in-efforts-to-resume-stalled-peace-talks/>

## AFGHANISTAN: TALIBAN WARNS NEIGHBORS AGAINST HOSTING U.S. MILITARY AFTER WITHDRAWAL

The Afghan Taliban on May 27, 2021, warned the neighbouring countries not to allow the troops of the United States to use their territory for operations after their withdrawal from the soil of Afghanistan. As the US troops are set to withdraw following the deadline of September 11, 2021 announced by Mr. Joe Biden, the president of the US, experts, and diplomats are speculating that Washington's future role in the region could include bases in nearby countries, especially in Pakistan.

"If such a step is taken, then the responsibility for all the misfortunes and difficulties lies upon those who commit such mistakes," the Taliban insurgent group said in a statement, without specifying the name of the country. U.S. officials have privately said that they are exploring potential options in countries near Afghanistan, like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, to set up the military base but have so far nothing has forwarded with any of them. In recent days, there has been a spate of talks between senior Pakistani and U.S. officials, including a meeting be-

tween Biden's National Security Adviser Mr. Jake Sullivan and his Pakistani counterpart. Pakistan shares a border with Afghanistan that runs along heavily congested areas of the south and the Eastern part of that country where the Taliban have a large presence.

A spokesman for Pakistan's foreign office denied the speculation over U.S. use of bases in Pakistan. The U.S. embassy in Islamabad did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Fighting between the Taliban and Afghan forces has escalated sharply in Afghanistan since Washington announced its decision to withdraw its troops.

Source:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-warns-nearby-nations-against-hosting-us-military-after-withdrawal-2021-05-26/>

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Afghanistan has started considering the Russian Federation as one of the options for purchasing weapons as U.S. and NATO forces are exiting after a 20-year presence in the country. Afghan Ambassador to Russia, Mr. Said Tayeb Jawad told the TASS news agency that Kabul is ready to purchase arms and military equipment from Russia.

Jawad wished that Russia would assist Afghanistan in repairing the existing Russian equipment, especially helicopters. He expressed hope that Moscow would facilitate training for Afghan pilots and support maintenance.

This recent development comes in the context of the drawdown of US troops officially. It is anticipated that the withdrawal of US troops would be completed by 11 September 2021, the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the US by Al-Qaeda terrorists.

The withdrawal of NATO and US troops raised concerns among the people of Afghanistan of a possible collapse of the government and the repetition of the chaos which Afghanistan witnessed following the complete pullout of Soviet troops a few decades ago. Therefore, Afghanistan is appearing to be desperate to fill the vacuum, which could be created after the exit of all international troops, by purchasing weapons and arms and by building alliances with other countries.

Source: <http://www.afghanistantimes.af/afghanistan-seeks-ways-to-purchase-russian-weapons-as-us-exit/>

## BANGLADESH: P4G SUMMIT: PRIME MINISTER SHEIKH HASINA PUT FORWARD THREE SUGGESTIONS; BANGLADESH OBSERVED INTERNATIONAL DAY OF UN PEACEKEEPERS

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on May 30, 2021, put forward three suggestions before the two-day virtual summit on "Partnering for Green Growth and the Global Goals 2030 (P4G)" held in Seoul, South Korea.

The suggestions include strengthening the campaign for an action-oriented approach by engaging stakeholders, the need for a whole-of-world attitude, and the need for leaders in the P4G summit to come closer to making a greener future for the next generation. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also said Bangladesh's key focus would be promoting locally-led adaptation solutions to address the adverse impact of climate change.

In the meantime, The United Nations has awarded eight fallen peacekeepers from Bangladesh with the "Dag Hammarskjold Medal" in a virtual ceremony on the occasion of the International Day of UN Peacekeepers on 27 May 2021. All the recipients of the award lost their lives while rendering duties in different peacekeeping missions in 2020. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had attended a function virtually which was held in the Dhaka Cantonment, on the occasion of the International Day of UN Peacekeepers. She said that Bangladesh would maintain a friendship with all as the government wants to turn the

country into a developed and prosperous one.

Foreign Minister Dr. AK Abdul Momen in a separate event said, "Bangladeshi peacekeepers at the UN are helping to build the brand of the country abroad as a peace-loving nation." He also lauded the role of Bangladeshi peacekeepers as "ambassador of peace" and mentioned that Bangladesh had become the top contributor to the UN Peacekeeping missions deploying almost 6,500 Peacekeepers in eight countries.

Sources:

<https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/un-honours-eight-fallen-bangladeshi-peacekeepers-2100705>

<https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/green-growth-campaign-action-oriented-approach-2101825>

## BANGLADESH: UN DELEGATES VISITED ROHINGYA CAMP & BHASHANCHAR

On 26 May 2021, the President of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Mr. Volkan Bozkir visited the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar located in the southeast part of Bangladesh. During his two-day official visit to Bangladesh, Mr. Bozkir met Rohingyas and interacted with them for thirty minutes, while the Rohingyas requested him to advocate and put pressure on Myanmar for their citizenship and safe and dignified return to their country of origin. In a statement, he recognized that Rohingya's rights and citizenship must be respected. He also expressed his concern about the deteriorating situation in Myanmar which might make the Rohingya repatriation uncertain. Mr. Bozkir stated that the UN is determined to ensure a better future for the persecuted Myanmar nationals. He commended the generous humanitarian assistance and

efforts provided by Bangladesh to the Rohingya.

Sources:

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/05/26/unga-president-bozkir-we-haven-t-forgotten-about-the-rohingya-people>

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/world/south-asia/2021/05/31/thousands-of-rohingya-protest-against-conditions-on-bhashan-char>

<https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/unhcr-concerned-bhasan-char-demo-2102693>

## INDIA: INDIAN GOVERNMENT IN RESPONSE TO WHATSAPP LAWSUIT; "NO FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT ABSOLUTE"

The government of India called WhatsApp's refusal to comply with the new IT rules a "clear act of defiance" and said that the right to privacy would come with reasonable restrictions.

The government added that social media companies would only have to give the originator of the messages if the court demands. The government also questioned WhatsApp's policy to share user's data with its parent company Facebook for marketing and advertisement purposes.

On May 25, 2021, WhatsApp sued the Indian government over a "trackability" clause in the new intermediary Rules 2021 which were notified by the government in February 2021. In WhatsApp's view, the new social media rules are unconstitutional and have filed the case for companies.

<https://www.deccanherald.com/amp/national/no-fundamental-right-absolute-centre-responds-to-whatsapp-990279.html>

## INDIA: FUEL PRICE IN INDIA TOUCHES RECORD HIGH

India has been witnessing a steady rise in the price of petrol and diesel for the last couple of months. However, it has been increased once again on the eve of June 2021. As of June 01, 2021, the price of petrol in Delhi stands at Rs 94.49 per liter while diesel is now selling at Rs 85.38. In Mumbai, the fuel cost is much higher than any other part of the country where petrol costs Rs 100.72 while diesel is retailing at Rs 92.69.

Since May 4, 2021 petrol price has increased by Rs 4.09 per liter and diesel has

climbed by Rs 4.65 in New Delhi. Fuel prices in India are revised on daily basis and differ from state to state depending on the local taxation (VAT) and freight charges.

Source:

<https://www.news18.com/news/business/petrol-price-at-all-time-high-in-india-hiked-16th-time-this-month-3794522.html>

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## MYANMAR: NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT SIGNED AGREEMENT WITH ETHNIC REBEL GROUP TO TOPPLE JUNTA

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On May 29, 2021, the shadow government of Myanmar, the National Unity Government (NUG) signed a formal agreement with ethnic rebel group Chin National Front (CNF) to "demolish the dictatorship and to implement a federal democratic system" and obliged to act as a fellow accomplice. NUG is committed to uniting all the pro-democratic groups to counter the military regime and it has previously declared their military unit named as 'Peoples Defense Force' as a harbinger to the Federal Union Army. Senior advisor on Myanmar to the International Crisis Group, Richard Horsey said, it is a symbolic move as the group has no such military might yet it bears significance because CNF has esteemed political leaders who could play a constructive role in the peace talks.

The 74th World Health Assembly which took place from 24th to 31st May 2021 excluded Myanmar as the authority faced a quandary over whom to recognize as the legitimate representative of Myanmar. Meanwhile, French oil and gas group Total and US energy company Chevron jointly proposed Moattama Gas Transportation Company Limited to impede their pending payments to Myanmar, and the decision had been taken at a shareholders' meeting on 12

May 2021. The decision was highly appreciated by the International community, rights groups & pro-democratic forces of Myanmar.

Source:

<https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/unity-govt-allies-with-chin-national-front-to-demolish-junta/>

<https://guardian.ng/news/myanmar-shadow-government-says-allying-with-rebels-to-demolish-junta/>

<https://theaseanpost.com/article/nug-allying-rebels-demolish-junta>

<https://www.thedailystar.net/world/news/myanmar-excluded-who-annual-meeting-2099713>

<https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/total-chevron-suspend-payments-myanmar-2100253>

## MYANMAR: ASEAN OPPOSED ARMS EMBARGO ON MYANMAR

The United Nations General Assembly was set to consider a draft non-binding resolution for an immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar. The draft resolution entailed "an immediate suspension of the direct and indirect supply, sale, or transfer of all weapons, ammunition and other military-related equipment to Myanmar", prompted the implementation of five-point consensus of ASEAN, demanded military to end the state of emergency and stop violence against peaceful protestors. It finally highlighted respecting the will of the mass and requested the unconditional release of all political prisoners.

ASEAN, on May 19, 2021, sent a letter to Liechtenstein and nations sponsoring the draft U.N. General Assembly resolution on Myanmar. The letter asked to discard the sentence urging an arms embargo to the country. ASEAN states that the current form

of the draft is not conducive to gain support from the countries as it has been directly affecting the region and mentions that ASEAN firmly believes in the UN efforts to resolve the conflicts in Myanmar.

Sources:

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/world/myanmar-coup-un-general-assembly-arms-embargo-resolution-14824404>

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/southeast-asian-nations-oppose-arms-embargo-myanmar-report-2021-05-28/>

## MALDIVES: MALDIVES ECONOMY GRADUALLY IMPROVES

According to records released by the Finance Ministry of Maldives, the country's debt stood at 130% of its GDP by the first quarter of 2021. The total public and public guaranteed external debt raised to 63% and the total public and private guaranteed internal debt raised to 67% of the GDP. The overall debt is slightly reduced from the previous year. In a press conference on May 27, 2021, the Finance Minister, Mr. Ibrahim Ameer stated that despite the positive recovery there might be some risks ahead. However, the early vaccination has helped to revive the tourism industry and more than a million tourists are estimated to visit in the current year. He added that

the country's economy would recover to the pre-pandemic stage by 2022.

The tourism industry of Maldives was hit hard by the pandemic in 2020 resulting in the decrease of the country's real GDP by -32.2%. However, the economy observed a bounce back sooner than expected with the resume of tourism. Earlier in April 2021, IMF predicted Maldives's real GDP to grow by 18.9% in the current year.

Sources:

<https://english.sun.mv/66965>

<https://en.sun.mv/67008>

<https://en.sun.mv/66188>

## NEPAL: CARETAKER GOVT PRESENTS A BUDGET OF RS1.64 TRILLION; OPPOSITION ALLIANCE THREATENS TO OPPOSE IT

A week after dissolving the House of Representatives, the caretaker government of KP Sharma Oli has presented the federal budget for the next fiscal year 2021-22, through an ordinance, during a second wave of the pandemic. Finance Minister Bishnu Prasad Paudel has presented a bloated budget of Rs1.64 trillion, which is 12 percent bigger than that for the ongoing fiscal year, giving a semblance of focus on the pandemic, but the funds earmarked to fight the virus barely scratch the surface. Mr. Paudel said he had set aside funds for vaccine procurement and Covid-19 prevention and control. For Covid-19 control, the government has allocated Rs37.53 billion, less than 3 percent of the total budget.

Meanwhile, the Opposition alliance has warned state bodies not to support the government's unconstitutional actions. As they had staked a claim to form a new government and the issue is pending at the Supreme Court the opposition alliance led by Nepali Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba has warned the government not to take any decision having long-term effects.

In a statement on June 01, 2021, the opposition alliance that includes Nepali Congress, Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre), Madhav Nepal-led faction of CPN-UML, Upendra Yadav-led faction of Janata Samajbadi Party, and Rashtriya Janamorcha has also requested all state bodies not to support the government's undemocratic and unconstitutional activities. The statement comes a day after the government announced the budget of the fiscal year 2021-22 through an ordinance on May 29, 2021, which the opposition claims the caretaker government does not have the right to do.

Sources:

<https://kathmandupost.com/national/2021/05/30/opposition-alliance-warns-state-bodies-not-to-support-government-s-unconstitutional-actions>

<https://kathmandupost.com/national/2021/05/30/a-bloated-budget-of-rs1-64-trillion-through-ordinance>

## PAKISTAN: PAKISTAN INVITES AFGHAN FOREIGN MINISTER FOR OFFICIAL VISIT

The Pakistani government invited Afghan foreign minister, Mohammad Haneef Atmar to visit Islamabad amid cold relations between the two neighboring countries. The foreign ministry said in a statement that the invitation offered in a telephonic conversation by the Pakistani ambassador to Kabul, Mansoor Ahmad Khan to Minister Atmar on May 30, 2021.

The Pakistani ambassador to Kabul in a tweet said that he had constructive exchanges on the Afghan peace process and further "strengthening Pakistan-Afghanistan relations with Atmar. "It was an

honor to reiterate the invitation from (Pakistani Foreign Minister) to Minister Atmar for visiting Islamabad at the earliest convenience," he added.

This comes as there are rumors that Pakistan will likely host a conference on the Afghan peace process. The relations between the countries have recently become severe as the Afghan government accuses Islamabad of supporting the terrorist groups that cause violence in Afghanistan.

Source:

<http://www.afghanistantimes.af/pakistan-invites-afghan-fm-for-official-visit/>

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## About Us

Bangladesh Enterprise Institute is a non-profit, non-political research centre. Established in October 2000, the Institute has established for itself a reputation for excellence in its research and advocacy work focusing on the growth of private enterprise in Bangladesh. The Institute promotes issues of importance to the private sector and seeks to initiate essential measures and influence policy for the development of a market-oriented economy. Through the promotion of sustainable growth in domestic trade, commerce and industry, BEI hopes to address the enormous challenge for Bangladesh in securing a fair share of the global market.

BEI has a particular interest in the support and growth of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs), which have the potential to be the engine of economic growth in Bangladesh. BEI also undertakes research and policy advocacy work focusing on the issues of foreign policy and security, particularly those of terrorism impacting Bangladesh and South Asia.

Being conscious of the enormous challenge to securing a fair share for Bangladesh in the global market as well as to address issues of trade and investment promotion, the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) was established under the initiative of some leading business personalities of the country. Salman F. Rahman, Deputy Chairman of the BEXIMCO Group, has been working as the Chairman of the Board of Governors, and Farooq Sobhan, former Foreign Secretary and Ambassador, and past Executive Chairman of the Board of Investment, has been working as the President and Chief Executive of the institute.

The institute is registered with the Registrar of Joint Stock Companies, Bangladesh, under the Societies Registration Act.

## DISCLAIMER

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](mailto:bei@bol-online.com). For more information about BEI and our work, please visit <https://www.bei-bd.org/> ]

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