

|| WEEKLY NEWS HIGHLIGHTS ||

BANGLADESH ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE (BEI)

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

|| June 03, 2021 – June 10, 2021 ||

SOUTH ASIA: COVID-19 CRISIS: AT A GLANCE

Afghanistan's health ministry registered 1,724 new cases of COVID-19 and 54 deaths, the highest death toll as reported on June 08, 2021. Schools and Universities will remain closed for another two weeks in 16 provinces because of a surge in positive cases.

Bangladesh has been observing a rise in the percentage of both death toll and cases due to COVID-19. As of 10 June 2021, 36 new deaths and 2,537 cases were reported which increased the total number of cases to 8,17,819 and the total death toll to 12,949. The country extends lockdown until June 16 with particular concern for districts along the border with India.

Bhutan reported 15 new cases on 10 June 2021 and no death toll as the country reported only 1 death toll due to COVID-19. In Bhutan, a total of 1,739 cases of the virus has so far been identified.

India reopens major cities and malls as new COVID-19 cases and death toll hit a two-month low. As of 10 June 2021, India reported 2,177 deaths and 93,463 new cases. The country's total number of cases now stands at 2,91,82,532 and the total death toll is 3,55,705.

Maldives' total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases are 69,213 while the death toll is 191. 32.82% of the population is vaccinated. The country is on the US list of priority countries for receiving vaccines.

Myanmar's total confirmed cases are 144,175 and the number of deaths is 3233. The vaccination drive is uncertain due to the political turmoil.

Nepal on June 08, 2021, reported 3,870 new Coronavirus cases taking the nationwide infection tally to 595,364. All the while, the country's health facilities are now overwhelmed with coronavirus patients, a lot of whom died because they could not get the critical care requiring oxygen or a ventilator.

Pakistan reported a Conavirus positivity rate of 2.94% on June 08, 2021. This is the first time the country has reported a positivity rate below 3% since February 14, 2021. The National Command and Operation Centre said 1,383 new COVID-19 cases had been detected on June 08, 2021, and 53 people had lost their lives to the virus. The national death tally is now 21,376.

Sri Lanka commenced vaccination in 12 districts with 1 million doses of Sinopharm vaccines brought on 6th June 2021. The government prioritized the elderly, frontline workers, government employees, factory workers & expectant mothers for the inoculation. The total confirmed cases are 213396 & the total deaths are 1910.

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

Source: John Hopkins University

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BUSINESS AND ECONOMY: BUDGET FOR FY 2020-2021

BUSINESSES GIVEN PRIORITY IN BID OF MORE EMPLOYMENT

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AHM Mustafa Kamal, Bangladesh's Finance Minister stated on June 04, 2021 in a virtual post-budget press conference that the main goal of the budget for FY 2021-22 was to prioritize lives and livelihood. He added that business persons would be given the highest benefits in the proposed national budget for the fiscal year 2021-22 in the hope of creating more jobs. The proposed budget saw corporates tax rates slashed, while local industries have been given protection and business turnover tax rates have also been cut. The new budget proposed a reduction of tax for non-listed companies to 30% from 32.5% and for listed companies to 22.5% from 25% and a decrease of Advance Tax (AT) from 4% to 3% for the import of raw materials for industries. Moreover, the new budget proposed to promote the "Made in Bangladesh" brand to accelerate the establishment of mega industries and production of import-substitute industrial goods in the country through giving tax exemption on products made in Bangladesh for the next ten years. The tax-free income ceiling for women entrepreneurs was also increased to Tk. 7 million from existing Tk. 5 million in the new budget aiming to raise the number of women entrepreneurs and ensure economic and social empowerment of women.

For the health sector, Tk. 32,731 crore has been allocated against Tk. 31,472 crore in the current fiscal year indicating a 3.8% increase. The proposed allocation for FY22 is 0.95% of GDP, as compared to 1.02% in the current fiscal year. In addition to this, the government has set aside Tk. 10,000 crore to meet expenses related to unanticipated emergencies due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The government expanded its social safety net programs in the proposed budget for the low-income people and for those who become poor in the pandemic time by setting aside Tk. 1,07,614 crore for social protection, which is 17.83% of the budget and 3.11% of GDP.

The allocation for the education sector has been increased to Tk. 71,952 crore from the ongoing budgeted amount of Tk. 66,401 crore which is 11.9% of the total budget and 2.09 % of the GDP. UNESCO suggested allocating 4-6% of the GDP for education. The government however imposed a 15% tax on the total income of private educational institutions.

In the proposed budget, the rate of income tax for corporations, government agencies, and NGOs has been set at 30%. The Finance Minister said the ongoing rate for artificial juridical persons is inconsistent with the philosophy of taxation.

Sources:

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/business/economy/2021/06/03/kamal-starts-presenting-bangladesh-budget-for-fy2021-22>

<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/bangladesh/tax-reform-elusive-export-diversification-ignored-job-creation-less-prioritised-1622779402>

AFGHANISTAN: US PULLOUT REACHES HALFWAY STAGE, WASHINGTON MULLS OPTIONS FOR EMBASSY'S SECURITY

The Pentagon announced on June 08, 2021, that the US pullout from Afghanistan is more than 50 percent complete, as it approaches its September 11, 2021 deadline to remove all its troops. The US military is tasked with removing 2,500 troops, 16,000 civilian contractors and hundreds of tons of equipment from the country by September 11, 2021, which marks the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington DC. To date, US Central Command has handed over control of six military installations to the Afghan ministry of defense, with the US military yet to with-

draw from its main Bagram air base, about 50 kilometers north-east of Kabul. The Associated Press reported that as early as this week, the top U.S. commander for the Middle East, Gen. Frank McKenzie, will give Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin a range of military options for securing the U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan and providing counterterrorism support from outside the country once the withdrawal is complete.

Source:

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1628360/us-afghan-pullout-reaches-halfway-stage>

AFGHANISTAN: AFGHAN-TALIBAN PEACE TALKS PROMPT CALLS FOR WORLD SUPPORT

Head of the Afghan government's negotiation team, Masoom Stanekzai, has called for international support to revive peace talks with the Taliban, amid growing uncertainty and the looming withdrawal of U.S. troops. As part of peace efforts, chief and members of the government's negotiating team in a meeting on June 07, 2021 with Muttaqi al-Qahtani, Qatar's Special Representative for Counter-Terrorism, and Debra Lyons, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Afghanistan, raised the issue of global support for Afghanistan's peace talks with the Taliban.

A statement said that Mr. Stanekzai stressed that the Afghan government wanted to make headway in its talk with the

Taliban. In another meeting with Debra Lyons, emphasis was placed on accelerating the ongoing negotiations and garnering the support of the international community. The UN envoy reiterated her commitment to the Afghan government's negotiating team and assured that the United Nations would stand by the Afghan people. The Afghan government delegation has been negotiating a peace agreement with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, since September 2020.

Source:

<http://www.afghanistantimes.af/faltering-peace-talks-prompt-calls-for-world-support/>

AFGHANISTAN: AFGHAN TROOPS SUFFER 'SHOCKINGLY HIGH' CASUALTIES AS VIOLENCE MOUNTS

At least 150 Afghan troops have been killed or injured in the last week in a surge of attacks by Taliban militants as foreign forces withdraw, senior government officials said on June 07, 2021. Fighting is now raging in 26 of the country's 34 provinces, the officials said, speaking on condition of anonymity. Casualties were "shockingly high", one added. The government says clashes over territory have increased as the United States pushes on with an operation to withdraw all its remaining troops by September 11, 2021.

The Taliban seized Shahrak district of western Ghor province on on June 07, 2021 and forced Afghan troops to retreat

to nearby villages after a heavy firefight, local officials said. Political talks between the government and the Taliban have largely stalled as Washington pulls its troops out 20 years after U.S. bombing forced the Taliban from power. Both sides have accused the other of provoking and failing to halt attacks against civilians.

Source:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghan-troops-suffer-shockingly-high-casualties-violence-mounts-2021-06-07/>

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BANGLADESH: FINANCE MINISTER TABLED BUDGET TK. 6,03,681

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Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal on June 03, 2021, presented the budget for the fiscal year 2021-22 in the National Parliament amounting Tk. 6,03,681 crore. The proposed budget is about 17.4% of the GDP and 6.28% higher than the current fiscal year's main budget. The new budget targeted its GDP growth at 7.2% while it set the inflation rate at 5.3%. Government expenditures had been set at Tk. 3,78,357 crore while the allocation for the annual development program (ADP) set at Tk. 2,25,324 crore in the upcoming budget.

Total revenue collection had been fixed at Tk. 3,89,000 crore and the budget deficit will be

to Tk. 2,14,681 crore (6.2% of GDP). Health sectors had been provided 5.4% of the budget FY-2021-22 and it has special provision for Covid-19 response amounting Tk. 10,000 crore. The allocation for the education sector in the upcoming fiscal has gone up at Tk. 71,951 crore. The Tax-free income limit remained unchanged at an annual income of Tk. 3,00,000.

Source:

<https://en.prothomalo.com/business/local/budget-2021-22-at-a-glance>

BANGLADESH: BANGLADESH URGES WORLD TO BE PROACTIVE TO SECURE RIGHTS OF THE ROHINGYAS

The Japanese Ambassador H. E. Mr. Ito Naoki as invited by State Minister Shahriar Alam MP for a meeting at his office on 8th June, 2021. Alongside discussing bilateral issues and future areas of co-operation, the issue of discussion was regarding the repatriation of the persecuted Myanmar nationals. Mr. Alam urged Japan government to use its influence and persuade the Myanmar government to take back their nationals, which was crucial for regional peace and stability. The Japanese envoy echoed his government's commitment in helping to resolve the issue. Prime Minister's Principal Secretary, Dr. Ahmed Kaikus held a meeting with foreign diplomats at the Prime Minister's office on 6th June, 2021. Ambassadors and High Commissioners of USA, the UK, Japan, Australia, France, Canada and Netherlands as well as delegates of international organizations including the EU and

UNHCR joined the discussion. Mr. Kaikus informed the development partners that 80 thousand Rohingya would be shifted to Bhashanchar soon adding that 18,000 of them were already residing at the housing complex built for them. The government urged the diplomats to help support the stay of the Rohingya as well as ensuring their fundamental rights and repatriation.

Sources:

<https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/pandemic-rohingya-crisis-dhaka-tokyo-agree-work-together-2108241>

<https://today.thefinancialexpress.com/bd/public/metro-news/bd-urges-world-to-ensure-human-rights-for-rohingya-refugees-1623001200>

BANGLADESH: COP PRESIDENT ALOK SHARMA VISITED BANGLADESH; DHAKA LONDON HOPEFUL OF SIGNING "CLIMATE ACCORD"

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on 2 June 2021 expected the United Kingdom would work for the interest of climate vulnerable countries in international platforms during a meeting with COP26 president-designate Alok Sharma. The COP26 President also welcomed strong climate commitments from Bangladesh putting emphasis on converting power generation in the "Green Energy" system. They also discussed various issues on climate change situation, its global adverse impacts, mitigation and Climate Change Fund and Covid-19 pandemic.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina mentioned at the meeting with the COP president that Bangladesh could be the worst affected country due to climate change even though the carbon emission of the country is very low.

She also said the government had taken various programs to increase the renewable energy use in mitigating the demand for power as the country currently has around 5.8 million solar power connections and a massive tree plantation programme is underway. In the meantime, Bangladesh and the UK agreed to sign a bilateral "climate accord" before COP26, to be held in Glasgow, as the two countries agreed to work together to avert, minimize, address loss and damage due to the impact of climate change.

Source:

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/06/04/dhaka-london-hopeful-of-signing-climate-accord-before-cop26>

BANGLADESH: BANGLADESH ELECTED AS VICE PRESIDENT OF 76TH SESSION OF UNITED NATION GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Bangladesh has been elected as a vice-president of 76th session of the United Nation General Assembly for a term beginning September 2021. Kuwait, Lao People's Democratic Republic and the Philippines have also been elected as vice-presidents from the Asia Pacific Region.

Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the UN, Ambassador Rabab Fatima said that Bangladesh is a flag bearer of multilateralism has faith in the UN leadership to address the current challenges of the world. She added that the election depicts the

recognition of Bangladesh as it plays a vital in addressing issues such as development, peace, security and human rights.

Sources:

<https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/bangladesh-elected-vice-president-76th-unga-session-2107505>

<https://unb.com.bd/category/Bangladesh/76th-unga-session-bangladesh-elected-vice-president/73060>

BHUTAN: GOVERNMENT EXPECTS STRONG ECONOMIC RECOVERY IN COMING YEAR

The government of Bhutan is optimistic about its economic revival after the completion of the vaccine drive in the country. The government has projected GDP growth of 3.3 percent for the next fiscal year but it hopes for 6% GDP growth provided that the scenario improves both inside of Bhutan as well as in India and Bangladesh after the Covid vaccination drive. In Bhutan, the economy would recover swiftly once export and import activities regains momentum.

Bhutan government also hopes for better GDP growth as the industries and construction sectors along with agricultural sector

has already been starting to thrive. Bhutan's government was also hopeful for an economic recovery as domestic revenue for the ongoing fiscal year would not see much impact since most economic activities except retail continued in Bhutan despite the lockdown. During the lockdown, most industries worked in a containment mode and activities like the export of boulders and oranges continued during the past year.

Source:

<https://kuenselonline.com/govt-expects-strong-economic-recovery-next-fiscal-year/>

INDIA: INDIAN PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI "BIMSTEC EMERGED AS A PROMISING REGIONAL GROUPING"

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi extended his greetings on the occasion of 24th BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) Day on June 6, 2021. He said the BIMSTEC had emerged as a promising regional grouping and it made progress on several fronts including finalization of a master plan for connectivity in the region. He also stressed on joint efforts to fight against the ongoing pandemic. On the occasion of BIMSTEC Day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said he expected that BIMSTEC would continue to grow and play a great role in fostering cooperation among the member nations to make for a prosperous Bay of Bengal region.

On BIMSTEC day, the External Affairs Minister of India Dr. S Jaishankar also recalled the potential of BIMSTEC in South and South East Asia. India has been making a concerted effort to make BIMSTEC a vibrant forum for regional cooperation as initiatives under SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) were not moving forward for a variety of reasons. Besides India, BIMSTEC comprises Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal and Bhutan.

Source:

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bimstec-emerged-as-a-promising-regional-grouping-pm-modi/article34746534.ece>

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INDIA: INDIAN PRIME MINISTER MODI ANNOUNCES FREE COVID-19 VACCINES FOR ALL ADULTS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 7 June 2021 announced the Centre would provide free vaccines to all above 18 years and it would be effective from 21 June as the government had revised its vaccine policy. The central government will now buy 75% of the vaccines and give them free of cost to states. Under the previous policy, the government was supposed to buy 50% of all vaccines, and states and private firms were to share 25% each. Several states on Monday thanked the Centre for "accepting their demand" of centralized procurement of Covid vaccine.

In the meantime, as of 10 June 2021, India has administered at least 23,36,80,929 doses of COVID-19 vaccines—about 8.6% of the country's population. As per the last week data, India averaged about 2,719,975 doses administered each day. At that rate, it will take a further 101 days to administer enough doses for another 10% of the population.

Source:

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/indias-modi-pm-announces-free-covid-19-vaccines-all-adults-2021-06-07/>

MYANMAR: NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT WILL ENSURE ROHINGYA CITIZENSHIP

In a policy statement of Minister for International Cooperation, Dr. Sasa, released on 3rd June, 2021, Myanmar's parallel government, National Unity Government (NUG) has promised to grant the country's Rohingya minorities as citizens, pledged equal rights, ensure safe, voluntary, dignified repatriation of persecuted Myanmar nationals following the agreements signed with the neighboring countries, including Bangladesh and prosecute the military junta for their brutality against the ethnic group.

abolish the processing of the National Verification Card and repeal Myanmar's controversial 1982 Citizen Law, which had 135 ethnic groups listed as 'national races' exempting the Muslims minority in Rakhine state.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken appreciated the move and added that it would be an important indication for all who have been working for an inclusive and democratic future.

Sources:

<https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/rohingya-citizenship-myanmars-nug-draft-new-charter-ensure-it-2105037>

<https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/us-welcomes-pledge-myanmar->

MALDIVES: MALDIVIAN FOREIGN MINISTER ELECTED PRESIDENT OF UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Foreign Minister of Maldives, Abdulla Shahid has been elected as the President of 76th session of United Nation General Assembly on 7th June, 2021. He won with a large margin against the Foreign Minister of Afghanistan Zalmay Rassoul. The Minister received felicitations from home and abroad. He will assume the presidency in September, 2021.

development. His focus will be to help amplify the voice of the youth, and advocate gender equality.

Source:

<https://en.sun.mv/67140>

It is the first time a senior official from the Maldives will serve in such an exalted position in UN. The Minister said that the next session would particularly be focused on environment protection and sustainable

MYANMAR: SIGNIFICANT VISITS IN MYANMAR CONCERNS

ASEAN Secretary General, Lim Jock Hoi and Brunei's second minister for foreign affairs, Erywan Pehin Yusof visited Myanmar and had a meeting with the Junta Chief, Min Aung Hlaing on 4 June, 2021. It is said to discuss issues like humanitarian concerns, holding election once the country was stable & irregularities of the last election which led to the military coup. Meanwhile, the opponent, NUG stated that they do not have faith on the ability of ASEAN to help Myanmar & clout junta to end conflict. The President of International Committee of the

Red Cross (ICRC), Peter Maurer visited Myanmar on 3rd June, 2021. Mr. Murer urged to end existing violence in the country, requested humanitarian access of the Red Cross teams in the conflict areas & allow prison visits. To such proposals the Junta chief didn't refused but was non-committal.

Source:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/myanmar-junta-opponents-say-no-faith-asean-envoys-visit-2021-06-04/>

MALDIVES: PRESIDENT ADDRESS THE NATION ON CLIMATE

President Ibrahim Mohammad Solih addressed the nation on the occasion of Environment Day on 5th June, 2021. Accentuating the preservation & protection of Natural resources, he said that the current generation may be the last with a chance to save the country from the perils of climate change & thus they must take prompt actions to preserve environment & biodiversity.

The country used renewable solar PV hybrid energy to generate 31.5 mw of electricity, joined Global Ocean Alliance to protect at least 30% as Marine Protected Areas by 2030. However the archipelago faces challenges in sustainable waste management & increased usage of single-use plastics.

Source: <https://en.sun.mv/67109>

NEPAL: ALL EYES ON CHIEF JUSTICE CHOLENDRA SHUMSHER

After Cholendra Shumsher Rana constituted the bench on seniority basis, Oli's lawyers demand expulsion of two justices for their position that current House dissolution is linked to March 7, 2021 verdict. Nepal's judiciary is facing a tough time extricating itself from an ongoing crisis it has plunged into after questions raised over justices and their presence in the Constitutional Bench which is hearing petitions on the May 21, 2021 House dissolution.

the basis of their seniority. But those defending Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's House dissolution decision, including Attorney General Ramesh Badal, demanded that at least two justices cannot be on the bench because of the position they have taken that does not appear impartial. Now pressure is building on Chief Justice Rana to resolve the crisis and find an amicable solution as the judiciary's independence is at stake.

Source:

<https://kathmandupost.com/national/2021/06/07/all-eyes-on-chief-justice-rana-as-crisis-deepens-in-the-judiciary>

After senior advocates pleading on behalf of the petitioners asked not to have at least two justices on the bench, Chief Justice Cholendra Shumsher Rana on June 06, 2021 reconstituted it by designating justices on

PAKISTAN: CIA CHIEF TOLD DRONE BASES WON'T BE HOSTED

Government officials have privately confirmed a secret visit to Islamabad of CIA Director William Burns and are suggesting that he was firmly told that Pakistan would not host the spy agency's drone bases on its territory. This comes after New York Times in an article published on June 6, 2021 claimed that Mr Burns had travelled to Pakistan for meetings with Army Chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa and ISI Director General Lt Gen Faiz Hamid to explore the possibility of counterterrorism cooperation between the two sides.

Afghanistan and execute counterterrorism strikes after the completion of its troop withdrawal from there. Although the exact date of the CIA director's hours-long trip has not been disclosed by either side, it is believed to have taken place in late April, 2021. The Pakistan officials said the CIA chief was categorically informed that no US operation would be allowed on Pakistani territory, and instead suggested to have asked the Americans to hand over the drones to them for carrying out the strikes against terrorist targets.

Source:

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1628311/cia-chief-told-drone-bases-wont-be-hosted>

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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 M Humayun Kabir, former Ambassador, 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. For more information about BEI and our work, please visit <https://www.bei-bd.org/>

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