

|| WEEKLY NEWS HIGHLIGHTS ||

BANGLADESH ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE (BEI)

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

|| June 11, 2021 – June 17, 2021 ||

SOUTH ASIA: COVID-19 CRISIS: AT A GLANCE

Afghanistan is facing the third wave of Pandemic. On June 14, 2021 The Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) announced 1,722 new cases of Covid-19 and 94 deaths across the country in the past 24 hours. The total tally since the outbreak of the epidemic reached to 96,531 cases in the country and the death toll exceeded to 3,842.

Bangladesh is continuously observing rise in percentage of both death toll and infection rate due to coronavirus. On 16 June 2021, Bangladesh reported 50 new death toll and 3,319 fresh cases of coronavirus. As of 16 June, total cases in Bangladesh becomes 8,33,291 and total death toll reaches to 13,222. In Bangladesh, border districts nowadays has emerged as the hotspots of coronavirus.

Bhutan reported 16 new cases on 16 June 2021 and no death toll as the country reported only 1 death toll back on Jan 8, 2021 due to Covid- 19. In Bhutan, so far 1,842 cases of coronavirus identified.

India reported 2,542 death and 62,224 new cases due to coronavirus as of 16 June 2021, . Country's total cases becomes 29,633,105 and total death toll reached to 3,79,573. On June 15, India recorded 60,461 cases, the lowest since March 29. The active cases have come down below 10 lakh as the country presently has 8,65,432 active cases.

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 curfew is eased by 4 hours and the mosques are reopened. However, congregation prayers are still barred.

Myanmar's total confirmed cases are 144,175 and the number of deaths is 3233.

Nepal on June 16, 2021 reported 2,014 new coronavirus cases taking the nationwide infection tally to 614,216. Nepal's Health Ministry reports 52 new deaths. The country is ready to procure 04 million Sinopharm vaccines from China.

Pakistan reports 945,184 confirmed positive cases as of June 17, 2021 with a current positivity rate 3.0%. Total death toll became 21874.

Sri Lanka's National Operations Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak (NOPCO) stated that vaccination drive is running on 51 vaccination centers in 10 districts . The total confirmed cases are 213396 & the total deaths are 1910.

Source: John Hopkins University

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BUSINESS AND INVESTMENT: FTA BETWEEN BANGLADESH AND CHINA AFTERMATH OF LDC GRADUATION IS CRUCIAL, EXPERTS SAY; GOVT. TO START NEGOTIATIONS TO SIGN PTA WITH SRI LANKA

The Economic Reporters' Forum (ERF) and the Bangladesh China Chamber of Commerce & Industry (BCCCI) on 9 June 2021 jointly organized a discussion titled 'Bangladesh-China Economic and Trade Relations in the aftermath of the COVID-19 Global Pandemic.' Policymakers, economists, and diplomats from both countries joined the discussion and said that Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China would be crucial for Bangladesh not only to reduce the mammoth trade gap between the two countries but also to absorb the shock that Bangladesh has been experiencing after graduating from LDC. Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi said in his speech that Bangladesh had started talks aiming at signing FTA with China and the negotiations would need to be concluded in due course of time to gain the maximum benefit. He also mentioned that the trade imbalance is highly unfavorable to Bangladesh and signing the FTA would help to reduce it. Bilateral trade between Bangladesh and China last year stood at around US\$12 billion, of which China's export to Bangladesh is over 11.5 billion. The minister urged the businesses to take advantage of China's duty-free market for raising Bangladesh's exports to China. Chinese Ambassador Li Jiming also stressed the need for signing the China-Bangladesh FTA.

On the other hand, Bangladesh will soon start negotiations aiming to sign a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka by this July, in a bid to increase bilateral trade volume between the friendly nations. As part of the move, the commerce ministry has already formed a high-powered 'Trade negotiation committee' to take the next course of action in this regard. The additional secretary (FTA) of the commerce ministry has been named the chief negotiator of the committee. The twelve-member committee will work in coordination with the Sri Lankan side to carry forward the negotiations for PTA between the nations. An official of the commerce ministry also said Bangladesh needs to sign several PTAs and FTAs before graduation from LDCs, to reap benefits of the least-developed country category.

Source:

<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/fta-with-china-crucial-for-absorbing-post-graduation-shock-experts-say-1623238306>

<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/dhaka-to-start-negotiations-with->

BUSINESS AND ECONOMY: FACEBOOK GETS VAT REGISTRATION; BSCIC INAUGURATES "ONE-STOP SERVICE"

Social media giant Facebook on June 13, 2021 received the value-added tax registration from the National Board of Revenue. Three entities of Facebook; Facebook Technologies Ireland Ltd, Facebook Ireland Ltd, and Facebook Payments International Ltd. got the Business Identification Number (BIN) from the Dhaka South VAT Commissioner. Facebook's move comes nearly two weeks after Google and e-commerce company Amazon's secured the BINs. In July 2019, the NBR made it mandatory for tech giants to either set up offices in Bangladesh or appoint agents so that the government can collect VAT on the advertisements and other services provided by them to local firms. Facebook's local sales agent Httpool Bangladesh Ltd has been paying VAT against ad sales since July 2020 in favor of Facebook and as of April 2021, the NBR has received Tk 9.40 crore from Httpool Bangladesh. According to German database company Statista, with 4.1

crore users, Bangladesh has the 10th largest Facebook population in the world.

In the meantime, Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) on 13 June 2021 inaugurated its "one-stop service" to attract domestic and foreign investment. The service would help businesses get trade licenses, land registration, naming, environmental clearance and many other certificates from BSCIC. Through this, BSCIC has entered into a new era with the inauguration of the One Stop Service Centre. Businesses can now apply online and get these services from a single platform

Source:

<https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/facebook-gets-vat-registration-nbr-2110041>

<https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/corporates/bscic-launches-one-stop>

AFGHANISTAN: REPUBLIC, TALIBAN DELEGATIONS REACH BREAKTHROUGH IN AFGHAN TALKS

The negotiating team of the Afghan government and Taliban delegation in Doha reached a breakthrough over preparation and organizing the agendas of the intra-Afghan negotiations.

On January 15, 2021, the two sides' contact teams held a meeting and discussed the coming negotiations organizing and preparations, a member of the Afghan negotiating team, Ghulam Farooq Mujroh confirmed. A spokesman for the Taliban's political office in Qatar, Mohammad Naeem also confirmed the meeting. The meeting between the two sides comes a day after the European Union stressed the resumption of the intra-Afghan negotiations.

The U.S.-led allied forces are ending their military mission after 20 years of presence in Afghanistan while the violence lingers at an unabated high level. Talking to a press conference after the

NATO leaders' summit, the U.S. President Joe Biden said that there is great consensus among the NATO leaders to continue support to the Afghan forces after pullout. On June 08, 2021, the negotiating teams of the Taliban and government met after a longtime delay in the intra-Afghan negotiations.

Source:

<http://www.afghanistantimes.af/republic-taliban-delegations-reach-breakthrough-in-afghan-talks/>

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AFGHANISTAN: TURKEY OFFERS TO GUARD KABUL AIRPORT

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Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan seeks U.S. trust to hand him over guarding and running of Kabul- Hamid Karzai- Airport after the withdrawal of U.S.-led NATO forces from Afghanistan. Turkey would be the "only reliable" country left to stabilize Afghanistan after the US pulls out its troops, he said, indicating Washington could rely on its NATO ally. His remarks come days after the Taliban's announcement that all countries present as part of NATO allied in Afghanistan must exit based on the peace deal signed between the U.S. and insurgent group. Erdogan also said he would discuss the issue in his first face-to-face meeting with US President Joe Biden on the margins of a NATO summit in Brussels on Monday, after strained relations between their two countries.

President Erdogan said on June 30, 2021 that Turkish officials had informed their American counterparts about Ankara's plans in Afghanistan after the US troop pullout, without providing details. Turkey has made clear its intentions to stay in the war-torn country, but the details remain unclear. A Turkish official said Turkish troops could remain as long as certain conditions including legal and financial are met.

Source:

<http://www.afghanistantimes.af/turkeys-erdogan-offers-to-guard-kabul-airport-post-u-s-exit/>

BANGLADESH: BANGLADESH AMONG TOP 3 PERFORMERS IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT; BGMEA GREEN EFFORTS WIN US ACCOLADE

The Sustainable Development Solution Network (SDSN) on 14 June 2021 published the Sustainable Development Report- 2021 that shows Bangladesh along with Afghanistan and Ivory Coast have progressed the most on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) index score since the adoption of the 2030 global agenda in 2015. Bangladesh has been ranked 109th with the overall score of 63.5 in the 2021 SDG index. The report also presented that East and South Asia has progressed more on the SDGs than any other region, both since 2010 and since the inception of goals in 2015. In the meantime, The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) has been awarded the prestigious 'USGBC Leadership Award' by the United

States Green Building Council (USGBC) for its strides in making the local apparel industry eco-friendly. Bangladesh has the highest number of green garment factories in the world. Currently, there are 143 Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified apparel manufacturers in the country. Of them, 41 are platinum-rated, 89 gold-rated, and the rest are silver and only LEED-certified. Another 500 garment factories are set to be certified by the USGBC.

Source:

<https://www.thedailystar.net/business/economy/news/bgmea-green-efforts-win-us-accolade-2109833>

BANGLADESH: FOREIGN MINISTER URGES UN TO TAKE IMMEDIATE STEPS TO RESOLVE ROHINGYA CRISIS

Foreign minister Dr. AK Abdul Momen urged the United Nations to take immediate steps to resolve the Rohingya crisis and to take initiatives for returning Rohingya people to their birthplace, Myanmar. Foreign Minister made the remarks while presenting the keynote speech in an event titled "The current situation in Myanmar: implications for Rohingya Minority" cosponsored by the permanent missions of Canada, Saudi Arabia and Turkey and the Global Centre for Responsibility to Protect. The Foreign Minister also remembered the efforts of the international community, including the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council as they keep the issue of Rohingya alive. He expressed the hope that the council will take urgent measures to resolve the crisis in My-

anmar so that the Rohingya people can return to their homes with safety, security and dignity. He also urged the regional countries and other stakeholders in playing their due role. The president of the General Assembly, Volkan Bozkir joined the event and shared experience from his recent visit to Cox's Bazar. Foreign Minister is currently on a week-long visit to USA to attend two UN events-one on Myanmar crisis and the other on Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and he is expected to return on June 22.

Sources:

<https://thepolicytimes.com/bangladesh-foreign-minister-dr-momen-urged-the-un-to-take-immediate-actions-to-resolve-the-rohingya-crisis/>

BHUTAN: BHUTAN KING PATROLS EASTERN BORDER AREAS TO KEEP CHECK ON COVID-19 SPREAD; GOVT. REQUESTS 17 COUNTRIES FOR SECOND DOSE OF COVID-19 VACCINE

Amid the spread of coronavirus pandemic, Bhutan King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck accompanied by Prime Minister Lotay Tshering patrolled the eastern border areas for five days to check illegal crossings that could increase the chances of infection of COVID-19. In a tweet, the President of the Media Association of Bhutan, Tenzing Lamsang, shared pictures of the king who is taking his 14th or 15th trip to the borders during the pandemic. Sharing few pictures of the king, Lamsang also added that Wangchuck has rarely been home since the pandemic began, and is busy patrolling and ensuring the safety of his country. In the meantime, The government of Bhutan has requested 17 countries to provide 550,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine to administer the second dose to all its eligible population.

Besides India, the government has sent urgent requests to the USA, Japan, Denmark, Russian Federation, France, Switzerland, Kuwait, Canada, Australia, Thailand, Germany, South Korea, Israel, Norway, Austria, and Finland. Foreign minister Dr. Tandi Dorji said India, the USA, Denmark, and Japan are considering Bhutan's request positively but no confirmation on the arrival date of the vaccine has yet been made. Bhutan is hopeful to get the vaccines once it begins administering the second jab. The USA donated 7-million doses of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccine to Asian countries which excluded Bhutan.

Source:

<https://indianexpress.com/article/world/bhutan-king-patrols-the-eastern-border-to-keep-check-on-covid-19-7360047/>

INDIA: INDIAN PRIME MINISTER AT G7 SUMMIT: INDIA A NATURAL G7 ALLY

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the G7 Summit on 13 June 2021 said India is a natural ally for the G7 and its partners to defend democracy and freedom of thought from challenges arising due to authoritarianism, terrorism, disinformation and economic coercion. The Summit was held in the British seaside resort of Cornwall and Prime Minister Narendra Modi virtually joined as a guest speaker in two of its sessions.

He highlighted India's commitment to democracy, freedom of thought and liberty. Prime Minister Narendra Modi also urged at the Summit to adopt a united approach to the coronavirus pandemic and future health emergencies with the mantra of 'One

earth, one health' demanding support for India's proposal for a waiver of patent protections for Covid-19 vaccines. He pointed the special responsibility of democratic and transparent societies to prevent future pandemics and called for global unity, leadership and solidarity. In a separate meeting at the United Nations high-level dialogue on Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought on 14 June 2021,

Source:

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

INDIA: DELTA PLUS VARIANT IDENTIFIED; USA CDC CLASSIFIES DELTA VARIANT AS 'VARIANT OF CONCERN'

The highly transmissible Delta variant of SARS-CoV-2 has mutated further to form the Delta plus' or AY.1'. The new Delta plus variant has been formed due to a mutation in the Delta or B.1.617.2 variant, first identified in India and one of the drivers of the deadly second wave. Although there is no indication yet of the severity of the disease due to the new variant, Delta plus is resistant to the monoclonal antibody cocktail treatment for COVID-19 recently authorized in India. The USA Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has classified the Delta variant as a 'variant of concern.' The CDC said the Delta variant showed increased transmissibility, potential reduc-

tion in neutralization by some monoclonal antibody treatments under emergency authorization and potential reduction in neutralization from sera after vaccination in lab tests. The variant of concern designation is given to strains of the virus that scientists believe are more transmissible or can cause more severe disease.

Source:

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/health-fitness/health-news/coronavirus-new-variant-new-delta-plus-variant-in-india-all-you-need-to-know-about-the-new-strain/photostory/83539398.cms?picid=83539410>

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MYANMAR: #Black4Rohingya CAMPAIGN PICKED UP STEAM

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Chiliad of pro-democratic netizens are expressing their solidarity with the persecuted Rohingyas through a social media campaign. Activists & civilians posting their pictures wearing black, flashing three finger salute of resilience with a hashtag 'Black4Rohingya'. By the evening of 13th June, 2021, the hashtag was trending in the social networking sites with more than three million mentions. Marking the occasion, Local Medias of the country demonstrated a protest at the capital protesting against the oppression on Rohingyas.

Black4Rohingya is an online awareness initiative which initially started at 5th June, 2013 later shifted to 13th June from 2014. The campaign was launched by the Free Rohingya Coalition, a South Africa based rights group to commemorate the June,

2012 massacres in Arakan state. Nay San Lwin, co-founder of the Free Rohingya Coalition acknowledged that since the coup they received public apologies & huge support from fellow Burmese people. He was overwhelmed by the support, positive gestures & popularity of the event within the country.

Sources:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/14/myanmars-pro-rohingya-social-media-campaign-shows-mass-support>

<https://freerohingyacoalition.org/en/black4rohingya-on-13-june-2018/>

NEPAL: PRIME MINISTER SAYS GOVERNMENT FORMATION IS A POLITICAL PROCESS AND IT CANNOT BE DECIDED BY THE COURT

Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli on June 11, 2021 furnished a response to the Supreme Court, as demanded by the Constitutional Bench on June 9, 2021 with regards to his decision to dissolve the House of Representatives on May 21, 2021. In his 18-point response, Prime Minister Oli has said that government formation is a political process and that it cannot be decided by the Supreme Court. Prime Minister Oli has argued that Article 76 of the constitution vests the authority with the President to appoint the prime minister. Prime Minister Oli has also claimed that Article 76 (5) doesn't allow the Parliament or the court to test whether someone holds a majority.

Prime Minister Oli has said the claims by the writ petitioners are against the basic spirit of the constitution and democracy. As many as 146 lawmakers of the dissolved House of Representatives on May 24, 2021 filed a petition against Prime Minister Oli's May 21, 2021 decision to dissolve the House and demanded that Nepali Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba be appointed a prime minister. On May 21, Deuba had submitted signatures of as many as 149 lawmakers before President Bidya Devi Bhandari, requesting her to appoint him the new prime minister as per Article 75 (6). As many as 29 members of the Madhav Nepal faction of the

CPN-UML had provided their signatures in support of Deuba. But Oli too laid claim to the government, saying he had support of 153 lawmakers.

Prime Minister Oli has also claimed that since two parties, the UML and Janata Samajbadi, had extended support to him, he expected to be appointed the prime minister as per Article 76 (5). In an attempt to justify his House dissolution, Prime Minister Oli has said that there was no possibility of forming an alternative government after the President rejected claims by both him and Deuba. The same situation still continues, he said. After listening to opening remarks from lawyers from the plaintiffs, the Constitutional Bench on June 10, 2021 had directed the defendants, including Oli, to present in writing the reasons for dissolving the House. The final hearing will begin on June 23, 2021.

Source:

<https://kathmandupost.com/national/2021/06/17/oli-says-government-formation-a-political-process-and-it-cannot-be-decided-by-the-court>

PAKISTAN: ELECTORAL REFORM BILL PASSED BY THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

The electoral reforms bill passed by the National Assembly, including voting rights for overseas Pakistanis as well as use of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs). The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has expressed severe concerns over some clauses and has assessed that many proposed amendments may violate constitutional requirements.

The Chief Election Commissioner Sikandar Sultan Raja presided over a meeting of the commission on June 15, 2021 and reviewed the amendments on which the commission has serious reservations. The commission said it had already submitted its response to the relevant parliamentary committee but regretfully it was not included in the bill.

The ECP has recorded these concerns and comments with its rationale in a detailed document that compares the original clauses of the Election Act 2017 with the amendments proposed by the government in the Elections (Amendment) Act 2020 that has been passed by the National Assembly and will require to be passed by the Senate before it becomes law. A press release issued by the ECP on June 15, 2021 listed some of the concerns that the commission discussed in the meeting. The ECP also fears the proposed amendments will dilute its constitutional powers and shift them to NADRA which is part of the federal government and not an independent body like the ECP.

Source:

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1629570>

BEI ACTIVITIES: BEI RELEASES A PUBLICATION TO COMMEMORATE 20 YEARS

Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) has published a commemorative volume on the occasion of completion of its 20 years of service. The volume briefly catalogues its activities during the last two decades since the inception. The publication is available at the following link:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1CQmdBemlu879xLUawf9QwkZjdvr73nWd/view?usp=sharing>



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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, Ambassador Farooq Sobhan, former Foreign Secretary and Ambassador, and past Executive Chairman of the Board of Investment, has been working as a Distinguished Fellow and Member of the Board of Governors of the institute 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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