

|| WEEKLY NEWS HIGHLIGHTS ||

BANGLADESH ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE (BEI)

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

|| July 16, 2021 – July 23, 2021 ||

SOUTH ASIA: COVID-19 CRISIS: AT A GLANCE

Afghanistan, till July 23, 2021 has recorded 1,43,439 cases and 6,357 deaths in total since the beginning of the pandemic. Total 90,973 people have recovered as of July 23, 2021.

Bangladesh, on July 22, 2021 has reported 187 new deaths and 3,697 fresh cases of infection due to Covid-19. Country's infection rate has become 32.19% across the country. Total death toll of the country has stood at 18,685, while the case load stood at over 1.14 million. As of July 22, 2021, according to Reuters, 3.1 per cent people of the country got vaccinated. Bangladesh has re-imposed its coronavirus shutdown for two more weeks from 23 July 2021 after a weeklong recess that allowed Muslims to celebrate the Eid ul-Adha festival.

Bhutan has recorded one new case on July 22, 2021. Bhutan's total case load has become 2,456 and two fatalities have so far been observed till July 22, 2021. As per Reuters' data, 31.9 per cent Bhutanese has been vaccinated till July 22, 2021.

India, on July 22, 2021 has recorded 41,383 new cases and 507 more deaths due to Covid-19 pandemic. Country's total caseload has become 3,12,57,720 and total death toll has reached to 4,18,987. According to Reuters, 15.3 per cent Indian has been vaccinated till July 22, 2021. India's fourth national sero-survey has revealed that Covid-19 antibodies have been detected in 67 per cent of the population of the country.

Maldives has reported 76,454 active cases and the death toll has risen to 218, 49.02 percent of the population has been vaccinated as of July 23, 2021. The country has suspended lockdowns and eased travel restrictions since last week. However, the Health Protection Agency (HPA) has reported a slight surge with newly confirmed cases.

Myanmar's official sources have reported 253,364 active cases and the number of 6,133 deaths have been recorded till July 23, 2021. The country is going through the third wave of the pandemic. Recently, the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has designated Myanmar a level 4 COVID-19 nation.

Nepal on July 23, 2021 has reported 1,982 new coronavirus cases taking the nationwide infection tally to 676,708. Total 995 people have been tested positive in a total of 3,610 antigen tests, according to the Health Ministry till date. According to the report till July 23, 2021, around 72 percent of the 30 million population remains to be vaccinated.

Pakistan, till July 23, 2021 has recorded 10,00,034 cases and 22,939 deaths in total since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. The country's current positivity rate is 5.6% as reported on July 23, 2021.

Sri Lanka has recorded 291,298 active cases and 3959 deaths till July 23, 2021. According to the Health Ministry, the Delta variant has been detected in fourteen areas of the country and the total number of cases of the delta variant to 68. The vaccination drive has continued as the country vaccinated 7.90 percent of its population till July 23, 2021.

Source: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> (John Hopkins University)

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TRADE AND INVESTMENT: BANGLADESH'S EXPORTS TO SAARC COUNTRIES SHOW IMPRESSIVE GROWTH

The export of Bangladeshi products to South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries has increased by 88 per cent over the last five year period. This rate is higher than other countries in the world. The main reason behind Bangladesh's upward export growth to SAARC nations is duty-free access to India which triggered the country's largest export income from the SAARC countries over the last few years. In addition, some product diversification of country's export basket and local incentive provisions have helped boost the export earnings of Bangladesh to its neighbors.

Export Promotion Bureau data show that Bangladesh has exported US\$1.49 billion to SAARC countries in 2020-2021 which is 88.03 per cent more than that of \$797.69 million in FY 2016 whereas at the same period of time, country's overall export growth to across the globe has been increased by 13.14 per cent. Moreover, the shipment of Bangladeshi products to Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka has maintained a steep rise over the last five years.

Source: <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/bangladesh/bangladeshs-exports-to-saarc-countries-post-impressive-growth-1626489289>

AFGHANISTAN: AFGHAN-TALIBAN END TALKS IN DOHA WITH NO BREAKTHROUGH; "NO PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN UNTIL A NEW NEGOTIATED GOVERNMENT IN KABUL AND PRESIDENT ASHRAF GHANI IS REMOVED" - SUHAIL SHAHEEN, TALIBAN SPOKESMAN

The two-day peace talk in Doha held on July 18, 2021 to July 19, 2021 between the Taliban and the Afghan government failed to break the stalemate as fighting in Afghanistan raged on. 15 diplomatic missions and the NATO representative in Kabul have urged the Taliban to halt offensives, just hours after the group and the Afghan government failed to agree on a ceasefire at their talks in Doha. The recent talks marked the most senior-level interaction including representatives from the European Union, the US and UN. Suhail Shaheen, Taliban spokesman lays out the group's stance on what should come next in the country in an interview with The Associated Press news agency. Mr. Shaheen has said the Taliban will lay down their weapons when a negotiated government acceptable to all sides in the conflict is installed in Kabul and Ghani's government is gone. This week, the top US military officer, General Mark Milley, told a Pentagon news conference that the Taliban had "strategic momentum" and he did not rule out a complete Taliban takeover. But he said it is not inevitable. In the meantime, Abdullah Abdullah, Afghanistan's key peace and reconciliation leader has met External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in the nation-

al capital on July 23, 2021 as the Afghan government forces prepare a massive retaliation plan against the Taliban. According to sources in the Afghan government, the Ashraf Ghani dispensation is leaving no stone unturned to ensure that some of its key regional partners, including India, rallies behind Kabul as it goes for a "full-fledged retaliation" against the Taliban with the support of the US, notwithstanding the withdrawal of American troops by August 31, 2021. Meanwhile, Imomali Ibrohimzoda, deputy head of Tajikistan's emergencies committee, has told a briefing on July 23, 2021 that Tajikistan is ready to take in up to 100,000 refugees from neighboring country Afghanistan.

Sources: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/18/afghan-govt-taliban-agree-to-meet-again-expedite-talks?fbclid=IwAR2a2fbnEWi9oUyHax_mIRkAFqrwLXUpMWLahLcsAcjCdIB80PGfcWdz0
<https://apnews.com/article/government-andpoliticstali-ban88251a1eac731bce259165968bdf0155>

AFGHANISTAN: U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE TO VISIT INDIA AND KUWAIT FOR TALKS FOCUSING AFGHANISTAN AND INDO PACIFIC

Antony Blinken, US Secretary of State will travel to India and Kuwait on July 26, 2021 to July 29, 2021 for talks on China, the coronavirus and Afghanistan, the State Department said on July 23, 2021. The State Department said Blinken will meet with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi on July 28, 2021 before traveling to Kuwait City the next day. Kuwait, along with Qatar, is one of several countries being eyed as possible hosts for thousands of Afghans who had worked for the United States and want to be relocated to the US before the complete withdrawal of

American troops from Afghanistan by the end of August, 2021.

Sources:

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/eam-s-jaishankar-meets-top-afghan-peace-negotiator-abdullah-abdullah/articleshow/84675631.cms>

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/afghanistan-indo-pacific-in-focus-for-us-secretary-of-state-blinken-s-visit-to-india-101627056549801.html>

BANGLADESH: RUSSIA AGREES TO CO-PRODUCE ITS VACCINE IN BANGLADESH, FOREIGN MINISTER SAYS

Foreign Minister Dr AK Abdul Momen on July 19, 2021 has said that, along with exporting, Russia agreed to go into co-production of its Sputnik V Covid-19 vaccine in Bangladesh. The Foreign Minister discussed the vaccine issue with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on July 16, 2021 on the sidelines of the international conference on 'Central & South Asia: Regional Connectivity, Challenges and Opportunity' held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The Foreign Minister has also said although Russia would not transfer vaccine making technology, the deal is in final stage as Russia agreed on co-production in bottling and finishing of the vaccine. In the meantime, the Foreign Minister Dr. Abdul Momen urged Uzbekistan President to open Uzbekistan's Embassy in Bangladesh and usher Dhaka-Tashkent bilateral and interregional

relations to a new height. Uzbekistan replied that they would start necessary steps to open Uzbekistan Embassy in Dhaka. The Foreign Minister also discussed with Indian External Affairs Minister on Covid-19 situation of both countries. Giving no timeframe, Indian External Affairs Minister said that they would send the postponed vaccine to Bangladesh when the situation in India would be normal. In a separate meeting, Dr Abdul Momen also discussed with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on vaccine supply and co-production.

Source:

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/health/coronavirus/2021/07/19/momen-russia-agrees-to-co-produce-its-vaccine-in-bangladesh>

BANGLADESH: UNHRC ADOPTS BANGLADESH-PROPOSED RESOLUTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has adopted a climate change and human rights resolution proposed by Bangladesh along with Vietnam and the Philippines. Bangladesh has been raising the proposal in the UN Human Rights Council since 2008. The resolution is focused on vulnerable groups, especially the disabled and the elderly people, due to the adverse effects of global warming and calls for keeping global warming below 1.5 degrees

Celsius, implementing the Paris Agreement, providing effective assistance to high-risk countries, strengthening international cooperation, and giving more importance on tackling climate change.

Source: <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/environment/bangladeshs-proposal-climate-change-and-human-rights-accepted-un-275389?amp>

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BHUTAN: BHUTAN, WITH A LEADING VACCINATION RATE IN THE REGION, STARTS ITS SECOND VACCINATION DRIVE

Bhutan has commenced its second nationwide vaccination program on July 20, 2021 for individuals above 18 years old, which is scheduled to end on July 26. Prime Minister Dr Lotay Tshering, along with more than 200 people of different age group, have taken the second jab as part of the country's massive vaccination program. By July 20, 2021, Bhutan has now the highest vaccination rate in South Asian and Southeast Asian countries. The Government agencies and authorities have been working round the clock to educate the

public about the importance of vaccination, answer queries, and instill confidence.

Source: <https://www.dailybhutan.com/article/bhutan-with-a-leading-vaccination-rate-in-the-region-commenced-its-second-vaccination-drive>

INDIA: ECONOMIC INFLATION STAYS HIGH OVER CENTRAL BANK'S ACCEPTANCE LEVEL

India's benchmark inflation measure, the Consumer Price Index (CPI), grew at 6.26% in June 2021 for the second consecutive month while Reserve Bank of India (RBI) set 6% tolerance level of CPI. Wholesale Price Index (WPI) grew at 12.07% in June, the third month of double-digit wholesale inflation in a row. The prices of fuel are at a record high at present. Any sharp inflation in the country squeezes purchasing power and demand of consumers. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Act 1934 allows monetary policy committee

of the central bank to keep inflation under 6 per cent level. In the last fiscal year, average inflation rate was 6.22 per cent and for the current fiscal year, it has been projected at 5.1 per cent.

Source: <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/inflation-stays-elevated-when-will-the-rbi-act-1008142.html>

INDIA: INDIAN PARLIAMENT OPENS AMID PEGASUS SPYWARE ALLEGATION; INDIAN GOVERNMENT DENIES ANY INVOLVEMENT

A new session of India's parliament has begun on July 19, 2021 amid allegations against government of using spyware from an Israeli firm to hack phones of politicians, journalists and businessmen. The list of targeted persons has been leaked to major international news outlets. In response, Indian government has denied any unauthorized activities. Opposition lawmakers has disrupted Parliament proceedings and demanded urgent debates over the allegation. The Pegasus spyware allegation has come out on July 18, 2021 by the Washington Post, the Guardian and 14 other international media house including India's The Wire.

Pegasus is a spyware owned by Israel based NSO Group. It enables the remote surveillance of smartphones, secretly unlocks the contents of a target's mobile phone and

transforms it into a listening device. The NSO Group has denied any wrongdoing as it said the software had been intended for tracking criminals and terrorists and only sold to military, law enforcement and intelligence agencies from countries with good human rights records.

Source: <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pegasus-spyware-issue-to-rock-monsoon-session-parliament-1829790-2021-07-19>

MALDIVES: PRESIDENT IBRAHIM SOLIH VISITS SRI LANKA; INDIA'S MARITIME WARFARE CENTRE CONDUCTS VIRTUAL MEETING WITH TOP DEFENCE OFFICIALS OF MALDIVES, SRI LANKA AND INDIA

Maldives President Ibrahim Solih has met his counterpart, President of Sri Lanka Gotabaya Rajapaksa during his unofficial three day visit to Sri Lanka from July 20, 2021 to July 23, 2021. The leaders discussed the challenges their countries had been facing due to the pandemic and emphasized that mass vaccination was required for speedy and sustainable recovery of the economies. Both the leaders had echoed their commitments toward strengthening bilateral cooperation further. Meanwhile, top defense officials of Maldives, India and Sri Lanka have participated in a two day trilateral tabletop exercise, TTX-2021 with an aim to enhance mutual understanding, cooperation in maritime search and rescue and

exchange of best practices to counter common trans-national maritime crimes. The virtual meeting had been coordinated by the Maritime Warfare Centre, Mumbai, India from July 14 to 15, 2021. The simulation exercise had been held as a sequel to the fourth National Security Adviser (NSA)-level trilateral meeting in Colombo last year. The Indian Ocean neighbors have significantly increased their interaction and synergies in the recent years.

Source: <https://en.sun.mv/67959>
<https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-sri-lanka-and-maldives-hold-virtual-trilateral-exercise-on-maritime-security/696891/>

MYANMAR: NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT FORMS COVID-19 TASK FORCE (CTF) AMID FRAGILE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM OF MYANMAR

Myanmar's parallel government, National Unity Government (NUG), has founded an eleven member COVID-19 Taskforce composed of ethnic health agencies on July 21, 2021. The Taskforce would be led jointly by Dr. Cynthia Maung, chair of the National Unity Government (NUG)'s Ethnic Health Committee and Union Minister of Health Dr. Zaw Wai Soe, former head of Myanmar's COVID-19 task force. The primary objective of this unit is to arrest the spread of COVID-19, impart treatment and solicit international cooperation to fight the pandemic. The task force is planning to implement the vaccine program and Covid recovery policies by including third parties like United Nation agencies, International non-governmental organizations, foreign governments and the neighboring countries.

Myanmar is grappling with the terrible third wave of the pandemic. 90 percent of the townships are affected with Alpha, Delta and Kappa variants identified. The official number of deaths is 6,133 which is a very humble number compared to the unprecedented influx of cremations observed in the cemeteries. The testing and contact tracing has been interrupted due to civil disobedience movement after the coup, vaccination drives are also facing

challenges, shortage of oxygen, medical facilities, lack of health professionals, caregivers and growing political turmoil crippled the whole health care system. Meanwhile, the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Health and Sports, Dr. Aye Tun, has received the shipment of seven hundred thirty thousand vaccine jabs out of the two million Chinese donations that arrived in Myanmar on July 22, 2021. Myanmar has purchased four million Covid-19 vaccines from China which is scheduled to arrive in the successive week. Junta head, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has stated at a local media that during his last month's visit to Russia he sought seven million Russian vaccines of which two million will arrive in the current month. The military regime is inclining to buy more Chinese and Russian Covid vaccines as the infection surges.

Sources: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-parallel-govt-forms-covid-task-force-with-ethnic-health-agencies.html>

<https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/myanmar-shadow-government-forms-covid-19-task-force/>

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NEPAL: UML SEEKS CLARIFICATION FROM 22 LAWMAKERS WHO VOTED FOR PRIME MINISTER DEUBA DURING CONFIDENCE VOTE

The CPN-UML conflict has escalated after as many as 22 of its lawmakers on July 18, 2021 voted for Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba during his vote of confidence. On July 19, 2021, a Central Committee meeting of UML decided to seek clarification from all 22 lawmakers who defied the party whip. Bishnu Rijal, a Central Committee member of the UML, has confirmed to seek clarification from 22 Members of Parliament. "Besides, the meeting also endorsed the 10-point proposal drafted by the 10-member task force for party unity," Rijal told the Post. On July 12, 2021 a day ahead of the Supreme Court verdict on House dissolu-

tion, the task force, which had five members each from the KP Sharma Oli and Madhav Nepal factions, had drafted a 10-point proposal in a bid to keep the party unity intact. Mr. Nepal, however, refused to own up the document later. Prime Minister Deuba on July 18, 2021 won House confidence with 165 lawmakers voting for him, and of them 22 were from the UML-14 from the Madhav Nepal faction and eight from party chair KP Sharma Oli group.

Source: <https://kathmandupost.com/politics/2021/07/20/after-deuba-s-trust-vote-uml-seems-to-be-unravelling>

PAKISTAN: PAKISTAN VOICES 'SERIOUS CONCERN' OVER REPORTS ABOUT PEGASUS SPYWARE; PAKISTAN FOREIGN MINISTER, ISI HEAD VISITS TO CHINA

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan voiced "serious concern" over media reports about eavesdropping on foreigners, including Prime Minister Imran Khan, using Israeli spyware Pegasus and urged the UN to thoroughly investigate the matter. According to reports, Imran Khan was a potential target of the Israeli-made Pegasus spyware programme by clients of the NSO Group cyber espionage firm. The Foreign Office (FO) of Pakistan also called on the relevant UN bodies to thoroughly investigate the matter. Top Pakistani officials including foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi and ISI chief Faiz Hameed have reached China on July 23, 2021. The high-level visit from Pakistan came in the backdrop of the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. In Islamabad,

Pakistan foreign office said that during Foreign Minister Qureshi's visit both sides will discuss further deepening of bilateral relations, focus on cooperation as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, defense and security cooperation, Covid-19 vaccines, counter-terrorism, and regional and international issues of mutual interest.

Sources: [https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/20/pegasus-snooping-pakistan-imran-khan-phone-hacked?](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/20/pegasus-snooping-pakistan-imran-khan-phone-hacked?fbclid=IwAR2ys6a7PAVm6_yRnBEC78z60ky5CNXawRkWQa8QykgTOi9X1PqcYnghIVg)
http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-08/20/c_139305393.htm

SRILANKA: SRI LANKA AT ASIA'S HIGHEST RISK OF DEBT DEFAULT

According to the Bloomberg model rating, Sri Lanka's five-year credit default swaps rose to 1,553 basis points and debt default probability is estimated to be 27.9 percent, which is the highest in Asia. The probability has been increased by 13 percent within a span of six months. The total outstanding external debt of the Government reports 35.1 billion US dollars as of April, 2021, whereas the foreign exchange reserve is approximately 4 billion US dollars. However, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's administration is striving to control the critical situation by undertaking measures to tighten the capital outflow of foreign currency from the country. The outward remittance from personal or commercial Sri Lankan assets and funds are capped up to twenty thousand US dollars, overseas investments

by Sri Lankan residents have been suspended for six months from July 2, 2021 and import restrictions on foreign luxury goods further extended. The central bank has tightened control on dollar sales, imposed quotas on importers of essential commodities and eased monetary policy to stabilize the economy. Currently, Sri Lanka has been garnering monetary support from its neighbors i.e. the country has signed currency swap agreements of 1.5 billion US dollars with China, 400 million US dollars with India and 250 million dollars with Bangladesh.

Source: http://www.erd.gov.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=102&Itemid=308&lang=en

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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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