

|| WEEKLY NEWS HIGHLIGHTS ||

BANGLADESH ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE (BEI)

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

|| August 20, 2021 – August 26, 2021 ||

SOUTH ASIA: COVID-19 CRISIS: AT A GLANCE

Afghanistan has reported a total of 163,000 cases and a death toll of 7,096 due to coronavirus as of August 26, 2021, since the beginning of the pandemic.

Bangladesh on August 25, 2021, has recorded 114 death tolls and 4,966 new cases of coronavirus. In Bangladesh, the total number of cases becomes 1,477,930 and the total death toll has reached 25,627 till August 25, 2021. Bangladesh has administered a total of 24,251,390 doses of the Covid-19 vaccine which covered the country's total 4.10% population. A press release issued by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare said another consignment of 10 lakh doses of the Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine will arrive in Dhaka on August 30, 2021.

Bhutan on August 25, 2021, has reported six new cases and no death toll as the country reported a total of three death tolls due to Covid-19. In Bhutan, a total of 2,591 cases of coronavirus have been identified till August 25, 2021. 62.19% Bhutanese got vaccinated as of August 25, 2021.

India has reported 607 death and 46,164 fresh cases due to coronavirus as of August 25, 2021. The country's total cases become 32,512,366 and the total death toll reached 435,758. 9.65% of Indians have been vaccinated till August 25, 2021.

The Maldives has reported a slight rise in the infection rate, the number of active cases is 80,328 and the death toll rises to 225 till August 26, 2021. 56.51% of the population is vaccinated. Travel restrictions are lifted. Nevertheless, Health Ministry urges people to follow health guidelines strictly. Concerns raised as COVID-19 vaccination card issued in the Maldives not accepted in United Arab Emirates (UAE) as it does not specify that it was issued by Maldivian health authorities.

Myanmar's official sources have stated the 380,879 number confirmed cases and 14,737 deaths as of August 26, 2021. Coronavirus infections spread in the Internally Displaced camps and Thai camps of Myanmar Refugees. The Thai authorities have started inculcating refugees in the camps. However, the Myanmar government is following systematic discrimination against the Rohingya IDPs in the camps.

Nepal on August 26, 2021, has reported 2,052 new coronavirus cases taking the nationwide infection tally to 754,915. The countrywide death toll has reached 10,638 and the number of active cases stands at 38,384.

Pakistan has reported 141 new deaths due to coronavirus on August 25, 2021, the highest number of fatalities recorded in more than three months. The health authorities also detected 4,199 new cases of Coronavirus taking the total number of confirmed cases to 1,135,858 as of August 25, 2021.

Sri Lanka reports 407,768 confirmed cases and 7,948 deaths as of August 26, 2021. The daily cases have exceeded 4000. The government urged obey people to stay at home and travel restrictions are extended further. The government is preparing for mass inculcation. To date, 27.29% of the population is vaccinated.

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

Source: *John Hopkins University*

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BUSINESS AND INVESTMENT: BANGLADESH, AUSTRALIA SET TO SIGN TIFA AGREEMENT IN SEPTEMBER; THAILAND KEEN TO SIGN FTA WITH BANGLADESH

Bangladesh and Australia have agreed to sign Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) in mid-September to increase bilateral trade between the two countries. The deal aims to boost trade and investment through bilateral cooperation in mutually agreed arenas and sectors like garments and textiles, manufacturing, information and communications technology, skills development, and education will be focus areas in the agreement. Both sides have finished preliminary groundwork and Bangladesh's Commerce Minister Mr. Tipu Munshi and Australian Trade Minister Mr. Dan Tehan would sign the deal in the coming September. By signing the deal, Bangladesh is expecting more Australian investment in the country. In the last fiscal year, Australia invested US\$845 million in Bangladesh mainly in the gas and petroleum sectors. In FY 2019-2020, Bangladesh exported goods worth \$678 million to Australia and imported worth \$649 million from Australia. Thailand has also shown an interest to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Bangladesh to increase bilateral trade. Thai trade counselor in Dhaka Mr. Khemath Archawathamrong expressed interest in FTA with Bangladesh to a Bangladeshi national daily. He said a high tariff on Thai products had been creating an impediment to exporting Thai products despite the huge demand in Bangladesh. Thai trade counselor in Dhaka also said that Thailand had raised the FTA issue in high-level meetings with Bangladeshi officials in the past and urged Bangladesh to reduce the high tariff on Thai products.

Sources: <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/bangladesh/bangladesh-australia-going-to-strike-tifa-deal-1629430904>
<https://www.dhakatribune.com/business/economy/2021/08/22/bangkok-keen-to-sign-fta-with-dhaka>

BANGLADESH, JAPAN TO SIGN MOU SOON ON FEASIBILITY STUDY IN CAR PRODUCTION; SOUTH SUDAN WANTS BROADER TIES WITH BANGLADESH, SEEKS MORE INVESTMENT

Bangladesh and Japan would sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to conduct a feasibility study to set up factories for Mitsubishi car production in Bangladesh. On 18 August 2021, Industries Minister Mr. Nurul Majid Mahmud, while meeting with the Japanese ambassador to Bangladesh H.E. ITO Naoki at the Industries ministry said the MoU is at the final stage. Ambassador H.E. ITO Naoki expressed his satisfaction with the feasibility study and said an investment-friendly climate now exists in Bangladesh. Thanking the Japanese government for extending cooperation towards the development of Bangladesh, the minister requested Japan to invest more in Bangladesh in sugar, agro-food processing, and ship-rebuilding sectors to accelerate industrialization in the implementation of Vision-2041. Meanwhile, South Sudan President Mr. Salva Kiir Mayardit has invited more investment from Bangladesh while meeting with Foreign Minister Dr. AK Abdul Momen in Juba, South Sudan on August 22, 2021. The President appreciated the contribution of Bangladeshi peacekeepers in the infrastructural and social developmental activities of South Sudan since its independence. Recognizing the development of Bangladesh, he also urged Bangladesh to invest more in the country to take advantage of its open foreign policy. He also showed his interest in establishing a diplomatic relationship with Bangladesh.

Sources: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/business/2021/08/19/bangladesh-to-sign-mou-with-japan-for-a-feasibility-study-on-mitsubishi-factory>
<https://www.newagebd.net/article/146851/bangladesh-south-sudan-seek-greater-trade-ties>

AFGHANISTAN: WORLD BANK AND IMF DEEPLY CONCERNED, PAUSED AID TO AFGHANISTAN; KABUL AIRPORT PROBLEMS BLOCKED MEDICAL SUPPLIES FOR AFGHANS- 'WHO' SAID; EU WARNED TALIBAN IT HAD NOT RECOGNIZED THEIR REGIME

The World Bank has suspended aid to Afghanistan, saying it is "deeply concerned" by the situation there, especially regarding women's rights, after the Taliban seized power. "We have paused disbursements in our operations in Afghanistan and we are closely monitoring and assessing the situation," the official said. "We are deeply concerned about the situation in Afghanistan and the impact on the country's development prospects, especially for women." The suspension follows the Taliban's swift takeover of Afghanistan, as US forces prepare to complete a withdrawal with a deadline of August 31, 2021. Washington announced it would deny the Taliban access to the country's gold and cash reserves, most of which is held overseas. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) also suspended operations with the country, including an existing \$370 million loan program, as well as \$340million Kabul was due to receive from Special Drawing Rights (SDR), the lender's basket of currencies.

More than 500 tons of medical supplies including surgical equipment and severe malnutrition kits due to be delivered to Afghanistan are stuck because of Kabul airport restrictions, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on August 31, 2021. Aid agencies say medical and food supplies must reach some 300,000 people displaced in Afghanistan over the past two months that culminated in the capture of Kabul on August 15, 2021. Nearly 18.5 million people, half the population rely on aid, and the humanitarian needs are expected to grow due to drought.

AFGHANISTAN: TALIBAN ASKED WEST NOT TO ENCOURAGE AFGHAN EXPERTS TO FLEE; CIA DIRECTOR MET TALIBAN LEADER IN AFGHANISTAN; U.S.A ON PACE TO COMPLETE AFGHAN PULLOUT BY AUGUST 31, BIDEN TOLD G7

The Taliban urged skilled Afghans not to flee the country, as the new rulers of Afghanistan asked the United States and NATO allies they would not accept an extension to the agreed August 31, 2021 evacuation deadline. The developments followed by the two US officials held a meeting between CIA Director William Burns and Taliban leader Abdul Ghani Baradar in Kabul on August 23, 2021, to discuss the chaos in Afghanistan. However, the Biden administration has been evacuating U.S. citizens and other allies amid chaos at Kabul airport ahead of an August 31, 2021 deadline to pull out of Afghanistan.

The European Union's top officials warned the Taliban on August 21, 2021, that the current conversations being held to secure the exit of as many Afghan evacuees as possible do not mean the bloc is prepared to recognize the new regime. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen acknowledged the necessity of continuing to engage with the Taliban during her visit, along with EU Council President Charles Michel, to a reception center for evacuees established by Spain near Madrid. "We do have operational contacts with the Taliban in this moment of crisis because we need to discuss in these difficult times how we can facilitate it for people in Kabul to come to the airport," the EU leader said. "But this is completely distinct and separated from political talks. There are no political talks with the Taliban and there is no recognition of the Taliban." She also said the continuance of European humanitarian aid to Afghanistan will hinge on the Taliban respecting human rights, especially for women and girls.

Sources:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-58325545>

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/who-says-cannot-fly-medical-supplies-into-afghanistan-2021-08-23/>

<https://apnews.com/article/europe-migration-taliban-9179687a275c66dee37ad80353410572>

President Joe Biden told G7 leaders, on August 24, 2021, in an emergency meeting that the success of U.S. pullout from Afghanistan by August 31, 2021 largely depends on cooperation from the Taliban, the White House said. The nearly 6,000 U.S. troops are helping to evacuate American citizens and at-risk Afghans and to protect the airport so other countries can evacuate their citizens as well.

Sources: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/24/g7-to-meet-on-afghanistan-withdrawal-deadline-live-news>

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BANGLADESH: BANGLADESH URGES UN STEPS FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN; “BANGLADESH WANTS PEACE AND SECURITY IN AFGHANISTAN”- BANGLADESH’S PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE TO OIC

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Bangladesh has urged United Nations to take steps for sustainable peace in Afghanistan through multi-party inclusive political dialogue. Bangladesh Permanent Representative to the United Nations Office at Geneva Md Mustafizur Rahman on August 24, 2021, said at the 31st Special Session of the UN Human Rights Council on the ongoing human rights situation in Afghanistan that An Afghan-led and Afghan-owned inclusive political dialogue is essential for peaceful Afghanistan. He mentioned that an unstable Afghanistan would be a regional and global threat and had reiterated Bangladesh’s commitment to contribute to the reconstruction and socio-economic development of this country, as the country wants to see Afghanistan as a peaceful, stable, prosperous, responsible country.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh’s Ambassador to Saudi Arabia and Permanent Representative to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation

(OIC), Javed Patwary while speaking in an emergency meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) on August 22, 2021, has urged peace, security, and quick evacuation of foreigners in Afghanistan. He also said Bangladesh wants sustainable peace and stability in Afghanistan. He added that being situated between South and Central Asia, Afghanistan should utilize its natural resources and geostrategic position properly to act as a bridge between South and Central Asia.

Sources:

<https://unb.com.bd/category/Bangladesh/dhaka-calls-for-lasting-peace-as-oic-stands-by-commitment-to-afghanistan/77640>

<https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/bangladesh-calls-meaningful-dialogue-ensure-lasting-peace-afghanistan-292831#.YsXqItuUoiE.whatsapp>

BANGLADESH: BANGLADESH ARMY CHIEF OF STAFF VISITS TURKEY TO ENHANCE DEFENSE TIES

The Chief of Army Staff General SM Shafiuddin Ahmed has met Turkey’s President of Defense Industries Mr. Ismail Demer and Deputy Minister of National Defense Mr. Muhsin Dere on August 19, 2021. According to the press release of Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the Army chief had stated long-standing strategic friendships and cultural ties between the armed forces of Bangladesh and Turkey and hoped for closer ties and new opportunities for the military forces of the two friendly countries in future during this meeting. The army chief thanked both the President of the Turkish Defense Industries and the Deputy Minister of National Defense for inviting him. Turkey’s President of Defense Industries assured the army chief that Turkey’s Defense

Industries would provide necessary assistance in the field of military equipment and training of military personnel and technology exchange to Bangladesh Army so that future defense cooperation between the two countries would be friendlier and mutually beneficial.

Source:

<https://www.newagebd.net/article/146956/army-chief-says-turkey-visit-to-boost-armed-forces-cooperation>

BHUTAN: CHILDREN IN BHUTAN AT 'RISK' OF CLIMATE IMPACTS, SAYS UNICEF

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), on August 20, 2021, has released a report titled "The Climate Crisis Is a Child Rights Crisis: Introducing the Children's Climate Risk Index." The report shows children in Bhutan are at risk of climate change which threatens their health, education, and protection. The report is the first of its kind which assessed the impact of climate on children worldwide. The report ranked countries based on children's exposure to climate and environmental shocks as well as their vulnerability to those shocks. Compared to its neighboring countries, young people in Bhutan are at lower risk of climate-induced risk but the country's dependence on climate-sensitive sectors like hydropower and agriculture sectors make children vulnerable to climate-induced risk. In Bhutan, many people

depend on farming and forestry sectors and are more prone to hazards like landslides, mudslides, and flash floods. The report pointed out that such climate and environmental hazards had negatively affected the access of the children to key essential services, which reduces their resiliency and adaptive capacity.

In South Asia, children of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan are among those most at risk to the impacts of climate change which threaten their health, education, and protection while Nepal and Sri Lanka are among the top 65 countries in the ranking.

Source: <https://kuenselonline.com/children-in-bhutan-at-risk-of-climate-impacts-says-unicef/>

INDIA: INDIA, RUSSIA TO ASSESS TALIBAN ACTIONS BEFORE ANY RECOGNITION MOVE

India and Russia have agreed to mutual consultation before deciding to recognize the new Emirates of Afghanistan and have also decided to set up a combined committee to assess the Afghanistan situation to take future action jointly. The decisions had been taken during a telephone call between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Narendra Modi on August 24, 2021, ahead of the G7 summit. Earlier, the Russian President discussed the Afghanistan situation with leaders of Central Asian Republics, the French President, and the Italian President on the impact of the rise of an Islamist terrorist force in Kabul. During the conversation between the two leaders, Prime Minister Modi expressed his

concern about Islamic radicalization and Pakistan-based Taliban-affiliated terrorist groups. President Putin agreed with Prime Minister Modi's concern over radicalization in Central Asia. In addition, both leaders expressed satisfaction on 'Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership' despite the Covid pandemic. They also discussed on BRICS Summit, the meeting of the Council of SCO Heads of State, and India's participation in the Eastern Economic Forum.

Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/narendra-modi-vladimir-putin-afghanistan-crisis-taliban-siege-101629796646493.html>

INDIA: AFGHANISTAN SITUATION REMAINS 'CRITICAL', EVACUATION OF INDIANS TOP PRIORITY: EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MINISTER AT ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY MEETING

At an all-party parliamentary meeting, held at Parliament House, External Affairs Minister Mr. S Jaishankar on August 26, 2021, said, the situation in Afghanistan remained critical. India's top priority was only to evacuate people as many as possible since the Taliban takeover. He also said India evacuated a total of 565 personnel including diplomats, Indian citizens, Afghan citizens, and foreign nationals so far. The External Affairs Minister said that the Taliban had broken the promises made in the February 2020 Doha agreement with the US which envisaged religious freedom and

democracy. He added that it is an evolving situation in Afghanistan and as soon it normalizes, the government will brief India's stand regarding Afghanistan to the leaders in parliament. Following the all-party parliamentary meeting, External Affairs Minister tweeted that he had briefed the floor leaders regarding the Afghanistan situation and 37 leaders from 31 different political parties attended the meeting.

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/jaishankar-briefs-political-leaders-on-afghanistan-situation/>

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MALDIVES: PETITION IS BEING SIGNED TO CHANGE PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM TO PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM

The ruling political party, Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) has been spearheading the signing of a petition from August 21, 2021, calling for a constitutional referendum to change the governance system from the existing Presidential form of government to the Parliamentary system.

The spokesperson of the President's Office, Mr. Mabrook Azeez affirmed that President Solih welcomes the public opinion and will side with the referendum. However, he

added that the Maldives was switched to presidential governance from the parliamentary system through a plebiscite on August 18, 2007.

Sources: <https://en.sun.mv/68604>

<https://raajje.mv/105393>

<https://en.sun.mv/68617>

<https://en.sun.mv/68618>

MALDIVES: MALDIVIAN GOVERNMENT REDUCED SPENDING ON DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS BY 50%

The government's allocation on development projects declined by fifty percent in the current year compared to 2020. According to the Finance Ministry, the government spent MVR 1.6 billion on Public Sector Investment Program (PSIP) projects by August 12, 2021, from the allocated MVR 8.4 billion, while government expenditure was MVR 2.8 billion in the previous year. Finance Minister, Ibrahim Ameer has stated that the government is engaged in multiple efforts to improve the Maldivian economy. The Finance Ministry circulated the Medium Fiscal report for 2022 on August 25, 2021. The anticipated income of the state is MVR 23.7 billion albeit the expenditure is as-

sumed to be MVR 33.8 billion. However, the ministry predicts to receive MVR 2.896 billion aids for projects till 2023.

Source:

<https://www.sun.com.mv/68596>

<https://timesofaddu.com/2021/08/25/state-expenditure-to-exceed-income-in-2022/>

MYANMAR : MYANMAR GOVERNMENT SEIZES RADIOS TO SILENCE SHADOW GOVERNMENT BROADCASTS; SINGAPORE FM EXPRESSED DEEP DISAPPOINTMENT ON ASEAN EFFECTIVENESS ON MYANMAR

The shadow government of Myanmar, the National Unity Government (NUG) launched a radio station named 'Radio NUG' and scheduled to air their programs twice daily for thirty minutes. The transmission is devised to mobilize national and international support and acquaint people with the activities of local self-defense forces. To elude the military enforced internet blackouts the National Unity Government urged people to buy radios and keep themselves informed.

Soon after, the State Administration council started confiscating radios from shops and planning to restrict imports as well. A Yangon police source admitted that authorities at the security meeting assigned to police, ward, and village force to seize short wave radios from shops and is planning to stall the purchase of radios for a certain period. Earlier in April, the military regime confiscated PSI satellite dishes and restricted

internet access.

Myanmar's military raided Sanchaung, Kamayut, and Yankin townships during the night and looted oxygen concentrators, hospital beds, expensive furniture, televisions, guitars, etc. from shops and offices arresting fifteen youths.

Foreign Minister of Singapore, Vivian Balakrishnan expressed his dismay upon the effectiveness of ASEAN to resolve the conflict in Myanmar. He added that the regional bloc was anticipated to settle the crisis through diplomacy soon. However, he recognizes the difficult situation of Myanmar and is concerned about the cooperation of the regime to give the ASEAN envoy access to every stakeholder.

Source: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-confiscates-radios-to-silence-shadow-government-broadcasts.html>

NEPAL: THE COUNTRY'S LARGEST PARTY CPN-UML SPLITS. MADHAV NEPAL NOW LEADS THE CPN (UNIFIED SOCIALIST)

Nepal registered a new party CPN (Unified Socialist) with the support of 29 lawmakers and 55 Central Committee members. KP Sharma Oli continues to chair the CPN-UML, the short form for the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist. The "unified" communist party may have been cleaved into two, but both continue to have "unified" in their names. There's no clarity yet about the ideology of Nepal's newly-registered party, which has broken away from the one that has supported "People's Multiparty Democracy" as its guiding principle since 1993. The CPN-UML, however, has faced criticism for fail-

ing to fully adhere to People's Multiparty Democracy, a principle propounded by the late communist leader, Madan Bhandari. "This split has nothing to do with any ideology or principle," said CP Mainali, the long-time communist leader who currently leads the CPN-ML.

Source:

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/nepals-largest-communist-party-cpn-uml-officially-splits/article35993499.ece>

PAKISTAN: PAKISTAN STEPPED UP DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS FOR INCLUSIVE AFGHAN SETUP; PEACEFUL AFGHANISTAN VITAL FOR PAKISTAN AND REGIONAL STABILITY, PRIME MINISTER IMRAN KHAN TELLS RUSSIAN PRESIDENT

Pakistan has been working with immediate neighbors of Afghanistan as well as other key stakeholders, as Islamabad steps up its diplomatic efforts for "an inclusive and broad-based government" despite the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban. The move came as Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi was on a visit to Tajikistan capital Dushanbe on August 25, 2021, in the first leg of his four-nation tour. Mr. Qureshi met with his Tajik counterpart Sirojiddin Muhridin. The Foreign Minister also visited the Presidential Palace and met with the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon. Officials said Pakistan had been working to develop consensus on the way forward for Afghanistan. In this regard, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi had undertaken a crucial trip to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran. Tajik President Emomali Rahmon had expressed his vision of the future government of Afghanistan under the Taliban's control, saying that Dushanbe would want to see all ethnic groups in the country represented in the next cabinet. Welcoming FM Qureshi, President Raisi recalled excellent bilateral ties between the two countries. Iran's President Ayatollah Ebrahim Raisi appreciated the foreign minister Qureshi's visit on August 26, 2021, for strengthening the regional approach in the wake of the situation in Afghanistan and expressed hope that Afghanistan would achieve peace and stability. Prime Minister Imran Khan has stressed

that a peaceful, secure, and stable Afghanistan would be vitally important for Pakistan and regional stability. Besides ensuring safety, security, and protection of rights of Afghans, an inclusive political settlement was the best way forward in resolving the crisis, he was quoted by the PM's Office as saying during a telephonic conversation with Russia's President Vladimir Putin on August 25, 2021. The two leaders exchanged views on the evolving situation in Afghanistan and bilateral relations. Prime Minister Imran underscored that the international community must stay positively engaged in support of the people of Afghanistan, to help address humanitarian needs and ensure economic sustenance. He also stressed the importance of coordinated approaches in addressing the evolving situation and noted that Pakistan attached high importance to the role of the Troika Plus format.

Sources:

<https://gulfnnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/pakistan-and-central-asia-agree-on-coordinated-approach-on-afghanistan-1.81825289>

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