

|| WEEKLY NEWS HIGHLIGHTS ||

BANGLADESH ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE (BEI)

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

|| 10 December 2021 – 16 December 2021 ||

SOUTH ASIA: COVID-19 CRISIS: AT A GLANCE

Afghanistan recorded a total of 156,000 cases of coronavirus since the beginning of the pandemic. As of 18 December the total number of death cases reported was 7,234.

Bangladesh reported 3 new deaths and 295 coronavirus cases on 16 December, and has thus far recorded a total of 28,034 fatalities and 1,580,005 confirmed cases. Bangladesh has administered a total 131,370,116 Covid-19 vaccine doses, totaling 26.99% of the population.

Bhutan reported no new cases or deaths as of 16 December. A total of 2,649 cases have been registered until 16 December, while 73.99% of Bhutan's population has been vaccinated.

India reported 247 deaths and 6,984 new coronavirus cases on 16 December bringing the total number of cases to 34,710,628 while the total number of deaths now stands at 476,135. Until 16 December, 38.45% of Indian population has been vaccinated.

Maldives reported 93,733 active cases and 259 deaths until 17 December. 68.88% of the population has been vaccinated.

Myanmar reported a total of 527,931 confirmed cases and 19,208 deaths as of 17 December.

Nepal on 18 December reported 363 new coronavirus cases taking the nationwide infection tally to 818,035. The countrywide death toll reached to 11,438 since the beginning of the pandemic.

Pakistan recorded a total of 515 new cases of coronavirus on 18 December. Total 11 fatalities were also recorded according to the reports on 18 December.

Sri Lanka reported 578,439 confirmed cases and 14,720 deaths as of 17 December. 63.30% of the population has been vaccinated.

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

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ADB RAISES 2022 FORECAST FOR BANGLADESH; BANGLADESH BANK TO LEND \$200M TO MALDIVES; BANGLADESH BANK FEEDS \$2.0B TO EASE FOREX-MARKET CRUNCH; BANGLADESH-NEPAL BILATERAL PTA AT FINAL STAGE

ADB has said in its latest estimates presented in a regular supplement of the Asian Development Outlook (ADO) 2021 that in Bangladesh, exports and imports grew more than projected in the ADB's 2021 update thanks to a surge in global demand for clothing. Faster import growth widened the trade deficit, but growth will be supported by private investment with imports of capital machinery and raw materials for garments. It added that the expected implementation of fiscal and monetary stimulus adds to pressure from higher fuel prices. However, South Asia is forecast to expand less than projected in the update for 2021.

On another note, after Sri Lanka, the Bangladesh Bank is now going to lend \$200 million to another country, the Maldives. Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih sought the loan in March this year when he visited Bangladesh to join the birth centenary celebrations of the 'Father of the Nation' Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Bangladesh's Golden Jubilee of Independence. The foreign ministry discussed the proposal with top managers of the Bangladesh Bank. Though no official proposal has been made yet by the Maldives, the central bank is positive about the lending. The Bangladesh Bank has the capacity to lend the amount, said Governor Fazle Kabir.

In the past four months, the Bangladesh bank has \$2.0 billion as the US dollar enjoys a great demand amid an economic rebound. As part of the money-market-managing move, the Bangladesh Bank sold US\$30 million directly to three commercial banks on Thursday, adding up to the four-month tally. A total of \$143 million has been sold to different commercial banks during the first nine days of the current month, according to the Bank's data, so that the rising price of the dollar could not rise steeply in its exchange with the local currency. A total of \$2.17 billion has been sold from the country's foreign-exchange reserves since August 18 of the current fiscal year (FY), 2021-22, to the commercial banks as part of the central bank's ongoing support.

In other news, a preferential trade agreement (PTA) between Bangladesh and Nepal is in the final stages, said commerce secretary Tapan Kanti Ghosh while speaking as the chief guest at the business networking meeting between the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI) and the visiting business delegation from Confederation of Nepalese Industries (CNI). DCCI President Rizwan Rahman chaired the meeting. Meanwhile, a memorandum of cooperation (MoC) between DCCI and CNI was also signed during the meeting. Mr. Rahman and President of CNI Vishnu Kumar Agarwal signed the document on behalf of their respective organizations. Ghosh expressed the hope that soon the PTA will be signed after getting final nod from the Nepalese side.

<https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/adb-raises-2022-forecast-bangladesh-343459>

<https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/banking/bangladesh-bank-lend-200m-maldives-343762>

<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/bangladesh/bangladesh-bank-feeds-20b-to-ease-forex-market-crunch-1639103928>

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/business/2021/12/15/bangladesh-nepal-bilateral-pta-at-final-stage>

AFGHANISTAN: "SANCTIONS AGAINST AFGHANISTAN WOULD NOT HAVE ANY BENEFIT"- ACTING FOREIGN MINISTER AMIR KHAN MUTTAQI; UK TO ALLOCATE USD 99.5 MILLION HUMANITARIAN AID TO AFGHANISTAN; EU SAID ENGAGEMENT WITH ISLAMIC EMIRATE

The Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi said that Afghanistan wants good relations with the US and other countries, adding that US sanctions against the Islamic Emirate is a mistake. Pointing to the grave humanitarian and economic situation in the country, Muttaqi said instability in Afghanistan is not in the benefit of anyone and that Afghanistan was trying to build a country that will be in conflict with no one and will stand on its own feet. Mr. Muttaqi also said that Afghanistan wants the United States to have good relations with Afghanistan, end the differences and make the distance shorter between Kabul and Washington. Meanwhile, US Secretary Anthony Blinken in a telephone conversation with Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammad bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani discussed the latest development in Afghanistan, the State Department said.

UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss planned to allocate another batch of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, in the amount of 75 million pounds, the British Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office informed. The foreign office specified that out of the total aid package, 34 million pounds will go to the UN World Food Programme (WFP). The declaration came in the Group of Seven (G7) Foreign Ministers on 11 December 2021 in Liverpool, where they discussed global conflicts and regional crises, including Afghanistan.

The EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell said the EU will continue engaging with the Islamic Emirate without granting them legitimacy. Speaking at a press conference, Mr. Borrell said the conditions for engagement consist of the five benchmarks that EU had highlighted in September, and Afghanistan should make progress on those benchmarks.

Mr. Borrell said he had spoken with Qatar Foreign Minister Mohammad bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani about the situation in Afghanistan. Qatar played a key role in the EU's engagement with the Islamic Emirate, he said. Mr. Borrell also said the EU will expand its cooperation with its partners in Central Asia, adding that Afghanistan is also important in that matter.

<https://www.afghanistantimes.af/uk-may-allocate-99-5m-aid-to-afghanistan/>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/13/sanctions-benefit-no-one-afghan-foreign-minister>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/9/eu-member-states-agree-to-take-in-40000-afghan-asylum-seekers>

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BANGLADESH:

GLOBAL DECISIONS MUST BE RESPONSIVE TO ASPIRATIONS OF ALL NATIONS: DHAKA; WILL DISCUSS WITH THE US TO CHANGE THEIR POSITION: FOREIGN MINISTER; US SANCTIONS ON RAB OFFICIALS WILL

Foreign Minister Dr AK Abdul Momen has reaffirmed Bangladesh's strong commitment to democracy, equality and inclusion at the 14th Bali Democracy Forum. While speaking at a session on "Democracy and Humanity: Addressing inequality" as one of the panelists on 9 December, 2021, Momen highlighted the people-centric inclusive development policies of the government of Bangladesh. He underlined that with a strong leadership at the helm, the country has come a long way in its journey as a democratic nation through poverty alleviation, food security, health and education for all, women empowerment. He added that in its response to the pandemic, the government has remained true to its democratic values and placed vulnerable section of our society at the center of our recovery plan. Acknowledging the important role of civil society, press and media, Momen said during the peak of the pandemic, they continued to remain frontline fighters and helped raise public awareness and ensured efficiency and accountability in service delivery.

The Foreign Minister on 14 December, 2021, said the government's efforts and discussions with the United States will continue so that the country changes its decision on sanctions imposed on some of the present and former officials of Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). He said while responding to a question at a virtual media event stating that the decision of the US was not correct. He added that Bangladesh would discuss the issue with the USA and expects they will change their position. Terming the Dhaka-Washington relations

"very sweet" with continuous discussion on many issues, the foreign minister said they believe that there will be no impact on the relations between the two countries. He described the US decision as "regrettable" and mentioned that by and large RAB is free from corruption and people have confidence in them.

On the same issue, Awami League general secretary and road transport and bridges minister Obaidul Quader said on 12 December, 2021 that the US sanctions on the 6 and current RAB officials have been politically motivated and the decision will inspire terrorism and militancy. Quader said that RAB as an elite force has been professional in the discharge of its duties. He recalled the controversial US role during Bangladesh liberation war in 1971 and after the assassination of Bangabandhu in 1975. Yet Bangladesh did not allow these issues to stand on way of establishing friendly relations with Washington. He added that the US move has hurt Bangladesh when it is celebrating 50 years of its independence.

<https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/global-decisions-must-be-responsive-to-aspirations-of-all-nations-dhaka>

<https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/government/will-discuss-with-the-us-to-change-their-position-foreign-minister>

<https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/us-sanctions-on-rab-officials-will-encourage-militancy-quader>

INDIAN PRESIDENT WRAPS UP THREE-DAY BANGLADESH VISIT; PM HASINA FOR EASY TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER TO FACE 4TH INDUSTRIAL REV CHALLENGE

Indian President Ram Nath Kovind has visited Bangladesh to attend the country's 50 years celebration of its independence. President Kovind wrapped up his three-day state visit to Bangladesh on Friday that saw a slew of announcements. Foreign Minister Dr AK Abdul Momen saw him off at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport. The visit was of "historical significance", given the 50th anniversary of the shared sacrifices of the people of the two countries during Bangladesh's struggle for liberation in 1971. This was the Indian president's maiden visit to Bangladesh and also his first visit overseas since the outbreak of Covid-19. Dr Subhas Sarkar, minister of state for education, and Rajdeep Roy, member of parliament (Lok Sabha) was part of the presidential delegation. In March this year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, too, paid a landmark state visit to Bangladesh. The key announcements made during the president's visit included gifting of the Bangabandhu-Bapu Digital Exhibition to the Liberation War Museum in Dhaka; announcement of the first occupant of Bangabandhu Chair at Delhi University; and extension of the Nutan India-Bangladesh Maitree Muktiyoddha Sontan Scholarship Scheme for five years.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on 11 December, 2021, called for ensuring easy transfer of available technologies to developing nations so that they can face the toughest challenges of the 4th industrial revolution (4IR) in keeping pace with the developed countries. Joining virtually at the closing ceremony of a conference on the 4IR from her official Ganabhaban residence in Dhaka, she said her government has been taking various time-befitting policies and measures to face the upcoming challenges of the 4IR. The

University Grants Commission (UGC) arranged the two-day international conference on the 4th Industrial Revolution at the Bangabandhu International Conference Centre in Dhaka from 10 December, marking the birth centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Golden Jubilee of country's independence. The prime minister said that the world is divided into two to create affordable and green value-chains as rich nations invent technologies and enjoy their utility, and some other countries are unable to invest in them.

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/2021/12/17/indian-president-wraps-up-three-day-bangladesh-visit>

<https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/pm-hasina-for-easy-technology-transfer-to-face-4th-industrial-rev-challenge>

INDIA:
**MEA JAISHANKAR ANDUK PM JOHNSON ADDRESS
GLOBALTECHSUMMIT: AS 2021 WINDSDOWN,
GEOPOLITICSANDTECHNOLOGYHAVENEVERBEEN MORE**

In remarks made on 16 December at the Global Tech Summit, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said technology is creating challenges for democracies around the world and countries will have to find the balance between using technology for progress and tackling vulnerabilities and threats created by it. He also described technology as a double-edged sword as democracies are facing some unique challenges due to technology. He added that India must have robust reliable national capacities even as it works to forge partnerships with others in the realm of technology. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson during his speech at the summit described the UK and India as natural partners with their shared culture of innovation and entrepreneurial spirit since both countries are collaborating on several issues ranging from the implementation and rollout of revolutionary 5G technology to other technological innovations that promote openness, transparency and peace in a world growing increasingly digitized.

The timing of the latest summit is significant as it not only arrives months after the UK and India framed the 2030 Roadmap to boost strategic ties but in the face of increasing geopolitical uncertainty borne out of technological progress.

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/global-technology-summit-jaishankar-uk-pm-talk-about-challenges-and-threats-101639497565420-amp.html>

MALDIVES:
**PRESIDENT SOLIH ADDRESSED THE NATION ON THE OCCASION
OF INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DAY**

President Ibrahim Solih took the podium at the official ceremony held to mark Human Rights Day and the eighteenth anniversary of the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives (HRCM). The president reiterated his administration's commitment and efforts to protect and promote human rights and added that the government remains acknowledge the current "learned and rights-conscious" younger generation's ambitions to improve protection of human rights and works accordingly. The country has a zero-tolerance policy on issues related to violence,

harassments and discriminations; he added that his administration is tirelessly working to protect the rights of children, women and elderly. He applauded the HRCM members and employees for their efforts to promote, protect and uphold human rights across the Maldives and urged HRCM to pay greater attention to all aspects of human rights.

<https://raajje.mv/110862>

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MALDIVES INAUGURATED THE LARGEST WASTE MANAGEMENT PROJECT OF THE COUNTRY

President Mohammad Solih launched the Greater Malé Waste to Energy Project on 15th December, 2021. The three hundred and four million US dollar worth's project is the largest waste management initiatives of the country that extends from the Greater Malé Region to the Ari and Vaavu atolls.

The archipelago of the north-central Indian Ocean accords high priority to the protection and preservation of the environments, one of the efforts to reduce hazardous waste being the phasing out of single-use plastics in June

2021 as well as prohibiting the import, manufacturing and marketing of some items declared as single-use plastics.

The project will be carried out with the assistance from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and Japan Fund for the Joint Crediting Mechanism, Technical Assistance Special Fund, and the Islamic Development Bank (IDB).

<https://raajje.mv/110944>

MYANMAR: ROHINGYA SUED FACEBOOK; META TO BAN ALL MYANMAR-ARMY CONTROLLED BUSINESSES FROM PLATFORMS

Rohingya refugees in the United Kingdom and United States have accused Facebook of allowing hate speech against them to spread. The minority Burmese nationals alleged the social media giant for amplifying hate speech against the Rohingya people, moderators and fact checkers failed to invest on the contents, knowing the political situation in Myanmar, company failed to take timely and appropriate measures i.e. the company failed to remove posts or delete accounts that incited violence against Rohingyas. The persecuted minority demanded more than one hundred and fifty billion US dollars in compensation.

Meta, formerly known as Facebook announced on 8th December 2021, that it would ban all entities linked to Myanmar

military and its controlled businesses from having a presence on its platforms. Rafael Frankel, Meta's Pacific director of public policy for emerging countries, did not comment on the lawsuit however he stated that they were appalled by the crimes committed against the Rohingya people in Myanmar and mentioned about few measures Meta would undertake i.e. it will built a dedicated team of Burmese speaker to check on harmful misinformation, hate speech to help people keep safe and will take actions on manipulating public debates.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59558090><https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/meta-ban-all-myanmar-army-controlled-businesses-platforms-2021-12-08/>

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF TREASURY SANCTIONED MYANMAR JUNTA OF SERIOUS HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE; UNITED STATES ASKED COMBODIA NOT TO COMPROMISE WITH MYANMAR

On the occasion of Human Rights Day, the Treasury Department of United States imposed sanctions on several entities of Myanmar military for their massive atrocities against the civilians. The US was joined by Canada and the United Kingdom in imposing sanctions related to rights abuses in Myanmar.

U.S. State Department Counselor Derek Chollet urged Cambodia to continue to exclude Myanmar junta officials during his brief visit to the country on 10th December. He emphasized that Cambodia should make no concessions to Myanmar's military junta when Phnom Peng chairs ASEAN next year. However, he stated that urged the country to promote and uphold

the ASEAN peace plan. The remarks were made soon after Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen said Myanmar officials should be invited to return to ASEAN meetings and made plans to visit the country as well.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-envoy-urges-cambodia-make-no-concessions-myanmar-junta-asean-2021-12-10/>
<https://en.prothomalo.com/opinion/hun-sens-myanmar-visit-is-china-playing-the-cambodia-card>

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NEPAL: NEPALI CONGRESS ELECTED PRIME MINISTER SHER BAHADURDEUBA AS PARTY PRESIDENT

The delegates of Nepal's largest Democratic Party, the Nepali Congress, on 15 December 2021 re-elected Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba as the president. Mr. Deuba, who secured 2,733 votes during the second round of election, defeated Shekhar Koirala, who secured 1,855 votes, according to the 14th General Convention of the Nepali Congress. The first round of the election could not decide the President as none of the five contestants received a clear majority of more than 50 per cent votes. Other contestants for the party president in the first phase of election Prakash Man Singh and Bimalendra Nidhi

decided to support Mr. Deuba in the second phase of election, which made his victory comfortable.

<https://bit.ly/33xbdZN>

PAKISTAN: "PAKISTAN WANTS RELATIONS WITH U.S IN SYNC WITH CHANGED PRIORITIES": FOREIGN MINISTER SHAH MAHMOOD QURESHI; HEAD OF UNDP IN ASIA PACIFIC REGION TO VISIT SRI LANKA NEXT WEEK

Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said, on 14 December, that Pakistan wants a relationship with the United States which is in sync with the country's changed priorities. Speaking at the Margalla Dialogue Forum in Islamabad, the Foreign Minister said the new approach is in line with Prime Minister Imran Khan's vision of shifting from geo-politics to geo-economics. While maintaining that Islamabad values its longstanding relationship with Washington, Mr.

Qureshi said the country wanted multifaceted ties that were not susceptible to the vagaries of regional and international policies. He added that enhanced trade and investment ties with the U.S and cooperation with regards to regional connectivity can work to Pakistan's mutual benefit.

On another

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2333893/pakistan>

SRI LANKA: HEAD OF UNDP IN ASIA PACIFIC REGION TO VISIT SRI LANKA NEXT WEEK

United Nations Assistant-Secretary-General (ASG), UNDP Assistant Administrator and Director of the UNDP Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, Ms. Kanni Wignaraja will be visiting Sri Lanka from 13th to 17th December.

economic impacts, while importantly celebrating the human development achievements of Sri Lanka.

http://www.colombopage.com/archive_21B/Dec10_1639123811CH.php

ASG Kanni Wignaraja is visiting Sri Lanka with the aim of better understanding country priorities and exploring new avenues of support from UNDP to Sri Lanka—particularly focusing on follow up to the recently concluded UN Climate Change Conference COP26, post-COVID-19 socio-economic recovery in the region, and leveraging of more development financing to the country, a media release said.

The official visit will focus on the human development agenda and the acceleration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also given COVID-19 socio-

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.

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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