

|| WEEKLY NEWS HIGHLIGHTS ||

BANGLADESH ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE (BEI)

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

|| 17 December 2021 – 23 December 2021 ||

SOUTH ASIA: COVID-19 UPDATE: AT A GLANCE

Afghanistan recorded a total of 156,000 cases of coronavirus since the beginning of the pandemic. Total death cases reported 7,234 as of 25 December.

Bangladesh reported 1 new death and 342 coronavirus cases on 25 December, and has thus far recorded a total of 28,055 fatalities and 1,582,710 confirmed cases. Bangladesh has administered a total 119,341,653 Covid-19 vaccine doses, totaling 27.44% of the population.

Bhutan reported no new cases or deaths as of 25 December. A total of 2,659 cases have been registered until 25 December, while 74.05% of Bhutan's population has been vaccinated.

India reported 387 deaths and 7,189 new coronavirus cases on 25 December bringing the total number of cases to 34,779,815 while the total number of deaths now stands at 479,520. Until 25 December, 41.70% of Indian population has been vaccinated.

Maldives reported 94,564 confirmed cases and 261 deaths until 25 December. 69.07% of the population has been vaccinated.

Myanmar reported a total of 529,327 confirmed cases and 19,248 deaths as of 25 December.

Nepal on 25 December 2021 reported 363 new coronavirus cases taking the nationwide infection tally to 818,035. The countrywide death toll has reached to 11,438 since the beginning of the pandemic.

Pakistan recorded a total of 515 new cases of coronavirus on 25 December, 2021. Total 11 fatalities were also recorded according to the reports on 25 December.

Sri Lanka reported 582,722 confirmed cases and 14,852 deaths as of 25 December. 63.40% of the population has been vaccinated.

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

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BUSINESS AND INVESTMENT:

IMF ENHANCES GROWTH PROJECTION FOR BANGLADESH FOR FY-22 TO 6.6%; KAMAL HOPEFUL OF 7.2% GDP GROWTH IN FY22; CTG PORT INKS DEAL WITH THAILAND'S RANONG PORT TO ENHANCE MARITIME CONNECTIVITY

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has enhanced the economic growth projection for Bangladesh to 6.6% for the current fiscal year (FY) from its October projection of 6.5 per cent. Rahul Anand, Division Chief in the IMF's Asia & Pacific Department, disclosed while addressing at a press briefing held at a city hotel on 19 December, 2021 that growth is expected to pick up to 6.6 per cent in FY, 2021-22 as the impact of Covid-19 abates and policies remain accommodative. The projection is lower than the government's target of GDP growth 7.2 per cent for FY22.

In a news on the same context, Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal has expressed his high optimism of achieving 7.2% GDP growth in the current fiscal year (FY22) since the country is on the right path towards development. He said that earlier, the GDP growth target in the current fiscal year (FY22) was set at 7.2 per cent. He believes that the country will be able to attain higher GDP growth. The finance minister said this virtually while replying to a volley of questions after chairing the 41st meeting on the Cabinet Committee on Government Purchase (CCGP) on December 20, 2021. Asked about the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) latest enhanced growth projection of 6.6 per cent for Bangladesh in the current fiscal year (FY22) from its earlier projection of 6.5 per cent made in October, Kamal said that the World Bank and the IMF always make conservative projections on such issues.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh's Chattogram port and Ranong port of Thailand signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to enhance maritime connectivity and facilitate trade between the two friendly countries. Md Zafar Alam, member (admin and planning) of the Chittagong Port Authority and ChamnanChairith, RTN of the Port Authority of Thailand, inked the agreement on behalf of their respective organizations at a virtual platform on 20 December, 2021.

<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/bangladesh/imf-enhances-growth-projection-for-bangladesh-for-fy22-1639899379>

<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/bangladesh/kamal-hopeful-of-72pc-gdp-growth-in-fy22-1640000591>

<https://www.tbsnews.net/dropped/trade/ctg-port-inks-deal-thailands-ranong-port-enhance-maritime-connectivity-347044>

AFGHANISTAN: UNSC ADOPTS RESOLUTION TO EASE AFGHAN AID; PAKISTAN HOSTED OIC SUMMIT TO DISCUSS ON AFGHAN HUMANITARIAN CRISIS; COUNTRIES VOWED TO PROVIDE AID TO AFGHANISTAN

UNSC adopts resolution to ease afghan aid; pakistan hosted oic summit to discuss on afghan humanitarian crisis; countries vowed to provide aid to afghanistan in OIC summit.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on 22 December 2021 passed a resolution permitting a carveout in sanctions against the Taliban government to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. The resolution, put forward by the U.S passed after Security Council members. The resolution (2615) mandates a review of the carveout every six months. Additionally, it strongly encourages providers of assistance to try and ensure that benefits do not accrue to entities designated on the 1988 Sanctions List. It also requests that an Emergency Relief Coordinator brief the UNSC every six months on the delivery of assistance and any obstacles to implementation. It also calls on all parties to respect human rights and observe international humanitarian law.

The hastily called meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Islamabad,

Pakistan ended with a promise to set up a fund to provide humanitarian aid through the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), which would provide a cover for countries to donate without dealing directly with the country's Taliban rulers. In a press conference at the end of the summit, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said Western delegates met with the Taliban team led by the Interim Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi. Several nations called for a quick opening of the country's banking system and collectively, with the UN and international banking institutions, to provide assistance to Afghanistan.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/22/un-security-council-afghanistan-aid-resolution>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/19/oic-nations-pledge-fund-to-prevent-afghanistan-economic-collapse>

BANGLADESH: UNITED NATION'S SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR URGES WORLD COMMUNITY TO DO MORE TO RESOLVE ROHINGYA CRISIS

United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Myanmar, Tom Andrews, called on the international community to resolve Rohingya crisis by coordinated efforts and intensifying pressure on Myanmar from where they have persecuted to Bangladesh.

At the press conference he stated that Bangladesh could not and should not bear this responsibility alone as the crisis initiated in Myanmar and its ultimate resolution was on the same country. Bangladesh was already immensely populated with a population of more than 160 million people and the Rohingya crisis had created an extra burden on the country. Mr. Andrews acknowledged the humanitarian act of Bangladesh and added

that Government of Bangladesh needs and deserves a stronger international partnership

Mr. Andrews offered several recommendations from his mission, notably that the Rohingya community must be provided with security, educational opportunity, access to health care, and the creation of sustainable livelihood opportunities, especially in Bashan Char.

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/rohingya-crisis/2021/12/19/resolution-to-rohingya-crisis-is-in-myanmar-not-bangladesh>

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BANGLADESH:

BANGLADESH TO SUPPORT AFGHAN PEOPLE WITH HUMANITARIAN AID PACKAGE; MALAYSIA REOPENS DOORS TO BANGLADESHI WORKERS, MOU SIGNED; U.S. SENATE CONFIRMS NEW ENVOY TO BANGLADESH

Bangladesh has decided to support Afghan people with food and medicinal assistance. While appreciating the OIC for calling for extraordinary Council, Bangladesh has also urged the leaders to intensify cooperation within and beyond OIC in support to the Afghan people. Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen conveyed the message during the 17th Extraordinary Council of foreign ministers of the OIC on Afghanistan held in Islamabad, Pakistan on 19 December.

On another note, Malaysia has reopened its labor market to Bangladesh after a three-year hiatus as the governments of both countries signed an MOU in Kuala Lumpur on 19 December, according to the Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Ministry. The press release stated that Bangladesh's expatriates' welfare minister Imran Ahmed and Malaysian minister for human resources Datuk Seri M Saravanan signed the MoU on behalf of their respective governments. The Malaysian government suspended hiring workers from Bangladesh in 2018. Several bilateral meetings were held between both countries to resume workers' recruitment. Recently, the Malaysian government approved the recruitment of workers from Bangladesh.

In the meantime, the US Senate has confirmed Peter D Haas, a career diplomat, as the ambassador to Bangladesh. Haas will replace Ambassador Earl R Miller, who was appointed to the post in 2018. On July 9 this year, President Joe Biden named Peter Haas the new nominee for US ambassador to Bangladesh. Haas is the acting assistant secretary and principal deputy assistant secretary at the US Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs.

<https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/bangladesh-to-support-afghan-people-with-humanitarian-aid-package>

<https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/malaysia-reopens-doors-to-bangladeshi-workers-mou-signed>

<https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/diplomacy/news/us-senate-confirms-new-bangladesh-ambassador-2921316>

INDIA:

KOLKATA MUNICIPAL CORPORATION ELECTION 2021 RESULTS: TMC REGISTERS LANDSLIDE VICTORY, WINS 134 OF 144 WARDS; DELIMITATION COMMISSION PROPOSES SIX ADDITIONAL SEATS FOR JAMMU, ONE FOR

The Trinamool Congress on 21 December registered a landslide victory in the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) elections, winning 134 of the 144 wards. The BJP, which had emerged as the main opposition party in the Assembly polls earlier this year, won three seats, while the Left Front and Congress won two each. The Independents, with three seats, ended an equal footing with the non-TMC parties.

In another news, the draft paper of the Delimitation Commission has proposed seven additional Assembly seats for Jammu and Kashmir — six in Jammu division and one in Kashmir valley. For the first time, the commission proposed reserving nine seats for Scheduled Tribes (STs) on the basis of population. Seven seats are proposed for the Scheduled Caste (SC) community. With the proposed addition, the total Assembly constituencies in Jammu and Kashmir has risen to 90 — in Jammu, the number of seats has gone up to 43 from 37, and in Kashmir, by one seat to 47.

In the meantime, on 19 December, External Affairs Minister Jaishankar said that India and the Central Asian countries had similar concerns and objectives in Afghanistan, and flagged the goals of “a truly

inclusive and representative government, the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking, ensuring unhindered humanitarian assistance, and preserving the rights of women, children, and the minorities”. Jaishankar informed his counterparts from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan that they must find ways of helping the people of Afghanistan.

<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/kolkata/kolkata-municipal-corporation-election-kmc-results-live-updates-tmc-bjp-cpim-7682945/>

<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/delimitation-commission-proposes-six-additional-seats-for-jammu-one-kashmir-7681836/>

<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-central-asia-dialogue-our-concerns-goals-in-afghanistan-similar-says-jaishankar-7680012/>

MALDIVES: PRIME MINISTER SHEIKH HASINA CONCLUDES HER SIX-DAY OFFICIAL VISIT TO MALDIVES

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made a six-day official visit to Maldives from 22nd to 27th December 2021. The government of Maldives warmly welcomed the visiting Prime Minister and following the welcoming courtesies, the two premiers of the South Asian countries, presided over a ceremony which saw the exchange of several MoUs.

The agreements were as follows: a Memorandum of Understanding on the Recruitment of Qualified Health Professionals; a Renewal of the Memorandum of Understanding in the Areas of Healthcare and Medical Sciences; a Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Areas of

Youth and Sports Development; and an Agreement to Eliminate Double Taxation on Income Taxes and the Prevention of Tax Evasion and Avoidance.

A symbolic handover of keys to thirteen military vehicles donated by Bangladesh to the Maldives also took place at the ceremony between the Maldives' Chief of Defense Force, Major General Abdulla Shamaal, and General S. M. Shafiuddin Ahmed, Chief of Army Staff of Bangladesh.

<https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/26063>

MYANMAR: INDIAN FOREIGN SECRETARY, HARSH VARDHAN SHRINGLA VISITED MYANMAR

Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla concluded his two-day official visit to Myanmar on 22-23 December 2021. This was the first high-level visit from India after the coup.

A statement of Indian Ministry of External Affairs released on 23rd December 2021, stated that Foreign Secretary, Shringla held discussions with the State Administration Council, political parties and members of civil society. According to the political analysts, India will continue to demand the restoration of democracy in Myanmar simultaneously it will keep the communication channel with military leaders open to mitigate its domestic security challenges. Mr. Shringla expressed concerns over the border security of both the countries.

The discussions included issues relating to humanitarian support to Myanmar and as part of efforts to assist the country fight Covid-19, Mr. Shringla presented 3,000 vials of Remdesivir to the local authorities.

In the context of connectivity during the last visit, India had announced a grant of \$2 million for the construction of the border market (haat) bridge at Banyu/Sarsichauk in Chin State, which will provide increased economic connectivity between Mizoram and Myanmar. In the context of energy security, India proposed to construct a petroleum refinery Thanlyn region near Yangon.

<https://thediplomat.com/2021/12/indian-foreign-secretary-embarks-on-state-visit-to-military-ruled-myanmar/>

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/foreign-secretary-to-visit-myanmar-on-december-22-23-first-high-level-trip-since-coup/articleshow/88412030.cms>

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/will-india-serve-as-a-catalyst-to-solve-myanmar-crisis.html>

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Myanmar's military regime has shut down the office of the United Nation's (UN) Special Envoy for the country, citing the reason of Christine Burgener's term having ended as the Special Envoy. The junta did not offer any further elaboration about the closure of the office in the Myanmar capital Naypyitaw in their statement released on 21 December.

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-shutters-un-special-envoys-office.html>

NEPAL: PURNA BAHADUR KHADKA AND DHANRAJ GURUNG HAVE BEEN ELECTED VICE PRESIDENTS OF THE NEPALI CONGRESS

Purna Bahadur Khadka and Dhanraj Gurung have been elected vice presidents of the Nepali Congress. Mr. Khadka represents the panel led by Sher Bahadur Deuba, who has reclaimed the party president position, while Mr. Gurung is from Shekhar Koirala panel. Both Purna Bahadur Khadka and Dhanraj Gurung are the first elected vice presidents in the history of Nepali Congress. Khadka secured 2,121 votes and Gurung secured 1,908 votes, according to the Central Election Committee of the party. A total of

4,679 votes were cast in the election held on Monday. There were seven leaders vying for two vice president posts.

<https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/khadka-gurung-elected-nc-vice-president>

PAKISTAN: HOPEFUL OF REACHING CONSENSUS ON ADDRESSING DETERIORATING HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN: PAKISTAN FOREIGN MINISTER SHAH MAHMOOD QURESHI

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi on 18 December said the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan is finally getting global attention and that he was hopeful of reaching a consensus to address the humanitarian crisis in the neighboring country during the key OIC foreign ministers' meeting. The 17th extraordinary session of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's (OIC) Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) held in Pakistan to discuss the

situation in Afghanistan. Qureshi, while addressing the media, said that the Afghanistan issue was finally getting global attention due to the looming humanitarian crisis and economic collapse, as repeatedly highlighted by Pakistan. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1664496>

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SRI LANKA: INTERNATIONAL RATING AGENCY FITCH DOWNGRADES SRI LANKA AS DEFAULT FEARS MOUNT

International Rating Agency, Fitch downgraded cash-strapped Sri Lanka by one notch from "CCC" to "CC" due to mounting fears of a sovereign default on its \$26 billion foreign debt. The downgrade came on 18th December, a day after Sri Lanka reported a 1.5 percent contraction in the third quarter of this year as a foreign exchange crisis wrecked its recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

Fitch stated that the downgrade reflected its view of an "increased probability of a default event in coming months" as Sri Lanka's foreign reserves slumped to \$1.58 billion at the end of November.

The rating agency noted that the island nation had to repay two international sovereign bonds of \$500 million in January 2022 and \$1.0 billion in July 2022 with little improvement in capital inflows into the nation of 21 million people.

The banking regulator had also warned that it will freeze accounts of informal money

changers who offer higher prices for hard currency than official exchange rates.

Meanwhile, the central bank had been appealing for foreign currency, including from nationals after returning from overseas trips, as the government is in desperate need for dollars. Supermarkets have rationed staples such as milk powder, sugar, lentils, tinned fish, and rice as commercial banks ran out of dollars to finance imports. The island's tourism-dependent economy was hammered by the pandemic and authorities responded to falling foreign exchange reserves with a broad import ban, triggering shortages including food, fuel, and medicines.

https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking_news/Fitch-downgrades-Sri-Lanka-as-default-fears-mount/108-227206

<https://www.newsfirst.lk/2021/12/18/fitch-downgrades-sri-lanka-to-cc/>

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BEI PRESIDENT AMBASSADOR M. HUMAYUN KABIR WAS PRESENT AS CHIEF GUEST AT A DISCUSSION EVENT BY STATE UNIVERSITY ON THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF VICTORY



BEI PRESIDENT AMBASSADOR M. HUMAYUN KABIR DELIVERED A LECTURE ON "INTER-STATE RELATIONS, DIPLOMACY OF SMALL STATES AND DISPUTE SETTLEMENT MECHANISMS" IN A PROGRAM RISE IN JOURNALISM ORGANIZED BY THE U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (USAID) BANGLADESH



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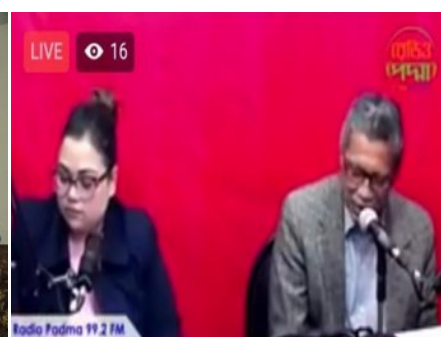
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- Kolkata municipal corporation election 2021 results: tmc registers landslide victory, wins 134 of 144 wards; delimitation commission proposes six additional seats for jammu, one for kashmir valley; afghanistan meet: india, central asian nations seek peace and stability
- Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina concludes her six-day official visit to maldives
- Indian Foreign Secretary, Harsh Vardhan Shringla visited myanmar
- State administration council shuts un special envoy's office
- Purna Bahadur Khadka and Dhanraj Gurung have been elected vice presidents of the nepali congress
- Hopeful of reaching consensus on addressing deteriorating humanitarian situation in Afghanistan: Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi
- International rating agency fitch downgrades Sri Lanka as default fears mount
- Recent Highlights of BEI

BEI ORGANIZED A LESSONS-LEARNED MEETING AND A COMMUNITY RADIO PROGRAM ON 22 DECEMBER 2021 AND 23 DECEMBER 2021 AT RADIO PADMA FM 99.2, RAJSHAHI

"Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI), in collaboration with The Asia Foundation, is implementing a project titled "Building Capacity of CSOs/NGOs and Media to Promote Accountability in Governance and Influence Elite Opinion". As part of this project, BEI organized a Lessons-Learned meeting on 22 December 2021 at Parjatan Motel, Rajshahi with the participation of government officials, elected representatives, members of civil society, media, academicians, political parties, etc. A survey (purposive) report was presented before the audience by four trainees who shared their achievements being involved in this project from the beginning and also delivered some recommendations to scale up the process of building awareness, capacity and using the Right to Information Act, National Integrity Strategy and Annual Performance Agreement effectively to ensure good governance.

BEI also organized a Community Radio program on 23 December 2021 at Radio Padma FM 99.2, Rajshahi with the participation of four trainees who expressed their experiences with their involvement in this project. The purpose of the radio program was to disseminate the knowledge, understanding, and skills of the participants achieved through different activities of the project to a larger community. Both of the programs were followed by two separate grooming sessions in presence of the trainees of the project. All the CSOs/NGOs and Media personnel well-appreciated the initiative and contribution of Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) to sensitize, develop their capacity and enable them to use the existing laws effectively within the democratic framework.

However, BEI held an Inception Meeting, gave a three-day Capacity Building Training on good governance tools enacted by the Government of Bangladesh (Right To Information act-RTI, National Integrity Strategy- NIS, and Annual Performance Agreement-APA) to the selected 20 trainees (CSOs/NGOs and Media) and conducted a participatory purposive survey at the beginning of this year before organizing these two closing programs of the project. "



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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