

|| WEEKLY NEWS HIGHLIGHTS ||

BANGLADESH ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE (BEI)

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

|| 1 JANUARY 2022 - 7 JANUARY 2022 ||

SOUTH ASIA: COVID-19 CRISIS: 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 8 January.

Bangladesh reported 7 new deaths and 1,140 coronavirus cases on 7 January, and has thus far recorded a total of 28,097 fatalities and 1,589,947 confirmed cases. Bangladesh administered a total 130,266,448 Covid-19 vaccine doses, totaling 27.44% of the population.

Bhutan reported 2 new cases and no death as of 7 January. A total of 2,671 cases have been registered until 7 January, while 74.43% of Bhutan's population has been vaccinated.

India reported 302 deaths and 117,100 new coronavirus cases on 7 January, bringing the total number of cases to 35,226,386 while the total number of deaths now stands at 483,178. Until 7 January, 45.44% of Indian population has been vaccinated.

Maldives on 7 January recorded 97,331 confirmed cases and 264 fatalities. Health Protection Agency urged people to take health precautions. 69.32% of the total population are fully vaccinated.

Myanmar recorded 531,801 confirmed cases and 19,288 deaths as of 7 January.

Nepal on 8 January 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 8 January. Total 11 fatalities were also recorded according to the reports on 8 January.

Sri Lanka recorded 590,651 confirmed cases and 15,099 deaths as of 7 January. 63.54% of the total population are fully vaccinated.

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

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BUSINESS AND INVESTMENT:

NATIONAL STRATEGY SOON FOR SMOOTH LDC GRADUATION: PM HASINA; OVERSEAS EMPLOYMENT OF BANGLADESHIS GROWS 1.5 TIMES IN 2021; CASH INCENTIVE ON REMITTANCE INCREASED TO 2.5%: FINANCE MINISTER

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on 02 January, 2022, said the government has taken steps to formulate a National Smooth Transition Strategy, aiming to make Bangladesh's graduation from the Least Developed Country (LDC) group to a developing one smoother. While addressing an official celebration programme, she said that all kinds of directives have to be incorporated in the strategy to face future challenges, marking Bangladesh's graduation from an LDC to a developing country. The Prime Minister asked all concerned to formulate a time-befitting strategy paper based on data and information by thorough research and survey. The programme was held at Bangabandhu International Conference Centre and the Prime Minister joined from her official residence Ganabhaban virtually.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh's overseas employment is expected to increase 1.5 times in the outgoing calendar year (2021), said a RMMRU report on January 30, 2021. It forecasts that the remittance income would climb by an estimated 2.0 per cent. Citing the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) data, the RMMRU report showed Bangladesh sent 485,893 workers to different countries during the period January-November 2021. If the trend continues, it predicts, overseas jobs may increase one and a half times this year. Bangladeshis remitted \$21.75 billion in 2020. They sent \$20.44 billion in the January-November period of 2021, according to the Bangladesh Bank. It is anticipated that remittance income would rise by 2.0 per cent if capital inflow continued in December in such a manner.

On another note, the government has increased cash incentive on remittance to 2.5 per cent from 2 per cent to encourage migrants to use proper channels to send money home. Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal said that the government has decided to increase the cash incentive to 2.5 per cent from 2 per cent to increase the remittance inflow through proper channel. Mr. Kamal said the new cash incentive will be effective from January 1, 2022. He added that the remittance inflow is expected to increase to \$26 billion this fiscal year compared to \$24 billion in the last fiscal year.

<https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/national-transition-strategy-soon-smooth-graduation-ldc-pm-hasina-352090>

<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/bangladesh/overseas-employment-of-bangladeshis-grows-15-times-in-2021-1641030059>

<https://www.thedailystar.net/nrb/migration/remittance/news/cash-incentive-remittance-increased-25-kamal-2930091>

AFGHANISTAN: SIGAR REACTED TO RESTRICTIONS ON AFGHAN WOMEN AND GIRLS' ON SPORTS ACTIVITIES AND ACCESS TO MEDICAL SERVICES.

The U.S Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reacted to recent Islamic Emirate policy, citing a report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) which said that the Islamic Emirate had restricted women and girls' sports activities and access to medical services. The Ministry of Virtue and vice wrote a letter recommending that unaccompanied women (Muharram) should not go to sports and health centers. The US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction reacted to the restrictions on women's sports activities. Meanwhile, a number of female athletes in the country say the new

restrictions are very challenging for them. In the meantime, officials of the Ministry of Virtue and vice said that such rules are not restrictions but protection for the women and girls of the country. Following the imposition of restrictions on women, Human Rights Watch (HRW) called 2021 the worst year for women in Afghanistan, and the State Department appointed Rina Amiri as the US Special Envoy for Women, Girls, and Human Rights in Afghanistan.

<https://www.afghanistantimes.af/sigar-reacts-to-restrictions-on-afghan-women/>

BANGLADESH: DHAKA WAITING FOR WASHINGTON'S RESPONSE, OPEN TO SUGGESTIONS; LETTER TO THE US SEEKING WITHDRAWAL OF SANCTIONS ON RAB

Foreign Minister Dr AK Abdul Momen has said the government will try to rectify any weaknesses as Bangladesh looks for a response from the US on its call for withdrawal of sanctions on RAB and six of its current and former officials. The Foreign Minister wrote a letter to US Secretary of State Antony J Blinken last month requesting him to withdraw the sanctions. Dr Momen said once the US responds, Bangladesh will reply providing correct information. In his letter, the Minister

also mentioned RAB's role in curbing the drug menace and terrorism in the country and hoped to boost bilateral relations.

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/foreign-affairs/2022/01/04/dhaka-waiting-for-washingtons-response-open-to-suggestions>

<https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/government/letter-to-the-us-seeking-withdrawal-of-sanctions-on-rab>

BHUTAN: INDIAN FOREIGN MINISTER SPOKE TO BHUTAN'S FOREIGN MINISTER, ASSESSED CONTINUING PROGRESS IN DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIP

Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar spoke with his Bhutanese counterpart Dr Tandi Dorji on 05 January and assessed the continuing progress of their development partnership. India and Bhutan share unique and exemplary bilateral relations, which are based on mutual trust, goodwill and understanding. Last year India delivered 150,000 doses of Covishield vaccines to Bhutan as the first recipient country from India. There is a close bilateral

cooperation in the field of education and culture between the two countries.

https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/jaishankar-speaks-to-bhutanese-counterpart-assessed-continuing-progress-in-development-partnership20220105175704#.Ydh1_kWynlQ.whatsapp

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INDIA: EAM JAISHANKAR SPOKE TO U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE AND RUSSIAN FOREIGN MINISTER OVER PHONE

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has talked with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov over phone on 03 January. During the conversation with Blinken, Jaishankar discussed bilateral and global issues, including the situation in the Indo-Pacific region. The two leaders spoke as both countries prepare for the next 'two-plus-two' foreign and defence ministerial talks. The situation in Afghanistan also figured in the conversation. India's ties with the US have witnessed a signifi-

cant upswing in the last few months on a range of issues including the situation in the Indo-Pacific and tackling the COVID-19 pandemic.

In his conversation with Russian Foreign Minister, Jaishankar followed up about the recent annual summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin that took place in last December.

<https://theprint.in/diplomacy/eam-jaishankar-speaks-to-us-secretary-of-state-russian-counterpart/795375/>

MALDIVES: TO MARK THE OCCASION OF 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF BILATERAL RELATION, CHINESE FOREIGN MINISTER IS ON A TWO-DAY OFFICIAL VISIT TO MALDIVES, FROM 7TH TO 8TH JANUARY

Maldives and China on January 8, 2022, signed key bilateral agreements during Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit, on developing and maintaining infrastructure in the Indian Ocean archipelago, besides agreeing on a visa-free travel arrangement for Maldivians intending to travel to China. Mr. Wang arrived in Maldives as part of his five-nation trip to Eritrea, Kenya, the island nation of Comoros, the Maldives and Sri Lanka. Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid and his Chinese counterpart unveiled a special official logo to mark 50 years of diplomatic relations

between the countries. Describing China as "one of the most important development partners" of the Maldives, Mr. Shahid said that China "has continued to contribute to the socio-economic development" of the Maldives. The Foreign Ministers discussed "strengthening the many areas of cooperation" during official talks, according to Mr. Shahid's tweet on Saturday.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/maldives-china-ink-key-deals-agree-on-visa-exemption-visa-exemption/article38191082.ece>

MYANMAR: ROHINGYA REPATRIATION: MYANMAR NOW PROPOSES NEW JOINT COMMITTEE

Myanmar has proposed to form a new joint committee with Bangladesh to settle the Rohingya verification issues, nearly three years after the two countries held a bilateral meeting on Rohingya repatriation. The proposal of forming the committee, comprised of officials from both the countries, came in late December, said a foreign ministry official, seeking anonymity. Speaking to the Daily Star, the official said that they proposed the idea and we received it positively. Earlier, multiple repatriation attempts fell flat as the Rohingyas denied returning to their homeland arguing their demands for

guaranteed safety, basic rights and citizenship. Around 750,000 Rohingyas entered Bangladesh in August 2017 following a brutal military crackdown on the Rakhine State of Myanmar.

<https://www.thedailystar.net/rohingya-influx/news/rohingya-repatriation-myanmar-now-proposes-new-joint-committee-2933976>

NEPAL: PRIME MINISTER SHER BAHADUR DEUBA IS SET TO LEAVE FOR INDIA ON 9 JANUARY

Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba is scheduled to meet Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the Vibrant Gujarat Summit as part of his four-day visit to India starting from 9 January. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is hosting the Summit from 10 to 13 January in Gujarat. This will be Prime Minister Deuba's first official visit to India after assuming power in July. Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit was conceptualized in 2003. It has now

evolved into one of the most reputed global forums for business networking, knowledge sharing and strategic partnerships for inclusive socio-economic development.

<https://bit.ly/3FWZTOD>

PAKISTAN: PAKISTAN AND THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC) FINALIZED THE 'JOINT ACTION PLAN FOR STRATEGIC DIALOGUE (2022-26)'

Pakistan and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) finalized the 'Joint Action Plan for Strategic Dialogue (2022-26)', to provide an institutional approach to deepen cooperation in various fields. The plan was discussed in a meeting between the visiting GCC Secretary General Dr Nayef Falah M Al-Hajraf and Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi. Both sides underscored that the Action Plan would provide a strong impetus to optimally realizing the tremendous potential for increased cooperation. During the meeting, the two sides reviewed the progress on the efforts to conclude a free-trade agreement (FTA) between Pakistan and the GCC. Foreign Minister Qureshi and Secretary General Al-Hajraf expressed their determination to conclude the negotiations on priority. At the onset of the delega-

tion-level talks, Qureshi reaffirmed Pakistan's abiding fraternal and historical ties with the GCC member states, rooted firmly in shared faith, values and culture. During the talks, the two sides explored new avenues of cooperation. The 'Joint Action Plan for Strategic Dialogue' would provide an institutional approach to deepen cooperation in various fields, including political; security; trade and investment; agricultural and food security, transportation; energy; environment; health; culture; and education.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1667922/pakistan-gcc-finalise-action-plan-for-strategic-dialogue>

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SRI LANKA: THERE IS NO MONEY LEFT, COVID CRISIS LEAVES SRI LANKA ON BRINK OF BANKRUPTCY

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Sri Lanka is facing a deepening financial and humanitarian crisis with fears it could go bankrupt in 2022 as inflation rises to record levels, food prices rocketing, and its coffers running dry. The meltdown faced by the government, led by the strongman president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, is in part caused by the immediate impact of the Covid crisis and the loss of tourism but is compounded by high government spending and tax cuts eroding state revenues, vast debt repayments to China and foreign exchange reserves at their lowest levels in a decade. Inflation has meanwhile been spurred by the government printing money to pay off domestic loans and foreign bonds. The World Bank estimates 500,000 people have fallen below the poverty line since the beginning of the pandemic, the equivalent of five years' progress in fighting poverty. Inflation hit a record high of 11.1% in November and escalating prices have left those who were

previously well off struggling to feed their families, while basic goods are now unaffordable for many. After Rajapaksa declared Sri Lanka to be in an economic emergency, the military was given power to ensure essential items, including rice and sugar, were sold at set government prices – but it has done little to ease people's woes.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/02/covid-crisis-sri-lanka-bankruptcy-poverty-pandemic-food-prices>

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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