

|| WEEKLY NEWS HIGHLIGHTS ||

BANGLADESH ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE (BEI)

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

|| 21 January 2022 – 27 January 2022 ||

SOUTH ASIA COVID-19 UPDATE: AT A GLANCE

Afghanistan recorded a total of 150,485 cases of coronavirus since the beginning of the pandemic. Total death cases reported 6,908 as of 29 January.

Bangladesh reported 15 new deaths and 15,807 coronavirus cases on 28 January and has thus far recorded a total of 28,288 fatalities and 1,747,331 confirmed cases. Bangladesh has administered a total 155,276,891 Covid-19 vaccine doses, totaling 36.62% of the population.

Bhutan reported 136 new cases and no death as of 28 January. A total of 4,225 cases have been registered until 28 January, while 74.72% of Bhutan's population has been vaccinated.

India reported 627 deaths and 251,209 new coronavirus cases on 28 January, bringing the total number of cases to 40,622,709 while the total number of deaths now stands at 492,327. Until 28 January, 50.82% of Indian population has been vaccinated.

Maldives recorded 130,599 confirmed cases and 274 fatalities as of 28 January. 69.60% of the total population was fully vaccinated.

Myanmar recorded 534,908 confirmed cases and 19,310 deaths as of 28 January.

Nepal reported a record of 12,338 new cases on 29 January, compared to a few hundred daily cases last month. Nepal's capital shut schools, ordered citizens to carry vaccination cards in public, banned religious festivals and instructed hotel guests to be tested every three days as it battles its biggest Covid-19 outbreak.

Pakistan on 29 January reported 7,678 new coronavirus cases, the highest number of cases since the pandemic began in February 2020. Further, 23 fatalities were also reported during this period while the national positivity rate rose to 12.93 percent.

Sri Lanka recorded 608,065 confirmed cases and 15,386 deaths as of 28 January. 63.74% of the total populations were fully vaccinated.

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

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BUSINESS AND INVESTMENT:

SYMPHONY BECOMES 2ND 'MADE IN BANGLADESH' SMARTPHONE EXPORTER; DHAKA RENEWS EFFORTS TO BRAND BANGLADESH

Symphony has become the second local brand to export "Made in Bangladesh" smartphones by sending its smartphones to Apex Group of Nepal. Jakaria Shahid, managing director of Edison Group, the parent company of Symphony, said that they started to export smartphones to Nepal with 15,000 smartphones on 26 October last year. The 2nd consignment is scheduled to be shipped to the export inauguration held at Symphony Mobile Factory in Asulia of Savar. He added that they are planning to grab handset markets of five more countries including Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Oman, and Nigeria by 2022.

Meanwhile, the government of Bangladesh wants to expedite its efforts to brand Bangladesh abroad highlighting its areas of strength with an aim to make the country a more attractive destination for trade and investment. An inter-ministerial meeting of the committee on 'Branding Bangladesh Abroad' was held at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on January 23, 2022. At the beginning of the meeting, the foreign secretary outlined various aspects of economic diplomacy and outlined the specific goals of the foreign ministry which include increasing foreign direct investment and creating diversification, increasing exports and diversification, quality services, exporting human resources and skills and technology transfer.

<https://www.tbsnews.net/tech/smartphones/symphony-export-made-bangladesh-smartphones-nepal-360760>

<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/bangladesh/dhaka-renews-efforts-to-brand-bangladesh-1642951345>

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BUSINESS AND INVESTMENT:

BANGLADESH OFFERED HELP TO RETAIN GROWTH PACE IN POST-LDC PERIOD; COMPANIES CAN INVEST 25PC OF ASSET OFFSHORE; PER CAPITA INCOME TO REACH \$2,785 IN FY22: FINANCE MINISTER

Ms. Samantha Cohen, CEO Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council (CWEIC) has said that CWEIC is willing to assist Bangladesh in sustaining its robust economic growth after the country's graduation from the category of least developed countries (LDCs). Ms. Samantha made the remark at a meeting with Md Jashim Uddin, president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FBCCI) on 23 January 2022. Business people around the globe are still not well-aware of the rapid transformation that Bangladesh has gone through in recent years and also about the tremendous opportunities that the 'New Bangladesh' offers, said the FBCCI chief. FBCCI is keen to connect to the private sector of the Commonwealth countries to promote the government's 'Branding Bangladesh' initiative.

In another note, the government issued guidelines permitting Bangladeshi entrepreneurs to make offshore equity investment to the tune of 25 per cent of net asset of a company to instant welcome from businesses. Seven core conditions are tied to the investment in foreign countries, an option big businesses of Bangladesh have long sought. The financial institutions division of the of the Finance Ministry has published a gazette notification on the 'Capital Account Transactions (Overseas Equity Investment) Guidelines 2022' detailing how to spread their wings beyond borders. Interested overseas investors will have to take prior permission from the government through central bank channels. Investors will be allowed to make equity investment abroad up to 20 per cent of their average annual income from exports during the last five years or 25 per cent of net assets mentioned in the last audited financial report.

Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal on January 26 stated that the country's economy will recover to its pre-Covid level very soon, expressing optimism that per capita income would reach \$2,785 in the current fiscal year. According to the provisional estimates of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the per capita income at the end of the last fiscal year stood at \$2,554. This year a further \$231 will be added to our per capita income, according to the minister.

<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/bangladesh/bangladesh-offered-help-to-retain-growth-pace-in-post-ldc-period-1642994590>

<https://today.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/first-page/companies-can-invest-25pc-of-asset-offshore-1643220825>

<https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/capita-income-reach-2785-fy22-finance-minister-362794>

AFGHANISTAN:

TALIBAN DELEGATION, WESTERN OFFICIALS MET IN OSLO TO DISCUSS AFGHANISTAN'S HUMANITARIAN CRISIS; WESTERN DIPLOMATS PRESSED TALIBAN ON RIGHTS, GIRLS EDUCATION; 'THE TALIBAN MUST UPHOLD THE FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN': UN SECRETARY-GENERAL ANTONIO GUTERRES

Taliban has said three days of discussions by its delegates with Western diplomats in Norway went very well" while the latter said they linked humanitarian aid to Afghanistan to an improvement in human rights after meeting the Afghan delegation on a landmark visit. On 25 January, the final day of the Taliban's first official trip to Europe since returning to power in August, the group held talks behind closed doors with several Western diplomats. Acting Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi said the Taliban government will do its best to protect Afghanistan from any sorts of problems, attract more assistance, seeking solutions for the economic problems.

Western diplomats have told the Taliban that humanitarian aid to Afghanistan will be tied to an improvement in human

rights, according to reports emerging as meetings with a Taliban delegation held in Oslo, Norway. The Taliban must uphold the fundamental human rights of women and children, the United Nations chief has said, as he urged the international community to release frozen Afghan aid to prevent families from selling their babies to buy food. The secretary general, António Guterres, also warned that Afghanistan is hanging by a thread as millions of impoverished citizens struggle to survive amid deteriorating humanitarian conditions.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/26/west-links-afghan-humanitarian-aid-to-human-rights>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/26/un-chief-calls-on-taliban-to-uphold-womens-rights>

BANGLADESH:

BANGLADESH WANTS TO BE A SECTORAL DIALOGUE PARTNER OF ASEAN; BANGLADESH, JAPAN TO CELEBRATE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF DIPLOMATIC TIE; BANGLADESH DROPS A NOTCH ON CORRUPTION INDEX

Bangladesh wants to have greater interaction with ASEAN and expressed its wish to become a Sectoral Dialogue Partner as the country has good trade relations with some of the countries of the southeast Asian regional bloc. According to a foreign ministry statement, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen made the communication to Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno L P Marsudi during a telephone call on January 27. In responses, the Indonesian foreign minister, while expressing her support for Bangladesh's candidature, also suggested for fostering a greater engagement with the member countries of the ASEAN in this regard. Noting with satisfaction the rising trend in bilateral trade and commerce between the two countries, Minister Momen emphasized on an expeditious conclusion of the proposed preferential trade agreement this year.

On a related note, Bangladesh and Japan have decided to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the bilateral diplomatic relationship between the two countries this year through various events in Dhaka and Tokyo to further strengthen bilateral partnership. The two

countries established diplomatic relations on 10 February 1972. During the meeting with the Japanese Ambassador, Foreign Minister Momen recognized Japan as a long-trusted friend of Bangladesh and a proven development partner.

In the meantime, Bangladesh has dropped a notch on the global corruption perception index (CPI) to rank 147th among 180 countries which is second most corrupt position in South Asia. According to the Berlin-based Transparency International's report y, Bangladesh's score on the index for 2021 was 26 out of 100, which has been unchanged for the fourth year. In the 2020 CPI index, Bangladesh ranked 146th. Afghanistan came out the most corrupt in South Asia with 16 points and 174th on the global CPI list.

<https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/corruption/bangladesh-drops-notch-corruption-perceptions-index-362011>

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BANGLADESH:

EC FORMATION LAW PASSED IN THE PARLIAMENT

Despite the flak from political parties and civil society, a bill titled 'Appointment of the chief election commissioner and election commissioners Bill, 2022' unanimously passed in parliament aiming to form the next commission under the new law. Before the law was enacted, opposition lawmakers criticized many aspects of the bill and proposed amendments to it. According to Article 118 (1) of the Constitution, the bill will give a legal shield to the appointments of the

Chief Election Commissioner and election commissioners to form the EC. The tenure of the incumbent KM Nurul Huda led election commission will expire on Feb 14.

<https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/ec-formation-bill-passed-parliament-363016>

INDIA:

RUSSIA-CHINA WARMTH MAKES DELHI WALK THE TIGHTROPE ON UKRAINE; INDIA RANKS 85 IN TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL'S CORRUPTION INDEX; IRAN'S FOREIGN MINISTER TO VISIT INDIA NEXT WEEK

On January 19, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman spoke to Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla and discussed "Russia's concerning military build-up on Ukraine's borders". Delhi is however yet to issue an official statement on the matter, choosing to closely monitor the developments for the time being. Officials here said that with key strategic partners on both sides, any hasty moves may shrink the already tight diplomatic space Delhi has. While there is concern about Russia's muscle-flexing and external intervention in national matters, New Delhi does not want to jeopardize its equation with Moscow. Almost 60 per cent of India's military supplies are Russian-manufactured, a significant factor when Indian and Chinese troops continue to be in a stand-off on the eastern border.

Meanwhile, underlining that some of the mechanisms that could help reign in corruption are weakening, Transparency International ranked India at 85 among 180 countries in its Corruption Perception Index 2021 report. The index, which ranks 180 countries and territories by their perceived levels of public sector corruption according to experts and business people, uses a scale of 0 to 100 to rank Corruption Perception Index (CPI), where 0 is highly corrupt and 100 is

very transparent. Transparency International gave India a CPI score of 40.

On another note, Iranian foreign minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian is set to visit India next week for discussions that are expected to focus on the situation in West Asia and Afghanistan and regional connectivity. Two key issues that are expected to figure in Abdollahian's interactions in New Delhi are the situation in Afghanistan, especially the urgent need for humanitarian assistance, and measures to boost the development and use of Iran's Chabahar port.

<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/russia-china-warmth-delhi-ukraine-7743371/>

<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-ranks-85-in-transparency-internationals-corruption-index-7741760/>

https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/irans-foreign-minister-to-visit-india-next-week-101643222328201.html?utm_source=whatsapp&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=ht_site

MALDIVES: MALDIVES RANKED 85TH ON CORRUPTION PERCEPTION INDEX

Maldives ranked 85th position among 180 countries and scored 40 points out of 100 in the Corruption Perception Index of 2021 by the Transparency International. The country projected improvement as it ranked 75th in the 2020 report. CPI ranked countries around the world based on how corrupt their public sectors were perceived to be. The results were given on a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 is highly corrupt, and 100 is very clean.

A statement released by Transparency Maldives stated that Maldives was still

falling behind in effectively implementing and enforcing laws to tackle corruption. The statement further said that the archipelago had weak investigation, prosecution, enforcement, and implementation of laws, resulting in an increased lack of accountability of political and public officials.

<https://avas.mv/en/113322>

MYANMAR: ENERGY GIANTS TOTAL, CHEVRON AND WOODSIDE TO EXIT MYANMAR AMID RIGHTS ABUSES

Energy giants Total Energies, Chevron Corp and Woodside on 20th, 21st and 27th January announced to exit their businesses from Myanmar due to the worsening human rights situation and deteriorating rule of law after since coup last year. Total and Chevron were part of a joint venture running the offshore Yadana gas field and the MGTC transportation system that carries gas from the field to Myanmar's border with Thailand. And Woodside operates multiple exploration and drilling sites in the country. The decision was targeted international sanctions on Myanmar's oil and gas sectors to disrupt the flow of revenue to the Myanmar military junta.

Human Rights Watch, Global Witness, civil society organizations and rights groups across the globe applauded the decision. Earlier, on December 2021 Human Rights Watch urged Total to support sanctions that would stop revenues from natural gas flowing to entities controlled by Myanmar's military.

The US government last week warned companies, Investors, and traders worldwide that doing business with state-owned enterprises in Yangon may expose them to significant reputational, financial, and legal risks.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/1/21/oil-giants-total-chevron-exit-myanmar-due-to-human-rights-abuses>

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/business/2022/01/27/major-australian-energy-firm-woodside-announces-myanmar-pullout>

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PAKISTAN:

"PAKISTAN NOT COMPLETELY OPTIMISTIC OF TALIBAN GOVERNMENT IN AFGHANISTAN": PAKISTAN'S NSA

National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf stated that the country was not completely optimistic about the Taliban government in Kabul as organized terrorist networks are still operating in Afghanistan and the Afghan soil was still being used against his country. Briefing the National Assembly Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs, Yusuf spoke about the threat posed to Pakistan by the presence of the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan in Afghanistan. He said organized terrorist networks are still operating in Afghanistan and the Afghan

soil is still being used against Pakistan. He mentioned that Pakistan is not completely optimistic of the Taliban government and a complete solution to all problems should not be expected with the Taliban coming into power.

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/pakistan-not-completely-optimistic-of-taliban-govt-in-kabul-nsa/articleshow/89160080.cms>

SRI LANKA:

ECONOMIC CRISIS TIGHTENS GRIP ON SRI LANKA; FINANCE MINISTER MENTIONED ABOUT TALKS WITH BONDHOLDERS AND

Sri Lanka's fast-depleting foreign reserves has accentuated the economic crisis in the country. People were struggling to afford essentials such as rice, pulses, vegetables, milk powder, fish, meat LPG cylinders and other fuel. Import restrictions imposed to save foreign exchange resulted in severe price hike. Consumer price inflation hit 14% last week.

Sri Lanka's Shippers Council and Joint Chamber of Commerce outlined serious concerns about the forex crisis, effecting the business of the country. In separate statement released, the business lobbies stated that delaying in foreign currency release were hampering the import of raw materials in turn missing deadlines of exports, creating a fear of losing orders. Finance Minister, Basil Rajapaksa at an

interview said that Sri Lanka was negotiating with bondholders and mentioned about talks with IMF as well.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/economic-crisis-tightens-grip-on-sri-lankas-hinterland/article38341126.ece>

<https://economynext.com/sri-lanka-facing-import-blocks-fears-of-export-ordering-shifting-amid-forex-trouble-89936/>

<https://island.lk/joint-chambers-urge-govt-to-put-sri-lanka-back-on-track/>

<https://www.ft.lk/front-page/Basil-hints-at-talks-with-IMF/44-729736>

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BEI ACTIVITY UPDATE: TAF PROJECT BANGLADESH ENTERPRISE INTITUTE ORGANIZED A DAY LONG LESSONS LEARNED MEETING AND FACEBOOK LIVE DISCUSSION IN KHULNA

On 26 th January 2022, BEI organized a day-long Lessons Learned meeting in Khulna to present the survey findings, conducted by the trainees of the ongoing project titled 'Building Capacity of CSOs/ NGOs and Media to Promote Accountability in Governance and Influence Elite Opinion'. Subsequent to their training in March 2021, the trainees were engaged in a participatory research named 'Accountability and Transparency Ensuring Good Governance during the COVID 19 pandemic: Stakeholders Perception' and developed a report based on the field research activity. Trainees of Khulna shared their knowledge, experiences and challenges faced during the project tenure while involving with the local stakeholders.

Forty six local stakeholders, which included government officials, elected representatives, members of civil society, non-profit organizations and

media attended the meeting. The timely initiative of Bangladesh Enterprise Institute was widely applauded and featured by the local media with much importance.

Following the lesson learned meeting, a 'Facebook Live Discussion' was held in the evening of 26 th January 2022 with the participation of seven selected trainees of Khulna. The program was live on social media (Facebook) to reach out to the wider audience. The trainees shared their opinions, suggestions and current situation of the Right of Information (RTI) act, National Integrity Strategy (NIS) and Annual Performance Agreement (APA). Amb. Humayun Kabir also joined the online session to share his opinion on the project outcomes.



BEI ACTIVITY UPDATE: GCCS PROJECT BANGLADESH ENTERPRISE INTITUTE ORGANIZED TWO ROUNDTABLE AND ONE FGD IN KHULNA, BARISAL AND SATKHIRA

Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI), in collaboration with Global Center on Cooperative Security (GCCS), is implementing a project titled 'Developing National Action Plan for Preventing Violent Extremism'. As part of the project, BEI organized two roundtable meeting to solicit views from the participants for developing a set of recommendations for the development of National Action Plan to prevent violent extremism in Bangladesh on 24 and 27 January 2022 at Tiger Garden International Hotel, Khulna and BDS Club, Barisal respectively where

30 participants attended in each meeting. Representatives from the media, civil society, private sector, religious leader and local NGO were invited to the program. The roundtable meetings were followed by a FGD conducted in Satkhira district under the same project. The FGD was conducted with the CSO Members of the city.

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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