

|| WEEKLY NEWS HIGHLIGHTS ||

BANGLADESH ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE (BEI)

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

|| June 18, 2021 – June 24, 2021 ||

SOUTH ASIA: COVID-19 CRISIS: AT A GLANCE

The Ministry of Public Health in **Afghanistan** reported 1,575 new cases of Covid-19 and 86 deaths across the country on June 24, 2021. The new cases came positive out of 5,096 suspected samples during the same period of time, according to the Health Ministry's data. Another 537 patients fully recovered during the same period of time. The total number of deaths exceeded 4,452 across the country since the outbreak of the pandemic over a year ago.

On June 24, 2021, **Bangladesh** reported 85 new death toll and 5,727 fresh cases of Covid-19. As of June 24, 2021 the total number of cases in Bangladesh reached at 8, 66,877 and total death toll reached to 13,787. The country has administered 2.62% vaccination of its population so far.

Bhutan reported seven new cases on June 24, 2021 and no death toll since the country reported only one death due to Covid- 19. In Bhutan, 1,970 cases of Covid-19 have been identified so far. Bhutan has administered 484,189 doses of Covid-19 vaccine as of June 24, 2021.

India reported 1,321 death toll and 54,069 new cases due to Covid-19 as of June 24, 2021. Country's total cases became 3, 00, 82,778 and total death toll reached to 3,91,981. In India, 3.78% of population were fully vaccinated till June 24, 2021.

Myanmar confirmed 149,927 positive cases of Covid-19 with a surge in death tolls to 3,269 as of June 24, 2021. The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) of the doctors and frontline workers made the vaccination drive uncertain.

Maldives reported 72,466 positive cases and 207 deaths till June 24, 2021. Till date, 34.69% of the population has been vaccinated. The government recently approved the emergency use of AstraZeneca vaccine, which is the 7th COVID-19 vaccine after Covishield, Pfizer, Sinopharm, Sputnik V, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson. The movement restrictions have been eased further in the current week.

Nepal's Covid-19 tally reached 627,854 with 1,511 new cases as of June 24, 2021. The Health Ministry reported 81 new deaths including figures from the past few days based on statistics from the Nepal Army. The countrywide death toll reached 8,894 till June 24, 2021. The number of active cases stood at 50,520 till date.

Pakistan reported major decrease in coronavirus cases. It has recorded lowest positivity rate since last eight months of the pandemic. According to the National Command and Operation Centre's daily statistics from June 24, 2021, total 39,017 tests for COVID-19 were conducted across the country in the last 24 hours, of which 663 returned positive, while 27 people lost their lives to the virus. The positivity rate currently stands at 1.69%.

Sri Lanka reported 246,109 positive cases and 2,769 deaths till June 24, 2021. 3.86% of the total population has been vaccinated so far. Seven areas of three districts have been put into strict lockdown. France has listed the country among the 16 red list countries and hence restricted the movement of people between these two countries.

Source: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> (John Hopkins University)

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BUSINESS AND INVESTMENT: BANGLADESH AMONG THREE COUNTRIES LEADING RECOVERY IN GLOBAL COTTON TRADE, USDA

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) said Bangladesh along with China and Turkey to lead the global cotton trade recovery. The USDA said in its June, 2021 report that the cotton demand will grow due to robust demand in China, Bangladesh, and Turkey. According to Bangladesh’s Export Promotion Bureau (EPB), the recent spurt in cotton import in the country is due to skyrocketing demand amongst local spinners, millers, traders and importers resulted from higher demand from the garment exporters as apparel export is on the path to recovery in the first 11 months of fiscal 2020-21. Bangladesh registered 11.1 per cent year-on-year growth to earn US \$ 28.57 billion from garment exports, alongside full utilization of capacities of mills by weavers and spinners.

The export data shows that the Bangladeshi garment sector is recovering fast with the rise in demand in the western world. A significant development was the return of woven shipments to the positive territory last month after declining for a year. The demand for woven items had fallen in the western world as formal events were suspended because of the lockdowns and fears over contracting Covid-19. However, it will take some time to recoup the industry’s losses incurred last year because of the fallouts of the Covid-19. During this period, the retailers and brands had been paying up but there were many who had gone bankrupt and were still delaying payments.

Source: <https://bd.apparelresources.com/business-news/trade/per-usda-bdesh-amongst-3-countries-leading-global-cotton-trade-recovery/>

BANGLADESH SEEKS INCENTIVE-BASED PACKAGE FOR SUSTAINABLE GRADUATION OF LDC

Foreign Minister Dr. AK Abdul Momen on June 18, 2021 called for an incentive-based and long-term package for the graduating and graduated countries from LDCs as they are at a high risk of sliding back both due to the Covid-19 impacts and the loss of LDC specific support measures. He made the statement while speaking as a keynote speaker at a high-level virtual event on ‘Building Resilience for Sustainable and Irreversible Graduation of the LDCs’ hosted by the Permanent Mission of Bangladesh in New York in collaboration with the Permanent Mission of Canada and the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (OHRLLS). The Foreign Minister also said most of the LDCs have limited fiscal buffers and absence of ex-ante insurance schemes against shocks will make their graduation trajectory highly challenging. He underlined the importance of adequate financing and resources as critical means for LDCs to keep pace with graduation expectations and emphasized that LDCs needed enhanced financing support to mitigate critical deficits in physical and institutional infrastructure and capacity building.

Source: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/06/18/momen-seeks-incentive-based-package-for-ldc-graduation>

AFGHANISTAN: AFGHANISTAN PRESIDENT ASHRAF GHANI TO VISIT USA ON JUNE 25, 2021

Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani will meet US President Joe Biden on June 25, 2021 the White House confirmed on June 20, 2021. Abdullah Abdullah, Chairman of Afghanistan's High Council for National Reconciliation will also be present. The meeting comes at a time when fighting between the Taliban and Afghan security forces has surged. The visit will highlight the enduring partnership between the United States and Afghanistan as the military drawdown continues.

Michael Kugelman, a US scholar of South Asian affairs, said it was an important visit, and "the fact that Ghani and Abdullah are

coming to Washington together is as significant as the visit itself." Earlier, the United States assured that it will remain deeply engaged with the government of Afghanistan to ensure that the country never again becomes a safe haven for terrorist groups who pose a threat to the US.

Source:
<https://www.dawn.com/news/1630591>

AFGHANISTAN: USA MULLS SLOWER AFGHANISTAN PULLOUT AS TALIBAN ADVANCES; UN URGES TALIBAN TO PROTECT CIVILIANS

The US military has said June 21, 2021 that the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan could slow down amid an unprecedented surge in the Taliban battlefield gains across Afghanistan. This remarks came from Pentagon as Afghanistan is embroiled in a searing conflict, with the insurgents closing in on major strategic hubs. At least ten districts in northern Afghanistan have been overrun by the Taliban and recaptured by Afghanistan armed forces over past days. Over 40 districts have fallen since May, 2021 when the withdrawal of foreign forces began. The situation in Afghanistan changes as the Taliban continue to conduct these attacks and invade district centers as well as spread threats and violence.

Meanwhile, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has demanded the Taliban to take practical measures for the protection of civilian lives. The UNAMA said that they had meeting with Taliban leaders this week in Doha where the UN concerns over the great pains

inflicted on Afghan civilians were shared with the militant leaders. The UNAMA called on Taliban to stay committed to the protection of civilian lives. The UNAMA has recently expressed concerns over the increased violence and civilian casualties in Afghanistan, saying that civilian casualties had a 41 per cent increase since the intra-Afghan dialogues began in Qatar in September, 2020. The UN mission in Afghanistan also warned against the potential loss of achievements gained in the past 20 years after the US withdrawal especially the future of women, minorities, human right activists and journalists.

Source:
<https://menafn.com/1102327907/UN-urges-Taliban-to-protect-civilians>

<https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/taliban-extend-territorial-gains-us-suggests-slower-afghan-pullout>

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AFGHANISTAN: USA TO SEND TROOPS TO KAZAKHSTAN AFTER AFGHAN WITHDRAWAL

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The United States plans to transfer soldiers to Kazakhstan after exiting from Afghanistan in September, 2021 to protect their national security interests, the US representative for Afghan reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad said recently. Kazakhstan government has also confirmed that Washington has demanded them to allow their soldiers in the largest Central Asian state. Khalilzad had said earlier in June, 2021 that his country would consider Central Asia as a potential location for stationing their assets for preserving their national security after the Afghan withdrawal.

"The United States has demanded via channels in the ministry of defense for negotiations over stationing of their troops in Kazakhstan after their withdrawal from Afghanistan," said a Kazakh official. The United States is to complete its troops withdrawal process from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021 after 20 years of presence under the title of War on Terror. The withdrawal was agreed in a peace deal with the Taliban in Doha in February, 2020.

Source:

<http://www.afghanistantimes.af/u-s-to-send-troops-to-kazakhstan-after-afghan-withdrawal/>

BANGLADESH: "PLANNED MEASURES HELPED BANGLADESH BE TOP THREE SDG PERFORMERS" - PRIME MINISTER SHEIKH HASINA; BANGLADESH RANKED AS THIRD MOST PEACEFUL COUNTRY IN SOUTH ASIA

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on June 22, 2021 said, government's planned measures for the country's development have put Bangladesh as one of the top three performers on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Index. She made the statement while virtually unveiling the cover of a memorial book titled "Durjog Jhuki Hrashe Bangabandhu" (Bangabandhu in Disaster Risk Reduction) in ECNEC (Executive Committee of the National Economic Council) meeting from her official Ganabhaban residence. According to the Sustainable Development Report 2021 launched recently by the Sustainable Development Solution Network (SDSN), Bangladesh ranked among the top three SDG performers.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on June 22, 2021 called for taking immediate collective action to help mitigate the impacts of the pandemic through putting forward six suggestions to consider in framing post-Covid-19 economic recovery plan in a pre-recorded message played in the three-day Qatar Economic Forum Virtual. The six suggestions included taking ambitious climate action to meet the goal of the Paris Agreement, leveraging science, technology, and innovation for closing the digital divide; having targeted international support to revitalize global trade and export earnings; contribute to the reintegration plan of migrant workers highlighted as vulnerable group by the host countries, business leaders and investors in the region; ensure new international support measures for the graduating LDCs to prevent any possible sliding back due to the pandem-

ic, and having an inclusive, sustainable and holistic recovery plan for shared prosperity.

In the meantime, the Global Peace Index published by Sydney-based think tank Institute for Economics and Peace shows that Bangladesh has gone up seven notches from 2020 and secured 91st place among 163 nations in the 2021 Global Peace Index. The Index measures the state of peace across three domains - the level of societal safety and security, the degree of militarization and the extent of ongoing domestic and international conflict. The improvement makes Bangladesh the third most peaceful country in South Asia behind Bhutan and Nepal and ahead of Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Singapore has been named the most peaceful Asian country, while Iceland remains the most peaceful nation in the world.

Sources:

<https://www.theindependentbd.com/post/263679>

<https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2021/06/22/covid-19-pandemic-is-a-test-for-global-solidarity-says-hasina>

<https://eastertimes.in/planned-measures-helped-bangladesh-be-top-3-sdg-performers-hasina/>

BANGLADESH: BANGLADESH WANTS CLEAR ROADMAP FOR ROHINGYA REPATRIATION; DHAKA 'DISAPPOINTED' OVER UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION ON MYANMAR

Foreign Minister Dr. AK Abdul Momen on June 16, 2021 stated that Bangladesh has sought a clear roadmap from the United Nations for repatriation of the Rohingyas to Myanmar. The statement came out at a bilateral meeting with Christine S. Burgen, the Special Envoy of the Secretary General on Myanmar at the Bangladesh Permanent Mission in New York. Foreign Minister of Bangladesh added that the solution to the crisis lies in safe and sustainable repatriation of Rohingya people to Myanmar. During the meeting, the Foreign Minister referred to the negative impacts of protracted presence of the Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar, particularly for the host community, and said if repatriation does not commence soon, it would only deteriorate the overall situation there and create instability in the region and beyond. He briefed the special envoy on Bhashan Char project where the Rohingyas can engage in economic activities and stressed the engagement of UN in providing humanitarian assistance there. Dr. Momen invited the Special Envoy to visit Bhashan Char when the Covid-19 situation improves.

In the meantime, Bangladesh abstained from voting a UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution and expressed "deep

disappointment" over the new United Nation General Assembly (UNGA) resolution on Myanmar as it failed to reflect on the Rohingya crisis and their repatriation from Bangladesh. A release issued on June 19, 2021 by Bangladesh Permanent Mission to the UN in New York stated that the resolution failed to adequately reflect on the Rohingya crisis and recommend any actions to resolve the crisis as it did not include any recommendations or actions on the issue of repatriation of the Rohingyas population to Myanmar. The Bangladesh Permanent Mission also said the resolution lacks determination to address root causes of the Rohingya crisis through collective means.

Sources:

<https://bdnews24.com/rohingya/2021/06/17/bangladesh-demands-clear-roadmap-from-un-on-rohingya-repatriation>

<https://www.tbsnews.net/rohingya-crisis/dhaka-disappointed-rohingya-crisis-not-focused-un-resolution-263737>

INDIA: DELTA PLUS VARIANT IDENTIFIED; USA CDC CLASSIFIES DELTA VARIANT AS 'VARIANT OF CONCERN'

The highly transmissible Delta variant of SARS-CoV-2 has mutated further to form the Delta plus' or AY.1'. The new Delta plus variant has been formed due to a mutation in the Delta or B.1.617.2 variant, first identified in India and one of the drivers of the deadly second wave. Although there is no indication yet of the severity of the disease due to the new variant, Delta plus is resistant to the monoclonal antibody cocktail treatment for COVID-19 recently authorized in India. The USA Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has classified the Delta variant as a 'variant of concern.'

The CDC said the Delta variant showed increased transmissibility, potential reduction in neutralization by some monoclonal antibody treatments under emergency authorization and potential reduction in neutralization from sera after vaccination

in lab tests. The variant of concern designation is given to strains of the virus that scientists believe are more transmissible or can cause more severe disease.

Sources:

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/health-fitness/health-news/coronavirus-new-variant-new-delta-plus-variant-in-india-all-you-need-to-know-about-the-new-strain/photostory/83539398.cms?picid=83539410>

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BHUTAN: BHUTAN MOST PEACEFUL COUNTRY IN SOUTH ASIA

Bhutan is the most peaceful country in South Asia according to the report entitled Global Peace Index (GPI) released on June 17, 2021. Bhutan ranks 19th out of 163 countries across the world in peacefulness. Bhutan is the only country outside of Europe and Asia-Pacific to rank in the top 20. The report stated despite its high level of peacefulness Bhutan had an overall deterioration in the score of 2020 GPI as Bhutan’s rank dropped four places from 15 in 2019.

After Bhutan, Nepal is the second most peaceful country followed by Bangladesh in the third as most peaceful country in South Asia ahead of India and Pakistan. The report states peacefulness in South Asia has deteri-

orated on the 2020 GPI with a fall of peacefulness in Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan.

Source:

<https://kuenselonline.com/bhutan-is-the-most-peaceful-nation-in-south-asia-says-gpi/>

BHUTAN: EFFORTS CONTINUE TO SECURE THE SECOND DOSE OF VACCINE IN BHUTAN

The Health Minister of Bhutan said the government was in consultation with 18 countries to get the vaccines as soon as possible as the country enters week-13 after the seven-day nationwide vaccination campaign. During her recent visit to Geneva, Switzerland, at the sidelines of the World Health Assembly, Bhutanese Health Minister Lyonpo met with several world dignitaries to discuss matters of global health concerns and securing vaccines for the second dose. Among the list of global health leaders, the Health Minister met representatives from GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, and the Health Minister of Switzerland, Alain Berset.

In the meantime, the White House announced that the US government was allocating 55 million doses from America’s own vaccine supply in an effort to end the pandemic globally. After missing the list of countries to receive the first 25 million doses, Bhutan has been identified as one of the beneficiaries of these vaccines from the US through the COVAX Facility. The Health Ministry had received a letter from the COVAX Facility confirming the allocation of 108,000 doses of AstraZeneca for Bhutan.

Source:

<https://kuenselonline.com/efforts-continue-to-secure-the-second-dose-of-vaccine/>

INDIA: PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI CALLED FOR INNOVATION AND INVESTMENT IN THE COUNTRY; INDIA COMMITTED TO FREE, OPEN, INCLUSIVE AND RULES-BASED INDO-PACIFIC

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on June 16, 2021 addressed the fifth Viva Tech conference and said India had offered what innovators and investors needed. He also invited the world leaders to invest in India based on the five pillars of talent, market, capital, ecosystem, and culture of openness. He also said India’s strides in the world of tech and start-up are well-known and the country is home to one of the world’s largest start-up ecosystems as several unicorns have come up in recent years.

Meanwhile, The European Union (EU) and India carried out a joint naval drill in the Gulf of Aden on June 18-19, 2021 to improve operational interoperability and promote peace and security in the key waterways. Both sides said, the EU and India are committed to a free, open, inclusive and rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, underpinned by respect for territorial integrity,

sovereignty and freedom of navigation and over flight and the influential grouping. The two sides are keen to enhance cooperation in the maritime security sphere in the Indo-Pacific region. In January, 2021, the 27-nation EU and India launched a dialogue on maritime security and agreed to deepen two-way cooperation in this domain. Both sides reaffirmed the primacy of international law, including the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). An identical statement was also issued by India’s defense ministry.

Sources:

<https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/live-updates-covid-19-has-put-conventional-methods-to-test-says-pm-modi-at-vivatech/story/441794.html>
<https://www.news18.com/news/india/eu-india-committed-to-free-open-inclusive-and-rules-based-indo-pacific-3874949.html>

INDIA: INDIA ABSTAINS FROM VOTE ON UNGA'S MYANMAR RESOLUTION

India along with Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal abstained from voting on a United Nations General Assembly resolution on Myanmar and India said the resolution was tabled hastily, and is not conducive to aiding joint efforts toward strengthening the democratic process in Myanmar. The draft resolution "The situation in Myanmar" was adopted on June 18, 2021 with 119 member states voted in favor, while 36 nations abstained and one country voted against it.

The resolution expressed "grave concern" at the February 1, 2021 coup and called upon Myanmar's military junta to immediately and unconditionally release President Win Myint, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and other government officials, politicians and those arbitrarily detained or arrested. It also called upon all member states to prevent the flow of arms into

Myanmar. India's Permanent Representative to the UN T S Tirumurti said in a statement, the resolution was tabled without adequate consultation with neighbors and regional countries. He added that India considers the resolution as counterproductive to the efforts of the ASEAN to find a solution to the current situation in Myanmar. He stated that India's views have not been reflected in the draft for adoption. India considered consultative and constructive approach involving the neighboring countries and the region remains important as the international community strives for peaceful resolution of the issue.

Source:

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-abstains-from-vote-on-unga-s-myanmar-resolution-101624129552897.html>

MYANMAR: UNITED NATION CALLS FOR AN ARMS EMBARGO IN MYANMAR

The United Nation General Assembly condemned the military regime's use of violence against the civilians and called for an arms embargo in the resolution adopted in June 18, 2021. Initial draft of the resolution used strong words for imposing arms embargo on the country, however on the request of ASEAN the text was modified as "calls on all member states to prevent the flow of arms into Myanmar".

The resolution calls on the Myanmar junta to stop all violence against peaceful protesters, restore democratic transition respecting peoples will, unconditional release of President Win Myint, State Counsellor Suu Kyi and other 5000 political prisoners and immediate implementation of the five-point consensus which junta agreed on with ASEAN on April, 2021. Among the 193 member states, 119 voted in favor of the resolution and 36 countries abstained from voting including Bangladesh, China, Russia, Thailand and Laos. Belarus was the only country to vote against it. Although, not legally binding but the UNGA resolutions have political significance.

The junta-controlled Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent letters of objection to the UN General Secretary and UNGA's President. The regime dismissed the resolution and termed it as an interference in their internal affairs based on 'allegations and false as-

sumptions'. Meanwhile, Myanmar's military regime leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing is on a visit to Russia for the Moscow Conference on International Security scheduled for June 22-24, 2021. Tatmadaw Navy chief, Admiral Moe Aung has also joined the International Maritime Defense Show (IMDS) held in St. Petersburg from June 23 to 27. It is assumed that these visits are intended for arms procurement from Russia defying the call of the International body.

Sources:

<https://www.thedailystar.net/myanmar-coup/news/united-nations-calls-halt-weapons-myanmar-2113777>

<https://www.un.org/pqa/75/2021/06/18/general-assembly-meeting-on-myanmar/>
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NEPAL: NEPAL'S TOP COURT REMOVES MOST OF CABINET MINISTERS OF CARETAKER GOVERNMENT

Nepal's Supreme Court delivered a fresh blow to embattled Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli by removing 20 recently appointed ministers, pending a ruling on whether a caretaker premier can make such sweeping cabinet changes. With the Himalayan country struggling to contain a deadly second wave of coronavirus infections and beset by political turmoil, Oli lost a vote of confidence in May, 2021 as a result of factional infighting within his Communist Party of Nepal (UML).

Oli dissolved parliament and ordered fresh elections for November, 2021 while staying on as caretaker prime minister until the elections are held. The Supreme Court is set to begin hearing dozens of petitions challenging Prime Minister Oli's dissolution of parliament. In a bid to hold onto power and ditch opponents within his own party, Prime Minister Oli earlier this

month dropped most ministers from his cabinet, and named 20 replacements, who were mainly members of a junior coalition partner. The ministerial appointments had been "against the spirit of the constitution", the Supreme Court judges said, as Oli was only a caretaker prime minister. The court's removal of the 20 ministers means the cabinet is left with just five members, including the prime minister.

Source:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/nepals-top-court-removes-most-cabinet-blow-caretaker-pm-2021-06-23/>

PAKISTAN: PAKISTAN PM IMRAN KHAN WARNS OF A CIVIL-WAR IF NO PEACE DEAL IN AFGHANISTAN

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan has called on the United States to find a political settlement to its war in Afghanistan before withdrawing from the country, as he ruled out hosting any US military bases to be used against other countries. Prime Minister Imran Khan was speaking in an interview to US news platform Axios and said that, "The Americans, before they leave, there must be a settlement," referring to a September 11, 2021 deadline set by the US government for its troops to withdraw from Pakistan's northwestern neighbor. He stated that "A political settlement in Afghanistan would mean a sort of coalition government. A government from the Taliban side and the other

side. There is no other solution."

Source:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/21/pakistan-imran-khan-axios-afghanistan-uighurs>

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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.

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