

|| WEEKLY NEWS HIGHLIGHTS ||

BANGLADESH ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE (BEI)

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

|| 18 March – 25 March 2022 ||

SOUTH ASIA: COVID-19 CRISIS: AT A GLANCE

Afghanistan has recorded a total of 168,550 cases of coronavirus since the beginning of the pandemic. Total deaths reported stood at 7,465 as of March 26.

Bangladesh reported no new death and 65 coronavirus cases on 26 March and has thus far recorded a total of 29,118 fatalities and 1,951,239 confirmed cases. Bangladesh has administered a total 229,224,717 Covid-19 vaccine doses, totaling 70.3% of the population.

Bhutan reported 445 new cases and no death on 26 March. A total of 24,761 cases have been registered until 26 March, while 75.66 % of Bhutan's population has been vaccinated.

India reported 149 deaths and 1,421 new coronavirus cases on 26 March, bringing the total number of cases to 43,019,453 while the total number of deaths now stands at 521,004. Until 26 March, 60.48% of Indian population has been vaccinated.

Maldives has 174,658 confirmed cases and 297 deaths so far.

Myanmar has 610,728 confirmed cases and 19429 deaths till now.

Pakistan reported 276 deaths and 31,812 positive cases in the last week.

Sri Lanka has 660,797 confirmed cases and 16,454 deaths altogether.

Nepal reported 10,687 new coronavirus cases on March 25 taking the nationwide inflection ally to 970,462 since the beginning of the pandemic. To date, the total number of deaths stands at 11,852.

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

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BUSINESS AND INVESTMENT: MINIMUM AGE FOR EMPLOYMENT 14 YEARS: BD TO RATIFY ILO CONVENTION; BEZA INKS DEAL TO PAVE WAY FOR JAPANESE ECONOMIC ZONE; INFLATION CLIMBS TO 6.17PC INDICATING HARSH FOOD PRICE IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh has fixed 14 years as minimum age for employment. Through this, the country intends to implement its commitment to eradicate all forms of child labor by 2025 and seeking existing GSP facility in the European Union. The country is also scheduled to ratify the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 138 on Minimum Age on March 21. To this end, a 15-member delegation, led by law minister Anisul Huq, departed Dhaka for Geneva to attend the 344th ILO governing body meeting. State minister for labour, Begum Monnujan Sufian is included in the entourage. During the ninth session of the EU-Bangladesh Joint Commission in October 2019, the government agreed to develop a NAP on the country's labor sector. Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA) and Bangladesh Special Economic Zone Limited have inked a deal on the development of a dedicated zone for Japanese investors in Narayanganj's Araihaazar. The agreement marks the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries. In March 2019, the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council approved the Foreign Direct Investment Promotion Project for the establishment of the Japanese economic zone at a cost of Tk 25.62 billion. The country's first government-to-government-based economic zone will sprawl over 1,000 acres of land in Araihaazar.

On the other hand, Bangladesh's economy has witnessed a 6.17 per cent inflation in February this year, the highest in 17 months. According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistic (BBS) data, in February 2022, the economy faced 6.22 per cent inflation on food items that was 5.6 per cent in January. This showed that the food inflation rate increased by 62 basis points in a month.

<https://today.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/public/last-page/minimum-age-for-employment-14-1647540205>

<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/beza-inks-deal-to-pave-way-for-japanese-economic-zone-1647512096>

<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/inflation-climbs-to-617pc-indicating-harsh-food-price-in-bangladesh-1647869850>

AFGHANISTAN: OIC MEETING PARTICIPANTS CALLED FOR SUPPORT OF AFGHANISTAN; CHINESE FOREIGN MINISTER AND RUSSIAN ENVOY VISITED AFGHANISTAN; TALIBAN ORDERED AFGHAN GIRLS' SCHOOLS SHUT HOURS AFTER REOPENING

The appeal for a trust fund was made at the 48th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, or OIC, a two-day event in the Pakistani capital. The discussions on further support for Afghanistan were welcomed by participants and analysts of a trust fund to provide humanitarian aid and enable rebuilding efforts in the nation. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan said during his keynote speech that it is important for nations to help Afghanistan and that sanctions imposed on the country should be removed to avoid a humanitarian crisis and strengthen the fight against terrorism.

The Taliban ordered girls' secondary schools in Afghanistan to shut just hours after they reopened, sparking confusion and heartbreak over the policy reversal. Foreign Minister Wang Yi embarked on a surprise visit to Afghanistan in an attempt to deepen political and economic ties between the two countries. Wang met with Taliban leaders in Kabul, his first trip to the country since Taliban took control in August. Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghani Baradar and Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi were two top Taliban officials present at the meeting, working together in Afghanistan's mining sector. Zamir Kabulov, Russia's special envoy for Afghanistan, and his accompanying delegation visited Kabul to hold talks with the officials of the Islamic Emirate as well as top Afghan politicians. The Russian delegation met with talks with Mullah Baradar and Muttaqi to discuss bilateral relations and extension of ties between Kabul and Moscow.

<https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-177224>

BANGLADESH: BANGLADESH VOTES IN FAVOR OF UKRAINE ON UN RESOLUTION; PARTNERSHIP DIALOGUE: US WANTS BANGLADESH TO JOIN IPS; WORLD HAPPINESS INDEX: BANGLADESH ADVANCES BY 7 NOTCHES

Bangladesh along with 140 other countries has voted in favor of a UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine. A total of 38 countries including India abstained while five countries: Russia, Belarus, Eritrea, North Korea and Syria voted against the resolution. The UN General Assembly adopted a resolution that calls out Russia's assault on Ukraine for creating a dire humanitarian situation, pushes for a humanitarian corridor, and demands to stop fighting.

In the meantime, USA undersecretary for political affairs Victoria Nuland has said there are economic, security and technological elements in Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) and Bangladesh has an intention to join it. The US will be hap-

py if Bangladesh joins most of the areas of this initiative. The US has been placing the issue of joining of Bangladesh in the IPS at different discussions for the last couple of years.

In other news, Bangladesh has moved up seven notches in the happiness index ahead of India, Pakistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. According to the UN-sponsored World Happiness Report 2022, Bangladesh has been ranked the 94th among 146 nations. India, Pakistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka placed 136th, 121th, 126th and 127th respectively while Nepal placed 84th in the happiness index. In the previous year's report, Bangladesh was ranked 101st among 149 countries.

BANGLADESH: WANG YI MEETS JAISHANKAR AND DOVAL, FOCUS ON RESTARTING STRAINED INDIA, CHINA TIES; VICTORIA NULAND: 'RUSSIA-CHINA AXIS NOT GOOD FOR INDIA; USA CAN HELP WITH DEFENCE SUPPLIES'; INDIA ABSTAINS IN UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON RESOLUTION BY UKRAINE AND ALLIES ON HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

China's foreign minister Wang Yi met his Indian counterpart S. Jaishankar and held delegation level talks with him. The visit is the first by any Chinese leader since 2020 standoff along the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh between the two countries. During the talk, Jaishankar told Chinese Foreign Minister that there will be no normality in India-China ties unless the troops amassed at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) are withdrawn. However, the talk ended without any joint statement or agreement on the way forward. Chinese foreign minister also met India's National Security Adviser Ajit Doval. While 15 rounds of commander-level talks and eight rounds of a special Working Mechanism on Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) for border affairs yielded "considerable progress", several friction areas remained between the two countries.

On the other hand, USA Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland has told Indian Express that the USA is ready to help India move away from dependence on Russia for defence supplies. While framing the Russia-China alliance over Ukraine as a debate between democracies and autocracies. She also said that NATO is a defensive alliance which is a voluntary alignment of countries who asked to join together to defend themselves. Meanwhile, India abstained from a resolution by Russia on the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. The resolution failed to get adopted by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as it got only two yes votes from Russia and China.

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/videos/news/wang-yi-meets-jaishankar-doval-focus-on-restarting-strained-india-china-ties->

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MYANMAR: ASEAN ENVOY SEES LITTLE HOPE OF BREAK-THROUGH IN MYANMAR; CAMBODIA, JAPAN LEADERS URGE MYANMAR JUNTA TO HONOR ASEAN PEACE PLAN

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Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn said last week the Myanmar issue was complicated and would take a long time to solve, as the “stakeholders were not ready to cooperate and still insist on fighting and eliminating one another.” Sokhonn visited Myanmar as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) special envoy for the country on March 21-23. He met with the country’s regime leader Min Aung Hlaing and some of his cabinet members, among others, but not with the country’s ousted democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

On the same topic, the prime ministers of Cambodia and Japan have urged the Myanmar junta to comply with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) five-point consensus, and pave the way for ASEAN members and development

partners to distribute much-needed humanitarian aid to the Myanmar people. The call for the junta to abide by the five-point consensus was made on Sunday during a state visit to Cambodia by Japan’s Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. Japan’s premier was in Cambodia to strengthen bilateral ties and to discuss economic and security cooperation, with the crises in Myanmar and Ukraine high on the agenda.

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/asean-envoy-sees-little-hope-of-breakthrough-in-myanmar.html>

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/cambodia-japan-leaders-urge-myanmar-junta-to-honor-asean-peace-plan.html>

MYANMAR: US SAYS MYANMAR COMMITTED GENOCIDE AGAINST ROHINGYA

The United States has determined that the violence against the Rohingya minority committed by Myanmar’s military amounted to genocide and crimes against humanity, an official told AFP last week. Hundreds of thousands of the mostly Muslim Rohingya community have fled Buddhist-majority Myanmar since 2017 after a military crackdown that is now the subject of a genocide case at the United Nations’ highest court in The Hague. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is due to officially announce the decision to designate that crackdown a genocide in remarks at the Holocaust Museum in Washington on Mon-

day, where an exhibit on “Burma’s Path to Genocide” using a former name for the country is on display.

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/us-says-myanmar-committed-genocide-against-rohingya.html>

NEPAL: CHINESE FOREIGN MINISTER VISITS NEPAL TO SHORE UP TIES; US BIPARTISAN CONGRESS DELEGATION TO VISIT NEPAL IN APRIL

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met top Nepalese officials during a three-day trip, which came just weeks after Nepal's parliament approved a contentious half-billion-dollar aid grant from the United States. Wang held talks with his counterpart, Narayan Khadga, and Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba. China has always had good relations with Nepal and in the past has been one of its biggest donors. However, China's help lately has come through loans financed by Chinese state-owned banks that must be repaid. The recently approved U.S. assistance, by contrast, was a grant for the construction of power transmission lines and improvement of roads in the Himalayan nation.

US delegation to be in Nepal right after Chinese foreign minister's visit.

A team of 25 Congressional members, the biggest ever, is flying into Kathmandu after the MCC compact's passage, which Washington has hailed. Nepali officials confirmed that the delegation comprises 25 members will be visiting Kathmandu. US Congress delegation visit is expected to be high-level exchanges later this year from both sides to mark the 75 years of the establishment of diplomatic ties between Nepal and the US, Nepali newspaper reported citing sources.

<https://kathmandupost.com/national/2022/03/26/wang-visit-an-opportunity-for-nepal-china-to-make-amends>

<https://tkpo.st/3CMfa3X>

PAKISTAN: PRIME MINISTER IMRAN KHAN FACED TOUGH CHALLENGE IN NO-CONFIDENCE VOTE; NATIONAL ASSEMBLY SESSION ADJOURNED WITHOUT TABLING OF NO-TRUST MOTION AGAINST PM

The much-anticipated session of the National Assembly with a crucial no-confidence motion filed by the opposition against Prime Minister Imran Khan on the agenda was adjourned till March 28 without tabling of the resolution. The ruling PTI's Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Shireen Mazari, Asad Umar and Ali Muhammad Khan were among those attended the session, as well as Grand Democratic Alliance's Dr Fehmida Mirza. From the opposition ranks, the opposition leader in the National Assembly, Shehbaz Sharif, PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari and PPP co-

chair Asif Ali Zardari, were also present. Reportedly, over 150 opposition lawmakers and around 50 treasury members attended the session.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/25/pakistan-opposition-imran-khan-no-confidence-motion-delayed>

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SRI LANKA: FLEEING FOOD SHORTAGE, ECONOMIC MISERY, FIRST TRICKLE OF SRI LANKAN REFUGEES AT TAMIL NADU

The ripples of Sri Lanka's economic crisis are now being felt on Indian shores. Last week, 16 Sri Lankan nationals, all Tamils from the Jaffna and Mannar regions in the north, reached Tamil Nadu in two batches. The first set of six refugees, including three children, were stranded near an island off the coast of Rameswaram and rescued by Coast Guard. The second group of ten reached late in the night. Sources in Tamil Nadu Police

told The Indian Express that the refugees were fleeing unemployment and shortage of food in Sri Lanka. And reports from the northern Tamil-dominated regions of Lanka indicate that this may just be the beginning. Intelligence officers in Tamil Nadu have obtained information that "around 2,000 refugees" are likely to arrive in the coming weeks.

SRI LANKA: US 'WELCOMES ACTION' BY SRI LANKA ON RECONCILIATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS'

The United States has "welcomed action taken by Sri Lanka to promote reconciliation and human rights" in a joint statement last week, despite Colombo's deteriorating record of jailing critics and ongoing rights abuses. The statement, released as part of the Fourth Sri Lanka - U.S. Partnership Dialogue in Colombo today, said that the regime in Sri Lanka "outlined its progress in reconciliation, in promoting and protecting human rights, and in strengthening democracy". "The United States acknowledged progress in these areas," it added. It comes as Under Secretary for Political Affairs of the U.S. Department of State Victoria Nuland landed in Colombo and met with Sri Lanka's Minister of Foreign Affairs G.L. Peiris. Nuland is the most senior US official to visit the

island since former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in October 2020.

<https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/us-welcomes-action-sri-lanka-reconciliation-and-human-rights>

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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 Companies, Bangladesh, under the Societies Registration Act.

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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