

|| WEEKLY NEWS HIGHLIGHTS ||

BANGLADESH ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE (BEI)

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

|| February 11, 2022 – February 17, 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 February 18.

Bangladesh reported 13 new deaths and 2150 coronavirus cases, as of February 19, 2022, and has thus far recorded a total of 1,931,304 fatalities and 28,944 deaths. 54.7% population of Bangladesh has been vaccinated.

Bhutan reported 347 new cases but no deaths as of February 19, 2022. A total of 9,557 cases have been registered, while 75.01% of Bhutan's population has been vaccinated.

India reported 673 deaths and 19,968 new coronavirus cases bringing the total number of cases to 42,822,473 while the total number of deaths stands at 511,903. Up until February 19, 56.45% of Indian population has been vaccinated.

Maldives reported 164,229 confirmed cases and 290 deaths as of February 19. The country has vaccinated 69.80% of its population.

Myanmar reported 562,364 cases of coronavirus cases and 19,327 deaths until February 19.

Nepal reported 10,687 new coronavirus cases on February 18, taking the nationwide infection tally to 970,462 since the beginning of the pandemic. To date, the total number of deaths stands at 11,852.

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

Sri Lanka had recorded a total 635,606 confirmed cases and 15,969 deaths. As of February 19, 64.50% of the population had been fully vaccinated.

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

Source: *John Hopkins University*

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AFGHANISTAN

U.S PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN PROPOSED SPLITTING BILLIONS IN AFGHANISTAN FUNDS BETWEEN 9/11 VICTIMS AND HUMANITARIAN AID; TALIBAN DELEGATION HELD MET EU, US DIPLOMATS IN DOHA; ARAB STATES STRESSED WOMEN'S RIGHTS TO TALIBAN IN AID TALKS IN DOHA

US President Joe Biden began clearing a pathway for releasing about \$3.5 billion in frozen Afghan reserve funds held in the United States to be used for humanitarian and other assistance in Afghanistan, while an equal amount would be reserved for families of 9/11 victims who have legal claims against the Taliban. The plan, including an executive order that President Biden signed is an attempt to grapple with some of the financial implications of Biden's decision to end the U.S. war in Afghanistan after 20 years of conflict. When the Taliban toppled the Afghan government last August, it left uncertainty concerning \$7 billion in Afghan central bank funds remaining in the United States.

Taliban delegates held talks with European Union's representatives in Doha. According to the statement released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), Taliban delegates reassured the EU envoys that the new ruling government of Afghanistan is committed to upholding the legitimate rights of the society. Gulf envoys stressed that women must be able to work and go to school, in talks with the Taliban foreign minister. Amir Khan Muttaqi met in Doha with ambassadors from the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on the first full day of his latest mission, where he is also to hold talks with European envoys.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/11/us-biden-to-split-frozen-afghan-funds-between-9-11-families>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/16/taliban-meets-with-eu-us-in-bid-to-unlock-funds-for-afghanistan>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/14/gulf-diplomats-urge-taliban-to-respect-womens-rights>

BANGLADESH

UK WANTS PLURAL, TRANSPARENT DEMOCRACY IN BANGLADESH: ENVOY; ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE: UN WORKING GROUP EXAMINES 17 CASES FROM BANGLADESH AND SEVERAL OTHER COUNTRIES; BANGLADESH IMPROVES ONE NOTCH IN EIU DEMOCRACY INDEX 2021, RANKS 75

British high commissioner to Bangladesh H. E. Robert Chatterton Dickson has said that the world community is regarding upcoming 2023 Bangladesh national election as very important for all; upon which the productive and better relationship with its friends depends. He commented at the "Meet the Reporters" program hosted by Dhaka Reporters' Unity (DRU) where he expressed his hope for a "fair and credible" process for the 2023 election. He reiterated that the election should be Bangladesh- led and as the country is fully capable enough to run a free and fair election. He added that the UK along with its ally support the plural and transparent democracy in Bangladesh as stated in the constitution of Bangladesh.

In the meantime, the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) has examined 17 reported cases of enforced disappearances from Bangladesh, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Kenya, Lebanon, Libya, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, and Saudi Arabia. A press release on its website said that the Working Group examined the cases during its 126th session, which took place between 7 and 11 February 2022 in Geneva, Switzerland, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The Working Group will hold its 127th session from 9-13 May 2022.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh has improved one notch from the previous year securing 75th position and has been placed at 'hybrid- regime' out of 165 countries and two regions in the London- based EIU (Economist Intelligence Unit) Democracy Index-2021. The country ranked 76th rank in the EIU Democracy Index-2020.

<https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/uk-wants-plural-transparent-democracy-in-bangladesh>

<https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/un-working-group-examines-17-cases-from-bangladesh-other-countries>

<https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/bangladesh-improves-on-notch-ranks-75>

BANGLADESH

BANGLADESH- INDIA FRIENDSHIP DIALOGUE: BANGLADESH REITERATES FIRM COMMITMENT TO ENSURING REGIONAL PEACE; BANGLADESH FOREIGN SECRETARY TO VISIT INDIA SOON FOR TALKS, OPENING OF CHENNAI MISSION

At tenth round of the Bangladesh-India Friendship Dialogue, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Md Shahrar Alam has highlighted the growing friendship between Bangladesh and India and talked about the unwavering commitment to ensuring peace and stability in the region and beyond. He was speaking at the India Friendship Dialogue, titled 'Reliving Bangabandhu's Vision for India - Bangladesh Friendship' held in Shimla, India. The dialogue has been organized by the India Foundation and the Bangladesh Foundation for Regional Studies.

On the other hand, Bangladesh foreign secretary Masud Bin Momen is going to India next week to observe the preparatory work for foreign minister's trip to

India and to open a new deputy high commission in Chennai. He will meet Indian foreign secretary Harsh Bardhan Shringla and other officials during his trip from 23- 25 February. Bangladesh currently has assistant and deputy high commissions in Agartala, Guwahati, Kolkata and Mumbai.

<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/national/shimla-dialogue-bangladesh-reiterates-firm-commitment-to-ensuring-regional-peace-1645183921p>

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/bangladesh-foreign-secretary-to-visit-india-soon-for-talks-opening-of-chennai-mission-101644848290541.html>

INDIA

CHINA FAILED TO HONOR PACT: INDIA AT QUAD MEET; INDIA, AUSTRALIA MAY STRIKE INTERIM TRADE PACT IN MARCH; INDIA OUTLINES FOCUS AREAS AT MEETING ON COVID-19 GLOBAL ACTION PLAN

External affairs minister S Jaishankar has reiterated India's contention that the standoff with China in the Ladakh sector of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) was the outcome of the Chinese side disregarding written agreements on not massing troops on the border. He was responding to a question on whether the situation at the LAC figured in his meeting with his Australian counterpart Marise Payne. Both Jaishankar and Payne said the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, is not against any country and the group's focus is on building prosperity and resilience through initiatives focused on Covid-19 vaccines, infrastructure development and maritime security. The Chinese foreign ministry had criticized the Quad as a "tool for containing and besieging China to maintain US hegemony" and to stoke confrontation and undermine international solidarity and cooperation.

In the meantime, India and Australia are likely to move for a comprehensive free trade agreement (FTA) in 12 months by ending the existing interim "early harvest" trade pact in the next one month. The decision was taken after a meeting between commerce ministers of the two countries in Delhi. While addressing a joint press conference with his Australian counterpart Dan Tehan, India's commerce minister Piyush Goyal said that India will come up with interim agreement in the next 30 days. The Australian

trade minister said both partners want a "quick but high quality" agreement. In this regard, the broad areas include goods, services, investment, energy, logistics, standards, rules of origin, and sanitary and phytosanitary measures.

Meanwhile, while participating in a Covid-19 global action meeting convened virtually by US secretary of state Antony Blinken, Foreign Secretary Harsh Bardhan Shringla outlined New Delhi's focus areas for the Global Action Plan. From now on, India will contribute to a Covid-19 Global Action Plan by strengthening global supply chains and working with partners and the World Health Organization (WHO) to improve sub-optimal approval and regulatory processes that are impeding stable supplies. The virtual meeting focused on coordinating global action for the Covid-19 response, especially in vaccination, supply chain resilience, supporting healthcare workers, addressing information gaps, ensuring non-vaccine interventions, and strengthening health security architecture around the world.

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/china-failed-to-honour-pact-india-at-quad-meet-101644689807126.html>

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-australia-may-strike-interim-trade-pact-in-march-101644602083931.html>

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MYANMAR

JAPAN STILL TRAINING MYANMAR MILITARY PERSONNEL DESPITE CONDEMNING COUP; MYANMAR RANKED SECOND-LEAST DEMOCRATIC NATION IN WORLD; MYANMAR JUNTA INVITES SOME ETHNIC ARMED GROUPS TO PRELIMINARY PEACE TALKS

For all its initial condemnation of last year's coup and the Myanmar junta's use of force against unarmed protesters—as well as its vote in favor of a resolution on Myanmar at the United Nations General Assembly—Japan continues to admit Myanmar military personnel to its education and training programs. Since the coup, the army has killed more than 1,500 civilians who opposed military rule in the country. Currently, 10 members of the Myanmar military—including two senior officers and two elite candidates—are receiving practical security training for several months to a year. Elite candidates receive basic education and training, including live ammunition drills, over a five-year period, according to The Asahi Shimbun newspaper. They were accepted after the military coup in February 2021. The Japanese Defense Ministry said it accepts military personnel from 36 countries, including Myanmar, under its Self-Defense Forces (SDF) Law. Since 2015, Myanmar military cadets have been studying at Japan's National Defense Academy, receiving both academic and military training.

On another note, Myanmar joined North Korea and Afghanistan among the three least-democratic countries in the world last year, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU)'s latest Democracy Index. Of the 167 countries surveyed, Myanmar—which has been in chaos followed the military coup in February last year—ranked 166th, just ahead of Afghanistan and below North Korea, according to the EIU's new report. The coup in Myanmar and the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan spared North Korea from occupying the bottom of the table for the first time. Myanmar was ranked 135th on the 2020 index. The EIU's annual survey rates the state of democracy across countries on the basis of five measures—electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of government, political participation, democratic political culture, and civil liberties. Norway, New Zealand, Finland, Sweden, Iceland, Denmark, Ireland, Taiwan, Australia and Swit-

zerland comprised the top 10 in the annual report.

Meanwhile, The Myanmar junta released an announcement on Sunday inviting ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) excluding those it has declared as “terrorist groups” to attend preliminary peace talks on the upcoming Union Day, which will fall on Saturday. The offer comes as it struggles to control the country a year after the coup and faces intensified clashes nationwide with civilian resistance forces and ethnic armed groups allied with them. The junta, which is notorious for its brutal killings, shelling, air strikes and atrocities against civilians including in ethnic states, claimed in the Sunday announcement that achieving enduring peace for the entire nation was a policy that formed part of its roadmap. “It is necessary to focus on perpetual peace by seeking a solution in negotiations in accord with democratic practices in order to solve the political problems [that have existed] in successive eras,” the regime stated in the announcement. It added that except groups declared as terrorist groups, it had invited not only ethnic armed organizations that are signatories to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) but also non-NCA signatories to the Diamond Jubilee Union Day ceremony and the pre-coordination meeting on “perpetual peace talks”. The junta has declared the parallel civilian National Unity Government (NUG), its parliamentary body the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) and it armed wing the People's Defense Force as terrorist groups.

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/japan-still-training-myanmar-military-personnel-despite-condemning-coup.html>

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-ranked-second-least-democratic-nation-in-world.html>

NEPAL: Nepal's Chief Justice Is Suspended, Deepening Political Chaos

Cholendra Shumsher Rana became the second Chief Justice of Nepal to face impeachment procedure in Parliament in seven years over allegations of corruption. Based on earlier precedence, CJ Rana has been suspended pending final disposal of the case, and Dipak Karki, the senior most judge in the Supreme Court has taken over as the acting CJ. The sudden development followed a swift and secret operation where signatures of 98 Members of Parliament belonging to

Nepali Congress, Unified Socialists and Maoist Centre were collected and submitted in the Parliament secretariat in the morning. The country's main opposition party, Nepal Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist, has called for a party meeting where it is likely to decide the list of judges it wants impeached.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/13/world/asia/nepal-chief-justice-suspended.html>

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PAKISTAN

PRIME MINISTER IMRAN KHAN TO VISIT RUSSIA; GAS PIPELINE PROJECTS AMONG PM'S RUSSIA VISIT AGENDA; PAKISTAN'S EXPORTS OF GOODS AND SERVICES WILL EXCEED \$38 BILLION IN THE ONGOING FISCAL YEAR, WHICH IS FOR

PRIME MINISTER IMRAN KHAN TO VISIT RUSSIA; GAS PIPELINE PROJECTS AMONG PM'S RUSSIA VISIT AGENDA; PAKISTAN'S EXPORTS OF GOODS AND SERVICES WILL EXCEED \$38 BILLION IN THE ONGOING FISCAL YEAR, WHICH IS FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THE COUNTRY'S HISTORY

Prime Minister Imran Khan is set to undertake a crucial visit to Russia later this month, the first by a Pakistani premier in over two decades for a meeting with President Vladimir Putin. Prime minister Imran Khan is expected to visit Russia from February 23 to 26, 2022. His planned visit to Russia is expected to take place after his visit to China where he attended the Beijing Olympics and held talks with top Chinese leadership including President Xi Jinping. Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan will take up the agenda of two mega gas pipeline projects during his planned first visit to Russia. Pakistan and Russia are expected to strike major deals during the trip, including a movement forward on Russian investment to build a USD 2 billion worth gas pipeline, in the

wake of the country's fast-depleting local reserves. Pakistan's civilian and military leaderships were on the same page on signing the Pakistan Gas Stream Project and the gas pipeline from Kazakhstan project with Russia.

Pakistan's exports of goods and services will exceed \$38 billion in the ongoing fiscal year, which is for the first time in the country's history, projected Trade Development Authority of Pakistan (TDAP) Chief Executive Arif Ahmad Khan. In a meeting with a delegation of the Council of Economic and Energy Journalists, he said that in the first six months of fiscal year 2021-22, goods shipments to overseas markets rose to \$15 billion, posting an increase of 18%.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2343937/gas-pipeline-projects-among-pms-russia-visit-agenda>

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2343897/exports-projected-to-hit-38-billion>

SRI LANKA

SRI LANKAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION CALLS FOR ABOLITION OF ANTI-TERROR LAW PTA; SRI LANKAN FM TO VISIT INDIA TO FORMALIZE ECONOMIC RELIEF PACKAGE

Sri Lanka's Human Rights Commission (HRC) on February 16 called for the complete abolition of a controversial anti-terror law that gives police sweeping powers to arrest suspects without trial, amid mounting pressure from the Tamil and Muslim political parties over concerns it violates human rights. Enacted in 1979, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) allows authorities to make warrantless arrests and searches if a person is suspected of involvement in a "terrorist activity." "It is explicitly for those who threaten or use violence unlawfully to target the civilian population by spreading fear thereof to further a political-ideological or religious cause," said Justice Rohini Marasinghe, Chairperson of Sri Lanka's HRC. The HRC statement comes a day after political parties representing the minority Tamil and Muslim communities started a campaign to collect signatures in support of repealing the controversial law. The signatories included religious leaders, leaders of the political parties, civil society, trade union members, human rights activists and the general public, organizers of the campaign said. The HRC statement assumes significance as the government issued a gazette notification last month saying the PTA will be amended, amid growing pressure from the EU and the UN Human Rights Council.

In another news, Sri Lanka's Finance Minister Basil Rajapaksa will visit India in a fortnight to formalize India's economic relief package for the

island nation facing a serious forex crisis, Foreign Minister G.L. Peiris said on Tuesday. This will be Mr. Rajapaksa's second visit to New Delhi in two months. In January, India announced a \$ 900 million loan to Sri Lanka to build up its depleted foreign reserves and for food imports, amid a shortage of almost all essential commodities in the country. Mr. Peiris told reporters here that Rajapaksa's visit to India in December "brought in many fruitful outcomes as we received \$ 2.4 billion assistance from India as a result". Basil Rajapaksa, the younger brother of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, during his visit to New Delhi in December, briefed the Indian side on the economic situation in Sri Lanka and his government's approach in addressing the challenges. During his visit, discussions took place on deepening cooperation in areas of food and health security, energy security, the balance of payment issues and Indian investments in Sri Lanka among others.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lankan-human-rights-commission-calls-for-abolition-of-anti-terror-law-pta/article65055210.ece/amp/>

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lankan-fm-to-visit-india-to-formalise-economic-relief-package/article65052192.ece/amp/>

SRI LANKA: SRI LANKA'S FOREIGN RESERVES IN FREEFALL DESPITE CURRENCY SWAPS FROM INDIA AND CHINA; SRI LANKA SAYS IT WON'T RUSH TO IMF DESPITE RISING ECONOMIC RISKS

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Sri Lanka's foreign currency reserves have fallen over 24% to USD \$2.36 billion by the end of January from USD \$3.14 billion at the end of December 2021, despite currency swaps and debt deferments from India and China. The January foreign reserves only provide 1.4 months' worth of import cover. However, critics have pointed out that the actual number to be at USD \$800 million of useable reserves, roughly 3 weeks' worth of imports. The USD \$2.36 billion includes the Chinese swap of 10 billion yuan, which equals roughly USD \$1.5 billion. The holding of yuan although bolstering the nation's reserves is not being used to finance vital imports or settle debt repayments as the country spirals into a deepening economic crisis. Sri Lanka has received USD \$ 900 million worth of financial assistance from India and is expecting a further USD 1 billion in March to facilitate essential imports such as food and medicines. The government is allegedly said to be discussing further credit lines from Pakistan, Japan and Australia.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's foreign exchange reserves are plummeting, essential imports are stalling and opposition leaders and some

experts warn that time is running out to avoid a sovereign default that would further upend the economy. But Finance Minister Basil Rajapaksa is focused on helping the domestic economy shake off the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic before he seeks assistance from the likes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a close aide said. "We should not be in a hurry to run here and there without sorting out local issues," said Milinda Rajapaksha, who works closely with the finance minister and is an additional director general in the media ministry. It could take up to four to five months to fix issues like local supply chains and restart businesses, which alongside a pickup in tourism and remittances - both major foreign exchange earners - would help stabilize the economy, Rajapaksha said.

<https://www.reuters.com/markets/rates-bonds/sri-lanka-says-it-wont-rush-imf-despite-rising-economic-risks-2022-02-11/>

<https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankas-foreign-reserves-freefall-despite-currency-swaps-india-and-china>

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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