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Bangladesh Foreign Policy Watch

CGS Centre for Governance Studies



January 14

Bangladesh Government Criticizes UN Human Rights Office's Statements on Election

The Government of Bangladesh has accused the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) of overstepping its mandate and misrepresenting facts in its recent statement on Bangladesh. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs argued that the OHCHR's remarks were subjective, biased, and aimed at politicizing human rights. The government defended its commitment to democratic principles, highlighting the peaceful conduct of elections on January 7, 2024. The statement criticized the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) for resorting to violence and hindering the democratic process. The government rejected OHCHR's allegations of reprisals, calling them baseless and unsubstantiated. In a statement on January 8, UN Human Rights Chief Volker Turk condemned the violence and repression witnessed during the January 7 election in Bangladesh, which was boycotted by major opposition parties. Turk urged the country to take measures to strengthen its democratic processes.

A Bi-Weekly Roundup of Key Events

Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud Addresses Global Concerns on Bangladesh Election

Newly appointed Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud asserted that both the East and West express eagerness to collaborate with the newly formed government after the January 7 national election, despite concerns raised by some countries. Mahmud, previously the information minister, emphasized the government's commitment to leading the country forward with cooperation from both regions, emphasizing Bangladesh's foreign policy of "friendship to all, malice towards none." Addressing concerns over the election, Mahmud highlighted its conduct as free, fair, and peaceful, while acknowledging the value placed on concerns raised by certain countries. The minister also outlined plans to strengthen economic diplomacy and address the Rohingya crisis diplomatically.

January 15

International Congratulatory Messages Pour in for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Re-Election

Members of the House of Commons in London, including Virendra Sharma and Paul Bristow, along with Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council (CEIC) Chairman Lord Marland, and Labour Party Friends of Bangladesh, have sent congratulatory messages to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on her historic fifth term and fourth consecutive win.

The MPs praised Hasina's leadership, highlighting Bangladesh's progress under her guidance. CEIC expressed commitment to supporting Bangladesh's economic prosperity, while Labour Party Friends of Bangladesh affirmed collaboration with the government and organizing visits for UK Parliamentarians. The messages emphasized goodwill for a peaceful and prosperous future for Bangladesh.

Indian High Commissioner Optimistic About Strengthening Bangladesh India Ties

Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Pranay Verma expressed confidence in the deepening bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India. During a meeting with newly appointed Foreign Minister Dr. Hasan Mahmud, Verma highlighted the countries' commitment to building peaceful and prosperous societies. The high commissioner emphasized the exploration of additional areas of cooperation for further development. This meeting marked Mahmud's first interaction with a foreign envoy since assuming office. Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S Jaishankar also conveyed congratulations and expressed eagerness to enhance the India-Bangladesh friendship.

January 17

Bangladesh Faces 63% Surge in Foreign Debt Repayment Amid Rising Obligations

The Bangladesh government's foreign debt repayment is projected to surge by 63% to \$4.5 billion in the fiscal year 2025-2026, signaling increased strain on the nation's finances. Rising disbursement of foreign loans and corresponding interest payments is elevating the debt servicing requirement. In the current fiscal year, repayments may exceed the \$2.79 billion budget target, reaching \$3.57 billion. Multilateral creditors like the World Bank account for 59% of Bangladesh's loans. The increased fund release for major projects and substantial budgetary support are contributing to the rise in loan repayment obligations. Concerns over lower revenue mobilization and export shocks are highlighted.

US Ambassador Expresses Intent to Strengthen Ties with Bangladesh



US Ambassador to Bangladesh Peter Haas conveyed a desire to work closely with Bangladesh on mutual interests, including climate change, business expansion, and the Rohingya crisis. After his meeting with Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud, Haas did not discuss past election criticisms but affirmed the US commitment to collaboration. Hasan emphasized the need for continued support for the Rohingya and cited challenges like fog impacting voter turnout.

EU Ambassador Foresees Significant Advancement in Ties with Bangladesh



European Union (EU) Ambassador to Bangladesh, Charles Whiteley, anticipates a substantial deepening of relations with Bangladesh over the next five years. The cornerstone will be the new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), a more politically focused accord than its predecessor. Whiteley envisions mature discussions encompassing foreign policy, global affairs, and shared priorities such as the Middle East, Ukraine, and the Rohingya crisis. Stressing the importance of a modern relationship, the ambassador lauds Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud's familiarity with Europe. The EU plans to negotiate the wide-ranging PCA soon, discussing topics from renewable energy to global challenges and acknowledging Bangladesh's role in the Global Gateway flagship program. The ongoing EU election expert mission aims to support Bangladesh's path forward based on its recommendations.

January 18

US Dismisses Speculation on Recognition of Hasina's Term

The United States dispelled speculation that it wouldn't recognize Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's fourth consecutive term. State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller clarified that the criticism of the election process doesn't imply non-recognition of the term. The U.S. encourages transparent investigations into reported violence and calls on all parties to reject political violence. Concerns persist over opposition arrests and election irregularities. While regretting non-participation by all parties, the U.S. condemns violence during and before the elections. The clarification emphasizes the importance of investigations and the rejection of political violence for building international trust.

EU Ambassador Commends Hasina's Reelection and Pledges Enhanced Cooperation

European Union (EU) Ambassador to Bangladesh, Charles Whiteley, congratulated Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on her fourth consecutive term, expressing optimism for elevated EU-Bangladesh relations. Whiteley noted the EU's commitment to enhancing existing benefits under the Global Gateway initiative, covering sectors like environment, governance, renewable energy, and transportation. The EU envoy reaffirmed continued support under the Everything but Arms (EBA) scheme, and pledged GSP plus facilities post-Bangladesh's graduation from LDC status. He praised government initiatives for people with disabilities and marginalized groups. Prime Minister Hasina expressed satisfaction with the 50-year EU-Bangladesh relationship, anticipating further elevation.

UN Secretary-General Congratulates PM Hasina on Reelection

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres extended his congratulations to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on her reelection. Guterres affirmed the UN's commitment to collaborating with Bangladesh, highlighting the country's significant contributions to UN peacekeeping, generosity towards Rohingya refugees, and efforts in achieving Sustainable Development Goals. Expressing appreciation for Bangladesh's participation in the Global Crisis Response Group, Guterres conveyed trust in continued support to address global challenges, including climate change and international financial architecture reform. The letter emphasized the enduring partnership between the UN and Bangladesh for the benefit of its people.

January 20

Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar Lauds Growing Ties with Bangladesh

Indian External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar expressed satisfaction over the flourishing Bangladesh-India relations during a meeting with newly appointed Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud on the sidelines of the 19th NAM Summit in Kampala, Uganda. Jaishankar congratulated Mahmud on his appointment and discussed various mutual interests. Both ministers acknowledged the excellent bilateral relations and discussed Mahmud's upcoming visit to New Delhi, scheduled for February 7. The visit aims to further strengthen ties, marking Mahmud's first bilateral visit since assuming office. The agenda for the visit is yet to be finalized, with potential meetings with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi under consideration.

January 21

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Shifts Diplomatic Focus to Economic Aspects

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has signaled a shift in Bangladesh's diplomatic strategy, prioritizing economic aspects over politics during her latest term. Inaugurating the Dhaka International Trade Fair, Hasina emphasized that the country's diplomacy will now concentrate on economic goals. She stressed the need to diversify the export basket, identifying jute products and leather as potential revenue sources. The Prime Minister highlighted the importance of creating opportunities for various products and boosting their global market presence. The Dhaka International Trade Fair is underway, focusing on exhibiting local products and identifying export opportunities in diverse markets.

January 22

UN Calls for Solidarity and Funding for Rohingyas and Host Communities

The UN spokesperson, Stéphane Dujarric, has urged more support and resources for the refugees and the local people in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, who are hosting them. Dujarric emphasized that no refugee should be repatriated against their will. He stated that the situation in Myanmar does not meet the requirements for the voluntary and dignified return of the Rohingyas, who fled violence and persecution in their homeland. Dujarric reiterated previous statements made by the UN, saying, "What we have said in the past from this podium, what the Human Rights High Commissioner has said, remains unchanged."

Bangladesh Seeks Enhanced Security Cooperation with China

Bangladesh's home ministry has sought increased cooperation from China in coastal, border, and cyber security, presenting a list of security priorities for potential Chinese training. Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan expressed gratitude as he received the 'Great Wall Commemorative Medal' from Chinese Ambassador Yao Wen, acknowledging China's willingness to support security efforts. Bangladesh aims to address cyber, transnational, and international crimes, seeking expanded training opportunities. The Chinese envoy praised the strong bilateral relationship, emphasizing China's commitment to supporting Bangladesh's national security and sovereignty. The home ministry anticipates further collaboration over the next five years in various security domains.

Bangladesh Border Guard Sepoy Killed in Firing Incident with Indian Forces

A tragic incident occurred at the Benapole border on Jashore, where a member of Bangladesh's Border Guard, Mohammad Raisuddin, was fatally shot by personnel from India's Border Security Force. The incident unfolded during a patrol's attempt to intercept cattle smugglers crossing the border. Amid dense fog, Raisuddin became separated from the team, and it was later learned that he had been injured in BSF firing. Bangladesh Border Guard expressed strong protest, demanding a thorough investigation into the incident. His body was handed over to Bangladesh authority on January 24.

January 24

British Foreign Minister's Message

British Foreign Minister David Cameron highlights the evolving bilateral relationship with Bangladesh, transitioning from a developmental focus to an economic, security, and migration partnership. Emphasis is placed on boosting trade, strengthening security, and collaborating on global issues such as climate change and the welfare of Rohingya refugees. Prioritizing cooperation on addressing illegal migration, democracy, and human rights. Cameron extends congratulations to Hasan Mahmud on his appointment as Foreign Minister and expresses eagerness to work together. The British High Commissioner delivers Cameron's letter outlining these priorities to Mahmud.

January 25

Foreign-funded development projects backlogged to \$45B

Bangladesh faces a significant backlog of \$48 billion in foreign loans, hindering forex reserves. To expedite loan disbursement, a high-level committee, led by the PM's principal secretary, will fast-track foreign-funded projects. Challenges such as poor feasibility studies and delays in approvals contribute to project delays. The Planning Commission aims to enhance project selection and appoint experienced directors. Development partners' conditions and slow decision-making also impede progress. Discrepancies in sectoral allocations compared to the 8th Five-Year Plan raise concerns about goal achievement. The committee seeks to address these issues for economic revitalization.

January 28

PM Hasina Invites British Investors to Establish Special Economic Zone



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has invited British investors to consider Bangladesh for large-scale investments, offering a special economic zone exclusively for them. During a meeting with a British parliamentary delegation led by Virendra Sharma, MP, Sheikh Hasina emphasized the country's strategic location and connectivity to vast markets. She highlighted the government's efforts in digitizing procedures for investor convenience, stating that 110 out of 170 items are already online. The British MPs pledged collaboration to advance development initiatives for Bangladesh's socioeconomic progress.

Foreign Minister Urges UN to Spotlight Rohingya Crisis Amidst Rakhine Tensions



Foreign Minister Dr. Hasan Mahmud has urged the United Nations (UN) to prioritize the Rohingya issue globally, highlighting the current tense situation in Rakhine state as a hindrance to repatriation. During a meeting with UN resident coordinator Gwyn Lewis, Mahmud raised concerns about reduced humanitarian aid for Rohingyas due to global conflicts. Lewis acknowledged the challenging conditions in Rakhine and affirmed the UN's commitment to work on repatriation. The minister emphasized the need for increased humanitarian assistance and cooperation. Lewis also discussed climate change, Bangladesh's LDC graduation, and ongoing collaboration with the new government.

China Invites Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for Official Visit to Deepen Cooperation

China has extended an invitation to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for an official visit to Beijing, expressing readiness to deepen mutually beneficial cooperation. Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud confirmed ongoing discussions to schedule the visit at a convenient time. During the meeting with Chinese Ambassador Yao Wen, the sides discussed bilateral relations and international affairs. China reiterated firm support for Bangladesh's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, opposing external interference. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina last visited China in July 2019, fostering diplomatic ties and participating in the 13th Summer Davos Forum in Dalian.

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