

26 February | 2024

Bangladesh Foreign Policy Watch

cgs Centre for
Governance Studies



February 12

Bangladesh Raises Concerns Over Ganges Water Sharing Deal with India



Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud addressed the pressing issue of the expiring Ganges Water Sharing Treaty during his maiden visit to India. He revealed discussions with Indian officials, including External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, regarding the renewal of the 30-year deal set to end in 2026. While hopeful for progress, Mahmud disclosed that the much-awaited Teesta water-sharing deal remained pending due to objections from the West Bengal government since 2011. Despite challenges, both nations aim to resolve these issues post-India's general elections. Additionally, Mahmud engaged in talks on security matters and border killings, emphasizing the need for non-lethal means along the shared borders.

A Bi-Weekly Roundup of Key Events

February 13

The government reverses its stance on export subsidy decision

After pressure from leaders in the readymade garment sector, the government has reversed its decision to exclude five apparel products and three countries from the export subsidy scheme. The central bank has issued a new circular, reinstating cash incentives for the five products and adding India, Japan, and Australia to the list of eligible markets. While the rates of cash incentives remain reduced, the effective date has been shifted from January 1 to February 13. Leaders from various garment associations, including the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, have expressed satisfaction with the government's decision, anticipating a boost in export competitiveness for the RMG and textile sector.

February 14

PM Urges Timely Release of Foreign Loans for Development

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has instructed officials to ensure the prompt disbursement of foreign loans for vital development projects, particularly those addressing climate change concerns.

During the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council meeting, the PM greenlit 10 project proposals, comprising four revised initiatives and six new ones spanning sectors like health, education, energy, and urban resilience. The country grapples with a dollar shortage since 2022, attributed to reduced exports and remittances against soaring import bills. To mitigate this challenge, the government is procuring loans from the IMF while also implementing import restrictions on select products.

Indian national detained for trespassing

Krishna Kumar, an 18-year-old Indian man from the Madhubani district in Bihar, was apprehended by the Border Guard Bangladesh for unlawfully entering Bangladesh through the Patgram border in Lalmonirhat. He was detained from the Burimari Ufarmara Sholagharia border area for his illegal entry. Subsequently, he was handed over to the Patgram Police Station, where a case was filed against him.

February 15

Bangladesh down 2 notches in Democracy Index 2023

According to the 2023 Democracy Index, Bangladesh witnessed a decline in its ranking from 73 to 75, accompanied by concerns over the fairness of the elections held in 2024. Since 2008, Bangladesh has been classified as a hybrid government. Despite scoring well in areas such as the election process, voter security, foreign influence, and public service execution, it lags behind in political involvement and civil rights.

The report highlights broader regional trends, with South and Southeast Asia receiving the lowest rankings. Countries including Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the United States, and India are categorized as imperfect democracies, indicating ongoing challenges in their democratic systems.

Bangladesh Returns 330 Myanmar Citizens Amid Border Tensions

Amid ongoing internal strife along the Myanmar border, Bangladesh facilitated the return of 330 Myanmar citizens, comprising soldiers, Border Guard Police (BGP), and civilians. The operation, led by the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), saw the Bangladeshi ship Karnaphuli carrying 165 passengers sail from the Inani naval port to hand over the individuals to a waiting Myanmar Navy vessel at the maritime boundary. A five-person team from the Myanmar BGP, led by Police Lieutenant Colonel Myo Thura Naung, oversaw the repatriation process. The BGB remains vigilant, closely monitoring the border to prevent further unlawful entries.

UN Expresses Concerns Over Muhammad Yunus Amid Fresh Allegations

Recent events surrounding Nobel laureate Prof. Muhammad Yunus have prompted concerns from the United Nations (UN). Yunus, suspected of fortifying his Grameen offices, faces fresh accusations, raising eyebrows at the UN. Stéphane Dujarric, spokesperson for UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, acknowledged Yunus as a valued UN partner while stating the UN's awareness of the issue. The controversy arose following Yunus' claims of "illegal" takeover of the Grameen Telecom Bhaban headquarters during a news conference. Denying involvement, Law Minister Anisul Huq mentioned complaints filed by the National Board of Revenue and the Anti-Corruption Commission against Yunus.

Nine Migrants Found Dead on Mediterranean Ship Near Tunisia

Tunisian authorities made a grim discovery as they found nine deceased migrants aboard a ship off the coast of Zarzis in the south. The provincial prosecutor's office is investigating the likelihood that they succumbed to gasoline fumes at the vessel's bottom. Among the victims were men from Syria, Egypt, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The ship, carrying over fifty individuals, suffered damage from water seepage. This incident underscores the perilous journey thousands of irregular migrants undertake yearly to reach Europe, with Tunisia and Libya serving as primary departure points. According to the International Organization for Migration, 2,498 individuals died or went missing attempting to cross the central Mediterranean last year.

February 16

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Engages in Munich Security Conference 2024



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina participated in the three-day Munich Security Conference (MSC) 2024 in Munich, Germany, accompanied by Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud. The conference, running from February 16 to 18, provides a platform for high-level discussions on global security challenges and marks the MSC's 60th anniversary.

Attending various meetings, including with Qatar's Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister Abdulrahman Al-Thani and Women Political Leaders (WPL) President Silvana Koch-Mehrin, Sheikh Hasina reinforces Bangladesh's engagement in international security dialogues. Her presence underscores Bangladesh's commitment to contributing to global peace and security.

Sheikh Hasina has proposed six key recommendations to address the arms race and climate financing challenges. Urging international leaders to redirect funds from military spending to climate finance, she emphasized the importance of opening up climate finance for vulnerable nations. Sheikh Hasina highlighted the critical need to address the disparity between funding for mitigation and adaptation efforts and called for an end to conflicts and civilian casualties. She commended French President Macron for allocating one billion euros to Bangladesh and called for reforms in the global financial framework to facilitate easier access to international climate funds.

Bangladesh and France to Ink \$1 Billion Climate Agreement

During Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's upcoming visit to France, Bangladesh and France are set to sign a \$1 billion Climate Adaptation Pact. This agreement aims to provide funding, predominantly through grants and concessional loans, to aid Bangladesh in combating climate change impacts. The pact will prioritize locally-led initiatives such as polder construction, improved water management, sanitation, and preservation of the Sundarbans. Additionally, both countries expressed intentions to boost bilateral trade and invest in enhancing railway infrastructure.

Russian Ambassador Affirms Bilateral Ties with Bangladesh Amidst Ukraine Discussions

Russian Ambassador to Bangladesh Alexander Mantytskiy expressed optimism regarding Bangladesh's balanced foreign policy toward Ukraine and its potential impact on relations with Russia. Mantytskiy praised Bangladesh's diplomatic approach, emphasizing Russia's independent perspective on Bangladesh. Additionally, he voiced support for conducive conditions in Myanmar and advocated for the repatriation of Rohingya refugees. Discussing potential collaborations, Mantytskiy mentioned Bangladesh's interest in purchasing Russian weaponry and proposed trade agreements, including discounted gas and oil sales and bilateral commerce using national currencies. Despite regional complexities, Mantytskiy highlighted Russia's commitment to fostering mutually beneficial ties with Bangladesh.

February 17

Ukraine Invites Bangladesh to Join Peace Initiative Amidst Moscow's Rejection



President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine extended an invitation to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh during their first meeting at the Munich Security Conference. Zelenskyy proposed Bangladesh's involvement in implementing the Ukrainian Peace Formula and participation in the inaugural Global Peace Summit. Despite Russia's opposition to the formula, Zelenskyy expressed gratitude for Bangladesh's support for Ukraine's sovereignty within the UN. Prime Minister Hasina emphasized Bangladesh's commitment to peace and friendship with all nations, advocating for an end to wars. Despite speculation, both leaders discussed enhancing trade ties and ensuring peace amid Bangladesh's longstanding foreign policy of maintaining amicable relations with all nations.

Rohingya Seek Refuge as Myanmar Conflict Escalates

As the conflict between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army intensifies, Rohingya residents of Rakhine State seek refuge aboard boats along the Naf River. Over 200 Myanmar citizens were turned away by the coast guard in Teknaf Upazila at the border. Approximately 400 to 500 Rohingya from Lalbunnya fled their homes and boarded boats, reports Mohammed Zubair, chairman of the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights. Law enforcement agencies remain vigilant amid reports of gunshots and mortar fire in various areas. The junta, having ousted a democratically elected civilian government, faces growing armed opposition from ethnic minority groups.

February 18

Bangladeshi Workers Overpay for Jobs in Malaysia

Bangladeshi workers face exorbitant costs securing jobs in Malaysia, surpassing those of workers from other nations due to poor migration diplomacy, middlemen, and agency syndication. Despite Bangladesh's zero migration cost policy for key sectors, enforcement failures have allowed corrupt recruiters to exploit migrants for profit. Many, predominantly from Bangladesh and Nepal, find themselves stranded in Malaysia as promised jobs vanish upon arrival. In response, Malaysia has initiated a review of bilateral labor migration agreements with all source countries, including Bangladesh, citing grave concerns over workers' rights violations.

Myanmar Incursions Prompt Alarm in Teknaf

Residents of Teknaf, Bangladesh, were gripped by fear and panic as sounds of explosions and gunfire echoed from the Myanmar side of the border. Amidst the turmoil, five Myanmar nationals, including a woman with bullet wounds, arrived in Bangladesh by boat, claiming to seek medical treatment. The Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) officials, already on high alert, intensified patrols and security measures along the border to prevent further incursions or violence. The incident underscores escalating tensions and the urgent need for vigilance to safeguard border communities from potential threats.

February 19

UN Refugee Agency Calls for Assistance as Rohingya Crisis Escalates at Bangladesh-Myanmar Border

The UN Refugee Agency has urged Bangladesh to consider admitting Rohingya refugees stranded in border areas amidst clashes between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army. However, Bangladesh has declined further Rohingya intake, citing the immense strain of hosting over a million refugees, lack of international support, and security and social challenges in the camps. Tensions escalate at the border, with Bangladesh's Border Guard and Coast Guard intensifying patrols along the Naf river to deter Rohingya infiltration attempts. Locals report hearing frequent explosions and gunfire from across the border, highlighting the urgency of addressing the ongoing crisis.

February 20

India Offers Defence Collaboration to Bangladesh, Extends USD 500 Million Credit Line

Indian High Commissioner Pranay Verma announced India's readiness to share its defense manufacturing capabilities with Bangladesh, aiming to enhance bilateral defense cooperation. This announcement came during the Seminar on Indian Defence Equipment (SIDE 2024) hosted by the High Commission of India in Dhaka, where various Indian defense companies showcased their products and services. India has extended a USD 500 million Defence Line of Credit to Bangladesh, which can facilitate joint ventures in defense manufacturing. Lt Gen MR Shameem, Principal Staff Officer of Bangladesh Armed Forces Division, also attended the meeting, underscoring the importance of bilateral collaboration in defense initiatives.

February 21

US Official Commends Bangladesh Partnership

Scott Urbom, the US Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary at the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, lauded Bangladesh as a vital partner of the United States and expressed optimism about strengthening cooperation in the future. Urbom also marked International Mother Language Day, honoring the sacrifices of Bangla language heroes and recognizing the global influence of the Bangla language. The Bangladesh Embassy in Washington DC organized a day-long program to commemorate the historic occasion, featuring activities such as laying floral wreaths, raising the national flag, hosting discussions, screening documentaries, and arranging cultural events.

February 22

US Calls for Compliance with Financial Regulations in Bangladesh

Matthew Miller, spokesperson for the US State Department, urges elected officials in Bangladesh to adhere to the country's laws and financial regulations concerning corruption. Recent reports, including one from Bloomberg, allege that former land minister Saifuzzaman Chowdhury amassed a significant fortune in the UK and US, valued at 200 million pounds sterling—equivalent to one percent of Bangladesh's foreign reserve. The US is closely monitoring these reports and emphasizes the importance of the Government of Bangladesh ensuring that all elected officials comply with financial regulations.

Finance Minister Acknowledges Strain on Debt Repayment

Finance Minister Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali acknowledges the daunting task of meeting foreign loan obligations and curbing inflation in Bangladesh. Data from the Economic Relations Division (ERD) reveals that Bangladesh's foreign debt surged to \$62.4 billion in FY23, nearly ten times its previous levels, largely driven by infrastructure projects funded through non-concessional loans with high interest rates. Projections indicate that Bangladesh's foreign debt payments will exceed \$4 billion in FY25 amidst dollar shortages and declining forex reserves. Meanwhile, Bangladesh's inflation rate soared to 9.86 percent in January 2024, the highest in a decade, prompting the finance minister to emphasize the gradual nature of addressing inflationary pressures.

February 23

No global leader raised concerns about elections says PM

During a recent press conference, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina discussed her trip to Germany for the Munich Security Conference and bilateral meetings with world leaders. She noted that no concerns were raised about Bangladesh's recent landslide victory in the general election. Hasina urged an immediate end to global conflicts, illegal occupations, and atrocities while calling on wealthy nations to fulfill their commitments to combat climate change. Emphasizing the importance of mutual partnership, she addressed bilateral issues such as trade, investment, LNG supply, the Rohingya crisis, and violence in Gaza. Hasina underscored Bangladesh's unwavering commitment to peace, sovereignty, and global security through her participation in the conference.

Contributors

Kazi Rhid

Research Assistant at Centre for Governance Studies (CGS)
rhid@cgs-bd.com

Marzana Mahnaz

Research Assistant at Centre for Governance Studies (CGS)
marzana@cgs-bd.com

Ishrat Jahan Shithi

Research Intern at Centre for Governance Studies (CGS)
ishratjahan@cgs-bd.com

Bahauddin Ahmed

Digital Coordinator at Centre for Governance Studies (CGS)
bahauddin@cgs-bd.com