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Bangladesh Foreign Policy Watch

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A Bi-Weekly Roundup of Key Events

September 12

UK wants free and fair elections

Sheikh Hasina's UNGA Trip: A critical analysis

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Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, arrived in New York on September 18, 2023, leading a large delegation to participate in the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Although attending the UNGA is a regular event, this visit holds special significance due to its timing, with the Bangladesh national election just three and a half months away, and ongoing US pressure for a free and fair electoral process. Let's take a closer look at this high profile visit.

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The UK and Bangladesh engaged in their fifth Strategic Dialogue, emphasizing the importance of a free, fair, and violence-free election in Bangladesh. They agreed to sign Standard Operating Procedures for the return of irregular Bangladeshi citizens and create a joint working group to address student and worker mobility to the UK. The dialogue also covered topics like climate change, trade, human rights, and the Rohingya issue, showcasing their shared commitment to a modern partnership. The UK also announced a funding of \$3.7 million for Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh.

September 14

European Parliament Raises Concerns Over Human Rights in Bangladesh

The European Parliament has passed a resolution expressing grave concern over deteriorating human rights in Bangladesh. It calls for the government to create a safe environment for NGOs, activists, and religious minorities, urging adherence to international commitments, notably the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The resolution condemns the recent sentencing of two Odhikar leaders and calls for the quashing of their ruling. Additionally, it calls for the reinstatement of Odhikar's registration, access to approved foreign grants for civil society organizations, and raises questions about Bangladesh's Everything but Arms (EBA) preferences in light of human rights violations. Bangladesh's Foreign Ministry expressed disappointment with the resolution, claiming Odhikar's lack of neutrality.

September 15

Bangladesh delivers humanitarian assistance to Libya



Bangladesh has dispatched emergency relief supplies to assist flood victims in Libya, where cyclone Daniel and floods have caused devastation. A Bangladesh Air Force C-130J aircraft carried relief materials and life-saving medicines to aid those affected.

September 16

Bangladeshi Cattle Trader Shot Dead by BSF

A Bangladeshi cattle trader, Mizanur Rahman, was fatally shot by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) near the Jibannagar border in Chuadanga. The incident has prompted calls for a flag meeting between the Bangladesh Border Guard (BGB) and BSF to address the situation.

September 20

Singapore Upgrades Dhaka Consulate to High Commission

Singapore will elevate its consulate in Dhaka to a high commission starting October 1, showcasing the deepening economic and people-to-people ties between the two nations. Singapore's Foreign Affairs Minister, Vivian Balakrishnan, conveyed this upgrade during a meeting with Bangladesh's Foreign Minister, AK Abdul Momen, at the 78th United Nations General Assembly in New York. Minister Momen encouraged increased Singaporean investment in Bangladesh, especially in its special economic zones, further enhancing bilateral cooperation.

7th TICFA meeting held



The United States and Bangladesh convened the seventh meeting of the United States-Bangladesh Trade and Investment Cooperation Forum Agreement (TICFA) Council. Key discussions included labor reforms, investment policies, digital trade, intellectual property protection, and agricultural cooperation.

The United States emphasized its commitment to workers' rights, freedom of association, and combating violence against workers and union organizers. They encouraged Bangladesh to extend these rights to Special Economic Zones and Export Processing Zones. Additionally, the importance of streamlining the union registration process and enhancing labor inspections was stressed.

Both parties affirmed their commitment to data protection and discussed improvements to Bangladesh's Data Protection Act. Progress was noted in removing the cotton fumigation requirement on U.S. cotton exports, an issue spanning two decades.

Intellectual property protection and enforcement were deemed essential for innovation, with ongoing dialogue about amendments to IP-related laws and regulations. Concerns about Bangladesh's ranking as a source economy for counterfeit clothing were raised by the US.

EU opts not to deploy full election observation team

The European Union (EU) has decided not to deploy a full-scale election observation mission for the upcoming national polls in Bangladesh. In a letter to the chief election commissioner, the EU cited uncertainty regarding whether the necessary conditions for a fair election would be met. The EU had conducted an exploratory mission in July to assess the feasibility of a full observation mission. While the letter mentioned exploring "other options," it did not elaborate on them.

September 21

Sri Lanka completes repayment of loan from Bangladesh

Sri Lanka has fully repaid a \$200 million loan from Bangladesh, concluding the two-year currency swap agreement. The final \$50 million installment, along with a \$4.5 million interest payment, has been settled. This repayment comes as Sri Lanka's economy starts to recover from a severe crisis.

September 22

Sheikh Hasina addresses UNGA



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh emphasized the importance of not politicizing human rights issues to pressure developing countries in her 19th address to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).

She urged world leaders to work together for peace and economic prosperity, expressing concern about eroding trust in international organizations. She addressed challenges including the Rohingya crisis, climate change, and the impact of the war in Ukraine on global stability. Bangladesh's upcoming graduation to a developing country in 2026 was noted, with a call for continued support during this transition. Hasina also affirmed Bangladesh's commitment to global peace and security through its contributions to UN peacekeeping operations and expressed concern over emerging terrorist threats and acts that harm religious harmony.

US imposes visa measures

The US Department of State has announced that it is currently implementing visa restrictions on individuals from Bangladesh who are deemed responsible for or involved in undermining the democratic election process. This group encompasses government officials, political party members, and law enforcement personnel. These measures reaffirm the US commitment to supporting free, peaceful elections in Bangladesh. Those targeted, along with their immediate families, will be ineligible for US entry.

Sheikh Hasina's UNGA Trip: A critical analysis

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Key highlights



Throughout the UNGA session, the Bangladeshi delegation actively engaged in various high-level events, held meetings with international dignitaries on the UNGA sidelines, and signed treaties and agreements. Here are the key takeaways.

Signing of BBNJ Treaty

On September 20, 2023, Sheikh Hasina signed the Treaty on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) at the UN Headquarters in New York.

UNCLOS' current framework inadequately tackles these issues, resulting in biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation due to climate change, overfishing, pollution, and deep-sea mining. This treaty addresses these gaps through the preservation and sustainable utilization of marine biodiversity beyond national boundaries.

Given its extensive maritime boundaries and diverse marine ecosystems, Bangladesh stands to benefit significantly from this treaty. By becoming a party, the country can play a crucial role in addressing global challenges like overfishing and marine biodiversity loss. The treaty also facilitates cooperation, technology transfer, and capacity building, empowering Bangladesh to conserve and responsibly use high seas resources.

Bilateral meetings

Sheikh Hasina held courtesy meetings with several world leaders during the 78th UN General Assembly, including the Presidents of Timor-Leste and Sri Lanka, and the Prime Minister of Denmark. Discussions centered on various bilateral issues.

High-level events



Sheikh Hasina addressed the "Sheikh Hasina Initiative of Community Clinics" event on universal health coverage, participated in a "Fair International Financial Architecture" discussion, and spoke at a "Pandemic Prevention and Response" meeting during the 78th UNGA. Additionally, she attended a session on climate ambition and adaptation.

In her 19th UNGA speech on September 22, Hasina urged against politicizing human rights issues and highlighted concerns about eroding trust in international organizations. She discussed challenges such as the Rohingya crisis, climate change, and the impact of the Ukraine war on global stability, while emphasizing Bangladesh's commitment to peace and security.

Negotiating the election

It could be stated without exaggeration that those closely following Bangladesh's politics were more focused on the developments on the sidelines of the main UNGA events. This heightened interest stemmed from the several high-level meetings between the US and the Bangladesh delegation during these sidelines discussions, where the emphasis was consistently placed on the necessity of a free and fair election.

Furthermore, the ruling party and its allies attempted to create an impression that this visit would resolve the so-called 'misunderstanding,' as described by an adviser to PM Hasina, between the US and the AL government. Interestingly, prominent Indian media outlet The Hindu had previously commented that Sheikh Hasina's UN trip would be part of the 'greater international engagement' that commenced with her attendance at the G-20 Summit in India. This engagement would aim to alleviate the domestic and international pressures mounting on the Awami League government in the lead-up to next year's elections.

However, the sequence of events reveals that the visit has failed to achieve its goal. Let's delve into how these events unfolded.

During the UNGA sidelines on September 19, US Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, Uzra Zeya, engaged in discussions with Bangladesh's Foreign Secretary, Masud Bin Momen, underscoring the significance of free and fair elections and freedom of expression.

On the same day, PM Sheikh Hasina attended a dinner hosted by US President Joe Biden. A photograph from the event, featuring the Bangladeshi PM and her daughter alongside the US President and First Lady, was shared. Notably, this photo failed to generate the same level of excitement as their earlier selfie during the G-20 summit, which the ruling party, AL, had portrayed as a sign of improved relations between the two governments.

On September 22, Sheikh Hasina held discussions with Uzra Zeya on the UNGA sidelines, with a specific focus on Bangladesh's upcoming election. Following this meeting, Bangladesh Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen stated during a press briefing that the government aims to ensure the next election is both free and fair. However, when the US emphasized the importance of maintaining peace during the election, the Bangladeshi response was that they couldn't guarantee it.

Interestingly, on the same date, the US Department of State declared that it had initiated the enforcement of visa restrictions on Bangladeshi individuals held responsible for or involved in subverting the democratic election process in Bangladesh. This action followed the May 24, 2023 announcement of a new visa policy by the US, aimed at supporting a fair election in Bangladesh and assisting those working to restore the democratic system.

The announcement of visa restrictions on the heels of discussions during the UN visit signifies that, despite a four-month interval since May, the Bangladesh government has failed to create a conducive environment to alleviate US concerns about holding a free and fair election in the country.

On the other hand, it also indicates that the ruling AL government's efforts toward greater international engagement have not received a favorable response from the United States, which is leading the Western pressure campaign to address Bangladesh's democratic deficit.

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