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Bangladesh Foreign Policy Watch

CGS Centre for Governance Studies



A Bi-Weekly Roundup of Key Events

April 8 Brazilian Foreign Minister Visits Bangladesh

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has urged Brazil to consider direct imports of readymade garments from Bangladesh, a departure from the current practice of using intermediaries. During a meeting with Brazilian Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira, an invitation from President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to attend the G20 Task Force meeting in Rio de Janeiro was extended to Hasina. In addition to discussing trade, Hasina expressed a desire for Brazil's assistance in advancing football development in Bangladesh. As a gesture of goodwill, Vieira presented Hasina with a jersey from Brazil's national football team.

Bangladesh is also pushing for duty-free access for its goods in Brazil, aiming to address the existing trade gap between the two countries. A seminar was convened to explore trade opportunities and challenges. Notably, Bangladesh's exports to Brazil amounted to \$0.17 billion, while imports totaled \$2.59 billion during the fiscal year 2022-23.

Acknowledged for its socioeconomic progress, Bangladesh aims to bolster trade and investment ties with Brazil, viewing the nation as a strategic partner. Both countries recognize the importance of fostering balanced trade relations and acknowledge the potential for mutual growth through collaborative efforts.

April 6 Myanmar Border Guard Members Seek Refuge in Bangladesh Amid Conflict

Seven additional members of Myanmar's Border Guard Police (BGP) have fled to Teknaf in Cox's Bazar due to clashes with the Arakan Army. Bangladesh has extended shelter in compliance with international law, and those injured are being cared for. Owing to recent tensions in the neighboring nation, multiple Myanmar government forces' personnel have sought refuge in Bangladesh on several occasions. Since March 11, a cumulative of 194 individuals from Myanmar have crossed into Bangladesh and are currently under the supervision of the 11th Border Guard Battalion (BGB) at Naikhongchhari.

April 9

Malaysian Authorities Targeting Bangladeshi Workers, Not Rogue Employers

The Malaysian Socialist Party (PSM) has accused Malaysian police of prioritizing the prosecution of Bangladeshi migrant workers over their employers, who allegedly confiscated passports and failed to provide jobs and salaries. Despite complaints lodged by both migrants and the PSM, there has been no action taken against the employers. In a twist, both PSM and Malayiakini now face a defamation case filed by Beaks Construction and Suria Harmoni.

According to reports, Bangladeshi workers have filed complaints against Beaks Construction and Suria Harmoni for withholding job opportunities, salaries, and confiscating passports. However, Malaysian police detained the workers following a clash and are reportedly investigating based on the complaints filed by the employers rather than addressing the grievances of the workers. PSM is demanding an independent investigation into the matter and urges authorities to take action against the employers involved.

April 16

UK P&I Club Negotiates \$5 Million Ransom for Hijacked Ship MV Abdullah



A UK-based P&I club arranged a \$5 million ransom to secure the release of the hijacked vessel MV Abdullah and its crew from pirates off the Somali coast. The ransom, delivered via airdrop in three waterproof bags, was verified by the pirates before they freed the ship and its crew. P&I clubs, which provide insurance coverage for ship owners and operators in case of mishaps or liabilities, often engage in negotiations and facilitate ransom payments during hijackings. The MV Abdullah was seized on March 12 and released on April 14 following negotiations. This incident is not the first encounter with piracy for KSRM; their vessel MV Jahan Moni was previously held for ransom in 2010.

More BGP Personnel and Civilians Enter Bangladesh

Amid ongoing clashes between Myanmar's military junta and the ethnic Arakan Army, an additional 68 individuals, including both personnel and civilians, have sought refuge in Bangladesh.

The recent influx brings the total number of arrivals since March 11th to 264. Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) is in the process of verifying identities and confiscating weapons and ammunition from those who carry them. Myanmar remains embroiled in widespread conflict, with the military engaged in battles against various armed resistance groups following the 2021 coup, resulting in considerable casualties in recent months.

Greece Regularizes Bangladeshi Citizens

During a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the 9th Our Ocean Conference in Athens on April 16th, Greece announced the regularization of around 10,000 Bangladeshi individuals, with potential for further regularization in the future. Greece also unveiled plans to employ Bangladeshi professionals in sectors such as agriculture, tourism, hospitality, and construction.

The two Foreign Ministers pledged to enhance cooperation between their nations across multiple domains, including migration, trade, investment, shipping, workforce recruitment, and the development of renewable energy infrastructure. Additionally, they committed to establishing a diplomatic mission in Dhaka.

Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud urged his Greek counterpart, George Gerapetritis, to encourage Greek businesses to import high-quality Bangladeshi products and facilitate exports from Bangladesh. Furthermore, the ministers agreed to collaborate on constructing a legal framework within the shipping sector.

April 17

Bangladesh's Ranking Declines in Freedom Index

According to the latest Global Freedom and Prosperity Report by the Atlantic Council, Bangladesh holds the 141st position out of 164 nations on the Freedom Index, categorizing it as "mostly unfree". In the South Asian region, Bangladesh lags behind Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan in terms of freedom, ranking 8th out of 12 countries in South and Central Asia.

The report highlights a 22-year continuous decline in Bangladesh's political freedom, citing a reduction in civil liberties, political rights, and pressures on the electoral system as contributing factors. Despite this decline, Bangladesh demonstrates resilience in terms of prosperity, securing the 99th spot out of 164 on the Prosperity Index, also labeled as 'mostly unprosperous'.

Furthermore, the report reveals a downward trend in political freedom in Bangladesh since 2000, with the country currently placed at 130th out of the 164 countries assessed.

Sheikh Hasina May Cancel Trips to Saudi Arabia and Gambia

Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, is considering the cancellation of her forthcoming visits to Saudi Arabia and The Gambia amidst escalating tensions in the Middle East. Originally scheduled from April 23-27, she planned to visit Thailand, followed by Saudi Arabia from April 28-29, and The Gambia from May 3-6. However, the itinerary for her trip to Thailand is expected to remain unaffected.

During her visit to Thailand, Prime Minister Hasina is slated to participate in the 18th session of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. Additionally, she is anticipated to engage in bilateral discussions with her Thai counterpart, Srettha Thavisin, with the aim of signing agreements pertaining to energy, trade, and investment.

April 18

US trade bodies oppose tariff hike idea

Four major American trade bodies, including the AAFA, NRF, RILA, and USFIA, have opposed the idea of higher tariffs on apparel imports from Bangladesh and four other countries. They argue that such tariffs ultimately burden end-consumers. The US International Trade Commission (USITC) is investigating the price hike and supply glut of garment items from Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Pakistan. Bangladeshi apparel exporters face one of the highest tariffs at 15.62 percent in the US, which imported more than \$116 billion worth of garment items last year. Bangladesh's share stands at 9.3 percent. The associations contend that tariffs increase costs for US businesses and consumers, rather than foreign exporters, and that higher tariffs on clothing would particularly harm low- and middle-income consumers. Imposing tariffs on other source countries would be counterproductive to US companies' efforts to diversify supply chains. Instead, they recommend renewing the GSP programme and expanding it to include certain apparel products.

Brunei to Recruit Bangladeshi Workers

The first batch of Bangladeshi workers is set to move to Brunei in early May through a government-to-government agreement managed by BOESL. The migration process started on March 1, involving costs between Tk44,000 and Tk56,000, with Brunei hiring for various skilled and less-skilled positions. Around 50 workers are expected to migrate to Brunei by the end of this month or the first week of May.

Dutch-Bangla JVC to Invest in Bangladesh

BSK Bangladesh Ltd., a Netherlands-Bangladesh joint venture, plans to establish a bag manufacturing industry in Cumilla EPZ. The company will invest US\$ 6.14 million and aims to produce 3 million pcs of various bags annually. This initiative will create job opportunities for 1,032 Bangladeshi nationals. An agreement was signed at the BEPZA Complex, Dhaka, with officials from BEPZA and BSK Bangladesh Ltd., including the BEPZA Executive Chairman and BSK Chairman.

April 19

UN Experts Condemn Exploitation of Bangladeshi Migrants in Malaysia

UN experts have raised alarm over the plight of Bangladeshi migrants in Malaysia, despite their official migration for better prospects. Many arrive to find promised employment unavailable, leading to visa overstays and risks of arrest, detention, and deportation. Fraudulent recruitment by criminal networks in both countries exacerbates the issue, with migrants forced into debt bondage through exorbitant fees. The involvement or condoning of high-level officials is deemed unacceptable. With over 400,000 Bangladeshis migrating under official syndicates, reports of joblessness or underpayment prevail. Urgent action is urged to protect migrants, hold perpetrators accountable, and ensure compliance with international human rights standards.

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