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Bangladesh Foreign Policy Watch

CGS Centre for
Governance Studies



A Bi-Weekly Roundup of Key Events

November 6

Study Highlights Bangladesh as Key Battleground Amidst US-China Geopolitical Rivalry

A new study by Aiddata, titled "The Belt and Road Reboot," positions Bangladesh as a pivotal battleground in the intensifying US-China competition. Citing the country's strategic location and growing Sino-US tensions, the study notes Bangladesh's economic reliance on China's Belt and Road Initiative. It underscores the need for economic diversification beyond textiles, suggesting opportunities for the US to engage through trade ties and alliance with India.

November 7

UN Voices Concern Over Arrest Spree in Bangladesh

The UN has expressed worry over a surge in recent arrests in Bangladesh. Stéphane Dujarric, the UN secretary-general's spokesman, addressed concerns during a press briefing, highlighting the absence of some parties, including the BNP, in the Election Commission's dialogue on fair elections. Approximately one-third of invited parties refrained from participating amid an escalating political crisis, raising apprehensions about the prospects for a fair and violence-free electoral process in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Faces Setback in MCC Evaluation

Bangladesh received a poor evaluation from the US Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), impacting its chances of accessing the MCC's \$1.07 billion fund. The assessment highlighted failures in controlling corruption and protecting democratic rights. Bangladesh, in the zero percentile for health expenditures, ranked only sixth percentile in controlling corruption. Its political rights and civil liberties scores fell below the minimum thresholds. Inflation, fiscal policy, and education expenditure were among the categories where Bangladesh performed better. Asian countries like Nepal, India, and Vietnam passed the evaluation, while Bangladesh has never been considered eligible for MCC funds.

November 8

US Urges Bangladesh to Revisit Minimum Wage Decision Amidst Worker Protests



The United States has called on Bangladesh to reconsider its recent minimum wage decision after police fatally shot a woman during garment worker protests. A government-appointed panel increased factory wages by 56.25%, but striking workers demand a larger hike. The US State Department spokesman, Matthew Miller, commended private sector support for reasonable wage increases but urged a review to address growing economic pressures on workers. The US expressed concern over ongoing repression of workers and urged Bangladesh to protect workers' rights, investigate allegations, and ensure peaceful protest. Bangladesh's garment industry, a major exporter, faces increasing scrutiny amidst labor unrest.

US Becomes Long-Term LNG Supplier for Bangladesh

Bangladesh has added the United States as a long-term liquefied natural gas (LNG) supplier, following Qatar and Oman. Excelerate Gas Marketing, a subsidiary of Excelerate Energy, will provide LNG to Bangladesh for 15 years starting January 2026. This marks Petrobangla's first long-term deal with a private company, with annual LNG deliveries set to increase from 0.85 million tonnes in 2026-2027 to 1 million tonnes from 2028-2040. The agreement aims to ensure a reliable LNG supply for Bangladesh's dynamic economy. US Ambassador Peter Haas highlighted the deal as a win-win partnership and an investment in Bangladesh's energy sector.

State Minister Shahriar Alam cautions diplomats over their public statements

State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Md Shahriar Alam, expressed hope that there won't be a need to summon foreign diplomats before the next national election. Shahriar stated that past reminders about their limits have been acknowledged, and with elections approaching, diplomats are expected to be cautious with their statements.

US Labels Threat to Ambassador "Violent Rhetoric," Stresses Importance of Diplomatic Safety

US State Department Spokesperson Vedant Patel condemned the threat made by Awami League leader Mujibul Haque to assault US Ambassador Peter Haas, calling it "violent rhetoric" and "deeply unhelpful." Patel emphasized the significance of ensuring the safety and security of diplomatic personnel and facilities. During a media briefing, he reiterated the US's expectation that host governments, including Bangladesh, uphold their obligations under the Vienna Convention to safeguard diplomatic entities. Patel declined to comment on potential visa restrictions but underscored the US's commitment to urging all stakeholders for free and fair elections in Bangladesh.

Canadian MPs Urge PM Hasina for Free and Fair Elections in Bangladesh

Eight members of the Canadian Parliament, including Brad Redekopp, chair of the Canada-Bangladesh Parliamentary Friendship Group, have written to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, expressing their desire for free, fair, and peaceful elections in Bangladesh. The letter emphasized the importance of protecting freedom of expression, preventing voting irregularities, and ensuring active participation by all eligible citizens. The MPs highlighted the strong bilateral relationship between Canada and Bangladesh and expressed hopes for continued growth in the exchange of people and goods in the future.

November 9

PM Hasina Advises Party Members to Refrain from Criticizing Foreign Diplomats

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has instructed her party members not to comment on statements made by foreign diplomats in Dhaka. The directive came during a meeting of the Awami League Central Working Committee, following criticisms of diplomats' remarks about the upcoming election. The PM's guidance follows a decision to take disciplinary action against a local Awami League leader for threatening the US Ambassador. The AL General Secretary emphasized Hasina's warning against harsh comments on dignitaries. The move comes amid diplomatic strain ahead of the elections and recent sanctions imposed by the US.

14-Year-Old Bangladeshi Boy Shot Dead by Indian Border Security Force

A tragic incident unfolded as a 14-year-old Bangladeshi boy, Samirul Islam, was fatally shot by the Indian Border Security Force while crossing the border near Rajshahi. The incident sparked a flag meeting between the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and the Border Security Force (BSF), with BSF expressing regret and assuring an inquiry into the unfortunate event.

Rohingya Refugees Abandoned as Trawler Runs Aground in Cox's Bazar

A fishing trawler carrying Rohingya refugees bound for Malaysia ran aground at Moheshkhali Para sea beach in Teknaf, Cox's Bazar. Human traffickers abandoned them after three days at sea, leaving women and children stranded. Police and coast guard responded, but the refugees fled before their arrival. The refugees, escaping deteriorating conditions in Rohingya camps, were promised passage to Malaysia via Indonesia by traffickers. An investigation is underway as authorities seek to understand the circumstances surrounding this perilous journey.

China Calls for Adherence to Constitution in Bangladesh Elections

Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh, Yao Wen, emphasized that China wishes Bangladesh's elections to adhere to the constitution, urging all stakeholders to resolve differences for political and social stability. Speaking at an event in Dhaka, Wen stated that elections are internal matters for each country, reiterating China's non-interference policy. He expressed hope for the protection of Chinese people and property, assuring confidence in the future of Bangladesh and China-Bangladesh relations. Wen discussed potential Chinese support for Bangladesh's foreign currency reserves shortage and mentioned ongoing discussions about a free-trade agreement to address the trade gap.

Bangladesh Faces Moderate Risk in Balance of Payments

Moody's Investors Service has identified Bangladesh as facing moderate susceptibility to balance of payments crises due to a significant drop in foreign currency reserves. The country's forex reserves fell to \$19.5 billion from a record high of about \$40.7 billion in August 2021, increasing the risk of a balance of payments crisis. While Bangladesh ranks better than Pakistan and Sri Lanka, India is considered the least vulnerable. The low trade openness, weak diversified export baskets, and macroeconomic policy challenges contribute to the vulnerability of South Asian countries to balance of payments crises.

Hasina Urges Ceasefire and Humanitarian Corridor in Recorded Address at Islamic Summit

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina presented five recommendations to halt the ongoing Israeli aggression against Palestine during the 8th Extraordinary Islamic Summit in Riyadh. Hasina called for an immediate ceasefire and the establishment of a humanitarian corridor for the rapid and safe supply of essential aid to Gaza. Emphasizing the need for a united Muslim Ummah, she urged adherence to agreed-upon decisions at the UN, the Arab Peace Initiative, and the Quartet Road Map to achieve a lasting solution for regional peace. Bangladesh reaffirmed its support for Palestine's right to self-determination and independence.

November 11

Amnesty International Urges UN to Address Human Rights Violations in Bangladesh Ahead of Elections

Amnesty International has called on UN member states to address the "gross human rights violations" in Bangladesh during the upcoming Universal Periodic Review (UPR) ahead of the general election. The organization highlighted attacks on critical institutions, opposition leaders, media, and civil society. It urged the UN to scrutinize Bangladesh's human rights records and hold authorities accountable for violating international obligations, expressing concern about the Cyber Security Act's draconian features and the need for its alignment with human rights standards. Amnesty called for the release of individuals detained for peaceful activism and an end to extrajudicial actions.

November 12

Russian Naval Ships Visit Chattogram After Half a Century



For the first time in almost 50 years, a Russian naval group, including destroyers Admiral Tributs and Admiral Panteleyev, docked at Chattogram Port. The visit signifies a milestone in Russia-Bangladesh relations. The last Russian/Soviet naval visit to Bangladesh occurred half a century ago.

Russian Ambassador Alexander Mantytskiy highlighted the historical significance, noting that the previous visit aimed to clear mines and aid Bangladesh's independence after the 1971 war. The current visit emphasizes the strong and friendly ties between the two nations.

November 13

US Urges Dialogue Without Preconditions Among Bangladesh's Major Parties



US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu has dispatched letters calling for "dialogue without preconditions" among Bangladesh's major parties—the Awami League, the BNP, and the Jatiya Party. The letters emphasize the importance of "free, fair, impartial, and participatory elections." The move comes amid rising political tensions surrounding the 12th parliamentary election.

November 14

UN Rights Experts Call for Free and Fair Elections in Bangladesh

UN rights experts, including Irene Khan and Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, have urged the Human Rights Council and the international community to ensure a safe environment for free and fair elections in Bangladesh. Expressing concern over the severe crackdown on RMG workers, activists, and civil society members, the experts stressed the importance of addressing these issues as Bangladesh approaches the 2024 national elections, expressing deep disturbance over the sharp rise in such incidents.

November 15

Japan Grants 575 Million Yen for Security Assistance to Bangladesh Armed Forces



The Government of Japan will provide 575 million yen as "Official Security Assistance (OSA)" grant aid to Bangladesh Armed Forces. The grant aims to deepen security cooperation, enhance security capabilities, and contribute to maintaining international peace and security. As a "Strategic Partner," Japan recognizes Bangladesh's role in the Bay of Bengal, providing patrol boats to strengthen maritime security capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region.

November 16

UN Adopts Resolution Urging Myanmar to Address Rohingya Crisis



The UN adopted a resolution urging Myanmar to address the Rohingya crisis's root causes and create a conducive environment for refugees' voluntary return. Co-sponsored by 114 countries, it marks the highest international support since 2017. The resolution commends Bangladesh's hosting of over 1.2 million Rohingya refugees and endorses Security Council Resolution 2669. It calls for swift implementation of ASEAN's five-point consensus, recognizing ongoing justice efforts. The international community is urged to support Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh responsibly. Bangladesh stresses the Rohingyas' need to return to Myanmar, emphasizing global solidarity to address the crisis.

November 17

Rohingya Refugees Turned Away from Indonesian Coast

About 250 Rohingya refugees aboard a wooden boat were denied entry to western Indonesia and pushed back to sea by locals in Aceh province. The refugees, who swam ashore and were subsequently forced back onto their overcrowded boat, had reportedly sailed from Bangladesh three weeks prior. Rohingya refugees often undertake perilous sea journeys to reach Malaysia or Indonesia, facing rejection and hostility. Human rights groups attribute the villagers' anger to a lack of resources and concerns about human trafficking. The UN refugee agency urged Indonesia to facilitate the landing and provide assistance.

November 20

US Condemns Violence Against RMG Workers in Bangladesh

The United States strongly condemned recent violence against workers protesting the minimum wage in Bangladesh. US Department of State Spokesperson Mathew Miller expressed concern about the criminalization of legitimate trade union and workers' activities. Emphasizing the importance of workers' rights, Miller stated that governments must ensure freedom of association and collective bargaining without fear of violence. Miller affirmed the US's objective of encouraging free and fair elections in Bangladesh, refraining from taking sides in internal matters.

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