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Bangladesh Foreign Policy Watch

CGS Centre for Governance Studies



A Bi-Weekly Roundup of Key Events

September 1

Foreign Affairs Adviser Reaffirms Commitment to Credible International Probe

Bangladesh's interim government is dedicated to conducting an impartial and internationally recognised investigation into recent massacres in the country, followed by appropriate judicial proceedings, according to Foreign Affairs Adviser Md Touhid Hossain. He reaffirmed Bangladesh's commitment to the UN Convention on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and reiterated the nation's support for the Palestinian peace process. Bangladesh also condemned Islamophobia and hate crimes against Muslims. Additionally, at the 50th Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Cameroon, a resolution on the "Situation of the Rohingya Muslim Community in Myanmar" was adopted, maintaining pressure on Myanmar authorities.

Bangladesh Deposits Accession to Enforced Disappearance Treaty with the UN

Bangladesh has officially become the 76th party to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED), following the deposit of the Instrument of Accession by

August 31

Vietnamese Envoy Seeks to Deepen Bilateral Cooperation

Vietnamese Ambassador to Bangladesh, Nguyen Manh Cuong, has called for the exploration of untapped potential in the partnership between the two nations. Speaking at a reception celebrating the 79th Vietnamese National Day, which commemorates the historic date of September 2, 1945, Cuong highlighted the strong traditional friendship between Vietnam and Bangladesh, which spans over 51 years of cooperation across various sectors. Last year, bilateral trade between the two countries reached 1.05 billion USD, with a goal of doubling it to 2 billion USD in the near future.

Ambassador Muhammad A Muhith at the UN. The interim government, led by Prof Muhammad Yunus, completed the necessary internal procedures within 20 days of assuming office. The accession was finalised on August 30, the International Day for Victims of Enforced Disappearance, underscoring Bangladesh's solidarity with victims and their families.

September 2

Prof Yunus to Attend UNGA with Streamlined Delegation

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus is set to lead a small, streamlined delegation to the 79th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York. The visit will last less than a week, including travel time, though exact dates are yet to be confirmed. The chief adviser's primary objective is to present his government's economic plans and seek international backing to bolster Bangladesh's economy. The summit, scheduled for September 22-23, 2024, will bring together leaders and activists to discuss how the global system can better serve present and future generations.

Foreign Adviser Hints at Review of MoUs with India

Bangladesh may reconsider the Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) signed with India if they are found to be not in the country's best interest, according to Foreign Affairs Adviser Md Touhid Hossain. If necessary, the government may also seek the extradition of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina from India. Indian contractors are expected to return to Bangladesh to resume work on projects financed under the Indian line of credit.

August Remittance Inflow Surges

Bangladesh saw a remittance inflow of \$2.2 billion in August 2023, marking a 39% year-on-year increase and a significant rise compared to July 2024. This surge is largely attributed to the central bank's decision to raise the dollar exchange rate by 2.5%, which incentivised expatriates to send more funds. While some banks, such as Trust, BRAC, and Premier, experienced substantial growth in remittance inflows, others like Social Islami and Sonali Bank reported declines. The stabilisation of the political situation and the resumption of full banking operations, following disruptions earlier in August, contributed to the improved flow of remittances.

IMF Considers Additional \$3 Billion Loan to Bangladesh

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is considering lending an additional \$3 billion to Bangladesh, conditional on the interim government's reform plans, particularly in relation to improving the tax-to-GDP ratio. Bangladesh is grappling with high inflation and dwindling foreign reserves, with inflation reaching 11.66% in July and reserves falling to \$20.5 billion. The IMF has recommended various reforms, including boosting tax revenues, cutting subsidies, and strengthening the banking sector.

Public Engagement Key to Improving Indo-Bangla Relations: Touhid Hossain

Foreign Affairs Adviser Md Touhid Hossain has called for strategic steps to address public dissatisfaction with Bangladesh-India relations, despite the strong governmental ties. He criticised the Indian media for presenting exaggerated narratives about Bangladesh, noting that international media coverage tends to be more neutral. Hossain highlighted the potential of BIMSTEC as an alternative to SAARC but acknowledged its limitations, particularly due to the instability in Myanmar. He also stressed the importance of improving relations with Pakistan for the mutual benefit of both countries, despite historical tensions.

Jamaat Urges China to Assist in Rohingya Repatriation

Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami has appealed to China to take a more active role in the rehabilitation and repatriation of Rohingyas. The appeal was made during a meeting between Jamaat Ameer Shafiqur Rahman and Chinese Ambassador Yao Wen at the Jamaat office in Dhaka. Rahman highlighted China's crucial role in Bangladesh's development and expressed optimism for increased Chinese investment. The discussions also covered enhancing cooperation between Bangladesh and China in sectors such as education and culture.

US Pledges Support to Bangladesh's Interim Government

The United States has expressed its support for Bangladesh's interim government, aiming to bolster ties across various sectors. The US is actively involved in the resettlement of Rohingya refugees and has increased humanitarian aid for their welfare. Additionally, the US embassy in Dhaka will soon resume consular services to expedite visa processing. Concerns regarding labour and minority rights were raised, with the interim government offering reassurances to uphold human rights.

September 3

India Pauses Diesel Pipeline Extension Amid Bangladesh Political Crisis

The extension of the Indo-Bangla Friendship Pipeline from Parbatipur to Natore has been delayed due to the ongoing political turmoil in Bangladesh. The pipeline, inaugurated in March 2023, currently supplies high-speed diesel to seven districts in northern Bangladesh. Although a feasibility study for the extension was verbally agreed upon, it has yet to commence. In August, Bangladesh imported approximately 4,000 tonnes of diesel, with additional orders for 7,000 tonnes placed.

Government Aims to Enhance Trade Through Bhomra Land Port

The Bangladesh government plans to accelerate export-import activities with India via the Bhomra Land Port, permitting nearly all goods, except powdered milk, for import. The National Board of Revenue (NBR) is considering upgrading Bhomra from a land customs station to a full customs house, owing to the high volume of imports. Located closer to Kolkata than Benapole, Bhomra is strategically positioned to facilitate increased bilateral trade with India. However, infrastructure improvements, such as road widening and better customs facilities, are required to maximise its potential.

Bangladesh Eyes Trade Talks with Upcoming US Delegation Visit

Bangladesh is set to discuss financial support and further bilateral cooperation during a high-level visit by a US delegation on September 15. The delegation includes key US officials, and discussions may include topics such as US sanctions and visa policies. Reports that the US is seeking control over a Bangladesh island have been dismissed.

UAE Pardons 57 Bangladeshis Jailed for Anti-Hasina Protests

The President of the UAE, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, has pardoned 57 Bangladeshi nationals who were imprisoned for participating in protests against the Bangladeshi government. These individuals were convicted for taking part in unauthorised protests in the UAE, which echoed demonstrations in Bangladesh opposing Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Human Rights Watch criticised the detentions as arbitrary. The pardoned individuals are set to be released and deported back to Bangladesh shortly.

'White Paper' Panel to Review Foreign Loan Agreements

A committee led by Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya has been established to produce a comprehensive "White Paper on the State of Bangladesh Economy." The panel will assess loan agreements, particularly in the energy sector, and compare data with international standards. They plan to consult with experts from various fields, including sociology, economics, and political science. The committee intends to complete preliminary work within three days and advance within two months, focusing on issues such as banking, resource mobilisation, and poverty reduction.

Kuwait to Increase Recruitment of Skilled Bangladeshi Workers

Kuwait's Ambassador, Faisal Mutlaq Aladwani, paid a farewell visit to Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus in Dhaka, announcing plans to recruit more skilled workers from Bangladesh, including doctors, nurses, and engineers. Currently, over 300,000 Bangladeshis work in Kuwait, including more than 5,000 troops.

The discussions also covered economic engagement, defence cooperation, the Rohingya crisis, the Palestinian issue, and energy collaboration.

September 4

Foreign Investors Surge After Hasina's Fall

Foreign investor activity in Bangladesh's capital market soared by 501% in the first half of August, reaching Tk404.82 crore. The change in government, with Nobel laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus assuming leadership, has significantly boosted foreign investor confidence. Additionally, the removal of floor prices on most stocks has further encouraged foreign investment. Banking sector reforms and stabilisation of the forex market have played a key role in attracting increased foreign participation.

September 5

Committee to Investigate Power Sector Deals from Previous Government

Dr. Muhammad Fouzul Kabir Khan announced the formation of a committee to review power and energy sector deals signed during the previous Awami League government, with a focus on uncovering potential corruption. In a meeting with Indian High Commissioner Pranay Verma, Dr. Khan discussed recent reforms implemented by the new government, including the suspension of controversial laws and regulatory changes. Verma reaffirmed India's commitment to ongoing bilateral projects and explored future collaboration, particularly in solar energy and regional power connectivity involving Nepal, Bhutan, India, and Bangladesh.

Railway Trade Resumes Between Bangladesh and India After 47-Day Suspension

Trade via railway between Bangladesh and India, through Benapole Land Port, resumed on after a 47-day suspension. The halt, which began on July 19 due to security concerns amidst student protests, was lifted following the establishment of Bangladesh's interim government on August 5. Benapole Land Port Deputy Director Rezaul Karim confirmed the resumption, with traders expressing relief as goods, including stones and garments, began moving again.

Indian BSF Returns Body of Bangladeshi Girl Shot at Border

The Indian Border Security Force (BSF) handed over the body of 13-year-old Swarna Das to the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), 45 hours after she was fatally shot by BSF personnel. The tragic incident occurred near the Lalarchak border in Kulaura upazila as Swarna and her mother attempted to cross into India illegally. A flag meeting between BGB and BSF was held to address the situation.

The shooting has sparked outrage and renewed concerns over border security and the use of lethal force.

British High Commissioner Meets Khaleda Zia, First Foreign Envoy Visit Since 2018



British High Commissioner Sarah Cooke met with BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia at her Gulshan residence, marking the first meeting with a foreign envoy since 2018. The visit occurred as Khaleda prepares for a potential trip to the UK for medical treatment. Khaleda, who was recently acquitted of corruption charges, has been suffering from severe health issues, including liver cirrhosis. Her medical board and BNP officials were present during the meeting. She had been released from jail in March 2020 under special conditions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

France Extends Support for Bangladesh's Reform Agenda

French Ambassador Marie Masdupuy offered technical, legal, and institutional support to Bangladesh's interim government during a meeting with Foreign Affairs Adviser Md Touhid Hossain. The support is aimed at advancing anti-corruption, governance, and financial reforms. Ambassador Masdupuy conveyed a congratulatory message from French Minister Stephane Sejourne, while Hossain expressed gratitude for France's interest and reaffirmed Bangladesh's commitment to sustainable reforms, improved business conditions, and human rights. Both sides also pledged to collaborate on combating human trafficking and migrant smuggling.

Dhaka Seeks Loan from International Lenders

Bangladesh is grappling with a dollar shortage, affecting its ability to fund essential imports such as electricity, fuel, and fertilizers. In response, the government has requested \$6 billion in budget support from four major international lenders: the World Bank, ADB, JICA, and the IMF. These loans will be allocated to settle overdue payments for electricity, gas, and fuel oil imports. Formal negotiations with these lenders are expected to commence soon, with potential conditions, including the removal of subsidies for electricity and gas.

September 6

Muhammad Yunus Urges Resolution of Teesta Water-Sharing Dispute

Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus has stressed the urgency of resolving the Teesta water-sharing dispute between Bangladesh and India in accordance with international norms. He underscored the rights of lower riparian countries like Bangladesh. Yunus also suggested that until a treaty is finalised, both nations should collaborate to manage flood situations on humanitarian grounds to alleviate public suffering. The interim government, including Adviser on Water Resources Syeda Rizwana Hasan, is committed to reviving negotiations on the Teesta water-sharing agreement with India.

Adani Power Urges Bangladesh to Settle \$800 Million Debt

The Adani Group has called on Bangladesh to expedite the settlement of more than \$800 million owed to Adani Power Ltd. Despite the outstanding debt, Adani Power has assured Bangladesh of an uninterrupted electricity supply from its Godda power plant. Lenders are pressing the Adani Group to repay the debts accumulated during the construction of the plant. Adani Power entered into a 25-year power purchase agreement with BPDB in 2017 to provide 1,496 MW of electricity, which accounts for about 10% of Bangladesh's peak power demand.

September 7

Home Adviser Calls for Enhanced Professionalism and Legal Compliance in Border Guard Bangladesh

Home Adviser Lt Gen (retd) Jahangir Alam Chowdhury has called for heightened professionalism within the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and reinforced the importance of strong border security and anti-smuggling efforts. He expressed a firm stance against border killings.

September 8

Suspension of Inter-Country Passenger Train Services Prolonged

Inter-country passenger train services between Bangladesh and India have been suspended for more than a month and a half, as India remains hesitant to resume operations. While freight trains between the two countries recommenced on 20 August, passenger services continue to be halted. Despite multiple proposals and formal letters from Bangladesh Railway urging a resumption, the Indian Railway Board has not responded. The matter has now been referred to the foreign ministry, which is currently engaged in discussions with India to find a resolution.

Yunus Stresses Fair, Equal Relations with India

Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus has highlighted the importance of maintaining strong relations with India, founded on the principles of fairness and equality. During a meeting with students, including leaders of recent quota reform protests, Yunus discussed their aspirations for a discrimination-free country and encouraged them to keep pushing forward. He reaffirmed his commitment to realising their vision and cautioned against forces that might oppose change. Yunus expressed confidence in Bangladesh's future, envisioning a leading role for the nation on the global stage, driven by its youth.

Bangladesh Seeks 30-Year Loan Repayment Extension from China

Bangladesh has requested China to extend its loan repayment terms to 30 years, similar to those offered by Japan. Talks were held with representatives from JICA, ADB, and the Australian High Commission to explore additional cooperation and secure more aid. The Asian Development Bank is expected to provide Bangladesh with \$400 million within the current fiscal year. In addition, Bangladesh has requested an extra \$3 billion from the IMF, on top of the \$4.7 billion credit support already allocated.

Yunus Urges Acceleration of Rohingya Resettlement



Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus has called for a faster resettlement process for Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to third countries. In a meeting with officials from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Yunus discussed the need for urgency in the process. The United States has reaffirmed its commitment to resettle thousands of Rohingyas, though Yunus emphasised that progress must be quicker. The resettlement efforts, which resumed in 2022 after a 12-year pause, have made limited advancements this year.

Foreign Adviser Unfazed by Indian Defence Minister's Remarks

Foreign Adviser Md Touhid Hossain expressed surprise but not concern regarding Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's recent remarks that India must be prepared for war to ensure peace.

Singh made the statement during a Joint Commanders' Conference in Lucknow, where he urged military leaders to evaluate situations in Bangladesh, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the Israel-Hamas tensions. Hossain suggested that Singh's statement might be intended for domestic political purposes and questioned its relevance to Bangladesh's current situation.

Dhaka to Follow Standard Protocols for Yunus-Modi Meeting on UNGA Sidelines: Foreign Adviser

Bangladesh will adhere to regular procedures for any bilateral meetings during the upcoming UN General Assembly (UNGA) in New York. A meeting between Dr. Muhammad Yunus and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been proposed, though New Delhi has yet to confirm. The Chief Adviser of Bangladesh is set to visit New York from 22 to 29 September, accompanied by an entourage of 10-12 members. The 79th session of the UNGA begins on 10 September, with the high-level General Debate starting on 24 September.

Rohingya Influx Grows as Myanmar Conflict Escalates

Over 20,000 Rohingyas have fled into Bangladesh within the past month due to intensifying conflict in Myanmar, with more awaiting entry at the border. Residents of Cox's Bazar report hearing explosions, and many Rohingyas are seeking refuge in camps or rented accommodations. The Bangladeshi government is closely monitoring the situation, with Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) on high alert, taking measures to prevent illegal entry. Rohingyas are fleeing violence involving Myanmar's junta forces and the Arakan Army, often paying agents to help them cross the border in a bid to escape the escalating conflict.

September 9

Italian Embassy in Dhaka Addresses Visa Processing Delays and Fraud Concerns

The Italian Embassy in Dhaka has responded to concerns about delays in processing work visas after a peaceful protest by applicants calling for faster services. The embassy reaffirmed its commitment to cooperating with Bangladeshi authorities and the EU to combat fraud and improve migration procedures. It assured that "nulla osta" documents remain valid while applications are processed, and clarified that VFS Global only handles applications, not decision-making. The embassy cautioned applicants against using intermediaries and stressed that visa decisions are bound by Italian law, warning of serious consequences for illegal migration and exploitation.

September 10

Adani Warns Bangladesh About Unsustainable Power Deal

India's Adani Group has expressed concerns over the sustainability of its coal power agreement with Bangladesh, citing unpaid bills amounting to \$800 million. Despite the financial burden, Adani has pledged to continue supplying electricity from its Godda plant. The deal, which has significantly increased Bangladesh's power costs, faces mounting scrutiny as the nation grapples with financial challenges and seeks international loans. Experts are calling for a renegotiation of the agreement to ensure fairness and protect Bangladesh's national interests amid rising energy costs.

Formation of Joint Task Force with FBI

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) of Bangladesh is planning to establish a joint task force with the FBI to address money laundering issues. The FBI will provide consultancy and expertise to aid in the recovery of laundered funds. Negotiations are underway to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the ACC and the FBI. The proposed task force will include representatives from various Bangladeshi agencies to improve coordination and effectiveness in combating money laundering.

Reduced Flights to India Due to Visa Suspension

Several Bangladeshi airlines, including Biman Bangladesh Airlines, US-Bangla Airlines, and Novoair, have reduced or suspended flights to India because of a drop in passenger numbers, largely attributed to visa issues. Although Indian visa services have resumed on a limited basis, the number of visas issued remains low. This has led to fewer flights from Dhaka to Kolkata, Delhi, and Chennai, with some routes being completely suspended. Airlines are facing significant financial losses due to the passenger decline and are hoping for a swift resolution of the visa issues by policymakers in both countries.

Eight Bangladeshi Expatriates Detained in Saudi Arabia; Families Call for Government Intervention

Eight Bangladeshi expatriates were detained in Saudi Arabia after attending a prayer meeting to honour martyrs of the Anti-discrimination Student Movement. The detentions have caused considerable hardship for the detainees' families, who are struggling in their absence. The families have urgently appealed to the Bangladesh government for intervention to secure the release of their loved ones. Despite repeated attempts, they have yet to receive a response from Saudi authorities.

September 11

Indian High Commissioner Urges Cooperation with Bangladesh Amid Border Tensions

Indian High Commissioner Pranay Verma has stressed the need for close cooperation between India and Bangladesh to advance security and development objectives. Bangladesh recently protested against the killing of a 16-year-old by the Border Security Force (BSF), raising concerns despite previous commitments to non-lethal methods. Projects funded by Indian loans will proceed as planned, with \$2 billion already disbursed from a \$7.36 billion commitment. Relations between the two countries have been strained since the fall of the Awami League government, with allegations of India's support for Sheikh Hasina's regime amid accusations of corruption and human rights violations.

US Denies Involvement in Bangladesh Protests, Supports Interim Government

The United States has refuted allegations of its involvement in recent student-led anti-government protests in Bangladesh. Deputy Principal Spokesperson Vedant Patel clarified that the US is focused on supporting the interim government led by Dr. Muhammad Yunus and denied any speculation of US or Chinese influence in the protests. Patel emphasised that claims of US involvement are baseless and that the US is closely monitoring the situation in Bangladesh.

14-Year-Old Killed by BSF at Bangladesh-India Border

Jayanta Kumar Singh, a 14-year-old boy, was shot dead by BSF personnel while attempting to cross the Thakurgaon border into India. Jayanta's mother is in distress, and his father, who was injured, is receiving medical treatment. Jayanta's maternal grandfather, residing in India, had advised the family to bring him to India for safety. While attempting to cross the border, they were fired upon by BSF patrols. The Border Guard Bangladesh is awaiting information from the BSF regarding the return of Jayanta's body.

Egypt and Bangladesh Explore Expanded Trade and Investment Opportunities

In a recent discussion with Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI) President Ashraf Ahmed, Egyptian Ambassador Omar Mohie Eldin Ahmed Fahmy expressed Egypt's interest in increasing exports of petrochemicals and fertilizers to Bangladesh.

Despite 50 years of diplomatic relations, bilateral trade was only \$180.55 million in the 2022-23 fiscal year. Fahmy also highlighted the potential for Bangladeshi pharmaceuticals in Egypt and suggested leveraging Egyptian ports for global exports. DCCI President Ahmed proposed exporting Bangladeshi frozen food, shrimp, and mangoes to Egypt and encouraged Egyptian investment in Bangladesh's economic zones. Both parties discussed ways to boost bilateral trade through sector-specific conferences and Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs).

September 12

Review Underway of Foreign-Funded Projects to Prioritize Economic Impact

The interim government is conducting a review of all foreign-funded projects to identify those that offer immediate economic benefits and job creation, while considering discontinuing non-essential projects. The Economic Relations Division (ERD) is leading this review, requesting government agencies to submit priority lists and project details. High-priority projects include the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant and Metro Rail, while projects like additional TV centers are deemed less critical. With Bangladesh's external debt rising significantly, a strategic approach to new foreign loans is being adopted, focusing on projects with quick economic returns.

US and EU Discuss Latest Developments in Bangladesh

The US and EU held high-level meetings to discuss recent geopolitical trends in Bangladesh, including issues in Myanmar and financial support for the military government.

Russia Rejects "Fake News" Claims about Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant

Russia has dismissed allegations of embezzlement in the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant project as "fake news" intended to discredit the project and damage relations with Bangladesh. As of September 3, 2024, approximately \$7.8 billion of the \$11.9 billion allocated by Russia for the project has been used. The Russian Embassy clarified that the financing mechanism is designed to prevent corruption, with funds managed by the Russian Ministry of Finance and VEB.RF rather than being directly transferred to Bangladesh.

US-Based Labour Group Criticises Previous Government's Worker Safety Record

The AFL-CIO has condemned the former Awami League-led government for creating a hazardous environment for workers by suppressing freedom of association and undermining collective action. During labor unrest in 2023, at least 35 criminal cases were filed against RMG workers and union leaders, with over 40,000 individuals named as defendants. The AFL-CIO and the Solidarity Center have urged the interim government led by Professor Muhammad Yunus to foster a worker-friendly environment and withdraw unjust cases against workers. The Ministry of Labour and Employment is currently reviewing these cases and addressing instances of harassment.

September 15

U.S. Delegation Meets with Bangladesh Interim Government Signs \$200 Million Development Agreement

A high-level interagency delegation from the United States met with key advisers of the Bangladesh Interim Government, including Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, Foreign Affairs Adviser Touhid Hossain, and Finance and Commerce Adviser Dr. Salehuddin Ahmed. The U.S. delegation was led by Department of Treasury Assistant Secretary Brent Neiman, Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu, USAID Deputy Assistant Administrator for Asia Anjali Kaur, and Assistant U.S. Trade Representative Brendan Lynch.

The meetings focused on strategies to foster inclusive economic opportunities, ensure financial stability, and enhance democratic governance in Bangladesh.

During the visit, USAID signed a development agreement exceeding \$200 million with the Interim Government. This funding aims to advance development, strengthen governance, boost trade, and create more opportunities for the Bangladeshi people. From 2021 to 2026, USAID has pledged nearly \$1 billion to support the improvement of lives in Bangladesh. This latest funding tranche is intended to help Bangladesh pursue a more inclusive, equitable, and democratic path for its future.

Contributors

Kazi Rhid

Content Strategy Coordinator at Center for Governance Studies (CGS)

rhid@cgs-bd.com

Marzana Mahnaz

Research Assistant at Center for Governance Studies (CGS)

marzana@cgs-bd.com

Bahauddin Ahmed

Digital Coordinator at Centre for Governance Studies (CGS)

bahauddin@cgs-bd.com

