4 December | 2023

Bangladesh Foreign Policy Watch

cgs Centre for Governance Studies





A Bi-Weekly Roundup of Key Events

November 21

EU Scrutinizes Bangladesh's Labor Rights, Raises Concerns for Trade Preferences



The European Commission's assessment report on the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) program has raised concerns about Bangladesh's eligibility for duty preferences due to labor rights issues. As the largest export destination for Bangladesh, the EU scrutinizes compliance with international standards on human rights and labor rights. The report highlights key concerns such as legal obstacles to trade unions, minimum membership requirements, and the absence of unions in export processing zones. Anti-union discrimination, including violence and harassment, is another area of worry. Despite some reforms, the revised labor rules fall short of international standards. The report emphasizes the need for the government to fulfill commitments, increase labor inspectors, and address safety concerns.

November 20

North Korea Shuts Embassy in Bangladesh

North Korea closes its embassy in Bangladesh, informing the foreign ministry through a note verbal. The closure, effective since November 20, aims to enhance regional operations through the embassy in New Delhi. Bangladesh, without notable trade ties, expects minimal impact as it maintains diplomatic relations through its embassy in China.

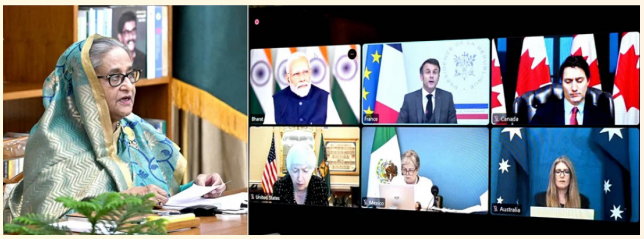
Compliance with GSP standards is crucial for Bangladesh, especially as it anticipates transitioning from the Everything But Arms arrangement to standard GSP. The report underlines the importance of meeting obligations, particularly in labor rights reforms, to maintain eligibility for duty preferences.

November 22

Rohingya Genocide Intensifies Amid Armed Conflicts

The Rohingya genocide worsens in Myanmar's Rakhine state, with renewed armed conflicts and aid restrictions, as per a report by the Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK (BROUK). The study, "Struggling to Survive," reveals alarming intensification of genocidal practices. Ongoing conflict escalation endangers Rohingya civilians, with a collapsed ceasefire and military actions. Restrictions on movement and aid access amplify the crisis, leaving over 600,000 Rohingyas in Rakhine state at severe risk. Immediate global intervention is urged to alleviate the humanitarian catastrophe.

Hasina Urges Global Leaders to Reject Wars for Humanity's Sake at G20 Summit



Addressing the "G20 Leaders' Summit 2023," Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina advocates a firm global stance against wars to safeguard humanity. She emphasizes the summit's theme, "One Earth, One Family, One Future," urging leaders to prioritize Earth's well-being. Hasina highlights the toll of conflicts, calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and supporting the repatriation of displaced Rohingyas. She also praises Bangladesh-India relations as a "neighbourhood diplomacy" model. Notable leaders, including Modi, Putin, Macron, and Trudeau, contribute to the summit discussions.

Russia Accuses US Ambassador of Interfering in Bangladesh's Internal Affairs

Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova accuses US Ambassador to Bangladesh Peter Haas of grossly interfering in internal affairs. Zakharova claims Haas met with local opposition, discussing plans for anti-government rallies, deeming it as blatant interference. The statement follows US calls for transparent elections amid escalating political tensions and strikes led by BNP and Jamaat.

November 23

UK and Bangladesh Align on Climate Goals for COP28

British Deputy High Commissioner Matt Cannell affirms the UK and Bangladesh's commitment to translating climate pledges into action. Discussing common objectives for COP28, he emphasizes the importance of preserving the 1.5-degree target, advancing the clean energy transition, and restoring trust in climate financing commitments. The discussion, "Towards COP28: Building momentum for climate action," convened diverse stakeholders, including policymakers, academics, private sectors, civil society, youth, and media.

November 24

42 Bangladeshis Return After 3-Year Imprisonment in India

Forty-two Bangladeshi women and children, who had been in an Indian prison for three years, returned home via the Benapole check-post. Arrested in West Bengal while working, they were sentenced to prison by a Kolkata court. After immigration formalities, they were handed over to Bangladesh with the assistance of both countries' Home Affairs Ministries. The returnees were victims of trafficking to West Bengal.

Momen Seeks Diplomatic Support for Regional Stability

Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen urged foreign diplomats in India to endorse regional stability and reaffirmed Bangladesh's commitment to fair elections. Speaking to about 60 diplomats, he emphasized the festive spirit of the upcoming national election, scheduled for early January. Momen highlighted Bangladesh's progress over 15 years and its foreign policy of "friendship to all." He underscored the strong relationship with India, collaborating on crucial projects for bilateral and regional development.

Bangladesh Urges Swift Action on Teesta River Deal in Key Talks with India



During the Foreign Office Consultations in New Delhi, Bangladesh called on India to expedite the Teesta River water deal and address shared river treaties.

Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen and his Indian counterpart Vinay Mohan Kwatra led the discussions, emphasizing the need to remove trade barriers for a seamless supply of essential commodities. The talks, significant ahead of national elections in both countries, covered political updates and India's commitment to a democratic Bangladesh. The leaders discussed enhancing people-to-people contacts, resolving the Rohingya crisis, and fortifying bilateral relations in trade, connectivity, and development.

November 25

US Rejects Russian Claim of Interference in Bangladesh

The US State Department refutes Russia's accusation of interference in Bangladesh's internal affairs, calling it a deliberate mischaracterization of Ambassador Peter Haas's meetings. The US embassy in Dhaka communicates the State Department's response, emphasizing a commitment to free and fair elections in Bangladesh. The US denies favoring any political party, urging cooperation for the people's benefit. Russia's claim, alleging plans for anti-government protests, is dismissed. The State Department highlights diplomatic engagement with Bangladesh for peaceful polls and rejects assertions of interference, asserting adherence to the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.

November 27

US policy on free polls beneficial to Bangladesh, claims FM Momen

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen affirms the US's support for Bangladesh's pursuit of free and fair elections. Momen emphasizes the significance of credible polls, stating that those hindering the process could face repercussions under the US visa policy announced in May. He notes that a BNP absence in the election, if conducted fairly, won't be a major concern, highlighting the importance of violence-free elections with the cooperation of all parties. Momen addresses US-Russia statements, emphasizing engagement while cautioning against unnecessary interference in Bangladesh's domestic affairs. He expresses optimism for the withdrawal of US sanctions on Rab.

Body of Bangladeshi Man Found Near India Border

Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) recovers the body of Rakibul Islam, a 35-year-old mason, near the India border in Jhenaidah. Rakibul, suspected of illegal border crossing, was found dead with bullet wounds. Authorities are investigating the circumstances of his trespassing into Indian territory and the subsequent tragic incident.

November 28

China Affirms Strong Ties with Bangladesh Amid Allegations of a 'China Trap'

Chinese Ambassador Yao Wen reassures Bangladesh of China's steadfast friendship and reliability as a development partner. Addressing concerns about a "China trap," Wen dismisses it as fabrication, emphasizing the tangible benefits brought by Belt and Road Initiative projects. China, Bangladesh's largest trading partner for 13 years, contributes significantly to foreign investment, totaling $3.17 billion. Wen notes occasional disturbances in relations but underscores the deep-rooted cooperation and friendship between the two nations. He announces plans for increased bilateral training programs and the imminent launch of more direct flights between Dhaka and Beijing to enhance people-to-people exchanges.

IOM Alarmed as Rohingya Refugees Face Interception and Pushback in Sea



The International Organization for Migration (IOM) expresses alarm over reports of vessels carrying Rohingya refugees being intercepted and pushed back in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. IOM verifies that Indonesia received over 1,000 Rohingya refugees, the majority being women and children, in a short period. Deteriorating conditions in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, lack of humanitarian support, and conflicts in Myanmar contribute to the surge in sea journeys. IOM urges countries to conduct search and rescue, provide safe ports, and address the Rohingya crisis. The organization warns that preventing landings and pushing refugees back violates human rights and international law principles.

November 30

Foreign Minister Momen Dismisses US Labor Rights Policy Concerns



Bangladesh's Foreign Minister, AK Abdul Momen, waves off fears over the new US labor rights policy, bluntly stating that the private sector operates independently and won't be swayed by government directives. Responding to concerns raised in a letter from the Bangladesh embassy in Washington, Momen, while not having read the letter, downplays worries and highlights the resilience of the private sector. The US policy allows for sanctions, trade penalties, and visa restrictions for labor rights violations. Momen, optimistic about Bangladesh's garment sector, urges a focus on progress in trade relations. The US exports account for $10 billion, and EU exports amount to $27 billion for Bangladesh.

UN General Assembly President Urges Bangladesh to Uphold Democratic Values

UN General Assembly President Dennis Francis emphasizes the importance of Bangladesh honoring its democratic tradition by conducting a free and fair election. Speaking at a briefing in New York, he stresses that upholding democratic values is in the best interest of the Bangladeshi people, enhancing the nation's relationship with the UN and the international community. Francis links democracy to sustainable development and encourages Bangladesh to align with Agenda 2030.

Bangladesh Advocates 'Loss and Damage' Fund Activation at COP 28



As the UN climate conference COP-28 begins in Dubai, Bangladesh aims to make the "Loss and Damage" fund operational, urging funds for its National Action Plan on climate change. Delegates from nearly 200 nations will decide strategies to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius. However, the UAE faces criticism for reportedly promoting its oil and gas deals during the event. A 33-member Bangladeshi delegation, including ministers and experts, will attend, seeking support for their NAP. Bangladesh identifies 113 interventions requiring $8.5 billion yearly, with $6 billion from international sources.

December 1

Bangladesh Makes Entry to IMO Council

Bangladesh secures its inaugural position as a member of the International Maritime Organization Council for 2024-2025, following elections at the IMO headquarters in London. The country earned 128 votes out of 166 participating member states in the competitive category C election. This marks Bangladesh's first-ever representation on the IMO Council, a significant recognition of its maritime policies. As a council member, Bangladesh aims to contribute to decision-making processes, focusing on sustainable maritime practices, compliance, and crucial issues impacting its shipping and maritime industry, according to Saida Muna Tasneem, Bangladesh's High Commissioner to the UK.

Contributors

Shamsuddoza Sajen
Journalist and Researcher
sajen1986@gmail.com

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

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

cgs Centre for Governance Studies