

Bangladesh



KEY FACTS

Joined Commonwealth:	1972
Population:	154,695,000 (2012)
GDP p.c. growth:	3.7% p.a. 1990–2012
UN HDI 2012:	world ranking 146
Official language:	Bangla
Time:	GMT plus 6hr
Currency:	taka (Tk)

Geography

Area:	143,998 sq km
Coastline:	580 km
Capital:	Dhaka

The People's Republic of Bangladesh is a fertile and densely populated delta country in southern Asia bordered by the Bay of Bengal, India and Myanmar (formerly Burma).



Topography: Apart from hills to the south-east, most of Bangladesh is a flat alluvial plain crossed by navigable waterways – the Ganges (Padma), Brahmaputra (Jamuna) and Meghna river systems – flowing into the Bay of Bengal. About 14 per cent of the country is normally under water. Flooding is frequent and can be disastrous.

Climate: Tropical monsoon-type. Hot and humid April to October, with the monsoon season running June to September. Cool and dry, November to March. The country is vulnerable to cyclones, which can be devastating. The cyclone of April 1991 killed 138,000 people. In November 2007, Cyclone Sidr hit the southern coastal strip of Bangladesh, also killing and making homeless thousands of people.

Environment: The most significant issues are severe overpopulation, high risk of flooding in large areas of the country, soil degradation and erosion, ground water contaminated by naturally occurring arsenic, and poisoning of fish by use of commercial pesticides.

Vegetation: Intensely cultivated; paddy fields dominate the delta; palms, bamboo, mango, the plains. Water hyacinth is a serious menace to waterways. Forest on the south-eastern hills; forest covers 11 per cent of the land area, having declined at 0.2 per cent p.a. 1990–2010. Soil is mostly very rich, supporting intensive cropping, with up to three crops p.a. in many places; arable land comprises 59 per cent of the total land area.

Wildlife: The country has a varied wildlife population, although 18 species became extinct during the 20th century and 34 species of mammals and 31 of birds were endangered in 2012. Mammal species include 26 types of bat, the famous Bengal tiger (now virtually confined to the Sundarbans and numbering a few hundred) and the Gangetic dolphin, and reptile species include turtles, river tortoise, crocodile, gaviel, python, krait and cobra. There are several 'protected' areas for wildlife.

Main towns: Dhaka (capital, pop. 10.86m in 2010), Chittagong (3.87m), Narayanganj (1.49m), Khulna (1.44m), Rajshahi (808,400),

Did you know?

The Tenth Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting was held in Dhaka, 17–19 June 2013, with delegates from 30 countries and a theme of 'Women's Leadership for Enterprise'.

Muhammad Yunus, Founder of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, delivered the 6th Annual Commonwealth Lecture, on 'Halving Poverty by 2015', in 2003; he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006, jointly with the Bank.

Two Bangladeshi-born writers have won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize Best First Book award: Adib Khan (1995) and Tahmina Anam (2008).

Tungi (437,400), Sylhet (410,200), Mymensingh (395,100), Narsingdi (361,600), Comilla (344,800), Rangpur (330,000), Barisal (270,900), Jessore (260,800), Bogra (260,200), Dinajpur (182,700), Pabna (182,600), Nawabganj (177,800) and Brahman Baria (157,900).

Transport: There are 21,270 km of roads, ten per cent paved; these roads are vulnerable to damage by storms or floods, and have many bridges. The 4.8 km Jamuna multipurpose bridge was inaugurated in 1998, linking the east and the west of the country by road and railway.

A rail network of some 2,835 km links the main towns. The Dhaka–Chittagong line has frequent daily services. Rail is broad gauge in the west, narrow gauge in the east, with ferry links across rivers.

Bangladesh has 5–8,000 km of navigable waterway, depending on extent of flooding, and a well-developed water transport network, carrying more than 30 per cent of domestic freight. The main ports are Chittagong and Mongla, Chittagong dealing with the bulk of foreign trade. Shahjalal (formerly Zia) International Airport is 19 km north of Dhaka.

Society

KEY FACTS 2012

Population per sq km:	1,074
Life expectancy:	70 years
Net primary enrolment:	92% (2010)

Population: 154,695,000 (2012); density among world's highest; 29 per cent of people live in urban areas and 14 per cent in urban agglomerations of more than one million people; growth 1.7 per cent p.a. 1990–2012; birth rate 20 per 1,000 people (47 in 1970), controlled by vigorous family planning schemes; life expectancy 70 years (44 in 1970).

Language: Bangla (Bengali) is the official language. English is widely spoken, especially in government and commerce.

Religion: Muslims 90 per cent, Hindus ten per cent, a few Buddhists and Christians (2004); Islam is the state religion.

Health: Public spending on health was one per cent of GDP in 2011. Public-sector medical facilities remain scarce, though there are clinics run by a major NGO, BRAC. To provide safe drinking water, between the 1970s and the mid-1990s some five million wells were drilled, and in 2011 the UN estimated that 83 per cent of the population was using an improved drinking water source and 55 per cent had access to adequate sanitation facilities. However, from 1996 naturally occurring arsenic was detected in the ground water (supplying over one million tube wells), putting nearly 50 per cent of the population at risk. By the 2000s there was an epidemic of health problems caused by arsenic poisoning.

Bangladesh has maintained a high level of immunisation coverage against diseases such as diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus and measles. There are 78 medical colleges in Bangladesh (2014). Infant mortality was 33 per 1,000 live births in 2012 (149 in 1960).

Education: Public spending on education was two per cent of GDP in 2008. There are five years of compulsory primary education and eight years of free education, starting at the age of six. Almost all primary schools are government-managed. Secondary schools comprise a first cycle of three years and a second cycle of four

years. Some 66 per cent of pupils complete primary school (2009). The school year starts in January.

A parallel system of education – madrasa education – offers Islamic instruction from primary level up to postgraduate level.

The main public universities are the University of Dhaka (established in 1921); University of Rajshahi (1954); Bangladesh Agricultural University (1961, located in Mymensingh); University of Chittagong (1966); and University of Jahangirnagar (1970, in Savar, Dhaka). There are also several private universities in Dhaka, including North–South University and Independent University. The Bangladesh Open University provides distance learning for a wide range of students at secondary and tertiary levels. The female–male ratio for gross enrolment in tertiary education is 0.70:1 (2011). Literacy among people aged 15–24 is 77 per cent (2010).

Media: Bangladesh has a lively and thriving press, with very many newspapers and weeklies in circulation. Leading English-language newspapers are *The Daily Star*, *Daily Sun*, *The Independent*, *New Age*, *The New Nation*, *Dhaka Courier* (weekly) and *Holiday* (weekly). Dailies in Bengali include *Ittefaq*, *Prothom Alo* and *Jugantor*.

Television is Bangladesh's most popular medium, especially in the cities. The country's sole terrestrial TV channel, Bangladesh Television, is a public service. Satellite and cable television are popular in urban areas. Betar–Radio Bangladesh is the national public radio service.

Some 48 per cent of households have TV sets (2006). There are 23 personal computers per 1,000 people (2006).

Communications: Country code 880; internet domain '.bd'. Mobile phone coverage is good in urban areas but patchy elsewhere. Internet connections exist in main towns.

There are six main telephone lines, 628 mobile phone subscriptions and 63 internet users per 1,000 people (2012).

Public holidays: Shaheed Day (International Mother Language Day, 21 February), Independence Day (26 March), Labour Day (1 May), Bank Holiday (early July), National Mourning Day (15 August), National Revolution Day (7 November), Victory Day (16 December) and New Year's Eve. The weekend comprises Friday/Saturday.

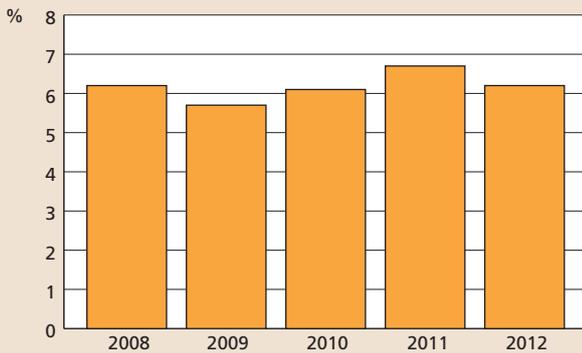
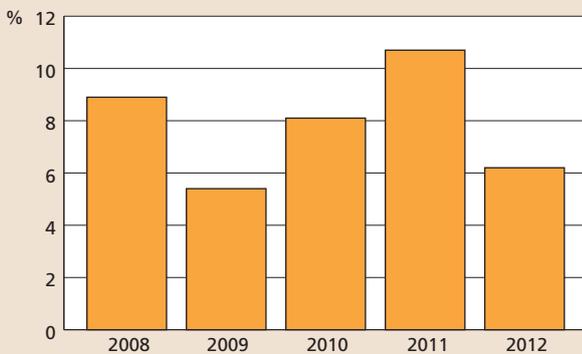
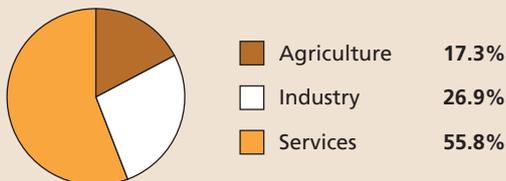
Religious and other festivals whose dates vary from year to year include Prophet's Birthday, Bangla Naba Barsha (Bengali New Year, around 14 April), Buddha Purnima (April/May), Shab-e-Bharat (Ascension of the Prophet), Eid al-Fitr (End of Ramadan, three days), Durga Puja (Dashami, October), Shab-e-Qadr (Evening of Destiny), Eid al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice, three days) and Islamic New Year.

Economy

KEY FACTS 2012

GNI:	US\$129.3bn
GNI p.c.:	US\$840
GDP growth:	6.2% p.a. 2008–12
Inflation:	7.9% p.a. 2008–12

The country has a high population density, limited natural resources and an agricultural economy vulnerable to floods and cyclones, but it nevertheless achieved economic growth averaging around four

Real Growth in GDP**Inflation****GDP by Sector (2012)**

per cent p.a. from the 1970s. It does also have huge reserves of natural gas (estimated at 200 billion cubic metres in January 2013) and some coal.

Economic policy has long aimed at the alleviation of poverty through increasing food production and expanding education, while developing an industrial and technological base, but severe floods have often frustrated development plans.

From the mid-1990s, successive governments were committed to free-market policies, privatisation of state-owned enterprises, attracting overseas investment and banking reform. More than 60 state-owned enterprises, in areas as diverse as manufacturing, agriculture, transport and communications, were identified for divestment, but progress was slow due to strong popular opposition. These policies led to an improvement in economic performance, even in 1998 when the country was devastated by the floods that covered nearly two-thirds of the land area.

From 2000 the economy grew strongly, with growth rates generally over six per cent p.a. in 2006–13 driven by strong exports. In 2008–09, despite the world economic downturn, the economy

remained buoyant with continuing growth in clothing exports and remittances from Bangladeshis living abroad. Keeping inflation under control, however, proved more challenging.

Constitution

Status:	Republic
Legislature:	Jatiya Sangsad
Independence:	1971

Bangladesh is a republic with a non-executive President. Under the Twelfth Constitutional Amendment (1991) there is a parliamentary system. The unicameral parliament (Jatiya Sangsad) comprises 300 directly elected members from geographical constituencies for five-year terms, plus 50 seats reserved for women nominated by political parties – based on their share of the elected seats – and then voted on by sitting lawmakers. The allocation of seats reserved for women was provided by the Fourteenth Constitutional Amendment (2004). One parliamentary candidate can stand in up to three constituencies. If a candidate wins in more than one constituency a by-election or by-elections are called. Parliament may sit no longer than five years. Constitutional amendments require a two-thirds majority of parliament.

Executive power is with the Prime Minister, who heads a council of ministers (the cabinet), and whose advice is necessary for all presidential acts. The head of state is the President who is elected by the national parliament for a five-year term. The presidency is a largely ceremonial role, although the President appoints members of the cabinet and the judiciary and has the power to dissolve parliament.

The Thirteenth Constitutional Amendment (1996) required a non-partisan caretaker administration to oversee the election process. However, following a Supreme Court judgment in May 2011 which had found it to be illegal, on 30 June 2011 the Jatiya Sangsad repealed the Thirteenth Amendment.

In November 2007 the caretaker government declared the independence of the judiciary from the executive, following a directive issued by the Supreme Court in December 1999 – in accordance with Article 22 of the Constitution of Bangladesh. Previous elected governments of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Awami League had effectively filibustered implementing the directive.

Politics

Last elections:	5 January 2014
Next elections:	2019
Head of state:	President Abdul Hamid
Head of government:	Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina
Ruling party:	alliance led by the Awami League
Women MPs:	20%

Following a very violent campaign, in October 2001, the four-party alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) won a surprise landslide victory, taking a total of 214 of the directly elective seats; the Awami League took 62 and the Islamic National Unity Front, which included a faction of the Jatiya Party led by Hossain Ershad, 14.

Although international observers declared the general election to be largely free and fair and both the head of the caretaker government and the chief election commissioner rejected the Awami League's

History

From its earliest pre-history Bangladesh has been subject to waves of migration and the incursions of regional – and later European – powers. An Indo-Aryan population, Hindu in belief, arrived between 3,000 and 4,000 years ago and the evidence suggests a flourishing, sophisticated civilisation.

The Moghul dynasty, conquering the territory in the 16th century, spread Islam widely through the country. The following successions of arrivals were the Portuguese, Armenians, French and British, who established military and trade outposts. In 1757 a British force defeated the local army of Nawab Siraj-ud-Dwola and set in train 190 years of British rule.

In 1947 East Bengal and Sylhet (then part of Assam) came to independence out of the UK's Indian Empire, as the eastern part of the Muslim state of Pakistan. From the start, East Pakistan was beset by problems. In particular, it resented the dominance of its richer and more powerful though less populous partner, West Pakistan, from which it was geographically separated by about 1,600 km of Indian territory. Political control, language and economic policy were among the large areas of disagreement. In 1949 the Awami League was established in East Pakistan to campaign for autonomy.

Protests and violent demonstrations followed the declaration, in 1952, that Urdu was to be Pakistan's official language. Bengali was finally accepted as the joint official language two years later. By the mid-1960s, continued under-representation in the government administration and armed forces and a much less than fair share of Pakistan's development expenditure gave rise to the belief by many in East Pakistan that the only remedy was greater autonomy and thus more control over its own resources and development priorities and politics.

In 1970, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leader of the Awami League, won an electoral majority in Pakistan's general election on a platform demanding greater autonomy for East Pakistan. At the same time Zulfikar Ali Bhutto gained a majority in the West. Despite Mujib's victory, he was prevented by the Pakistan authorities from becoming Prime Minister of the combined state.

The Awami League then issued its own plans for a new constitution for an independent state, as a result of which the Pakistani army took control and Mujib was arrested in March 1971 after a fierce crackdown. This precipitated civil war, with an estimated 9.5 million refugees fleeing to India as a result, and led to military intervention by India on the side of the *Mukti Bahini* (Bengali 'freedom fighters') at the beginning of December. Two weeks later, Pakistan forces surrendered and the separate state of Bangladesh emerged. Sheikh Mujib returned from captivity in Pakistan in January 1972 and became Prime Minister.

Instability in the new state was compounded by floods, famine, the assassination of Sheikh Mujib in August 1975 – shortly after he became President – and a succession of military coups, with martial law and frequent states of emergency. After a coup in 1975, Major-General Ziaur Rahman (Zia) assumed the leadership and in 1978 he became President. The 1979 general election brought his Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to government. The country then enjoyed a period of economic and political

stability. But in 1981 President Zia was murdered in an attempted coup.

In 1982 the then army chief, Lt-General Hossain Ershad, assumed power after another coup and became President in 1983. In May 1986 elections were held in violent conditions and boycotted by the BNP under Zia's widow, Begum Khaleda Zia. Ershad's Jatiya Party (JP) won and the Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Sheikh Mujib, boycotted parliament. Ershad won presidential elections in October 1986, and he lifted martial law and reinstated the constitution.

The following year was marked by riots and strikes, a state of emergency, thousands of arrests, and house-arrest for Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina. A general election of March 1988, boycotted by the opposition, returned the JP with 238 seats, and the state of emergency was lifted. Then ensued devastating floods covering up to 75 per cent of the country and making tens of millions homeless.

In December 1990, following mass demonstrations, President Hossain Ershad resigned and was put under house arrest. During 1991 he was convicted of illegal possession of firearms and other offences and sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment. In the February 1991 elections the BNP won 138 of the 300 directly elective seats and Begum Khaleda Zia was confirmed as the country's first woman Prime Minister. The main opposition was the Awami League and its allies, with 95 seats. A national referendum then endorsed a return to parliamentary democracy with a non-executive President. In 1991 a cyclone devastated the south-east coast, killing an estimated 250,000 people.

Political tensions mounted and opposition demands for a fresh general election increased from late 1993 into 1994, culminating in the resignation of all the opposition members from the Jatiya Sangsad in December. In 1995, following further strikes and violent protests staged by the opposition, the Jatiya Sangsad was dissolved at the request of the Prime Minister, pending the holding of a general election in 1996. The Awami League, Jatiya Party and Jamaat-e-Islami boycotted the poll and the BNP took the majority of votes cast. The opposition parties renewed their campaign and paralysed the country causing severe damage to the economy. In March 1996, the government agreed to the appointment of a neutral caretaker government to oversee the holding of fresh elections. Begum Zia resigned and the Jatiya Sangsad was dissolved.

In the parliamentary elections that followed in June 1996, the Awami League won 146 seats, the BNP 116, Jatiya Party 32 and Jamaat-e-Islami three. An informal alliance with the Jatiya Party allowed the Awami League to gain control of the majority of seats in parliament and Sheikh Hasina became Prime Minister, with Begum Zia's BNP now the main opposition which soon began a new campaign of strikes and street protests and a series of long parliamentary boycotts. In 1997 Ershad was released from prison and in March 1998 the Jatiya Party left the ruling coalition. The Awami League, which as a result of a number of by-elections now had an absolute majority, continued on its own. In 1998 the country was again devastated by floods which covered nearly two-thirds of the land area.

allegation of massive vote-rigging, Sheikh Hasina called for the elections to be run again, threatening mass protests and a parliamentary boycott, which had characterised opposition politics during previous administrations. The Awami League subsequently returned to parliament and assumed its role as opposition.

The political temperature remained very high in 2003. In June 2003 the Awami League began a boycott of parliament, which continued until June 2004. During 2004 the opposition called 21 general strikes as part of a campaign to oust the government.

In October 2006, a general election was called for January 2007 and President Iajuddin Ahmed formed a caretaker government. In early January 2007, it was confirmed that the Awami League and other smaller opposition parties were to boycott the election on the belief that the interim government and election commission were biased. Following national transport blockades raised by Awami League supporters who wanted the election postponed and ensuing riots, a state of emergency was imposed and President Ahmed postponed the election, stood down as chief adviser of the interim government and was succeeded by Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed, former central bank governor. The Election Commission then established a road map for electoral reform, including preparation of a new voters' list with photographs.

The election – held in December 2008 with Commonwealth observers present – was won by the alliance led by the Awami League, which itself took 230 seats; its ally the Jatiya Party 27. The BNP won 30 seats and its allies three. The turnout of the electorate was a record 87 per cent. Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina was sworn in as Prime Minister in January 2009. On 11 February, Zillur Rahman was elected unopposed to replace Iajuddin Ahmed as non-executive President.

In late February 2009, the new government faced its first crisis when a section of the paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) mutinied, ostensibly over pay and conditions. Officials reported 74 deaths – mostly BDR officers – and more than 1,000 soldiers were arrested and interrogated. Six special military courts were established in November 2009 to try BDR personnel accused of mutiny, while others charged with murder, looting and other serious offences were put to trial in civilian courts. On 23 January 2011 the BDR was officially renamed Border Guard of Bangladesh in accordance with the 'Border Guard Bangladesh Bill 2010' passed by the parliament on 8 December 2010.

In late 2010 the government established a tribunal to prosecute those accused of committing war crimes during Bangladesh's war of independence in 1971. From January 2013 the first verdicts were given; the first group to appear before the tribunal comprised nine leading members of Jamaat-e-Islami and two members of the opposition BNP and violent protests erupted in early March.

President Zillur Rahman died on 20 March 2013. Speaker Abdul Hamid, who had been acting President since 14 March, was elected President unopposed by parliament on 22 April and was sworn in on 24 April.

The election on 5 January 2014 was boycotted by the BNP, which had called for the polls to be held under a caretaker government. As a result, voting took place in only 147 of the country's 300 constituencies, with 153 seats uncontested. The Awami League obtained 231 seats overall, achieving a two-thirds majority in parliament. The Jatiya Party took 34 seats and formed the

parliamentary opposition. However, the Jatiya Party also accepted several cabinet positions.

Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma said on 6 January 2014 that: 'The limited levels of participation and the low voter turnout are disappointing. The acts of violence are deeply troubling...Therefore, it is critical that Bangladesh moves quickly to find a path forward through dialogue to a more inclusive and peaceful political process in which the will of the people can be fully expressed.' The new government was sworn in on 12 January.

International relations

Bangladesh is a member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association, Non-Aligned Movement, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, United Nations and World Trade Organization.

Traveller information

Immigration and customs: Passports must be valid for at least three months from the date of departure. Visas are required by all Commonwealth nationals.

Travel within the country: Traffic drives on the left. Visitors wishing to drive will need an international driving permit.

Domestic flights connect Dhaka with most of the other main towns. Rail travel is slow; the main line is between Dhaka and Chittagong. A ferry operates from Dhaka to Khulna. In urban areas cycle-rickshaws and taxis are widely available.

Travel health: Prevalent diseases where appropriate precautionary measures are recommended include cholera, dengue fever, diphtheria, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, Japanese encephalitis, malaria, rabies and typhoid.

There were 303,000 tourist arrivals in 2010.

Further information

National Web Portal of Bangladesh: www.bangladesh.gov.bd

Bangladesh Election Commission: www.ecs.gov.bd

Jatiya Sangsad: www.parliament.gov.bd

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics: www.bbs.gov.bd

Bangladesh Bank: www.bangladesh-bank.org

Bangladesh Tourism Board: www.tourismboard.gov.bd

Commonwealth Secretariat: www.thecommonwealth.org

Commonwealth of Nations:

www.commonwealthofnations.org/country/Bangladesh

Media

Daily Sun: www.daily-sun.com

New Age: www.newagebd.com/

The Daily Star: www.thedailystar.net

The Independent: www.theindependentbd.com

The New Nation: nation.ittefaq.com

Dhaka Courier: www.dhakacourier.com.bd

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Betar–Radio Bangladesh: www.betar.org.bd

bdnews24: www.bdnews24.com

Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha: www.bssnews.net

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