German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance
CPG

Asia in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

No. 4, January/2022, 4

Brought to you by CPG

Dear Readers,

The AiR team is pleased to present this week's Asia in Review issue.

I wish you an informative read and extend special greetings to everyone celebrating India's Republic Day and Australia's National Day in this week.

With best regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

Webpage: www.cpg-online.de,
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/CPGTU

Main Sections

- Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights and National Security in East Asia
- Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights and National Security in South Asia
- Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights and National Security in Southeast Asia
- International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia
- Announcements

Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights and National Security in East Asia

China: Interest rates cut after slow economic growth

(tp) The People's Bank of China (BPOC) has unexpectedly cut interest rates on 700 billion yuan (USD $110b) worth of one-year medium-term lending facility loans to 2.85% in a bid to address slowed economic growth in the December quarter.

Data from the National Bureau of Statistics shows that gross domestic product (GDP) in the December quarter grew 4% while retail sales fell to 1.7% in the period.

While these statistics were in line with economist's predictions, the December quarter was the slowest in a year and a half and does not factor in the effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

This comes amid concerns over Beijing's financial health after President Xi Jinping implemented his

"common prosperity" policy which has seen a crackdown on businesses, the Evergrande's restructuring, Covid-19 pandemic, and international condemnation over the detention of Uighurs and other Muslim minorities in the Xinjiang region.

The PBOC also cut the seven-day reverse repurchase rate and printed another 200 billion yuan of medium-term cash into the financial system. [BBC News] [South China Morning Post]

China: Former senior official expelled from CCP

(tp/dql) The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has expelled three former senior officials accused of corruption and abuse of their positions to further their personal interests.

Among the expelled are the former Vice Chairman of the China Banking Regulatory Commission Cai Esheng, former supreme court official Meng Xiang, and former Deputy Director of the National Food Administration Xu Ming. The latter is long-time protégé of Bo Xilai, one of President Xi Jinping's former rivals:
a charismatic politician, former member of the Politburo of the CCP and former Party Secretary of Chongqing, a major interior municipality who was convicted of corruption and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2013.

It is unclear whether Xu's downfall is related to Bo. [South China Morning Post] [France 24]

China: Official warns Winter Olympic athletes in lead up to Games

(tp) In response to a request for a comment on concerns for athletes of the upcoming Beijing Winter Olympics who speak out about rights issues,
the deputy director of the international relations department for the Beijing organising committee warned that speeches or behaviour that is against the "Olympic spirit", but especially against Chinese laws and regulations, will lead to "certain punishment", adding that a possible punishment could be the cancellation of the competitor's accreditation. [Daily Mail]

The warning follows a forum hosted by Human Rights Watch on Tuesday, January 18, which warned athletes

about speaking out against the Chinese Government and human rights issues as they will "not be protected" in an "Orwellian surveillance state." [BBC News 1]

There are also concerns over the data security and privacy of athletes who have to download the My2022 app for daily Covid monitoring at the Games. Media watchdog Citizen Lab said that the app has encryption flaws and requires athletes to upload sensitive personal information such as phone numbers, ID number and email address, and passport. [BCC News 2]

China: Newly elected Hong Kong barristers' chief warns profession to avoid politics

(tp) Victor Dawes, the newly elected leader of Hong Kong barristers said that the association should stay out of politics and instead forge closer ties to mainland China, adding that upholding the rule of law was "not a political concept" and that political topics are "not something the bar association should handle or discuss." [The Guardian]

Given that Hong Kong Bar Association has been a vocal advocate for human rights, Dawes's statement triggered concerns over a further erosion of the rule of law in the former British colony that in the eyes of observers has accelerated and escalated since the Hong Kong National Security Law was imposed by Beijing in June 2020.

Last year, Victor's predecessor Paul Harris was accused by Beijing of politicizing the bar association after his criticism of the sentencing of veteran democrats over two unauthorised assemblies in August 2019. A former Chief Executive called on the association to cut ties with Harris. [Hong Kong Free Press]

China: Human rights lawyer detained for 'inciting state subversion'

(tp) Chines human rights lawyer Xie Yang has been detained on grounds of "inciting state subversion" just weeks after advocating for a hospitalised teacher. He has also been accused of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" in a police notice on Monday.

The teacher was forcibly committed to a psychiatric hospital for expressing sympathy over views that

questioned Beijing's role in the 1937 Nanking massacre; a highly sensitive topic in China.

Xie's detention is widely seen as in line with recent moves of the Chinese government to crackdown on dissent and freedom of speech, having detained hundreds of human rights activists and lawyers since coming to power in 2012. [South China Morning Post]

China: Thousands of 'fugitives' forced back from overseas during Covid-19 pandemic, report says

(tp) More than 2,500 "fugitives" were forcibly brought back to China during the pandemic, according to a report published by human rights group Safeguard Defenders on Tuesday, January 18.

The program named Sky Net used various methods to recapture citizens including family intimidation, refusing to renew passports, exit bans, in-person threats and "state-sanctioned kidnapping".

Figures show an estimated 1,421 people were brought back to China in 2020 and 1,114 in 2021, despite travel restrictions during the global pandemic. These numbers only include people captured for economic crimes or crimes to official duties.

Together with operation "Fox Hunt" launched in 2014, Sky Net has brought more than 10,000 people back to China. Sky Net was moved under the control of the National Supervision Commission in 2018 and was relaunched in 2021, expanding its operations to include fugitives in areas of political, legal, and civil affairs. There are multiple reports of activists and dissents being targeted in this program, including Uyghurs and Hong Kong expats living overseas. [The Guardian]

Japan: Government officials disciplined for involvement in statistics tampering

(la) Japan's Land and Infrastructure Ministry has punished ten officials through pay cuts and reprimands on Friday, January 21, for their involvement in rewriting statistical data that allegedly have caused miscalculation of figures on the nation's gross domestic product.

A recent third-party panel investigation discovered that for over 20 years, the Ministry had over-stated or even rewritten data in its monthly construction orders which are calculated based on data from around 12,000 businesses each month, and subsequently used to compile Japan's GDP and influence government and business policies.

Amongst the punished officials were Kunihiro Yamada, Vice Minister of Land and Infrastructure, and Buichiro Kuroda, Vice Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications. According to the panel report, several ministry officials urged their bosses to address the malpractice, but superiors were reluctant to tackle the issue. Six of the involved officials were disciplined with a 10 percent pay cut for a period of one to three months.

Vice infrastructure minister Kunihiro Yamada was reprimanded for his alleged poor oversight. Following the investigation outcome, Land Minister Tetsuo Saito announced he would voluntarily return four months' salary including a bonus. [Mainichi]

Japan: Government facing domestic pressure to observe UN atomic bomb ban treaty

(la) The Japanese government is under great pressure domestically to attend as observer the first meeting between the signatories of the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, scheduled for March in Vienna. At least 10 countries have officially announced that they will participate as observers during the United Nations meeting, but Japan, the only country to have ever been attacked with an atomic bomb, is still reluctant to join.

The Japan Confederation of A- and H- Bomb Sufferers Organizations released a statement in which it urged the Japanese government to swiftly ratify and sign the treaty.

A total of 59 countries and regions have already ratified the treaty, which bans the development, testing, possession and use of nuclear arms. However, none of the countries that are officially recognized to possess nuclear weapons have signed the treaty. Japan too, is not one of the 86 signatory countries and regions of the treaty, despite its nation-wide avid rejection of nuclear weapons. [The Japan Times]

North Korea: Numbers of defectors to South Koreas drops

(dql) According to data released by South Korea's Unification Ministry, in 2021 the number of North Koreans defecting to South Korea stood at 63, a sharp drop from 229 in 2020 and more than 1000 in 2019. The Ministry cited Pyongyang's strict border restrictions in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic as reason for this development. [Yonhap News Agency]

In a separate development, North Korean authorities announced their decision to pardon those convicted of carrying out "criminal activities against the country and the people." The amnesty is granted to commemorate the 110th and 80th birth anniversaries of current leader Kim Jong-un's late father Kim Jong-il on February 16 and late grandfather Kim Il-sung on April 15 respectively and will take effect on January 31. [DT Next]

South Korea's presidential election campaign: Courts' rulings reflect continued mudslinging between candidates

(dql) With the presidential campaigns in full swing less than two months before election day, the Seoul Northern District Court on January 20 rejected an injunction request of the ruling Democratic Party (DP) that sought to stop the sales of a book critical of its presidential candidate Lee Jae-myung.

The book, released in late December and currently ranking high in bestseller lists, describes – among others – accuses Lee of attempting to commit his brother to a psychiatric hospital years ago and describes corruption cases involving Lee's confidants. [Korea Herald]

Meanwhile, the Seoul Southern District Court a day later allowed Voice of Seoul, a YouTube-based media outlet, Friday, to broadcast recordings of phone conversations with Kim Keon-hee, the wife of Yoon Suk-yeol, the presidential candidate of the main opposition People Power Party (PPP). Kim had file an injunction request to prevent the airing of the phone talks which revealed controversial remarks on the MeToo movement and attempts to interfere in the election campaign of her husband. [Yonhap News Agency]

The court decisions manifest the fact that the presidential election campaign continues to be overshadowed by mudslinging between the two main camps of the DP and PPP preoccupied with smearing each other's candidate. [Rand] [Korea Joong Ang Daily]

In a latest development of the election campaign, prosecutors have launched an investigation into allegations that in February 2020 Yoon – while serving as prosecutor general – followed a recommendation of the shamanic adviser of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus and refused to carry out a raid on the religious group which was accused of spreading COVID-19. [Yonhap News Agency]

Meanwhile, seven confidants of Lee Jae declared on Monday, January 24 that they will not take any appointed post if Lee should win the election. Their announcement comes as Lee is facing plummeting results in opinion polls in the latest of which Yoon is leading with 42 percent support against 36.8 percent for Lee. [Korea Herald]

South Korea: Highest economic growth in eleven years

(dql) According to data presented by the Bank of Korea (BOK), South Korea's central bank, the gross domestic product of Asia's fourth largest economy is estimated to have increased by 4 percent in 2021, marking the highest growth rate in eleven years.

The BOK cited as factors for the positive development firstly, consumption and exports bouncing back from slump caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and secondly, extra budgets allocated by the government, eased pandemic curbs, high vaccination rates as well as consumers' adaptation to the pandemic.

For 2022, economic growth is expected at 3 percent. [Aljazeera] [Korea Herald]

Taiwan's semiconductor industry on a sharp rise

According to US Research Institute Gartner, Taiwanese chipmaker MediaTek ranks as seventh largest producer of semiconductors in the world, gaining one position in comparison with the ranking of 2020. Sales for the Taiwanese chipmaker grew by 58.8% in 2021

from a year earlier, beating the global average of 25.1% according to figures [Gartner].

Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co (TSMC) was not included in the Gartner rankings because it is a pure-play foundry, meaning that it only makes chips for clients, not itself. If TSMC were included, it would rank third by sales, according to Fortune[Fortune].

TSMC also reported an expected the 2022 capital spending to be between $40 and $44 billion, marking a sharp increase from the $30 billion spending of 2021 and in line with the expected to be a $100 billion spending for 2023. The business for semiconductors seems to be booming worldwide, thus cementing the position of TSMC, which plans to open new producing plants in Arizona and Japan as well [The Verge].

Taiwan innovative transgender policy marks progressive trend on human rights

(eb) Taiwan's Chinese Taipei School Sport Federation (CTSSF) has allowed intersex and transgender athlete to compete in gender category of their own preference for the first time at the next National High School Games.

In the past transgender students have been allowed to participate to sport competitions in National University and College Athletic Games in the gender category indicated in their identity card but now for the first time, athletes will be able to participate in a gender category that is fitting to each individual [Focus in Taiwan].

Taiwan, ranked No. 7 among 210 countries in an annual report released by the U.S.-based non-governmental organization Freedom House last year, was praised by the head of the World League for Freedom and Democracy's (WLFD's) for promoting freedom and democracy over the years and becoming one of the freest countries in the world, as the NGO celebrated the annual World Freedom Day in Taipei. [Focus in Taiwan]

2021 set a new record for cyberattacks targeting Taiwan

(eb) Cyber-attacks on Taiwan educational and research institutions spiked by 38% in 2021, with hackers attempting to hit Taiwanese research bodies on an

average of 2,600 times each week, much higher than the world's average of 925 attempts each week according to Check Point Software Technologies, an Israelian company that conducted a survey on this topic. [Taiwan News]

Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights and National Security in South Asia

Bangladesh: Bill on formation of Election Commission expected to be passed by Parliament this week

(sk/lm) A bill on the formation of the Election Commission (EC) through a search committee is likely to be passed by parliament this week, despite criticism from opposition parties and rights organizations which claim that the drafting process did not take into account recommendations from civil society members and stakeholders.

The five-year tenure of the current EC will expire next month; the next Commission will be tasked with arranging Bangladesh's next parliamentary election, which is scheduled to be held between November 2023 and January 2024.

Article 118 (1) of Bangladesh's Constitution stipulates that the government shall appoint an EC in line with a law supposed to be introduced on that behalf. However, no government has taken such an initiative in the last 50 years. In the absence of the law, President Hamid had picked the Chief Election

Commissioner and four Commissioners in 2012 and 2017 from the names suggested by a search committee.

To give a legal shield to the current and previous ECs formed through search committees, Law Minister Anisul Huq on January 23 tabled the "Appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners Bill" in parliament. The bill was later sent to a parliamentary standing committee for final scrutiny. The committee was asked to submit its report before parliaments' lower house within seven days. [The Daily Star 1]

As per the bill, the six-member search committee will be headed by a judge from the Supreme Court's Appellate Division, and comprise High Court Division judge, the Comptroller and Auditor General, the Chairman of the Bangladesh Public Service Commission, and two other personalities appointed by the president. [The Daily Star 2] [The Independent]

Eligible to serve on the EC are Bangladeshi citizens who are at least 50 years old and have worked in prominent government, semi-government, judicial, or private jobs for at least 20 years. A former EC chief is ineligible for re-election to the same position. Other current or past election commissioners, on the other hand, may be appointed as CEC.

Against this backdrop, the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) described the government's move as a "joke" and said it will not participate in polls organized by an EC constituted under the new legislation. [Business Insider]

A former CEC criticized the legislation alleging that there is "no real representation of people in the present parliament", which is why the draft law should be finalized taking into account the views of all concerned. [The Daily Star 2]

Using a similar language, Transparency International Bangladesh said the law does not require potential commissioner candidates to be honest, transparent, and credible. The civil society group was also disappointed, claiming that the draft law did not consider recommendations from civil society members and stakeholders. [The Business Standard 2]

Bangladesh: Government to amend Digital Security Act to stop abuse, law minister says

(sk) Bangladesh's government will reform the contentious Digital Security Act (DSA) to prevent abuse, according to Law Minister Anisul Huq. [The Daily Star]

Addressing a press conference on January 20, Huq stated that the government had been holding discussions over DSA with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights twice. The minister also said that a committee had been constituted, and that he had requested the home minister to take the necessary steps to ensure that a journalist is not arrested at the primary stage of a DSA lawsuit.

When asked about the committee's mission, he replied that it would be to control cybercrime, not to persecute journalists.

Using a similar language, Huq earlier this month said that the government would amend sections of the DSA if necessary, after the Act had drawn the attention of human rights organizations and international organizations due to its alleged misuse to curb people's freedom of expression. [AiR No. 1, January/2022, 1]

Bangladesh: Three-day annual Deputy Commissioners conference held after two years hiatus

(sk) Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on January 18 inaugurated a three-day annual conference of Deputy Commissioners (DCs), the chief administrative and revenue officer of the country's 64 districts.

The conference, the first to be held after a two-year hiatus, focused on issues pertaining to COVID-19, land management, law enforcement, strengthening local government activities, disaster management, poverty reduction and employment at the local level, social safety net activities, ICT and e-governance, education, health, the environment, physical infrastructure, and development activities. [Business Insider 1]

Prime Minister Hasina issued 24-point directives to the DCs, which includes the provision of government services to people, ensuring that families of all martyred and freedom fighters (FFs) in the country's Liberation War can lead a dignified life, expediting activities to attain goals that are fixed under SDGs localization, among others. She also turned down a proposal to set up multi-story buildings for landless

and homeless people across the country. [Business Insider 2] [Business Insider 3] [Daily Sun 1]

Among the ministers holding various portfolios who also put forward their demands from DCs at the conference, the Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives Minister Md Tazul Islam demanded an increase in the revenue collection and capacity of local government and the Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change Md Shahab Uddin pressed for applying full force against land grabbers to recover occupied forest areas. [Daily Sun 2] [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Hearings on two graft cases against former Prime Minister Khaleda adjourned until March

(sk/lm) Hearings in two graft cases against Bangladesh's former prime minister and chairperson of the country's main opposition party, Khaleda Zia, and six others, have been postponed until March. [The Daily Star 1] [The Daily Star 2]

Zia, an archrival of current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's, had served 25 months out of 17 years of prison sentences on two other graft cases when a court in March 2020 granted her conditional release from jail. [AiR No. 13, March/2020, 5].

Last November, she was admitted to the critical care unit of a hospital, with doctors treating her saying they fear for her life if she is not allowed to fly abroad for medical care. Her Bangladesh Nationalist Party has held two phases of protests demanding the leader's treatment abroad [see AiR No. 2, January/2022, 2].

Bangladesh: Government, opposition parties spar over alleged lobbying in United States

(sk/lm) Bangladesh's foreign ministry has requested the Bangladesh Bank and the Election Commission to scrutinize transfers of funds by opposition parties to allegedly employ lobbyists in the United States to advocate against the ruling Awami League-led government. [Prothom Alo]

The government alleges that the Bangladesh Nationalist political party (BNP) spent at least $3.75 million over the past years in the US for lobbying

purposes aimed at stopping foreign assistance to Bangladesh and increasing Washington's pressure on Dhaka on human rights grounds.

Furthermore, the now-defunct Jamaat-e-Islami – previously the largest Islamist political party in Bangladesh – has allegedly made agreements with various US-based lobbying firms to campaign against Bangladesh, particularly to block Dhaka's domestic war crimes tribunal from trying suspects for the genocide committed during the Bangladesh Liberation War by the Pakistan Army and their local collaborators. [The Daily Star]

Appointing a lobbyist is not illegal in the American system, according to State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam, but the two institutions are asked to investigate whether the funds used for hiring lobbyists were transferred through illicit transactions.

The government's accusations were dismissed by the BNP as "baseless and fabricated allegation". The opposition party also claimed that the ruling Awami League-led government has been using lobbyists for the past 14 years to hide its alleged wrongdoings. [Business Insider]

Context and timing of the accusations assume added significance: Against the larger backdrop of strained ties with the US over human rights-related sanctions on Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion, a parliamentary committee earlier this month recommended the government to appoint a lobbyist in Washington to counter negative information about Dhaka. [AiR No. 2, January/2022, 2]

India: Court jails man for five years in first conviction over deadly 2020 New Delhi riots

(sr/lm) An Indian court has jailed a man to five years in prison and a fine of $161 in the first conviction over religious riots in New Delhi in February 2020 that left 53 people, most of them Muslims, dead.

The riots in the capital occurred after months of protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, which fast-tracks citizenship of Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian immigrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh who arrived in India before 2015 [see latest AiR No. 3, January/2022, 3]. Many Muslims in India opposed the exclusion of their community in the law and launched protests — many

of which turned violent — leading to a nationwide crackdown and the worst communal riots New Delhi had seen in decades. [NDTV]

Prosecutors and witnesses on January 20 said the accused was part of a mob of up to 200 mostly Hindu rioters who vandalised and set fire to the house of a woman. Police said that while the man was part of the mob, he had not been seen burning down the house. The court, however, held that being part of the mob meant he was ultimately responsible for the arson. [The Independent, $] [The Wire]

Earlier this month, the Delhi High Court granted bail to six people accused of the murder of a man during the riots.

India: Attorney General grants consent to initiate contempt proceedings against right-wing Hindu leader

(sr/lm) India's Attorney General has permitted initiation of criminal contempt proceedings against Yati Narsinghanand, a sect chief of a Hindu monastery who was arrested earlier this month for allegedly calling for a "genocide" of Muslims at a closed-door meeting of right-wing supporters last December.

Narsinghanand is one of five religious leader who called for the mass killings and use of weapons against Muslims during a three-day conference in the city of Haridwar, in the northern state of Uttarakhand, in December. Videos of the event had sparked outrage across India, prompting demands for action. India's Supreme Court recently issued notice to the Uttarakhand state government, while Narsinghanand was sent into 14 days of custody for hate speech against Muslims and calling for violence against them [see AiR No. 3, January/2022, 3].

Prior to his arrest, however, Narsinghanand made public statements that are believed to be direct attack on the authority of the Supreme Court of India and the videos of these statements went viral on Twitter. It is on the basis of these videos that the Attorney General has given his assent to allow contempt proceedings against the priest. [The Indian Express]

India: Kashmir independent press club shut down in latest blow to media

freedom in region

(rs/sr/lm) The future of press freedom in India's Jammu and Kashmir union territory has been thrown into question after pro-government journalists and police officers forcibly took over the umbrella organization for journalists in the region, which the authorities later shut down.

Citing threat of breach of safety and privacy, the government of on January 17 announced that the Kashmir Press Club (KPC) had been deregistered as a society and "ceased to exist". Authorities also said the land on which the KPC stands was being taken back into government hands, alleging that the club had failed to register under a new law and hold elections for a new managing body. [The New Indian Express]

Notably, the government's move ran in stark contrast with its policy in the region's Hindu-dominated Jammu city where another press club continues to function without having held an election for nearly half a decade. [Associated Press]

Prior to the announcement, a small group of journalists supportive of Prime Minister Modi-led government had stormed the KPC's offices with the assistance of armed police, allegedly threatening its ruling body, and locked up the building, preventing journalists from entering. [The Guardian]

In light of this, the Editors Guild of India accused the government of being "brazenly complicit" and dubbed it an "armed takeover." Reporters Without Borders called it an "undeclared coup" and said the region is "steadily being transformed into a black hole for news and information." [Reporters Without Borders] [The Hindu 1]

The shutdown of the independent press club followed on the detention of Sajad Gul, a trainee journalist who had been arrested by the Indian Army on January 5. That week, Gul had posted a video showing a militant's family shouting slogans police later said were "prejudicial to the security and sovereignty of the country." [The Washington Post, $]

The accused spent 11 days locked up before a local court granted him bail. But instead of freeing Gul, authorities booked him in a new case under the Public Safety Act, which allows the detention of an individual without trial for six months, and moved him to a distant prison. [Al Jazeera]

In a separate incident, police on January 21 arrested prominent human rights activist Mohammad Ahsan

Untoo for allegedly “spreading secessionist agenda” through social media. The police issued a statement stating that Untoo was an active secessionist and was often spoke at a Twitter space entitled “Radio Resistance Kashmir”, which is led by two UK-based rights activists who were both booked under India’s anti-terrorism law earlier this month. [The Hindu 2]

India: British police asked to probe Indian officials’ role in Kashmir

(sr/lm) A United Kingdom-based law firm has filed an application with British police requesting them to open an investigation and ultimately arrest India's army chief and a senior Indian government official over their alleged roles in war crimes in disputed Kashmir.

The application was submitted with substantial evidence documenting how Indian forces headed by General MM Naravane and Home Affairs Minister Amit Shah were responsible for “the torture, kidnapping and killing of activists, journalists and civilians”. The law firm's report was based on over 2,000 testimonies taken between 2020 and 2021. It also accused eight unnamed senior Indian military officials of direct involvement in war crimes and torture in Kashmir. [The Independent, $]

The police application was made on behalf of the family of a resident of Pakistani-controlled Kashmir whom the law firm said was the victim of an extrajudicial killing by Indian authorities in 2021, and on behalf of human rights campaigner Muhammad Ahsan Untoo, who was allegedly tortured before his arrest earlier this month. [Al Jazeera]

The request to London police was made under the principle of “universal jurisdiction,” which gives national courts authority to prosecute individuals accused of crimes against international law – such as crimes against humanity, war crimes, genocide, and torture — based on the principle that such crimes harm the international community or international order itself.

India: Facebook stalling report on human rights impact in India, rights groups, critics allege

(sr/lm) More than 20 organizations, joined by prominent whistleblowers and former employees have

urged Facebook to release a long-awaited report on its impact on hate speech in India, alleging the company is purposely obscuring human rights concerns.

The social networking giant, now called Meta, had commissioned a law firm in 2020 to carry out an independent review of its impact in India – the company's largest market by number of users – but its release has repeatedly been delayed, activists allege.

In their letter to Facebook, activists cited the United Nations guiding principles on business and human rights, which urge that companies should "be prepared to communicate this externally, particularly when concerns are raised by or on behalf of affected stakeholders". [The Guardian]

Meta replied to the renewed calls stating that release of the findings had been delayed because of the pandemic but was now in its final stages. [Reuters]

India: National Human Rights Commission calls for law on refugee rights

(rs/lm) India's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on January 20 organized an online open discussion on the protection of the basic human rights of refugees and asylum seekers in India.

Mr. Justice MM Kumar, a member of the NHRC, chaired the event. NHRC chairperson, Mr. Justice Arun Mishra, other NHRC members, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and representatives of Union Ministries of Law, External Affairs and Home Affairs were also present in the online discussion. [NHRC]

During the discussion, it was unanimously felt that though India has a long history of dealing with and handling international refugees and asylum seekers, it is high time for a national law to be enacted to incorporate all of the best practices and policies to ensure uniformity and legal sanctity in the protection and realization of refugees and asylum seekers' human rights across the country and to assist them in seeking other welfare benefits.

Justice Kumar said that India is a signatory to a number of international conventions and treaties, concerning refugees and asylum seekers, largely within the framework of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) but not on the basis of the Citizenship Act, 1955, which he said, can be regulated to preserve their rights.

He further said that in the absence of a national law, preserving their rights solely on the basis of particular papers on a case-by-case basis may lead to discrepancies in the uniform interpretation.

He concluded the discussion by saying that the Commission will further consider all of the suggestions before forwarding them to the government as recommendations for implementation.

Pakistan: Ayesha Malik appointed as first female Supreme Court judge

(lm) Pakistan swore in Ayesha Malik as its first female Supreme Court judge on January 24, in what lawyers and activists hailed a rare victory after decades of struggle to get representation for women in the country's top court. [The Straits Times]

Earlier this month Pakistan's top judicial commission (JCP) confirmed the elevation of Malik to the Supreme Court [see AiR No. 2, January/2022, 2]. The nine-member body had initially turned down Malik's elevation last year, in light of claims she jumped a queue of more senior male candidates qualified for the post. Justice Malik was the fourth most senior judge in the lower court from which she has now been elevated. [BBC]

Pakistan: Government announces new residence scheme for wealthy foreign nationals

(tj/lm) Pakistan has decided to offer a permanent residency scheme that for the first time allows wealthy foreign nationals to buy houses, hotels and invest in property, in an effort to attract investment and boost the country's flagging economy.

According to the *Express Tribune*, the Khan administration seeks to attract wealthy Afghans who are currently taking advantage of residency agreements to move to safer countries such as Turkey and Malaysia. The scheme is also aimed at attracting Chinese industrial investors and Sikh businessmen interested in developing pilgrimage sites for devotees of their religion. [The Express Tribune]

Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry through an overnight tweet announced that the new scheme was in line with the new National Security Policy, which was

formally launched by Prime Minister Imran earlier this month and seeks to shift the focus away from the military to a citizen-centric framework with economic security at its core. [AiR No. 3, January/2022, 3]

Pakistan: Woman sentenced to death for 'blasphemous' social media status

(lm) A court in Pakistan has sentenced a woman to death over allegedly blasphemous messages and caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad sent over WhatsApp and Facebook. The death sentence is subject to confirmation by the Lahore High Court, a forum before which the accused also has the right of appeal.

The defendant, who had been arrested in May 2020 and stated that she is a practicing Muslim, denied all the charges. During the trial, she told the court that she believed the complainant had deliberately pulled her into a religious discussion so he could implicate her and take "revenge" after she refused "to be friendly" with him. The complainant, for his part, contended that the accused shared the allegedly blasphemous material as a WhatsApp status and refused to delete it when he confronted her on the messaging platform. [The Guardian]

Legal experts said no proper legal aid was provided to the accused during the trial. [Deutsche Welle]

Few issues are as galvanizing in Pakistan as blasphemy, and mere allegations of an insult to Islam can invite mob attacks [see AiR No. 49, December/2021, 1]. Rights groups say accusations of blasphemy can often be wielded to settle personal vendettas, with minorities largely the target. Islamabad has long been under pressure to change the country's blasphemy laws – a move mullahs and religious-political parties like the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan strongly resist. In practice executions are not carried out and the accused spend their lives in jail.

Pakistan: Taliban militants claim responsibility for multiple attacks on police

(tj,lm) The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban, on January 17 targeted police in multiple attacks overnight in the capital, Islamabad,

and the country's restive northwest. Three policemen and three assailants were killed in the shootouts.

The first attack took place in Islamabad, raising fears that the insurgents, whose assaults had previously taken place near the border with Afghanistan, have been able to re-establish a presence in the heavily guarded capital. An officer and two assailants were killed in that attack. Later, two policemen were killed in attacks in the districts of Dir and North Waziristan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which borders Afghanistan. [Associated Press] [Voice of America]

The TTP has increased attacks in Pakistan, particularly since early December when a one-month ceasefire between the militants and the government expired. Afghanistan's ruling Taliban had brokered the truce to try to pave the way for substantive peace talks between the two adversaries. But the TTP refused to extend the agreement, citing a lack of progress in the talks. [AiR No. 50, December/2021, 2].

Earlier this month then, the TTP confirmed the killing of one of its top commanders in the eastern Afghan border province of Nangarhar. The dead man was identified as senior leader Khalid Balti, but it was not clear who killed him. [AiR No. 3, January/2022, 3]

Over the years, the TTP has claimed responsibility for carrying out hundreds of suicide bombings and other attacks in Pakistan that killed thousands of Pakistani civilians and security forces. Increasing attacks in part explain why violence-related casualties in Pakistan increased by 42 percent in 2021, according to a new report from the Center for Research and Security Studies, a Pakistani think tank. [Center for Research and Security Studies]

At the same time, last week offered a grim reminder that the TTP is not the only terror threat in Pakistan. On January 23, a newly formed separatist group from Balochistan province – the Baluchistan Nationalist Army – claimed responsibility for a blast that ripped through a market in Lahore, the country's second largest city, killing at least three people and wounding 28. [The Washington Post, $]

Baloch separatists previously claimed several attacks on projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and thousands of Pakistani security personnel are deployed in the region to counter the violence.

Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights and National Security in Southeast Asia

Cambodia: Trial of former opposition leader continues

(dm) The trial for former Cambodian opposition leader Kem Sokha on charges of treason was resumed on 19 January after a two-year delay due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Sokha appealed to the court to drop his charges in the hopes of achieving “national reconciliation”. If found guilty, he could face up to 30 years in jail.

Sohka, arrested in September 2017, is accused of “conspiracy with foreign power” to overthrow the current government ofCambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen. [AiR No. 3 January/2022,3]

Prosecutors mostly based their case against Sokha on having allegedly received foreign donations when he was president of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, a local NGO he founded in 2002. Sokha also co-founded the now-dissolved Cambodia National Rescue Party. [France 24]

Human rights groups criticized the case claiming that Soka was brought to court merely on politically motivated charges which were used to suppress democratic freedoms. Currently, Cambodia counts over 60 political prisoners and activists. [DW]

Indonesia: Legislative council shares concerns over capital city move

(gl) The Jakarta Regional Legislative Council (DPRD Jakarta) stated that the planned move of the capital city from Jakarta to East Kalimantan will negatively impact Jakarta's economy by leading to a reduction in goods and services in Jakarta which, in turn, will reduce household consumption and state apparatus spending.

DPRD Jakarta emphasized that the economic negative effects would add to the fact that Jakarta would still remain affected by air pollution and traffic congestion despite the move. Other arguments against the chamge relate to the capital city relocations' alleged negative impact on fauna and flora. [Tempo] [AiR No. 51, December/2021, 3]

However, the capital relocation also might have its military and strategic advantages according to some observers. It would come with a significant increase in Indonesian military presence in East Kalimantan and thus a militarization of Borneo and also bringing key points for transnational criminal and terrorist activities closer to the focus. Moreover, the new capital would share borders with Brunei, Malaysia, and the Philippines, locating the capital more at the center of maritime South East Asia. [The Strategist]

Indonesia: More corruption cases against public figures

(gl) On January 17, businessman Heru Hidayat was convicted for money laundering and graft related to a corruption scandal related to Asabri, a state-owned insurance company engaged especially with military and police personnel. The graft event involved misappropriation of money and crooked investments that costAsabri US$ 1.6 billion. Although Hidayat was initially given a death sentence but eventually received instead a life sentence in prison. [Jakarta Globe 1] [Jakarta Globe 2] [AiR No. 50, December/2021, 2]

On January 20, the Corruption Eradication Committee (KPK) arrested a judge in the Surabaya District Court for allegedly taking bribes. Reports from NGOs argue that the judge was notoriously known for acquitting major corruption case defendants. [Jakarta Globe 3]

On the same day, the KPK also arrested a district head in North Sumatra for allegedly intending to take US$

5.4 million in bribes from a businessman who won several projects from the regional government. [Jakarta Globe 4]

Together with the Attorney General's Office, the KPK also announced it will launch a criminal investigation into state-owned airline Garuda Indonesia. The airline is suspected of corruption around its aircraft lease. The alleged fraudulent acquisition of aircraft leases has cost US$ 250 million to the state. [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia: cyber sexual assaults and forced marriage to be included in sexual violence bill

(gl) On January 20, the Deputy of the Presidential Staff Office announced that the government will support the incorporation of cyber sexual assaults in the sexual violence bill (RUU TPKS). Sexual violence in cyberspace does not only encompass digital abuse, but also hacking, deceiving, privacy breaches, and threats of video or photo publication. The majority of victims are teenagers, with someone in their vicinity usually being the perpetrator. [Tempo]

On the same day, six non-governmental organizations urged the government to also include forced marriage in RUU TPKS. Presently, Indonesia ranks tenth in the world as one of the countries with the greatest number of forced child marriages. [Tempo]

Indonesia: Al-Qaeda-linked terrorist leader sentenced to 15 years

(gl) A senior member of the al-Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorist group was sentenced to 15 years in prison by an Indonesian court over the 2002 Bali bombings and for coordinating other attacks carried out by JI. The defendant was found guilty of associating with a terrorist organization, assisting militants, and withholding information about terrorist acts.

The prosecution accused the man of playing a key role in producing the bombs used in multiple deadly attacks across the country in early 2000, including the Bali attack that destroyed two nightclubs killing 202 people. The Bali attack was also referred to as Southeast Asia's deadliest-ever terror attack. Three key figures involved in the Bali bombings were executed after receiving a death sentence in Indonesia in 2008.

Although the man was initially sentenced to life imprisonment, the Indonesian court disregarded that charge because of the prosecution period expiry. According to Indonesia's Criminal Code, criminals cannot be prosecuted after 18 years. [Al Jazeera] [Benar News] [The Diplomat]

Indonesia: Military blames pro-independence group for attacks in West Papua

(bs) The Indonesian military accused a pro-independence group to be responsible for a deadly attack in West Papua despite separatist rebels have already claimed responsibility for the attack.

The group was also blamed for another deadly attack in September that killed four government soldiers. Six suspects were arrested. If found guilty, they might face the death penalty.

The group has denied all the accusations for both the attacks claiming that it has never encouraged a violent approach. The group, in fact, is known for its pro-independence rallies and calls for peaceful solutions. [Benar News]

Indonesia: Increased digital violence puts freedom of speech at risk

(gl) The National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) stated that digital threats to free speech have prominently increased since the COVID-19 pandemic has led more individuals to rely on technology.

Between 2020 and 2021, Komnas HAM reported a total of 44 incidents violating freedom of speech rights, with 52% percent of these cases involving major online free speech violations. [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Public discontent over handling of child sexual abuse cases

(gl) Prosecutors and several government officials urged the Bandung District Court to sentence to death a Islamic boarding-school teacher accused of raping at least 13 teenage girls and having at least 9 babies born

from those sexual violence acts. The case triggered divisions in public opinion, among which, activists shared their doubts on the effectiveness of the death penalty for sexual abuse cases in deterring these violent acts.

Meanwhile, another Indonesian court sentenced a 37-year-old Christian priest to 10 years in prison for sexually assaulting six 13-year-old students. The decision led to a debate among another side of the public opinion, which argues that the 15-years maximum sentence for child sexual assault cases is not sufficient, being a lengthier prison sentence necessary. [Al Jazeera] [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia to impose crude palm oil export restrictions

(gl) As of January 24, Indonesia will impose a crude palm oil (CPO) export restriction in order to boost domestic market prioritization and lower domestic rising cooking oil prices. CPO exporters will be required to show proof of their domestic transactions in order to apply for export permits. [The Jakarta Post]

Meanwhile, economists urged the Oil Palm Estate Fund (BPDP-KS) to increase its transparency with regards to using its funds for cooking palm oil subsidies. Increased transparency is necessary not only to determine cooking palm oil price, but also to assess the number of funds allocated to subsidies. A speaker at the Center of Economic and Law Studies stated that these subsidies should be given to palm oil producers to offset the difference between the government's retail price ceiling and market prices. [Kompas]

Laos: Legislative body elects new National Assembly Party committee

(bs) On January 21, the Lao National Assembly (NA) elected a new Party committee to oversee the activity of the NA Secretariat and the NA`s departments, and to strengthen the political awareness of Party members.

On the same occasion, the assembly appointed the President of the NA to chair the committee and endorsed a new five-year development plan and an assessment report on Party leadership. [Vientiane Times $]

Laos: Government drafted law on hydropower safety

(bs) Laos has drafted a law that governs safety procedures for the construction of hydropower dams, including quality standards and risk prevention measures.

The effects of hydropower dams have been widely disputed among environmentalists and government officials. In 2018 a dam collapsed in the South of Laos killing 71 people and displacing 14,400 villagers, most of whom are still waiting for government compensation for their losses. [ReliefWeb]

The Lao government has already begun the displacement operations for the construction of another dam in the northern province of Luang Prabang by relocating 581 families. The villagers have shared concerns over the small dimensions of the arable land in the new assigned location, as the majority of the displaced families rely on farming for family sustenance.

Thai NGOs have urged the Lao and Thai government to revisit the project and have encouraged the countries to not build further hydropower plants. NGOs and locals, whose lives depend on the Mekong River, shared their concerns over the worsening of the doughnuts in the Mekong basin since the beginning of hydropower operations upstream. According to experts, the dams have had an impact on periodic droughts and have negatively affected the fish population, marine biodiversity, and the nutrients of the water, which is now often not usable for farming or living purposes. [Radio Free Asia 1] [Radio Free Asia 2]

Currently Laos has over 80 operational hydropower plants and is planning to build another 246 in the future. This plan would make the country the “battery of Southeast Asia,” according to international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and human rights groups. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Lao women employed at Chinese casino call for help

(bs) Three Lao women have allegedly been coerced into staying in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (SEZ), 80 percent owned by Chinese companies,

in a northern province of Laos. The company has also confiscated passports and identity documents of the women.

After being hired as “chat girls” and not meeting the targets given by the hiring company, the girls are now waiting to be sold to another employer while being indebted for over $1,600. The debt is growing as the company has been charging the women for accommodation and basic necessities since they could not meet the sale targets.

If no other company will buy the women and they will not be able to pay the debt, the girls might face the risk of being forced into prostitution.

The three women called the Lao authorities to rescue them. However, the area remains hardly accessible to Lao police and the Lao government despite being located on national territory. An official at the Labor and Social Welfare Department of the northern province said that the Lao officials were able to rescue a small number of women from the Chinese-run casino area in the past but did not provide further information on why they could enter the SEZ on those specific occasions.

The Golden Triangle SEZ has been on the radar of national and international anti-human trafficking institutions for over a decade. The area is also well-known for being the center of drug production and contraband. [AiR No. 51, December/2021, 3] [Radio Free Asia]

Malaysia: Johor to hold a state election in March

(dw) On January 22 the Sultan of Malaysia’s southernmost state of Johor dissolved the state parliament “to pave the way for a state election.” [The Strait Times]

The decision was pre-empted by an anticipated snap election from Malaysia's ruling party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), in the state of Johor in order to assist the state to move away from political uncertainty. This election would terminate the UMNO five-year term earlier, which was originally due to end next year. [Malay Mail 1]

Meanwhile, the opposition coalition of Pakatan Harapan and the Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (Muda), a youth-centered and multiracial political party, criticized the snap election for its high cost and

said the finances should be used for people's welfare instead. [Malay Mail 2] [see AiR No. 3, January/2022, 3]

The ruling coalition currently has 28 seats, while the opposition controls 27 seats. According to UMNO, the state government will be easily intimidated and controlled by the opposition with its narrow majority situation. [Malay Mail 3]

Malaysia: Anti-Corruption Chief discharged from graft scandal investigation

(dw) The Securities Commission (SC), concluded its investigations against the chief commissioner Anti-Corruption Commission's (MACC) into the acquisition of public shares, and said it was unable to "conclusively establish" any breach under the Security Industry Act.

The statutory body, responsible for regulating the Malaysian capital market, began investigating on January 19, after the MAAC chief openly revealed that his brother had used his share trading account to buy millions of shares in two publicly traded businesses in 2015. [Malay Mail 1] [The Star] [AiR No. 2, January/2022, 2].

Due to heavy protest against the investigation's outcome, the senior official was discharged. The 'Catch Azam Baki' movement, who organized the protest, criticized him for refusing to share information with the Parliamentary Select Committee on Agencies concerning his stock acquisitions case. According to the lawmakers, the parliamentary committee has the right and power to do an independent investigation. [Malay Mail 2] [Free Malaysia Today] On January 22, the movement staged a peaceful street protest demanding the Chief to resign. [Channel News Asia]

After high dissent among politicians and civil society, the Prime Minister, who is also a member of the ruling UMNO, advised the opposition to accept the decision of the Supreme Court [Malay Mail 3]. As a result of this case, the National Assembly and the People's Assembly have decided to meet to form a joint committee to combat corruption in the country. [Malay Mail 4]

Malaysia: New multiethnic party recruits members from opposition parties

(dw) The new multicultural party, Warisan (Heritage Party), is expected to recruit members in the island state of Penang over the following weeks. On January 22, the party elected its first West Malaysian legislators, who were formerly members of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a major pro-democracy center-left Malaysian political party. [Malay Mail]

According to experts, Warisan's presence in the Malay state could affect the positions of both the DAP and the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) as members of the current opposition with social democracy, multiculturalism, secularism, and reformist ideas at their cores. [Free Malaysia Today] [AiR No. 3, January/2022, 3]

Warisan was founded in the Borneo states of Sabah as a regional party and is currently expanding to a national level. [AiR No. 3, January/2022, 3]

Malaysia: Opposition leaders meet Prime Minister on legislative reforms of key political rules

(dw) On January 20 opposition coalition leaders met with the Malaysian Prime Minister to discuss anti-hopping bill, corruption issues, and post-flood measures.

The government is considering introducing an anti-hopping law, taking India, Singapore and the United Kingdom as examples, that would expel members of the parliaments who switch political parties. According to the government, the law is necessary to improve political stability and public confidence in the democratic process. [New Strait Times] [Malay Mail]

Moreover, according to a minister from the Prime Minister's Department, the legislative body should also consider limiting the Prime Minister's term to 10 years in order to reduce the risk of corruption, nepotism and cronyism.

In this light, experts are predicting that the incumbent Prime Minister, Ismail Sabri Yaakob, would only serve a transitory term as he was only meant to be a caretaker prime minister and would only be in office until the next general election (GE15) scheduled for mid-2023. Experts also urged Ismail to do more to reach out to non-Malay groups and be more inclusive, criticizing his alleged Malay-centric approach. [Free Malaysia Today] [Bernama]

Malaysia: Watchdog asks government to eliminate discrimination possibilities under new voting age law

(dw) An electoral watchdog has called on the government to address the possibility of discrimination under the new Undi 18 election law and the introduced automatic voter registration.

Under the new Undi 18 law, the voting age is lowered to eighteen. According to the watchdog, discrimination could occur because only 16% of the youth reside in urban regions. This group is most likely to have access to vote and the necessary knowledge.

The election watchdog has urged the Election Commission to divulge the number of new voters in each of the parliamentary and state constituencies so that all citizens could assess the problem's scope. The watchdog also requested that the parliament evaluate the necessary constitutional reforms of the 13th schedule of the Federal Constitution to avoid political manipulation and uneven state divisions. According to the watchdog, the ideal strategy is to transfer seats from a state with fewer voters to a state with more voters while maintaining the same number of seats. [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysia shows strong commitment to nuclear disarmament

(dw) The Malaysian government confirmed its commitment to nuclear disarmament and pledged to continue collaborating with international partners to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons.

According to the foreign ministry, January 22 marks Malaysia's entry into effect of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). The government believes that the TPNW improves global standards against nuclear weapons threats and hopes that the Treaty's universality could be achieved as soon as practicable. Malaysia's government stated that it encourages other countries to accelerate their Treaty accession as a sign of their commitment to nuclear disarmament and total elimination. [The Star]

Malaysia: Oil royalty disputes in the state of Kelantan

(dw) The state government of Kelantan, a Malay state, and activists have been claiming an oil royalty from the territory of Putrajaya for decades. The federal government of Putrajaya has repeatedly dismissed the claims stressing that the oil is extracted outside Kelantan's territorial waters. The dispute over Kelantan's oil royalty also hampered the state's development. Kelantan has made a series of unsuccessful attempts to retrieve royalties since 2005, in compliance with a 5% fee agreed in a 1970s agreement.

On the other hand, Putrajaya already provides Kelantan compassionate money, totaling RM15.7 million (USD 3.7 million) in 2019. Based on a rate of 5% of petroleum revenue received from the state, the federal government has also paid the Kelantan state government RM400 million (USD 95.5 million) for 2020 and 2021.

The conflict over Kelantan oil royalties is a long-lasting dispute over the sea borders. All seas beyond three nautical miles from the coasts of any Malaysian state are under federal administration according to the Emergency Ordinance of 1969. If oil is extracted in waters beyond three nautical miles, the federal government of Putrajaya has decided to not pay a royalty. This is in stark contrast to a 1975 agreement between the national oil corporation and all the states, which stated that if oil was discovered inland or offshore, the corporation would pay a 5% royalty to the states.

Political favoritism has also influenced royalty conflicts. The Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) is based in Kelantan and Terengganu, two neighboring states. The royalty was abolished during the opposition's leadership, and the government paid the compassionate money. When the PAS took power in the states in 2009, the government resumed the royalty. [Free Malaysia Today]

Myanmar: Junta sentences activists, lawmaker to death

(ny) The Myanmar military junta sentenced to death two pro-democracy activists. The men were accused of leading and planning attacks against the junta’s forces and were convicted under Sections 49 (a), 50 (i), and 50

(j) of the Counterterrorism Law, according to which any activity related to explosives, bombings, and financing terrorism is illegal. One of the men was a lawmaker from Aung San Suu Kyi's party. [Aljazeera] [Myanmar Now]

Another sentence came for a pro-democracy student who was accused of hiding weapons and advising on terrorist activities. The court also accused the man of contacting the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), the National Unity Government (NUG), and the People's Defense Force (PDF), an opposition coalition and militia network formed by politicians ousted in the 2021 February coup that the junta declared terrorist organizations.[Radio Free Asia] [Myanmar Now].

Maung Kyaw (Phyo Zeyar Thaw) is also a well-known hip-hop artist, a former National League for Democracy legislator, and a close aide to deposed Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The military court also accused him of having Zoom meetings with CRPH, NUG, supporting financially local People's Defense Force members, contacting the opposition groups, and involvement in attacks in Yangon. [Radio Free Asia] [Al Jazeera]

Myanmar: Professor jailed for leading anti-military protests

(ny) A professor of oriental studies at Yangon University was sentenced to three years in prison on January 19 for leading an anti-military protests and charged under Section 505 (a) of the Penal Code for incitement. He is the founder of the University Teachers' Association and one of the leaders of the Civil Disobedience Movement against the military coup.

Myanmar military junta has suspended more than 120,000 striking teachers and issued arrest warrants for 14 professors since the February coup. [Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: former chief minister of Rakhine State sentenced for corruption

(ny) Nyi Pu, former chief minister of Rakhine State, was sentenced to nine more years in prison for corruption in addition to a previous charge of two years for incitement. The court added a three-year jail sentence for each of the three new charges against the man,

who was sentenced under Section 55 of the Anti-Corruption Law.

The former chief minister is also facing charges under Section 130 (a) and 109 of the Penal Code for allegedly violating the Constitution. He was allegedly involved in a construction project without parliamentary permission. [Myanmar Now]

Myanmar: three journalists arrested in media crackdown

(bs) Three journalists for an independent news portal and two reporters for an online news outlet in the South of Myanmar were arrested in a media crackdown. The reasons behind the arrest remain unknown. The junta, in past claims, said that it would not allow news that would cause public unrest. Meanwhile, the military has imposed restrictions on media licenses, internet access, and broadcasts. At least 46 reporters are currently held by the junta. [Reuters] [Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Court to hear objections in Rohingya genocide case in February

(sd) Myanmar's military junta will present its objections to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in relation to the alleged genocide committed against Rohingya Muslims in 2017.

The accusation, brought against the state by Gambia, involves the alleged killing, raping and arson attacks committed against the Rohingya by Myanmar security forces during a clearance operation of 700,000 Muslims in 2017. The case was originally filed in 2019 by Gambia for the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the hearing will take place from 21 February at the ICJ's seat in the Netherlands, both online and in-person with some people attending by video link.

The operation was launched in the western state of Rakhine following attacks on police outposts orchestrated by the insurgent group The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. UN investigators said there was "genocidal intent" behind Myanmar's actions, but both the government and the military have denied the accusation.

Myanmar was ordered by the ICJ, also referred to as the World Court, to implement several provisional

measures protecting the Rohingya population from harm and to prevent the destruction of evidence of crimes committed against them.

In June 2021 a new legal team was created to build a defense on behalf of Myanmar's military. Among the eight panel members are two serving lieutenant generals.

The military has yet to announce who will present the arguments at The Hague. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Continuous deadly clashes, opposition government seeks to involve international courts

(ny/bs) Local resistance forces and the Myanmar Army have been fighting for over ten days after 200 soldiers launched an offensive along the Falam-Kalay on January 8. The clashes claimed 50 junta soldiers and several civilians lives and forced hundreds of people to flee the villages. The Chin National Defense Force (CNDF) warned the villager to not travel along the road. Over 3,000 people have been displaced by fighting between local defense groups and government forces in Chin state, southern Myanmar. According to an Indian Express report, over 2,000 people fled to India at the border with Chin state. [Radio Free Asia 1] [The Wire]

According to a report by UNOCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), more than 30,000 people across Chin State have been forced to flee their homes because of the battles since the coup. [Myanmar Now] [UNOCHA]

In the same week, in Kayah State, eastern Myanmar, six civilians were killed by military airstrikes, which forced over 20,000 refugees to flee the area and take refuge in the nearby mountains. Some local rights groups called the attacks a crime against humanity.

Meanwhile, in Rakhine state, western Myanmar, the villagers shared their concerns over possible armed clashes along the border with Bangladesh following a recent increase in attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), an armed group against the military junta. The group has been attempting to establish control over major Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. [Radio Free Asia 2]

The Minister of Human Rights of the country´s underground/exile opposition government, the

national Unity Government (NUG) claims that the attacks were in violation of the Geneva Convention on war crimes. According to the minister, the junta should have either avoided the attacks or announced their upcoming in order to protect civilians [Radio Free Asia 3]. Moreover, two other ministers of the NUG, a group made by elected lawmakers and members of parliament ousted in 2021, shared their intention to submit the crimes committed by the junta in Chin State to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in addition to reporting the junta's violations to the United Nations Security Council. [Myanmar Now]

Myanmar: Landmines along gas pipelines in Shan State

(ny) The Myanmar military positioned landmines in a northern Shan State along oil and gas pipelines used for supplies and trade. The junta affirmed that the landmines were placed for security reasons and to prohibit villagers to enter the landmines areas. [Myanmar Now]

Local residents in this region worry about their safety from these landmines, as their livelihoods are also affected. [Mizzima] [Irrawaddy]

The Philippines: Marcos- Duterte move on for presidential elections

(my/hg) Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte-Carpio, the son of late dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. and the daughter of incumbent President Rodrigo Duterte, who are running together in the upcoming 2022 general elections in May, seem to receive considerable public support. In December, the candidates topped two surveys, receiving favorable results especially among young voters. [AiR No. 1, January/2022, 1]

Now, the four-party platform supporting them, the so-called "UniTeam", came out with ten senatorial candidates it is also backing. [Philippine Star 1]

Together with the president, 12 of the Philippine's´ 24 senators will also be elected on May 9, aside with all members of the house of representatives, governors, vice governors, mayors and council members of cities and municipalities.

Among the UniTeam´s 10 senatorial candidates are

- Deputy House Speaker Rodante Marcoleta, who was instrumental in attempting to financially eliminate the country´s human rights commission by reducing its budget to 1000 Pesos in 2017,

- Larry Gadon, a prominent lawyer who suggested to “kill them all and burn their houses” in dealing with the country´s Islamic terror movements if they would not want peace,

- former defense secretary Gibo Teodoro, who served in the cabinet under President Gloria Macapagal-Aroyo, and

- former presidential spokesperson Harry Roque, formerly human rights lawyer who already attempted to gain a senatorial seat in 2019.

Meanwhile, Sara Duterte-Carpio has officially been received support as the vice-presidential candidate from the Socialist Democratic Party PDP-Laban. [Philippine Star 2] PDP-Laban is the party chaired by incumbent President Duterte yet internally deeply divided over intra-party criticism of Duterte´s foreign policy vis-à-vis the Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea among other issues. Sara Duterte-Carpio herself is the chairwoman of the Hugpong ng Pagbabago party, a regional party founder by herself in 2018.

Sara Duterte-Carpio’s proposed to introduce mandatory military service for people aged 18 and above. The proposal faced several criticisms over its potential civil rights and freedom violation, it also potentially eroded into the avenue of forced labor, according to rights groups. [Inquirer]

The Philippines: Over 300 Twitter accounts supporting presidential candidate Marcos Jr. taken down

(my) Twitter suspended more than three hundred accounts supporting Marcos Jr. for violating Twitter´s rules on spam and manipulation. While Twitter allows rallying and sharing political content under the community guidelines, it seeks to exclude paid and inauthentic accounts. [Aljazeera]

The spokesperson of Marcos mentioned the probability that some accounts may not belong to the supporters of the presidential candidates. According to further inspection, many accounts were created after

his announcement to join the presidential election in October 2021. [France 24]

The Philippines: Human Rights Defender Bill disputed

(my) The Human Rights Defender Protection Act (or House Bill No. 10576), recently approved by the Philippine House of Representatives, has been criticized as terrorist exempt law by the National Task Force to End Local Armed Conflict (NTF-ELAC), the task force organized by the government of the Philippines to respond and raise awareness to the ongoing communist rebellion in the Philippines. The agency warned that if the bill will be passed into law, it will "open the floodgates of abuse and torment on our people by terrorists like the CPP-NPA-NDF," adding that the Anti-Terrorism Law that the Supreme Court recently declared constitutional would become ineffective and toothless. [Philippine News Agency]

Among others, the bill provides for the human rights defenders "to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms; form groups, associations, and organizations; solicit, receive and utilize resources; seek, receive and disseminate information; and develop and advocate for human rights ideas."

The bill is now pending passage in the Senate. Amnesty International called the bill a chance "to rescue the deteriorating human rights situation in the country" caused by President Duterte's "counter-progressive policies on freedom of expression and association." [Philippine Star]

Similarly, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (OMCT-FIDH) welcomed the passage of the bill by the House of Representatives and called on the Senate to follow suit, reminding it that in 2019 the House of Representatives had already adopted a Human Rights Defenders Bill under House Bill No. 9199, but that due to the Senate's failure to adopt the correspondent bill that prevented the bill becoming law. [FIDH]

The Philippines: Presidential candidates yes and no to same-sex marriage

(my) The majority of the candidates in the Philippines' upcoming presidential election expressed their

opposition to same-sex marriage, with only two of them supporting same-sex civil unions.

Whereas Vice President to current President Rodrigo Duterte, Leni Robredo, declared her support for the civil union of LGBTQ+ couples, Manny Pacquiao, a famous boxer who turned politician, cleared up his stance on the LGBTQ+ community, calling "worse than animals" those who engage in same-sex relationships. In another interview, he clarified that he was misquoted, and that he is only abiding by "what The Lord wants."

While the predominantly Catholic Philippines does not legally recognize same-sex union, it is not explicitly banned by the constitution as ruled by the Supreme Court in 2019. [Rappler]

The Philippine army to purchase new upgrades for Army Modernization

(my) Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana announced that the Philippine will be purchasing 32 new Black Hawk helicopters from a Polish manufacturer, costing around US$620 million.

The announcement comes after the military purchased in late December two new warships from South Korea

The purchases were to push the modernization of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). The purchase of the helicopters was not only encouraged by the modernization but also the realization of the lack of transport planes and helicopters during to the Rai Typhoon, which ravaged the Philippines in late 2021. [Channel NewsAsia] [Benar News] [Reuters] [AiR No. 52, December/2021, 4]

Meanwhile, the army also signed a deal for a number of Indian-made BrahMos medium-range ramjet supersonic cruise missiles. Together with the two Brahmos batteries, the missiles were also purchased under a similar modernization program. [Philippine News Agency] [AiR No. 1, January/2022, 1]

Singapore: Former chairman of the Reform Party accumulates public offenses

(avdv) Chairman of the Reform Party Charles Yeo has stepped down following his arrest on 12 January on charges of criminal breach of trust. On 19 January he

was also accused of offending the police and the Christian community because of multiple Instagram and Facebook posts dating back to November 2020, January 2021, and February 2021, in which Yeo allegedly made abusive remarks towards a police officer and allegedly sought to hurt Christians who hold certain beliefs about homosexuality. [Asia in Review No. 3, 2022] [The Straits Times] [Today]

Singapore: Upgraded national standards for workplace safety

(avdv) The government's Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) Council advertised its Vision Zero video at its leadership convention on 20 January, as they aim for an annual workplace fatality rate below 1.0 per 100,000 workers.

This follows the Ministry of Manpower's 2028 vision to raise Singapore's workplace safety ranking to be one of the top countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. This agenda is jointly supported by the Singapore National Employers Federation and the National Trades Union Congress.

The main partnering companies are from the chemical and petroleum industries. The video also targets other industries. The construction industry and the food & beverage industry are known to need improvements after a rising number of workplace accidents over the years prior to the pandemic. [Ministry of Manpower 1] [Ministry of Manpower 2] [The Straits Times 1] [The Straits Times 2] [WSH Council]

Thailand: New opposition party unveiled

(ay) Four former members of the ruling Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) have revealed their newly-founded political party, Sang Anakot Thai (Building Thailand's Future), on January 19.

Sang Anakot Thai is a new opposition party to the PPRP. The four founders resigned from the PPRP at a party general assembly in June 2020 allegedly in order to facilitate the prime minister's reorganization of the cabinet. [see AiR, No. 2. January/2022. 2] [Bangkok Post 1]

The new party aims at solving economic issues and laying a solid political foundation for the country. Sang Anakot Thai will vote to choose the party's leader and

other key members, but no date has been set. [Bangkok Post 2] [Bangkok Post 3] [Matichon]

Meanwhile, PPRP secretary-general Thamanat Prompow and 20 other members of the party were expelled from the party on January 19 after losing two by-elections in Chumphon and Songkhla provinces and being accused of "serious unethical behavior." In order to retain their Member of the Parliament (MP) status, the expelled politicians must join another party within 30 days. [Nikkei Asia] [Bloomberg] [Bangkok Post 4][Bangkok Post 5]

Thailand: Opposition parties to question the government in mid-February

(si) On 21 January, the opposition parties submitted a motion requesting a general debate against the government. The discussion will take place in mid-February to question the government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic, African Swine Fever outbreaks, economic issues caused by high living costs, political reform, corruption, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. [Thaipbsworld] [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Prime Minister instruct royal pardon to convicts in corruption cases

(bs) The Justice Ministry has received instructions from Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha to follow the recommendations from an independent committee to grant royal pardon to those convicted in corruption cases who show regret and eagerness to make an effort towards self-improvement. The pardon would grant a reduction of their jail terms.

The Prime Minister also urged the Justice Ministry and the Department of Corrections to present guidelines to improve the criteria for granting pardons "as soon as possible." [Bangkok Post 1]

Meanwhile, the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) has opened a Corruption Deterrence Centre (CDC) to analyze data in the prevention of misconduct and corruption within state departments. The center also aims to gather data from both domestic and international networks. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Drug inmates request a review on their sentences after law amendment

(ay/as) According to the Thai National Narcotics Control Committee, approximately 92,000 inmates submitted a petition requesting a review of their sentence in response to changes to the Narcotics Act. [Bangkok Post 1]

On January 20, the Ministry of Public Health's committee on narcotic control submitted a draft bill to the Narcotics Control Board (NCB) that would decriminalize the use of cannabis by officially removing the substance from the narcotics list. The country had already become the first country in South-East Asia to legalize cannabis for food and cosmetics in late 2021.

The draft will be reviewed by the NCB in a meeting on January 25. If approved, the draft will be signed by the public health minister and announced in the Royal Gazette for promulgation. [Bangkok Post 2] [Bloomberg]

Thailand: Democrats party win Chumphon, Songkhla provinces in by-elections

(ay) The Democrat Party won the by-election and retained the House seats won in Chumphon's constituency 1 and Songkhla's constituency 6 on January 16.

According to a political science lecturer at Rangsit University, the ruling Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) lost because it relied on the party's leader and secretary-general to drive its campaign rather than Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, who is more popular among people in the province. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha has urged both the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) and Democrats to work together in the coalition of government to serve the people. However, some may see the victories as a sign of a possible comeback of the Democrat Party after suffering major losses in the 2019 general election. [Bangkok Post] [The Straits Times]

Thailand: UN envoy urged Thailand to help resolve Myanmar crisis

(ay) During a courtesy call on Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha at Government House last week, Noeleen Heyzer, Special Envoy on Myanmar of UN Secretary-General António Guterres, requested Thailand's assistance in preventing an escalation of the crisis in Myanmar and has welcomed assurances that refugees fleeing Myanmar military operations would be protected by the Thai government.

Prayuth, for his part, confirmed that Thailand has available plans to designate areas to accommodate Myanmar refugees for humanitarian assistance and aims to "create pathways for effective implementation of the Five-Point Consensus acceptable to all stakeholders in Myanmar."

Heyzer's meeting with Prayuth is part of her efforts to solicit foreign assistance to displaced people while urging Myanmar's military junta to respect the five-point consensus agreed with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) last April.

Currently, approximately 1,300 people are still in a refugee camp after fleeing violence near the border erupted two months ago, while more than 50,000 people in Myanmar have been displaced as a result of the Myanmar military's operation against the Karen people. [Bangkok Post] [Thaiger]

Thailand: Police raid anti-monarchy publishing house

(si/kc) Thai authorities raided the Same Sky Books, a well-known book publishing house for Thai politics and the monarchy. The police came with a search warrant for a banned book that contains a speech of human rights lawyer Arnon Nampa at a rally on 3 August 2020 criticizing the role of the King in Thai politics.

The officers did not find the targeted publication, but they seized the mobile devices and computers of its co-founder.

The editor could be charged with the Computer Criminals Act if he was found spreading online information against national security. This is the second time the police raided Same Sky Books after the first seizure of this book in March 2021. [Bangkok Post][VoiceTV, in Thai]

Arnon Nampa is a prominent Thai human rights lawyer who led rallies and openly criticized the monarchy during 2020-21. He has been jailed since 9 August 2021 charged with multiple crimes including lese majeste. [AiR No. 32, August/2021, 2]

Thailand: Royalists gather names to expel Amnesty International Thailand

(si) A number of representatives of a royalist group gathered one million signatures for a petition aimed at scrapping the operating license of Amnesty International Thailand and expel the human rights organization from the country for undermining national security and the monarchy. [Thaiger]

Fueling the anger of Thai royalists, the organization has been openly critical of the government's repressive measures against activists demanding a reform of the monarchy and run projects inviting Amnesty International supporters worldwide to appeal to the Thai government to end prosecution and charges against activists. [Bangkok Post 1]

Thailand: DSI investigates more witnesses on a missing land right activist

(si) The Department of Special Investigation (DSI) has submitted additional information to the Office of the Attorney-General (OAG) regarding the disappearance of Karen land rights activist Porlajee "Billy" Rakchongcharoen.

According to the DSI director, officials have investigated seven witnesses about four issues. That includes DNA connection between Porlajee and his family, a forensic analysis of the bone fragments believed to be belonging to the missing activist, examining forensic experts and evidence related to the case. [Bangkokpost]

Billy was an activist advocating for the villagers' right to live on their land in Kaeng Krachan National Park. He disappeared in 2014. Burnt bone fragments were found in an oil drum, and a DNA test indicated that it belonged to him in 2019. [BBC] [Amnesty, in Thai]

Timor-Leste: Timor-Leste President will run for next presidential elections

(bs) Timor-Leste President Francisco “Lu-Olo” Guterres announced his intention to run as a candidate in the presidential election in March.

The president, who is also chairman of the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor Party, promised to ensure the respect of constitutional principles, a democratic political dialogue, and to fight against social injustice, corruption, and nepotism, while promoting international relations and sustainable development in the country. [E-Global, in Portuguese]

Among other influential presidential candidates are former President Jose Ramos-Horta, backed by social democratic party National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT), and current Commander of the Defense Forces of Timor-Leste (F-FDTL) who is backed by Fretlin, or Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor, the opposition left wing of the parliament. [The Interpreter]

Vietnam: Jailed Vietnamese journalist wins human rights award

(kc) Vietnamese journalist and author Pham Doan Trang, arrested in October 2020 and sentenced to nine years in prison for anti-state content, was one of the three activists named as 2022 laureates for the Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders. The journalist was co-founder and contributor to several independent media against the government to raise awareness amongst Vietnamese of human rights, democracy, and environmental protection. [The Diplomat]

She was arrested in October 2020 and sentenced for violation of article 117 of the Vietnamese Penal Code for “making, storing, distributing or disseminating information, documents and items against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam” in December 2021. [No. 41, October/2020, 2] [No. 51, December/2021, 3]

Vietnam: Human trafficker sentenced for letting 39 people die in a shipping container

(bs) A Belgian court sentenced the Vietnamese leader of a human trafficking gang to 15 years in prison for the manslaughter of 39 Vietnamese citizens who suffocated in a refrigerated shipping container while being smuggled into the United Kingdom in 2019.

The court also mentioned human exploitation in its ruling and convicted other eleven people of Vietnamese origin and six taxi drivers for cooperating with the traffickers by allowing them to use their property for meeting points for migrants and acting as intermediaries.

In 2021, a British court convicted four people for the same crime sentencing them to prison terms from 13 to 27 years.

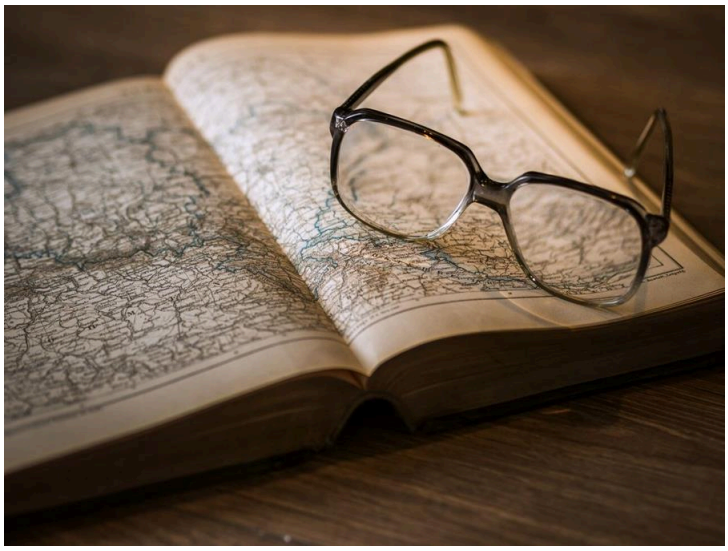
According to British authorities, Vietnam is one of the main sources of trafficked migrants, who often find jobs in nail salons or factories, facing abuse and exploitation. Vietnamese traffickers habitually make their clients travel through China and France, or the Netherlands until other gangs take the charge of smuggling the migrants into the UK. [Reuters] [The New York Times]

Vietnam: Activist forced into psychiatric evaluation

(bs) Vietnamese authorities forced an activist to undergo a mental health evaluation while waiting for the trial which lasted for a full month. The family did not receive any information from the authorities since the arrest and worry about her mental condition. The activist was undergoing treatment for depression before her arrest.

The activist was arrested in April 2021 for allegedly disseminating anti-state material. [Radio Free Asia]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia



China-US trade relations: Tariffs to remain in place, Biden says

(pm/dql) Prospects for easing Sino-US trade tensions remain bleak after Washington and Beijing made clear their respective positions on the existing tariffs on Chinese imports to the US.

On January 19, US President Joe Biden announced taxes imposed by former President Donald Trump will not be lifted for the time being citing China's failure to fulfil its purchase commitments made under the phase one trade deal which was signed two years ago on January 15, 2020, and under which China agreed to increase its imports of American goods and services by at least 200 billion USD in 2020 and 2021 [see AiR No. 3, January/2020, 3]. By November last year, only 60 percent of the promised purchases were realised.

One year into his office, the announcement reflects Biden's determination to continue a hard line against China while reversing other policies of Trump.

Expressing a similar confrontational stance, China's Ministry of Commerce responded to Biden's statement with the demand that the US must immediately lift all tariffs added under the Trump administration as part of any deal to stop the prolonged trade dispute. [Reuters 1] [South China Morning Post]

Meanwhile, the US hard line tariff policy against China have drawn scepticism among US lawmakers, with more than 140 of them from both the Democratic and Republican Party calling for more exemptions to the tariffs on Chinese goods paid by US firms.

The call refers to a decision of the Biden administration in October to restore a limited number of products to a list of goods that are eligible for exclusions from the

tariffs. Lawmakers rejected the list as to narrow and called for an expansion making. [Reuters 2]

US Nuclear submarine spotted in the Indo-Pacific may change the perspective over possible attack on Taiwan

(eb/pm) The otherwise extremely rare appearance of a Class-Ohio nuclear submarine in the US Navy base of Guam has excited defence experts over the implication for Taiwan's defence against a possible invasion by China.

The Ohio submarines hold a significant technological edge in terms of stealth and longer operational autonomy underwater over their Chinese counterparts. The presence of this unit in the Pacific could, according to experts, foil attacks against Taiwan. [Taiwan News]

Meanwhile, according to findings of the South China Sea Probing Initiative (SCSPI), a Beijing based maritime strategic study think tank, routes and drill patterns of aircraft carrier strike groups of the US Navy in the South China are becoming more diversified, complicated and unpredictable. Defence experts interpret these changes as possible indication of new countermeasures devised to handle any contingencies in the region, including a potential attack on Taiwan by China's People's Liberation Army, or over South China Sea territorial disputes.[South China Morning Post]

This comes as China confirmed that the Chinese military warned off the USS Benfold, a Arleigh Burke guided-missile destroyer, that sailed through disputed the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea, accusing the US of "provocative actions" and warning of "serious consequences".

The Paracel Islands are claimed by China, Taiwan and Vietnam. [The Guardian]

China, Iran and Russia hold two joint military exercises within a week

(pm/dql) On Friday, January 21, China, Iran and Russia kicked off joint naval exercise "2022 Marine Security Belt"

in the northern Indian Ocean involving eleven Iranian, three Russian (including a destroyer), and two Chinese

vessels as well as smaller ships and helicopters belonging to Iran's Revolutionary Guard. The manoeuvres would cover some 17,000 square kilometres and include night fighting, rescue operations and firefighting drills.

It comes on the heels of another exercise from January 18 to 20 in the Gulf of Oman which connects the Indian Ocean to the Persian Gulf via the Strait of Hormuz – the world's most important oil transit chokepoints.

These drills reflect growing ties between the three countries and send a signal to the US with which all three currently have tensions running high. [The Times of Jerusalem] [South China Morning Post]

China-Australia relations: Prime Minister Morrison takes aim at Beijing at World Economic Forum

(pm) In a speech addressing the Davos World Economic Forum, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison sharply attacked China, further fuelling tensions to already frosty Sino-Australian relations.

Without naming Beijing, Morrison warned that the Indo-Pacific had turned into a "highly contested" regions as a result of the growing use of "grey-zone tactics" by a "source of sharper geopolitical competition" that seeks to "coerce and intimidate". To respond to this development, the Prime Minister said that Australia wants to establish a "web of alignment" with nations that are ready to cooperate with his country to "favour freedom and the rule of law", including Pacific nations, the ASEAN countries and the Quad group with Japan, India and the US. [The Guardian]

Morrison's statement came as China called on the World Trade Organisation (WTO) on January 21 to arbitrate the dispute between China and Australia regarding the latter's tariffs imposed on China's exports of railway wheels, wind towers and stainless steel-sinks between 2014 and 2019. Last year in June, Australia launched a WTO dispute complaint against tariffs imposed by China on Australian wine. [South China Morning Post]

China-Germany relations: High-level diplomatic talks

(pm/dql) During the first video conference on Thursday, January 20, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and her German counterpart Annalena Baerbock discussed "the countries' bilateral relations and global issues," as well as "issues where fundamental differences of opinion exist – including with regard to human rights," according to a statement of the German Foreign Ministry and seen by observers as echoing earlier pledges for a European and value-led China policy combining both "dialogue and toughness". [Foreign Ministry, Germany, in German] [South China Morning Post]

China's Foreign Ministry, meanwhile, reported that – among others – both ministers agreed to "conduct equal dialogues on human rights, democracy and other issues on the basis of mutual respect, enhance mutual understanding, and refrain from 'microphone diplomacy'." [Foreign Ministry, China 1]

Days earlier, on January 17, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz held a phone conversation with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang during which the latter called for a focus on fostering "pragmatic" cooperation in the two countries' relations to which the former responded that Germany was ready to "further deepen cooperation in the fields of trade and economy," among others, according to the readout of the talk of the Chinese Foreign Ministry. [Foreign Ministry, China 2]

It appears that human rights were not on the agenda of the conversation as the German Government's statement confirmed that bilateral partnership and economic ties were discussed but human rights not. [Federal Government, Germany, in German]

In an earlier talk between Scholz and Chinese President Xi Jinping in December, human rights were also excluded from the agenda [see AiR No. 52, December/2021, 4].

French, European and British parliaments call for action against human rights violations in Xinjiang

(pm/dql) The French National Assembly passed on Thursday, January 20, a resolution with 169 against one vote calling on the government to denounce Beijing's "crimes against humanity and genocide" against its Uyghur Muslim minority in Xinjiang and to take foreign policy measures to make this stop.

With this move, France joins a growing group of parliaments in Western countries condemning China's human violations in Xinjiang as genocide such as the Canadian, Dutch, British, Belgium and the US who all have adopted similar resolutions. [France 24]

The European Parliament, meanwhile, on the same day adopted a resolution on violations of fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong, condemning the deterioration of human rights in the former British colony including "severe restrictions on freedom of expression, freedom of association and press freedom." The resolution urged the European Council to put in place "targeted sanctions" against Hong Kong and Chinese officials considered responsible for the ongoing crackdown on human rights crackdown and furthermore called for "a diplomatic and political boycott" the upcoming Winter Olympics in Beijing. [European Parliament]

Furthermore, British lawmakers in a debate in the House of Commons have demanded that the British government put more sanctions against China in place and enact blacklists on Chines imports, along with additional measures to address human rights abuses against Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang China is accused of. [South China Morning Post]

In April last year, the House of Commons approved a parliamentary motion which stated that Uighurs in Xinjiang were suffering crimes against humanity and genocide, calling on the government to use international law to bring it to an end. [AiR No. 17, April/2021, 4]

China to upgrade fighter jets

(pm) China's military has announced its plan to upgrade the engines of its most advanced stealth fighter jet, the J-20, to replace the current stopgap engine with new thrust-vectoring nozzles to bring the performance closer to the US F-22 Raptor.

Chinese scientists have spent 20 years to develop and master the new technology which was first presented at an air show in 2018.[South China Morning Post]

Japan and France agree to beef up cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region

(la) Japan and France agreed on Thursday to boost their military cooperation in the Indo-Pacific during the virtual “two-plus-two” talks between the foreign and defense ministers of each nation, topics such as China’s growing assertiveness in waters nearing the disputed Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands, stability in the Taiwanese Strait and North Korean nuclear development were discussed.

Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi and Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi, as well as their French counterparts Jean-Yves Le Drian and Florence Parly, shared “serious concerns” over China’s military assertiveness in the East and South China seas and underlined the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

The ministers, furthermore, expressed concerns over North Korea’s growing nuclear and missile development, specifically referring to Pyongyang’ ballistic missile launch on Monday, affirming their commitment towards the complete and irreversible dismantling of North Korean mass destruction weapons and ballistic missiles in line with the U.N. Security Council resolutions. They also stated they will continue monitoring ship-to-ship smuggling with North Korean vessels.

The two countries have also agreed to discuss a potential framework to ease transportation restrictions on weaponry and joint training supplies and welcomed further progress in defense cooperation, including joint exercises, between the two countries.

The talks reflect latest efforts of Japan to respond to China’s growing military assertiveness and presence in the Indo-Pacific region by deepening its defense cooperation with Western nations, including its long-standing alliance with the U.S., its new partner Australia, and now, after Britain and Germany, France. [The Japan Times]

Japan and US leaders discuss security issues and launch talks on economic cooperation

(la/ep) During online presidential security talks on Friday, January 21, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and US President Joe Biden discussed security matters, including Russia’s aims in Ukraine, North Korea’s missiles and China’s growing might.

Kishida and Biden agreed to work together to contain China's aggression in the East and South China seas and promote the rights of the Uygur population in the Chinese Xinjiang region. Biden reaffirmed the commitment of the US to protect Japan's sovereignty over the disputed Senkaku islands, which China calls Diaoyu, referring to the 1960 Japan-US security treaty. The leaders also agreed on working closely together to halt North-Korean nuclear and missile development and prevent a Russian invasion of Ukraine. [Aljazeera]

They, furthermore, reaffirmed the importance of peace in the Taiwan Strait. [Taiwan News]

The talks followed earlier US-Japan two-plus-two discussions that took place two weeks ago, and led to the signing of two new defense deals [see AiR No. 2, January/2022, 2].

Japan has been increasing its defense cooperation with Western democratic states to protect its position in the Asian Pacific: earlier last week, Japanese ministers engaged in security related two-plus-two talks with France, and a security cooperation agreement has been signed with Australia [see AiR No. 3, January/2022, 3].

In addition to security cooperation, the Kishida and Biden have decided to launch regular ministerial two-plus-two discussions on economic and environmental matters, in an attempt to bolster bilateral cooperation amidst China's rising power. The participants in the dialogue framework will consist of Japan's foreign and industry minister, and the U.S. secretaries of state and commerce. The talks are expected to include topics such as green energy, economic security, trade and infrastructure management. [Mainichi]

South Korea: Moon's Middle East trip

(dql) During his trip to the Middle East last week, South Korean President Moon Jae-in visited the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Egypt for talks in which focus was laid on deepening economic and defense cooperation.

In Dubai, Moon witnessed the conclusion of memorandum of understanding on Sunday, January 16, under which the UAE will purchase South Korea's Cheongung-II M-SAM system, a surface-to-air-missile system designed to combat lower-tier ballistic missiles at altitudes below 40 kilometers. The value of the deal is estimated at US$3.3 billion, making it Seoul's biggest single defense equipment export ever. Moon also

announced that the two countries agreed on expanding their existing energy cooperation into the hydrogen sector [see AiR No. 3, January/2022, 3].

During his stop in Saudi Arabia, the two countries announced on Tuesday, January 18, that they have signed preliminary agreements on cooperation in developing hydrogen economies after a meeting between Moon and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. [Arab News]

Similarly, Moon's visit to Egypt saw on Thursday, January 20, the signing of several cooperation agreements, including a US$1 billion infrastructure soft loan to Egypt and a joint feasibility study on a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA), which would be Seoul's first FTA with an African country. In 2021, two-way trade stood at US$2.3 billion. [Egypt Today]

In a separate meeting on Wednesday in Ryad, Moon and Nayef Falah M. Al-Hajraf, Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), agreed to resume talks for a free trade agreement between South Korea and the GCC which had been halted for twelve years.

Established in 1981, the GCC is a political and economic alliance between six countries, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman. Trade between South Korea and these countries stood at US$46.6 billion in 2020, accounting for nearly 80 percent of Seoul's trade with the Middle East. [Korea Times]

South Korea not to lift ban of Japanese seafood for Tokyo's support in CPTPP application

(dql) South Korea's Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries has declared that it is not considering a lift of the country's ban on imports of Japanese seafood in return for Tokyo's support for Seoul's planned application to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

Since 2013, the South Korean government has barred seafood from eight Japanese prefectures near Fukushima have been barred from entering South Korea following the 2011 Fukushima nuclear power plant meltdown.

Because of the ban, Tokyo has long been maintaining a reserved stance towards South Korea's accession to the trade agreement for which unanimous support

from all eleven member states is required. [Korea Herald]

US, partners reiterate call for full implementation of UNSC sanctions against North Korea

(dql) On Thursday, January 20, the United States along with seven other UN Security Council (UNSC) members – including Albania, Brazil, Britain, France, Ireland, Japan and the United Arab Emirates – urged all UN members to fully implement UNSC sanctions on North Korea. [VoA]

The call came on the heels of China's and Russia's blocking of a US proposal for additional UN sanctions against North Koreans and entities in the wake of its recent missile launches since the start of the year. [Aljazeera] [See AiR No. 3, January/2022, 3]

In a latest development, North Korea on Tuesday, January 25, fired two cruise missiles into the sea off its east coast, marking the its fifth missile test of the year. [Channel News Asia]

Taiwan: New strategies to strengthen air force

(eb) The past days saw again high number of Chinese warplanes entering Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ).

On Thursday, January 20, an anti-submarine aircraft of the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) entered the airspace of Taiwan. Days later on Sunday, January 23, another 39 military airplanes entered the ADIZ, marking the second largest incursion since Taiwan made public the numbers of incursion by Chinese planes. On Monday, January 24, 13 warplanes including ten J-16 fighter jets, two H-6 bombers and one Y-8 anti-submarine aircraft entered the southwest of the island's air defence identification zone (ADIZ). [Al Jazeera] [Taiwan News] [South China Morning Post]

The incursions of the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) prove to be a massive burden for Taiwan's pilots. To tackle this problem, a retired Air Force Lieutenant General has called for the creation of an air force reserve, adding that the level of risk of pilots has affected recruitment rates and therefore the

enlistment numbers are not high enough to properly fill units.

Chiu Chen-Yuan, legislator of the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) said that the air force must recruit and train more fighter pilots in order to keep pace with the possible military escalation. Among the factors cited by Chen-Yuan to be considered detrimental for the current status of enrolment in the Air Force is the decreasing birth-rate and the higher rate of sight deficiencies in the population of Taiwan. [Taipei Times 1]

The burden on the frequent incursions is not only for the pilots, whose readiness may slow down in case of an attack, but also economical. According to Derek Grossman, RAND corporation senior defense analyst, China is wearing down Taiwan just by having the Taiwanese Air Force scrambling so often. In 2020 alone 2,972 defensive scrambles occurred with a cost of $905 Billion. [Swissinfo.ch]

An occurrence of a possible stress-related accident happened one week ago, when a plane abruptly nosedived into the ocean and resulted in the death of the pilot following a routine exercise. After safety checks on all the aircrafts the fleet has become operational once again. [Focus in Taiwan]

In this context, the US administration is planning to accelerate the delivery of the 66 F-16 fighter jets ordered in 2019, originally set by the end of 2026. Once those will be delivered, Taiwan is set to have the largest F-16 fleet in Asia, with well over 200 aircrafts [Taipei Times 2]. However, without proper infrastructures and without having completed the training for the pilots, the high number of F-16 might become a burden according to Lieutenant General Chang Yan-ting and it would be more helpful to focus on upgrading the older versions of F-16 A/B and Mirage 2000 aircrafts [Taipei Times 3].

Mike Gallagher, Congressman for the 8th district of Wisconsin and member of the Republican Party, meanwhile, introduced the Arm Taiwan Act, which would see the US Secretary of Defense establish the Taiwan Security Assistance Initiative and approve US$3 billion (NT$83.11 billion) annually for the initiative from 2023-2027 according to his press release. The funds will be spent in: "equipment, training, and other support required to accelerate Taiwan's deployment of the asymmetric defense capabilities required to delay, degrade, and deny a Chinese invasion against Taiwan." [Official Press Release of Congressman Gallagher]

Chinese satellite takes high-definition pictures of Taipei, for military purposes?

(eb) The China National Space Administration (CNSA) announced it had put the "highest-resolution remote sensing satellite" into operation during a news conference on January 20. During the event high-definition pictures of Chinese cities such as Beijing and Tianjin were shown as well as pictures of Taipei City.

The satellite was launched from a base in Shanxi Province in 2020, with testing completed in December 2021. It is believed that this technology might be used by Beijing for military purpose. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan to impose non-retaliatory ban on Chinese custard apples

(eb) In the wake of the ban by the People's Republic of China against Taiwanese fresh fruit, a "non-retaliatory" measure against the import of frozen custard apples from China has been applied by the Taiwanese government. Taiwan has long had a ban on the importation of fresh custard apples from China, but not on frozen imports of the fruit [Taiwan News]

Taiwan to enforce protection measures against Nicaragua while bolstering relations with Honduras

(eb) After Nicaragua severed diplomatic relations with Taiwan a month ago [see AiR No.50, December/2021,2], Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is working on temporary measures to protect the rights of Taiwanese businessmen in Nicaragua such as redirecting various firms that were working in Nicaragua towards Belize or Paraguay. According to the ministry, the decision to severe diplomatic relations ended the Free-Trade Agreement between the two countries in violation of the 180-days buffer stipulated in the FTA termination clauses [Taiwan News].

Taiwan Vice President William Lai Ching-Te will stop in the United States on his way back from Honduras, where he will be present at the inauguration of President-elect Xiomara Castro alongside a delegation of Taiwan to discuss of boosting relations with

Honduras and show the world Taiwan's determination to participate on the world stage. [Reuters]

Castro previously suggested recognizing Beijing in order to counter the influence of the United States during the electoral campaign but apparently backtracked its decision. Vice-President William Lai will remain in Honduras for six days of bilateral talks on issues of mutual concern according to the Foreign Ministry. [The Guardian] [France24]

Taiwan-Czech Republic relations: Deepening ties

(eb) After six months of negotiations between different parties involved including the National Central Library Masaryk University, and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in the Czech Republic, the 39th Taiwan Resource Center for Chinese Studies will be established at Masaryk University. The TRCCS will promote Chinese culture with Taiwanese characteristics according to NCL Director-General Tseng Shu-Hsien. [Focus Taiwan].

This comes after earlier this month Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala approved a four-year administrative plan which included a reassessment of the relations with Russia and the People's Republic of China and closer ties with Japan, India, South Korea and Taiwan. The plan followed the policy of the previous Foreign Affairs minister Vaclav Havel and mentions Germany, Israel, the UK and the US as democratic countries to enhance cooperation in the name of democracy and human rights. [Taipei Times]

Furthermore, Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) expressed on January 21 support for the resolution by the Czech's Senate Foreign Affair Commission which asked the Czech government and the European Union to watch closely and critically the economic pressure China is exerting on Lithuania as what is widely seen as a retaliation against Lithuania's decision to allow Taiwan to open a representative office in Vilnius bearing the word "Taiwanese" in its name. [Taiwan News] [See AiR No. 39, September/2021, 4].

Regarding this very matter, a group of 41 EU lawmakers wrote a letter to European Council President Charles Michel, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell and two other officials asking to condemn

China's aggressive policy Lithuania and to show support to the latter [see AiR No. 3, January/2022, 3].

Defying Beijing's pressure, Taiwan supported the export of Lithuanian Rum with the purchase of 24,000 bottles in order to mitigate the economic fallouts of Chinese trade blockades, making them available in Taiwanese stores after the Lunar New Year celebrations. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan and Flanders Region of Belgium sign MOU to enhance cooperation

(eb) Taiwan and the Flanders Region of Belgium have signed a memorandum of understanding on the January 19 with the purpose of enhancing comprehensive cooperation and consultation mechanism between the two countries via a joint commission that will oversee cooperation about digital economy, network security and more. The MOU will have immediate effect according to the Taiwanese MOFA.

Flanders has already signed six different MOU with Taiwan covering investment, renewable energy, education, workforce employment, vocational training, public health and science [Focus Taiwan].

United States, Russia vie to brief India on Ukraine crisis

(rs/lm) Russia and the United States, the main protagonists in a tit-for-tat series of escalations along Ukraine's border, have been briefing India on the situation, with New Delhi being in the enviable position of having working ties with both Washington and Moscow.

US Deputy Secretary Wendy Sherman spoke with her Indian counterpart Harsh Vardhan Shringla late on January 20. That phone conversation followed on a meeting held between Shringla and the Russian ambassador in New Delhi the day before. Both conversations are believed to have centered around a potential war between Russia and the Ukraine. [Hindustan Times] [The Tribune]

For India, which is practicing a delicate balancing act between the US and Russia, renewed tensions between the two countries are a matter of concern, as New Delhi will likely find it difficult to please both

should a Russian-backed coup or invasion takes place in Ukraine. [The Indian Express]

One the one hand, Washington and New Delhi are aligned in viewing China as the key threat facing both countries, but the US Indo-Pacific strategy remains primarily maritime, centered around the Quadrilateral Dialogue (Quad) that joins both countries with Japan and Australia.

On the other hand, Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent high-profile visit to New Delhi affirms India's desire for strategic autonomy. That visit marked the 19th meeting between the Russian president and Prime Minister Narendra Modi since the latter came to power in 2014. The summit also included the inaugural 2+2 dialogue comprising meetings between the two countries' foreign and defense ministers. Before, India had arrangements for this top-level ministerial dialogue only with member states of the Quad. [AiR No. 49, December/2021, 1]

That said, relations between New Delhi and Moscow are focused primarily on energy and defense, with Indian purchases of Russian military equipment as the most significant element. A case in point, President Putin was making his first foreign trip in nearly six months as New Delhi took delivery of the first regiment of Russia's S-400 surface-to-air missile defense-system that is part of a $5.3 billion weapons deal [see AiR No. 47, November/2021, 4].

The missile deal has already been complicated by looming US sanctions on India under US legislation meant to punish countries dealing substantively in the defense realm with Moscow, the world's second-largest arms exporter.

Nepal upset over India's announcement to build road in disputed Lipulekh territory

(sr) A fresh diplomatic spat has emerged between South Asian neighbors Nepal and India after Indian Prime Minister Modi's announcement last December to expand a road to Lipulekh, a Himalayan pass on the border between India's Uttarakhand state and the Tibet region of China, which is claimed in part by Kathmandu.

In May 2020, India's defense minister virtually inaugurated the new road in the Himalayas. The Nepali government protested immediately, contending that

the road crosses territory that it claims and accusing New Delhi of changing the status quo without diplomatic consultations. [AiR No. 19, May/2020, 2]

Among the many escalatory moves that ensued, Nepal deployed police forces to the region, summoned the Indian ambassador in Kathmandu, and initiated a constitutional amendment to formalize and extend its territorial claims over the Lipulekh Pass and other mountain territory claimed by both New Delhi and Kathmandu [see AiR No. 24, June/2020, 3]. India, on the other hand, conveyed its openness to a dialogue, but only after the COVID-19 crisis.

Nepal-India relations then hit a rock bottom. It took months for the two countries to bring bilateral ties back to normal.

Against this backdrop, Indian Prime Minister Modi at an election rally organized by his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party announced that his government was further widening a road built up to Lipulekh Pass. The remarks created an uproar in Nepal, with political parties from both government coalition and opposition demanding Prime Minister Deuba to issue a protest note against New Delhi.

Anticipating the move, the Indian embassy in Kathmandu on January 15 issued a statement saying that New Delhi's position on its geographical boundary with Nepal is "well known, consistent and unambiguous." In light of this, Kathmandu the following day urged New Delhi to cease all construction activities at Limpiyadhura, Lipulek and Kalapani, which it claimed an integral part of Nepal's territory. [The Kathmandu Post] [The Print]

Pakistan lures Chinese firms to economic zones; pays Dasu attack victims

(tj/lm) Pakistan has decided to compensate the 36 Chinese nationals, who died or were injured in a terrorist attack last year, and is dangling tax incentives for Chinese companies, ahead of a crucial visit to China by Prime Minister Imran Khan from February 3. [The Express Tribune]

The suicide attack on July 14 targeted a convoy of vehicles carrying Chinese and Pakistani workers to the World Bank-funded Dasu Hydropower project in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province [see AiR No. 29, July/2021, 3]. The incident deepened concerns among Chinese companies and workers, particularly

amid the instability in neighboring Afghanistan and the then-immanent Taliban takeover.

After Islamabad tried to downplay the suicide attack as an accident caused by gas leakage, Beijing immediately cancelled a scheduled meeting of the principal decision-making body of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship project under President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative [see AiR No. 39, September/2021, 4]. The Chinese contractor had also stopped the work on the project and demanded a compensation of $37 million.

Crucially, Islamabad has decided to make the payments, despite not being contractually obliged to make financial compensation related to casualties of the contractor's staff, owing to any terrorist activity.

In yet another attempt to reassure Chinese businesses and investor against the backdrop of an uptick in militant activity, Pakistan has announced tax incentives for Chinese companies looking to relocate. While these incentives are available for companies from other countries, such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Vietnam, Islamabad is targeting Chinese firms given the massive presence of CPEC projects. [Bloomberg]

Both developments come in the lead-up of a crucial three-day visit to China by Prime Minister Khan from February 3 as a guest for the opening of the Winter Olympics, where he is also expected to hold bilateral meetings. China's investments in Pakistan – which was just $76.9 million in the quarter that ended last September, compared with $154.9 million in the same quarter in 2020 – will be a key part of those meetings [see AiR No. 2, January/2022, 2].

The visit is also preceded by a meeting between Beijing's ambassador to Islamabad and Pakistan's Chief of the Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, on January 19. During the meeting, the army chief reaffirmed Pakistan's commitment to providing full security to Chinese projects and citizens working in the country. [Dawn]

An opinion piece arguing that the Pakistani Army's view of the relationship with China appears to be souring — and diverging from the political leadership's – has been recently published with the [The New York Times, $].

Pakistan, Russia keen to work on gas project, in talks for maiden Putin visit to

Islamabad

(lm) Pakistan and Russia are in talks to finalize the plan for what would be a landmark visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Islamabad later this year, the *Express Tribune* reported, as both sides hope to launch a multibillion-dollar gas pipeline project.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan reportedly reiterated the invitation in a phone conversation with his Russian counterpart on January 17. The two leaders are also expected to meet in Beijing next month on the sidelines of the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics. [Dawn]

The two leaders also discussed the status of the $2.5 billion PakStream Gas Pipeline project that will secure the delivery of 12.3 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year from liquefied natural gas (LNG) import terminals in Karachi and Gwadar to the city of Lahore in Punjab Province. An agreement was originally signed in 2015, but the project was not implemented due to United States' and European sanctions against Russian state-owned conglomerate Rostec, as well as a dispute over pipeline transport fees. [AiR No. 35, August/2021, 5]

Prior to the phone conversation, Pakistan's energy minister on January 15 announced that negotiations are underway with Russia to build a gas pipeline from Kazakhstan to Pakistan. [The Express Tribune]

The envisioned new pipeline marks Islamabad's latest effort to strengthen connectivity with Kabul and Central Asia—but not the rest of South Asia. Last year, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan agreed on the construction of a $4.8 billion trilateral railway project connecting Mazar-e-Sharif, Pehswar and Kabul.

Pakistan, United Kingdom agree to ink pact on repatriation of convicted criminals

(tj/lm) Pakistan and the United Kingdom have agreed to finalize and sign at the earliest agreements for repatriation of convicted citizens and criminals. The understanding was reached at a meeting between Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed and the British High Commissioner Christian Turner in Islamabad on January 18. [The Express Tribune]

The decision on the extradition treaty between the two countries came a day after the Special Ministerial

Committee constituted by the federal cabinet on January 17 held its meeting in Islamabad. During the meeting, the committee decided that the agreement will be signed in the best interest of the public. It also decided that the British authorities will be further consulted before presenting the agreement to the federal cabinet for final approval. [Radio Pakistan]

The signing of a repatriation agreement with London is part of Pakistan's efforts to convince the UK to repatriate former Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who has been residing in the UK since 2019, after a court granted him indefinite bail to seek medical treatment [see AiR No. 1, January/2021, 1]. In Pakistan, Sharif is facing several corruption charges and is considered by the courts to have absconded. He is also facing sedition charges for accusing the military of political interference [see AiR No. 41, October/2020, 2, AiR No. 37, September/2020, 3].

The first round of negotiations on a criminal extradition treaty was held in October 2019. In a similar meeting held in February last year, both countries advanced towards signing an extradition treaty after Interior Minister Rashid had assured the British envoy that Islamabad did not intend to use the treaty for politically motivated extradition. [AiR No. 6, February/2021, 2]

No Chinese components in electricity sold on India's exchange market, New Delhi tells Kathmandu

(lm) India has reportedly conveyed to Nepal that it will not buy surplus electricity that was produced by hydropower featuring Chinese components or built by Chinese contractors, days after the industry players from the neighboring South Asian countries signed a landmark agreement for power trading.

Last November, India allowed Nepal to participate in daily auctions at the Indian power exchange market to sell of its surplus electricity at a competitive rate. The move followed a decision in April that enabled India to sell surplus electricity to Nepal from the same market [see AiR No. 45, November/2021, 2]. Earlier this month then, Nepal Power Exchange Limited, a private sector-owned power trading company, and India's Manikaran Power Limited signed a Memorandum of Understanding on energy trading to facilitate bilateral power trading by private players.

The agreement marked a huge turnaround for the Nepali energy sector, which met more than half of its electricity needs through imports from India during peak demand in 2019. Since it became an energy-surplus country after launching a large hydropower project in August, Nepal had lobbied to sell its electricity to the Indian market. The Himalayan country, which still has about 88 percent of its economic potential of hydropower available for further development, has built energy projects with the assistance of both China and India.

But India has permitted export of hydropower generated only from the Trishuli and the Devighat hydropower projects, both of which were built with New Delhi's assistance. For India, the move is a part of a measure to check any indirect advantage that the Chinese could derive from Indian market access to the Nepalese. To sell electricity in the Indian market, the Nepalese need to make sure that power plants are not built by Chinese contractors or do not have Chinese investment.

For Nepal, the hydropower sector is of extreme importance for it is the only viable means to bridge the huge trade deficit with India. However, for Nepal to achieve this, it needs to have a prior, long-term understanding with India regarding its power projects as India and Bangladesh (in the latter's case transmission lines will have to pass through India) are the only markets where it could sell power. [The Kathmandu Post]

China donates 1 million tons of rice to economically troubled Sri Lanka

(lm) China will donate one million metric tons of rice to Sri Lanka, officially to commemorate the anniversary of a bilateral trade agreement, as Colombo is facing an expected crop loss due to an earlier ban on chemical fertilizers. [ColomboPage]

The ban on chemical fertilizers, as well as pesticides and herbicides, was introduced by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's government in May of last year, ostensibly to make Sri Lanka the first country in the world to grow 100 percent organic produce [see AiR No. 47, November/2021, 4]. The campaign lasted only seven months, but farmers and agriculture experts blame the policy for a sharp drop in crop yields and spiraling prices that are worsening the country's growing economic woes and leading to fears of food shortages.

The subject of fertilizers has also started to test ties between Sri Lanka and China, a key ally to Colombo. Last November, Sri Lanka agreed to pay 70 percent of the claim made by a Chinese company for an organic fertilizer shipment that Colombo had previously rejected as it was found to be contaminated [see AiR No. 48, November/2021, 5].

Announcement of the donation comes after China's State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in Colombo. [AiR No. 2, January/2022, 2].

Indian, UAE foreign ministers hold phone conversation following drone attack in Abu Dhabi

(rs/lm) India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on January 18 held a phone conversation with his counterpart from the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, following a drone strike that targeted fuel trucks in Abu Dhabi and left three people dead and injured six.

Two Indians and a Pakistani national, all employees of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), were killed in the suspected drone attacks claimed by the Houthi rebels on January 17. [The Tribune]

The phone conversation between the two diplomats coincided with Saudi-led coalition airstrikes against strongholds and camps in Yemen's capital, Sana'a, belonging to the Houthi group in reprisals for the drone attacks. [The Guardian]

Indian lawmaker accuses China border patrol of abducting teenager from inside Indian territory

(rs) A teenager from India's northeastern border state of Arunachal Pradesh, who was believed by an Indian lawmaker to have been abducted by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), has been located and will be returned to his home country. [South Asia Monitor]

According to several media reports, through an established military hotline designed to help defuse border tensions between the countries, the Indian Army contacted the PLA over the alleged kidnapping. [The Independent]

This is not the first instance of Indian civilians going missing near the border in recent years. In 2020, there were at least two such incidents, which New Delhi said were kidnap attempts by China [see AiR No. 36, September/2020, 2]. Beijing denies this.

China refers to Arunachal Pradesh as "Zangnan" and considers it as an extension of the southern portion of Tibet, covering eleven out of the twenty-five districts of the northeastern Indian state. Last December, Beijing assigned a new set of "standardized names" for 15 places in Arunachal Pradesh in accordance with regulations released by the State Council, China's chief administrative authority. [AiR No. 1, January/2022, 1]

Rights groups urge United Nations to ban Bangladesh's paramilitary force from peacekeeping missions

(ap) Human rights groups documenting human rights-related abuses committed by the Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) have urged the United Nations (UN) to ban members of the paramilitary unit from UN deployment.

In a letter – which was sent as early as last November but made public on January 20 – the 12 organizations also call on the UN's Department of Peace Operations to screen all uniformed personnel's individual human rights records independently from the Bangladesh National Human Rights Commission. [Al Jazeera]

Shortly after the letter was sent privately, the United States announced sanctions on the RAB, citing "serious human rights abuses." It also sanctioned the current director of the security force and five former senior RAB officials, including Benazir Ahmed, now Bangladesh's top police chief. [AiR No. 50, December/2021, 2]

The organizations in a statement further alleged that the Bangladeshi government had responded to the announcement of US sanctions with denials and retaliation, alleging that families of victims of enforced disappearance have been pressured into signing false statements. [International Federation for Human Rights]

Speaking against this backdrop, in a televised interview Ahmed aid the US sanctions were based on "false and fabricated lies" adding that people calling for a ban on RAB from UN peacekeeping are "trying to embarrass our government and our country."

Bangladesh open to foreign observers in next election, foreign minister tells outgoing US envoy

(ap/lm) Bangladesh will remain open for foreign observers for its next national election due in 2023, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen told outgoing US Ambassador Earl R Miller during a farewell meeting on January 19. The two diplomats also discussed continued cooperation on human rights and economic projects. [The Daily Star 1]

In the lead-up to the last national elections held in 2018, the US-funded Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) had terminated its observation mission due to Bangladesh's alleged failure to secure accreditation for its election observers.

US-Bangladesh relations have been strained since Washington's last December announced sanctions on the Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), citing "serious human rights abuses." It also sanctioned the current director of the security force and five former senior RAB officials, including a travel ban on Benazir Ahmed, now Bangladesh's top police chief. [AiR No. 50, December/2021, 2]

Against this backdrop, Ambassador Miller underscored that the US was willing to remain closely engaged with Bangladesh "to have honest and direct conversations" on human rights related issues, including through regular dialogues. [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh wants to become Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN, foreign minister tells Indonesian counterpart

(ap) Bangladesh's Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen in a phone conversation on January 19 told his Indonesian counterpart Retno LP Marsudi that Bangladesh wants to become a Sectoral Dialogue Partner with ASEAN to increase diplomatic interaction.

Momen emphasized Dhaka's existing relations with countries in the regional bloc and sought increased imports from Indonesia. However, the Indonesian foreign minister recommended that Dhaka deepen economic and political engagement with ASEAN countries before concluding an agreement on becoming a Sectoral Dialogue Partner. [The Daily Star]

German frigate visits India in first port call in nearly two decades

(rs) The German Navy's frigate Bayern docked in Mumbai on January 21 as a part of its seven-month deployment to the Indo-Pacific region. The visit marked the last stop of the Brandenburg-class frigate's deployment, which began in July 2021 and marked the first German Navy's presence in the region in almost two decades. [AiR No. 31, August/2021, 1] [Hindustan Times]

On the sidelines of the visit, the chief of Germany's navy, Vice-admiral Kay-Achim Schönbach, held high-level consultations with senior Indian officials.

While addressing a livestreamed think-tank discussion in India on January 21, Schönbach made controversial comments over Ukraine that caused the navy chief to resign from his position the next day. Specifically, Schönbach had said the idea that Russia wanted to invade Ukraine was nonsense, arguing that Russian President Putin needed to be treated as an equal by the West. He also argued that the Crimean Peninsula, which Russia annexed in 2014, "is gone and will never come back". [The Guardian]

Bangladesh's navy chief visits Maldives, Sri Lanka to boost regional cooperation

(ap) Bangladesh's Navy Chief of Staff, Admiral M Shaheen Iqbal, this week concluded a two-leg tour to neighboring Maldives and Sri Lanka to improve maritime cooperation. Bangladesh and The Maldives are working to launch a direct shipping service between the two countries, with a stopover in Sri Lanka, to boost regional trade and connectivity. [The Daily Star]

During his four-day visit to the Maldives, the navy chief spoke with Maldives Defence Minister Mariya Ahmed Didi and Chief of Defence Force Major General Abdulla Shamaal. He also visited the Bangladesh High Commission in Male and held a meeting with Dhaka's High Commissioner.

Admiral Iqbal subsequently visited Sri Lanka, where he met with the Chief of Defence Staff and Commander of the Army, General Shavendra Silva.

India, South Korea discuss bilateral trade issues

(sr) The industry and commerce minister of India and South Korea on January 18 set a bilateral trade target of $50 billion before 2030.

During their meeting in the Indian capital New Delhi, Indian Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal and his South Korean counterpart Yeo Han-Koo agreed to expand trade and to promote B2B interactions between industry leaders. Additionally, both ministers gave momentum to the discussions on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement and agreed to address issues brought up by the industries in both nations on a regular basis. [Hindustan Times]

Cambodia-China ties in focus, amidst growing influence of China in the South China Sea

(bp) Indonesian media outlets reported that the country had invited Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, and Brunei to discuss events in the South China Sea and recent incursions by China into Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). [The Straits Times 1]

On December 11, 2021, Indonesian officials reported Chinese vessels near oil and gas drilling sites in the North Natuna Sea, following a Chinese coast guard vessel and a Chinese research ship being spotted in the North Natuna Sea between August and October. [The Straits Times 2]

Malaysia's Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah says that China has moved to claim historical rights to four island groups in the South China Sea, namely the Paracel Islands, Pratas Islands, the Macclesfield Bank area, and the Spratly Islands, referring to the territories as "Four Sha" or Four Sands Archipelagos. China's territorial claims overlap with the territorial claims of some members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) like Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Brunei. [Radio Free Asia]

As Cambodia takes the role of the ASEAN's chair, its growing relations with China are significant as its relationship with the United States (US) seems to deteriorate [VOA Cambodia]. There are also concerns

about Chinese military activity in Cambodia's Ream Naval Base and its investment in the region to upgrade the base, which was confirmed by Cambodia's Defense Minister in June 2021.

Experts warn that China's presence in Cambodia's naval base is a strategic move, giving the Chinese military the logistical advantage to exert control in the region. The US has urged Cambodia to work towards reducing China's influence in the region to maintain regional and global security. As Cambodia continues to keep China as its close political and economic ally, Cambodia has insisted that the disputes regarding the South China Sea be left out of ASEAN's discussions. [The Straits Times 3]

Indonesia continues to be South Korea`s major arms customer with recent navy deals

(gl) The Indonesian Navy´s Chief of Staff (TNI AL) requested that three corvettes from South Korea to Indonesia. Although the class of corvette ships involved in the transaction is not known yet, some speculate they would be Pohang-class corvettes.

Meanwhile, the Republic of Korea Navy (ROKN) will send some technicians to Indonesia to conduct maintenance on two Jang Bogo-class submarines. These, including an additional one, are part of a US$ 1.07 billion deal between TNI AL and ROKN. Another US$ 0.97 billion deal for an additional three Jang Bogo-class submarines might soon be settled as well.

Indonesia and the Republic of Korea are consolidating their military ties, with Indonesia being the largest importer of ROK weapons and the ROK delivering a considerable quantity of warships to Indonesia. [Naval News]

Indonesia is seen to strive to modernize and strengthen its navy in order to effectively confront future intrusion by Chinese ships into the northern economic exclusion zone (EEZ) maritime border. [Asia Times]

Malaysia calls US businesses to invest in RCEP opportunities

(bp/dw) During the US-ASEAN Business Council (US-ABC), held in Kuala Lumpur on January 19, Malaysia's

Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob addressed the importance of international commerce, collaboration, and the interconnections of regional supply chains. The Malaysian government encouraged American enterprises to take advantage of the vast investment prospects afforded by Malaysia's Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a trade agreement of ASEAN countries and some countries in East Asia and Australia. The government highlighted that the RCEP accelerates helping Malaysia revitalize domestic and international economic activity.

The RCEP agreement is due to take effect in Malaysia on March 18, 2022, through which the US-ABC can continue to increase collaboration and move towards positioning Malaysia as a supply chain hub in ASEAN and an attractive international investment opportunity. According to the Prime Minister, Malaysia will remain an open economy, with pro-business and pragmatic policies that promote the country's investment climate. He also stated that the summit aided in advancing regional integration while improving relations between the United States (US) and ASEAN member states. Since 2015, the US has been Malaysia's third-largest trading partner and its second-largest foreign investor in the country's manufacturing sector. [Malay Mail]

Cambodia and Thailand discuss Myanmar crisis

(bp) On 19 January, the foreign ministers of Thailand and Cambodia discussed the Myanmar crisis agreeing that the crisis had no quick fix and the solution must be led by Myanmar itself.

Also, Thailand's foreign minister met with the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Myanmar on January 14, and both sides expressed their concern over the violence in Myanmar and the urgent need to find a solution to aid Myanmar in returning to a state of political stability and peace. Thailand reiterated its support for Cambodia's role as ASEAN chair and its initiative in Myanmar, and stated its commitment to ensuring cooperation with ASEAN and the UN towards implementing the ASEAN five-point consensus in Myanmar. [Phnom Penh Post]

'New Southbound Policy' will help Taiwan increase investment in Southeast Asia

(bp) Taiwan's 'New Southbound Policy' will help Taiwan increase its presence across the Indo-Pacific to strengthen Taipei's relationship with 10 ASEAN countries (Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar), Australia, New Zealand, and six states in South Asia (Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Bangladesh). The policy will help Taiwan lessen its dependence on China.

In 2021, 37% of Taiwan's foreign direct investment went to Southeast Asia, as compared to 33% to China. The policy will also help Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Taiwan to expand into the Indo-Pacific region and explore overseas business opportunities to engage bilateral ties with Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific region. [Nikkei Asia]

Thailand, South Korea discuss defense ties

(bs) Thai Prime Minister and Minister of Defense met with the South Korean Defense Minister on December 19-21 to discuss security issues in Southeast Asia, bilateral defense cooperation, and procurement of a frigate.

The countries are looking forward to enhancing their defense Strategic Partnership relations, including the plan of a joint regular consultative group in the army, navy, and air force.

The countries started a frigate acquisition project in 2012 which called for the acquisition of two frigates by South Korea. The first vessel was delivered in 2018, and the second acquisition is expected to materialize this year. [Naval News]

Malaysia to sign MoU on Indonesian domestic workers

(lb) Malaysian Human Resources Minister M Saravanan is set to meet the Indonesian counterpart Ida Fauziyah on February 7-8 to discuss the final details of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Recruitment and Placement of Indonesian Domestic Workers (PDI). The MoU is expected to regulate the one-maid-one-task (for a household), the one-channel system, and wages for Indonesian workers. [Free Malaysia Today] [AiR No. 50, December/2021, 2]

Canada ends contract with Malaysia's glove factory following forced labor allegations

(lb) Canada has ended its $222 million sourcing contract with Supermax Corp, a Malaysian disposable glove maker, following allegations of forced labor.

In November 2021, Canada put the contracts with Supermax on hold until an audit report was received on the firm's labor practices.

Malaysian factories have become increasingly criticized due to allegations of mistreatment of foreign workers, who make up a significant part of the factory-based workforce. The increasing number of allegations of treatment at Malaysian companies has had a negative impact on national businesses. Supermax said it has introduced a new foreign worker management policy and has increased the human resources policies in response to the allegations. In November 2021, Supermax commented on its treatment of employees and said it would try and meet the International Labour Organisation's labor standards, a goal it originally set in 2019. [Free Malaysia Today] [Reuters]

Indonesia asks for international help in funding energy transition

(lb) Indonesia's President, Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, spoke virtually on 20 January at the World Economic Forum. According to the Indonesian president, Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, Indonesia would need $50 billion to realize the transformation to renewable energy, and $37 billion to manage land use in the forestry sector and marine carbon. [Jakarta Globe]

The Philippines receives funds from Germany for environmental project

(lb) The German government's International Climate Initiative granted €4.6 million to the Philippines for a Climate Initiative that aims at improving access to water and irrigation in the country.

A Project Management Committee has been created and the project is set to start this year. There are hopes the project will have a positive effect on

biodiversity and reduce vulnerability to climate change in the river basins. [The Manila Times]

The Philippines' government to begin China loan for railway project

(lb)The Philippines Department of Transportation's (DOTr) undersecretary announced that the country is commencing negotiations with the Chinese government in hopes of securing a loan to finance a Philippine National Railways (PNR) train project. A $2.8 billion contract between the department and a Chinese railway consortium was signed in January.

The PNR South Long Haul, also known as the PNR Bicol project, will include transportation means and 35 stations across four provinces and 39 cities and municipalities. [The Phnom Penh Post]

The first phase of the project is set to begin in the first quarter of 2022 and finish in the third quarter of 2025. The Philippine government will also seek loans from China for two other railway projects: the Mindanao Railway Project and Subic Railway Project. [Global Construction Review]

The Philippines praises US report on Beijing's claims over South China Sea

(lb) A US State Department study has found China's maritime claims to the South China Sea unlawful and inconsistent with international law.

The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) released a statement saying the study is consistent with the vision statement issued on 16 November by the Philippines and the US. The study is a 47-page research paper of the US State Department's Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs.

The document says that Beijing has no basis under international law for its maritime claims in the region. The executive summary of the report states: "The PRC unlawfully claims sovereignty or some form of exclusive jurisdiction over most of the South China Sea". The Chinese government has described the study as misleading and claims the US has misrepresented international law to "mislead the public". [Philstar Global]

Timor-Leste, Australia negotiation documents on maritime borders remain secret

(bs) Australia has been accused of attempting to conceal information regarding a case of negotiations with Timor-Leste.

An independent senator challenged a decision in 2021 that meant Australia was not required to publish key documents on the country's strategy for removing boundaries in the Timor Sea in 2000. The area, rich in oil and gas resources, would have benefitted stricken Timor-Leste, but Australia allegedly used underhand tactics during negotiations, including bugging their offices. An expert from Timor-Leste accused Australia of having taken advantage of the "desperate" financial situation of Timor-Leste in early 2000, when the country was facing destruction by Indonesian hands while on its way towards independence.

According to national sources, the records were originally withheld to avoid damaging the current relations between Australia and Timor-Leste. However, the most recent claims from the Australian government say that the secrecy remains necessary to avoid "damage to the security, defense or international relations of the commonwealth" and in the national security interest. [The Guardian]

Brunei, Singapore navies in a passage exercise

(sd) Singapore's Navy conducted a passage exercise with the Navy of Brunei on January 15.

On its way through Brunei waters, Singapore's RSS Endeavor, an Endurance-class amphibious ship, communicated and performed maneuvers with the KDB Daruttaqwa, one of the Darussalam-class offshore patrol vessels, then continued on its voyage after making a farewell pass.

Arrangements for the exercise were made virtually, and it was performed during Singapore's six-week Midshipman Sea Training Deployment, part of the training period to become naval officers. [Borneo Bulletin]

Cambodia: Dredgers detected at Cambodian naval base where China is funding work

(dm) Dredgers, necessary for the construction of deeper port facilities for the docking of larger military ships, have been identified off Cambodia's Ream naval base, where China is financing construction work.

This raises concerns of Beijing's military and territorial expansion in the region, and the US State Department said that "these developments threaten US and partner interests, regional security, and Cambodia's sovereignty".

A report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) think tank claims that dredgers can be seen in photos from the Cambodian government and in commercial satellite imagery. [Reuters]

Vietnam, Cambodia to reinforce bilateral trade relations

(dm) Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen met with Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son on 19 January to strengthen trade relations between both countries.

The parties focused on a plan to increase trade volume between Cambodia and Vietnam in 2022. The trade volume between the countries increased to nearly $10 billion in 2021 and is expected to continue its growth thanks to the development of stronger economic ties and bilateral cooperation.

Both parties agreed on further collaboration in the fields of investment, tourism, as well as the possibility of creating a railway connecting Vietnam and Cambodia. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Human rights groups call Taiwanese Supreme Court to consider Vietnam's human rights situation

(bs) Taiwan's Supreme Court is urged to consider the human rights violations in Vietnam in ruling over the 2016 environmental disaster that caused disastrous marine pollution along Vietnamese coasts.

Following the disaster, Vietnam repressed peaceful protesters who called for full accountability from Taiwan's petrochemical giant Formosa Plastics Group (FPG), the company responsible for the catastrophe. Over 7,000 victims, having failed any attempts to appeal to Vietnamese courts, appealed to a Taiwan court and sued the parent company.

Human rights groups called on the Taiwanese Supreme Court to consider, when ruling on this case, not only the human rights situation in Vietnam but also to take into consideration the provisions of the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, which were accepted by Taiwan in 2009. The groups also appealed to Vietnam, urging immediate release of human rights defenders and revising the national Penal Code provisions that entail incarcerating people for exercising fundamental rights in alignment with international law. [FIDH]

Announcements

Upcoming Online Events

26 January 2022 @9:00 a.m. (GMT-8), Hoover Institution, Stanford University, USA

Poland: On the Front Line of European Security

In this webinar, two experts, H.R. McMaster and General Rajmund Andrzejczak, will explore the relationship between the U.S. and Poland, security issues, particularly current Russia's threatening military

moves in Europe, interlinked energy security, and cross-border terrorism.

If you want to know more about the event, visit [Hoover Institute].

26 January 2022 @ 9:30-10:15 a.m. (GMT-4), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

The Capital Cable #40 with Mark Lambert

This webinar will feature a conversation with Mr. Mark Lambert, an expert in East Asia, who will lead a discussion on the relationship between Korea and Japan, the U.S.-ROK partnership, and North Korea.

Find more about the webinar at [CSIS].

26 January 2022 @ 9:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m. (GMT-4), United States Institute of Peace, USA

PeaceCon@10: COVID, Climate, and Conflict: Rising to the Challenges of a Disrupted World

Climate change, migration, the rise of autocracy, fake news, and a failing international order have all altered the current world order in various ways. As a result, in this disrupted environment, the practice of peacebuilding and conflict resolution is countering a major crisis. In this webinar, leading experts will share their perspectives and analyses on how the fields of peacebuilding and conflict resolution may tackle these challenges in the long and short term.

Visit [USIP] to learn more about the event.

26 January 2022 @5:00-6:30 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Sandford University, USA

Democracy, Diplomacy, Geopolitics and the Future of Southeast Asia

With the downturn of democracy and the expansion of despotism, the ASEAN Community has faced new challenges from the region's current geopolitical risks and conflicts, confronting threats to democracy and human rights. In this webinar, Dr. R.M. Marty M.

Natalegawa will discuss these concerns and the roles of ASEAN in these emerging global crises, as well as explore appropriate strategies to navigate them.

If you wish you attend this event, register at [FSI].

27 January 2022 @4:00-5:00 p.m. (GMT-8), World Affairs, USA

Has Erdogan Lost It?

This online session will feature the Chair of the World Affairs Marin Chapter, Frank Rettenberg, who will assess the performance of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, address key challenges and conflicts that have arisen during his presidency, and forecast the potential outcome of the upcoming election in June 2023.

More information is available at [World Affairs].

27 January 2022 @ 12:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

Iranians on #SocialMedia: The Only Way to be Heard

This webinar will discuss Iranian internet users' social media habits and how the Islamic Republic is restricting the online world based on the recent report Iranians on #SocialMedia, written by Holly Dagres.

More information is available at [Atlantic Council].

27 January 2022 @11:30-1:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Sandford University, USA

Autocracy: A Substantive Approach

This webinar will revisit how autocracy is defined, explore the relationship between autocracy and democracy, and examine the "non-autocratic non-democracies" sorts of regimes that exist in the gray area between these two clear-cut principles.

For more details of the event, see [FSI].

27 January 2022 @4:00-5:30 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Sandford University, USA

Sparking Joy Across the Pacific: How KonMari Became a Global Success

Marie Kondo, a famous expert in tidying and the founder of KonMari Media, Inc., will be featured in this online session, together with Takumi Kawahara, her life partner and the company's CEO. The two speakers will highlight the essential business strategies that led to their success, as well as how they overcame cultural hurdles and successfully entered the US market.

Further information about the event is provided at [FSI].

27 January 2022 @ 12:00-1:00 p.m. (GMT+10), Australian Institute of International Affairs, Australia

The Biden Administration and Democracy Promotion: Challenges Abroad and at Home

One of Biden's administration's attempts to put democratic reform on the global agenda was the democracy summit held last December during his first year in office. The summit was mixed with criticism and many aspects were further discussed. This webinar, joined by Bruce W. Jentleson, will look at the performance of the Biden administration, as well as the risks and opportunities that come with promoting democracy on both a domestic and international level.

For more details of the event, see [AIIAVIC].

27 January 2022 @ 10:00-11:30 a.m. (GMT+8), Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

One Year After the Coup: Whither Myanmar?

This webinar will feature a panel of experts who will discuss the current situation in Myanmar after one year of the military coup in February 2021 and offer insights on the threats and outcomes of this ongoing crisis that lie ahead for the country.

If you want to know more about the event, visit [ISEAS].

27 January 2022 @ 10:00-11:30 a.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

The Middle East and North Africa in 2022: Regional Security and America's Role

During this webinar, a panel of experts will be brought together to debate what lies ahead in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region's geopolitical landscape, as well as how the Biden administration might effectively handle crises and promote regional security and, ultimately, global stability.

More information is available at [Atlantic Council].

27 January 2022 @7:00-8:00 p.m. (GMT-5), The Stimson Center, USA

Understanding Kim Jong Un's Economic Policymaking: Implications and Opportunities

At this webinar, a panel of experts will present finding from research on North Korea's economic policymaking and address opportunities and threats for the U.S. and ROK policymakers.

For more details of the event, see [Stimson].

27 January 2022 @8:30-9:30 a.m. (GMT-5), The Stimson Center, USA

Prospects for Japanese Defense Policy and the Indo-Pacific Region

This webinar will offer insights on Japan's revised security strategy in 2022 and its implications for the future direction of Indo-Pacific security and regional cooperation.

For more details of the event, see [Stimson]

27 January 2022 @5:30 p.m. (GMT-5), Krasno Global Affairs and Business Council, USA

Ambassador Forum: Relations between the EU and the U.S.: Transatlantic Security

Relations & How to Deal with Russia and China

This online forum will feature a conversation with H.E. Jean-Arthur Regibeau, Ambassador of Belgium to the United States, who will talk about the current Russian military threat to Ukraine and the role of EU and the U.S. in this profound crisis.

If you want to know more about the event, visit [Krasno].

27 January 2022 @ 9:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

What can We Learn from the Afghanistan Experience?

This webinar will discuss lessons learnt from the Afghanistan conflict, as well as current humanitarian crises and the position of the international community in providing aid to the country. Various experts, including Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction John F. Sopko, will join this dynamic discussion to provide their insights and recommendations.

Follow [Atlantic Council] to learn more about the event.

28 January 2022 @3:00-4:30 p.m. (GMT+9), Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Japan

One Year from the Myanmar Military Coup and Three Months before the Philippines' Presidential Election: The Situation Facing the Media in Southeast Asia

After one year of military coups in Myanmar, the situation in the country is still on the verge. In this webinar, leading experts in the field of journalism will discuss the current and future direction of the industry under military governance.

For more details of the event, see [SPF]

28 January 2022 @ 10:00-11:00 a.m. (GMT+8), Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

Religious Extremism Among Students in Indonesia Major Campuses

This online session will explore the expansion of religious extremist beliefs among students in Indonesian universities, investigate the causes of this spread, and critique university and government measures for countering such extreme ideas.

Further information about the event is provided at [ISEAS].

31 January 2022 @ 1:00-2:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Economy Disrupted: The View from Guam

This webinar is the 6th episode of Economy Disrupted Season 2, the CSIS original series from the economics program. It will focus on the outlook of the Guam economy, including trade, technology, climate change, and job transformation, as well as the implications for the U.S. economy and a reflection on the U.S. global prominence.

Find more about the webinar at [CSIS].

1 February 2022 @1:00-2:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Sandford University, USA

Plans are Worthless, But Planning is Everything: A Resurrection of the Study of Grand Strategic Planning

This webinar will offer a new theoretical model and technique for interdisciplinary research on strategic planning, as well as explore how it may be applied to the study of grand strategy in the realm of international relations.

Learn more about the event at [FSI].

1 February 2022 @4:00-5:15 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Sandford University, USA

The Impacts of Pollution Levies on Chinese Firms with Professor Junjie Zhang

This webinar will look at the beneficial results of China's emission fee reform, which was implemented in 2007 and resulted in a 6.87 percent drop in firm-level SO2 emissions.

Visit [FSI] to learn more about the event.

1 February 2022 @ 9:00-10:30 a.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

No Progress Without Quality: Country-Led Strategies to Improve Health and Family Planning Outcomes

This webinar will explore country-level policies to elevate the quality of health systems' maternity, infant, child and adolescent health, and family planning programs during COVID-19 when the care has been confronting its most challenging time.

If you wish you attend this event, register at [Atlantic Council]

1 February 2022 @ 12:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

Inside Israel and the Abraham Accords: An interview with Axios' Barak Ravid

This online forum will feature a conversation with Barak Ravid, Axios Tel Aviv correspondent, who will examine the consequences of the Abraham Accords, their possible implications for the Middle East, and what they mean for the future of US-Israel ties.

If you wish you attend this event, register at [Atlantic Council].

2 February 2022 @ 1:00-4:00 p.m. (GMT+1), Istituto Affari Internazionali, Italy

Financing for the Sustainable Development Goals

This webinar will explore effective and innovative financing strategies that public development banks (PDBs) and multilateral development banks (MDBs) might assist in designing in order to accomplish the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

More information is available at [IAI].

Recent Book Releases

Benjamin Ho, ***China's Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism: International Order and Global Leadership***, Amsterdam University Press, 264 pages, published on April 22, 2021. For a discussion of the book, see [LSE].

Moritz Pieper, ***The Making of Eurasia: Competition and Cooperation Between China's Belt and Road Initiative and Russia***, I.B. Tauris, 184 pages, published on October 7, 2021. A review is available at [Manara Magazine].

Celeste L. Arrington and Patricia Goedde (eds.), ***Rights Claiming in South Korea***, Cambridge University Press, 300 pages, published on May 27, 2021. The book is discussed at [Youtube].

Evelyn Ruppert and Stephan Scheel, *Data Practices: Making Up a European People*, Goldsmiths Press, 368 pages, published on November 2, 2021, reviewed in [LSE].

Barbara F. Walter, ***How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them***, Crown, 320 pages, published on January 11, 2022. For a review visit [The New York Times].

Shiraishi Takashi, ***Maritime Asia vs. Continental Asia: National Strategies in a Region of Change***, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 217 pages, published on March 12, 2021, with a review in [Asian Review of Books].

Christopher J. Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, ***Technopopulism: The New Logic of Democratic Politics***, Oxford University Press, 256 pages, published on April 20, 2021. A review is available at [The New Statesman].

Calls for Papers

New Diplomatic History (NDH) invites paper proposals for the ***5th conference of the network for New Diplomatic History (NDH) on"Diplomacy situated: settings, personas, practices"***, scheduled for May 25-27, 2023, at the University of Turku. Deadline for submissions is August 1, 2022. For more information, see [NDH].

The **European Review of International Studies (ERIS)** invites manuscripts for ***special issues in 2022 and 2023***. Themes preferred for these issues include changing diplomatic practices; social change and international politics; the international politics of health; Europeans' various encounters with their imperial past; the international politics of migration and diaspora. If you are interested, you can find further details at [EISA].

The **European International Studies Association (EISA)** invites proposals for papers, panels and roundtables for its ***15th Pan-European Conference on International Relations on "Pandaemonium: Interrogating the apocalyptic imaginaries of our time***". The event will be held September 1-4, 2022, in Athens. Closing date for submissions is March 16, 2022. Details are available at [EISA].

The **Religion in Society Research Network** is seeking paper proposals for its ***Thirteenth International Conference on Religion & Spirituality in Society*** scheduled for June 21-22, 2023, in Athens. Conference theme is "Religion in the Public Sphere: From Ancient Years to Post-Modern Era". Proposals can be submitted until May 21, 2023. Visit [religioninsociety] for more information.

Jobs and Positions

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is looking for a ***Programme Coordinator*** to be based in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, and responsible for ensuring the achievement of the results of *the Affirmative Finance Action for Women in Africa* project. Closing date for applications is February 7, 2022. For more details, see [UNDP].

The **Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)** is hiring a ***Head of Programme*** to be based in Maiduguri, Nigeria. The successful candidate will be responsible for the overall programmatic strategy across the entire country operation. Further responsibilities include ensuring timely and adequate technical inputs, contributing to the quality assurance of program implementation across the project cycle management (PCM). Deadline for applications is February 1, 2022. If you are interested, you can find more details at [NRC].

The **European Institute of Public Administration (EIPA)** is offering the position of ***Director of Operations and Finance*** to be based in Maastricht, The Netherlands. Core responsibility lies in overseeing EIPA's finance, HR, ICT, and facility functions, as well as

quality management. Applications can be submitted until March 15, 2022. Further information is available at [EIPA].

The **World Resources Institute (WRI)** is seeking a ***Managing Director and Executive Vice President for Global Presence and National Action***, with responsibility for ensuring that WRI's country strategies are supported to deliver quality research and on-the-ground collective action needed for just transition in every country WRI is active. Closing date for applications is February 4, 2022. Visit [Perrett Laver] for further information.

Project HOPE is looking for a ***Director of Programs for the Americas, Global Health***, to lead Project HOPE's local Programs team in-country, maintain a strategic vision for the Country Program as well as constructive relationships both inside and outside of the organization, and ensure overall program quality and impact. More information about the job offer is available at [Project Hope].

The **United Nations' Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA)** is recruiting a ***Political Affairs Officer*** for its Division for Palestinian Rights (DPR). S/he will lie responsible for the substantive and organizational planning and organization of international meetings, conferences and activities organized under the auspices of the United Nations Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. Application deadline is January 31, 2022. See [UN] for more details.

Team:

Amanda de Mayrinck Malvazzo (am), Amna Pathan (ap), Anawil Yodprasit (ay), Atiwat Sinsirivanich (as), Auriane van der Vaeren (av), Beatrice Siviero (bs), Brandon Pinto (bp), Danny Widiatmo (dw), Duc Quang Ly (dql), Ethan Carey (ec), Ginevra Lapi (gl), Henning Glaser (hg), Jidapa Eagark, Kittikun Chumworathayee (kc), Lidewij Arnold (la), Lois Barker (lb), Lucas Meier (lm), Mega Yanti (my), Natinunt Muenchorn (nm), Prisca Mirchandani (pm), Ruchika Saini (rs), Sally Dobie (sd), Shivani Raheja (sr), Shreya Kar (sk), Sirapat Inthong (si), Tayla Peacock (tp), Tomwit Jarnson (tj), Venus Phuangkom

We would greatly appreciate your feedback! Please send any feedback you have regarding this newsletter

to: info@cpg-online.de

Also, don't forget to Like CPG on Facebook, and browse our *website* for other updates and news!

German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance - CPG
Room 207, Faculty of Law, Thammasat University, 2 Prachan Road, Bangkok 10200, Thailand

www.cpg-online.de
www.facebook.com/cpgtu

Preferences | Unsubscribe