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Asia in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

Wishing you a happy, healthy and successful Lunar New Year, I am presenting you this week's Asia in Review issue.

I wish you an enjoyable read and extend special greetings to everyone celebrating Nauru's, New Zealand's and Sri Lanka's Independence Day and National Day respectively in this week.

With best regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

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

Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perception Index: Much work to do in Asia-Pacific

(bp/dql) On January 25, Transparency International released its 2021 Corruption Perception Index (CPI) report according to which the global average for 180 reviewed countries remains unchanged for the tenth year in a row, at just 43 out of possible 100 points. 131 countries have failed to make significant progress in fighting corruption in the last decade, while two-thirds of the countries score below 50 and 27 countries received their lowest score ever.

Highest ranked countries include Denmark (88), Finland (88), and New Zealand (88), lowest ranked

Somalia (13), Syria (13) and South Sudan (11). [Transparency 1]

Within the Asia-Pacific region, which scores 45 on average, the best performers are New Zealand (88), Singapore (85) and Hong Kong (76), the worst Cambodia (23), Afghanistan and North Korea (both 16). [Transparency 2]

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

China: Xi Jinping signals a more cautious approach to climate change as economy slows

(tp) President Xi Jinping told senior Party members in a speech on Monday, January 24, that China's low-carbon goals should not come at the expense of energy and food security or the "normal life" of ordinary people.

The Xi's statement comes as China has come under international pressure to "enhance ambition" and take greater action on global warming as the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases.

However, mounting challenges to China's economy, including risks to jobs and growth, has led Xi to warn China not to "overcome the notion of rapid success" and proceed gradually. He has repeatedly stressed that China would instead "prioritise stability" in 2022.

Though China pledged to become carbon neutral before 2060, it will only start to reduce coal consumption- one of the major producers of carbon dioxide- after 2025. [Reuters] [The Guardian 1] [The Guardian 2]

China: Shenzhen adopts new market reforms

(tp) The city of Shenzhen, China's technology hub often dubbed the country's Silicon Valley, has adopted a total of 24 new policy measures aimed at easing market access and creating a favourable environment for the growth of key industries. This includes areas of advanced technologies and their industrial development, financial investment, medicine and health, education and culture, and transportation, according to government documents released on Wednesday, January 26. [CCTV]

Government officials say the measures are part of a plan to make Shenzhen rank among the top cities in the world for economic strength and quality of development by 2025. The plan was first unveiled in October 2020 where President Xi Jinping said Shenzhen would become a "model city for a strong socialist country."

New guidelines, issued by the National Development and Reform Commission (NRDC), call on Shenzhen to develop standards for cross-border data transactions and trading products related to yuan settlements, and an international platform for trading electronic components and integrated circuits. This is expected to rapidly increase the development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong- Macao Greater Bay area. [Reuters] [China Daily]

China: High-profile corruption cases

(tp) Former Communist Party secretary of the technology hub of Hangzhou, Zhou Jiangyong, has been expelled from the party by China's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), the country' anti-corruption watchdog, after being investigated for committing graft.

State news agency CCTV aired a documentary in which Zhou confessed to having capitalised on his position to help his brother's businesses but did not name which companies.

Fintech giant Ant Group, an affiliate company of the Chinese Alibaba Group, has since been linked to the corruption case as in 2019 a unit of the company had purchased two plots of land at a reduced price in Hangzhou after taking stakes in two mobile payment businesses owned by Zhou's younger brother. [Nikkei Asia] [Reuters]

In a second case, Dong Hong, a former senior inspector of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), China's top anti-corruption agency, has been given a suspended death sentence for accepting bribes from 1999 to 2020 amounting to 463 million yuan (US$72.9 million). [South China Morning Post]

Hong is the former righthand man to Chinese Vice President Wang Qishan, who headed the CCDI from 22012 to 2017 and is one of the leading figures in Chinese politics. Hong's sentence might raise questions on the future of Wang. [Asia Sentinel]

China reveals ambitions to become a leading space power

(tp) On Friday, January 28, China released the fifth white paper on its space program, detailing key projects and technological targets over the next five years.

New technologies include smart self-management of spacecraft, space debris cleaning, space mission extension vehicle, and the service and maintenance of in-orbit spacecrafts.

These new targets come amid a quickening race with the United States to become the No 1 space power. [South China Morning Post 1]

China's National Space Administration is also working to develop "new forms of space economy," including space tourism, remote sensing businesses, and space biopharmaceuticals, in a bid to involve the private sector in outer space.

The White Paper also unveiled plans in the next five years to complete China's Tiangong space station, a high-resolution Earth observation system, more lunar landings, a near-Earth defence system against asteroids, deep space exploration and the development of heavy-lift rockets. [South China Morning Post 2]

China: Foreign reporters facing unprecedented hurdles and restrictions, report finds

(tp) According to an annual report by the Foreign Correspondent's Club of China (FCCC), release on Monday, January 31, reporters and foreign correspondents are facing "unprecedented hurdles" in their reporting from China where – as the report concludes – media freedom is declining by a "breakneck speed."

Of the 127 respondents who participated in the FCCC survey, 99 percent said they felt working conditions did not meet international standards. [DW]

Foreign journalists reported facing increasing threats of legal action, online troll campaigns, visa denials, intimidation, hacking, and harassment in their daily work. [Hong Kong Free Press]

The FCCC found that 62% of respondents reported being obstructed at least once by police or other officials, and 47% by unidentified individuals. It said 12% were "manhandled or subjected to other forms of physical force" while reporting. [The Guardian 1]

Under President Xi Jinping's leadership, China has cracked down on press freedoms and harassment of foreign media and their staff. In December, independent NGO Reporters Without Borders named China as the "world's biggest captor of journalists" after ranking 177 out of 180 in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index and placed 127 reporters behind bars. [See AiR, No.50, December/2021, 2] [The Guardian 2]

China: Government cracks down on iron ore speculators and misinformation spreaders

(tp) China's state planners have vowed to crack down on hoarders, malicious speculators, and misinformation spreaders in order to stabilize domestic markets and price changes.

This comes after prices in the raw material spiked in recent weeks despite stable demand and supply overall. [The Strategist]

China imports three quarters of its iron ore from mainly Australia and Brazil, making it vulnerable to

fluctuations in iron ore price. Consequently, authorities from the steel sector development ministry are encouraging the greater exploration of iron ore by up to 25 percent by 2025 to reduce Chinas reliance on imports.

The National Development and Reform Commission (NRDC), which formulates China's macroeconomic plans, said that it would investigate the "abnormal fluctuations" of iron ore as prices rose by nearly 60 percent from mid-November to US$138 per tonne.

Consequently, authorities are trying to encourage greater domestic exploration of iron ore to reduce China's reliance on imports. [South China Morning Post]

Japan: Record high cybercrimes amid pandemic, government to introduce new bureau in response

(la) Japanese authorities detected a record high 12,275 cybercrime cases across the nation in 2021, according to the National Police agency. The number of cybercrimes in Japan has been steadily increasing for seven consecutive years, and the year-on-year right rose with a staggering 24.3% in 2021. The police agency explains that the increase is most likely caused by the recent spread of electronic payment systems and rapid digitalization spurred by the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic. [Mainichi 1]

In response, the Cabinet endorsed a bill that enables the National Police Agency to establish a new bureau and team dedicated to tackling serious cybercrimes. With this bill, the government aims to centralize cybercrime police activities that are currently handled by multiple bureaus. The bill also follows increasing concerns about state-sponsored cyberattacks from Russia, China and North-Korea. [Mainichi 2]

Japan: Inquest panel concludes 35 people should be indicted over vote-buying

(la) A Japanese inquest panel comprised of citizens declared that 35 people should be charged over a vote-buying incident involving former Justice Minister Katsuyuki Kawai in an attempt to promote his wife in the 2019 Upper House election.

Kawai was punished with a three-year prison term, as well as a fine of 1.3 million yen for giving a total of 28.7 million yen to around 100 local assembly members and supporters in a ploy to buy votes for his wife Anri.

The panel's investigation followed prosecutors' decision to not indict 100 individuals, amongst whom many local politicians, suspected of receiving cash from Kawai. According to the panel's findings, 35 of these individuals should be indicted as they had received 100,000 yen ($870) or more while in public office. With the panel's conclusion the Tokyo prosecutor's office has announced it will reinvestigate the case. [Mainichi]

South Korea: Top court upholds prison sentence for President Moon's former environment minister

(dql) On Thursday, January 27, South Korea's Supreme Court upheld two-year prison sentence of an appellate court for Kim Eun-kyung, a former Minister for Environment of the current Moon Jae-in administration.

Kim had been found guilty of abusing her power forcing 13 executives who were appointed by former President Park Geun-hye to resign from their posts at public institutions affiliated with her ministry between 2017 and 2018. She is first minister under Moon sentenced to a jail term by the country's top court. [Korea Herald]

Taiwan: Police found guilty of excessive use of force against Sunflower protesters punished by Taiwanese court

(eb) On January 27 the High Court of Taiwan ordered the Taipei City police to compensate 15 protesters who were injured during an occupation of the Executive Yuan complex in 2014 after the court found the police guilty of excessive use of force when dispersing the demonstration. [Focus Taiwan]

In 2014 the Sunflower Movement, protest movement led by students and civic group, carried out an unprecedented occupation of the Executive Yuan, one of the branches of the Taiwanese government, on March 23, 2014, to protest against the controversial modifications of the Cross-Strait Services Trade

Agreement (CSSTA) proposed by the then ruling Kuomintang (KMT). The protesters were evicted a day later.

Taiwan to develop new air-launched version of HF-3 supersonic missiles

(eb) Taiwan has announced that an air-launched variant of the supersonic anti-ship missile Hsiung Feng-3 (HF-3) is on its way, with development expected to take five years and costs estimated at roughly US$314 million.

Developed after its two predecessors, the HF-3 is a supersonic missile and represents the third generation of Taiwanese technology in the Hsiung Feng series of anti-ship missiles. It is based on an integrated rocket ramjet featuring solid and liquid fuel boosters. The difference between earlier versions and HF-3 is that the latter uses a more innovative engine as its propulsion system, thus increasing the missile's speed substantially. The missile features a wingless design with four strake intakes and the air intake design arrangement was reported to have been optimized for evasive maneuvering at terminal sea-skimming altitudes. [The Defense Post]

Taiwan: Higher goals for space program to be set

(eb) Minister of Science and Technology Wu Tsung-tsong unveiled on January 26 a plan to double the previous 2019 plan by the Ministry and send into orbit up to twenty satellites over the next ten years. He added that the Ministry is willing to ease as much as possible legislation to involve the indigenous space industry.

For this fiscal year, the Ministry increased the space program's regular funding of NT$2.96 billion by NT$1.1 billion (US$39.65 million), with for more additional funding to be sought for next year. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan is currently seeking to launch a Triton satellite this year, that will be used to conduct research on soil composition, air-sea interaction and to determine beforehand the strength of typhoons. [NSPO]

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

Bangladesh: Bill on formation of Election Commission passed by Parliament

(ap) Bangladesh's Parliament has passed a new bill on the formation of the country's Election Commission (EC) through a search committee, despite criticism from opposition political parties and rights organizations, which claim that the drafting process did not take into account recommendations from civil society members and stakeholders. [The Business Standard 1]

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.

As per the legislation , the six-member search committee will be headed by a Supreme Court judge, and will comprise a High Court judge, members of the Bangladeshi bureaucracy, and two people appointed by the president [see AiR No. 4, January/2022, 4]. Thus, the law formalizes procedures used by the current and previous administrations that empower the country's president – almost always someone who resigns from the ruling party to take office.

In light of this, opposition parties, including the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), have called for a representation for politicians and

lawmakers in the search committee, but their proposals were ignored. They allege that the law violates the constitution, which states that the president shall appoint the prime minister and the chief justice only. [BenarNews] [The Business Standard]

In fact, the legislation was formulated in just two weeks, with little discussion, despite recent public statements by the law minister and cabinet members that it was not possible to make the law in a short period of time [see AiR No. 1, January/2022, 1]. [The Business Standard 2]

Against this backdrop, following the passing of the EC formation bill in Parliament, the BNP secretary general announced that his party does not accept the bill and will not participate in any national elections under the current government. He urged the government to hand over power to a non-party neutral administration to form the EC in consultation with all political parties. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Prime Minister Hasina criticizes opposition for alleged lobbying in the United States

(ap) While addressing Parliament last week, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has warned the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) that it must account for money allegedly sent to the United States to hire lobbyists against Bangladesh's interests.

Hasina's recent remarks follow her government's claim that the BNP has spent at least $3.75 million on lobbying in the US. Moreover, the now-defunct Jamaat-e-Islami – previously the largest Islamist political party in Bangladesh – allegedly hired lobbying firms in the US 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. [AiR No. 4, January/2022, 4]

Speaking against this backdrop, Hasina accused the BNP of looting public money during their five-year regime from 2001-2006, and now using that money to hire lobbyists. The prime minister also stated lobbyists have been hired to prevent the trial of war criminals, thwart elections, protect militants, tarnish the image of Bangladesh, and prevent progress. [Dhaka Tribune]

In response to the BNP's claim last week that the prime minister's ruling Awami League had been using

lobbyists for the past 14 years to hide its alleged wrongdoings, Hasina stated that the Bangladeshi government hired PR firms to boost the country's investment, export and production.

In related developments, Bangladeshi Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen claimed that the government has proof that lobbyists hired by the BNP were responsible for the sanctions imposed by Washington on Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) last December. In light of these sanctions, several international rights organizations have called for a ban on RAB officials from United Nations peacekeeping missions [see AiR No. 4, January/2022, 4]. [United News of Bangladesh]

Bangladesh: Government to shift focus to addressing climate change

(ap) Bangladesh's government is considering adapting its main focus towards addressing climate change, as it is the seventh most climate-vulnerable country in the world.

A government official recently highlighted that Bangladesh has increased quantified emission reduction targets, and is committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, especially from the agriculture, waste, energy and industry sectors. The official also stated that authorities aim to have 40 percent of the country's energy from renewable sources by 2041. [The Financial Express]

Bangladesh: University student announce prolonged protest against police violence

(ap) Student protesters of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) announced that they will continue their protests until the vice-chancellor of the university – who they say had earlier initiated a police attack against them – resigns. [Dhaka Tribune 1]

Although protesters' initial demands for the resignation of a hall provost who misbehaved with students were fulfilled, students extended the protest after a police attack against them on January 16. The students had confined the university vice-chancellor, and police attacked protesters with batons, injuring at least thirty people [see AiR No. 3, January/2022, 3].

Against this backdrop, on January 19, several SUST students began a hunger strike demanding the resignation of the vice-chancellor, and demanded the withdrawal of the police case against them. They ended their hunger strike last week. Five former students of SUST were arrested for funding the protesters, and were later released on bail. [Dhaka Tribune 2]

Bangladesh: Two former police officers sentenced to death for army major murder

(lm) In a closely watched verdict, a Bangladeshi court has sentenced two former police officers to death for the murder of a retired army major two years ago. Six more people were sentenced to life in prison for the killing, while seven others were acquitted. [Al Jazeera]

In July 2020, the two defendants shot dead a former member of the Special Security Force tasked with guarding the prime minister, who had gone into early retirement. Details of the murder were leaked to the press and triggered outrage among the country's military fraternity, who demanded the officers be punished.

Bangladesh: Foreign ministry considering setting up human rights cell, foreign secretary says

(lm) Bangladesh's foreign ministry is considering setting up a human rights cell under its United Nations wing to better analyze the country's human rights situation and present "the whole fact" to the international community, according to Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen. [The Daily Star]

The move comes after the United States in December announced sanctions on an elite Bangladesh paramilitary force, citing "serious human rights abuses." Washington also sanctioned the current director of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) 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]

In the run-up to the US sanctions, 12 international human rights organizations in a letter that was sent in November but made public just recently called on the

United Nations to ban RAB members from UN deployment. [AiR No. 4, January/2022, 4]

More recently, a member of the European Parliament in a letter to the European Union's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, also sought human rights-related sanctions against RAB. The lawmaker also referred to Bangladesh's Digital Security Act, which he alleged stifled free speech, criminalizes online dissent, and violates international law. [Prothom Alo]

Against this backdrop of allegations of human rights abuses, a Bangladeshi parliamentary committee earlier this month recommended Prime Minister Hasina's government to appoint a lobbyist in Washington to convey a desired public image about Dhaka. [AiR No. 2, January/2022, 2]

Bangladesh: Rights group urges government to stop allegedly coercive transfer of Rohingya refugees to flood-prone island

(ap/lm) Fortify Rights, a Myanmar-based human rights group, has called on Bangladesh and the United Nations to prevent the allegedly coercive and involuntary transfer of Rohingya refugees from mainland camps to a remote island in the southern Bay of Bengal.

Since December 2020, authorities in Bangladesh have been moving nearly 21,000 refugees to Bhasan Char to ease chronic overcrowding in the sprawling refugee camps in the district of Cox's Bazar, where more than one million members of the largely Muslim minority group have taken shelter. Authorities plan to eventually relocate a total of 100,000 refugees.

Citing testimonies and video material, Fortify Rights accused Bangladesh of coercion, unnecessary family separation, and manufacturing a lack of informed consent among the Rohingya refugees. The rights group said such practices violate an accord signed last October by Bangladesh and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) that guarantees all relocations of refugees to the island will be "on a voluntary basis" [see AiR No. 41, October/2021, 2].

Among the material referenced is an unpublished internal UN Joint Needs Assessment on Bhasan Char from January 2022. The document cites concerns around the separation of families, the protection of refugees, and the lack of freedom of movement on the

island. It states that refugees who attempt to visit mainland camps from the island face the risk of arrest without access to legal services. The UN assessment also notes there are unaccompanied and separated children on the island. [Scoop]

India: Government brings attention to controversial anti-British hero

(sr/lm) India's central government brought attention to one of the country's most celebrated independence figures on January 23, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that New Delhi would install a statue of independence leader Subhas Chandra Bose at the iconic India Gate war monument.

Bose spent time in Nazi Germany during World War II. He then became a top resistance leader against British rule in India, often taking more confrontational positions than peers such as Mahatma Gandhi. His courtship of fascist Germany and Japan made Bose a controversial figure elsewhere, but he remains widely revered in India for his role in the country's independence struggle. [The Straits Times]

At a ceremony unveiling a temporary holographic statue of Bose, Prime Minister Modi said the leader's contributions are often forgotten and that he wants to ensure his legacy is properly honored. The statue of Bose will replace a statue of Britain's King George V, which was torn down in 1968. [The Hindu]

Following the ceremony, a group of more than 130 academics, writers, lawyers and other professionals have written to President Ram Nath Kovind requesting that instead of installing a permanent statue of Bose at the India Gate, a diverse mix of Independence movement leaders be represented through holograms on a rotational basis. [The Indian Express]

India: New Chief Economic Advisor appointed before Budget session

(sr/lm) India's central government said on January 28 it had appointed V Anantha Nageswaram as its new Chief Economic Advisor (CEA), just three days before the annual budget session of Parliament. The position had been vacant since early December 2021 when K.V. Subramanian, Nageswaran's predecessor, stepped down after completing his three-year tenure. [Reuters]

The chief economic adviser generally authors the Economic Survey - a document that indicates the government's policy direction and serves as a precursor to the budget. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman tabled the Survey in Parliament on February 1, with projections between 8 and 8.5 percent of economic growth in the fiscal beginning April 1, a day ahead of the presentation of the Union budget. [The Economic Times]

India: Government held promotions for the past six years resulting in 30% vacancies in Central offices

(sr) India's central government has not promoted officers of the Central Secretariat Service (CSS) in the previous six years leading to 30 percent of the mid to senior management ranks in central government ministries being vacant.

As per a CSS forum, 1839 positions of 6210 positions are currently vacant. It is being reported that the promotions are stuck under the charade of pending cases in courts. The officers are important as the are the ones that process files, documents, and orders at the level of, Under Secretary, Deputy Secretary, Director and Joint Secretaries. [The Hindu]

India: Protesters torch trains as frustration over lack of jobs for young people boils over

(sr/lm) Protesting alleged irregularities in an entrance exam for the government-run rail sector, angry students torched trains and set tires alight in India's northeastern Bihar state, which has been reporting one of the highest jobless rates in the country. [India Today] [NDTV]

Protests began on a small scale on January 24 but have since spread, with crowds pelting stones at train cars, blocking tracks and burning effigies of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Police have also been criticized for a heavy-handed crackdown, with social media footage showing officers barging into the homes of suspected demonstrators and flogging them. [The Washington Post, $]

In light of this, the central government has now suspended the exam for the time being and

constituted a committee to address the grievances of students. [The Hindu]

Indian Supreme Court refused to give relief to NGOs that lost foreign funding license

(rs) The Supreme Court of India on January 24 declined to pass an interim order to allow around 6000 NGOs to receive donations from abroad, despite the required license under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) expired in December of last year.

The FCRA requires NGOs to obtain a license from the Ministry of Home Affairs of India authorizing them to receive foreign funds. The FCRA registrations of about 5,900 NGOs had ceased to be active after December 31, 2021, owing to either the NGOs not applying for renewal before the due date or the Modi administration refusing their renewal for alleged violation of the Act. [Firstpost]

Against this backdrop, the petitioner Global Peace Initiative, an organisation based in the United States, had petitioned the Supreme Court to extend the FCRA licenses of NGOs if they applied for extension in the next two weeks. However, the court asked the petitioner to make a representation to the central government, which may consider it on the merits. [The Tribune]

The Missionaries of Charity, founded by Nobel Laureate Mother Teresa, had also encountered difficulties in this regard. The central government late last December refused to renew the license for the Kolkata-based organization citing “adverse inputs”, just days after the organization faced a police investigation for “hurting religious sentiments of Hindus” [see AiR No. 1, January/2022, 1]. However, on January 8, the authorities reinstated the NGO’s FCRA registration, after the initial decision to block its renewal had been met with an international backlash [see AiR No. 2, January/2022, 2].

India: Former vice president expresses concern over human rights situation, rise of Hindu nationalism

(sr/lm) Hamid Ansari, former Vice President of India, has landed in the middle of a controversy after he

criticized India's recent record on protecting human rights, civil liberties and religious freedom at an event held on January 26, coinciding with Republic Day.

Speaking on January 26 at a virtual panel discussion organized by the Indian American Muslim Council, the former vice president vocalized his concerns about the "rising trend of Hindu nationalism" in India and the danger of the country veering from the values enshrined in its Constitution. [Hindustan Times]

Additionally, the misuse of India's premier anti-terrorism law, the Unlawful (Activities) Prevention Act, was discussed by the panelists, which also included a United States senator, three US Congressmen, and the chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

A day after Ansari had expressed concerns over the current human rights situation in India, the Ministry of External Affairs said India is a robust and vibrant democracy and does not require a certificate from others. It also targeted Ansari, a former career diplomat, and said the track record of the event organizers is as well-known as the "biases and political interests of the participants". [The Indian Express]

India: Sedition charges ordered against student activist by Delhi court

(sr) A court in the Indian capital New Delhi has ordered sedition charges to be framed against one of the key organizers of a peaceful sit-in protest in 2019, Sharjeel Imam, for delivering speeches that were allegedly inflammatory and incited violence. [India Today] [The New Indian Express]

The protests in the Shaheen Bagh neighborhood began in response to the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) in December 2019. The CCA fast-tracks citizenship of Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian immigrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh who arrived in India before 2015.

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.

India: 11 arrested after woman allegedly gang-raped, tortured, paraded through streets in New Delhi

(sr/lm) Police in the Indian capital New Delhi have arrested 11 people, including nine women and minors, after the alleged gang rape and torture of a young woman that included her being paraded through the streets and humiliated. The incident took place on January 26 as the nation celebrated Republic Day.

The victim was reportedly abducted from her home by a group of men and raped. Her head was shaved, face blackened, and a garland of shoes put around her neck as she was hit and paraded through the streets in East Delhi. It is being reported that the gang rape was an act of revenge by the family of a teenager who died by suicide last year after the married victim rejected his romantic advances. [NDTV] [The Straits Times]

The incident is the latest in a string of brutal rapes in India, part of an epidemic of sexual violence against women. More than 32,000 cases rape cases were filed in 2019, according to data from the national crime record bureau, but the actual number is likely to be far higher because stigma and victim-blaming often stop women from coming forward. [Insider]

India: Section of men lobbies against criminalization of marital rape, threaten ‘marriage strike’

(rs/lm) As a high court hears a petition against marriage-linked exemptions in the nation's laws against rape, a section of Indian men has declared on social media that they would go on strike — from marriage – if marital rape is criminalized.

Under the current Indian Penal Code, rape is defined as sexual intercourse with a woman without her consent, against her will or if she is a minor. There are a few exemptions to this, including medical interventions or procedures, no physical resistance, and sexual intercourse between a man and his wife, who is older than 18 years of age. According to experts, the marital rape exemption is an archaic piece of legislation that traces its roots to British colonial rule.

A bench of the Delhi High Court is dealing with a batch of petitions seeking criminalisation of marital rape. The

central government of Prime Minister Modi in 2017 resisted the demand to criminalise marital rape. Last week, in a written submission, it reiterated its official stance, telling the court that India has its own unique problems due to various factors and they should be considered carefully before criminalising marital rape. [Hindustan Times]

The proponents of the "marriage strike" argue that making non-consensual sex a criminal offense would be tantamount to turning husbands – who they say already face a number of false cases of abuse and dowry under a different set of laws – into "rapists" and will lead to the breakdown of the institution of the family. [Deutsche Welle]

More than 111,000 cases were filed under the domestic violence law in 2020, according to data from the national crime record bureau, the latest such figures available. Even as police filed charges in majority of the cases, the conviction rate under this section remains low. [The Washington Post, $]

India: Record payout awarded to sexual abuse victims

(lm) More than four dozen former residents of a homeless shelter for girls in India's northern state of Bihar have been awarded between $4,000 and $12,000 apiece in compensation, the National Human Rights Commission announced last week. [National Human Rights Commission]

The case was particularly striking because of the number of victims. Over a period of years, 34 of them were raped by shelter employees and officials of the state welfare department. At least one was as young as 10; the oldest was 19. [The New York Times, $]

The abuse was uncovered in 2018 during the Bihar government's first independent audit of its social welfare institutions. The Central Bureau of Investigation opened an inquiry that resulted in the conviction of 19 people, including the shelter's director. In 2020 they were found guilty of offenses ranging from negligence of duty to gang rape. Twelve of the defendants received life sentences. [The Indian Express]

India: Navy boosts naval patrols in Indian Ocean to keep pace with China, but

funding gap remains

(rs/lm) India is conducting more warship patrols in the Indian Ocean than ever before, amid growing concerns about the Navy's capacity to keep pace with China and other nations due to a lack of funding.

Senior Indian naval sources told *Bloomberg* that approximately 125 foreign naval warships are believed to be in the Indian Ocean at any given time – roughly three times the number deployed in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks when the when the United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan.

But service officials say the Navy's ability to stay up with China and other nations is jeopardized due to a shortage of funds and the government's preference to award contracts for building critical naval platforms to state-owned shipyards.

At present, the Navy operates a 130-ship fleet, and service spends about $1.5 billion annually on shipbuilding programs. But officials say that is not enough and should be increased threefold to meet the shortfall in capability. In fact, last year, the Navy saw the biggest gap among India's three military services between requested and actual funds, prompting a parliamentary panel to ask the Modi administration to stop making further reductions. [South China Morning Post]

As a result, the majority of the Navy's submarines, which are crucial to controlling the oceans, are over two decades old, and construction of various new vessels – including a third aircraft carrier – have been repeatedly postponed. [AiR No. 27, July/2021, 1]

In light of this, service officials warned earlier this month that the Navy is unlikely to meet its goal of having a 175-ship fleet in the next five years. The goal, set in December 2019, was already lowered from 200 ships after the government allocated less funding than the Navy expected.

The navy's budget will be in focus on February 1, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government presents its annual spending plan in parliament.

India: Military services hold meeting on creation of Maritime Theatre Command

(lm) India's Navy last week held a high-level meeting with officers from the Army and the Air Force (IAF) on

creating a Maritime Theatre Command, as it is seeking to set up a functional joint fighting formation by the end of this year. [India Today]

At present, India's military operates under a service-specific commands structure, comprising seventeen single-service commands that are divided into overlapping geographical areas. As a result, New Delhi lags behind important defence partners, such as the member states of the Quadrilateral Dialogue, and its direct competitor, the Chinese military, when it comes to interoperability.

At present, the only fully functional unified command is the Andaman and Nicobar Command set up in 2001 to overlook an important maritime choke point at the mouth of the Malacca Strait.

In light of this, India is in the process of carrying out the biggest military reforms in decades: theaterisation. The initial target for the rollout of the theatre concept was 2022. However, the process, which was led by the late Chief of Defence Staff, General Bipin Rawat, has expectantly not been a smooth one, with the IAF opposing the formation of unified theatre commands, citing limitation of resources.

Before he died alongside 13 other people in a helicopter crash last December [see AiR No. 50, December/2021, 2], General Rawat had sent the final draft military theatre command structure to the chiefs of the three services and directed them to return the report by April 2022 with comments, if any, for incorporation into the final structure. [Hindustan Times]

Under the proposal, India would create four theatre commands, one responsible for the border with Pakistan, another covering the now active border with China, a maritime command responsible for the Indian Ocean region, and the existing command in the Andamans looking at the eastern Indian Ocean. Two potential commands for the air force and cyber warfare were also in the works. [AiR No. 39, September/2021, 4]

India's Navy is particularly keen to see the rollout making headway, as the vast majority of the defence budget is currently spent on maintaining a large physical and deterrent presence along the disputed land frontiers with Pakistan and China. This has come at the cost of investing in India's presence in the Indian Ocean: The Navy remains the most underfunded service. [see also entry in this edition]

India: Government appoints new Army vice-chief, commanders for Army's Northern, Eastern commands

(lm) In a significant step, Indian Prime Minister Modi's government has appointed Lieutenant General Manoj Pande as the next Army vice-chief, superseding Lieutenant General CP Mohanty who retired on January 31.

The appointment of Lieutenant General Pande assumes added significance, because he is considered the top contender for the post of the Chief of the Army Staff (COAS), which will fall vacant after the incumbent, General MM Naravane, will retire on April 30. [The Times of India 1]

The Modi administration also appointed two new commanders for the Northern and Eastern Army commands, which are responsible for covering large portions of the country's now active border with China. Replacing Lieutenant General Pande as chief of the Eastern Army Command in Kolkata is Lieutenant General RP Kalita. Lieutenant General Upendra Dwivedi, in turn, was appointed as the new Northern Army Commander Udhampur, replacing Lieutenant General YK Joshi, who also retired on January 31. [The Times of India 2]

Meanwhile, the central government is yet to decide on the appointment of the next Chief of Defence Staff following the passing of General Bipin Rawat in a helicopter crash last December [see AiR No. 50, December/2021, 2]. COAS General Naravane – seen by many as the frontrunner for the post – is senior to both Air Chief Marshal Vivek Ram Chaudhari and Admiral Radhakrishnan Hari Kumar. [Hindustan Times]

India: Navy concludes joint maritime exercise off country's west-coast

(rs) The Indian Navy on January 25 concluded Paschim Lehar, a joint maritime exercise off the country's west coast. The exercise lasted 20 days and had the goal of validating the Western Naval Command's operational plans as well as improving inter-service synergy among the Indian Navy, Indian Air Force, Indian Army, and Indian Coast Guard.

Over 40 warships and submarines, along with fighter jets, maritime patrol aircraft, helicopters and drones

participated in the Intra-theatre exercise. [The Times of India] [The Indian Express]

Nepal: Prime Minister Deuba keen to table MCC accord in parliament's lower house

(lm) Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba on January 31 met with the leaders of the country's two major Communist political parties to discuss a contentious $500 million grant from the United States that deepened political divisions and raised doubts about the survival of the ruling coalition government.

Under the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC)-Nepal Compact, Washington will provide $100 million in grants a year over five years to support the implementation of two major infrastructure projects in Nepal, while Kathmandu would chip in $130 million.

The agreement, however, has become a hotly debated political issue in the Himalayan nation, with Nepal's two Communist parties – the Maoist Centre and the Unified Socialists – saying accepting the money could draw Kathmandu into the US Indo-Pacific Strategy to the detriment of China and undermine national sovereignty.

Against this backdrop, communist leaders Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Madhav Kumar Nepal told the prime minister that the MCC agreement could not be passed without making amendments to the agreement. Prime Minister Deuba, in turn, reiterated his stance, saying that deal is purely a grant assistance that can spur development if ratified by Parliament. [The Himalayan Times]

The prime minister's meeting with Dahal and Nepal came after a meeting of the five coalition partners on January 29 had failed to agree on getting the MCC ratified by Parliament. Thereafter, Speaker Sapkota – who in the past has made no secret for his opposition to the MCC – called off a scheduled House sitting for ten days without informing the prime minister, citing a rapid surge in COVID-19 infections across the country. [Nepali Times]

Pakistan: Protests in Sindh province over contentious local government bill continue

(lm) Opposition parties in Pakistan's southeastern Sindh province continue to protest over the passage of a law by the provincial government that critics claim curtails the powers of local bodies and municipalities.

Throughout January, opposition parties and activists had been protesting against the Sindh Local Government (Amendment) Act, which reconstitutes the province into townships controlled by municipal councils. It also delegates authority over public services like water, roads, transportation, hospitals and education centers to the provincial government. Significantly, Sindh is currently the only Pakistani province where an opposition party at the national level, Pakistan People Party, is the heading the government. [AiR No. 1, January/2022, 1]

Against this backdrop, violence erupted on January 26 when police swung batons and fired tear gas to prevent supporters of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P) political party from marching towards government offices in the southern port city, killing one. The party mainly represents ethnic Mohajirs, Muslim who migrated from India to Pakistan after the Partition of India, and is an ally of Prime Minister Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party. [Dawn] [Geo News]

While the opposition Islamic Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan party – the main force behind the protests – wrapped up its prolonged sit-in after signing an agreement with the Sindh government on January 27, the remaining opposition parties said they would continue with their agitation until all their demands are met. [Gulf News]

Pakistan: NSA 'not completely optimistic' about Afghan Taliban's ability to clamp down on TTP

(tj/lm) Pakistan's top security official has indicated that he is "not completely optimistic" about efforts by the Taliban rulers in neighboring Afghanistan to rein in the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), saying that a complete solution to all security problems could not be expected from the friendly government in Kabul.

Since the Afghan Taliban returned to power in Kabul in August of last year, attacks by the TTP – a former battlefield ally of the Afghan Taliban – targeting Pakistani security forces have seen a significant uptick. Last November, Taliban-mediated talks led to a one-month ceasefire with the government in Islamabad,

but the militant group later refused to extend it. [AiR No. 50, December/2021, 2]

Earlier this month, Islamabad told Afghanistan's Taliban rulers to consider tackling the TTP a "test case" that would help their government establish its credentials in the eyes of the global community with regards to stopping transnational terrorists from using Afghanistan for cross-border attacks. [AiR No. 3, January/2022, 3]

Briefing the National Assembly Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs against this backdrop, National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf said Afghanistan was still being used by organized terrorist networks as a base of operations to launch attacks on Pakistani soil. He also informed lawmakers that the TTP had unilaterally broken the month-long ceasefire agreement with the government. [The New Indian Express]

Days before, using a similar language, Pakistan's Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said that the government was ready to hold negotiations with the TTP, but warned that any group posing threat to the country's national security would be dealt with an iron fist. [The Express Tribune]

Pakistan: Christian priest shot, killed in ambush

(lm) Pakistani police have widened their manhunt for two unidentified assailants who killed a Christian priest and wounded another as the clerics drove home from church in the city of Peshawar, the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, on January 30. No one immediately claimed responsibility for the shooting. [South China Morning Post]

Pakistan's northwestern areas bordering Afghanistan have seen a surge in militant attacks on security forces since the Pakistani Taliban, also known by their acronym TTP refused to extend a monthslong ceasefire with the government in Islamabad in December [see AiR No. 50, December/2021, 2]. Earlier this month, TTP militants targeted police in multiple attacks overnight in Pakistan's capital, Islamabad, and the country's restive northwest [see AiR No. 4, January/2022, 4].

On January 31, the TTP claimed the killing of a police officer whose body was found in a deserted area near the garrison city of Rawalpindi a day earlier. [The Guardian]

Pakistan: At least 10 soldiers killed in attack on security post in Balochistan province

(lm) At least ten members of Pakistan's military were killed an attack on a security post in the country's southwest province of Balochistan last week. No group has so far claimed responsibility.

The attack took place late on January 25 in an area located near Pakistan's western border with Iran. Pakistan's military said that a "follow-up clearance operation" was ongoing and that three suspects had been apprehended since the attack. [Al Jazeera]

Attacks against Pakistani security forces in Balochistan have been on the rise, suggesting that not only the Pakistani Taliban feel emboldened by the return of Afghanistan's Taliban to power in Kabul. On December 24, at least two soldiers were killed when unidentified gunmen attacked a security forces checkpoint. That attack came 10 days after a soldier was killed in an attack on a border post along the nearby Pakistan-Iran border.

More recently, a newly formed separatist group from Balochistan province – the Baluchistan Nationalist Army – claimed responsibility for a blast that ripped through a market in the city of Lahore, the capital of Punjab province, killing at least three people and wounding 28. [AiR No. 4, January/2022, 4]

Separately, at least 17 people, including two policemen, were injured on January 30 in a grenade attack in a town in Balochistan. [Greater Kashmir]

Against this backdrop of a deteriorating security situation, Pakistan's Chief of the Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, on January 30 visited the province. [Asian News International]

Pakistan: Senior commander of Pakistan Taliban reportedly killed in infighting

(lm) A wanted senior commander of the Pakistani Taliban, known by their acronym TTP, was reportedly killed in Afghanistan, as rival factions jostle for power within the umbrella organization which comprises about two dozen banned militant groups. [The Express Tribune]

The death of Rafiullah comes less than a month after TTP's operational commander and spokesperson, Muhammad Khurasani, was killed in the eastern Afghan border province of Nangarhar. [AiR No. 3, January/2022, 3]

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

Cambodia: Former now-defunct-party members receive political rehabilitation

(dm) 29 of the former Cambodia National Rescue Party's (CNRP) 118 senior officials have been granted political rehabilitation by the King of Cambodia. This move allows the officials to reintegrate into political life.

The deputy head of the Ministry of Interior's General Department of Administration informed the public that the newly rehabilitated politicians were already active in their fields, rejoining or creating new political parties. This comes after the latest member was granted his political rights after being banned from participating in political activities for five years back in 2017.

The remaining members are eagerly awaiting confirmation of their political rehabilitation, due to the next elections quickly approaching.

In November 2017, following the Supreme Court Decision to dissolve the CNRP for allegedly attempting to overthrow the government of Prime Minister Hun

Sen, 118 senior members were prohibited from partaking in political life. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: Illegal logging threatens indigenous communities

(dm) Illegal logging in the northern forests of Cambodia is threatening the livelihoods and cultural heritage of indigenous people, a move that directly violates their human rights, says a new report by the human rights organization Amnesty International.

Illegal logging affects mostly the Kuy people with a population of 70.300, representing a quarter of the 24 indigenous communities currently residing in Cambodia. Most of the logging takes place in the Prey Lang Forest that runs through Kampong Thom, Preah Vihear, Kratie, and Stung Treng provinces in northern Cambodia. Besides being economically dependent on the trees for lighting and to sell for boat caulks, paints, and varnishes, the forest represents a point of contact to their ancestors for the Kuy people.

Although logging in these forests is condemned by the Cambodian constitution, corruption within the government and the police allow this practice to continue for profit maximization, says the report. [Radio Free Asia][The Guardian]

Indonesia: Senior politician sentenced to four years over bribe allegations

(gl) A senior politician from the Golkar Party, a center-right wing party, has been accused of allegedly bribing a Corruption Eradication Committee investigator with US$ 251,000. The exchange of money was allegedly meant to persuade the detective to drop the investigation in the politician's electoral district of Central Lampung. He has also been charged with damaging the House of Representatives' reputation, disturbing anti-corruption activities, and refusing to admit an offense.

The politician had been sentenced to four years and two months in prison. However, due to the aforementioned aggravating factors, his constitutional right of being elected will be retained for 5 years after the completion of his prison sentence. [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia: North Sumatra district head detained found guilty of modern slavery

(gl) Terbit Rencana Perangin Angin, a district head in North Sumatra, has been found guilty of allegedly practicing modern slavery in his house. Since 2012, two domestic iron-barred prison cells built in the house have accommodated between 2,000-3,000 palm oil plantation workers. The workers were locked, beaten, rarely fed, and their salaries were not paid.

Despite these new charges, Terbit remains in custody by the Corruption Eradication Committee under corruption charges for allegedly accepting US$ 5.4 million in bribes from a businessman who won several projects from the regional government. [Jakarta Globe] [Tempo] [AiR No. 4, January/2022, 4]

Indonesia: 91% increase in child sexual violence reports since 2020

(gl) The Indonesia Witness and Victim Protection Agency (LPSK) stated that, since 2020, Indonesia has seen a 91% increase in reports of sexual violence against children. The surge from 223 to 426 reports was the highest since LPSK was founded in 2009.

However, the increase in figures is also the result of growing citizen proactiveness and awareness in addressing these cases and applying for protection, according to the agency's deputy chairperson. [Tempo]

Indonesia: Jakarta Governor launches fortified rice in fight against undernutrition

(gl) The Jakarta Governor has launched FS Nutri Rice, an affordable and fortified version of rice that is rich in nutrients, vitamins, and minerals. The launch was targeted at reducing the poverty rates in Jakarta, where families are financially struggling to provide nutritionally-rich food to their children.

Two reports from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) found that the COVID-19 pandemic has been worsening Indonesia's double burden of undernutrition, especially in children. As the pandemic drives individuals into poverty, families are forced to decrease nutrient-rich food purchases and thus affect

how their children are fed. Between 2018 and 2020, the percentage of children accessing the minimum number of food decreased by one-third. [Forbes] [Tempo] [Unicef]

Indonesia: Soldier killed during shootout with Papuan separatist armed group

(gl) A shootout between the Indonesian Military (TNI) and the West Papua National Liberation Army - Free Papua Movement (TPNPB-OPM) took place in Bukit Tepuk, Papua. The attack initiated by TPNPB-OPM led to two TNI soldiers being shot, one of whom was killed on the spot.

Resolution between the government and TPNPB-OPM, a group of armed Papuan separatist fighters, has become increasingly unlikely in the past years. Historical tensions and the government's suppression of the Papuan identity have led to growing polarization between Jakarta and Papua. As the government refuses to accept any pro-independence demands, TPNPB-OPM hardens its separatist ideal. [Tempo] [The Diplomat]

Indonesia to invest in a US$ 125 billion military buildup

(gl) Indonesia is in the process of enhancing its military capabilities as it is expected to possess an estimated 50 warships by 2024. Other budgetary commitments would include various F-15EX fighter squadrons, two Arrowhead 140 frigates from the United Kingdom, two refurbished Maestrale-class light frigates as well as six FREMM multi-role frigates from the Italian Navy.

The impetus for this US$ 125 billion project was given by Indonesia's loss of an aging submarine as well as Chinese assertiveness inside Indonesia's Extended Economic Zone. Despite these motivating factors, Indonesia still faces the obstacle of having to compromise on the allocation of money with the army. In fact, a widespread belief in the Indonesian army is that "money spent on improving welfare is a better defense investment than hardware."

But the money will not come from the government's regular budget. In order to finance this project, some analysts speculate that Indonesia will depend on loans while also raising money through domestic bond sales. [Breaking Defense]

Indonesia: Capital move faces additional criticism

(gl) The current Indonesian capital is the most rapidly sinking city at the global level, with uncontrolled groundwater extraction leading to an estimated one-third of the city being submerged by 2050. Moreover, Jakarta is presently facing various issues ranging from road congestion, water, and air pollution, as well as earthquakes. Nonetheless, the most imminent is its rapid sinking into the Java Sea.

Within this context, President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo is framing the move of the capital to East Kalimantan as a solution to the issues faced by Jakarta. However, skeptics worry that the new capital will still face issues like threats to water systems, climate change-related risks, pollution, and threats to flora and fauna. With regards to the latter, environmental scientists argue that the move will endanger the province's orangutan, leopard, and other animal populations.

The project had already attracted criticism from the Jakarta Regional Legislative Council (DPRD Jakarta) which argued that the capital move 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. [NPR] [AiR No. 4, January/2022, 4]

Indonesia to introduce more stringent domestic market coal obligations

(gl) As the coal export ban expires at the end of January, only Indonesian coal mining companies complying with the new Domestic Market Obligations (DMO) will be able to resume their global shipments. Until January 19, when the new DMOs became effective, miners were expected to sell one-fourth of their products domestically at a price lower than US$ 70 per tonne. The new regulations will build on the previous DMOs with the addition of monthly reporting, fine warnings, license suspensions, and revocations. [Reuters] [AiR No. 4, January/2022, 4]

Laos: Thailand to deport human rights activist to Laos

(bs) Thai authorities arrested a Lao human rights activist and refugee on charges of overstaying in the country and are planning his deportation to Laos, where he will likely be arrested for his work on human rights.

Khoukham Keomanivong is a member of Free Laos, a rights group in Thailand to promote human rights and democracy in Laos. He moved to Thailand in 2002 and organized groups of Lao students and workers in support of democracy.

Human rights activists are seeking bail for the man by appealing to his status of United-Nations-recognized refugee. The Thai immigration "could grant bail with a bond and guarantor" for activists protected by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) according to Angkhana Neelapaijit, a former member of the National Human Rights Commission. Meanwhile, the deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch is considering finding a third country to grant asylum to Khounkham.

Laos has a long history of repression and enforced disappearance of pro-democracy and human rights activists. In 2012 Sombath Sompone, a rural development expert who advocated for human rights in Laos, was abducted allegedly by Lao police. [Sombath] In 2016 three Lao workers disappeared during a short visit to Laos to renew their passports before heading back to work in Thailand. The victims were then sentenced to 20 and 16 years in jail after an alleged forced confession of being part of a protest in front of the Lao embassy in Thailand and criticizing the Lao government on Social Media while abroad. Moreover, in 2019, another Lao pro-democracy activist disappeared "under mysterious circumstances" after posting a video online criticizing the Lao government while in Thailand. [Radio Free Asia]

Over the past months Thailand has received critics by human rights groups for returning refugees and asylum-seekers to China and Cambodia, where they are likely to face detention, torture, and persecution. [AiR No. 48, November/2021, 5]

Laos: The United States support workshop on countering trafficking in persons

(bs) The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) conducted a workshop on counter-trafficking in person for media, culture, and tourism stakeholders along with the Lao Department

of Media, the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism (MICT), and a United States (US)-based nonprofit organization for economic development and environmental sustainability.

The workshop aimed at empowering the role of media workers in combatting and preventing human trafficking in the Lao PDR. The involved stakeholders are encouraged to raise awareness and support vocational training among the population in an attempt of reducing its vulnerability to trafficking in person. [US Embassy in Laos]

According to a US-based research, the Lao government has not met the minimum international standards for the elimination of human trafficking in 2021. Lao authorities have been inadequately investigating and addressing perpetrators of trafficking in person, especially those operating in special economic zones, agricultural plantations, and large-scale infrastructure projects. Also, male victims receive less support than their female counterparts, according to the report. [US Department of State]

Laos: World Food Program presents new country plan

(bs) The World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations (UN) humanitarian organization on hunger reduction and food assistance, renewed its support to Laos by presenting a new Country Strategic Plan for 2022-2026.

The organization aims at helping Laos to graduate from its current Least Developed Country status by 2026 by improving food security, reducing malnutrition, improving community resilience, and ensuring sustainable food systems across the country. The final objective is to achieve Zero Hunger, UN Sustainable Development Goal 2. [Vientiane Times $]

Laos currently ranks 78th out of 116 countries in the Global Hunger Index.

Malaysia: Parliament to discuss a bill to limit the prime minister's term

(dw) The next Parliament meeting, which begins on February 28, is expected to discuss a bill limiting the prime minister's term to ten years. Political parties are

now reviewing an early draft of the revisions to the Federal Constitution.

This bill is one of the government's efforts to reform the legislation while also enhancing political stability in the country. The other law is the anti-hopping act, which prohibits members of political parties from switching parties. [The Star]

Malaysia: Political parties on upcoming Johor state election

(dw) The Sultan of Johor has ordered that an election be held in the southernmost state of Johor in March. After the Sultan dismissed the state legislature, this decision followed a dispute over a proposed snap election. [see No. 4, January/2022, 4]

United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the ruling party, has announced that it will make its own alliance decisions for the election. UMNO indicated that the other parties would not pressure it for its final choice. UMNO once shared a ruling coalition with Perikatan National (PN), including the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS).

Meanwhile, PAS said that UMNO will be unable to keep power without the PN coalition's support. [Malay Mail 1]

UMNO, on either side, will run alongside the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a political ally since the 1950s. According to UMNO, this partnership will help gain votes from the Chinese community. [The Star 1]

The opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH), which includes the Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), or the People's Justice Party, and Amanah, will not contest as a single entity. This is because PKR has declared that it will run its own campaign. The decision was made in response to demands from the party's members and grassroots supporters, who were concerned about the coalition's decline. In the election, PKR will compete for 20 seats. [Malay Mail 2]

However, DAP and Amanah would continue to run under PH. DAP will run for 16 seats, while Amanah will run for 20 seats. [Malay Mail 3] [Malay Mail 4]

On the other side, Parti Pejuang Tanah Air (Pejuang), an ally of the opposition coalition, is confident that the election will establish itself with a political force in the state since it promotes integrity and trust. Based on

previous community engagement programs held in the state, Pejuang is also optimistic about public support. [Malay Mail 5]

A newly registered youth party, Malaysian United Democratic Alliances (Muda), has also confirmed its participation in the election. This also marks Muda's first election as a contestant in political contestation. [The Star 2] [see No. 1, January/2022, 1]

Malaysia: Newly registered party announced its support to the ruling coalition

(dw) The newly launched Parti Bangsa Malaysia (PBM), former Sarawak Workers Party, had announced its top leaders. According to the party's statement, the party will most likely serve as a vehicle for several former opposition leaders who defected to the ruling government.

On January 28, PBM announced that it had sent invitations to opposition politicians to join the party but that no official answer had been received. According to the leaders, there would be a significant outflow of new members from PKR.

PBM was registered as a political party in October 2021. The party was rebranded from the Sarawak Workers Party, a regional-based party in Sarawak. The party has expressed its support for Barisan Nasional, the leading ruling coalition. Currently, the party has two members of parliament and five members of the state assembly. [Malay Mail 1] [Malay Mail 2]

Malaysia: Government to receive draft on Parliament Transformation proposal

(dw) The government is expected to receive the draft on Parliament Transformation proposals to revive the Parliamentary Services Act 1963 and various revisions to the Houses of Parliament (Privileges and Powers) Act 1952 before March 2022. According to the parliament speaker, Parliament will not function independently from the Executive power until administrative and financial functions, and roles are revived. [Malay Mail]

On the other hand, it was proposed that this recommendation should be used to develop a Code of Ethics for Members of Parliament. Under this law, the

head of state will punish people who criticize or ridicule Parliament's power. [The Borneo Post]

The Parliamentary Services Act of 1963 established the Malaysian Parliament's ability to manage its administration, employment, and finances. Since 1993, the act has been repealed.

Malaysia: Multiracial party's vice president will form a new indigenous ethnic-based party

(dw) The vice president of Warisan (Heritage Party) has left the party after, according to his statement, the party had veered from its core purpose of fighting for the people of the state of Sabah. He also stated that he would start a new indigenous ethnic-based political party to serve the needs of the public. [Free Malaysia Today]

Warisan was a regional political party based in the state of Sabah. In December 2021, Warisan rebranded itself as a multiracial party and became a national party. It will be contest at national and local levels in other states. [see No. 51, December/2021, 3]

Malaysia: NGOs urged the government to address solutions for refugees' education

(dw) Malaysian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have called on the government to address the issue of refugees' access to education in the country and play a key role in finding effective solutions.

According to the Organisation of Graduates of Educational Institutions Malaysia (Haluan), from 2021, 155,400 of the 180,440 refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia were from Myanmar, with 103,380 being ethnic Rohingya. Over 23,000 of them are school-aged children who require basic education for their future lives.

As a result, NGOs in Malaysia approached the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for assistance and advice in establishing education programs for the refugee children from countries such as Palestine, Syria, and Myanmar. According to the NGOs, the poor living conditions should not stop the refugees from receiving education. [New Strait Times]

Malaysia: Government asks to review US ban on import of palm oil after improvement on human rights issues in the sector

(dw/avdv) On January 31, the Malay Minister of Plantation Industries and Commodities urged the United States (US) to review and relax the ban, imposed in 2020, on import of palm oil produced by Malay-based Sime Darby Plantation and its subsidiaries following the country's progress in addressing forced labor issues and human rights violations in the palm oil industry. [International Labour Office] [Malay Mail]

As a leading palm oil producer, Malaysia faced a huge challenge regarding the industry's human rights issues due to its extreme dependency on foreign laborers who work on the plantations. In 2020, the United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP) addressed some human rights violations, including forced labor practices, child labor, and worker abuse in the sector. [Reuters]

However, after the accusation, Malaysian palm oil firms expressed their commitments to improve and respect workers' rights. The Malaysian Palm Oil Association also launched a framework to guide the firms to align with the human rights principle.

In 2021, the government developed a five-year National Action Plan on Forced Labor (NAPFL). This national plan will continue to be developed as an uncompromising commitment to eliminate the practice of forced labor in the country. The Malaysian government also has ratified the International Labor Organization (ILO) Protocol 29, which resulted from the Forced Labor Convention back in 2014. [Food Navigator]

Malaysia: Human rights group urges Malaysia to end harassment of opposition parliamentarians

(bs) Southeast Asian Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR), a regional network to advance human rights and democracy in Southeast Asia run by current and former parliamentarians, have urged the immediate cessation of ongoing harassment of opposition members of the parliament by Malaysian authorities.

The call came after the police summoned at least four legislators inquiring about their involvement in anti-corruption rallies, including the protest on January 20 asking to suspend the head of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) for unethical conduct after the man was discharged from the investigations on an alleged acquisition of public shares. [AiR No. 4, January/2022, 4]

APHR reported in its annual report, Parliamentarians at Risk, that legal harassment of opposition members of the parliament in Malaysia had seen an alarming increase that follows an increase in repression of freedom of expression. [APHR]

Myanmar: United Nations call for urgent response to atrocities in Myanmar

(bs) The United Nations (UN) urged the international community to respond to the continuous violence perpetrated by the Myanmar military regime. The call extends to the atrocities perpetrated against the Rohingya Muslim minority, for which Myanmar was accused of genocide by the UN.

In her plea, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet called for full accountability of the junta for violations, including practices of torture of journalists, intimidation and exploitation of factory workers, and persecution of ethnic and religious minorities, Rohingya among others. [United Nations 1] [United Nations 2]

Also, she called the international response “ineffectual” as it “lacks a sense of urgency commensurate to the magnitude of the crisis” and called for urgent restoration of human rights, democracy, and civilian rule in the country. [Aljazeera]

Meanwhile, governments and rights organizations criticized the inactivity of the UN Security Council in addressing the issue. While the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union have issued unilateral sanctions on Myanmar, no draft resolution for the council has been presented. Critics speculate that the reason lies behind the fear of encountering Chinese and Russian veto. [Human Rights Watch]

On a different note, Save the Children, a prominent organization for children’s rights, joined the UN’s call for an urgent response to human rights violations in Myanmar. According to the organization, children are some of the most affected groups by the escalating

violence across the country. Over the past two weeks, several children remained victims of the bomb attacks and airstrikes in two regions, the southeastern state of Kayah and the Sagaing region. Since the 2021 February coup, when the military imposed its repressive regime in Myanmar, over 150,000 children have been forced to flee the country. [Save the Children]

Moreover, currently, more than 11,787 people are arbitrarily detained for voicing anti-state opinions, and over 290 people were allegedly tortured and died while in custody by the junta's hands, according to the UN human rights chief. Also, the junta has already been accused of genocide for mass killing and persecution of the Rohingya ethnic minority. The military repression killed over 25,000 Rohingya people and led 700,000 to flee into Bangladesh. In addition, the country has been issuing a high number of death sentences, as the junta condemned over 100 people to death only in the southern region of Yangon denying them legal representation and often sentencing in absentia. [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: Pro-military online groups ready to crackdown silent strike on February 1

(bs/ny) The Myanmar junta receives support on social media from pro-military users who are tracking local businesses and civilians who plan to engage in a silent strike on February 1, one year after the 2021 coup on the same day.

The junta has announced the intention of charging with supporting terrorism, sedition, or incitement of those participating in the silent strike and property confiscation for involved businesses. The junta threatened to charge those who participate in the strike under Section 52a of the Counterterrorism Law, Section 124a and 505a of the Penal Code, and Section 33a of the Telecommunications Law, which carry prison terms ranging from 10 to 20 years. [Myanmar Now]

Most of the pro-military social media users operate from messaging app Telegram and social media site VK, popular in Russia. Both platforms are lightly regulated and easily accessible from Myanmar which banned access to other major social media and sites such as Facebook. [Frontier Myanmar]

The military junta also issued a warning that those who ban pots and pans as a form of protest would face high

treason charges under the anti-terrorism law or with agitating against the military. Pot banging, a practice traditionally associated with driving out evil spirits, became a demonstration against the dictatorship since the coup in February 2021. [The Jakarta Post]

Myanmar: Major energy firms' withdrawal to impact junta finance income

(bs) An Australian fossil fuel giant announced to halt its activities in Myanmar shortly after two other energy firms announced the total shutdown of their operations in the country due to the serious human rights violations in the country. The junta is expected to face major financial losses from the exodus of international firms.

In late January, France's Total Energies group and United-States-based Chevron announced their imminent withdrawal from Myanmar's major offshore gas company following the call for international sanctions on the country's oil and gas sector for atrocities and human rights abuses by the military junta since the coup on February 1, 2021, which killed 1,200 civilians during pro-democracy protests.

The moves aim to refrain from any financial support to the repressive military government not only causing financial losses but also severely affecting the political reputation of the junta. According to the Ministry of Electricity and Energy, the junta received $40 million in taxes from the work on a major gas project run by the two leaving companies. However, representatives of Myanmar's government remain positive. [Radio Free Asia] [The Guardian]

The junta has already been facing financial difficulties to the point that the military has started collecting due payments from civilians through death threats. Since the coup, millions of residents refused to pay the bills to the military government in an attempt to reduce the junta's income. As part of the protest, millions of people left their jobs contributing to the financial crisis of the country, which will lead to a higher rate of urban poverty in 2022, according to the United Nations Development Programme. [Bangkok Post]

Myanmar: Junta arrests civilians, no reason provided

(ny) On January 24, the junta arrested seven volunteers from a charity clinic and confiscated the property in Dawei, a city in south-eastern Myanmar, in a military raid. No news regarding the reason behind the arrest has been released, and no one has been able to contact the victims since the raid. [Myanmar Now]

On a similar occasion, the same week, two reporters and one graphic designer from Dawei Watch News Agency, an independent news portal, were arrested by the military Junta in a media crackdown and held in custody for interrogations for eight days. Currently, over 46 reporters are held by the junta. [Mizzima] [AiR No. 4, January/2022, 4]

Myanmar: Food shortage in Kayah State

(ny) Nearly 200,000 people across Kayah State had been displaced following the clashes between resistance forces and the Myanmar military.

Civilians in displacement camps are facing a food shortage for over a week. Due to the attacks in the state, agricultural production has also been stopped and the population hardly receives products from other towns. The costs for transportation and food are rising, and the citizens in Kayah State are facing an urgent need for support for their basic needs. The junta has also blocked medical supplies from the capital and other major cities. [Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Junta to pass cybersecurity law

(ny) The Myanmar military junta has asked the ministries to discuss the approval of a draft law on cybersecurity that would carry a three-year prison sentence and a $280 fine for those who utilize a Virtual Private Network (VPN) software, which by ensuring the anonymity of a user's Internet Protocol (IP) address can be used to bypass location-specific firewalls and unlock nationally-unauthorized websites.

Although the law has not yet entered into force, authorities have already begun the crackdown by stopping people and checking on their phones, seizing them in case of the presence of VPN software. Citizens can use Facebook and other social media to communicate about protests and silent strikes only thanks to VPN. [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: Continuous clashes to increase number of victims

(ny) On January 26, the bodies of six people, including women and children, were discovered mutilated and dumped in a septic well in the eastern Kayah State, and only two days later, two other bodies were found, a mother and son, in Htudu-Ngantha village. The faces of victims were swollen, and their abdomens had injuries from shooting or stabbing, clear signs of torture, according to the local villager who buried the bodies.

The military junta is allegedly responsible for the eight deaths. Over 8,800 civilians were arrested and 1,500 killed by the military since the February 1 coup during nonviolent anti-junta protests. [Radio Free Asia]

Meanwhile, resistance forces in the Yangon have not stopped their attacks against Myanmar's regime forces, government offices, and junta informants across the city despite the junta's threats of arrest and death sentences.

On January 29, a Yangon resistance group has allegedly bombed regime forces at the gate of a military interrogation center injuring some troops. Another bomb attack on a police station, on January 28, was claimed by two other groups. [Irrawaddy]

The Philippines: Commission on Election internal dissents on Marcos disqualification

(my) The Commission on Elections (COMELEC) First Division's presiding Commissioner voted in favor of the petitions seeking to disqualify Ferdinand Marcos Jr., a former senator, and son of former President Ferdinand Marcos, from the presidential race, she said in an interview.

The Commissioner reasoned her decision on the immoral behavior of Marcos Jr. in failing to pay income taxes in the 1980s. [Philippine News Agency] [Rappler]

COMELEC stands firm in defense of its commissioners after a group of petitioners requested for partial reconsideration of the decision citing "possible grave abuse of discretion" in handling the case. The second division was also protested as biased. [Rappler]

The request of disqualification to the Certificate of Candidacy of Marcos Ferdinand Jr previously was submitted by petitioners due to a sentence on his tax evasion case in 1995. [AiR No. 2, January/2022, 2]

The Philippines: President Duterte's allies take over major television network

(my) Advanced Media Broadcasting System, owned by Manuel Villar's company, took over two channels previously operated by ABS-CBN, one of the Philippines' largest television networks sparking concerns over media freedom in the country. Manuel Villar was active in President Rodrigo Duterte's campaign, and his daughter was one of Congress who voted against the renewal of the network's license.

President Duterte vehemently expressed his disagreement with the network reporting to his anti-drug crackdown and the network's refusal to feature one of his political advertisements in the 2016 election campaign. He has also threatened to block the network's franchise, which he submitted a Supreme Court petition to shut down ABS-CBN. [Aljazeera] [AiR No. 7, February/2020, 3]

With a history of high numbers of journalists murdered, the National Union of Journalists is concerned over the concentration of powers by conglomerates and political clans. The rejection to renew the network's license was feared as a further step to curb the freedom of the press. [SCMP] [AiR No. 3, January/2022, 3]

The Philippines: Senate ratified two resolutions on firearms, trade, statelessness prevention

(my) The Philippines' Senate has passed Proposed Resolution No. 260, which officially ratifies the United Nations Arms Trade Treaty, and Proposed Resolution No. 964 to prevent individuals from becoming stateless.

The treaty aims to control the sale and shipment of conventional weapons globally. The treaty also seeks to prevent the illegal trade of conventional firearms, battle tanks, armored combat vehicles, a large-caliber artillery system, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, warships, missiles and missile launchers, small arms, and light weapons. [Philippine News Agency] [Rappler]

Proposed Senate Resolution No.964 prevents individuals from becoming stateless at birth and later in life. The resolution was based on the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. The Department of Social Welfare and Development will push to register children born in disadvantageous situations. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Department of Labor and Employment will seek to ensure undocumented Filipinos and overseas Filipino workers, and their children, do not end up stateless. [Rappler]

Thailand: Opposition Pheu Thai party wins in Bangkok by-election

(lm) The candidate of Thailand's main opposition Pheu Thai Party secured a landslide victory in a by-election in the capital Bangkok, receiving more than four times the votes of the candidate of the ruling Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP).

The loss of the ruling PPRP assumes added significance, for the party had lost two by-elections in the Chumphon and Songhla provinces to the Democrat Party – a constituent party of the ruling coalition. All three by-elections were called after the lawmakers were disqualified by the Constitutional Court in December of last year. [AiR No. 4, January/2022, 4]

Observers consider the by-election a bellwether for the long-awaited Bangkok governor elections, which are likely to be held in May.

In light of the party's solid win, Pheu Thai party leader Chonlanan Srikaew has called on Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha to dissolve parliament and hold snap elections. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Lawmakers ousted from ruling party to join other parties

(as/ay/lm) Eighteen lawmakers previously removed from Thailand's ruling Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) have formally applied to join a newly founded political party, the Setthakij Thai Party (Thai Economic Party). The ousted lawmakers had to register with another party within 30 days to remain members of parliament. [Bangkok Post]

The PPRP decided to expel a total of 21 lawmakers, including the party's former secretary-general Thamanat Prompow, after the group demanded a radical restructuring of the party following two election losses earlier this month in southern Thailand [see AiR No.4, January/2022.4]. Thamanat had previously been removed from the Cabinet after being accused of persuading lawmakers to vote against Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha in a no-confidence motion.

The three lawmakers who are not joining the Setthakij Thai Party are expected to join the Bhumjaithai Party, a governing collation paerty. Moreover, a close follower of Thamanat said that they remain undecided on whether to support General Prayuth Chan-O-Cha or not due to internal affairs. [Thaipbsworld] [Thairath, in Thai]

This leaves the PPRP with fewer than 100 seats in the House, down from 117. Before the move, the ruling coalition held about 270 of the 500 lower house seats compared with roughly 210 for the opposition, a gap that will narrow further if the lawmakers join the other side. [NIKKEI Asia]

Thailand: Former ruling party member sued over campaign mugshot

(ay) Sira Jenjaka, a former Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) MP, is suing the Move Forward Party (MFP) leader and an MFP by-election candidate for using his image in a campaign poster.

Mr. Sira was expelled from the PPRP after the Constitutional Court ruled that he was disqualified from the House of Representatives due to a criminal conviction for fraud. [Bangkok Post 1]

According to Mr. Sira, the MFP leader doctored his image with the intent of mocking him and used it as a campaign poster, along with a message asking for volunteers to help catch poll cheats during the election campaign. The image shows Mr. Sira under a magnifying glass behind the MFP by-election candidate, with a message asking for volunteers to assist in catching those who were cheating at the elections. [Thaiger]

Mr. Sira stated that the MFP's actions were a violation of the Election of Members of Parliament Act and that he will file a complaint with the Election Commission requesting 50 million baht ($1.5 million) as compensation. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Prime Minister urges parliament to pass new legislation on elections

(ay) Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha has urged parliamentarians to pass two organic laws that would amend the election system. The parliament is expected to decide on the amendments in February.

The two laws pending the parliament's approval, the Political Parties Act and the Election of Member of the Parliaments (MPs) Act, will increase the number of constituency MPs from 350 to 400 while decreasing the number of list MPs from 150 to 100. Another difference is that future elections will use two ballots, one for a constituency MP and the other for a list MP, rather than the single ballot used in the 2019 general election.

The two bills will go through a public hearing organized by the Election Commission which will last 15 days before being presented to the parliament. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Anti-Corruption Commission files lawsuit with Supreme Court against former Prime Minister

(bs) The Thai National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) has filed a lawsuit against former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra over "wasteful" spending in 2013. Five other people were included in the lawsuit filed with the Supreme Court's Criminal Division for Holders of Political Positions. The case was previously turned down by the public prosecutor for lack of evidence.

The defendants are accused of allocating 240 million Baht ($7.2 million) to promote an infrastructure development project. The same year, the Constitutional Court ruled unanimously on the unconstitutionality of the legislative bill aimed to allow the Finance Ministry to find a $60.5 billion loan for the project. The bill had violated Sections 169 and 170 of the constitution [AiR No. 3, January/2022, 3].

According to the NACC, three of the defendants have allegedly violated Section 151 and Section 157 of the Criminal Code and Sections 12 and 13 of the law for submitting contract bids to state agencies. The remaining two should be charged for aiding the malfeasance.

The court will decide on the acceptance of the lawsuit on April 19. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Two suspected insurgents were killed in southern province

(ay) Two suspected insurgents were killed and one volunteer ranger was injured in a clash in Narathiwat province on January 28.

A team of military rangers and police officers surrounded a house in the Ra-ngae district after receiving information that up to three members of an insurgent group led by Abdulhagam Arwae, who was wanted on a security warrant, could be hiding there.

The insurgents were held responsible for two bomb attacks in this southern province last year. After the gunfire subsided for almost two hours, security officers searched the house and discovered two men who had been shot dead during the altercation including Abdulhagam Arwae. [Bangkok Post]

On the same day, at least 13 bombs were detonated during the night in a Yala province, causing most damage on the side of the road in front of convenience stores, shops, a market, an animal hospital, and a car repair shop, and injuring one person. The police also discovered at least three unexploded bombs on the following day. There was no claim of responsibility from any rebel groups and police suspected that the explosions were intended to cause a disturbance rather than cause damage or injuries.

The violence occurred just weeks after the government reopened talks with insurgents from the Malay-Muslim minority in the country's south. [Reuters]

Thailand: First Asian country to decriminalize cannabis

(as) Thailand agreed to decriminalize cannabis on 25 January. Thailand has now become the first country in Asia to remove marijuana from the list of controlled drugs. The process of removal of cannabis from the narcotics list will be formally signed by the health minister and will enter into effect 120 days after its publication in the government gazette. Law enforcement officers said the effect the change had on the personal use of marijuana was unclear, but it is

currently still regulated. [Khaosod] [AiR No.4, January/2022.4]

Thailand: The court dismissed the army accused of killing human rights activist

(si) The Appeal Court upheld a Civil Court ruling on January 26, dismissing a lawsuit against the army for compensation over the death of a human rights activist.

The Lahu activist Chaiyaphum Pasae was shot dead by the army in 2017 at a checkpoint in Chiang Mai province.

The activist's family sued the army for compensatory damages in May 2019. In October 2020, the Civil Court in Bangkok dismissed a lawsuit and considered that the soldier acted in self-defense. As a result, the defendant has not liable to pay damages to the activist's family.

The military officers argued that they found drugs in the activist's car and shot his arm because he escaped and attempted to throw a hand grenade at them. However, a witness said that they saw the officers drag Chaiyaphum out of the car, beat and shot him.

His lawyers are concerned about the investigation into the CCTV camera being damaged and the military possibly still having a copy of the footage, as well as the claim of self-defense because the bullet went through his arm to vital organs and killed him. The lawyers and the family announced that they will file the case with the Supreme Court. [Bangkok Post] [Prachatai]

Thailand: Arrested Indonesian fishermen for illegal entry and fishing

(si) Nineteen Indonesian fishermen were arrested and charged with illegally entering and fishing in Thai waters on January 27. Marine authorities seized the two vessels were found about 38 nautical miles from Phuket province, Thailand. The crew members, including a 13-year-old boy, and the boats were taken to Phuket's port. Thai officers said that encroachers frequently steal Thai vessels' fish traps and gear, causing thousands of Baht in damage and loss. There are at least ten reports of illegal fishing by Indonesian

boats in Thai territorial waters each year. [Bangkok Post 1][Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Oil leaked from pipeline in the Gulf of Thailand

(si/bp) On January 25, oil leaked from an underwater pipeline operated by Star Petroleum Refining Public Company Limited (SPRC) in Rayong province, Thailand, covering the sea's surface and beach. An estimated 50,000 liters (13,209 gallons) of oil spilled into the ocean 20 kilometers (12 miles) from the eastern seaboard.

According to a satellite image, the oil slicks affect nearly 47 square kilometers (18 square miles) of the surface, about nine times the size of Samet Island and 12 kilometers (7 miles) away from Samet Island. The officers decided to deploy vessels and aircraft to reduce the impact by using chemical dispersants and boom barriers to keep oil from reaching the beaches, especially Samet Island, which was home to coral reefs and marine species. [Thaipbsworld] [Bangkok Post]

Environmentalists are concerned about oil leaks and chemical sprays that will cause a long-term impact on animal food chains. Because the sprays will decompose the slicks into droplets before sinking underwater and disappearing for months. In addition, oil transfer from vessels to pipelines in the sea did more harm than transfer on the coast, as pipes had been installed over three decades and could erode, resulting in another oil spill. [Thairath, in Thai]

On January 26, the Thai Navy helped clean up 128 tons of crude oil spill that leaked from an undersea pipeline near Rayong Province in the Gulf of Thailand by sending a surveillance plane, two ships, and a helicopter to survey the area and spray chemicals to help disperse the oil slick. [SCMP]

Timor-Leste: Final negotiation of US-funded development project

(bs) A government representative of Timor-Leste met with the National Executive Director of the Compact Development Team to prepare for the final negotiation of a $400 million project on incident of disease reduction financed by a United States-based independent cooperation agency.

The agreement, which aims at improving the drinking water treatment, sanitation, and drainage system, and to improve the quality of Secondary Education by establishing a Training Centre of Excellence, is expected to be finalized in March and signed in May or June. [Timor-Leste Government]

Vietnam: Former Minister of Industry and Trade sentenced to 10 years for corruption

(kc) Vũ Huy Hoàng, ex-Minister of Industry and Trade, was sentenced to 10 in jail for "violating regulations on management and use of state assets, causing loss and waste."

Three other high-ranking executives were also given a 3 to 8 years sentence in the same case of violating regulations and land mismanagement. The four prisoners were also commuted for 6 to 12 months for their first offenses and previous merits. [Vietnam News]

The ex-Minister and his subordinates were involved in a land grant on Hai Ba Trung Street in District 1, incorrectly allocated to Vietnam's largest brewery company Sabeco to build a six-star hotel and convention center that was disclosed in November 2018. [VN Express]

Vietnam: Political prisoners in danger of human rights violations

(kc) Tết festival, or Vietnamese New Year, on February 1, marks not only the most important festival amongst the Vietnamese but also an occasion for the authorities to abuse their rights against political prisoners. At least 145 political prisoners in Vietnam were jailed for peacefully demonstrating or expressing political opinions in the past; 31 were accused of criticizing the government online in 2021. [Radio Free Asia 1]

Vietnamese law guarantees prisoners' rights to protect their lives and health, including participating in entertainment, sports, cultural and artistic activities. However, misconducts and brutality against political detainees and their health problems are constantly being reported, and the right to visit is also limited for health reasons.

Chau Van Kham, 72-year-old Vietnamese-Australian, is a member of Viet Tan's overseas pro-democracy group, who served 12 years in jail for alleged "financing terrorism." On 22 January, his wife wrote to the Australian Foreign Affairs Minister for more significant government intervention concerning his health problem. [The Guardians] [The 88 Project 1]

Chau Van Kham crossed into Vietnam through the Cambodian border in January 2019 to meet fellow pro-democracy activists, carrying a false identity document after his visa was denied. He and Vietnamese activists were later arrested in Vietnam. As a political prisoner, he disappeared and has not been face-to-face with the Australian consular since April 2021. [SBS News]

On 27 January, a Vietnamese human rights lawyer close to detained activist Le Quy Loc said that in May 2021, Mr. Loc was transferred to a criminal cell before being severely beaten after pleading with wardens to play sport outside of his cell. He is reported to have injuries on his face and went on hunger strike for eight days to protest the violence. [Radio Free Asia 2]

Le Quy Loc was a taxi driver who joined the Hien Phap group, a civil society organization, and promoted peoples' understanding of human rights. He was arrested in September 2018 and subsequently sentenced to five years in July 2020 charged under Article 118 of Vietnam's 2015 Penal Code for "disturbing security." The appeals court upheld his prison terms in January 2021. [No. 2, January/2021, 2] [The 88 Project 2]

Vietnam: Jail term upheld for journalists

(kc) On 27 January, the People's Court of Cần Thơ City upheld the prison terms of five journalists who were charged under Article 331 of the Vietnam Penal Code with "abusing democracy and freedom to infringe on state interests" after publishing anti-state content on a Facebook-based news outlet "Báo Sạch" ("Clean Journalism"). [Vietnam News]

In November 2021 the five journalists were sentenced to prison terms ranging from 2 to 4 years. They will also be barred from journalism three more years after their penitentiaries. [No. 44, November/2021, 1]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

China secures symbolic victory over US in WTO case

(pm/dql) On Wednesday, January 26, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) ruled to grant China the right to impose tariffs against the US worth US$645 million annually to compensate anti-subsidy tariffs which the US imposed between 2008 and 2012 on nearly two dozen Chinese products.

China went to the WTO in 2012 to challenge those tariffs which Washington has justified with Beijing's subsidies for those goods, dumping them on world markets.

While China had initially sought a much higher annual award of US$2.4 billion, last week's ruling means a symbolic victory for China, the second after the trade body in 2019 award Beijing the right to US$3.58 billion of retaliatory tariffs after finding fault with Washington's way to determine whether Beijing was dumping products on the U.S. market. [Jurist] [Aljazeera]

The Biden administration expressed disappointment over the decision criticising outdated WTO rules used to "shield China's non-market economic practises and undermine fair, market-oriented competition." [Office of the United States Trade Representative]

Beijing, on the other side, hailed the decision as having "great significance in rectifying U.S. countervailing duties on imported Chinese goods, protecting the legitimate trade interests of Chinese companies and safeguarding multilateral trading systems," and urged the US to "immediately correct the wrongdoings" in its trade practises. [Xinhua]

Meanwhile, on January 27 the US Federal Communications Commission announced the revocation of the license for the US unit of China Unicom to operate in the US. Citing national security concerns, China Unicom, a Chinese state-owned telecommunications operator and the world's sixth-largest mobile service provider by subscriber base, is ordered to cease all telecommunications services in the country within 60 days. [Reuters]

China's Ministry of Commerce condemned the move calling it an abuse of state power and has a severe deviation and demanding that the US "immediately cease its unreasonable suppression of Chinese companies." [Xinhua]

China warns US over Ukraine's legitimate security concerns

(pm/dql) In the ongoing standoff between the US and Russia over Ukraine – with , Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has urged the US to respect Russia's security concerns over Ukraine in a phone conversation with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Thursday, January 27, adding that it was necessary to return to the 2015 Minsk Agreements approved by the Security Council to resolve the conflict. [South China Morning Post] [Xinhua]

Wang's statements reflect China's solidarity with Russia in this conflict. They come a day after Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly informed his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron in a phone call that a formal US response to Moscow's core security demands – including guarantees that Ukraine will be permanently barred from NATO membership – to resolve the Ukraine crisis left them unaddressed, further cementing the impasse in US-Russian negotiations. [BBC] [Aljazeera]

On Friday, January 18, the US Department of Defence publicly confirmed that Russia has deployed 100.000 troops at Ukraine's borders, warning of a "horrific" battle scenario in the event of an attack of Russia on Ukraine. [CNBC]

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, meanwhile, has summoned the CEOs of nearly a dozen of America's largest defense companies for a high-profile meeting on Thursday this week at which he will emphasize the urgency in fielding hypersonic weapons as the US seeks to catch up with China's and Russia's advancements in this area. [Defense One]

China, Russia deepen relations: Joint military exercise, coordination on Asian affairs and Putin's presence at the Olympics

(pm/dql) Last week saw a series of events which reflect increasingly close cooperation and ties between China and Russia.

On Monday, January 24, Chinese and Russian navies conducted the joint "Peaceful Sea-2022"

anti-piracy exercises in the Arabian Sea aimed at strengthening the capabilities of the two countries' militaries in safeguarding strategic maritime routes. [TASS]

A day later, during a virtual meeting between senior Chinese and Russian diplomats, the two countries agreed to intensify coordination on Asian affairs. [South China Morning Post 1]

On the same day, Russia President Vladimir Putin in an address to Russian Olympians reaffirmed common values shared by Russia and China and both countries' unified rejection of the diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics, that will commence this Friday, by some Western countries the US, Canada, Australia and Britain [Reuters]

Putin will be among more than 30 head of states to attend the opening ceremony of the Games. Other countries represented there include Poland, Serbia, Luxembourg and Monaco, Cambodia, Singapore, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Argentina, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Among the attendees will also be UN Secretary-General António Guterres, UN General Assembly President Abdulla Shahid and World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus [South China Morning Post 2]

China agrees UN rights chief to visit Xinjiang

(pm/dql) China has agreed to host a visit to Xinjiang by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) Michelle Bachelet in the first half of 2022 after completion of the Winter Olympics which will commence this Friday in Beijing.

According to sources familiar with the issue, the agreement is based on the conditions that Bachelet's trip to Xinjiang will be a "friendly visit," and not an investigation and that she will not publish a report on Xinjiang ahead of the Olympics as requested by the US.

Since September 2018, when she assumed the post of the UN human rights commissioner, Bachelet has been pursuing negotiations with China for such a visit to the region where China has been accused of systematic human rights violations against the Muslim Uyghur minority, including holding more than one million Uyghurs in mass detention camps. [South China Morning Post]

China vows to deepen trade with Central Asia, calls for more anti-terrorism cooperation

(pm) Chinese President Xi Jinping held a virtual summit with five Central Asian leaders on 25 January to mark 30 years of diplomatic relations between China and the Central Asian countries. In his speech Xi vowed to open China's domestic market to increase import of more goods and agricultural products from the region, adding that China seeks to bring trade turnover between China and the region to US$70 billion by 2030.

Furthermore, he announced that China will provide the five countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – with US$500 million in grants within next three years for social projects and additional 50 million vaccine doses this year.

With regards to peace and stability in the regions, China's president called for more cooperation in areas such as border management and control as well as in countering terrorist use of the Internet and joint operation.

Over the past two decades, China and the five countries have steadily increased economic cooperation, with two-way trade having grown 25-fold, rising from US$1.5 billion to US$38.6 billion in 2020, and Turkmenistan leading, whose trade increased almost 200 times, to US$6.5 billion in 2020. Total Chinese investment in the five countries stood at US$40 billion at the end of 2020. [Xinhua] [Eurasianet]

For more data on China's growing influence in Central Asia and its investments soft power and security in this region see Asim Kashgarian in [VoA].

China- Saudi Arabia relations: Deepening military cooperation

(pm/dql) In a latest sign of China's efforts to increase its influence in the Middle East, Chinese Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe met with the Saudi Deputy Defence Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman via video link on January 26. Both sides agreed to deepen bilateral military relations as well as to jointly oppose "hegemonic and bullying tactics" targeting countries of the region. [South China Morning Post]

The meeting comes on the heels of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's meetings with his counterparts from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Iran and Turkey as well as with the Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). [AiR No. 3, January/2022, 3]

European Commission takes Beijing's trade restrictions against Lithuania to WTO

(pm/dql) The European Commission (EC) Thursday, January 27, filed a formal a formal complaint against China at the World Trade Organization (WTO) over "discriminatory trade practices" against European Union (EU) member state Lithuania in violation of WTO rules.

The EC cites evidence of Beijing's "refusal to clear Lithuanian goods through customs, rejection of import applications from Lithuania." Beijing is also accused of "pressuring EU companies operating out of other EU Member States to remove Lithuanian inputs from their supply chains when exporting to China." [European Commission]

The move reflects the European Union's attempt to send a clear signal of its willingness to defend its interest against China's power as it throws its weight into backing member state Lithuania that is facing diplomatic and economic pressure from China ever since it allowed Taiwan to open a representative office in Vilnius having the word "Taiwanese" instead of "Taipei" in its name [see AiR No. 2, January/2022, 2]. [AP News] [Aljazeera]

In a related development, Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda has reportedly demanded that the country's ministers "fix" the problem of the name of Taiwan's representative office in Vilnius. Earlier this month, Nauseda admitted that the naming of the representative office as "Taiwanese" office was a mistake, adding that he, who as President oversees foreign policy according to the constitution, was not consulted in the matter of the naming of the office. [Taiwan News] [AiR No. 2, January/2022, 2]

Huawei takes Sweden to court over 5G ban

(pm) Chinese smartphone giant Huawei announced on Sunday, January 30, that is has launched arbitration proceedings against Sweden under the World Bank Group, in response to its exclusion form Nordic country's 5G rollout in October 2020. Huawei was also ordered to remove already installed equipment by January 1, 2025. In In June last year, Swedish court upheld the decision by Sweden's Post and Telecom Authority. [South China Morning Post]

China-Netherlands relations: countries enhance cooperation

(pm) During a virtual meeting between Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte on January 26, both heads of governments agreed to advance cooperation in various the fields including economy, trade, climate change, science and technology, as well as modern agriculture and culture. [China.org]

North Korea tests mid-range ballistic missile for first time since 2017

(dql) North Korea confirmed on Sunday, January 30, it fired for the first time in five year a Hwasong-12 “mid-range ballistic missile”. It marked the seventh weapons test this month.

Last tested in 2017, the Hwasong-12 has an estimated range of 4,500km (2,796 miles) and is capable of carrying a nuclear warhead. [Aljazeera]

South Korea: RCEP takes effect

(dql) On Tuesday, February 1, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), world’s largest free trade agreement with its 15 members accounting for some 30 percent of the world’s population and 30 percent of the global GDP, entered into force in South Korea.

In November 2020, South Korea signed the trade deal with 14 other countries, including the ten ASEAN member states, Australia, China, Japan, and New Zealand. Ratification by the Parliament followed in December last year.

In 2020, South Korea’s total amount of exports to the RCEP countries stood at US$254.3 billion, accounting for around 50 percent of country’s total outbound shipments. [Yonhap News Agency]

With the RCEP effective in South Korea, the door seems open for a free trade agreement between South Korea, China and Japan, negotiations on which have been going on since 2013. [The Diplomat]

South Korea: President Moon’s hopes for FTA with Mexico

(dql) In an exchange of letters with his Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of establishing diplomatic ties between South Korea and Mexico, South Korea’s President Moon Jae-in expressed hope for the conclusion of a free trade agreement between his and the Central American country.

Free trade negotiations begun in 2006, but have halted since 2008 in the wake of opposition from businesses in Mexico.

Moon also said in the latter that he wished South Korea to become member of the Pacific Alliance to

which is has been observer since 2013.

The Pacific Alliance is a Latin American trade bloc, formed by Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru. Seoul's trade with these four countries accounts for 60 percent of its total trade with Central and South America. [Yonhap News Agency]

Japan to hold Quad meetings in February

(la) Japan, India, Australia and the United States, together known as the 'Quad' group, are planning to hold a meeting mid-February in Australia between their foreign ministers. The expected attendees of the talks include Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne.

Sources reported likely agenda topics during the meeting are economic and security cooperation, concerns over China's military assertiveness in the East and South China seas, and the common Quad goals of realizing a "free and open Indo-Pacific". The participants are also expected to talk about progress in their cooperation so far, and infrastructure building in the Indo-Pacific region. [Mainichi]

Former prime ministers call on EU to pursue zero nuclear power path

(la) Japanese ex-prime ministers Naoto Kan and Junichiro Koizumi called on the European Union to choose a path towards zero nuclear power, amidst the Union's plans to utilize nuclear energy to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050.

While in office, both Koizumi and Kan were proponents of nuclear power, but since the 2011 Fukushima disaster triggered by a massive earthquake and Tsunami, they have become known in Japan as prominent antinuclear voices. Koizumi stated that the disaster has taught the country that nuclear power is not safe, cheap and clean, and that there are not enough renewables to supply the power necessary for a nuclear plant, during a press conference at the Foreign Correspondents" Club of Japan.

EU institutions are currently discussing potential future regulation that allows for nuclear power to be characterized as renewable energy on a list of

technologies approved for EU-financial support and private investment.

In response, Koizumi and Kan warned the EU of the risks associated with nuclear energy. Koizumi, pointed mostly to France, a country that relies heavily on nuclear energy, and expressed his hope that it would follow nations such as Germany and Japan and phase out its use of atomic energy. [Japan Times]

Japan continues to propose Sado mine as UNESCO heritage site, despite South-Korean backlash

(la): Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced on Friday that Japan will recommend a gold and silver mine on Sado Island for the 2023 UNESCO World Heritage list, raising criticism from its neighboring country South Korea, which has urged Tokyo to drop the proposal of the site for its alleged connection to Korean forced laborers during World War II.

Relations between Japan and South Korea have been increasingly unstable the past years because of issues related to the two nation's shared wartime history, including Korean "comfort women" who were forced to work at Japanese military brothels, and forced labor performed by Korean workers during the 1910-1945 Japanese colonization of the Korean Peninsula.

In response to Japan's decision to propose the Sado mine, South Korea's Foreign Ministry released a statement in which it expressed "strong regrets" and urged the Japanese government to halt the attempt. Observers expect South Korea's opposition to decrease Japan's chances of successfully bringing the mine through UNESCO screening.

Following South Korea's official statement, Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi made clear that Tokyo found Seoul's argument "unacceptable", while also sharing his intention to have a sincere dialogue with South Korea to discuss the issue in a "calm and courteous way", according to the operational guidelines for UNESCO World Heritage registrations. [Kyodo news]

Taiwan's Vice-President attends inauguration of Honduras's new president, meets US lawmakers

(eb) Taiwan's Vice-President William Lai travelled to Honduras last week to attend the inauguration of Honduras's President Xiomara Castro at which he had a brief meeting with US Vice-President Kamala Harris. [Channel News Asia]

Vice-President Lai travelled to Honduras in order to shore up relations with the country after losing support from another Central-American country, Nicaragua, last month [see AiR No.4 January/2022, 4].

During his stop-over in Los Angeles on his way to Honduras met with US Congressmen to discuss bilateral trade relations and threats posed by China. He used the stop-over San Francisco on his return to Taiwan for a virtual meeting with US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi discussing economic and security issues between the two countries. [Focus Taiwan 1] [Focus Taiwan 2].

Meanwhile, on January 30 Chinese Ambassador to the US Qin Gang made clear in an interview that while the peaceful unification with Taiwan is the main goal, the possibility of a non-peaceful reunification is always on the table and warned that if "the Taiwanese authority, emboldened by the United States, keeps going down the road for independence, it would most likely involve China and the United States, the two big countries, in a military conflict." [The Manila Times]

Czech Republic will deepen intellectual ties with Taiwan by opening new think tank in Taipei

(eb) The European Values Center (EVC) for Security Policy, a Czech think tank, formally opened its Taipei office on January 28. According to its website, which is headquartered in Prague, the organization helps "defend Europe especially from the malign influences of Russia, China, and Islamic extremists."

The opening ceremony was attended among others by Taiwan's Foreign Minister Joseph Wu and the de-facto US and Czech ambassadors Sandra Oudkirk and Patrick Rumlar who are formally the Directors of the American Institute in Taiwan and the Czech Economic and Cultural Office Taipei respectively. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan government not sure on when to end ban on five Japanese Prefectures'

products

(eb) Although news reports suggested that a lift of the ban on Japanese food from the five provinces affected by the 2011 Tsunami and Fukushima Nuclear Accident was close, Taiwan's Cabinet said that there is no such decision in sight yet and that the priority of the government is to guarantee a high standard of compliance with international food safety standards. [Focus Taiwan]

On March 26, 2011, about two weeks after a massive earthquake and subsequent tsunami triggered a meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in Japan, Taiwan imposed a ban on the food coming from the five most affected prefectures of Japan, including Fukushima and the neighbouring Gunma, Chiba, Ibaraki, and Tochigi.

Taiwan donates 100 tonnes of typhoon aid to Philippines

(eb) As soon as the Philippines were hit by the Super Typhoon Rai, which left more than 300 people dead and many more without shelter, Taiwan donated $500,000 and 10 metric tonnes of aid materials with 2 C-130 aircrafts [Taiwan News 1].

Further aid is on its way by Taiwan as on January 26 Taiwan Foreign Minister Tien Chung-kwang announced that it has raised 100 metric tons of aid for the Philippines to help the island nation recover from the destruction wrought by the typhoon. Supplies included rice and building materials and were symbolically given to Manila Economic and Cultural Office (MECO) Chairman and Resident Representative Wilfredo Fernandez. [Taiwan News 2]

Support for Taiwan's participation in WHO

(eb) British and US representatives as well as representatives from the Marshall Islands and Saint Kitts and Nevis called for Taiwan's participation in the World Health Organization (WHO) during a meeting of WHO executive board last week. [Taiwan News 1] [Taiwan News 2]

Mongolia ready to cooperate with Russia in rare-earth metal exploration

(dql) Mongolian President Ukhnaagiin Khurelsukh declared in an interview on Monday, January 31, that his country was ready to work with Russia in the exploration of rare-earth metal deposits. [TASS]

The statement comes weeks after Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia and Mongolia have adopted a declaration as a follow-up to the Treaty on Friendly Relations and Comprehensive Strategic Partnership signed in 2019 that sets clear targets pertaining to deepen bilateral cooperation between. [Russia Briefing]

Pakistan, Afghanistan agree to set up mechanism to resolve border issues

(lm) Pakistan and the Taliban rulers of neighboring Afghanistan have agreed to form a national-level coordination mechanism to resolve border issues and facilitate trade via land borders. Both sides also reaffirmed their commitment to longstanding regional connectivity projects, including the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India natural gas pipeline project. [Dawn]

The decision to send the top official to Kabul was taken earlier this month during a high-level meeting of Pakistan's Afghanistan Inter-Ministerial Coordination Cell – a special body set up in October 2021 – on January 6. [AiR No. 2, January/2022, 2]

The announcements follow on a recently concluded two-day visit to Kabul by Pakistan's National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf. During his visit, Yusuf met with senior Afghan Taliban officials, including acting Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Salam Hanafi and Acting Foreign Minister Mullah Amir Khan Muttaqi. He also held delegation-level meetings with Afghan ministers and senior officials dealing with humanitarian and economic issues. [Al Jazeera] [Gulf News]

Since the Afghan Taliban seized power in Kabul in August of last year, Pakistan has led the calls for a reluctant world to engage with Afghanistan's new rulers in order to stave off a humanitarian crisis [see AiR No. 51, December/2021, 3].

But recent weeks have shown that Pakistan's engagements with the Taliban regime will not be a

cakewalk, as two points of tension have emerged.

At least on two occasions, Taliban fighters have clashed with Pakistani soldiers putting up fencing along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, known as the Durand Line. Pakistan began the fencing in 2017 to curb smuggling and illegal border crossing, despite protestations from Kabul, which has always contested that the barrier would divide families and friends of Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, the Pashtun.

Moreover, the Afghan Taliban's takeover has seen an uptick in attacks by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a former battlefield ally of the armed group, targeting Pakistani security forces in that country's northwest. Afghan Taliban-mediated talks led to a one-month ceasefire in November of last year, but the TTP refused to extend it; Pakistan must now hope for fresh talks. [AiR No. 50, December/2021, 2]

India hosts maiden summit with Central Asian leaders; gathering calls for joint group on Afghanistan

(rs/sr/lm) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on January 27 hosted the leaders of the five Central Asian nations at the first summit, pledging closer ties and security cooperation, days after neighbor and rival China hosted a similar meeting. [South China Morning Post] [The Hindu]

For India, the importance of close ties with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan has assumed added significance since the Afghan Taliban seized power from the Western-backed government in August last year. New Delhi has since been working towards expanding its footprint in the region to balance the growing influence of allied China and Pakistan, which both are eyeing opportunities in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

In November last year, India hosted senior security officials of these countries along with representatives from Iran and Russia for talks on Afghanistan's future, and later invited the foreign ministers under the third India-Central Asia Dialog in New Delhi [see AiR No. 46, November/2021, 3, AiR No. 51, December/2021, 3].

More recently, India and Russia exchanged a non-paper on how to increase engagement that could include joint defense projects in the five Central Asian countries through existing Soviet-era defense factories

in some of the republics in the region. [AiR No. 52, December/2021, 4]

Against this backdrop, one of the key topics of discussion at last week's summit was the use of Chabahar Port, seaport jointly developed by India, Iran and Afghanistan. Located on Iran's energy-rich southern coast, it is the only Iranian port with direct access to the Indian Ocean, and thus, is increasingly seen as a fulcrum of connectivity to landlocked Afghanistan and Central Asia.

The leaders also decided to establish joint working groups at the senior official level on Afghanistan and agreed to make the summit mechanism permanent by holding it every two years. [MEA]

Crucially, India's summit with the five Central Asian nations came two days after Chinese President Xi Jinping at a similar meeting with the same countries to commemorate three decades of diplomatic relations pledged to provide 50 million COVID-19 vaccine doses and $500 million in aid. [The Indian Express]

In a tacit show of support for Beijing, amid a US-led diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics, the five leaders are expected to travel for the opening ceremony of the games. India's plans to host the leaders as chief guests for the Republic Day on January 26 were shelved because of a surge in Covid-19 infections [see AiR No. 50, December/2021, 2].

Bangladesh, Myanmar hold first meeting of task force to identify Rohingya refugees

(sk/lm) A newly formed Bangladesh-Myanmar working group for the verification of Rohingya refugees was held on January 27, as the two countries resume talks after a nearly one-year lull since the military coup in Myanmar in February last year.

The repatriation talks have been moving at a snail's pace since more than 750,000 of Myanmar's stateless Rohingya ethnic minority fled to neighboring Bangladesh in August 2017 after a military crackdown against them in Rakhine, their home state.

The two countries had resumed China-brokered talks last January after a pandemic-related hiatus. While Dhaka announced that the two sides had agreed to start the much-awaited repatriation of the refugees in the second quarter of the year, the Burmese side

downplayed the significance of the meeting's conclusion [see AiR No. 3, January/2021, 3]. The next month, however, Myanmar's military toppled the elected government, thereby delaying discussions yet again.

During the talks last week then, Bangladesh offered cooperation under three bilateral tools to speed up the review process and emphasized that addressing issues and gaps in the upcoming review will pave the way for the start of sustainable repatriation of the Rohingya refugees. [Daily Sun] [Radio Free Asia]

In related developments, Bangladesh called on the United Nations to play an effective role in resolving the ongoing Rohingya crisis and create favorable conditions for the return of the displaced persons to safety in Myanmar. Dhaka expressed disappointment that it is entering its fifth year of crisis but still faces many challenges to accommodate more than a million internally displaced people, and added that the continued presence of the Rohingya in Bangladesh will see security issues such as human trafficking and drugs affect the entire region. [Business Insider]

India, Oman reinvigorate military talks after years-long hiatus

(sr/lm) Working to cement its footprint in the Indian Ocean Region vis-à-vis an increasing Chinese presence in the region, India is currently hosting Oman's top defence official Mohammed Nasser Al Zaabi, who is visiting New Delhi until February 4 for high-level military talks.

During his India visit, Al Zaabi will co-chair the 10th meeting of the Joint Military Cooperation Committee (JMMC) – the highest forum of engagement between India and Oman in the field of defence – alongside his Indian counterpart Ajay Kumar. The last meeting of the JMMC was held in Oman in 2018, although the format is supposed to meet annually. [The Hindu]

The Omani top official is also expected to meet Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and will be briefed on the Indian defence production industry for possible procurement and joint production.

Al Zaabi's visit to New Delhi assumes added significance, for it marks the launch of a series of high-profile defence engagements between representatives of India and Oman throughout the month of February.

These include visits to New Delhi by the chiefs of Oman's Air Force and Navy, which are taking place after a 5-year hiatus. The two countries will also conduct a bilateral air force exercise in Jodhpur.

Oman is India's closest defence partner in the Gulf region and an important anchor for India's defence and strategic interests. During a crucial visit to Oman by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in February 2018, the two countries finalized an agreement that secured New Delhi access to Duqm – a strategically located port overseeing the coast of Oman in the Arabian Sea. Access to the port enables the Indian Navy to sustain long-term operations in the western Indian Ocean, a hotspot for piracy in the area.

More importantly, even, India's access to Duqm constitutes an important factor in the now long-running contest for influence in the Indian Ocean against China. Beijing operates a military base in the Horn of Africa and the port facility at Gwadar in Pakistan, the southern terminal of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. China has additionally made investments in the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Bangladesh in a range of facilities.

Bangladesh, Russia mark 50 years of diplomatic ties

(sk) While congratulating Bangladesh on the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, Russia stated that further strengthening of the partnership between the two countries is mutually beneficial and will help maintain peace and stability in Asia. [New Age]

Several joint projects are currently being implemented, the flagship one being a nuclear power plant in Bangladesh's Pabna district. The total cost of the project is estimated at $12.85 billion, 90 percent of which will be provided by the Russian government. [Asia Times]

Denmark to invest in agro product processing, rainwater harvesting project in Bangladesh

(sk) Denmark will invest in Bangladesh to assist the country in processing its agricultural exports and improve the quality of its agricultural products. This

was agreed upon in a meeting between Bangladesh's agriculture minister and the Danish envoy to Dhaka in the Bangladeshi capital.

The two officials discussed mutual collaboration in agriculture, dairy, safe food, food waste reduction, food value chain development, and modern laboratories. Both parties also agreed to form a working committee to find areas for agricultural collaboration. [Fresh Plaza]

Over the course of three years, the Scandinavian country will also invest $4 million to serve 67,300 climate-vulnerable residents with safe drinking water through a rainwater harvesting project. The purpose of the project is to improve the well-being of the most climate-vulnerable residents by providing access to a close source of safe drinking water, a solution that can be duplicated in other comparable areas. [The Business Standard]

Canada-Bangladesh joint working group agrees to strengthen bilateral, economic ties

(sk) A Canada-Bangladesh joint working group has agreed to work to develop bilateral economic ties and boost trade and investment between the two nations. [The Daily Star]

Because of its infrastructure, large domestic market, and duty-free privileges in major global markets, Bangladesh is now one of the top investment choices in the area. However, Canadian investors are unaware of this benefit, therefore the joint working committee will endeavor to establish a brand for Bangladesh in Canada.

Bangladesh, Uzbekistan to promote bilateral trade, resume direct flights

(sk) Bangladesh and Uzbekistan are set to sign an agreement to cooperate in the banking industry in order to advance bilateral trade and economic relations. Both countries discussed establishing a Memorandum of Understanding between their central banks and to move forward with the process of concluding a Relationship Management Agreement between their banks to remove the Letter of Credit hurdles that both countries' businessmen face. [Daily Sun]

European Union follows Bangladesh's electoral process, envoy says

(sk) The European Union (EU) has been monitoring Bangladesh's electoral process, including the actions taken to build a new election commission, the EU ambassador to Dhaka said on January 27 while addressing a meet-the-press event.

According to the diplomat, the EU might deploy an election observation mission to Dhaka to monitor the general election in 2023. [NewAge]

In the aftermath of the national elections held in 2018, the EU, alongside the United Kingdom and United States called for reports of irregularities observed during the polling to be investigated. Ahead of the election, Washington had expressed disappointment that some US-funded observers had been forced to cancel plans to observe the polls due to Bangladesh's alleged failure to secure accreditation for the election observers [see also AiR No. 4, January/2022, 4].

ASEAN Chairman urges junta chief to allow aid and envoy visit into Myanmar

(bp) Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen urged Myanmar's junta chief Min Aung Hlaing to allow a visit of a special envoy visit to Myanmar as well as to support humanitarian ais access. Reports from Cambodia's Foreign Ministry state that Cambodia has also appealed to the Junta leader to follow the ASEAN five-point consensus to address conflict in Myanmar. Cambodia also asked all parties involved to cease violence in the country and to work with the ASEAN to provide humanitarian aid to its people. [VOA Cambodia]

Meanwhile, due to a lack of consensus among ASEAN members on the management of the Myanmar crisis as well as the South China Sea dispute, analysts see a shift from consensus-driven diplomacy to appears to be "minilateral diplomacy." This comes after diplomats of Singapore and Indonesia signed an agreement for bilateral cooperation in the South China Sea. Additionally, the defense ministers of Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines also have a trilateral security cooperation talk scheduled in March to focus on the Myanmar and South China Sea dispute, and issues of national security. [Radio Free Asia]

US warns companies over doing business in Myanmar

(bp) The Biden administration has issued an official warning to American businesses to be cautious when doing business in Myanmar due to risks of being linked to the military regime involved in human rights abuse and money-laundering and exposed to financial, legal and reputational risks.

The warning comes after key foreign companies like TotalEnergies, Chevron, Toyota, British American Tobacco, among others announced that they were exiting Myanmar following the tightening of control by the military regime. [Borneo Bulletin]

European Commission allocates funds for humanitarian aid in Southeast Asia

(bp) On January 28, the European Commission announced it will allocate €21 million for humanitarian aid and disaster preparedness in Nepal and other Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. This funding is reported to support people affected by natural hazards, the COVID pandemic, and conflicts in the region.

The Philippines will receive €10 million in humanitarian aid for families who have been impacted by the deadly typhoon that destroyed parts of the country in December 2021. An additional €1.5 million will be allocated for those in the Philippines affected by conflict and those whose livelihoods have been impacted due to lack of basic necessities like food, water, sanitization, and shelter, while €9.5 million will be provided to assist in disaster preparedness and prevention in Nepal, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. [European Commision]

Cambodia funds Chinese dredging operations on national naval base

(bs) Cambodia has confirmed the Chinese dredging operations at Cambodia's Ream Naval Base to enable docking of larger vessels after the release of satellite images by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI). The country has also shared that it has been

funding military development projects that include Chinese dredging activities at a Cambodia naval base. Following the statement, the United States (US) urged full transparency from Cambodia about the project.

The U.S. authorities have voiced alarm over the project since a 2019 Wall Street Journal report on a secret treaty between Cambodia and China that allegedly granted the Chinese navy use of the base for 30 years. Cambodia has always denied the claim and has repeatedly affirmed that at completion, Cambodia will be able to use the base to repair its small ships, instead of relying on Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia. [Radio Free Asia]

However, China would also benefit from a naval presence at the Cambodian base, as it would connect with the Gulf of Thailand and establish itself in the southern part of the South China Sea. On the other hand, Cambodia would be able to use China's naval presence as protection from threats from Thailand and Vietnam regarding acquisitions of maritime areas in the South China Sea. Moreover, the presence of China at the Ream naval base might pose a threat to Indonesia's Natuna Islands, which are part of the overlap between Indonesia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and China's nine-dash line, and so a contested subject. [Asia Times]

Philippines, India signed contract on Brahmos Export

(my/sr) The Philippines signed a $375 million deal with India to export the Brahmos Missile, secured in January 2022. The BrahMos is the first significant military export by India and has been promoted to multiple nations including the United Arab Emirates. [Economic Times]

The BrahMos shore-based anti-ship cruise missile system developed in joint collaboration with Moscow will include three missile batteries, mobile land-based launchers, operators and maintenance units' training, and logistical support. The deal was secured as a part of President Rodrigo Duterte's $5.85 billion military modernization program. It was also concluded under the effort to deal with Muslim and Communist insurgencies and counter China's increasingly assertive position in the South China Sea. [Times] [See AiR No. 3, January/2022, 3] [Arab News]

The deal also increased closer defense relations between India and the Philippines over the past few years, with the two countries' ongoing extension of

defense partnership and trade agreement. Earlier, India extended a defense-related line of credit worth $100 million to the Philippines. [The Economic Times]

Philippines, United States further strengthen diplomatic ties

(my) The Philippines and the United States (US) have launched the beginning of week-long joint marine exercises aimed to improve the two countries' amphibious operations, internal security operations, humanitarian assistance, and disaster response. [Philippine Star]

Bangladesh, Malaysia strengthen diplomatic ties

(lb) A press release states that Bangladesh and Malaysian Foreign Ministers spoke on the phone to discuss issues of mutual interest, such as IT-trained workers, the digital economy, Covid-19 vaccines,

support in candidacy at international and global fora and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Sectoral Dialogue Partnership.

Both Ministers stressed the importance of rushing the process for an early conclusion of the proposed Free Trade Agreement for increasing trade and commerce between the two countries. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh, in its early attempts to become Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN, also communicated with Indonesia on January 19 to increase diplomatic relations with the country. [AiR No. 4, January/2022, 4]

Indonesia, Singapore sign key defense extradition treaties

(lb) Indonesia and Singapore signed key defense and diplomatic agreements and treaties on extradition and airspace rights on January 25. The defense cooperation agreement will increase Singapore's ability to do naval and military exercises, as Indonesia has agreed to allow Singapore to use the maritime area of the South China Sea four times a year to carry out the drills. In return, Singapore agreed to limit their airspace rights

and cede air traffic control in the Riau region and over selected areas of Indonesia's Borneo.

There is hope the new extradition treaty will repatriate Indonesian citizens who are involved or suspect in corruption cases. The extradition treaty follows a similar agreement signed in 2007 which the Indonesian parliament did not approve. The new extradition treaty will cover 31 crimes including corruption, bribery, money laundering, terrorism funding, and narcotics. [Independent] [SCMP]

Vietnam meets international partners

(kc) On 19-20 January, high-ranking Vietnamese and Cambodian officials met on the 55th anniversary of their relations and discussed investment prospects for deeper ties in the future. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Vietnam also hosted a Hungarian delegation from 18 to 22 January, commemorating the 72nd anniversary of international relations. The two countries discussed investment, cultural exchange, public health management, and scholarships for exchange students. [Vietnamnews]

Furthermore, Vietnam highlighted ties and promoted bilateral trade with Morocco, Ukraine, and Russia in the same week. Morocco recently established an honorary consul in Ho Chi Minh City for more trade and business potentials, while Ukraine has agreed to boost bilateral trade to over $1 billion, and Russia also tightened Vietnam in a strategic partnership plan 2030.

The Canadian Ambassador to Vietnam also ensured to promote bilateral trade as the largest trading partner in the region, with the newly appointed Canada-Vietnam Joint Economic Committee. [Vietnam Plus 1] [Vietnam Plus 2][Vietnam Plus 3][Vietnam Plus 4]

Cambodia met with international partners to strengthen bilateral ties

(bs) On January 25, Cambodian Minister of Commerce Pan Sorasak and his counterpart Thani bin Ahmed Al Zeyoudi from the United Arab Emirates to discuss the establishment of a free trade agreement (FTA) between the two nations outlining potential sectors for investment, including natural resources, agriculture, and tourism. [Khmer Times 1] With the same objective,

Cambodia has urged Russia to speed up the negotiations for a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). [Khmer Times 2]

On the same day, Cambodia agreed with China to enhance bilateral cooperation on mine clearance in Cambodia. The Chinese representative renewed its commitment to support Cambodia through human resources development, technical assistance, and financing support in order to help Cambodia to achieve a mine-free status in 2025. [Khmer Times 3]

On a similar occasion, Cambodia commemorated the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with Australia by highlighting a long-standing relationship and strong cooperation between the two countries. [Khmer Times 4]

Nepal, meanwhile, concluded agreements with Cambodia on religion, trade, security, and sub-national reforms in the same week. [Khmer Times 5]

Laos, Malaysia strengthen cooperation in audit capability

(bs) Laos and Malaysia signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in public sector auditing. The agreement also aims at strengthening the efficient utilization of public finances and transparency in the public sector. [Vientiane Times $]

Timor-Leste: Cambodia supports Timor-Leste in joining ASEAN

(bs) The Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen expressed his support to Timor-Leste to become a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) during a three-day visit to Timor-Leste's foreign minister.

Timor-Leste's application to join ASEAN has been under review since 2011. The ASEAN Coordinating Council group on Timor-Leste regularly assesses the country's progress in political security, economy, and socio-cultural cooperation in view of its admission to the association. [Khmer Times 1]

During the meeting, the parties also discussed mutual cooperation in investment, trade, and taxation. Hun Sen invited Timor-Leste to consider taking part in various bilateral agreements including the Agreement on Protection of Investments, Free Trade Agreement,

and the Agreement on the Avoidance of Double Taxation. The parties also agreed to strengthen current cooperation activities and to speed up the negotiation on agreements on tourism, trade, education, and air service. [Khmer Times 2]

Singapore, Indonesia signed bilateral agreements

(avdv) Representatives from Singapore and Indonesia met on January 25 to pursue good diplomatic relations and sign bilateral agreements.

During the Singapore-Indonesia Leaders' Retreat, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Indonesia's President Joko Widodo signed an Agreement on the Realignment of airspace boundaries, a Treaty for the Extradition of Fugitives, the Military Training Area in Indonesia, and a Memorandum of Understanding on Energy Cooperation. The energy cooperation aims at supporting both countries in their energy transitions towards low-carbon energy. [Government of Singapore]

The airspace agreement proved particularly fruitful knowing that airspace control was a point of friction. Indonesia thus regained control over its islands' airspaces, the Riau archipelago, and Natuna, and gave Singapore a 25-year agreement to provide airspace services. [Bloomberg]

Future collaborations will look at "the digital economy, sustainability, and the green economy" as well as the expansion of already existing facilitated exchanges for students and educators.

Currently, Singapore is Indonesia's largest foreign investor. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] [The Straits Times]

Singapore signs a free trade agreement with Pacific Alliance

(avdv) On January 26, after a four-year negotiation period, Singapore and the Pacific Alliance signed the Pacific Alliance-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (PASFTA).

The agreement aims at strengthening cooperation in the energy, infrastructure, digital and food industries,

as well as shipping and port logistics between Singapore and the Latin American bloc. The PASFTA will enter into force when at least two of the signatory countries agreed to approve the agreement on a national level.

Member states of the Pacific Alliance included Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru. The Alliance represents the world's eighth-largest economy.

The most impacted country by entering into force of the PASFTA will likely be Colombia as it is the only country without a FTA with Singapore yet.[Channel News Asia] [Reuters] [The Straits Times]

Thailand, Saudi Arabia agree to restore full diplomatic ties over missing gems

(kc) Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman hosted Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-Cha for an official 2-day visit on January 25-26. Saudi Arabia and Thailand announced a plan to restore diplomatic ties. Both countries also vowed to boost bilateral trade and investment, tourism, and opportunities for Thai workers as Saudi is seeking millions of skilled workers. [AP] [Aljazeera][Thairath, in Thai]

The visit marked the first high-level meeting in three decades since the contentious blue diamond affair in 1989, in which a Thai servant working in one of the Saudi Prince's palaces looted 91 kilograms of jewelry and other valuable gems before fleeing to Thailand. The conflict escalated after the abduction and assassination of four Saudi officials while investing the case in Thailand. No one was ever arrested. Several Thai gem dealers and police officers were indicted but were later found not guilty. [IAS Chulalongkorn University, in Thai]

In 1990 Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic ties with Thailand expelled several thousand Thai laborers and barred people from traveling except for business and religious purposes. The Thai government has made efforts to restore ties with Saudi Arabia. The discussions have improved, especially in the past six years since Bahrain took a mediator position in the ministers' meeting at the 2016 Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) held in Bangkok. [BBC, in Thai] [Thansettakij, in Thai]

Thailand, Bangladesh strengthen ties

(bs) Bangladesh and Thailand agreed to intensify bilateral trade and investment relations by joining the proposed India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway.

Also, the Bangladesh foreign minister encouraged Thai investors to operate in the country in various sectors, including the agro-processing industries.

The parties committed to exchange future visits especially during this year of celebration of the Golden Jubilee of diplomatic relations between Thailand and Bangladesh. They also wished that the upcoming Second Foreign Office Consultations will be successful paving the way for deeper engagements between the two countries. [Dhaka Tribune]

Timor-Leste: Timor-Leste candidate for UN human rights council

(bs) On January 27, Timor-Leste presented its candidacy for a seat on the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council for a two year-term, 2024-2026.

The Timorese Minister of Justice, speaking during the council's third evaluation session of the Universal Periodic Examination (EPU), reiterated the country's commitment to ensuring the respect of fundamental rights as a basis for the candidacy to the human rights council. [RTP Notícias, in Portuguese]

Currently, Timor-Leste is participating in a ten-day session of the Universal Periodic Review with the UN Human Rights Council. The final report will be issued on February 4. [United Nations Human Rights Council]

Announcements

Upcoming Online Events

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

Poland: On the Front Line of European Security

This webinar will feature H.R. McMaster and General Rajmund Andrzwjczak. The two experts will address US-Poland relations and security concerns, particularly increased Russian assertiveness in Europe, energy security, and cross-border terrorism.

Find more about the webinar at [Hoover Institute].

2 February 2022 @ 10:00-11:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Myanmar: The Situation One Year Post-Coup

Since the coup in February 2021, a military government has been in power for one year. This webinar will examine the present situation and conditions in Myanmar and alternative policies for the U.S. and its allies to respond to the crisis.

Find more about the webinar at [CSIS].

2 February 2022 @ 2:00-3:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

A Conversation with GEN Van Ovost, Commander, U.S. Transportation

Command

This online session will feature a conversation between GEN Jacqueline Van Ovost, Commander of the U.S. Transportation Command, and Dr. Seth G. Jones, CSIS Senior Vice President and Director of the International Security Program, who will address the future direction and mission of USTRANSCOM.

Visit [CSIS] to learn more about the event.

2 February 2022 @ 4:00-4:45 p.m. (GMT-4), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Ukraine in Crisis

This webinar will be joined by Senator Jeanne Shaheen and Senator Rob Portman, who met with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Ukraine earlier this month to reassure the U.S. support to Ukraine in the face of Russia's escalating aggressiveness. It will also explore options that could be implemented to provide assistance to Ukraine and prevent a Russian invasion.

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

2 February 2022 @10:30 a.m.-2.00 p.m. (GMT-5), Observer Research Foundation, India

Cato Institute Policy Perspectives 2022

The Cato Institute will hold their annual conference to address several key topics that should be shed light on in 2022 and share perspectives on these issues.

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

2 February 2022 @1:00-2:15 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Sandford University, USA

Russia, Ukraine and NATO: The View from Berlin

With the current aggressive move of the Russian military toward Ukraine, demanding security assurances from NATO and the U.S., the new German administration faces an early foreign policy challenge in managing the efforts to dissuade a Kremlin decision

to strike Ukraine's border and the associated diplomacy. This webinar will discuss the role of Germany and the West in this crisis and what actions should be taken.

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

2 February 2022 @4:30-5:45 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Sandford University, USA

The Crisis in Xinjiang: What's Happening Now and What Does it Mean?

The international community has identified extreme policies in Xinjiang as programs that promote intolerance in cultural and political diversity within the CCP and endanger human rights.The crisis has been one of the main global concerns and challenges to the CCP's foreign affairs. This webinar will take a look back at the Xinjiang crisis and propose how we should interpret current developments.

Further information is accessible via [FSI].

2 February 2021 @ 2:00-3:15 p.m. (GMT-5), Belfer Center, Harvard Kennedy School, USA

Ukraine and Russia on the Brink

With Russia's aggressive move in stationing its military force near the Ukraine border amid escalating tensions and failed negotiations between Russia and the U.S., the crisis is still at a crossroads. This webinar will debate the possibility of a Russian invasion of Ukraine and possible measures for Ukraine, NATO, and the U.S. to deter the incursion and mediate the conflict.

For more details, see [Belfer Center].

3 February 2021 @ 12:15-2:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Belfer Center, Harvard Kennedy School, USA

Transforming the War on Drugs: Warriors, Victims, and Vulnerable Regions

The "War on Drugs," declared by US President Richard Nixon 50 years ago, has failed to reduce the scope or impact of the illegal drug trade significantly. However, there is no agreement on how to proceed in the

international policy discussion, and each country may have implemented different approaches. This webinar will explore how the international community can handle the war's multifaceted causes and consequences.

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

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

The Rise and Fall of Technology in Chinese History

At this webinar, Professor Yasheng Huang, of the MIT Sloan School of Management, will share his findings about China's technological breakdown and address its close correlation with the establishment of authoritarianism and homogeneity.

Further information is accessible via [FSI].

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

Russia-Ukraine Conflict and Implications to Turkey

The tension between Russia and Ukraine is currently ongoing after the stationing of Russian military forces near the border of Ukraine. This urges the US and EU to hold negotiations and determine strategies to respond to the potential escalation. Because of the long history of partnership, the country has had with both Russia and Ukraine, Turkey's position in this crisis is rather unique. This webinar will examine Turkey's role in this crisis and whether the country will be able to balance the tensions between NATO, Russia, and Ukraine while mediating and strengthening collaborations with all three.

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

3 February 2022 @6:00-7:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Sandford University, USA

Health System Strengthening during the Pandemic and Beyond: Views from the Minister of Health of Bhutan

This webinar will feature a conversation with Her Excellency Dasho Dechen Wangmo, the Minister of Health of Bhutan. Managing the national health system during the COVID-19 crisis and serving as President of the 74th World Health Assembly, the speaker will share perspectives on the development of the health system in Bhutan during the pandemic and address potential ramifications of the crisis for the world.

Follow [FSI] to learn more about the event.

4 February 2022 @ 10:00-11:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Covid-19 Vaccine Confidence at One Year

This online forum will reflect back on a year of COVID-19 vaccine deployment to discuss lessons learned and what else can be done to enhance vaccine confidence in the United States and around the world.

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

4 February 2022 @1:00 p.m. (GMT-8), Hoover Institution, Stanford University, USA

How Technology Is Changing Intelligence

During this webinar, Amy Zegart will present findings from her last book, Spies, Lies, and Algorithms: The History and Future of American Intelligence, which discusses the role of technology in intelligence and how it will affect practice.

For more information, visit [Hoover Institute].

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

Leveraging University Research into Medical Innovations with Social Impact: Biotechnology Entrepreneurship in Japan's New Startup Ecosystem

The failure to develop COVID-19 vaccines reflects the downturn of Japan's medical field. At this webinar, two experts who are founders of medical ventures will suggest how Japan should strengthen biotechnology entrepreneurship to encourage vital medical research in Japanese universities.

More information is available at [FSI].

7 February 2022 @10:00 a.m. (GMT-8), Hoover Institution, Stanford University, USA

Talking about Trade: Prospects and Challenges in U.S.-Taiwan Economic Ties

Because of a restriction on U.S. pork imports using the feed addictive ractopamine in 2020, the economic partnership between the U.S. and Taiwan has been on the verge. However, recently, the two countries have had several diplomatic negotiations to restore and bolster bilateral economic cooperation. In this webinar, experts will offer insights on these changes and the future direction of these ties.

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

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

Peninsular Malaysia's Floods of 2021 – Investigating the Causes and Possible Solutions

Last year, severe rains and huge floods hit Peninsular Malaysia, forcing more than 65,000 people to flee their homes and killing at least 50 individuals. Monsoonal floods are common, but the magnitude of this one caught everyone by surprise. During this webinar, experts will draw on their extensive knowledge of climate change and forests as nature-based solutions to extreme weather events and provide recommendations for avoiding the incident from being repeated.

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

7 February 2022 @ 1:00-2:15 p.m. (GMT-5), Brookings Office of Communications, USA

The Border within: The Economics of Immigration in an Age of Fear

This webinar will introduce a recently published book "The Border Within: The Economics of Immigration in an Age of Fear" co-authored by Brookings Rubenstein Fellow Tara Watson and journalist Kalee Thompson which discusses the significance of immigrations in every facet of American life and urges for immigration policy change.

Visit [BROOKINGS] to find more details of the event.

8 February 2022 @ 12:00-1:15 p.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

The Arctic in Transition: Energy, Resilience & National Security

This webinar will concentrate on the issues of energy, resilience, and national security in the Arctic region.

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

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

Hiding in Plain Sight: How China Builds and Exercises Military Power, 1995-2020

During this webinar, Oriana Skylar Mastro, a center fellow at the FSI will present findings from her recent paper arguing that the rise of China's military power and its dominant influence on global development is the result of a 25-year plan that the country has been implementing. The focus of the discussion will be on China's military development strategies and their implications for great power rivalry and power transition theory.

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

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

Digital Medicine, Genetic Information, and Health Technology Assessment:

Perspectives from Japan, Korea, and Singapore

With health systems facing challenges in financing and delivering affordable access to a growing range of technologies that enable people to live longer and healthier, some elements of society are being altered by technology. This webinar will feature a panel of three experts who will discuss various aspects of how Asian health systems produce, analyze, and govern transformational technology in different and complementary ways.

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

Recent Book Releases

Jiwei Qian, ***The Political Economy of Making and Implementing Social Policy in China***, Palgrave Macmillan, 216 pages, published on September 29, 2021, reviewed in [LSE].

Sherzod Muminov, ***Eleven Winters of Discontent: The Siberian Internment and the Making of a New Japan***, Harvard University Press, 384 pages, published on January 4, 2022. For a review see [Asian Review of Books].

Edward Tyerman, ***Internationalist Aesthetics: China and Early Soviet Culture***, Columbia University Press, 368 pages, published on December 7, 2021, with a review in [Asian Review of Books].

Chris Miller, ***We Shall Be Masters: Russian Pivots to East Asia from Peter the Great to Putin***, Harvard University Press, 384 pages, published on June 8, 2021. Learn more about the book in the review on [Asian Review of Books].

Mytheli Sreenivas, ***Reproductive Politics and the Making of Modern India***, University of Washington Press, 284 pages, published on June 4, 2021. Follow a discussion of the book at [Youtube].

David Runciman, ***Confronting Leviathan: A History of Ideas***, Profile Books, 288 pages, published on September 9, 2021. A review is available at [The New Statesman].

Calls for Papers

The **Metropolitan State University of Denver** invites paper proposals for the conference "***Understanding the Holocaust, Genocide, and Mass Violence in the Public Imagination***," to be held on September 21-23, 2022. Deadline for submissions is April 1, 2022. For more information, see [MSU Denver].

Digital Finance, a journal published by Springer, invites manuscripts for a special issue on ***"Decentralized Finance"***. Closing date for paper submission is July 31, 2022. If you are interested, you can find further details at [Springer].

Jobs and Positions

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is looking for a ***Programme Associate*** to be based in Niamey, Niger. Closing date for applications is February 11, 2022. For more details, see [UNDP].

The **Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)** is hiring a ***Protection Team Leader*** to be posted in Kampala, Uganda, with core responsibility in leading the supervision of the Kampala Urban protection team. Deadline for applications is February 8, 2022. If you are interested, you can find more details at [NRC].

Team:

Amna Pathan (ap), Anawil Yodprasit (ay), Atiwat Sinsirivanich (as), Auriane van der Vaeren (av), Beatrice Siviero (bs), Brandon Pinto (bp), Daniel Montas (dm), Duc Quang Ly (dql), Enrico Breveglieri (eb), Ginevra Lapi (gl), Henning Glaser (hg), Jidapa Eagark, Kittikun Chumworathayee (kc), Lidewij Arnold (la), Lois Barker (lb), Lucas Meier (lm), Mega Yanti (my), Nyein Yin (ny), Prisca Mirchandani (pm), Ruchika Saini (rs), Sally Dobie (sd), Shivani Raheja (sr), Shreya Kar (sk), Sirapat Inthong (si), Tayla Peacock (tp), Venus Phuangkom

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