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Asia in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to this week's Asia in Review issue.

I wish you informative read and extend special greetings to everyone who celebrates Central African Republic's, Chad's, Ecuador's, Pakistan's Independence Day and Singapore's National Day 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 East Asia

China: Alibaba and Ant Group stop data sharing

(ms) Chinese tech giant Alibaba will end its data-sharing agreement with the Ant Group, which owns the world's largest online payment platform Alipay, and will decide on a case-by-case basis whether data sharing is necessary "as permitted by applicable laws and regulations".

The announcement came shortly after Alibaba released its annual report last week, which showed Alibaba not growing for the first time since the company's founding but holding stable despite still-strict COVID-19 measures. In addition to the discontinued data sharing, the Alibaba Group changed its internal regulations, whereby employees of other companies are no longer allowed to be partners at Alibaba, which consequently led to the resignation of several Ant Group executives as partners.

Ant Group, which withdrew its international public offering in 2020 under pressure of Chinese regulators, benefited significantly from the data exchange with Alibaba, as it gained insight into the purchasing behavior of its customers.

It is believed that the changes were made in response to increased regulation of the tech sector by the Chinese government, which implemented new data security guidelines last month [see AiR No. 28, July/2022, 2], as Ant Group is seeking permission from the Chinese government in its bid to transform itself into a financial holding company. [Bloomberg] [CNBC] [South China Morning Post]

China: Evergrande terminates land contract

(ms) Heavily indebted Chinese real estate giant Evergrande continues to make negative headlines. In a latest development, the developer, whose liabilities exceed USD 300 billion, announced that it will pull out of a multi-billion land contract with the government of China's southern Guangdong province.

The deal, which was concluded in April 2020 for about USD 1 billion, was originally to be used to build the world's largest football stadium on the acquired land, in addition to constructing houses and infrastructure. However, Evergrande's liquidity problems have negatively impacted the construction, making the withdrawal from the contract and a refund of USD 818 million necessary.

Evergrande announced that the refund will be placed in an escrow account and will be used to settle costs related to the football stadium, including loans Evergrande owed to lender Citic Trust, construction costs and unpaid wages. [South China Moring Post]

This comes just weeks after both Evergrande's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Chief Financial Officer (CFO) resigned over alleged involvement in a scheme surrounding the improper use of cash reserves to obtain additional loans [see AiR No. 30, July/2022, 4].

China: Campaign against illegal wildlife trade led to more than 14,000 arrests

(ms) The National Forestry and Grassland Administration has presented the results of a three-month campaign to combat illegal wildlife trafficking

jointly carried out by 11 government bodies between March and June. According to the findings, the campaign saw about 14,000 offenders arrested and nearly 12,000 cases dealt with, while more than USD 8 million in illegal gains were confiscated and fines and penalties close to USD 15 million imposed.

The campaign was aimed, among others, at controlling the ban on the consumption of wild animals and the 10-year fishing ban in the Yangtze River, which was imposed with the start of 2021.

The campaign will continue with work on closing existing deficits in wildlife protection and to fight the online trade with these animals. [Global Times]

China: Hong Kong Justice Secretary on delay in prosecution of pro-democracy protesters, push for new security bill

(ms) In response to criticism over the delay of the prosecution of 47 pro-democracy protesters under the Hong Kong National Security Law – more than 30 of awaiting trial in detention for over a year –, Hong Kong's Secretary for Justice Paul Lam, who assumed his post last month, cited heavier workload of the city's prosecutors in recent years for the delay of the trials, and promised improvement. Lam did not answer the question of whether the trial of the 47 defendants should be decided by a jury in order to prove the legitimacy of the trial.

The statement was made in an interview in which he also commented on the possible passing of a security bill to implement Article 23 of the Hong Kong Basic Law and to supplement the Hong Kong National Security Law, which was introduced in mid-2020 and so far, covers criminal offenses of subversion, terrorism, separatism and collusion with foreign or external forces.

Article 23 states that the "Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall enact laws on its own to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government, or theft of state secrets, to prohibit foreign political organizations or bodies from conducting political activities in the Region, and to prohibit political organizations or bodies of the Region from establishing ties with foreign political organizations or bodies." [Hong Kong Government]

The expansion of the range of criminal offenses in the Article has trigger concerns the bill could further

increase the competence of the law enforcement authorities and extend the already strict restrictions on political activities even further than those already allowed under the National Security Law, including a higher bail threshold, more investigative powers and cases that allow mainland Chinese authorities to assume jurisdiction. In particular, activists fear that the offense of "state secrets" could be increasingly used against journalists, following the example of the mainland, and thus further curtail the free press in Hong Kong. [The Diplomat] [South China Morning Post]

China: Hong Kong court lifts reporting restriction in Tiananmen crackdown vigil case

(ms) Hong Kong's High Court lifted the reporting restriction in a high-profile case against three former leaders of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, which is most prominent for holding annual vigils until 2019 in memory of the victims of the Tiananmen incident on June 4.

The current decision follows an appeal by one of the defendants in May against the decision of a national security judge who refused to lift the reporting restriction. According to the High Court, the judge's ruling was not lawful and was thus overturned, adding that the High Court stated that in principle reporting restrictions on proceedings regarding the transfer of criminal cases to the High Court must be lifted if the defendant so requests. This ruling likely to have implications for further cases under the National Security Law, implemented in 2020. [Hong Kong Free Press 1]

The defendants were indicted on charges of inciting subversion in September 2021 for allegedly inciting other people to undermine Chinese state power among other things through their organized vigils. To date, their bail applications have been repeatedly denied, as was the case with Albert Ho, one of the defendants, two weeks ago. [Hong Kong Free Press 2] [Reuters] [see AiR No. 30, July/2022, 4]

Meanwhile, a Hong Kong court upheld the first appeal regarding a sentence under the Hong Kong National Security Law.

The case involves a pro-democracy activist who was sentenced in November 2021 to five years and nine months imprisonment for the content of his speeches and slogans calling for Hong Kong's independence

under the offense of inciting secession, which was reduced to five years by the new sentence.

It remains to be seen to what extent this precedent will have an impact on similar cases. [Hong Kong Free Press 3]

China: Taiwan-born activist advocating Taiwan's independence under investigation

(ms) China's National Security Agency has reportedly taken into custody a person suspected of endangering national security in the city of Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province, south of Shanghai.

The suspect is said to be a supporter of Taiwan independence who is also said to have been involved in the founding of a party with that very goal. This comes after Chinese authorities issued a statement in response to Pelosi's visit saying that China would intensify its crackdown on separatists who support Taiwanese independence. In addition to the man in custody, China announced that it will take action against other individuals, two foundations, and multiple companies related to secessionist activities and punish them to the fullest extent of the law.

The potential sentence for the suspect, if found guilty of "organizes, plots or acts to split the country or undermine national unification," ranges from ten years to life imprisonment and may even be punishable by the death penalty if the case is determined to be severe. [Global Times] [South China Morning Post]

China: Successful launch of reusable spacecraft

(ms) On July 5, China successfully launched a Long March-2F carrier rocket with a pilot reusable spacecraft attached, which, is designed to land back on Earth after performing its assigned work in space and can then be reused.

More detailed information about both the type of spacecraft and the tests and tasks to be completed have not been made public, but it has sparked speculation about the extent to which this form of reusable technology can be extended to manned spacecraft as well as military use, which could strengthen the competitiveness of the Chinese space

program in comparison with the U.S. in particular. [Global Times] [Reuters]

South Korea: Emergency committee to lead ruling party

(my) South Korea's ruling People Power Party (PPP) has launched an emergency committee to function as its interim leadership, following a decision the party's national committee during a virtual meeting. Joo Ho-young, a moderate conservative five-term MP, was elected as interim chief. [Arirang]

The decision to resort to an emergency party leadership system was necessitated by a party leadership crisis that saw first the suspension of the party membership of party leader Lee Jun-seok over a sexual bribery scandal and then the resignation of Lee's successor Kweon Seong-dong over leaked mobile phone messages within weeks [see AiR No. 31, August/2022, 1].

Lee announced he would file a court injunction against the launch of emergency committee which reduces his chances to return as the party leader after completing his six-month suspension period ends. [KBS News]

Japan: Construction of facilities to release treated radioactive water into the Pacific kicked off

(sb) Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings Inc. (TEPCO), operator of the crippled Fukushima nuclear power plant, has begun construction of facilities and undersea tunnels for the release of treated radioactive water of the Fukushima nuclear plant, after receiving approval of the Fukushima prefectural government and the Mayors of Futaba and Okuna – the two towns hosting the Fukushima plant – for the construction. The release of more than 1.3 million tons of treated water is scheduled to start from next spring.

Japanese Fishery operators oppose the release on safety grounds. [The Japan Times] [The Mainichi] [The Japan News]

Japan: Defense ministry eyes record defense budget

(sb) The Japanese Defense Ministry is reportedly planning to request a record defense budget of USD 41 billion for fiscal 2023, in an attempt aimed to boost the country's operational capabilities in space and cyberspace along the traditional domains of land, sea and air.

According to sources familiar with the matter, ministry plans to extend the range of the Ground Self-Defense Force's Type-12 surface-to-ship guided missiles and to purchase unmanned aerial vehicles. It also wants to develop new destroyers to be equipped with the Aegis missile interceptor system that can serve as an alternative to the U.S. Aegis Ashore land-based missile defense system. [The Mainichi]

South Korea: Education Minister resigns amid criticisms of her proposals

(my) Park Soon-ae, the Minister of Education and the Deputy Prime Minister submitted his resignation offer on August 8, less than five weeks after assuming the post.

Park's move came after a strong backlash from teachers and parents against her school policy proposals to lower school entry age from six to 5 and to abolish foreign language high schools.

Park assumed her office on July 5. If her resignation is accepted by President Yoon Suk-yeol, who assumed power in May, she will become the first minister to leave his new administration. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Former Democratic Party rising star discharged from prison

(my) An Hee-jung, former South Chungcheong Province Governor, was released from prison on August 4 after finishing his 3½ years prison term, to which he had been sentenced in 2019 for rape.

An, a close aide of the former President Roh Moo-Hyun (2003-2008), was a rising political star of the Democratic Party after winning the governorship in South Chungcheong Province two times in 2010 and 2014 and was considered a candidate of the party for the presidential election in 2017. In 2018 he resigned as governor over the rape allegations.

According to the election law, An remains banned from running for an official post for the next 10 years which

will see the 2024 parliamentary elections, 2026 local elections and the 2027 presidential election. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Bill enabling government to cut fuel taxes by up to 50 percent passed

(my) The National Assembly passed a bill to adjust South Korea's fuel tax on August 2.

In order to reduce the economic burden on the people amid rising fuel prices, the flexible tax rate on oil will be expanded to 50 percent under the new law, allowing the government to cut fuel taxes by as much as 50 percent if deemed necessary. The limit has been 30 percent so far. The new law will be effective until the end of 2024.

The government announced that it will implement the new law not immediately, but after comprehensive consideration of international oil prices and economic conditions. [Arirang] [Korean Policy Briefing, in Korean]

South Korea: Minimum hourly wage to increase

(my) South Korea's Labor Ministry has announced that minimum hourly wage for 2023 will increase by 5 percent to KRW 9,620 (USD 7.38) from USD 7.03 in 2022. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: New internship visa for foreign students introduced

(my) South Korea's Ministry of Justice has announced that it will introduce new "high-tech field internship visa (D-10-3)" for students majoring in high-tech fields at the world's 200 best universities selected by the U.S. magazine Time or at the top 500 universities included in the QS World University Rankings. Also, eligible are graduates from high-tech fields from the top global universities within three years.

The visa allows an internship at domestic listed companies or government-funded research institutes in the high-tech fields, including semiconductors, information technology, technology management, nano, and digital electronics.

The move aims to increase the competitiveness of South Koreas enterprises while addressing the labor shortfall in the high-tech sector. In order to avoid negative consequences on job opportunities for South Korean nationals, the government would ensure that the percentage of foreign interns at domestic enterprises does not surpass 20% of all employees. [Chosun Ilbo, in Korean] [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: First lunar orbiter launched

(my) South Korea's first lunar orbiter Danuri, also known as the Korea Pathfinder Lunar Orbiter (KPLO), entered its intended trajectory toward the moon on August 5.

KPLO is scheduled to enter its circular orbit 100 kilometers above the moon on December 31. Starting in January 2023, then a full-fledged lunar exploration mission will be launched for a 12-month period.

The launch mark's the country's first space mission to travel beyond Earth's orbit and its first lunar observation mission. [Yonhap News Agency]

It comes after the launch of the first homegrown rocket, Nuri, in June that made South Korea the seventh country in the world to develop a space launch vehicle capable of carrying a satellite of more than 1 ton [see AiR No. 25, June/2022, 3].

Taiwan: Head of new Ministry for Digital Affairs picked

(dql) Minister Without Portfolio Audrey Tang, Taiwan's first transgender Cabinet member, appointed as head of the new Ministry of Digital Affairs which will be launched later this month.

The ministry is charged with stepping up Taiwan's digital infrastructure aimed at enhancing data-driven collaboration in multiple domains, promoting data-sharing in the private sector for public benefit. It is also tasked with linking Taiwan to the world by fostering digital literacy. [Focus Taiwan]

Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights

and National Security in South Asia

Bangladesh: Conspiracy to oust her from power has intensified, Prime Minister Hasina says

(az) Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has warned of an intensified conspiracy spearheaded by the group of people responsible for killing her father and the Founding Father of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in 1975. Alluding to past events and situations, the prime minister also warned about what may happen if these so-called "evil forces" grab the power of leading the nation. [Business Standard]

Bangladesh: Government cracks down on money changers, suspends 5G plan

(az) Against the larger backdrop of a shortage of foreign currencies that pushed Bangladesh's local currency to a record low, the government has begun cracking down on money changers, citing alleged manipulation of the exchange rate. Prime Minister Hasina's administration has also suspended state-owned Teletalk's USD 25 million 5G telecom plan, saying the company needs to import almost 80 percent of equipment for the project. [The Financial Express] [The Straits Times]

The local currency, taka, is said to be losing its value due to the increase in imports in contrast to the low remittance inflow. In light of this, Bangladesh had previously announced a series of austerity measures, including curbs on the imports of luxury goods [see AiR No. 20, May/2022, 3].

While Bangladesh has enough foreign reserves to pay for four months of imports, recently it sought a loan from the International Monetary Fund – the third South Asian nation to seek such support after Pakistan and Sri Lanka - in what the government says is a preemptive measure. Bangladesh has also requested USD 250 million for each of the next three fiscal years from the World Bank, and another USD 750 million in funding assistance, in addition to another USD 1 billion in budget aid from the Asian Development Bank. [AiR No. 31, August/2022, 1]

Bangladesh: 'Tuneless' social media star grilled by police, told to stop performing classical songs

(az) Police treatment of Hero Alom, a Bangladeshi singer known for his out-of-tune renditions of popular songs, has triggered outrage on social media across the country. [The Independent] [The Strait Times]

Alom was detained by police on July 27 based on complaints that he was "distorting" classical songs, as well as wearing a police uniform in some videos. However, Alom has alleged that he mentally tortured and abused for eight hours. [TRT World]

Thus, the incident has angered netizens in Bangladesh, not least because this is not the first time that police have threatened or arrested singers accused of hurting others' feelings. During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, two singers — Rita Dewan and Shariat Sarkerwere - were arrested separately under the Digital Security Act for allegedly "hurting the religious sentiments of Muslims." [The News Times]

Bangladesh: 52 percent hike in fuel prices triggers massive queues, protests

(az) Thousands of Bangladeshis besieged petrol stations across the country after the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government raised prices by as much as 52 percent on August 6, citing higher prices. It is feared that the increase in fuel price will also pressure inflation, which has already been above 7 percent. [Hindustan Times] [The Strait Times 1]

Prior to this, a student leader from the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) died in hospital on August 3, three days after he was shot when police fired on protests against power cuts imposed by the

government as part of a series of austerity measures. [The Strait Times 2]

On August 7, then, student activists staged a demonstration blocking a main crossing in Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, to protest against the "unbridled plundering by the fascist Awami League government". Some students came under the charge of police and got beaten. [Prothom Alo 2]

The following day, Gholam Mohammad (GM) Quader, the current opposition party, and Jatiya Party (JAPA) leader, announced a two-day program starting on August 9 to protest against the increase in the fuel price. [Prothom Alo 2]

India: National Democratic Alliance candidate Jagdeep Dhankhar elected 14th vice president

(vv/lm) Former West Bengal state Governor Jagdeep Dhankar was elected India's 14th vice president on August 6, giving the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi control of the country's two highest constitutional posts.

Dhankhar,a member of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, defeated Margaret Alva, a former federal minister, fielded by the opposition led by the Indian National Congress and a few other regional parties. Dhankhar secured 528 votes, as compared to Alva's 182. The electoral college for the vice president consists of votes from both houses of parliament. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's coalition had a comfortable majority making Dhankhar's election a foregone conclusion. [Bloomberg]

Dhankar is a lawyer by profession and joined politics in 1989. He was appointed as the Governor of West Bengal state in July 2019 and regularly made news due to his stressed political relations with the state's government led by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee - one of Prime Minister Modi's fiercest critics. Following his nomination as the NDA's vice president candidate, Dhankar submitted his resignation as governor. [Hindustan Times] [The Hindu]

On July 21, Droupadi Murmu was elected as president of India, becoming the first tribal politician to occupy the top constitutional post in the South Asian nation. [AiR No. 30, July/2022, 4]

India: Rahul Gandhi, several opposition Congress leaders protesting against price rise detained

(vv) The former president of India's main opposition Congress party (INC), Rahul Gandhi, was detained for a second time this month after launching a protest march in the country's capital New Delhi on August 5. [Hindustan Times]

Earlier, 20 lawmakers were suspended over causing disruptions in the Parliament's winter session and for "wasting time". The suspended parliamentarians began protesting outside parliament against the decision and were supported by the INC, which launched a countrywide protest - dubbed as "Halla Bol" - in protest against the government.

In New Delhi, police had announced a ban on large gatherings and had clarified that no demonstrations would be allowed. However, despite barricades put across the district to dilute the protests, a standoff ensued between INC lawmakers, resulting in the detention of Gandhi and other party leaders. [National Herald] [The New Indian Express]

Gandhi had been detained earlier this month amid agitations against the questioning of INC President Sonia Gandhi by India's financial crime investigation agency, the Enforcement Directorate. The hearing pertains to a complaint filed nine years ago by a lawmaker from Prime Minister Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party regarding the *National Herald* newspaper owned and run by the INC. [AiR No. 25, June/2022, 3]

India: Government withdraws Personal Data Protection Bill, works on new bill

(vv) The Indian government on August 3 withdrew a data protection bill which was first proposed in 2019 and alarmed big tech giants, after a parliamentary review had suggested 81 amendments. The government further said it would now present a new bill. [The Straits Times]

The Personal Data Protection Bill, earlier introduced to Parliament in December 2019, was formulated to protect Indians and establish a data protection authority [see AiR No. 50, December/2019, 2]. However, concerns grew around the circle of big tech companies over additional compliance and data storage requirements - which the government says are needed to safeguard the data and privacy of citizens.

India: Supreme Court upholds powers of Enforcement Directorate; government critics concerned

(vv) A decision made by India's Supreme Court to uphold the powers of the country's financial crime investigation agency has invited much criticism from legal experts who worry of government authorities arresting suspects by merely weak evidence. Experts also claim that the decision may be especially alarming to critics and voices of dissent against the government, including opposition parties, who may be targeted based on this law. [The Straits Times]

The apex court on July 27 rejected nearly 250 petitions against amendments to the Prevention of the Money Laundering Act, including some made by Prime Minister Modi's government in 2019. One, among the several controversial provisions, postulates the immediate guilt of persons only accused of money laundering; while another provision allows the Enforcement Directorate (ED) to arrest and seize assets of accused without judicial monitoring. Confessions made to the financial crime investigation agency can now be used against the detainee, a power handed to the ED that even the police do not possess.

The Supreme Court rejected key arguments that the powers to arrest and an ambiguous definition of "proceeds of crime" could be misused. In light of this, some opposition parties have announced that they will again approach the Supreme Court to seek a review.

The central government, meanwhile, has claimed that the several amendments made by the BJP were a necessary step in empowering the ED's ability to investigate serious financial crimes that can be averted in the future. Law Minister Kiren Rijiju insists that such agencies do not involve themselves in illegal unconstitutional practices and this was made clear while ruling the amendment.

However, recent statistics show that under Prime Minister Modi's administration raids by the ED are 26 times as compared to the previous government. What is more, the conviction rate is extremely low: In 3,010 money laundering-related searches, only 23 accused have been convicted, and in 112 of these searches, there have been no money-laundering convictions.

Thus, opposition parties question the intention behind the arrests made by ED and that the government uses the agency to fulfill its own political agendas. In February of this year, the ED launched a money

laundering investigation against investigative journalist Rana Ayyub - a move that critics said was in response to Ayyub's works on issues affecting India's minority Muslims, her criticism of Prime Minister Modi's government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, and her commentary on the recent hijab ban at schools and colleges in the southern state of Karnataka [see AiR No. 8, February/2022, 4].

India: Supreme Court dismisses plea seeking contempt proceedings against heads of parties

(vv) India's Supreme Court has rejected a plea seeking initiation of contempt proceedings against heads of various political parties for allegedly not following the apex court's directions to present pre-existing criminal records of its candidates for the Uttar Pradesh state assembly polls held earlier this year. A bench of Justices stated that the Election Commission should be the right authority to handle the matter addressed in the plea. [The Indian Express]

The Supreme Court in its earlier ruling in August 2021 had asked all political parties to provide clear information on their official websites and social media with regards to any pending or pre-existing criminal records or criminal proceedings of its candidates ahead of the Uttar Pradesh assembly elections. This ruling followed an earlier ruling in 2018, which asserted that all candidature filing must be done after presenting their prior criminal antecedents to the Election Commission through public platforms, for a more transparent elections process.

India: Police break up Muharram processions in Kashmir Valley

(vv) Police on August 7 detained dozens of people in Srinagar, the largest city in the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley, as they dispersed Shiite Muslims who attempted to participate in processions marking the Muslim month of Muharram. [Al Jazeera] [Voice of America]

Muharram is considered to be one of Islam's holiest months across the world, which sees large crowds participating in processions and Muslims beating their chest to mourn the death of Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussein in present day-Iraq.

Earlier in 2020, many were injured as Indian forces fired shotgun and teargas to stop the procession. Other Muharram processions have also been banned earlier after an armed rebellion began in 1989 demanding Kashmir's independence or to merge with neighbor Pakistan, which ended in large numbers of civilians, rebels and government forces killed in the armed fight.

Kashmiri Muslims have, for many years now, complained that the government is intruding into its religious beliefs, and freedom, with the claims of protecting law and order in the valley. Kashmiri Muslims also allege that the government, however, continues to arrange Hindu Pilgrimage to the Amaranth Shrine in a Himalayan Cave, which sees thousands of annual visitors amid massive security arrangements.

India: Three years after Kashmir's constitutional autonomy was revoked

(vv) August 5 marked the third anniversary of India's central government abrogating Article 370 of the country's constitution, which stripped Jammu and Kashmir – India's only Muslim-majority region – of its special autonomous status. Today, the region remains tense as the Indian military maintains a large and often repressive security presence in the two union territories. Furthermore, local authorities have cracked down on civil rights, including the right to a free press and peaceful assembly, international human rights watchdog *Human Rights Watch* alleges. [Human Rights Watch]

Since 2019, militants of the region have killed at least 118 civilians,with many civilian attacks and deaths reported from the region off late. In this year alone, 13 civilians were reported to be killed, most of them being Muslims for holding pro-India beliefs and supporting the abrogation of Article 370. A huge protest also began in May, after militants killed a minority Hindu in the Budgam district of Kashmir [see AiR No. 20, May/2022, 3].

Kashmir's separatist movement is also observed to be crushed, as frequent detaining, jailing, intimidation, and silencing of leaders continue, with prominent leaders like Yasin Malik is in jail for a money laundering case and has been sentenced life imprisonment. Another top separatist leader, Syed Ali Shah Geelani, died at the age of 91 in September 2021 and was buried in secrecy after police did not allow the public

to participate in his funeral [see AiR No. 36, September/2021, 1].

Another concern that prevails in the region is targeting of civilians by militants, India has said that Jammu and Kashmir will hold parliamentary elections by the end of the year, which would be the region's first since 2014. But this week, local political leaders said officials in New Delhi have offered little clarity about an election timeframe. [Deutsche Welle]

Nepal: Government announces parliamentary, provincial elections for November 20

(op/lm) The Nepalese government has announced it will hold parliamentary and provincial polls in a single phase on November 20 amid concerns over high inflation and depleted foreign exchange reserves that have led to rising food and energy prices. The term of the sitting lawmakers will end on December 7, according to the Election Commission. [Swiss Info] [The Kathmandu Post 1]

In the elections for the 275-member lower house of Parliament, 165 seats will be chosen on first-past-the-post (FPTP) basis and the rest through proportional representation (PR). 550 members for the seven provincial assemblies will be chosen simultaneously, with 330 elected using the FPTP system and 220 using the PR system.

According to estimates, 18.6 million people have registered to vote for the upcoming elections, an increase of about 1 million since the Nepali Congress party of Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba secured a slim majority in elections to municipal assemblies in May [see AiR No. 20, May/2022, 3].

The five countries making up the ruling coalition – the Nepali Congress, Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre), Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Socialist), the Janata Samajbadi Party, and the Rastriya Janamorcha – have decided to participate in the upcoming elections as an electoral coalition, just as they did in the local level elections. Representatives of all parties met on August 5 to form an 11-member task team to negotiate seat distribution. [The Kathmandu Post 2] [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Political developments in Nepal are closely watched by neighboring giants China and India, who jostle for influence and have poured billions of dollars in aid and investment in infrastructure.

Ms. Vaishnavi Deegwal contributed research to this entry.

Nepal: Impeachment motion against chief justice sent to probe committee; questions about timing

(op/lm) The impeachment resolution against the chief justice of Nepal's Supreme Court was referred to the Impeachment Recommendation Committee on August 7 following a discussion in the House of Representatives, over six months after it was registered at the parliament secretariat.

Reports had surfaced in October last year that Chief Justice Cholendra Shumsher Rana had demanded a say in the distribution of posts in Prime Minister Deuba's Cabinet, allegedly as payback for the Supreme Court's ousting of the prime minister's predecessor KP Sharma Oli earlier in July. He was also accused of influencing cases assigned to other judges, though he denied the allegations against him. [AiR No. 44, November/2021, 1]

Against this backdrop, 98 lawmakers of the ruling coalition on February 13 registered a motion against the chief justice with 21 allegations, including that he encouraged judicial corruption and failed to carry out his responsibilities efficiently. Rana was immediately suspended when the motion was registered. [AiR No. 7, February/2022, 3]

On March 6, then a committee was established to provide recommendations and look into the accusations made against Rana. But it wasn't until this week that ruling parties presented a motion on the impeachment of Chief Justice Rana for discussion in Parliament's lower house - after the government announced elections for November 20. [see entry in this edition]

Crucially, without the backing of the opposition Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN (UML)) the impeachment move against the chief justice cannot be approved. The 271-member House must vote to impeach Rana by a two-thirds majority; the CPN (UML), which controls 98 seats, has opposed the impeachment motion's registration from the outset. Therefore, it appears that the ruling coalition has chosen to prolong the impeachment procedure until the chief justice retires on December 13. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

But some observers claim that once the present tenure of Parliament's lower house ends, the impeachment

motion filed against Chief Justice Rana would likewise be rendered ineffective. As a result, the chief justice theoretically has the option to report back to work following the election nomination filing. If that occurs, he can act as chief justice for roughly two months. [Khabar Hub] [Setopati]

Nepal: Opposition Communist Party takes to the streets to protest against government

(op) Sister groups of Nepal's main opposition Communist Party (CPN (UML)) held a demonstration on August 1 in the country's capital Kathmandu to call for the regulation of gasoline and food prices as well as the eradication of corruption and irregularities at all levels of government. [The Kathmandu Post] [My Republica]

Nepal: Nearly 20,000 people displaced as Kosi River breaks embankment

(op) Following days of heavy rain, the Kosi River – a transboundary river which flows through China, Nepal and India – has burst the embankment in Nepal's Udayapur district. After flooding invaded villages, almost 20,000 people relocated to safer lands with their cattle and other valuables. [Setopati]

Pakistan: Ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan to contest by-polls for nine parliament seats

(lm) Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan in a surprise move has announced he will contest by-polls for nine seats of Parliament's lower house, the National Assembly, on September 25. The seats were declared vacant by the Election Commission after the Speaker of the National Assembly accepted the resignations of nine lawmakers belonging to Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party. [Gulf News]

Pakistan: Parliament passes bill to curb power of anti-graft body

(lm) The lower house of Pakistan's parliament passed a bill on August 3 that seeks to further curb the power of the country's premier anti-corruption body, the National Accountability Bureau (NIB) by proposing that all corruption cases involving an amount below USD 2.2 million would not come in its purview. The bill also proposes that the federal government, and not the President, should have the power to appoint judges of accountability courts. [Dawn]

Ms. Mashal Shahid Khan contributed research to this entry.

Pakistan: National investigation agency summons opposition PTI leaders in foreign funding case

(lm) Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) has summoned 10 leaders of the opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), days after the country's Election Commission found that the party received funding from 34 foreigners or foreign companies - which is illegal in Pakistan [see AiR No. 31, August/2022, 1]. The FDI summoned the former governor of Sindh province, Imran Ismail, and others to address questions during the probe. [ThePrint]

Ms. Mashal Shahid Khan contributed research to this entry.

Pakistan: Parliament's lower house reduced to 336 seats as Election Commission issues new delimitation lists

(lm) Pakistan's Election Commission (EC) has issued the final lists of national and provincial assembly constituencies, reducing the total number of seats in Parliament's lower house from the existing 342 to 336. In doing so, the EC has removed a key legal hitch in the way of the next general elections. [Dawn]

As for provinces, the country's largest province, Punjab, will have 141 general seats in the lower house, Sindh 61, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 45, and Balochistan 16. Islamabad will have three seats. Women and minority seats will remain unchanged at 60 and 10, respectively.

Ms. Mashal Shahid Khan contributed research to this entry.

Pakistan: Protests in North Waziristan province over targeted killings

(lm) Thousands of people took to the streets in cities across North Waziristan, a district of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, as part of a protest movement launched three weeks ago against targeted killings. According to a local senior official, more than 60 people have been killed by security forces during security operations this year, while another 204 people have been arrested.

The region was once a hotbed of local and foreign Islamist militants, and it has seen a rise in militant violence in recent weeks. A suicide bomber attacked a military convoy in the district on August 8, killing four soldiers. [Reuters]

Ms. Mashal Shahid Khan contributed research to this entry.

Pakistan: Top commander of militant TTP reportedly killed in attack in eastern Afghanistan

(lm) A senior founding leader of the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), Abdul Wali, was killed on August 7 in a targeted attack along with two other leaders of the group in Afghanistan's Paktika province, which borders Pakistan. Wali, also known as Omar Khalid Khorasani, was the leader of a TTP-affiliated militant faction known as Jamaat ul-Ahrar, one of the most operationally active TTP networks in Pakistan's Punjab province. [CNN] [The Washington Post]

His death comes as the TTP and the Pakistani officials work toward peace talks with assistance from senior Taliban leaders in Afghanistan. Numerous delegations have met in Kabul since the Afghan Taliban took power in August of last year to help end the years-long conflict between Pakistani forces and the hardline TTP.

Pakistan: General Faiz Hameed appointed Corps Commander Bahawalpur

(lm) The incumbent head of Pakistan's Peshawar Corps, Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed, has been appointed commander of the XXXI Corps of the Pakistan Army headquartered in Bahawalpur, Punjab province. [The Express Tribune]

General Faiz Gen Faiz was appointed Corps Commander Peshawar in October 2021 in a surprise military shake-up after serving as Director General of the Inter-Service Intelligence for over two years [see AiR No. 41, October/2021, 2]. In his capacity as head of the Peshawar Corps he was instrumental in talks with the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan military group brokered by the Afghan Taliban.

Pakistan: Military denies insurgents' hand in helicopter crash, killing six

(msh) Separatist insurgents in Pakistan's Balochistan province have claimed they shot down a military helicopter that went missing while taking part in a flood relief operation on August 1, killing all six on board including, Corps Commander Lieutenant General Sarfraz Ali, Director General Pakistan Coast Guard Brigadier Amjad Hanif Satti and two major [see AiR No. 31, August/2022, 1]. Pakistan's military, however, dismissed the claim as propaganda and fake news, saying the helicopter crashed during bad weather. [Reuters]

In related developments, Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency has established a team to probe, trace and arrest those behind an alleged smear campaign on social media against the military and its officers following the helicopter crash. [Gulf News]

Sri Lanka: Supreme Court extends travel ban on former prime minister, finance minister until August 11

(kh) Sri Lanka's Supreme Court on August 3 extended a travel ban imposed on former Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapksa and his brother, ex-Finance Minister Basil Rajapaksa, until August 11 on grounds that they were both named respondents in a case filed over the economic crisis. Basil had previously tried to leave the country but was stopped at the airport by the immigration authorities [see AiR No. 31, August/2022, 1]. [The Indian Express] [Times of India]

Sri Lanka: President Wickremesinghe seeks all-party government to revive economy

(kh) Sri Lanka's newly elected President Ranil Wickremesinghe has urged citizens and lawmakers to support his administration's reform measures in order to help the country's economy to revive and convince the International Monetary Fund for a bailout program. Addressing Parliament on August 3, Wickremesinghe said he would support peaceful demonstrations but leave no room for violence or terror. [Bloomberg]

He also invited all political parties for talks on the possibility of forming an all-party government scheduled for August 5. Moreover, to reconcile with protestors Wickremesinghe said that his government is in the process of making constitutional amendments to reduce the president's wide-ranging powers. The amendment was approved by the Cabinet and will be sent to parliament in a few weeks [see AiR No. 31, August/2022, 1].

President Wickremesinghe said on July 30 that an agreement with the IMF had been pushed back to September due to the unrest over the past weeks. This came after the World Bank said it would not offer new funding to Colombo unless the bankrupt island nation carried out "deep structural reforms" to stabilize its economy. [AiR No. 31, August/2022, 1]

Sri Lanka: Protest leader Stalin freed on bail after arrest draws widespread outcry

(kh/lm) A Sri Lankan court on August 8 released on bail a top trade union leader, whose arrest had sparked international condemnation and widespread protest. Joseph Stalin, the secretary of the Sri Lanka Teachers' Union, was arrested from his office in the capital Colombo on August 3 for contempt after he participated in an anti-government demonstration that was banned by a court in May. [Khaleej Times]

Stalin's arrest had raised concerns among human rights advocates to call for the release of Stalin and other protesters arrested. For instance, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights, Mary Lawyer, had labeled the arrest as "disturbing". [Al Jazeera]

Furthermore, international human rights watchdog *Human Rights Watch* stated that the government has recently implemented emergency laws to target protesters and activists who are demanding accountability of culprits behind the economic crisis and want political reforms in the country. [TheStar]

Security forces last month raided a protest camp outside the president's office - a move that drew international condemnation over the alleged use of excessive force on unarmed demonstrators. [AiR No. 30, July/2022, 4]

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

Cambodia: King endorses 10th constitutional amendment

(fe) King Norodom Sihamoni, following approval by the National Assembly and endorsement by the Senate, has signed the country's 10th constitutional amendment into law on August 6.

The so concluded constitutional reform process by which six articles of the Cambodian Constitution and two articles of the Additional Constitutional Law were amended was criticized for allegedly having been drafted in secrecy and in violation of fundamental democratic principles. However, the Constitutional Council of Cambodia (CCC) ruled the amendment was in accordance with the Constitution. [AiR No. 29, July/2022, 3] [Khmer times]

Cambodia: Diplomat slams UN report on press freedom as 'biased and prejudiced'

(bs) The Permanent Mission of Cambodia to the United Nations (UN) slammed criticism in the recent OHCHR

"Report on the State of Press Freedom in Cambodia" as "biased, selective, prejudiced and unfounded."

According to the report, media workers in Cambodia face ongoing harassment, pressure, and violence which the Cambodian government denies claiming that the country's Press Law ensures confidentiality and independence in the media sector while banning pre-publication censorship. Enforcement of the law against violators could not be regarded as an undue restriction of press freedom.

In response, the OHCHR ensured that its sources were reliable. Among the sources, it included findings of foreign-funded NGOs and international media reports. [OHCHR] [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Provincial dep.-police chief sentenced to jail for encroachment

(bs) A Cambodian municipal court convicted a Kampong Chhnang provincial deputy police chief to four years in prison and a USD 12,500 fine on land encroachment charges for occupying restricted parts of flooded forest land in Tonle Sap Lake areas between 2011 and 2021 and selling the land. The court also confiscated USD 509,998 of the profit gained by the sale.

The police officer had been charged with destruction and embezzlement under Article 608 of the Criminal Code, land grabbing under Article 98 of the Law on Fisheries, for not declaring assets and liabilities under Articles 32 and 38 of Law on Anti-Corruption, and with 'money laundering under Article 38 of the Law on Anti-Money Laundering and Financing.

His defense claimed that the land was not illegally encroached but bought from local farmers instead and can still appeal the judgment within a 30-day deadline. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Former party leader sentenced to prison for armed robbery

(fe) The Phnom Penh Municipal Court sentenced Sok Sovann Vathana Sabung, former leader of the minor opposition Khmer Rise Party (KRP), to nine years in prison for masterminding an armed robbery against an online lotion tycoon. Seven of his accomplices were also sentenced to between six and nine years in prison for attempted theft and weapon possession,

conspiring to commit aggravated theft, and forging official documents in connection to the crime.

The former party leader, also known as William Guang, was charged with aggravated theft, illegal possession of weapons, and falsifying official documents under Sections 353, 357, 490, and 629 of Cambodia's Criminal Code.

In addition to the jail conviction, the judge also ordered the accused to jointly pay USD 500,000 for "damages" and USD 50,000 as indemnity, noting that they each have the option to appeal the ruling.

Guang and his accomplices committed the crime on December 19, 2021. They entered the tycoon's luxury house armed with weapons and stole diamonds. [The Phnom Penh Post] [Khmer Times]

Indonesia: Election Commission begins political party verification for 2024 elections

(jvk) Fourteen political parties have registered to the Election Commission (KPU) as of August 7, marking the beginning of the administrative and verification process ahead of the upcoming 2024 general election. The KPU will verify registered parties and welcome new registrations until December.

Of the parties registered, KPU has declared that ten political parties' documentation is complete. At this stage, non-parliamentary parties must prove if they have sufficient offices in all provinces and a minimum of 1,000 members to lawfully declare their candidacies in the 2024 regional and national elections. [Tempo in Indonesian]

The political parties that have successfully registered notably include the ruling Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI-P), Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), and center-right National Democratic Party (Nasdem). Ahead of the 2024 elections, the complete verification of political parties is considered to be the first determinant of the polls' success.

Previously, the KPU had called for the immediate disbursement of election funds to kick start the election process. The slow rollout of election funds from the state budget had caused concerns about a prolonged election process, amid fears of a 2024 election postponement [see AiR No. 31, August/2022, 1][Kompas]

Indonesia: Former Minister arrested on Hate Speech and Blasphemy Case

(jvk) The former Minister of Youth and Sports Affairs has been arrested for posting a picture of President Joko Widodo edited onto a Buddha Statue. Following online backlash claiming that the act insulted both the president and the Buddhist religion, he has been charged as a suspect in a hate speech and blasphemy case.

Former minister, Roy Suryo, had posted the image as part of a now-deleted Twitter post after the government announced plans to raise the entry price at the ancient Buddhist Borobudur complex in Central Java.

In Indonesia, insulting the president can be punished under an internet law (ITE) which is criticized by human rights groups for stifling freedom of expression. The case could set a precedent for the proposed draft of a new criminal code (KUHP), which solidifies the criminalization of presidential defamation. [Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Socialization of the new draft Criminal Code

(jvk) The House of Representatives (DPR) is finalizing the draft of the new Criminal Code (KUHP), which proposes comprehensive changes to the current Indonesian Criminal Code, and has attracted concern from human rights groups due to several controversial issues therein. [AiR No. 29, July/2022, 3] The President and The Ministry of Legal, Political, and Security Affairs have called for efforts to "socialize" the reformed code among the population and to involve public participation in order to allay concerns and address the 14 controversial issues in the changed Criminal Code.

The 14 controversial issues include laws on premarital sex, cohabitation, blasphemy, presidential defamation, and contempt of the court. [AiR No. 29, July/2022, 3] [Antara News] [Voice of Indonesia]

Indonesia: Government suspends school officers over alleged hijab enforcement

(jvk) A headmaster and three teachers of a state high school in Yogyakarta have been suspended over allegedly forcing a female student to wear a hijab.

According to a 2014 Regulation of the Ministry of Education there should be no coercion and enforcement of certain religious attributes in state schools. This includes measures forcing students to wear religious items as part of a school uniform, or banning the prohibition of certain religious items. [Tempo] [Jakarta Globe]

Despite regulation prohibiting discriminatory action or the enforcement of certain religious dress codes, some human rights groups claim that the recent incident is not an isolated case but points to a general problem across the country. [The Straits Times]

Indonesia: Suspected cover-up in murder case involving high-ranking police

(pe) An Inspector General, whose home was the scene of an alleged murder, has been arrested for tampering with evidence. The case gradually evolves as a major police scandal that is shedding light on the downsides of a police culture that is linked to impunity and secrecy in cases involving members of the police.

The victim is a low ranking enlisted police officer, Nofriansyah Yosua Hutabarat (Brigadier J), who was driver of then-internal police affairs chief, Inspector-General (equivalent to Major General) Ferdy Sambo.

According to the National Police´s initial account, Brigadier Yosua was killed on July 8 by a colleague, Brigadier Richard, the bodyguard of both officers' boss, Inspector-General Sambo. Allegedly, Yosua had attempted to assault the general´s wife in her bedroom, where Richard fatally shot him to protect her.

Suspicion over the official story rose, however, after irregularities begun to surface. Recordings of the CCTV cameras in the general´s residence disappeared while the body of Yosua allegedly displayed injuries that Tsuggested he had been stabbed and beaten. Two of his fingers were broken, his shoulder dislocated and his neck marked by scratches that resembled the marks of a rope.

Eventually, Brigadier Richard, the initial main suspect of the case, rejected the official version which he had first supported and announced seeking support from the Witness and Victim Protection Agency (LPSK).

The National Commission for Human Rights (Komnas HAM), which launched an independent probe into the case, soon suspected that Richard was pressured to take responsibility for Yosua's death as a scapegoat.

After public pressure mounted and even the President called for due process, the investigations took a turn with the National Police Chief forming a special team consisting of members of the Human Rights Commission and Police Commissions to investigate the case. Now, with investigations focusing on an alleged cover-up by police officers, 25officers from the internal affairs division (Propam), the Jakarta Police and the South Jakarta Police, including general Sambo and at least one other police general, are being investigated for potential ethics breaches over their actions at the crime scene. Sambo is currently even held at the police headquarters, while investigations are going on. [Benar News] [The Indonesia] [The Star] [Asia Sentinel]

Indonesia: Government agencies ready to address cyber security concerns in upcoming G20 Summit

(jvk) Indonesia's National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) and related ministries have expressed their readiness to take part in efforts toward strengthening national cyber security ahead of the upcoming G20 forum. Indonesia will be chairing the G20 forum that will take place in Bali in November.

Concerns about cyber security and safeguarding personal data are rising, specifically at a national level. Critics state that Indonesia lacks a comprehensive framework to address cyber security issues and govern personal data on the internet, relying on an outdated legal framework. Areas of particular concern for the BNPT center around the potential spread of violent radicalism that can occur online, without proper cybersecurity in place, causing potential security risk at the G20.

Raising awareness of cybersecurity and data protection online continues to be a focus area for the government, as the country awaits an upcoming Personal Data Protection Bill's ratification. [AiR No. 27, July/2022, 1] [Antara News 1][Antara News 2]

Laos: Foreign currency default rating further downgraded

(bs) Laos' Long-Term Foreign-Currency Issuer Default Rating (IDR) has been further downgraded due to an alarming increase in external liquidity risks the country is facing after the recent spike in goods' prices, which is leading Laos towards a major economic crisis.

The announcement came from the United-States-based credit rating agency Fitch Ratings, which has officially downgraded Laos from CCC to CCC-. Factors mentioned as reasons for the decision were the country's growing debt, surging inflation, currency depreciation, as well as low foreign-exchange reserves.

In fact, Laos has increased its import bill to tackle the growth in global commodity prices and repay its debts. However, the move is believed to have soared the demand for foreign exchange resulting in a 25 percent devaluation of the Lao kip against the USD within a six-month period. Nonetheless, Fitch cited the country's efforts to stabilize the exchange rate since June.

To date, Laos reportedly received around USD 800 million in bilateral debt relief from China in 2020-2021. However, Laos' inflation rate remains high. The country reached a 23.5 percent inflation rate in June, the highest in over 20 years. [The Laotian Times] [Fitch Ratings]

Malaysia: Former prime minister launches new Malay political movement

(pe) Malaysia's former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has launched a new political movement, the Gerakan Tanah Air (Movement of the People), targeting 120 Malay-majority seats in the upcoming election, scheduled for September 2023. The group aims to compete against the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO).

The movement includes the National Indian Muslim Alliance Party (Iman), Parti Bumiputera Perkasa Malaysia (Putra), Parti Barisan Jemaah Islamiah Se-Malaysia (Berjasa) and Parti Pejuang Tanah Air (Pejuang). The movement will also include some individuals, NGOs, and academics.

Mahathir, responding to criticism of the Malay-centric focus of the movement, has argued that Malays comprise the majority of poor people in Malaysia and therefore need better support. He stated that the movement will not detract from non-Malays but would ensure that income-disparity, amongst other issues faced by Malays, would be tackled fairly. [CNA]

Malaysia: Senior minister sidesteps question about deputy PM nomination

(pe) One of Malaysia's Senior Ministers, Mohamed Azmin Ali, has sidestepped questions about his alleged nomination as sole candidate for deputy prime ministership.

The current federal administration of Malaysia has four senior ministers appointed instead of a deputy prime minister. Mohamed Azmin is reported to have been nominated by the ruling Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu), one of the parties making up the largest coalition in the government. Media reports suggest that this decision has already been signed into agreement, between the opposition Barisan Nasional (PN) Chairman and the Prime Minister. However, recent talks to discuss the agreement terms were canceled last minute with no clear explanation.

Mohamed Azmin is currently a member of Bersatu's supreme leadership council. He is otherwise known for leading an exodus of MPs from opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim's Parti Keadilan Rakyat in February 2020. [CNA]

Malaysia: Anti-smoking bill set for further parliamentary scrutiny amidst debate

(pe) A bill intended to eradicate smoking and vaping amongst young people in Malaysia will be sent to the parliamentary select committee for further scrutiny. This will take place instead of putting it to vote as planned, due to resistance from parliament and the public.

The Tobacco and Smoking Products Control Bill 2022 aims to phase out cigarette smoking as well as vaping. This new law would criminalize use of such tobacco products for everyone born from 2007 onwards. Those supporting the bill argue that this move would effectively eradicate smoking and improve the lives of generations to come.

Critics state that the bill would unfairly target the less economically advantaged groups in society, who are more likely to smoke. They also argue that the bill could endanger civil liberties due to the broad enforcement powers granted to authorities. Some supporters of the bill have also backed this view, stating that better care needs to be taken to ensure

that the content does not allow unchecked enforcement activities. [South China Morning Post]

Malaysia: No automatic citizenship for children born overseas to Malaysian mothers

(pe) The Court of Appeal (COA) has reversed a landmark High Court decision that allowed citizenship to be granted to children born overseas to Malaysian mothers with foreign spouses.

The COA ruling states that Malaysian women married to foreigners will be unable to pass their citizenship to their children born abroad, this right will only be afforded to Malaysian men. Article 14(1)(b) of Malaysia's constitution gives fathers the automatic right to pass citizenship to their children born abroad. The COA has ruled, in a split decision, that 'father' in this case means biological father, and cannot be extended to mean mother or other parent.

Malaysia is one of just 28 countries that prevent women from passing their nationality to their children on an equal basis with men. Rights groups have expressed their concern over the decision, which they argue may lead to prolonged separation of families, as well as violating international law. Supporters of the COA decision maintain that any re-writing of the constitution should be conducted by parliament rather than courts. [New Straits Times] [Aljazeera]

Malaysia: Calls for probe into Navy project delays

(pe) The Democratic Action Party's (DAP) youth wing has called for an investigation into former prime minister Najib Razak, his former defense minister, and the current defense minister over the delay in a navy warship project.

DAP Youth said that police reports would be made against those involved in the RM9 billion (USD 2 billion) littoral combat ship (LCS) project. Complaints center around the claim that none of the six ships that were scheduled for delivery between 2019 and this year, under the programme, have not been delivered. Critics also claim that the original designs of the ship, as chosen by the Navy, had been changed.

The current Defense Minister has defended the project, stating that the project will still be delivered within the agreed time frame despite the delays. Has also stated that any evidence of wrongdoing will be punished. [Free Malaysia Today 1] [Free Malaysia Today 2]

Myanmar: Central bank eases foreign currency conversion law in response to Kyat-USD decline

(jp) On August 5, the Central Bank of Myanmar alleviated regulations on monetary conversion for exporters and amended the exchange rate from Myanmar kyat to dollar (USD) in an attempt to tackle the ongoing weakening of the national currency.

The new regulation governs that exporters would be permitted to retain 35 percent of their export proceeds. The Central Bank instructed to exchange only 65 percent of export revenues into Myanmar kyats until further instructions are released.

In April, the government of Myanmar exempted the majority of foreign nationals and businesses from the necessity to convert their foreign currency into kyat. This occurred as a result of global pressure. Among the entities and individuals exempted from the tax are embassies, special economic zones, and companies with more than 35 percent foreign investment.

The central bank of Myanmar has now fixed the exchange rate from 1,850 kyats to 2,100 kyats, a 20 percent increase from its previous benchmark. Beginning on August 8, 65 percent of export revenues must be converted to Myanmar kyats at a rate of 2,100 kyats per dollar.

In reaction to the depreciation of the Myanmar currency, the central bank also urged banks and enterprises to postpone the repayment of foreign loans. This measure was implemented to safeguard the country's foreign exchange reserves. [Bloomberg]

Myanmar: Abduction of ethnic party member sparks internal conflicts in Arakan resistance groups

(bs/jp) The abduction of members of the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), a local political party that advocates ethnic Rakhine people’s rights, allegedly by

the ethnic armed organization United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA) sparked alarming internal conflicts among local Arakan resistance groups in the southern Rakhine state. The ALP, which accuses the AA of being responsible for the abduction, stated that such an arrest undermines Arakan national unity and should never occur within Arakanese groups. However, by August 7, the AA has yet to release a statement in response to the allegations.

One of the individuals abducted is an ALP's central executive committee member, Khaing Paw Lin who represented the party at "peace talks" with Myanmar military officials in June. The meeting created hostility between some 24 Rakhine civil society organizations and the ALP. In fact, ahead of the meeting with junta officials, the civil society organizations released a joint statement condemning the ALP's decision. [Myanmar Now]

Following the incident, state-military authorities arrested three civilians. According to AA-backed Arakan Princess Media (APM) the arrests were supported by ALP members. However, the ALP denied the allegation ensuring that the Party has had no involvement in the event.

The ULA/AA have so far arrested at least ten ALP members.

The ALP was founded in 1968 with the assistance of the Karen National Union (KNU) and has frequently clashed with Myanmar governments. Its armed wing, the Arakan Liberation Army, signed a ceasefire agreement with the government in 2012 and joined the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015. [Radio Free Asia, Facebook, in Burmese] [Development Media Group] [Narinjara News]

Myanmar: Prominent local artists receive prison terms, die in custody over anti-regime protests

(bs/jp) A Myanmar photographer died while in custody after being arrested on July 30 for documenting anti-junta protests, and other anti-regime activities following the military coup on February 1, 2021. He would reportedly upload his photographs to social media, where politicians and local media frequently shared them. [Radio Free Asia]

Meanwhile, another prominent artist received a three-year prison sentence under Section 505 (a) of the Penal Code for participating in anti-government movements.

The rock singer, known as Ito, along with other 5 people, were arrested in September, released on amnesty, and rearrested in October 2021 in connection with alleged anti-regime activities, including accusations of gathering volunteers to receive military training and plotting bombings.

According to the Bangkok-based non-governmental organization Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, junta forces have killed at least 2,142 civilians since the coup and arrested nearly 15,000, primarily during peaceful anti-junta demonstrations. [Radio Free Asia, Facebook, in Burmese] [The Irrawaddy 1] [The Irrawaddy 2]

Myanmar: Ongoing clashes claim more civilian deaths in ground and air attacks

(jp) The Myanmar military army attacked the northern Sagaing division from both ground and air. During the first week of August, nearly 500 homes in at least ten villages were set on fire and around 5,000 people fled, according to residents. [Radio Free Asia, Facebook, in Burmese]

Meanwhile, between August 3 and August 8, two resident ward administrators were shot and killed. According to the resistance Shwe Tan Land People's Defense Force (PDF), one of the men was a key informant of the military council, while according to a ward resident, the other man was a retired soldier who became known in the community as a junta informant following the 2021 coup d'état. [Myanmar now, in Burmese] [Myanmar Now]

In the same week, a junta-appointed head of township was also shot and killed. [Myanmar Now, in Burmese]

Furthermore, in an ongoing series of deadly clashes between the regime's forces and local resistance in the northern Region of Sagaing, ten PDF members and seven villagers were killed between August 1 and August 5 during a military council raid.

Contemporarily, military council's soldiers held more than 60 children and 100 villagers hostage threatening them with weapons.

Monasteries and hospitals were also attacked and destroyed by fire as well as by air attacks led by the military. [Burma Associate Press, Facebook, in Burmese]

Approximately 18,886 residential houses were set on fire by the military council army and subordinate organizations between February 1 and May 31, with Sagaing having suffered the highest number at 13,840.

Moreover, since the coup, urban guerrilla forces opposed to Myanmar's military junta have targeted regime-loyal soldiers, police, and civilian administrators in the country's cities. The military has increased its efforts to arm and train pro-junta militia groups in cities and towns across the country. [Radio Free Asia, Facebook, in Burmese]

The Philippines: Anti-Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children bill lapsed into law

(jd) A bill designed to boost efforts of social media platforms, internet portals, service providers, internet and financial intermediaries against online sexual abuse towards children, has lapsed into law.

The Republic Act No. 11930, also known as Anti-Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children (OSAEC) focuses on increased accountability. Under the new law, internet stakeholders are required to better cooperate with law enforcement agents. In order to avoid penalty they must take down materials that violate the rights of children as well as preserve and immediately transmit any evidence of wrongdoing to law enforcement agencies.

Under this law, any form of production, access and/or divulgation of child sexual abuse and exploitative material (CSAEM) is punishable, this includes accountability for those who stream, subscribe or support sources that provide CSAEM.

While supporters of the law hail it as a step in the right direction, there are some limitations acknowledged such as the prevalence of the dark web and end-to-end encryptions which may hinder efficacy. However, lawmakers are actively discussing implementation strategies with messaging app Telegram, YouTube, and data storage hubs. [CNN Philippines]

NGOs addressing CSAEM have stated that with the passage of the new law the Philippines has become one of the first countries in the region to provide an institutionalized and collaborative approach for the safeguard of children against online sexual abuse and exploitation. [Philstar]

The Philippines: New Philippine National Police chief vows to support and continue war on drugs

(jd) The newly appointed Philippine National Police (PNP) chief has declared his intention to support and continue the war on drugs, which began in 2016 with former President Rodrigo Duterte and is now backed by current President Fedinand Marcos Jr.

According to General Rodolfo Azurin, the new chief, most of the illegal imports are able to get into the country through sea-based routes. He therefore affirmed the intention to intensify the cooperation with the Philippine Navy, the Philippine Coast Guard, the Bureau of Customs, and other related agencies, and to sanction vessels found to be associated with the transport of illegal drugs in the Philippines.

As part of his strategy, Azurin has also expressed the intention to collaborate with officials to provide rehabilitation to drug users as a measure to reduce the demand.

The war on drugs in the Philippines started with former president Duterte's promise to eradicate the drug issue from the country in less than six months, however critics attribute thousands of deaths to his approach, which came under the scrutiny of the International Criminal Court (ICC). In recent comments, the current president has stated that he has no intention for the Philippines to rejoin the ICC, amidst discussion on the resumption of an ICC probe into his predecessor's actions. [CNN Philippines] [CNN Philippines 2] [Philstar] [Philippine News Agency] [Aljazeera]

The Philippines: Meta purged millions of posts during national election season

(jd) According to Meta, more than 6 million posts from Filipino users were removed from Facebook and Instagram during the country's election season for violating content guidelines, inciting violence, hate speech and bullying, and for inauthentic behavior (IB).

Around 5 million of the removed posts were flagged for violating policies related to violence and incitement since many of these included 'high severity violence', threats, and violence related to voting, voter registration, or the result of the election, which ultimately saw President Ferdinand Marcos Jr's victory.

Around 670,000 of the removed posts contained hate speech such as dehumanizing speech and stereotypes. More than 550,000 posts were deleted for breaching Meta's bullying and harassment policies and included attacks on public figures.

Meta, which monitored content from the Philippines in the four months leading up to the May 9 polls and the week after, also pointed out a large scale of IB connected to fake accounts and spam of election-related posts. The company removed thousands of accounts for this reason, ahead of the election of Marcos Jr.

The Philippines has the sixth-largest body of Facebook users in the world and these numbers highlight how the heavy use of social media has made the digital sphere crucial to politics in the country. Observers state that this also makes Filipinos vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation, and to well-funded false information channels.

The Phenomenon was observed and documented starting from the 2016 elections that saw former president Rodrigo Duterte's so-called 'troll army' boost the narrative in his favor and against the opposition.

Claims of this nature have been made in relation to Marcos' presidential campaign as well, with accusations made of using social media to revise the history related to his father Ferdinand E. Marcos presidency during the repressive era of Martial Law (between 1972 and 1986), and to minimize claims that the Marcos family continues to benefit from the billions of dollars stolen from the state during his time in power.

Despite Meta's growing ability to identify and remove hate speech and inauthentic behavior there was still a high volume of pro-Marcos revisionism and disinformation that was observed in the country's social media networks during the election campaign. Observers state that this is an indicator of how the digital world will continue to have a central role in Philippine politics, and of how social media companies will have to expend their efforts to keep up with the alleged misinformation. [The Diplomat] [Inquirer News]

Singapore: Execution approach for drug-offenses under human rights scrutiny

(pe) Human rights groups have criticized the government of Singapore for resuming regular executions for drug-related offenses, after a two-year

hold had been put in place due to Covid-19. The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Office (OHCHR) has called for all scheduled executions to be halted, and for mandatory death sentences for drug abuses to be eliminated. [UN News]

Critics of the use of the death penalty for drug related offences argue that the approach violates international law. Furthermore, they state that Singapore's use of the death penalty disproportionately affects ethnic minorities and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Additionally, the government appears to have shifted from a long-standing policy of only conducting executions on Fridays, drawing criticism due to the increased uncertainty that this change could bring to families of those awaiting execution.

In March, lawyers who attempted a last-minute appeal against the execution of a man convicted of drug-offenses were fined for alleged abuse of the court system. This has led to some groups claiming that lawyers working on death penalty cases fear retribution, which in turn reduces fair access to legal help for those incarcerated. The Ministry of Law denies this accusation. [Aljazeera]

Singapore: Fuel supplier company's license suspended due to continued selling of contaminated fuel

(pe) Singapore's Maritime and Port Authority has suspended Glencore Singapore's license to sell fuel for two months. This decision is the result of an investigation which found that the company had continued to sell fuel despite tests uncovering contamination.

This finding was a part of a wider investigation that took place in March 2022, over the potential fuel contamination that impacted more than 200 vessels. The fuel was traced back to two suppliers, Glencore Singapore and PetroChina International (Singapore).The investigation had found no evidence to suggest that the suppliers had intentionally contaminated the fuel, however Glencore was the only supplier found to have continued their supply after the contamination was reported. No action has been taken against PetroChina due to their prompt response to the investigation's findings. [The Maritime Executive]

Singapore: Monetary Authority plans public consultation on cryptocurrency regulation

(pe) The Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) is reviewing its approach to regulating cryptocurrency, planning a public consultation in the near future.

A new regulatory regime could target stablecoins, a form of cryptocurrency that is pegged to the value of other assets such as the United States Dollar (USD). Tighter regulation for stablecoins is seen as increasingly important by regulators in major markets such as the UK, US, and European Union.

Possible new measures to be discussed during the public consultation include regulating reserve requirements for stablecoin users. This comes in response to a series of high-profile incidents involving cryptocurrencies in recent months, such as the collapse terraUSD (UST) a stablecoin that lost its US dollar peg earlier in the year. [Coindesk]

Despite increasing regulation in this space, the MAS continues to accommodate cryptocurrency companies that adhere to the rules, maintaining that Singapore can continue to be a hub for innovation. [Crypto Slate]

Thailand: Parliamentary session to scrutinize new electoral bill adjourned, major parties set to file constitutional petition

(td) Following the passing of new controversial law amendments on the election process on July 6, the first joint parliamentary session between the Senators and Members of Parliament (MPs) to discuss the matter was adjourned due to the absence of a quorum. The next session is scheduled on August 9.

The move is believed to be a bid to block the third reading of the newly proposed electoral bill, which would be implemented at the next general poll in 2023. Under the new election method, the figure 500, which would include all of the constituency MPs, rather than 100, the total number of party-list MPs, would be used in the calculation to determine the number of party-listed seats which each contesting party would receive. [AiR No. 28, July/2022, 2]

The motion in regards to the endorsement of the bill has been contested in the House of Representatives. However, if they fail to move forward with an

amendment of the organic bill on elections in the final parliamentary session by August 15, the Election Commission (EC) will take charge of the determination of a calculation method to ensure that it is consistent with the constitution. Based on this point, it should be noted that the vetting committee is considering whether the current bill contents should be rewritten in favor of the division of electorates by 500. [Bangkok Post 1]

Further, if the new electoral bill passes its final readings with approval from the EC, the opposition Pheu Thai Party and the ruling Palang Pracharath Party are set to forward the issue to the Constitutional Court to seek a final resolution. Furthermore, the Pheu Thai Party plans to petition to the National Anti-Corruption Commission to prosecute those lawmakers who have attempted to modify the last bill in an alleged violation of the constitution. [AiR, No. 31, August/2022, 1] [Bangkok Post 2][Bangkok Post 3][Thai PBS World]

Thailand: Prime Minister's constitutional term towards expiration, opposition to seek constitutional ruling

(td) Ahead of the upcoming poll scheduled for 2023, there have been growing calls from critics on Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha to step down from office as in their view his constitutional eight-year premiership term is due to expire in August, though the end-of-term date remains highly debated. While the government considers his premiership that started in 2019 when Prayut was officially endorsed as Prime Minister in accordance with the 2017 Constitution, the Opposition argues that his term officially began in 2014 when he took power with a military coup.

In a bid to remove him from the position, the main opposition Pheu Thai Party is set to push against any efforts of the Prime Minister to stay in power, reaffirming that his term should expire on August 24. With the same objective, a group of 99 people, including academics and activists, signed a petition letter calling for Prayut's resignation by August 23. Simultaneously, a prominent activist requested the Office of the Ombudsman and the Election Commission (EC) to seek a judicial review of Prayut's eight-year term. [Bangkok Post 1]

Meanwhile, petitioning the constitutional court seems to be another likely option, according to a Pheu Thai Party's legal expert. However, unless the ruling is in the Pheu Thai Party's favor, Prayut can stretch his tenure to 2027. In contrast, if he is to be suspended,

Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan will serve as interim prime minister.

Once a petition has been filed, the court would gather opinion from each state agency in the form of letters. As of now, it remains to be seen whether the opposition will succeed in overthrowing the Prayut-led government after its recent failure in the latest censure debate against Prayut.

According to Section 158 of the 2017 constitution, a PM's term is limited to a maximum of eight years. As the constitution was endorsed three years after Prayut began leading the country as head of the now-defunct National Council for Peace and Order in 2014, the government dismisses retroactive effects of the constitution. [Bangkok Post 2][Bangkok Post 3] [Reuters][Thai PBS World]

Thailand: Prime Minister to stick to ruling party, former PM Thaksin Shinawatra likely to return

(bs/td) In the lead up to the next general election in 2023, public speculation claims that, in the event that Prime Minister (PM) Prayut Chan-o-cha is not nominated for a second term in office, he may turn his back on the ruling Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) to join the emerging Ruam Thai Sang Chart Party; the party vowed to nominate Prayut as its prime ministerial candidate in the 2023 elections. In response to the claims, PM Prayut has assured that, on the contrary, he is considering applying for the PPRP's membership.

Generally speaking, whether it is the Ruam Thai Sang Chart or PPRP that nominates Chan-o-cha, they both are set to help capture public support so that the coalition parties win sufficient seats at the next poll, which would see the incumbent government holding a tight grip on power. Under the current law, each party must secure at least 25 seats to be able to nominate the prime minister. [Bangkok Post 1][Thai Enquirer] [Thai PBS World]

Meanwhile, some believe that if the opposition Pheu Thai Party wins local elections, the party might allow former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to return to Thailand and rejoin politics before the upcoming polls. Thaksin's government was ousted in 2006 by a military coup. Since then, Thaksin has lived in exile. He was also sentenced in absentia to two years in jail for abuse of power for tax evasion. The former prime minister was also condemned for killing more than 2,500 people in a

"war on drugs" and encouraging strong opposition against separatist insurgencies in the Muslim southern provinces of Thailand.

His return seems now more likely than ever as the Central Tax Court has recently ruled in his favor in a tax-related case. The court revoked a USD-479-million fine in taxes ordered by the Revenue Department, which considered his siblings's purchase and reselling of Shin Corp shares in 2006 a move to change of share ownership. [Bangkok Post 2][Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand: House subcommittee cuts armed forces budget int half

(td) The House sub-committee has slashed the proposed budget plans of the armed forces by about 3 billion baht (USD 83 million) in the 2023 fiscal year. Following the decision, the agency filed a petition to the House budget scrutiny committee, which granted the Royal Thai Air Force a partial budget of 369 million baht (USD 10 million), out of the initial 700 million baht (about USD 19.3 million) requested by the army, to move forward with its plan to purchase fighter jets from the United States (US) upon approval of the US Congress.

If the Air Force is unable to secure such an approval, the funds will have to be returned to the Treasury. The residual budget will be carried over until fiscal year 2026.

Another budget plan worth 2 billion baht (USD 55.9 million) is expected to be allocated to the Thai Army to push ahead with the procurement of electric buses and helicopters. Meanwhile, a budget of 200 million baht (around USD 5.5 million) to be allotted to the Thai Navy to arrange personnel training linked to its submarine acquisition scheme was cut given that China Shipbuilding and Offshore International Corporation has yet to be able to supply the navy with a S26T Yuan-class submarine powered by a German-made MTU 396 diesel engine. [AiR, No. 31, August/2022, 1][Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2] [Thai PBS World]

Thailand: Former ruling party MP convicted of delegating parliamentary vote

(td) A former ruling Palang Pracharath's member of parliament (MP) was sentenced to one-year imprisonment and suspended from her MP office for two years, in addition to a USD 5,589 fine for allowing another MP to vote on her behalf using her ID card. According to the Supreme Court's ruling, such an action constituted the violation of Article 120 (paragraph 3) of the Constitution, as well as Rule 72 of the parliamentary regulations concerning meetings.

As of now, she has the right to appeal the ruling within 30 days, while her parliamentary status remains intact as the case is not concluded.

The incident happened in 2019, when the parliament debated on royal medals. [Thai PBS World]

Thailand: Election committee urged to probe bribery claims

(pe) The Election Commission (EC) has been petitioned by the opposition Seri Ruam Thai Party, who ask for an investigation into seven parties for alleged violations of election law. This follows claims that MPs from seven 'micro-parties', some consisting of single MPs, have received cash bribes in order to pledge support for the government.

Any parties found to be in violation of the election law would face possible dissolution and the MPs involved could be barred from politics for up to ten years. It is illegal for political parties to allow outsiders to influence their decision making in a way that impacts party members' independence.

Those making the accusations refer to evidence posted on social media, transfer receipts which showed some MPs allegedly receiving 'allowances' of up to USD 2,822. Some members of the accused group have already stated that the receipts are fakes. [Bangkok Post] [Thai PBS World]

Thailand: Senior Supreme Court judge denied promotion after joining pro-democracy protests

(td) The Judicial Commission ruled against the extension of term in office of Wichit Leethamchayo, a Supreme Court's senior judge, following his engagement in pro-democracy protests in 2021. In principle, according to the Thai legal system, an

extension of the service of any judge after retirement is permissible on an annual basis considering performance review.

Leading up to his retirement, Leethamchayo served as head of the Supreme Court's division responsible for issuing writs of certiorari. Hence, he had been regarded as one of the high-profile judicial officials, until he allegedly violated Section 34 of the Code of Judicial Conduct by attending pro-democracy protests. In accordance with the invoked law, a judge must refrain from involvement in politics and parliamentary affairs by any means to ensure transparency and independence of the Supreme Court. Nonetheless, Leethamchayo's case is not the first one as his predecessor, who served as the first female president of the Thai Supreme Court, also participated in anti-government protests led by the conservatives, which resulted in the recent 2014 coup.

All in all, the public commentators are crying foul at what they deem an unfair treatment because of ideological differences. For now, the former judge's retirement pension and any promotion has been suspended for 1 year. However, it should be noted that ruling on his case allegedly went against the norms; the Judicial Commission failed to act on recommendations of the sub-committee to keep him in the lines of promotion. A move that has led to suspicion. [Prachatai English]

Thailand: Youth political activists released on bail after hunger strike and deteriorating health conditions

Two Thai youth political activists and royal critics, nicknamed Bung and Baipor, have been granted a release on bail following a 64-day hunger strike.

The two girls were detained for over three months awaiting trial on royal defamation charges, also known as lèse-majesté under Section 112 of the Thai Criminal Code. Several Human rights lawyers, commenting on the activists' jail conditions, condemned the authorities for the girls' deteriorating health and growing distress while in detention.

Prior to this case, in an attempt to improve the human rights situation in Thailand, a group of pro-democracy demonstrators called upon the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to intervene in the case of arbitrary detention and ramp up international pressure on the Thai government as a party to the International Covenant

on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). [AiR, No. 30, July/2022, 4][Bangkok Post]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meet commences, Taiwan issue possibly on the table

(fe/jp/jw/sg/sb/my) The 55th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting took place in Phnom Penh, Cambodia from August 3. Representatives from 10 ASEAN member states and multiple dialogue partners including the United States (US), China and Australia attended the conference. The 29th Edition of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was also held in the framework of the 55th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, which concluded with the adoption of almost 30 documents on regional cooperation.

The summit of the foreign ministers took place amid tensions surrounding US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and growing outbreaks of violence in Myanmar between army and anti-Junta forces. The fallout from the global COVID 19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its impact on global energy and food security also dominated the conference. [ASEAN]

Cambodia

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen in his role as 2022 ASEAN chair opened the summit with some opening remarks on the Myanmar regime's recent executions, tensions between China and Taiwan, as well as the

Russian invasion of Ukraine. Another major subject of discussion was the cooperation between India and the Mekong countries of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. Specifically, in view of the COVID-19 outbreak and other continuing global concerns, the meeting was planned to evaluate the collaboration's effectiveness and establish the future direction of Mekong-Ganga cooperation. [Phnom Penh Post]

On another note, Hun Sen announced in his opening remarks that Timor-Leste accession to ASEAN will not be granted yet. Analysts believe that among the reasons behind this decision would be Timor-Leste's poor financial strength, its close ties with China, and a failure to condemn Myanmar's military regime. [The Diplomat]

The Cambodian Prime Minister also claimed that the recent executions of four opposition activists have made the ongoing crisis in Myanmar worsen the ties with the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus (5PC), a regional peace agreement. He declares that Cambodia, as well as all ASEAN Member States condemn the executions and the little effort that the Myanmar regime is making to end the atrocities.

Hun Sen asserted that the 5PC has so far achieved very little, if anything, except from providing humanitarian aid to Myanmar. [Phnom Penh Post 2]

China

As turbulence over the Taiwan dispute continued, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi attended the ASEAN meeting to gather support for China's stance on Taiwan. Wang who refrained from meeting his also present US counterpart Antony Blinken did not mention Taiwan in his opening remarks but instead pledged to continue and deepen cooperation between China and the ASEAN countries. In a bilateral meeting with his Cambodian counterpart Prak Sokhonn, both sides agreed that questions concerning Taiwan are Chinese internal affairs. [Associated Press] [The Diplomat]

Wang reportedly also staged two walkouts at the summit, leaving the room together with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov shortly before a speech of Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi. Furthermore, anonymous sources cited by Reuters claimed that Wang walked out before the start of a gala dinner attended by more than a dozen foreign ministers including Blinken. [Reuters] [South China Morning Post]

Japan

(sb) Japan's Foreign minister Yoshimasa Hayashi reaffirmed in his address to the Foreign Ministers' Meeting Japan's support for the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific", an initiative that is, according to the ASEAN, "intended to enhance ASEAN's Community building process and to strengthen and give new momentum for existing ASEAN-led mechanisms to better face challenges and seize opportunities arising from the current and future regional and global environments." He added that Tokyo was ready to support ASEAN's commitment to resolve the crisis in the coup-hit Myanmar, while strongly condemning recent executions by the junta of pro-democracy activists. [ASEAN] [Kyodo News]

On the sideline of the Foreign Ministers' Meeting, Hayashi held a series of bilateral meetings, notably with Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn to boost defense cooperatio. Hayashi added that he will make regular visits to the Ream Naval Base that is being modernized with Chinese funds and where China is suspected of maintaining a military presence. [Kyodo News 1] [[Kyodo News 2]

For his meeting with South Korean Foreign Minister, see below.

South Korea

In his statement addressing the Foreign Ministers' Meeting, South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin vowed that South Korea will strengthen its economic partnership with ASEAN, adding that ASEAN will play a key role in his country's envisioned Indo-Pacific initiative. [The Korea Herald]

On the sidelines of the meeting, Park held a total of 13 bilateral talks, including with Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa. The two ministers agreed to accelerate consultations to resolve disputes over the legacy of Japan's colonial rule in Korea as well as to strengthen trilateral security cooperation with the US in the face of North Korea's missile tests and nuclear threats. [Korean Policy Briefing, in Korean] [Yonhap News Agency 1]

During a meeting with the US Secretary of State Tony Blinken, the two sides reaffirmed the alliance between their countries and discussed continuing close cooperation on North Korea's nuclear issues, in addition to other regional and global issues, including relations with China. [The Department of State] [Yonhap News Agency 2]

Park also spoke with An Kwang-il, North Korea's envoy to ASEAN and Ambassador to Indonesia during a welcome dinner on August 4. Park called for Pyongyang agreement to resume and engage in the inter-Korean dialogue without conditions. [Yonhap News Agency 3]

India

Indian minister of external affairs S. Jaishankar attended an India-ASEAN ministerial meeting on the sidelines of the ASEAN ministerial meeting. During his address to foreign ministers of Indian ASEAN partners, Jaishankar highlighted joint views to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, boost connectivity, and cybersecurity challenges. The foreign minister acknowledged IT, health, agriculture, education, and green growth as critical areas driving India-Southeast Asian partnerships. [Jaishankar via Twitter]

Jaishankar, who represents India as a dialogue partner to ASEAN nations along with the US, China, and Russia, among others, also met up with his counterparts from Australia and the US. On arriving in Phnom Penh, Jaishankar first met up with US secretary of state Antony Blinken with a focus on strengthening India-US ties. The two exchanged views on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its impact on global food insecurity. Furthermore, the pair also highlighted other regional issues, including Sri Lanka's economic crisis and the ongoing situation in Myanmar. Washington has criticized New Delhi after it banned wheat exports in May, citing its own food security while also pushing the Indian government to avoid trade and continuing relations with Moscow [AiR No. 20, May/2022, 3]. [The Indian Express]

Jaishankar also talked separately with foreign ministers from ASEAN members Vietnam, Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, and host nation Cambodia. In his meeting with Singapore foreign minister Vivian Balakrishnan, Jaishankar discussed the Indo-Pacific, the global Covid-19 pandemic, and political instability in Myanmar. While the discussion with Vietnamese foreign minister Bui Thanh Son centered on the India-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. [The Print]

Indian partnerships with Southeast Asia in the ASEAN constellation form a vital part of India's Act East Policy which aims to "develop" India's Northeast Regions as a gateway to Southeast Asia. The Act East Policy focuses on connectivity through physical infrastructure to create a seamless west-east link from India to Southeast Asia. [The Diplomat]

Pakistan

Pakistan's foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari's speech emphasized climate change and sustainable development. Pakistan has been ravaged by alternating extreme drought and rainfall, which has worsened food security and has already been inflated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Bilawal further highlighted the situation in Afghanistan and urged participants to push for more inclusivity in governance and respect for the human rights of all Afghans. [Pakistan ministry of foreign affairs] [The Express Tribune]

On the sidelines of the conference, Bilawal also met up with the host and Cambodian counterpart, Prak Sokhonn. The two discussed regional issues and aimed to push for greater bilateral cooperation. [Pakistan Today] Bilawal engaged with several other foreign ministers from Indonesia, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and Singapore. [Dawn]

Sri Lanka

Newly inaugurated foreign minister Ali Sabry represented his country at the round table. In his address to representatives, Ali briefed delegates about the ongoing economic struggles his country is facing and echoed concerns about the global effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sabry reiterated these concerns in separate discussions with Antony Blinken, Chinese representative Wang Yi and Indian counterpart Jaishankar among others. Meanwhile, partners have assured support for the new government in Colombo amid the current economic turmoil and civil unrest. [Newswire] [The Print]

Violent protests have erupted in Sri Lanka against the government of the current president and prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe. The country is in the midst of the worst economic crisis since independence and defaulted on its USD 51 billion foreign debt in April after missing interest payments on two USD 1.25 billion sovereign bonds [see AiR No. 17, April/2022, 4]. Colombo is in talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and bilateral creditors such as India and China for fresh funds [see AiR No. 25, June/2022, 3]. Considering the lack of foreign currency, Colombo is struggling to get oil shipments from its usual suppliers in the Gulf or elsewhere.

Bangladesh

Foreign minister AK Abdul Momen spoke of maximizing Bangladesh's potential as a hub for trade in the Bay of Bengal. Momen highlighted his country's vision of transitioning into a hub of road, rail, maritime,

and air connectivity for South Asian and Southeast Asian countries.

The cornerstone of Momen's visit focused on the ongoing Rohingya crisis in neighboring Myanmar, which has significantly impacted Bangladesh. Almost a million people have fled to Bangladesh after continuous outbreaks of violence against the Muslim Rohingya population since 2016. Dhaka is keen to repatriate refugees back to Myanmar but has so far failed. To secure progress, Momen urged ASEAN and dialogue partners to sanction the military leaders in Myanmar. Additionally, the foreign envoy made multiple proposals to ensure economic cooperation and strengthen regional cooperation. These include plans for greater resource exploration and an energy hub in the Bay of Bengal region. Like the other participants, Momen also spoke of the pandemic, food security, and climate change challenges. [The Daily Star] [Dhaka Tribune]

Pakistan Army Chief seeks financial help from UAE, Saudi Arabia

(sg) Pakistan's army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa has contacted Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) requesting financial aid for his country. The move comes after the International Monetary Fund (IMF) called on Pakistan to provide firm guarantees for USD 4 billion in external financing ahead of a USD 6 billion IMF line of credit in late 2022 to fulfill obligations included in a staff-level agreement with the IMF signed in August [see AiR No. 29, July/2022, 3].

General Bajwa had previously reached out to United States Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman seeking Washington's help in securing an early release of an essential USD 1.17 billion installment from the IMF to his country. However, the agreement is still subject to approval from the IMF's board of directors – which is not scheduled to meet until late August. [AiR No. 31, August/2022, 1]

The IMF has now reportedly asked that Islamabad provide monetary guarantees of up to USD 4 billion from its allies worldwide. This new requirement has sent the all-powerful Pakistan military to ask its middle eastern partners for financial help. The two middle eastern countries have both financially helped Pakistan in the past. In 2018 both countries extended bailout packages to the government of then prime minister Imran Khan, with General Bajwa playing an integral part in securing the funding. [Business Standard]

In light of the ongoing crisis, Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif traveled to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in April but returned empty-handed as neither country could offer any firm assurance [see AiR No. 18, May/2022, 1]

Global food security crisis to worsen amid India drought

(sg) A drop in monsoon rainfall in parts of India could pose a severe threat to the fragile global food security. The decline in rainfall in India's rice-producing regions is set to have consequences on this year's rice harvest, which could drop by around 8 percent.

Monsoon rainfall around the Indian states of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh has fallen by as much as 45 percent. According to the All India Rice Exporters Association, this has partly led to a 13 percent drop in rice planting area in these provinces – the smallest area in the last three years. [Geo News]

India is the world's largest producer and exporter of rice, representing roughly 40% of the world's total trade in the commodity. Bangladesh, China, Nepal, and Middle Eastern countries are significant customers of Indian rice and could suffer from lower import volumes and higher prices. Diminishing production will lead to surging costs and inflation. According to Quartz, "export prices are expected to increase to USD 400 a metric ton by September, from USD 365 now." [Bloomberg]

Rice shortage could become the next challenge for the global food supply after the Russian invasion of Ukraine led to a fall in worldwide wheat supplies. Ukraine and Russia are some of the largest wheat exporters. In response to the crisis, New Delhi announced a ban on wheat exports on May 13. The Indian government cited food security, rising commodity prices, and a record-breaking heatwave as reasons for the measure. [see AiR No. 20, May/2022, 3]

India increases efforts in fighter jet export

(bs) In an attempt to reduce the country's reliance on foreign military equipment, India has been investing in the production of 83 Tejas fighter jets. The government is also aiming at selling part of those abroad. In 2020, to pursue its goals, the government signed a USD 6 billion contract with Hindustan Aeronautics, agreeing

to produce 83 fighter jets and begin their delivery in 2023. [The Straits Time]

India made a first offer of 18 light-combat aircraft (LCA) to Malaysia. However, other countries, including Argentina, Australia, Egypt, the United States, Indonesia, and the Philippines, have shown interest in the Indian-produced jets.

The country is currently relying on military equipment mostly from Russia, the United Kingdom, and France.

India approves new emission reduction scheme

(bs) On August 3, India's Union Cabinet approved new updates to the national emission reduction scheme. The document, known as nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), aims at reducing Emissions Intensity of the country's GDP by 45 percent and achieve 50 percent cumulative electric power installed capacity from non-fossil fuel-based energy resources by 2030.

The approval came ahead of the upcoming COP27, scheduled in November 2022, and was delivered in the framework of the Intended Nationally Determined Contribution that India submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2015. Currently, the country is attempting to speed up efforts to meet the 2015 NDC goals and the Paris Agreement, an international treaty on climate change effective since 2016. [Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change]

Although at a slow pace, India has been broadly praised for its ongoing effort in tackling climate change. Despite being harshly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, the country has shown progress. Recent findings reported that India has allocated two-thirds of the resources towards a green recovery. It has also provided subsidies for fossil fuels as well as renewable energy. However, it is worth mentioning that the government has made little to no efforts in tackling the coal-fired production across the country. [Climate Action Tracker]

South Korea to join preliminary Chip 4 meeting

(my) South Korea has reportedly decided to attend a preliminary meeting of the so-called "Chip 4" alliance,

envisioned semiconductor alliance involving also the U.S. Japan and Taiwan that is widely seen as an attempt to strategically isolate China in the semiconductor supply chain.

Scheduled to take place at the end of August or in early September, the meeting is believed to focus on setting the detailed agenda of the Chip 4, as well as determining the scope of participation of each country and deciding on a formal name for the group.

Cautious about joining the alliance, since its largest trade partner China is excluded from the alliance, South Korea has refused to describe the group as an exclusive "alliance", calling it instead a cooperation dialogue on semiconductor supply chains.

According to the presidential official, whether South Korea officially joins the alliance will be determined by the results of the meeting. [Yonhap News Agency]

Brunei Crown Prince discusses maritime security with Singaporean delegation

(bs) A Bruneian delegation led by Brunei Crown Prince and Senior Minister at the Prime Minister's Office paid an official visit to Singapore Changi Naval Base.

During the visit, the delegation met its Singaporean counterpart and discussed maritime security and the promotion of defense cooperation on a regional level. They specifically stressed the importance of enhancing their inter-agency coordination.

Following their first meeting, Brunei Crown Prince boarded the RSS Sovereignty Littoral Mission Vessel (LMV), a key resource of the Singapore Navy, where he was introduced to Singapore's Maritime Security (MARSEC) area of operation and deterrence operation demonstrations. [The Star]

Cambodia, Malaysia set to sign domestic worker MoU

(pe) Malaysia has announced plans to sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for the recruitment of Cambodian domestic workers into the country. Once signed, the MoU would allow for recruitment to begin in September 2022.

In addition, Malaysia has begun recruiting domestic workers from Bangladesh and Indonesia, as a result of

similar agreements being reached with the source countries. [Khmer Times]

Despite MoUs being reached, there continues to be some conflict between Malaysia and source countries with regards to the protections offered against human trafficking into Malaysia. For example, Indonesia has previously accused Malaysia of breaching their MoU by using online recruitment channels to find workers, bypassing systems established to protect worker safety. Critics argue that the existence of MoUs does not always serve to protect workers from abuse. [Free Malaysia Today]

Cambodian armed forces begin official visit to Vietnam

(bs) On August 8, a delegation of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) began an official visit to Vietnam to celebrate the 55th anniversary of the establishment of the countries' bilateral diplomatic relationship and the Vietnam-Cambodia Friendship Year 2022.

The army representatives from both countries discussed enhancing long-term cooperation in various fields, including cross-border defense and delegation exchanges to train national armed forces staff.

The parties also agreed to maintain information sharing mechanisms in military areas and cooperate in responding to natural disasters, infectious diseases, as well as tackling illegal migration. [Vietnam Plus]

China's furious response US House Speaker's Taiwan visit

(jw/sb/my) In response to US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan [see AiR No. 31, August/2022, 1], China started on August 4 to hold large-scale live-fire air and sea military drills in areas all around Taiwan, crossing the Taiwan Strait median line, firing numerous missiles near or over Taiwan and disrupting key trade routes and air traffic effectively isolating the island. The Taiwanese military claimed that 66 sorties of Chinese aircrafts were flown on August 7 alone. In a latest development, China deployed 45 warplanes and 10 warships into areas around Taiwan on August 9, with 16 of the 45 aircraft crossing the Taiwan Strait median line, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense said. [CNN] [Reuters 1] [DW] [Focus Taiwan]

Reacting to China's display of force, Taiwan held civil defense drills and put its military on alert. However, Taiwanese forces displayed some restraint and refrained from directly confronting Chinese ships and aircraft operating near or across the median line, possibly to avoid escalation or accidents. Missiles flying over Taiwan also prompted no reaction, due to their high altitude. Nevertheless, the Taiwanese navy repeatedly hindered Chinese boats from approaching the island more closely, reportedly engaging in a "cat and mouse" game in the Taiwan Strait. Chinese drones spotted flying over restricted areas were met with warning flares. According to the Taiwanese Defense Ministry, Taiwan does not seek escalation but prepares itself for combat. Washington also deployed some of its military assets including the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan and its battle group in the area. [Associated Press 1] [Reuters 2] [Reuters 3] [Taipei Times]

In a move not officially designated as a retaliatory measure, China hit Taiwan with trade restrictions, suspending imports of food products ranging from tea leaves and honey to fruits and fish. According to Chinese authorities, the trade limitations were imposed due to pesticide residue detected on products as well as frozen fish packages carrying the COVID-19 virus. However, Chinese authorities also suspended. the export of sand from China to Taiwan. Taiwanese media linked the trade limitations to the Pelosi visit. [Bloomberg] [CNN] [Focus Taiwan]

China also targeted the US, sanctioning House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and her immediate family. A statement asserting that this is in response to her "egregious provocation" did not specify the nature of the sanctions. Furthermore, China announced that it would cut certain communication channels with the US, suspending bilateral talks and collaboration on issues including climate emergency, repatriation of illegal immigrants, counternarcotics and legal assistance in criminal matters. China also cut communication channels meant to prevent unintentional flare-ups by facilitating coordination between US and Chinese commanders conducting military operations. [Chinese Foreign Ministry] [The Guardian 1]

The White House criticized the decision to suspend communication on the abovementioned issues as "irresponsible", vowing to "continue [...] efforts to keep opening lines of Communication". According to US Special Envoy on Climate Change John Kerry, the Chinese decision to suspend bilateral talks on climate change "punishes the world." [Associated Press 2] [Reuters 4]

On the diplomatic front, the Chinese military drills were heavily criticized by Taiwan and western countries. While the Taiwanese Defense Ministry called the drills "highly provocative", Foreign Minister Joseph Wu called China's threat "more serious than ever," arguing that exercises along with "cyberattacks, disinformation and economic coercion," were an attempt to weaken public morale in Taiwan." He, furthermore, warned that Beijing's intention was "to link the East and South China seas through the Taiwan Strait so the entire area becomes its internal waters."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken asserted that "China has chosen to overreact and use Speaker Pelosi's visit as a pretext to increase provocative military activity in and around the Taiwan Strait". Blinken emphasized that the US would not be intimidated by the drills and continue to "fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows". [Al Jazeera] [Reuters 5] [South China Morning Post]

Furthermore, the foreign ministers of the G7 countries issued a statement voicing their concern over "threatening actions by the People's Republic of China" which have "no justification". The ministers urged China "not to unilaterally change the status quo by force in the region, and to resolve cross-Strait differences by peaceful means" instead of "increasing tensions and destabilizing the region".

In a reaction to the statement, China summoned diplomatic envoys of European Union member states to lodge solemn representations. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi rejected the statement, claiming that it "groundlessly criticizes China". Furthermore, China canceled a planned meeting between Wang and his counterpart from G7 member Japan Yoshimasa Hayashi due to the statement on the sidelines of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Cambodia. [CGTN] [Reuters 6] [US Department of State]

In an earlier statement, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida condemned the Chinese military drills as a "grave problem" that must "stop immediately," after Chinese missiles that were fired as part of the drills landed in Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone east of Taiwan. Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi described China's drills as "extremely coercive," and as "a grave issue that concerns our country's national security and the safety of the people." [Reuters 7] [The Guardian 2] [Kyodo News]

China ally, meanwhile, called Pelosi's Taiwan visit an "impudent intervention of the US in internal affairs," expressing support for the Chinese government's principles and added that "intentional political and

military provocations" are to blame for the region's threatened peace and security. [MBC News, in Korean] [The Diplomat]

The Taiwan dispute dominated a meeting hosted by ASEAN with attendees from 27 countries including the foreign ministers of Russia, China and the US. As ASEAN is split between countries with close ties to China and countries that are skeptical of Chinese influence, a joint statement did not mention China or the US but called for "maximum restraint" and stated that "ASEAN stands ready to play a constructive role in facilitating peaceful dialogue." [ASEAN] [France 24]

US House Speaker Pelosi visits Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan

(dql/my/sb) US Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's Asia tour last week took her to Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan. For Singapore and Malaysia, see [AiR No. 31, August/2022, 1]

In Taiwan, the third visit of her tour, Pelosi visited the parliament and met with President Tsai Ing-wen. On both occasions, she reaffirmed U.S. commitment to Taiwan, highlighting mutual security interests between the US and Taiwan, economic cooperation, and "shared values of self-governance and self-determination." [The Diplomat]

For China's furious response to her Taiwan visit, see entry above in this issue.

In South Korea, Pelosi held talks with Kim Jin-pyo, the National Assembly Speaker. In a joint press conference, both stated that both administrations would work together to denuclearize North Korea and promote interparliamentary cooperation.

Pelosi also spoke on the phone with President Yoon Suk-yeol, pledging strong cooperation between the two countries to establish regional security and order in the Indo-Pacific. Yoon was criticized both domestically and internationally for declining to meet Pelosi in person, "skipping Pelosi due to his staycation," and snubbing the US House Speaker. [Washington Post] [Yonhap News Agency] [The Diplomat] [Hankyoreh, in Korean]

In Tokyo, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Pelosi agreed on close cooperation between Japan and the U.S. to ensure peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. [Kyodo News]

US delegation visit Solomon Islands trying to regain foothold in Pacific

(jw) A high-ranking diplomatic delegation headed by Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman arrived in the Solomon Islands on August 6 for a three-day visit meant to foster cooperation between the US and the Pacific region. After China drastically stepped up its diplomatic presence in the region, securing multiple bilateral agreements with Pacific island nations and a security pact with the Solomon Islands [see AiR No. 23, June/2022, 1], the US also tries to increase its influence seeking to open embassies on the Solomon Islands, Kiribati and Tonga, which Sherman visited before arriving on the Solomon Islands.

During her visit which was also meant to commemorate the World War Two battle of Guadalcanal where the US defeated Japan, Sherman refrained from criticizing China directly but rebuked leaders who "believe that the principles and institutions the world set up after the Second World War, the rules-based international order [...] can be ignored and undermined, diminished and destroyed."

However, in a sign of tension, Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare did not attend a commemoration service, "snubbing" the US delegation according to local press. Reacting to Sogavare's absence, Sherman stated that she pitied the missed opportunity to enhance the partnership between the US and the Solomon Islands. However, Sherman emphasized that solidarity with the Pacific Islands is prioritized under the administration of US President Joe Biden. [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2] [Solomon Star] [Voice of America]

China to allow visit of Turkish delegation to Xinjiang

(jw) At an August 3 meeting between Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu both sides discussed a possible visit of a Turkish delegation to the Chinese province of Xinjiang, where China is accused of committing large-scale human rights violations against the Uyghur minority that also has a strong presence in Turkey. According to Wang, "China has always taken an attitude of being open and transparent on issues related to Xinjiang" and can invite Turkish officials to "bust the false narrative and promote transparency".

The Chinese pledge for transparency comes two months after UN High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet visited Xinjiang and was heavily criticized for allegedly allowing China to score a propaganda victory. After her visit, Bachelet asserted that she was not able to move freely and promised to shortly publish a report on the Human Rights situation in Xinjiang. However, China exerted pressure on Bachelet to not publish the report [see AiR No. 30, July/2022, 4]. [Republic World] [South China Morning Post]

China engages Zambia's private creditors for debt restructuring talks

(jw) China invited private creditors of Zambia to discuss possibilities for the restructuring of the African nation's debt shortly after official creditors led by China agreed to ramp up their restructuring efforts. An agreement reached in the previous week paves the way for a USD 1.3 billion loan from the IMF and sets a precedent for Chinese cooperation with lenders who defaulted on their debt – like Zambia in 2020 – or are threatened by default.

To further save money, Zambia announced the discontinuation of several infrastructure projects with Chinese contractors and moved to cancel USD 1.6 billion Chinese loans that have been negotiated but not yet disbursed. [CNBC] [Financial Times] [South China Morning Post 1]

China to cut tariffs on imports from least developed countries

(dql) In a separate move, the Chinese Customs Tariff Commission announced that China will cut tariffs on 98 percent of taxable goods imported from 16 countries considered to be belonging to world's poorest countries, including Bangladesh, Cambodia, the Central African Republic, Chad, Djibouti, Eritrea, Guinea, Kiribati, Laos, Mozambique, Nepal, Rwanda, the Solomon Islands, Sudan, Togo, and Vanuatu. Applying to nearly 8,800 items, the tariff cuts will take effect on September 1.

Observers believe that this move might aim at increase international acceptance of the yuan for cross-border settlements, as part of Beijing's efforts to tackle the global reliance on the US dollar for trade and investment settlement. [South China Morning Post 2]

Ukrainian President Zelenskyy urges China to refrain from supporting Russia

(jw) On August 3, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy clarified his stance toward China, stating that he accepts China being neutral but urges the country to refrain from assisting Russia in any way. Speaking in front of Australian university students, Zelenskyy said that he would wish for China to join western countries in condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, according to Zelenskyy, the status quo is acceptable as "[China's] neutrality is better than China joining Russia." [Associated Press]

In an interview with the South China Morning Post, Zelenskyy further elaborated that he hopes for China to use its political and economic clout to pressure Russia into relenting its war efforts. Zelenskyy also claimed that he had sought direct contact with Chinese President Xi Jinping since the invasion started in late February but was not given the opportunity to call Xi. He reiterated that even though he "would really like China to review its attitude towards the Russian Federation" he respects the Chinese decision to maintain a "balanced" attitude towards the war and continues to hope for a steady development of relations between Ukraine and China – its largest trading partner.

Additionally, Zelenskyy appealed to the global responsibility of China, urging it to support the implementation of international norms through its permanent membership in the UN Security Council. According to Zelenskyy, China could use its economic weight to significantly restrain Russian military capabilities, for example by limiting trade with Russia until the war is over. [South China Morning Post]

Nepal's Foreign Minister Khadka in China; visit closely watched by United States, India

(op/lm) Nepal's Foreign Minister Narayan Khadka arrived in China on August 9 for a three-day visit aimed at strengthening bilateral ties at a time when the political leadership at home wants to avoid being caught up in Beijing's geopolitical power games with the United States. Khada's trip marked the first trip of a high-level Nepalese official to China since the government of Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba

assumed office in July of last year. [The Kathmandu Post]

While sandwiched between India and China, Nepal has increased engagement with the US in recent years, ratifying a US-funded infrastructure assistance package in February. Critics say the agreement with the Millennium Challenge Corporation undermines the Himalayan nation's sovereignty, while also ensnaring Nepal in Washington's deepening competition with China. [AiR No. 9, March/2022, 1] [Deutsche Welle]

But in June, the Nepalese government decided to withdraw from joining the State Partnership Program (SPP), a key US security cooperation program set up to enhance cooperation between the US National Guard and partner nation militaries [see AiR No. 26, June/2022, 4]. US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Donald Lu, who visited Nepal on July 28, said Kathmandu dropped out of the SPP following pressure from Beijing [see AiR No. 31, August/2022, 1]. China has denied this.

In light of this, Khadka's trip – coming at the invitation of his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi – is widely seen as Beijing's effort to consolidate support among friendly countries. It will also provide an opportunity to discuss the prospect of a trans-Himalayan connectivity under China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Ms. Vaishnavi Deegwal contributed research to this entry.

Chinese Foreign Minister meets Mongolian counterpart, President, vows to deepen cooperation

(jw) On August 8, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met his Mongolian counterpart Batmunkh Battsetseg and the Mongolian President Ukhnaa Khurelsukh with both sides agreeing to enhance their cooperation under multiple frameworks such as the Belt and Road Initiative. According to Chinese state-owned media, Mongolia expressed its support for China in viewing issues relating to Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet or Hong Kong as internal affairs.

Specifically, both sides discussed the enhancement of cross-border exchange, with China pledging to gradually reopen its border, facilitating trade, investment and traffic over ports, railways and highways. China and Mongolia also agreed to ramp up their afforestation efforts and cooperation on desertification control. [Xinhua 1] [Xinhua 2] [Xinhua 3]

Chinese regulators allow Australian bank to sell stake in Chinese bank, marking possible thaw in relations

(jw) After only four months of wait time, Chinese regulators gave the Commonwealth Bank of Australia the green light for selling its USD 1.8 billion stake in the Bank of Hangzhou. The quick proceeding of the transaction is noteworthy as a previous attempt of the Commonwealth Bank of Australia to sell its stake in a Chinese business took two years, with Chinese regulators protracting deliberations amid deteriorating bilateral relations. The difference in deliberation time does however not necessarily mark a thaw in diplomatic relations as the previous transaction was more complicated and politically sensitive. Still, the acceleration of regulatory proceedings comes as China and Australia resume some high-level diplomatic interaction after relations were at an all-time low during the previous conservative government of former Prime Minister Scott Morrison [see AiR No. 28, July/2022, 2] [Financial Review]

Backchannel talks with India have reached dead end, Pakistani source claims

(lm) Backchannel talks between Pakistan and India have reached a dead end, with both sides struggling to agree on moves that would pave the way for a gradual improvement in bilateral relations, a source familiar with the developments has told *The Express Tribune*. [The Express Tribune]

According to the source, backchannel talks that began during the tenure of then Prime Minister Imran Khan picked up pace in April after the change of government. Two months earlier, the two countries had agreed to observe a ceasefire along the Line of Control – the de facto border that divides the disputed Kashmir Valley between the two countries [see AiR No. 9, March/2021, 1].

But despite “intense” backchannel diplomacy, the two sides were not willing to concede an inch on their respective issues. Pakistan maintains that India must take steps with regards to Kashmir - claimed in full by both New Delhi and Islamabad - before any process of normalization of ties begins. India, however, is more interested in Pakistan first exploring the option of resuming bilateral trade.

US, Indonesia hold joint military drills, enhancing cooperation amid growing Chinese assertiveness

(jw) The US and Indonesia began annual joint military drills on August 3, involving more than 5000 soldiers – for the first time also joined by soldiers from partner countries Australia, Japan and Singapore. The combat exercises which are supposed to last for two weeks are meant to strengthen cooperation between the US and regional partners amid the growing assertiveness of China. Even though China and Indonesia have close diplomatic ties, Chinese territorial ambitions in the South China Sea put a strain on bilateral relations and draw Indonesia toward the US. [Associated Press]

Indonesian repatriates victims of human trafficking from Cambodia

(jvk) Twelve Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) who are victims of fraud and human trafficking in Cambodia arrived in Indonesia on August 5. Their arrival was facilitated by close coordination between the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Indonesian Embassy in Phnom Penh, and the Cambodian Police.

Previously, 62 Indonesians were found to be victims of trafficking via an online scam in the Cambodian province of Sihanoukville. In a statement, the Cambodian Police highlighted that "cooperation to prevent human trafficking must be strengthened." [MedCom] [The Diplomat]

A.M Farul Baqi contributed research to this article

Indonesia proposes tighter oversight on nuclear submarine technology

(jvk) Indonesia is lobbying for stricter supervision of nuclear-powered submarines in the United Nations, on grounds of humanitarian and environmental concerns. Indonesia has called for close monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), on nuclear submarine technologies, citing the global non-proliferation pact.

A challenge in Indonesia's proposal includes the uncertainty that nuclear-powered states will adhere to the non-proliferation treaty. Analysts say that though

Australia is engaged in Aukus, the security pact with Britain and the United States, Indonesia's proposal for stricter oversight should have no negative impact on Australia-Indonesia relations. [South China Morning Post]

A.M Farul Baqi contributed research to this article

Japanese largest trading companies to consider continuance in Sakhalin 2 gas project

(sb) Japanese Industry Minister Koichi Hagiuda has revealed he has asked two of the country's largest trading companies Mitsui & Co. and Mitsubishi Corp to consider joining a new operating company for the Sakhalin 2 gas project in the Russian Far East, citing the need to ensure stable energy supply. Both companies hold stakes in the project, 12.5 % and 10 % stakes respectively.

Haguida's request comes in response to a change in control over the project. A decree that was signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin in June to set up a new operating company for Sakhalin 2 that is affiliated with Russian energy company Gazprom, effectively brought it under the control of the Russian government, replacing the current operator Sakhalin Energy Investment Co. A second decree, issued on August 2, requires that foreign investors to apply within a month to maintain their stakes in the new entity.

British oil and gas giant Shell decided to drop out of the Sakhalin-2 project in February after Russia begun its invasion of Ukraine.

The production of Sakhalin-2 is about 10 million tons of LNG a year, of which Japan imports 6 million. [Nikkei Asia] [Kyodo News]

Lao PDR, Thailand discuss cooperation on wildlife trafficking prevention and rail links to connect with China

(td) Lao PDR and Thailand have stepped up efforts in strengthening their bilateral ties through close cooperation in various sectors, including cross-border security and connectivity.

On the security front, relevant enforcement agencies from the two countries attended a workshop organized by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) to combat wildlife Trafficking in the northern Lao province of Bokeo, specifically in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (SEZ). To that end, Thai and Lao authorities committed to enforce policy initiatives into practice. In this regard, the parties discussed ways forward to enhance existing measures as well as new mechanisms to be utilized in the tracking and prevention of wildlife traffickers.

With regards to connectivity, following the success of the China-sponsored railway in a landlocked country, Lao PDR has provided Thailand with the basis on which it could build for an enhanced integration to enable it to directly connect with China. Therefore, Thailand has embarked on the three-phased railway construction expected to be completed by 2028. Albeit backlogs, the Transport Ministry pressed ahead with an array of plans to support the project, ranging from a feasibility of a new crossing bridge over Mekong the river, domestic high-speed railway, products transfer center, to inter-agencies cooperation to realize these objectives.

In general, it is noticeable that, behind those cooperation between the two Southeast Asian nations, China has played a supportive role, specifically the three-way rail links which may potentially lead to the set up of regional economic corridors. Laos thus hails China as the driving force in social and economic developments. On the sidelines of ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting, they further underscored their unbreakable partnership. [AiR, No. 28, July/2022, 2] [The Laotian Times][The Nation Thailand]

Myanmar authorities charge Japanese filmmaker with incitement

(jp) Japanese filmmaker Toru Kubota, who was detained by the Myanmar military since July 30 after he filmed anti-regime demonstrations, was charged with incitement under section 505 (a) and immigration law 13-1, which together carry up to 8 years in prison. Following the filing of the charges, Kubota was transferred to Yangon's Insein prison despite calls from the Japanese government for his immediate release.

Previously, Kubota also produced documentaries about the Muslim Rohingya minority in Myanmar and about "refugees and ethnic issues" for Al Jazeera and VICE Japan.

Since the 2021 military coup that had overthrown the Myanmar civilian government, violence and arbitrary arrests in the country have alarmingly escalated. At least 135 journalists have been arrested in Myanmar, according to Reporters Without Borders. Moreover, according to a local monitoring group, 2,100 people have been killed in Myanmar's crackdown on dissidents and 15,000 have been arrested. In addition, 48 journalists have remained in detention. [AiR No. 31, August/2022, 1] [Al Jazeera] [Channel News Asia] [Japan Times] [Reuters]

Ousted Myanmar civilian government opens office in Australia

(jp) Myanmar's shadow National Unity Government (NUG) opened its representative office in Canberra, Australia, less than two kilometers from the official embassy of Myanmar. The NUG's representative in Australia described the event as a "momentous occasion."

The new opening of a NUG office in Australia was particularly welcomed by both the Australian and the shadow Myanmar governments as the question of Australia's diplomatic relations with Myanmar has been subjected to increasing scrutiny since the 2021 coup.

During the inauguration event, a representative of the Australian foreign minister ensured that the country "will continue engaging with representatives of the NUG" and that Australia's engagement with the military regime would remain "necessarily limited."

The NUG was formed in May 2021 by ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy and other opponents of the military junta, which took over the country in a violent military coup in February 2021. [SBS News] [NUG Representative Office – Australia, in Burmese]

Prominent members of Nepal's ruling party visit neighboring India

(op/lm) Bimalendra Nidhi and Sujata Koirala, two prominent members of Nepal's ruling Nepali Congress (NC) party are currently visiting India on separate trips and with distinct objectives.

On August 2, Koirala met with India's Defense Minister Rajnath Singh, who is also the head of the nation's

ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Koirala hasn't revealed any further information about the meeting despite releasing images from it.

Nidhi has been in India for a while at this point. On August 3, the former vice-president of the NC met with Vijay Chauthaiwale, the head of the BJP's foreign affairs division, at the party's headquarters in New Delhi. Nidhi and Chauthaiwale discussed future plans for enhancing ties between NC and BJP as well as between the two adjacent nations during their roughly hour-long discussion.

On the same day, Nidhi met Nitin Gadkari, India's Minister of Road Transport and Highways, at his home. The two leaders talked about building up Nepal's physical infrastructure during their discussion. Nidhi asked that the Indian government expand the four-lane Ayodhya-Bhittamod road to the Nepalese border at Jatahi via Girijasthan in the Madhubani region of India. The involved authorities were then promptly told by Gadkari to incorporate the road expansion to the Jatahi border into the ministry's plans.

On August 3, Nidhi also met with Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, India's hydropower minister. During the meeting, the two talked about concerns pertaining to both nations, including flood control, energy development, and highways and water resources. Shankar Sharma, the ambassador of Nepal to India, was also present when Nidhi met with Ministers Gadkari and Shekhawat. During the sessions, Ambassador Sharma brought up the topic of giving Nepal a line of credit and technical support for building physical infrastructure. [Setopati 1]

North Korea: UN envoy refutes criticism of nuclear program

(my) North Korea's mission to the United Nations has lashed out against the US condemnation of its nuclear program at the Review Conference for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken accusing Pyongyang of continuing to expand its "unlawful nuclear program" and decrying its "ongoing provocations against the region."

In response, North Korea warned in its conference statement that nobody had the right to impinge on the country's right to self-defense, adding that "[t]oday, the mastermind that undermines the foundation of the non-proliferation regime is none other than the US." North Korea "will never tolerate any attempt by the US

and its servile forces to groundlessly accuse our state and encroach upon our sovereign rights and national interests," the statement continued. [MBC News, in Korean] [Yonhap News Agency]

Pyongyang slams Seoul's North Korea policy

(my) President Yoon Suk-yeol's approach to the North received criticism from North Korean media.

The Yoon administration's "audacious plan" on North Korea was presented by Foreign Minister Park Jin during the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) on August 5. The "audacious plan" suggests to offer economic and security support step by step in response to North Korea's actual denuclearization efforts.

The weekly North Korean publication Tongil Shinbo on August 7 linked Yoon's strategy to the approach to Pyongyang taken by former President Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013). The policy called 'denuclearization, open and 3000' promised to provide North Korea with all the aid necessary to raise its per capita income to USD 3,000 within 10 years if it chose the road of full denuclearization.

Tongil Shinbo reported that the Yoon administration's policy was simply a modified version of Lee's plan that was "thrown in a trash bin ten years ago," calling it an unrealistic plan for reunification by absorption. [The Korea Herald]

North Korean media lash out against South's appointment of human rights ambassador for the North

(my) North Korean media have criticized South Korea's appointment of an ambassador-at-large for North Korean human rights.

In contrast with the previous Moon Jae-in administration, the Yoon Suk-yeol administration has expressed its willingness to implement the North Korean Human Rights Act, which was enacted in March 2016. Accordingly, it is actively promoting the launch of the North Korean Human Rights Foundation this year. The foundation will be responsible for investigating the status of North Korean human rights and developing related policies.

The Yoon administration appointed Lee Shin-hwa, a professor of political diplomacy at Korea University, on July 28 as the ambassador-at-large of North Korean human rights. The position has been vacant for the past five years. Ambassador Lee said, "We feel sorry that human rights have often gone backward depending on the nature of the regime," expressing her intention to play an active role in promoting North Korean human rights.

North Korea's Internet media Uriminzokkiri ("Among Our People") criticized the appointment, calling it "the height of shamelessness and sophistry," and that "nothing more than a silly trick to avoid the extreme governance crisis they are facing."

"South Korea has the most serious problem and is the world's worst place that abuses human rights," another North Korean outlet, Echo of Unification. said on the same day. [Kyunghyang, in Korean] [The Korean Herald]

Philippines' President meets US Secretary of State meet, US assures commitment to Mutual Defense Treaty

(jd) United States (US) Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Philippines' President Marcos Jr. on August 6 as both seek to strengthen military ties amid increased tensions in the region. Blinken assured that the United States would act in defense of the Philippines if attacked in the South China Sea, underlining the US commitment to the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) that links the two countries.

The meeting inevitably covered the US-China tensions over US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and China's military exercises around the island. In the opening remarks to Blinken, Marcos Jr stated that the intensity of the tensions had been high even before Pelosi's trip, as the situation was already volatile in the international diplomatic scene. He reiterated therefore, that the relationship between the United States and the Philippines is an important matter.

Blinken defined the 70-year-old defense pact between the two countries as ironclad, assuring that any attack on the Philippines would invoke US mutual defense commitments under their treaty.

Analysts observe that Marcos Jr's administration will need to balance ties between China and the US, as the

US-Philippines relations were previously shaken by the anti-US rhetoric adopted by the Duterte's administration.. [CNN]

In addition, Philippines' Foreign Secretary Enrique Manalo said that joint patrols between the Philippines and the US could be considered as a possibility since the subject falls under the MDT. The US is also working with fisherfolks and researchers from the Philippines, activity attributed to protecting the country's maritime resources from illegal fishing and environmental destruction. Observers consider reference to illegal fishing and related activity to be a veiled reference to Chinese military actions in the contested waterway.. [Inquirer News] [The New York Times]

South Korean and Australian defense ministers hold talks

(my) Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Richard Marles held bilateral talks with South Korean Defense Minister Lee Jong-sup on August 4, during Lee's visit to Australia. During the talks, the two ministers agreed to strengthen defense cooperation, in a number of areas, including defense science and technology, outer space and the arms industry as well as joint bilateral and regional military exercises.

Furthermore, Lee and Marles reaffirmed their countries cooperation to achieve North Korea's denuclearization. [The Korean Herald]

South Korean National Assembly Speaker visits Poland, Romania

(my) The speaker of the National Assembly Kim Jin-pyo visited Poland and Romania last week to discuss cooperation in the defense industry and economic sector.

Kim and his Polish counterpart Elżbieta Witek held talks on August 5 during which both sides discussed the finalization of major arms export deals under which Poland would acquire 48 FA-50 jets, 980 K2 battle tanks and 648 K9 howitzers form South Korea. They also discussed ways to open Poland's nuclear reactor construction project to South Korean companies.

In Romania, Kim met with Acting President of the Senate Alina-Ștefania Gorghiu to speak on South Korea contributing to Romania's arms modernization and to

propose that South Korea, together with the U.S., participate in Romania's nuclear reactor project. [Yonhap News Agency 1] [Yonhap News Agency 2

U.S. Secretary of State reaffirmed US' support for Sri Lankans while meeting Sri Lanka's FM

US Secretary of State met with Sri Lankan Foreign Minister to discuss US cooperation with the country. He reaffirmed that the US stands with Sri Lankan public emphasized that US assistance of $ 179 million to be provided to support the vulnerable community and enhance the country's economy during these difficult times. [ColomboPage]

New Zealand's High Commissioner meets key Sri Lankan parliamentarians

(lm) New Zealand's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka met with the Sri Lankan prime minister, opposition leader and National Peoples' Power leader to discuss bilateral cooperation, the economic crisis, political and economic policy reforms, public opinion and international community's role in helping the country. [NewsFirst]

Thailand, China to resume joint fighter jet drills

(dql) The Thai Air Force has announced that the annual "Falcon Strike" exercise, a joint fighter jets exercise between Thailand and China, will take place from August 14 on and run for 11 days.

The exercise has been conducted four times since 2015 and was suspended for two years during the pandemic.

The exercise comes at a time when China is holding large military exercise in an angry response to the visit of US House of Representatives House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, intensifying tensions to the U.S. of which Thailand is the oldest ally in Asia. [Reuters]

Vietnam keeps anti-dumping tax on sugar imports from Thailand despite ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement

(td) The Vietnamese Ministry of Industry and Trade will put in place an anti-dumping duty and a countervailing duty of 42.99 percent and 4.65 percent respectively on sugar products from Thailand, effective from August 9, 2022, to June 15, 2026. The latest decision follows an investigation which has been carried out to ensure a fair and competitive environment for Vietnam's domestic sugar industry to be in line with international commitments.

Since the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Free Trade Agreement took effect on January 1, 2020, the import tax on sugarcane has been reduced from 80 percent to about 5 percent on unprocessed sugar and white sugar, leading to a great import of sugar products from Thailand. Consequently, the Vietnam Sugar and Sugarcane Association as well as domestic sugar producers urgently called for an anti-dumping and an anti-subsidy investigation into those Thai products.

As the first investigation had kicked off in late 2020, the volume of sugar imports from Thailand began to slump dramatically. The Ministry found out afterwards that, despite levies, plenty of Thai sugar products could enter the Vietnamese market through neighboring countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, and Myanmar – thus circumventing tax measures.

Following the finding, Vietnam temporarily imposed an anti-dumping and anti-subsidy duty on several sugar products from Thailand in February 2021 before it became full-fledged later in June of the same year. The imposition of such a levy is regularly reviewed to determine whether the domestic producers are unaffected and remain competitive in relation to foreign-made products, which sees taxes imposed on Thailand for another four years.

Overall, according to the cane and sugar board of Thailand, Vietnam is not a key market for the export of Thai sugar products – with the trading based on global prices, and Vietnam collects the same tax rate from Thailand. As a result, the impact of Vietnam's fresh imposition of levies is likely to be limited. Furthermore, tax measures will apply only to those non-original products in each trading partner country to prevent a circumvention. Lastly, although Vietnam is a party to ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement, certain provisions of the pact are yet flexible and allow for the imposition of duties to protect the rights and interests

of domestic industries as appropriate. [Hanoi Times] [Reuters][The Phnom Penh Post][Vietnamnet Global]

Suspected Thai illegal job seekers barred from entering South Korea

(td) A group of 110 Thai nationals suspected as illegal job seekers – dubbed "little ghosts" — on board a flight to Jeju island was denied entry to South Korea by local immigration authorities.

The issue of Thai little ghosts has been problematic for years since South Korea granted an exemption of tourist visa for 90 days to Thai passport holders. Due to a relatively light punishment for illegal workers, along with higher salaries, South Korea is a preferred destination for illegal job seekers from Thailand. As of December 2021, the number of illegal workers was estimated at 140,000, according to the Thai Embassy in Seoul.

Overall, Thailand is well aware of the issue and has stepped up efforts in stemming the outflow of those illegal job seekers. In 2019, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to tackle problems surrounding little ghosts, whereby the Thai Justice Ministry would share information on unregistered Thai migrants with the South Korean Immigration, and regular working-level talks would be held once a year. In the future, Thailand is also set to sign another MoU on a seasonal worker program with its counterpart to ensure more job prospects. Under the labor law, Thailand does not allow short-term contracts, thus some amendments must first be made. [Bangkok Post 1][Bangkok Post 2][The Korea Times 1] [The Korea Times 2]

International arbitral tribunal postpones verdict on Australia-Thailand gold mine dispute

(td) The international arbitral tribunal will rule on a dispute over gold mining operations between the Thai government and Australias' Kingsgate Consolidated Ltd on December 31. The ruling was postponed by the tribunal to allow the parties to finalize their negotiations on the matter. The tribunal has yet to make a decision although it completed the hearing in early 2020.

The Kingsgate scandal dates back to 2014, when current Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, then-leader of the now-defunct Thai National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), invoked Section 44 of the interim charter promulgated after the military coup to suspend gold mining from January 1, 2017, over health and environmental concerns.

In light of the Thailand-Australia Free Trade Agreement, in addition to a unilateral action by the military-led government, the Australian company decided to bring the matter before an international court of arbitration demanding 30 billion baht (around USD 839 million) in compensation for the losses it suffered as a consequence of an "unlawful" expropriation of the gold mines in 2016. Despite the controversial legal proceedings still ongoing, the company has been called for an immediate resumption of mining activities.

According to opposition parties and critics, Thailand has spent hundreds of millions during the arbitral tribunal process which also led to immediate layoffs of local workers. For the time being, the Thai government is thus likely to agree to the company's terms. All in all, albeit in obscurity, the Kingsgate may win permission to resume its operation soon as it has launched the inspection and refurbishment of the gold mines, with a recruitment plan to seek new workers to be put in place as well. [Bangkok Post 1][Bangkok Post 2][Nikkei Asia]

Vietnam airlines halts flights in Taiwan proximity

(ntan) Following the announcement of imminent military drills from China to Taiwan, the Director of the Civil Aviation Authority of Vietnam advised local airlines to change their route or cancel their flights to avoid six key locations near Taiwan until further notice. The flights include routes from Vietnam to the United States (US), Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea. [Hanoi Times] [Vietnam News]

After the visit of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan, China argued that the US violated the one–China principle and the provisions of the three China-US joint communique. Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs called for relevant parties to maintain restraint and not escalate tension in Taiwan. [Tuoitre News]

Announcements

Upcoming Online Events

16-26 August 2022, German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance (CPG)/Asian Governance Foundation/Hanns Seidel Foundation

CPG's Online Academy 2022 on Human Rights

CPG's Academy on Human Rights is designed to give an in-depth understanding and critical assessment of human rights laws, institutions, advocacy, and scholarship. Contributions by internationally recognized scholars and practitioners provide a bridge between the theoretical and the practical dimensions, with an emphasis upon various aspects of field practice.

For further details, visit [CPG].

10 August 2022 @ 9 :00 a.m., (GMT+1) Fundação Getúlio Vargas, Portugal

Insurance and reinsurance: Market, public policies and regulatory governance

This webinar will discuss the transformation of the insurance industry in Brazil.

More information available on [Fundaçao Getulio Vargas].

10 August @ 6:00 p.m., (GMT+1) Fundação Getúlio Vargas, Portugal

Evidence-based decisions in public policy: theory and practice

This event will promote a reflection based on successful experiences in Brazilian public management.

More information available on [Fundaçao Getulio Vargas].

10 August @ 1p.m., (GMT+1), Chatham House, United Kingdom

South Africa's ANC party policy conference 2022: Outcomes and prospects

The African National Congress (ANC) recently concluded its 6th National Policy Conference in Johannesburg. This webinar will discuss the outcomes of the ANC Policy Conference 2022, with a focus on measures to accelerate inclusive growth, job creation and energy transition.

More information at [Chatham House].

10 August @ 8:00 p. m, (GMT+9), Asian Development Bank Institute (ADBI), Japan

ADBI Session on Green Hydrogen for Emission Mitigation (14th International Conference on Applied Energy)

The Asian Development Bank Institute (ADBI)ADBI will examine green hydrogen's potential, it could play a significant role in the fight against climate change, with benefits including zero emissions and high-energy density and versality. It will focus on ways to build the reliability, affordability, and sustainability of green hydrogen production, conversion, storage, and utilization. This includes policy and financing recommendations for developing countries in Asia and the Pacific and globally.

Further details are accessible via [ADBI].

10 August @ 3:00 p.m (GMT+2), Institute for Security Studies, South Africa

How will global upheavals affect Africa?

Global upheavals are pervasive as power and influence shift eastward. The impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine takes hold, and pandemics such as COVID-19 and global health emergencies like monkeypox take their toll. The seminar will explore how global trends could impact Africa.

More information at [ISS]

10 August, @ 12:30 p.m. (GMT+11) Lowy Institute for International Policy, Australia

Migration nation: Australia's foreign policy from a multicultural perspective. What is the role of Australia's multiculturalism in foreign policy?

Australia is home to more than 250 ancestries and 350 languages. Half of all Australians were born overseas. The new Labor government has invoked Australia's multiculturalism as a part of our national identity in its recent engagement with the region. But what is the role of Australia's multiculturalism in foreign policy? Find the answer to this question at this webinar.

More information on [Lowy Institute for International Policy].

11 August @ 12:00 p.m. (GMT+5) Urban Institute, USA

The Prescription: Fiscal Policy for Today's Economy with Kyle Pomerleau

Kyle Pomerleau, senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute will discuss the tax provisions in the inflation reduction act and how the legislation could impact the economy.

More informations on [Urban Institute].

11 August @ 1:00 p.m (GMT+2), Royal United Services Institute, UK

The Emergence of Hybrid Warfare in Afghanistan: Taliban and Islamic State

While several of its victories have gained media headlines, the Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K) is struggling to compete with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Drawing on extensive field research, Dr Giustozzi will outline in this webinar the changing nature of the war in Afghanistan over the past two decades, and how the Taliban and its leaders have responded over time.

More information on [RUSI].

11 August @ 10:00 a.m (GMT+7), Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Indonesia

Afghanistan One Year Later: Consequences & Responsibilities

August 15, 2022, marks the one-year anniversary of the fall of Kabul to the Taliban. The experts of the webinar will discuss how to manage the many consequences of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan.

Find more information at [CSIS]

Recent and upcoming book releases

Michael Beckley and Hal Brands, ***Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China***, W. W. Norton & Company, 304 pages, to be published on August 16, 2022. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) will host an online book discussion on August 23, 2022. If you are interested in joining the event, register at [CSIS]. A brief review is available at [Publishers Weekly].

Scott Moore, ***China's Next Act: How Sustainability and Technology are Reshaping China's Rise and the World's Future***, Oxford, 2022. For a review, visit [China Books Review].

David Sehat, ***This Earthly Frame: The Making of American Secularism***, Yale University Press, 344 pages, published on March 8, 2022, with a review in [Los Angeles Review of Books]

Max Haiven, ***Palm Oil: The Grease of Empire***, Pluto Press, 160 pages, April 20, 2022, reviewed in [LSE].

Calls for Papers

IGI Global publishing house invites chapter proposals for a ***collected volume on the theme of "The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Digitalization of Diplomacy"***. The closing date for manuscript submission September 30, 2022. For more information, visit [IGI Global].

The French Research Center in Humanities and Social Sciences (CEFRES). Prague, invites pager proposals for its international conference ***"Conservative mobilizations in Central Eastern Europe in transnational perspective"*** to be held on December 8-9, 2022, in Prague. Deadline for abstract submission is September 5, 2022. Further details are available at [H Net].

Jobs and positions

The **Academy of European Law**, Trier, Germany, invites applications for the position ***Lawyer (Course Director) in European Human Rights***. Candidates specializing in the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, litigation before the CJEU and the ECtHR, and European institutional law, will be preferred. For more information, see [Academy of European Law].

The **Association of European Energy Exchanges (Europex**) is looking for a ***Policy Advisor*** in the field of power and gas markets. This position is based at the Association's headquarter in Brussels, Belgium. The Application closing date is September 16, 2022. Find more details at [Europex].

The **European Investment Bank (EIB)** is hiring a ***Director General*** for its Personnel Directorate. This position is based at the Bank's headquarters in Luxembourg and at grade 8/9. Deadline for application is September 15, 2022. If you are interested, access further details via [EIB].

The **United Nations Development Porgramme (UNDP)** is looking for a ***Programme Associate*** to based in Saudi Arabia. Applications must be submitted until August 16, 2022. For more details, see [UNDP].

The **Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)** is hiring a ***Protection Associate***. This position is based in Wahsington, D.C., USA. Application deadline is August 21, 2022. Find more information at [UNHCR].

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