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Asia in Review

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Dear Readers,

The Asia in Review (AIR) team is pleased to present you this week´s AiR issue with the latest events, developments and trends in domestic politics, international relations and geopolitics in East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

I wish you an informative read and extend special greetings to everyone who celebrates the Independence Day of Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Trinidad and Tobago, Qatar and Uzbekistan 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: Huawei allegedly building nationwide network of secret semiconductor factories

(ms) The Chinese tech giant Huawei is said to be building several secret semiconductor factories in China, according to Bloomberg, in part to circumvent U.S. sanctions against the company.

Huawei has reportedly received USD 30 billion in support from the Chinese government since last year in response to U.S. sanctions barring China from importing advanced semiconductors and technologies needed for their production, according to the report.

In Shenzhen alone, China's tech hub in the south of the country, the company is said to have already acquired two unknown semiconductor factories and is also

involved in the production of three more in and around the city.

More exact information about the extent of the expansion plans is not known, however a country-wide semiconductor network is allegedly being created. It is feared by the US side that if Huawei builds semiconductor factories under a different name, it would allow the company, which has been blacklisted since 2019, to circumvent US sanctions and thus expand its exports to the US again. [Bloomberg 1] [Bloomberg 2] [Reuters]

In addition, Huawei announced on August 25 that it would renew its existing licensing agreement with Swedish telecom company Ericsson. The deal covers the licensing of intellectual property related to 3G, 4G, and 5G technologies and enables Huawei to use certain patented technologies, protocols, and innovations developed by Ericsson. [South China Morning Post]

China: Further support not enough to save struggling housing market

(ms) Despite continued support and incentives to bolster the country's housing market, two of the largest Chinese property developers, Evergrande and Country Garden, are reporting price declines and facing the risk of insolvency.

The Chinese government on August 25, in the wake of continued support for the real estate market, introduced relaxations to existing mortgage regulations that would classify more Chinese citizens as "first-buyers" and thus qualify for a variety of home-buying assistance from the Chinese government.

The new regulations allow local governments to classify people who do not own real estate but have applied for a housing loan in the past as first-time homebuyers, which is accompanied by e.g., reductions in payment ratios and interest rates. In addition, the existing personal income tax rebates for persons who have acquired a new property after selling a previously owned one within one year have been extended until 2025. The steps are aimed at encouraging more citizens to buy their first property or upgrade their housing situation. [Bloomberg] [Global Times]

However, this continued support from the Chinese government is not enough to sufficiently recover the Chinese housing market.

One-time housing developer behemoth Evergrande, which was the catalyst for the country's ongoing housing crisis in late 2020, reported a share value loss of over 80 percent when trading resumed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange after a 17-month suspension. The share price now stands at the equivalent of USD 0.028, meaning the stock has lost 99 percent of its former value since the crisis began. In addition, the company reported losses of USD 4.5 billion in the first half of the year. As a possible silver lining, the company also announced that sales in the first six months of this year rose 44 percent year-on-year to 17 billion. [BBC] [South China Morning Post 1]

The situation at Country Garden, formerly the country's largest real estate developer, may look even more precarious. Internal reports indicate that on August 25, a meeting with bondholders to vote on an extension plan for a USD 535 million bond due next week was postponed to August 31.

The vote is to be held on whether to extend the "16 Bi Yuan 05" bond payments due on September 2 for three years. The company is said to have held several meetings with creditors in an attempt to convince them to accept the proposal, but the current postponement of the vote suggests that these attempts have not been sufficiently successful so far.

A rejection by the bondholders would mean the insolvency of the housing developer and would be the biggest developer since the default of Evergrande 2021 to meet such a destiny. The damage such a default would have on the already struggling housing market is difficult to predict, but with Country Garden having four times more projects than Evergrande at the time of default, it is believed that the damage could be greater than in 2021. [Channel News Asia] [Reuters] [South China Morning Post 2]

China: Reduction of stamp duty on stock transactions by half

(ms) The Chinese Ministry of Finance and the State Taxation Administration announced that as of August 28, the stamp duty on stock transactions will be halved to 0.05 percent, the first reduction since 2008.

The measure is aimed at restoring confidence, especially among foreign investors, which continues to be lacking. However, economic experts anticipate that although the measures will have an effect, this will only be a short-term effect. In their opinion, larger-scale reforms are needed to achieve the hoped-for long-

term bounce back after almost three years of zero growth.

A similar verdict applies to the almost simultaneously announced measures by the China Securities Regulatory Commission (CSRC), which include a reduction of margin requirements for investors when buying securities from 100 percent to 80 percent. [Reuters] [South China Morning Post] [Xinhua]

China: Anti-corruption body promises measures to prevent corruption in flood relief funds

(ms) In a statement released on August 22, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) echoed President Xi Jinping's call [see AiR No. 34, August/2023, 4] for the fastest possible reconstruction of the infrastructure destroyed by the floods that hit the northeast of the country in early August, and at the same time ensured measures to prevent possible misuse of the relief funds.

The CCDI is thereby addressing an existing concern among the population. With reference to the 2021 flood disaster in Henan, where of the more than USD 1 billion in relief payments disbursed to the affected region, more than half of the funds are estimated to have been diverted or embazzeld by business and local governments for purposes other than reconstruction or support of the affected population.

To prevent such an abuse from happening again, the CCDI calls on local branches of the anti-corruption body to expand its surveillance of the funds and pledged to set up channels through which any suspicions about possible misuse of funds can be reported. [South China Morning Post]

China: Xi stays committed to “social stability” in Xinjiang Region

(ms) During his visit to the northwestern region of Xinjiang, Chinese President Xi Jinping reaffirms his commitment to the "social stability" campaign, which is used to justify the perceived systematic suppression of ethnic minorities in the region.

Xi articulated clear goals and priorities for the region's development during his visit to Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital, on August 26. Alongside promoting scientific

and technological innovation and enhancing related infrastructure, Xi emphasizes that "social stability in the region" remains the highest priority.

Of particular concern is Xi's focus on combating "terrorism" and secessionist movements in the region. Reports, including those from the UN Human Rights Council, indicate that under Xi's leadership, the Chinese government began to enact various laws in 2015 following the previous year's terrorist attacks, systematically suppressing ethnic minorities, particularly the Uyghurs. Among other things the government established a security apparatus that specifically targets individuals of Muslim religious affiliation, and allegations of torture against minority members have been raised.

Xi's current visit is seen as implying that this course will continue. He called for the further promotion of speaking of Mandarin in the region and the "unity of the identity of the Chinese nationality" through imposed laws. Such references raise concerns that ethnic minorities and their cultures are at risk of assimilation. [South China Morning Post] [Xinhua]

Japan: Government considers scrapping rules blocking export of lethal aid to third countries

(ed) Japan's government is considering abandoning the country's longstanding pacifist principle that forbids the export of lethal weapons to third countries.

On August 23, at a meeting of Japan's ruling parties, defense officials presented the government's official stance that the rule should be relaxed to allow the next-gen jets that are being jointly developed with the UK and Italy to be exported to worldwide markets.

An official pointed out how if Japan cannot directly export the new jets, the volume of jets in circulation would decrease and they would not become mainstream.

The UK has also pressed Japan to allow direct exports, since under Japan's current rules, the UK and Italy would need to ask for the consent of the Japanese government before exporting the jets to third countries.

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)'s junior coalition partner Komeito, which describes itself as a pacifist party, has been cautious about increasing weapons exports but showed understanding regarding the

relaxation of the rules. The deputy chief of Komeito advised “careful consideration to ensure that Japan’s own restrictions do not hinder joint development”.

The government is also considering expanding the scope of exports allowed under the principles. Officials at the meeting expressed the government’s stance that lethal weapons should be able to be exported as long as they are required for defense or related activities.

Such reforms to Japan’s principles of weapons exports would mark a major shift in its postwar security policy and is likely to be made without discussion in the Diet. [Asahi Shimbun]

Japan: New missile for next-gen fighter jets to be designed

(dql) Japan is reportedly planning to design a new missile for next-generation fighter jets as part of a trilateral joint fighter development project, the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), together with the UK and Italy announced in December last year [see No. 50, December/2022, 2]

The new missiles are to be mounted on the fighter jets of Japan's Air Self-Defense Force when they are first deployed in the Asian nation. The deployment is expected for 2035. [Kyodo News]

Mongolia: Cabinet decisions

(tb) In a regular decision on August 23, the Mongolian cabinet decided the following:

The Government issued a Resolution outlining actions to be taken concerning secondary schools linked with specific state-owned universities. These measures aim to enhance and expand secondary education in specific regions, define the role of university-affiliated secondary schools, restructure them, alleviate academic burdens, and enhance their accessibility. Additionally, there are plans to modernize technical and vocational education and training institutions.

Furthermore, the National Education Council was established, in an attempt to enhance the sustainable implementation of an education policy rooted in collective responsibility. This includes public and state participation, shared responsibility in education, inter-sectoral coordination, and the integration of democratic and humanistic values into training

materials. The Prime Minister of Mongolia will oversee this Council. [Montsame]

Mongolia: Comprehensive plan developed for new city

(tb) Mongolia's government has devised an all-encompassing strategy aimed at rectifying imbalances in regional progress. This involves the establishment of a fresh urban center named "New Zuunmod City" and the establishment of a free economic zone within the Khoshig Valley situated in the Tuv province.

The Parliament of Mongolia granted its endorsement to the New Zuunmod Development Master Plan in April 2022, signifying a significant stride in this endeavor. The master plan for the new Zuunmod development will not only foster growth within the designated region but also make notable contributions to realizing the objectives outlined in Sustainable Development Goals 9 (pertaining to Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) and 11 (centered on Sustainable Cities and Communities). [Aki Press]

South Korea: Unification ministry to restructure amid inter-Korean strain

(tms) South Korea's Unification Ministry has unveiled plans to streamline its organizational structure, including merging units overseeing inter-Korean exchanges, in response to heightened tensions and strained ties with North Korea.

The ministry intends to reduce its workforce by 13 percent and consolidate four divisions into one. To prevent policy gaps, the ministry will flexibly adapt its structure if inter-Korean relations shift towards dialogue and exchange.

Additionally, the government aims to establish new units, including a taskforce addressing abductees and detainees in North Korea.

After a six-day public notice period, the plan is set to take effect following a vice-ministerial meeting on August 31 and a Cabinet meeting on September 5. [Yonhap]

South Korea: Prime Minister Han announces comprehensive measures to counter random violent crimes

(tms) In response to a series of disturbing and deadly random attacks in public areas, the South Korean government has revealed a comprehensive policy package aimed at enhancing public safety and preventing indiscriminate violent crimes.

Prime Minister Han Duck-soo introduced the measures which include plans to increase police manpower by around eight thousand officers. Reintroducing auxiliary police, wherein conscripts fulfill mandatory military service within police units, is also under consideration.

Surveillance measures will be augmented. The government is also advocating for more stringent penalties for those who commit severe crimes, which Han likened to acts of terror.

The government further plans to adopt strategies to more effectively manage mental health issues and reintegrate socially isolated individuals. [KBS]

South Korea: Education ministry introduces measures to safeguard teachers' rights

(tms) South Korea's Ministry of Education has unveiled a comprehensive strategy aimed at enhancing the protection of teachers' rights within classrooms.

Education Minister Lee Ju-ho announced the plan under which each school will form a dedicated team under the principal's authority, initially designed to handle parental complaints on a trial basis starting from the upcoming fall semester. Matters requiring faculty involvement will be transferred to the homeroom teacher or the principal.

If disputes cannot be resolved within the school, a broader complaint management team under the district education office will be considered. The ministry will also support legislative revisions. [KBS]

These initiatives follow an incident involving the apparent suicide of a young elementary school teacher in Seoul's Seocho District [see AiR No. 30, July/2023, 4].

South Korea: Opposition leader summoned for questioning in third-party bribery case

(tms) Lee Jae-myung, the leader of the opposition and chairman of the Democratic Party (DP), has been summoned by prosecutors for questioning regarding allegations of third-party bribery linked to illicit money transfers to North Korea by a company, marking his fifth appearance for prosecution inquiry.

The Suwon District Prosecutors Office initially suggested questioning for August 30 due to scheduling constraints, but Lee opted to respond promptly.

The inquiry revolves around accusations that Ssangbangwool Group, an underwear manufacturer, illicitly transferred USD 8 million to North Korea from January 2019 to January 2020 on behalf of Gyeonggi Province. Lee previously served as Gyeonggi governor from 2018 to 2021.

Investigators suspect that around USD 3 million was aimed at supporting Lee's projected visit to Pyongyang, while the remaining funds were intended for Gyeonggi's smart farm support initiative in North Korea. [Yonhap]

South Korea: Parlaiment approves election law amendment, street political posters banned

(tms) The National Assembly has passed a revised election law that imposes a ban on political posters or banners on public streets until 120 days prior to the election day.

The move comes in response to the proliferation of political banners on streets, which escalated after the Constitutional Court invalidated a clause of the election law prohibiting such banners until 180 days before an election. [Yonhap]

South Korea: Government to issue KRW 11 trillion in state bonds next month

(tms) South Korea's finance ministry has announced its intention to sell KRW 11 trillion (approximately USD 8.32 billion) in state bonds in the upcoming month.

The issuance will encompass a variety of maturities and types of bonds including KRW 1.4 trillion in two-year Treasurys, KRW 2.1 trillion in three-year government bonds, KRW 1.8 trillion in five-year bonds, and KRW 1.9 trillion in 10-year Treasurys.

The country also plans to float KRW 500 billion in 20-year bonds and KRW 2.9 trillion in 30-year bonds.

In August, South Korea had already issued KRW 13 trillion won in state bonds. [Yonhap]

South Korea: Nationwide air raid exercise conducted amid tensions

(tms) South Korea conducted its first air raid exercise in six years, featuring a civil defense siren sounded across the country. The 20-minute drill entailed vehicles on specified roads pulling over, and people evacuating to shelters or underground facilities.

The exercise coincides with North Korea's announcement of an upcoming satellite-carrying space rocket launch. The air-raid alarm will be in effect for 15 minutes, followed by free movement. Subway trains will run, but passengers can't exit stations during the alarm.

Around 480 multiuse facilities will guide customers to shelters, but essential services like hospitals, transportation, and utilities will operate normally. Approximately 17,000 locations were designated as defense drill shelters last year.

The drill, aimed at preparing for air raid scenarios and potential missile threats from North Korea, was last held in August 2017, influenced by improved inter-Korean relations and COVID-19 considerations. [Yonhap]

South Korea: Pressure mounts on President Yoon over Fukushima wastewater discharge

(tms) South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol is facing increasing scrutiny for his neutral stance on Japan's release of wastewater from the damaged Fukushima nuclear plant. Opposition parties have taken part in rallies in Fukushima Prefecture, urging an end to potential irreversible damage to health and the environment.

Opposition leader Rep. Woo Won-shik, heading the Democratic Party of Korea's campaign against the discharge, criticized the release plans as "criminal." Japan's decision to release 1 million metric tons of treated radioactive water into the Pacific Ocean over the next 30 years has raised concerns about its impact on health and the environment. [Yonhap 1]

Japan contends that the released water will have sufficiently low radiation levels due to a filtration and dilution process.

The Yoon administration has neither openly supported nor opposed the release. The administration has cited the findings of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that the radiological impact will be "negligible." [Yonhap 2] [Yonhap 3]

Yoon had previously asked Japan to share real-time data on the release plans and suspend them if radiation levels exceed safety standards. A team of South Korean nuclear experts has visited the IAEA office in Fukushima, marking the first of many regular trips planned to monitor the situation closely. [Korea Herald]

Meanwhile, North Korea also urged Japan to stop Fukushima wastewater release, citing environmental devastation and threats to humanity. [Yonhap 4]

Taiwan: Business tycoon Terry Gou announces run for presidency

(ed) On August 28, the founder of Foxconn, Terry Gou, announced his bid to run for the Taiwanese presidency in the elections scheduled for January 2024.

Gou is now the fourth candidate in the election, but polls place him far behind the current frontrunner from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Vice President Lai Ching-te.

Terry Gou was previously affiliated with the opposition Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT), which is traditionally more pro-China and anti-independence. He previously tried to win the nomination from the KMT on two occasions, in 2019 and 2023. This year, the KMT chose New Taipei City mayor Hou You-yi as its candidate for the presidency rather than Gou. Consequently, many suspected that Gou would run as an independent candidate in the January elections [see AiR No.34, August/2023, 4].

Over the past few weeks, Gou has been holding campaign-like rallies around Taiwan, calling on the anti-DPP opposition to unite behind him and cautioning against war. In the speech in which he announced his run for the presidency, he criticized the DPP for "leading Taiwan towards the danger of war". He promised that "Taiwan must not become Ukraine", suggesting that the DPP's sympathy to Taiwanese independence was leading Taiwan towards war with China, which claims Taiwan as its own territory.

The principal message in Gou's pre-campaign speeches was avoiding war with China. He promised to "bring 50 years of peace to the Taiwan Strait and build the deepest foundation for mutual trust" if elected. However, he also criticized the DPP domestically, saying the "era of entrepreneur's rule" had begun with him.

Taiwan's presidential elections work on a first-past-the-post system, whereby a candidate wins with a simple majority. Observers have noted that any attempt by Gou to run for the presidency would further split the opposition vote and solidify the DPP's lead.

Gou had repeatedly called on the opposition candidates to cooperate with him to defeat the DPP, and stated that his candidacy is "to promote the integration of the opposition". However, the KMT expressed "extreme regret" at Gou's announcement, saying Gou was breaking a promise made to help Hou You-yi, for whom the party redoubled its support. The Taiwan People's Party (TPP) also backed the efforts of its own candidate, Ko Wen-je. [Focus Taiwan]

Although Gou is seen as more pro-China, he emphasized that he "has never been under the control of the People's Republic of China", and said he was willing to sacrifice his personal assets in China in the event of conflict. Gou no longer manages Foxconn after having transitioned to new management four years ago. [Liberty Times, in Chinese] [Reuters]

Foxconn is the the world's largest technology manufacturer and service provider. Headquartered in Taiwan, the company's majority revenue is earned from assets in China.

Taiwan: Cabinet approves 2024 budget with increased military spending

(ed) On August 24, Taiwan's Executive Yuan approved a NTD 2.88 trillion (USD 90.49 billion) budget for the 2024 fiscal year, which could bring defense spending

up to its highest ever figure of NTD 606.8 billion (USD 19.07 billion) if additional packages are approved.

Most of the increased budget is earmarked for social welfare and education. This includes NTD 120.1 billion (USD 3.77 billion) which will be spent on tackling Taiwan's low birth rate. Additionally, NTD 58 billion (USD 1.82 billion) will be used to facilitate the transition to renewable energy, a 37 percent increase from the year before.

The official figure in the 2024 budget for defense spending is NTD 440.6 billion (USD 13.84 billion), which is a 7.7 percent increase from the previous year. This could increase to NTD 606.8 billion if additional special budgets and funds are approved, which include plans to purchase new fighter jets and projects to enhance aerial and marine combat capabilities. The latter figure would bring Taiwan's defense spending up to around 2.5 percent of annual GDP.

The National Science and Technology Council (NSTC) stated that the budget's contribution to technology projects is set to rise by 18 percent to NTD 156.9 billion (USD 4.93 billion), with a continued focus on semiconductors, as well as net-zero energy, gerontechnology, space technology and G6 telecommunication systems. However, the NSTC minister warned against excessive focus on manufacturing semiconductors, a field in which Taiwan is a world leader, but called on all industries to thrive and innovate. [Taipei Times] [Focus Taiwan]

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

Bangladesh: BNP holds mass demonstrations in Dhaka to demand resignation of government

(tms) Supporters of Bangladesh' main opposition BNP party have organized extensive processions in the capital city, displaying black flags as part of their unified movement demanding Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's resignation and the conduction of elections under a non-partisan neutral administration. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Thousands of Rohingya refugees protests; demonstrations mark six years since exodus

(lm) Amidst heavy monsoon rains, numerous demonstrations took place across Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh on August 25, with protesters demanding their safe return to Myanmar on the sixth anniversary of the violent crackdown that drove them across the border. The largest of these protests was attended by approximately 10,000 refugees, according to the Armed Police Battalion, which holds responsibility for ensuring security within the camps. [France24] [CNN]

Bangladesh and Myanmar are working on a pilot programme to begin returning the Rohingya to their homes, despite concerns from rights groups and UN experts who say conditions are not safe for their return. The repatriation preparations are set to start in September, with both countries since March having engaged in confidence-building measures, including bilateral visits [see AiR No. 12, March/2023, 3].

Against this backdrop, Bangladesh's Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen has said that the government intends to initiate the repatriation of Rohingya refugees this year, beginning with approximately 1000 refugees while ensuring family unity. [UNB]

Meanwhile, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in a statement last week warned that the humanitarian conditions in the camps worsen, especially since a funding shortfall of USD 56 million forced the UN World Food Programme to steeply reduce humanitarian aid to the Rohingya in June, with rations now USD 8 per refugee, per month [see AiR No. 23, June/2023, 1]. This has raised concerns over consequences such as rising rates of malnutrition, child labor, and gender-based violence. [UN News]

Bangladesh: Minor political parties prepare for upcoming polls; big parties clash over arrangements

(tms) As Bangladesh's major political parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), remain at odds regarding the framework for the forthcoming national election, several smaller and lesser-known parties are gearing up for participation, with some planning to contest all 300 electoral seats.

Amidst concerns over a politically divided environment and fairness of the electoral process, many of these parties express reservations about holding the election under the governance of a party government.

Gono Front, Zaker Party, Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam Bangladesh, Bangladesh Islami Front, Nationalist Democratic Movement (NDM), and Bangladesh Muslim League are among the parties contemplating participation in the election, but varying degrees of skepticism prevail regarding the current political landscape and the feasibility of impartial polls. [The Business Standard]

Bangladesh: Election Commission to finalize revised foreign election observers' guidelines in September

(tms) The Election Commission of Bangladesh is in the process of finalizing updated guidelines for foreign election observers and journalists, with the goal of completing this task by September. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Arrest warrant issued against Jamaat-e-Islami leaders in sabotage case

(tms) A court in Bangladesh has issued arrest warrants for three individuals, among them a local senior official of Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, the largest Islamist political party in the country. The arrest warrants were issued in relation to a case filed in 2022 involving acts of sabotage. [BSS]

In March last year, a group of around 400 to 500 leaders and activists affiliated with Jamaat-e-Islami reportedly gathered in the vicinity of the Motijheel police station, causing disruptions to road traffic. When

the police attempted to manage the situation, the Jamaat members allegedly assaulted them.

According to police officials, the trio had previously obtained a six-week bail from the High Court, with the condition that they would surrender to the Dhaka Metropolitan Sessions Judge Court. However, since they failed to appear in court after the allocated time, the court proceeded to issue arrest warrants against them.

Bangladesh: New finance secretary appointed

(tms) Khairuzzaman Mozumder, who previously held the position of Energy Secretary, has been chosen as the new Finance Secretary, announced the public administration ministry of Bangladesh. This decision follows the assignment of the current finance secretary, Fatima Yasmin, to the prestigious role of being the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) first Bangladeshi vice-president in June. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Government adopts USD 230 billion plan to enhance climate resilience

(tms) The government of Bangladesh has approved the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) worth USD 230 billion, outlining a comprehensive strategy to establish a climate-resilient nation focusing on eight key sectors, including water resources, disaster management, agriculture, urban areas, and more. The amount is projected with around 72.5 percent planned to be mobilized by 2040. [UNB]

The NAP aims to achieve six goals through 23 strategic approaches and 28 outcomes, promoting climate-resilient agriculture, infrastructure, and socio-economic sectors. The interventions are aligned with global Sustainable Development Goals and the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100, prioritizing inclusivity and social equity.

Bangladesh, ranked seventh in the 2021 World Climate Risk Index, is highly vulnerable to climate change and has been taking measures to enhance adaptive capacity and resilience.

Bangladesh: Government to retain restrictions on foreign property acquisition

(tms) The Bangladeshi government has chosen to uphold a provision that prevents foreign voluntary organizations from obtaining immovable assets within the country without prior permission. The draft law, now available for public review on the land ministry's website, is a transformation of a 1983 ordinance with similar provisions, aiming to regulate the acquisition of property by foreign voluntary organizations. [BDNews24]

Under the proposed Foreign Voluntary Organisations (Acquisition of Immovable Property) Regulation Act, properties acquired through methods such as purchase, donation, or exchange will be taken over by the government. The law defines foreign voluntary organizations as entities incorporated or established outside Bangladesh to engage in voluntary work or services within the country.

India: Special provisions given to Northeast to remain untouched, central government says

(hp) During a hearing on the petition challenging the central government's decision to revoke Article 370 and reorganize Jammu and Kashmir, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta assured the Supreme Court that the central government has no plans to amend legal provisions applicable to the Northeast and other regions. [The Statesman]

With this, SG Mehta appealed to the panel to look at the difference between the provisions given to Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 and Article 371 of the Constitution. The latter bestows “special status” on 12 states, including Manipur, Assam, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Mizoram. [Republic World]

India: Parliamentary panel convened to review proposed bills for replacing current criminal legislation

(hp) A parliamentary panel was convened to deliberate over the newly introduced the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, and the Bharatiya Sakshya Bill which seek to replace the the

Indian Penal Code, Criminal Procedure Code and the Evidence Act, respectively. Home secretary Ajit Bhalla made a detailed presentation on the same to brief the members about the propositions of the bills. [Millennium Post] [India Today 1].

The bills, introduced by Home Minister Amit Shah, aim to replace the colonial laws imposed by the British with contemporary ones which serve the needs and demands of the Indians [see AiR No. 33, August/2023, 3]. According to sources, there was some opposition regarding the Hindi names of the bills. Some ministers from southern states demanded for the standing committee to visit various states seeking views of various stakeholders. [The Hindu]

The panel must provide its decision within two months for the government to table the bills in the next session of the parliament. [India Today 2].

India: Supreme Court hears report on compensation for the people of Manipur

(lf/lm) India's Supreme Court received three reports on August 21, outlining the urgent need for the nation's compensation program for those who have been negatively impacted by the violence within the state of Manipur to be upgraded. The reports were put forward by a panel which aimed to create strategies for the rehabilitation and restoration of those who have lost their homes, businesses and livelihoods from the violence.

The court will consider the suggestions, possibly resulting in large sums of financial compensation for those who qualify to be reimbursed for what they have lost. The Supreme Court also requested that proper internet services be provided within the state for those who desired to testify before the court and provide evidence, without having to travel. [Indian Express] [Mint]

A significant amount of the Supreme Court's efforts are dedicated to ongoing cases from across Manipur. In order to avoid gridlock, the court decided on August 26 to delegate 27 standing cases to designate judged within Assam, who can provide quick and convenient rulings. [Hindustan Times]

The violence in Manipur, which has seen the local Kuki and Meitei tribes clash over political differences, has manifested itself through arson, physical & sexual assault and murder. A potential financial settlement for the people of Manipur would require a significant

amount of money to be put forward. The Supreme Court continues to hear suggestions for the best way to deal with the ongoing situation within Manipur, with a likely response still likely far off. [Frontline]

India: Two men get sentenced for five years in jail for promoting terrorism, anti-India activities

(hp) On August 24, two individuals were handed five-year prison sentences for promoting terrorism and engaging in anti-India activities on behalf of the Islamic State, commonly known as ISIS. The charges against them encompass sections of the Indian Penal Code, Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, and Explosive Substances Act. The verdict was based on their proven involvement in indoctrinating and manipulating Indian Muslim youth, recruiting them for ISIS with the intention of carrying out terror attacks. [NDTV] [Press Trust of India]

The case was heard at a specialized court of the National Investigation Agency (NIA), which focuses on counter-terrorism enforcement. In 2018, the NIA initiated a targeted investigation into the registered cases following directives from the Central Home Ministry. The court uncovered a conspiracy involving three Indian citizens who were affiliated with the ISIS factions in Syria and Iran. Subsequently, these individuals were sentenced to seven years of imprisonment.

India: Central government blocks *The Kashmir Walla* website, social media accounts

(hp) The *Kashmir Walla*, a Srinagar-based news outlet, had its website blocked and social media accounts taken down following an order by India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology under the IT Act without any prior notice. Furthermore, its staff stated that they had been given an eviction order from the landlord of its office in Srinagar. [Al Jazeera]

The media outlet is known for its human rights reporting in the disputed territory of Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir. In 2022, its founder and editor-in-chief, Fahad Shah, was arrested for spreading and glorifying terrorism. His arrest was one of the many where several journalists were taken into

custody, following the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019 [see AiR No. 32, August/2019, 1]. [Outlook India]

Several associations and organizations of media including the *Editors Guild*, *Press Club of India*, *Press Association*, *Indian Women Press Corps*, *Delhi Union of Journalists* and the *Working News Cameraman Association* are demanding the release of Shah and the restoration of the *Kashmir Walla*. On the other hand, there had been no response by the government. [The Economic Times]

India: Video of Uttar Pradesh teacher encouraging pupils to slap Muslim student goes viral

(lf) A viral video which emerged on August 25 across social media platforms has grabbed India's attention, as a teacher in an Uttar Pradesh school encouraged pupils to slap one of their peers for being a Muslim. The student, who is seven years old, was subjected to a barrage of Islamophobic comments from the teacher, who is heard in the video shouting "I have declared that all Muslim children should go". The teacher then encouraged the other students in the class, who are individually subscribers of the Hindu faith, to assault the young boy for his religion.

A fifth of the population of Uttar Pradesh are Muslims, one of the highest concentrations of believers within India. The school has subsequently been shut down by authorities as an investigation into the conduct of the teacher and the events portrayed within the video has begun. The teacher in question maintained that she was "not ashamed" of her actions in the video, and maintained that the community of the area approved of her actions. [BBC] [NDTV]

The situation very quickly became political after the video attained viral status. Critics have credited the rhetoric of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) towards religious minorities. Opposition leader and head of the INDIA political bloc Rahul Gandhi maintained in a post to X that the teacher had turned a "holy place like school into a marketplace of hatred", following the lead of the "BJP which has set every corner of India on fire". The Samajwadi Party, a socialist political party that is part of Gandhi's INDIA alliance, also accused the BJP of creating the "politics of hate" which had empowered the teacher in the video to feel her actions were appropriate. [India Today]

Tensions between India's Hindu majority and Islamic minority are commonplace, as politicians and civil society groups alike have benefitted from highlighting the differences between the two communities. Authorities have requested that social media sites ban the video from being shared in order to maintain the peace within Indian society and avoid violence or unrest in response to the video. [Al Jazeera] [WION]

India: Section 144 imposed in Nuh district of Haryana amid speculations of violence

(hp) In response to potential violence during the upcoming Shobha Yatra, a Hindu pilgrimage, authorities in the Nuh district of India's Haryana state have imposed prohibitory orders under Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. [Mint] [Times of India] [DNA India 1]

Despite the denial of permission for the Shobha Yatra on August 28 by the Haryana government, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), an Indian right-wing Hindu organisation based on Hindu nationalism, has chosen to disregard this decision. The VHP has insisted on conducting the yatra regardless on August 29. The police are currently keeping a close check for any signs of violence and only permitting locals to visit the temple, where the yatra was supposed to take place. [DNA India 2] [Indian Express]

The yatra procession holds significance as it was previously disrupted on July 31 by a mob. During the events of that day, a religious procession organized by the VHP was targeted in Nuh, resulting in the loss of five lives, including two Home Guard personnel. The unrest subsequently spread to the nearby Gurugram district, where mosques and shops were attacked, and a Muslim cleric lost his life. [AiR No. 31, August/2023, 1]

India: Defense minister sets up committee to review DRDO

(hp) Under the leadership of India's Defense Minister Rajnath Singh, the central government has set up a committee to review and revamp the Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO), the country's premier R&D agency.

The committee will be composed of nine members, with a former Principal Scientific Advisor to the government serving as its head. The remaining

members will include individuals from the industrial and defense sectors, and the defense ministry. It has been given a timeframe of three months to present its report, outlining its proposed suggestions. [ANI 1]

The primary task of the committee involves assessing the operations of the DRDO and presenting recommendations for its restructuring. These recommendations encompass various aspects such as enhancing the involvement of academia and start-ups in technological innovation, devising strategies for fostering international collaborations, and overhauling administrative systems to expedite processes within the DRDO. [Hindustan Times] [ANI 2]

There have been several attempts to redefine the DRDO in the past including a parliamentary panel discussion in 2019, however not much progress has been observed. Many of its projects such as the unmanned aerial vehicles and new communications systems have seen long delays. [The Print]

Maldives: Police initiate investigation against former Anti-Corruption Commission president

(na) The police on the Maldives have initiated an investigation against the former President of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), Hassan Luthufee, and seized his passport upon his return from Malaysia for the ongoing investigation. [Edition]

Police had started investigating a money laundering case against him in February 2019, but it stalled when he left the country.

Earlier, Luthufee, along with former ACC members, faced criticism for handling a corruption case involving ex-President Abdulla Yameen. The ACC's decision to use a special account instead of freezing Yameen's bank account caused controversy. Consequently, Luthufee resigned amid ongoing parliamentary attempts to remove him from the ACC. [Maldives Independent]

Maldives: Education ministry reverses niqab ban for teachers in public schools

(na) The Education Ministry in the Maldives has overturned its previous ban on teachers wearing the niqab, a facial veil except for the eyes, during their

instruction in public schools. This policy reversal follows significant public criticism aimed at the government's initial stance. [Avas]

Initially, the ministry had prohibited teachers from wearing the niqab while teaching, citing a guideline from the Civil Service Commission that emphasized easy identification of civil servants through attire. Although teachers could wear the niqab in school, they were required to remove it while conducting classes.

However, a recent amendment announced by the Education Ministry has removed the obligation for teachers to unveil while teaching. Nonetheless, teachers must visibly display their issued staff cards. The amendment also maintains the requirement for niqab-wearing teachers to uncover their faces if they teach children under ten years old.

Maldives: Parliamentary disruptions, adjournment amid lawmakers' non-adherence to regulation

(na) Recently, parliamentary proceedings have been marred by members of parliament's (MPs) non-compliance with regulations, culminating in disruptions and an adjournment amidst disagreements.

During the August 22 session, an MP, Kelaa MP Ibrahim Shareef, refused to leave the chamber despite being instructed by the chair. This was prompted by the MP's persistent shouting and disruptions. [Edition]

Similar behavior was observed during the preceding day's session when Shareef directed loud outbursts toward Speaker Mohamed Nasheed and resisted leaving the chamber. [Avas]

In the same week, the parliament witnessed further disruptions as MP Abdul Ghafoor Moosa occupied a designated cabinet seat, leading speaker Nasheed to ask him to leave. When Moosa refused, the session was adjourned.

Concerns have grown among members about MPs' failure to comply with regulations, even prompting discussions about involving security services to ensure order. However, Nasheed declined to call security officers despite ongoing disregard for regulations.

Nepal: Opposition party ends parliament obstruction, agrees to gold smuggling inquiry

Nepal's main opposition party, the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML), has put an end to its obstruction in Parliament. This comes after it reached an accord with other major political parties to establish a high-level inquiry commission tasked with investigating a recent gold smuggling incident. [The Kathmandu Post]

Starting from July 26, the CPN-UML disrupted proceedings in the lower house of Parliament, demanding the creation of a parliamentary probe committee to investigate the gold smuggling case that occurred on July 18 see AiR No. 31, August/2023, 1]. The smuggling operation involved 100 kilograms of gold worth around USD 8.5 million. The contraband gold was seized during customs clearance at Tribhuvan International Airport, having been illicitly transported from Hong Kong [see AiR No. 30, July/2023, 4].

To resolve the obstruction, on August 23, the major parties agreed on a two-point deal. As per the agreement, the Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) of Nepal Police, which had been investigating the recent seizure of smuggled gold, will continue its examination of all those implicated in the crime.

Also, a separate and impartial commission will be established by September 22 to conduct a comprehensive investigation into recurring instances of gold smuggling. Furthermore, the commission will present a report containing recommendations about curbing the smuggling of this valuable metal, suggested improvements to existing laws, and an overview of the investigative procedures for such cases.

Nepal: Supreme Court once again limits Koshi government's long-term decision authority

(na) On August 25, Nepal's Supreme Court issued a second interim order to the Koshi state government, instructing it not to make long-term decisions. This development came in response to a writ petition filed by the country's main opposition party, the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML), with the apex court. The petition alleged that Koshi Chief Minister Uddhav Thapa gained a vote of

confidence by manipulating Israile Mansuri's role as the chair of the state assembly. [My Republica]

Thapa successfully obtained a vote of confidence from the provincial assembly earlier this month. Out of the 77 lawmakers present, 47, including those presiding over the meeting, supported the motion presented by the chief minister, while 30 opposed it. Notably, sixteen lawmakers from the main opposition party CPN-UML, and the Rastriya Prajatantra Party were absent. Mansuri, a member of the Nepali Congress, chaired the provincial assembly and cast a vote that sparked controversy, as it is unconstitutional for the assembly chair to vote unless a tie occurs. [The Kathmandu Post]

In light of these events, the Supreme Court declared the vote of confidence secured by the chief minister to be unconstitutional. However, whether the government's formation itself is unconstitutional will determine the scheduling of a hearing on September 1. The court requested a written response by that date and mandated the submission of all relevant details, including the Chief Minister's appointment and the confidence vote, by August 30.

Earlier in July, the Supreme Court had issued a similar order invalidating the Speaker's role in forming the Koshi province's government. On July 27, the court instructed various authorities, including the Koshi Province head and the provincial assembly's Speaker, to establish a new government within seven days, citing Speaker Gautam's support as the reason for deeming the Thapa-led Cabinet unconstitutional [see AiR No. 31, August/2023, 1]. Following these developments, Chief Minister Thapa assumed office after the resignation of Speaker Gautam [see AiR No. 32, August/2023, 2].

Nepal: Supreme Court halts implementation of controversial constituency development program

(na) Nepal's Supreme Court has issued an interim order to halt the implementation of a contentious infrastructure development program both federal and provincial levels.

The current year's budget has allocated funds for the Constituency Infrastructure Development Programme, previously known under various names including the Local Infrastructure Development Partnership Programme and Constituency Development Fund. This program functions as a funding scheme, directing

funds from either federal or provincial governments to electoral constituencies for smaller-scale infrastructure or development projects.

The program has sparked controversy due to lawmakers' unrestrained authority in project selection, and allegations have arisen that lawmakers divert funds to so-called "users' groups," composed of party members, loyalists, and supporters within their constituencies. [Nepal Live Today]

Consequently, the federal government suspended the program for two years, reallocating funds towards the COVID-19 response, although provinces sustained the initiative.

Taking these considerations into account, the Supreme Court has observed that federal and provincial lawmakers' primary roles seem to center around legislative matters, and they lack constitutional authorization for performing executive functions. The court has also highlighted disparities in the treatment of lawmakers from the upper and lower houses of the parliament regarding the program. [The Kathmandu Post]

However, the final verdict will determine the potential future of similar programs initiated by governments.

Pakistan: Ex-Premier Khan's graft conviction suspended, sedition case quashed

(lm) Two recent court verdicts have brought relief to Pakistan's embattled former Prime Minister Imran Khan, who was imprisoned earlier this month after being sentenced to three years for unlawfully selling state gifts during his tenure as prime minister from 2018 to 2022.

On August 28, a Pakistani court quashed a sedition case against the former prime minister. The charges had been filed in March in the southwestern city of Quetta, the capital of Balochistan province, over one of his speeches. Subsequently, upon Khan's appeal, the Balochistan High Court determined that prosecutors had not acquired the necessary consent from either the federal or provincial government to initiate the charges. The court deemed the charges to be "unauthorized and legally invalid," issuing a directive for the case to be annulled. [The Straits Times]

The following day, the Islamabad High Court temporarily halted the recent corruption conviction of

Khan. However, although the suspension has been enacted, it remains uncertain whether this will result in his release from imprisonment due to other court orders allowing for his arrest in other cases. [The Straits Times] [The Guardian]

In fact, in addition to the corruption and sedition cases, Imran Khan is confronting a spectrum of charges. These include accusations of terrorism and inciting attacks on state institutions, stemming from incidents in May when his supporters targeted military and government sites [see AiR No. 20, May/2023, 3]. Furthermore, he is also facing charges of abetment to murder, in connection to the killing of a Supreme Court lawyer in June.

Pakistan: Ex-Premier Nawaz to return home in October after 4-year exile, prime minister confirms

(lm) Nawaz Sharif, a former prime minister of Pakistan and three-time leader, is set to end his four-year exile and return to the South Asian country in October. His younger brother, current Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, announced this decision after consultations with the senior leadership of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party. However, the precise date of Nawaz Sharif's return was not disclosed by Shehbaz Sharif. [La Prensa Latina]

In 2018, Nawaz received a 10-year prison sentence after being found guilty of money laundering, stemming from his family's alleged acquisition of upscale London flats. The following year, he left for the United Kingdom under bail terms for medical treatment overseas, agreeing to come back to Pakistan. Nevertheless, he prolonged his stay in Birtain, essentially opting for self-imposed exile.

Crucially, Nawaz was disqualified permanently from holding any public office after his conviction. But his brother's government amended the laws, reducing the disqualification period to five years [see AiR No. 26, June/2023, 4]. The amendment potentially paves the way for him to contest the upcoming elections, which Pakistan is slated to conduct later this year.

Pakistan: Election Commission begins consultations with political parties on general elections

(lm) Pakistan's Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has begun engaging with political parties regarding the country's upcoming general elections, seeking their input on matters such as the delimitation of constituencies, the preparation of electoral rolls, and the scheduling of the general election. [Arab News]

As the ECP initiates the consultations, considerable attention will be directed towards the main opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, led by former Prime Minister Imran Khan. Khan has been in a contentious relationship with the election regulatory body for several months. Currently serving a prison sentence stemming from his conviction in a case involving the illicit sale of state presents, Khan's party's actions and stance will be closely monitored.

As per the constitutional mandate, general elections are to be conducted within 90 days if Parliament is dissolved prior to the completion of its full term. The legislator was dissolved on August 9 – a few days before it completed its full term – meaning elections should be held in November at the latest [see AiR No. 33, August/2023, 3].

However, the ECP earlier this month released a notification outlining its strategy to conclude the demarcation of both federal and provincial constituencies by December 14 [see AiR No. 34, August/2023, 4]. Consequently, it is widely anticipated that the electoral timeline will be extended beyond the typical 90-day period, potentially leading to a postponement of the polls until February.

Pakistan: Antiterror court allows former Premier Khan's arrest over May 9 riots

(lm) A Pakistani antiterrorism court has given permission to the police to question and detain former Prime Minister Imran Khan in connection with a case linked to the assault on a military facility in Lahore city. [Al Jazeera]

The attack occurred during the demonstrations that ensued after the former prime minister's brief apprehension on corruption allegations earlier this year in May [see AiR No. 20, May/2023, 3]. Authorities allege people belonging to Khan's Pakistan Tahreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party stormed the so-called Jinnah House, the official residence of a top military commander in Lahore.

Meanwhile, the Joint Investigation Team (JIT) investigating the May protests has reported that Khan

has once again altered his perspective on the events. The JIT, comprising a five-member team of high-ranking officials, visited Attock jail to interrogate the PTI leader in connection with various cases, including charges under sedition and anti-terror laws. Khan informed the team that his party leaders were not implicated in the riots, but rather, different individuals were involved in the incident. [The News International]

Pakistan: Mob attacks factory owned by member of Ahmadiyya Muslim community

(lm) On August 18, a mob attacked a factory owned by a member of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Lahore, accusing him of blasphemy. Instead of prosecuting the attackers, the authorities charged eight members of the Ahmadi religious community with blasphemy. [Dawn]

The Ahmadiyya movement is regarded as heterodox by the majority of Sunni and Shi'a Pakistanis, and Ahmadiyya Muslims have been marginalized, discriminated against in various ways, and sometimes violently oppressed. After decades of agitation on the part of the Jamaat-e-Islami and other Islamist groups, Ahmadis were categorized as a non-Muslim minority in national law in 1974—a view held by the majority of Pakistanis today—and constitutional reforms in 1973 barred an Ahmadi from holding the presidency.

In recent months there has been an increase in attacks on religious minorities in Pakistan and their places of worship. On August 16, thousands of Muslims attacked a Christian settlement in Faisalabad district in Pakistan's Punjab province, after two members of the community were accused of committing "blasphemy." The mob, armed with stones and sticks, vandalized several churches, dozens of houses, and a cemetery. [AiR No. 34, August/2023, 4]

Pakistan: Six soldiers killed in attack near Afghanistan border

(kr) At least six Pakistani soldiers were killed when members of the Pakistani Taliban, known by its acronym TTP, ambushed two military vehicles in the country's North Waziristan District near the border with Afghanistan. Four armed fighters belonging to the TTP were also killed. [Al Jazeera]

Sri Lanka: Opposition MPs protest in parliament in support of plantation sector

(lf) Members of the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) party staged a protest in Sri Lanka's parliament, demonstrating in favor of the nation's plantation sector on August 22. The lawmakers were demonstrating in favor of an estate worker whose house had allegedly been knocked down by an estate superintendent.

Even if the event which caused the MPs to demonstrate did not occur in its full description, there remains an underlying tension between laborers and superintendents, characterized by economic disparities. Estate superintendents set the terms to which workers undertake their tasks, with many receiving shorter hours and less pay in the wake of Sri Lanka's economic woes.

The SJB announced last week that it would work with President Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) so long as efforts were made in good faith to help the nation recover [see AiR. No. 34, August/2023, 4]. The demonstration in parliament, however, shows that deep divisions still exist between the two leading political institutions over fundamental issues and key matters that need to be addressed. [Daily Mirror] [The Guardian]

Sri Lanka: Central Bank places lending caps on major banks to bring down interest rates

(lf) The Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) placed caps on the maximum amount of money available to borrowers through a number of loans and financial services in an effort to bring down interest rates, in a decision announced on August 24. The CBSL accused Sri Lanka's commercial banks of not fully enacting the nation's relaxed monetary policies which were aimed at benefitting borrowers, by giving out "excessive" loans with high interest rates.

Pawning facilities have had their maximum interest rate levels on monetary loans and financial services capped at 18 percent, whereas licensed banks have had their rates capped at 28 percent per annum on credit card related charges and 23 percent per annum for pre-arranged overdrafts, where customers

withdraw more money than they have in their account at a given time. The CBSL also dictated that penal interest rates would be capped at two percentage points over the regular rate.

These strategies were enacted in place of another cut to core interest rates, as the CBSL hopes that its cuts in June and July can have a full effect on the economy through the caps. The nation's deposit rate and standing lending rate remains at 11 percent and 12 percent respectively. Sri Lanka is currently preparing for its first routine IMF review to be held on September 14-27, where the nation's policies regarding their domestic debt restructuring and economic recovery will be assessed against the terms of its USD 2.9 billion bailout agreement from the organization agreed to in March. Sri Lanka has since doubled taxes and discarded a number of subsidies in an attempt to satisfy and repay both domestic and international creditors. The cap on interest rates is another policy attempt at stabilizing the economy for its average citizens, who have battled with currency inflation and shortages of key items, including food and medicines, since 2022. [Daily Mirror] [CNA] [The Manilla Times]

Sri Lanka: 24 infrastructure projects paused due to COVID-19, economic crisis to be resumed

(lf) Sri Lanka's Urban Development and Housing Minister Prasanna Ranatunga has authorized the recommencing of works on 24 infrastructure projects, which were halted due to the impacts of COVID-19 and the nation's 2022 economic crisis. Announced on August 24, the minister assured the nation that he had coordinated with the appropriate departments and ministries within the country to effectively restart construction works on a number of large projects, including the LKR 55 billion (USD 169.7 million) Welikada prison complex replacement project, along with other ventures targeting transportation, water supply and energy. The Urban Development Authority of Sri Lanka is considering allowing private investment to cover part of the costs of these projects.

The majority of the 24 infrastructure projects in question were halted due to COVOD-19 restrictions and guidelines halting work throughout the country during 2020 and 2021, followed by the economic crisis which griped Sri Lanka in 2022, which saw the nation face a massive debt crisis and large-scale protests over shortages of essential items including food and medicines. Whilst in the process of restricting its debt. These large infrastructure works have remained in

limbo, with some maintaining their recommencement would provide essential employment to citizens who are desperate for income, whilst others cite their costly prices as too much of a burden for Sri Lanka's already weak economy.

The Urban Development Authority also hinted at 12 further projects which could recommence if the nation successfully passes its upcoming IMF review set for September 14-27. [Daily Mirror]

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

Cambodia: First meeting of new Cabinet held

(dql) Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet on August 24 chaired the first meeting of the new Cambodian Cabinet that was approved by the parliament last week [see AiR No. 34, August/2023, 4].

The so-called Pentagon Strategy Phase I was top on the agenda, while other issues discussed included a draft law concerning the status of the Ministry of National Assembly-Senate Relations and Inspection, a draft law on the establishment of the Secretariat of Border Affairs; and the general functioning of the seventh-mandate government.

The Pentagon Strategy revolves around five main sectors including economic growth, job creation, equity, efficiency and sustainability. It serves as a roadmap in the government's bid to achieve the goal of becoming a high middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income one by 2050.

Earlier, Prime Minister Hun Manet had outlined six priorities which will be implemented from 2023, including expanding healthcare services towards achieving the universal health coverage; providing vocational and technical trainings for youth from poor and vulnerable households across the nation; institutionalising the national social assistance programme for poor households, vulnerable people and at-risk households; introducing coordinating mechanisms and financing programmes; and deploying agricultural technical officers to all communes. [Khmer Times 1] [Khrmer Times 2]

In an earlier move, deputy National Police chief Sar Thet, who also doubled as the commissioner of the Phnom Penh Municipal Police, was appointed by King King Norodom Sihamoni on August 23 as the new National Police chief. He succeeds Neth Savoeun, one of the ten new deputy prime ministers.

As of last week, Cambodia's new political leadership includes Prime Minister Hen Manet, ten deputy prime ministers, 21 senior ministers and 30 ministers, as well as 29 government delegates attached to the prime minister. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Meanwhile, Hun Sen has become the new Supreme Privy Council of the King, appointed by the king on August 22, the day he stepped down as prime minister. Hun Sen's new post is equal with that of the Prime Minster in rank, indicating that he still holds a lot of power in the country. [Cambodianess]

Cambodia: Prime Minister vows support for formers with USD 100 million budget

(dql) New Prime Minister Hun Manet has announced USD 100 million has been allocated in the government's budget to help improve the agricultural sector for farmers.

He made the announcement when meeting with 18,000 factory workers from 13 factories in Phnom Penh on August 29, 2023, promising to help especially those who struggle with price fluctuations in the agriculture sector.

He pledged that his government would use the budget to prevent the fall in the price of agricultural products and to find a market for good products. [Khmer Times]

Indonesia: PDI-P expels Budiman for backing Prabowo

(ys) The ruling Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) has formally expelled Budiman Sudjatmiko after an official letter was signed by the chairwoman Megawati Sukarnoputri and secretary-general Hasto Kristiyanto.

The ethics board of the party has found Budiman had violated the party's disciplinary code for throwing his support on Prabowo Subianto from the Gerindra Party to run as president in 2024 when Megawati had named Ganjar Pranowo as a candidate in April this year. Budiman said he accepted the decision of PDI-P and will stay loyal to the party's ideology.

Budiman is former pro-democracy activist who opposed former President Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime (1966-1998) and who was arrested when Prabowo was a military general. Prabowo was later accused of leading a special forces group that kidnapped many pro-democratic protesters. [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Factories ordered to stop operation to fight pollution

(ys) The Environment and Forestry Ministry has ordered four companies around Jakarta to shut down, in a bid to curb the worsening air quality in the capital.

PT Wahana Sumber Rezeki, PT Unitama Makmur Persada, PT Maju Bersama Sejahtera and PT Pindo Deli 3, which are all coal suppliers, were named as the culprits and ordered to be shut down.

The ministry is also probing more companies in industrial regions around Jakarta. The government has been denying the accusation from the public that coal-fired power plants and factories around Jakarta are the cause of pollution and instead put the blame on the dry season and El Niño weather pattern.

Last week the government also conducted a cloud-seeding experiment to help density in the cloud and cause rain. The ministry also pushed for more effort, such as spraying mist from tall buildings in the city. [The Jakarta Post]

In a latest development, the environmental ministry announced on August 28 that 11 industrial firms – including coal stockpiling, smelting, paper and charcoal companies – have been sanctioned failing to meet

operational standards as the government steps up efforts to cope with major pollution spikes in the capital Jakarta. The names of the targeted firms have not been disclosed. [Terra Daily]

Furthermore, President Joko Widodo launched on the same day the country's first elevated rail line for Greater Jakarta, a USD 2.13 billion project that aims to ease Jakarta's chronic road congestion and worsening air pollution. [Reuters]

Indonesia: Bandung declares state of emergency over raging fire

(ys) The West Bandung regency, West Java, has declared a state of emergency after a raging fire in the Sarimukti landfill engulfed about 15 hectares of area.

The government has not been able to extinguish the fire that is said to be caused by a cigarette, made worse by the dry season. Residences around the area have been struggling with hazardous air from the fire.

The regional government also ordered around 188 waste trucks in line to dump waste in Sarimukti to return to Bandung Central City to be stored in temporary landfills, pending further instruction. The government also issued a warning to the public not to burn their waste as it could be dangerous. [CNN Indonesia, in Bahasa Indonesia]

Indonesia: TNI chief gives green light for capital punishment for soldiers in an abduction case

(ys) The Indonesian Military (TNI) chief Admiral Yudo Margono has demanded that the three soldiers involved in an abduction case be fully prosecuted by the law, including life sentences or death penalties if necessary. The statement was announced after three soldiers, including one member of presidential security details (Paspampres), were arrested as suspects in an abduction, torture and murder case of Imam Masykur. Imam was found dead with signs of torture after his family could not provide the IDR 50 million (USD 3,270) ransom demanded by the abductors. A video was later circulated on social media of Imam being tortured and the Military Police (Pomdam Jaya) arrested the suspects after receiving the report. Data from Amnesty International Indonesia (AII) shows that between June 2019 and June 2023, there were at least 105 such

abuse cases, of which 77 cases involved police personnel, 15 cases TNI members and 7 cases other government workers. [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Indonesia lifts ban on sending workers to the Middle East

(ys) The Indonesian Minister of Manpower has lifted a moratorium on sending Indonesian workers to the Middle East as domestic workers but cautioned everyone willing to go to take legal procedures to ensure protection from the government. The government made it illegal in 2015 for Indonesians to work as domestic workers in 19 Middle Eastern countries due to a high number of abuses. But in 2018, the Indonesian government and the Saudis agreed to use the One Channel System (SPSK), which requires the use of approved *syarikah*, a migrant worker placement company to sponsor a would-be domestic worker. This is because many Middle Eastern countries implemented the *kafala* sponsorship system, where a migrant is required to have an in-country sponsor, usually their employer. The *kafala* system has been criticized for making way for mistreatment of domestic workers. Many Indonesians are still willing to go to the Middle East as domestic workers, despite the 2015 moratorium, largely because they believe that it would help them escape poverty. The government has yet to pass a law on worker protection bills. [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Haj allocation to be limited to one time per person

(ys) The government is planning on limiting the haj quota to one time per person, in a bid to alleviate the long queues faced by the people intending to go. The haj is an Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca that every able-bodied Muslim who can afford it is obliged to take.

Since there is no limitation on doing haj more than once, some people who can afford it are likely to take another trip, causing a long queue despite Indonesia having the largest quota from Saudi Arabia, amounting to 229,000 per year.

As a result, many people doing the haj are elderly and are prone to health issues. Official data show that nearly 45 percent of pilgrims this year are over 60 years old and there have been 773 deaths this year. For an Indonesian Muslim who wants to do haj from

Indonesia, the waiting time could range between 11 to 47 years, depending on the quota of the city or regency of residence. [The Jakarta Post]

Lao PDR: Laos to increase minimum wage to cope with economic situation

(ws) The Lao government has recently raised the monthly minimum wage for employees in privately owned businesses by almost 25 percent, yet workers contend that it remains inadequate in light of persistent inflation and the escalating cost of living.

On August 6, the office of Lao Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone formally released an official announcement, approving an elevation of 300,000 kip (equivalent to USD 15). Commencing from October, the new minimum monthly wage will stand at 1.6 million kip (approximately USD 82). However, it's important to note that this new minimum wage does not apply to state workers' salaries.

Despite the adjustment, the inflation rate has remained overly high, hovering at 28 percent in July. This comes after surging to a peak of over 41 percent in February. Coupled with the depreciation of the Lao kip, citizens have been struggling to make ends meet due to the escalating costs of essentials like gasoline, food, and daily necessities.

While Lao workers acknowledge the step in the right direction, they emphasize that the monthly minimum wage should be set higher to be genuinely impactful.

In 2022, a report indicated that as many as 500,712 Lao citizens were employed abroad. This trend continues in 2023, with over 31,394 skilled workers having left Laos for overseas opportunities. Thailand remains a main destination, with more than 30,200 individuals venturing there. [The Star] [Radio Free Asia]

Lao PDR: Regional human rights organization demands release of detained Chinese human rights lawyer

(dql) The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), a regional human rights organization with 85 member organizations in 23 countries across Asia, has demanded that the Laotian government immediately release of a Chinese human

rights lawyer detained in Laos earlier late last month while he was en route to Thailand to embark on a flight to the U.S. [see AiR No. 31, August/2023, 1].

In its statement issued on August 28, the organizational also called on the government in Laos reveal Lu's whereabouts, adding that Lu's arrest on Laotian soil reflects "how ASEAN countries tend to succumb to China's policy to silence, intimidate, and persecute human rights defenders on their turf." [Forum-Asia] [UCA News]

Malaysia: UMNO chief calls for Najib Razak's charges in 1MBD scandal to be dropped, citing alleged 'memo'

(lm) The chief of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) has suggested that charges against former Malaysian Prime Minister and ex-party president Najib Razak linked to the 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB) scandal should be dismissed if a leaked memo is proven genuine. [South China Morning Post] [Free Malaysia Today]

In October 2018, Najib and former Treasury Secretary-General Irwan Serigar Abdullah were charged with six counts of criminal breach of trust involving government funds of approximately USD 1.43 billion, which allegedly included payments to Abu Dhabi-owned International Petroleum Investment Company.

The alleged 12-page internal memo, reportedly dated September 2019 and sent by the lead prosecutor in the case to former Attorney General Tommy Thomas, said an evaluation found that the available evidence in the case was "grossly insufficient to prove a prima facie case for the six charges, let alone to secure a conviction beyond reasonable doubt".

The Attorney General's Chambers's investigation into the leaked memo is ongoing, as confirmed by Attorney General Idrus Harun on August 17.

Malaysia: By-election race heats up

(ic) In the aftermath of Malaysia's state elections, two by-elections are looked at as proof points to further validate the results. The Pakatan Harapan (PH)-Barisan Nasional (BN) unity government, led by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim is looking to secure their mandate against the opposition Perikatan Nasional (PN) led by former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin.

The two by-elections are set to occur in Johor, the state in Malaysia which borders Singapore. Both seats, the state-level ward of Simpang Jeram and the federal-level seat of Pulai, were held by the late Salahuddin Ayub, who also served as the domestic trade and cost of living minister in the PH administration.

One of the key learnings of the state elections that the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the leading party within BN, has identified and is looking to address is to explain to their largely conservative Malay-Muslim voter base how their collaboration with PH benefits them and why they should not turn to PN, which is also appealing. This is because in both by elections BN are not running, and instead encouraging voters to vote for the PH candidate. [The Star]

PN, on the other hand, is calling on local support to show a rejection of the federal government. [The Straits Times] Muhyiddin has stated that the party has no official platform, but will campaign on fixing the issues of the people, most notably that of poverty. [Malaysia Gazette, in Bahasa Melayu]

The third party contesting both seats is the National Trust Party (Amanah), which has progressive-liberal Islamic leanings, and a junior partner in the unity government. [Malay Mail 1] Salahuddin was a member of this party, and as such Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, President, UMNO, has stated that BN will not contest out of respect but still encourage voters to vote for the PH candidate. [MalaysiaKini] [Malay Mail 2] It is likely that there are also fears of splitting the vote if three parties in government ran for the same seat against a single opposition party.

Prime Minister Anwar reminded the general public that party symbols are not to be placed on government aid during the campaign period. [Malay Mail 3]

The Sultan of Johor has also expressed support for PM Anwar, a key message in a period when Malaysians are increasingly concerned about the '3R' issues of race, religion, and royalty. [Malay Mail 4]

Malaysia: Barisan Nasional to defend Pelangai seat in by-election

(lm) Malaysia's four-party Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition is set to contest the upcoming by-election for the Pelangai state seat on October 7. The seat became vacant after the passing of assemblyman Johari Harun in a plane crash earlier this month. Presently, the BN coalition has not disclosed the identity of the candidate

who will be vying for the Pelangai seat. [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysia: Court of Appeal affirms High Court's ruling in denying woman's bid to leave Islam

(ic/lm) Malaysia's Court of Appeal has upheld the High Court's ruling which rejected a woman's request for a judicial review of her apostasy attempt to transition from Islam to Confucianism and Buddhism. In a verdict delivered on August 28, the Court of Appeal affirmed that the High Court's decision to deny the appellant's leave was accurate, noting that the issue of renouncing Islam fell under the jurisdiction of the Shariah Court, and the High Court's dismissal of the leave was not erroneous. [Malay Mail]

In 2020, the woman had lost a bid in the Shariah Court to formally renounce Islam to become a Confucian and Buddhist. It was stated that doing so would aid a Muslim in the act of apostasy, and therefore be a contravention on the part of the court.

The issue was raised for appeal at the civil High Court in 2022, with the four respondents being listed as the Shariah Court of Appeal, the Shariah High Court, the Federal Territories Islamic Religious Council (MAIWP) and the government of Malaysia. The High Court at the time denied this appeal on the grounds that, per Article 121(1A) of the Constitution, civil courts have no jurisdiction in Shariah Court matters. [Malay Mail 2]

Malaysia: Selangor ruler orders study on competency of state legislative assemblies to enact Islamic laws

(ic/lm) In response to the recent spike in Shariah Court decisions being challenged in civil courts, Selangor Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah, who is also Chairman of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs (MKI), has ordered a study on the competency of state legislative assemblies in formulating and approving Islamic (Shariah) laws, as well as the jurisdiction of the Syariah Courts that preside over them. [Malay Mail]

Malaysia: National Day Perdana address on August 30

(ic) Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim will give this year's annual National Day Perdana address on August 30 in the Plenary Hall of the Putrajaya International Convention Centre (PICC). This annual address is, similarly to Singapore's National Day Rally, traditionally given in the same month as both countries' respective independence days, which are both August, and serve as a way for the leader of that year to give insight to the efforts and themes for the coming year. [New Straits Times]

Malaysia: Prime Minister unveils USD 430 million seed fund to power green energy projects

(lm) Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim on August 29 revealed his government's plan to create a USD 430 million seed fund designed to provide financial support to energy transition projects, both public and private, that might otherwise generate returns lower than market expectations. During the launch of the National Energy Transition Roadmap, Anwar emphasized Malaysia's capability to address the "energy trilemma," encompassing sustainability, security, and affordability within the energy sector. [South China Morning Post]

However, the announced seed fund is just a minor step when compared to the substantial USD 260 billion investment that Malaysia must undertake by 2050 to implement its comprehensive energy transition master plan. In May, the government set a target of producing 70 percent of its energy through renewable sources by 2050 and lifted the ban on cross-border trade in renewable energy, especially to Singapore.

Myanmar: RCSS urged to discuss face-to-face to find solutions for military and political issues.

(wn) The Reconstruction Council of Shan State (RCSS), whose armed wing, the Shan State Army – South, is signatory to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement with the government of Myanmar, has called for relevant stakeholders to convene and discuss military and domestic political issues to find solutions through peaceful dialogue.

The RCSS is advocating for the establishment of trust and the promotion of dialogue. This statement was released after a meeting from August 18 to 20 at the RCSS headquarters in Se Taing Lieng.

The peace implementation work could not move forward because the RCSS still clings to the essence of the NCA; even though the NCA was intended to reform the country's administrative system through dialogue, stakeholders still need to make compromises. [BBC Burmese]

Myanmar: Military council not seeking talks with ith NUG and PDF

(wn) The Military Council has declared during a recent press conference that it has no intention to hold discussions with the National Unity Government (NUG) and People's Defense Forces (PDF), stating that there "is no reason to engage in dialogue with groups declared as terrorists," adding that a dialogue to start, terrorist acts must stop.

The Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Karen National Union (KNU), Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), and the Chin National Front (CNF), which are supporting the war of resistance, may be declared illegal associations depending on their actions, according to Council.

NUG Defense Minister U Yee Mon, meanwhile, said that they have a plan to militarily enter not only the border areas but Nay Pyi Daw, where the military council rues, Mandalay Bago, Yangon and the Irrawaddy regions. [BBC Burmese]

Myanmar: Export of rice to be restricted

(wn) The Myanmar Rice Federation has disclosed that rice exports will be temporarily restricted for 45 days starting at the end of this month, citing the rapid rise in domestic prices.

According to data from the United States Department of Agriculture, Myanmar is the world's fifth-largest exporter of rice, with over 2 million metric tons exported annually.

Since last month, India has banned rice exports, reducing global market demand by 20 percent or 10 million tons. Myanmar's rice exports are lower than those of India and Thailand, but the export restrictions coincided with a tihtening of supplies in general. [VOA] [Bangkok Post]

Myanmar: Military intends to launch satellite

(wn) A source from the Military Council office informed BBC that Myanmar has signed a memorandum of understanding with Russia to launch a satellite.

According to the source, obtaining the satellite is easy, but it was difficult to launch. However, they expect to launch it soon. The source did not provide a cost estimate for the satellite but mentioned that payment would not be required right away.

The Military Council has been planning their own satellite program since Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's visit to Russia last year. During that trip, he visited the Vostochny Cosmodrome space launch station. However, the Military Council has not made this plan public, however, Russian space agency Roscosmos announced last month that Vietnam, Myanmar, Algeria, Egypt, and South Africa were preparing contracts for specific types of satellites. [BBC Burmese]

Myanmar: Military junta airstrikes intensify in Kayah State and affect the children

(ha) In Myanmar's eastern Kayah State, fierce fighting has taken place between the military junta army and the allied resistance forces, with the former using heavy weapons and airstrikes, according to local sources. As a result of the military junta's airstrikes, civilian areas were affected in Fruso township and three children were injured, one of whom was in critical condition. Schools in Kayah State have been closed and local residents have been forced to flee their homes.

The military junta is stepping up military operations in Kayah State and trying to control the roads connecting the townships. Airstrikes are said to being carried out aggressively against civilian targets and efforts are being made to support the frontline troops.

According to observers, 516 civilians have been killed by the military junta army in Kayah State and at least 1639 homes and 39 religious buildings have been destroyed since the coup in February 2021. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Military junta arrests three Mandalay civilians accuseed of financial assistance of PDFs

(ha) The military junta has arrested an academic of Mandalay University, and her husband, a retired ophthalmologist, as well as a third civilian over suspicion of funding the National Unity Government (NUG) and People Defense Forces (PDFs).

Military junta soldiers and police raided and sealed off the ophthalmology clinic of the pair and their home. Military junta owned broadcasting channels have announced that they found NUG and PDFs financing evidence on their phones.

Since the coup in Myanmar, the military junta has been repressing health workers who oppose the regime. The repressive measures include firing doctors and nurses, cancelling licenses and forcing hospitals to close.

According to the findings of the National Unity Government, the medical licenses of at least 557 doctors have been revoked and at least 800 health workers were arrested since the coup. At least 71 health workers have died in custody. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Residents flee from more than 40 villages in Kyaukkyi Township, Bago Region

(sk) On August 21, residents from over 40 villages in Kyaukkyi Township, southern central Bago Region, have been compelled to leave their homes due to reported junta human rights violations.

The Karen Emergency Relief Committee (KERC) reported that the Military Council's actions led to civilian displacement, causing concerns for well-being. Military activities like artillery strikes, airstrikes, and arbitrary arrests have forced residents from their homes.

Currently, 8,000 internally displaced individuals (IDPs) are identified from 10 villages among the 40 affected. Challenges include harsh living conditions, heightened infection risks (dengue, malaria), and lacking necessities like water, food, medicine, healthcare, and education.

Over 600,000 people have left their homes in Karen National Union (KNU) districts due to violence, demanding urgent humanitarian aid. [Mizzima]

Myanmar: Civil society organizations condemn UN OCHA's current Myanmar strategy

(sk) 514 civil society organizations (CSOs) have issued a joint statement expressing concern over the approach taken by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Myanmar. The CSOs believe that UN OCHA's current stance could embolden the Myanmar junta's oppressive actions.

The statement comes after the chief of UN OCHA visited Myanmar, including a meeting with coup leader Min Aung Hlaing.

The CSOs argue that the visit lacked significant achievements, particularly in negotiating humanitarian access, even after Cyclone Mocha in Rakhine State. They call for UN OCHA to disassociate from the junta, collaborate with legitimate stakeholders, and partner with local humanitarian groups for effective aid delivery.

The CSOs also note that UN OCHA's statement omitted the Military Council's role in the humanitarian crisis and questioned its alignment with UN resolutions. They suggest that UN OCHA should work closely with local entities, ethnic providers, the Spring Revolution administration, and the National Unity Government to ensure efficient aid distribution on the ground. [Mizzima]

Myanmar: NUG criticizes military regime's economic policies

(sk) The shadow National Unity Government (NUG) has voiced concerns over the junta's economic management. Rather than targeting businessmen for rising inflation, the NUG asserts that junta leader Min Aung Hlaing and Central Bank executives should be held accountable for biased monetary policies.

Tin Tun Naing, NUG's Planning, Finance, and Investment Minister, emphasized that arresting junta leaders and CBM officials would be more effective in addressing economic challenges. Drawing a historical parallel, he compared this approach to the actions of past dictators Ne Win who wrongly blamed businessmen for economic failures caused by their policies.

The NUG's critique extends to the Central Bank's handling of USD dollar speculation. The current governor, Than Than Swe, appointed by the junta, convened a meeting with businessmen to address concerns regarding currency rumors.

Amidst a significant devaluation of the kyat against the USD, from 1,300 kyats per USD before the coup to 3,500 kyats on the black market, the NUG underscores the urgency of reevaluating economic policies and holding responsible parties accountable for the nation's economic stability. [Mizzima]

Philippines: House certifies Teves' seat vacant, calls for special elections

(lb) The House of Representatives in Manila has passed House Resolution No. 1212, which confirms the existence of a vacancy in the third congressional district of Negros Oriental.

The resolution calls on the Commission on Elections (Comelec) to organize a special election to fill the seat that was previously held by expelled Representative Arnolfo "Arnie" Teves Jr.

Arnolfo “Arnie” Teves Jr. is facing murder, frustrated murder, and attempted murder charges in connection with the killing of Negros Oriental governor Roel Degamo. The Department of Justice (DOJ) confirmed that the charges were filed before the Regional Trial Court of Manila on August 18. [Rappler]

The resolution was introduced by Speaker Ferdinand Martin Romualdez, Majority Leader Manuel Jose "Mannix" Dalipe, and House Minority Leader Marcelino Libanan, and it was approved through a voice vote. [Philippine News Agency]

Philippines: Government actions scrutinized amid concerns for human rights defenders

(lb) The Quezon City Office of the Prosecutor, in collaboration with General Hermogenes Esperon and NSA General Eduardo Ano, has filed a petition to review a lower court's decision related to a group of individuals who have been identified as human rights defenders.

The individuals who were accused were undergoing a trial at Quezon City Metropolitan Trial Court Branch 37 on charges of 'perjury,' a claim attributed to former National Security Adviser General Hermogenes Esperon. These charges were alleged to be in retaliation for their efforts in May 2019, when they sought legal safeguards from the Supreme Court to protect human rights defenders. [ESCR-NET]

The Philippine government has invoked the Anti-Terrorism Act to address concerns related to security and public safety. However, this move has raised questions and garnered attention from various quarters, both domestically and internationally. Human rights groups have expressed concerns that the application of the ATA might inadvertently impact human rights defenders and their activities. [FIDH]

Philippines: Coast guard resupplies Spratlys shoal troops stationed on the BRP Sierra Madre

The National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea (the term used by Manila to refer to its areas of the contested water in the South China Sea) declared that the navy effectively executed the mission to replenish the stationed soldiers aboard the BRP Sierra Madre.

Philippine and Chinese coast guard vessels faced off in a standoff for five hours before Philippine supply boats were able to breach the blockade. [The Diplomat]

Singapore: Police investigate bomb threats

(lb) Singapore police are conducting an investigation into alleged bomb threats made at over 18 locations, including government buildings and embassies. The threats were reported in the morning of August 22.

Although security guards collaborated with officers, no suspicious items were found. Specific locations and potential evacuations were not disclosed. One threat targeted the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment's office building, prompting increased security measures.

The police acknowledged similarities to recent hoax bomb threats in South Korea and emphasized their commitment to taking action against false information. [South China Morning Post].

Thailand: Srettha receives royal endorsement as prime minister

(ak) On August 23, the Royal Gazette published the royal endorsement of His Majesty the King to endorse PM-elect Srettha Thavisin as prime minister (PM). The PM must take the oath of office and inform his government's policies to Parliament within 15 days. [The Nation]

Thailand: 16 Rebel Democrat MPs defy party's resolution

(nk) In a surprising turn of the parliamentary voting session, 16 Democrat MPs defied their party's resolution to abstain and voted in favor of Srettha Thavisin, the Pheu Thai party's candidate, who was subsequently elected as Thailand's 30th prime minister. Chuan Leekpai, former Democrat party leader, expressed disbelief at this decision, highlighting the long-standing rivalry between the Democrat and Pheu Thai parties. He noted that the Democrat party had fought against Pheu Thai for many years, particularly in the southern region, where previous Pheu Thai-led governments had allegedly cut budget allocations. Of the 16 MPs who voted for Srettha, 12 represent constituencies in southern provinces.

Chaichana Detdecho, one of the rebel Democrat MPs, explained that their decision was motivated by a desire to expedite the formation of a new government, addressing voters' concerns over the prolonged post-election period. They were swayed by Srettha and Pheu Thai's promise not to touch the lèse majesté law. While aware of the consequences for defying party resolutions, they are prepared to explain their reasons to the party. The rebel MPs, who insist they remain part of the opposition, await an invitation to join the Pheu Thai-led coalition government. Acting Democrat party leader Jurin Laksanawisit has called for an explanation from the group at an upcoming party meeting, which has yet to be scheduled. The Democrat party, divided on joining the coalition, won 24 seats in the May 14th election.

Det-it Khaothong, Democrat deputy leader responsible for the southern provinces, asserted that the party did not adopt a resolution dictating how the MPs should vote, except for a call by Jurin Laksanawisit for them to abstain. He argued that they are a new generation of Democrats unaffiliated with historical political rivalries

and should not be bound by them. Det-it acknowledged the party's lack of unity amid two failed attempts to elect a new party leader and executive committee. He also raised questions about the possibility of expulsion, given the need for approval from three-quarters of MPs and the executive committee. [ThaiPBS 1][ThaiPBS 2][ThaiPBS 3][Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Outgoing PM Prayut Chan-o-cha bids farewell, hopes for continuation of new administration

(nk) Outgoing Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha bid farewell to the nation in a Facebook message, expressing hope that some of his administration's initiatives would be continued by the incoming government to lead Thailand to further progress. He extended his gratitude to the Thai people for their cooperation in overcoming various challenges during his nine-year tenure, including the COVID-19 pandemic and global conflicts. Prayut highlighted his government's achievements, such as the 20-year national strategy, significant investments in transport and communication infrastructure, and efforts to make Thailand a regional hub for technology and innovation.

During his farewell address, Prayut also mentioned the establishment of the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) to support future industries and enhance the country's labor force. He underscored the development of mechanisms to manage key natural resources, including water, forests, and land. Additionally, Prayut cited the introduction of new technologies to provide easier access to government services, such as the state welfare card scheme and the 1669 hotline for emergency healthcare. [Facebook in Thai]

Thailand: Thai government threatens to sue Facebook over scams

(nk) The country's minister of digital economy and society, Chaiwut Thanakamanusorn, announced the planned lawsuit following a ministry meeting to sue Facebook over scams exploiting the platform to defraud users of tens of millions of dollars annually, with the case possibly leading to a nationwide shutdown of the social media site. Common scams include paid ads urging people to invest in fake companies, often using the logo of Thailand’s

Securities and Exchange Commission or endorsements from local celebrities. Of the approximately 16,000 online scam complaints filed in Thailand last year, 70% to 80% involved Facebook and cost users upwards of $100 million.

Ministry spokesperson Wetang Phuangsup stated that the ministry had urged Facebook for the past year to do more to screen and vet paid ads but is now resorting to the courts as a last resort. He said the government is concerned about the potential collateral damage of a shutdown but has to risk a lawsuit that could result in one due to the clear evidence of the crimes. Neither Facebook nor its parent company, Meta, have commented on the situation. The Asia Internet Coalition, an industry association that includes Meta, acknowledged that online scamming is a growing issue across the region. [VOA]

Thailand: Thai Deputy House Speaker faces ethics probe over beer video

(nk) A video showing Thai Deputy House Speaker Padipat Suntiphada enjoying a craft beer has ignited controversy in Thailand, with calls for an ethics probe. Social activist Srisuwan Janya alleges that Padipat's video violates the Alcoholic Beverage Control Act, which imposes severe penalties for any activities that encourage drinking. Posting images of alcoholic beverages on social media with visible labels, logos, or brand names can lead to fines of up to 500,000 baht ($15,000).

Padipat, a member of the progressive Move Forward Party, was pictured with a craft beer produced in his native province. His party supports small-scale beer and liquor producers facing challenges under current laws that favor established enterprises. Srisuwan argues that Padipat should be held accountable for disregarding the responsibilities tied to his political role. Thailand's National Anti-Corruption Commission now enforces stricter penalties for ethical violations by MPs. Padipat has suggested revising the advertising ban on craft beers to support local producers, emphasizing the importance of informing consumers about craft beer ingredients. [Bangkok Post] [The Thaiger]

Thailand: Prime Minister-elect Srettha Thavisin finalizes cabinet selection

(nk) Prime Minister-elect Srettha Thavisin has finalized his cabinet selection process following extensive deliberations within his Pheu Thai party and coalition partners. The cabinet nominations are now with the Secretariat of the Cabinet for qualification checks.

While the Defence Minister's appointment remains eagerly awaited, Srettha assured that the chosen candidate would meet expectations and emphasized the importance of assessing their performance and leadership for civilian and military acceptance.

Srettha expressed his intention to announce government policies in parliament before mid-September, but the timeline for cabinet list submission for royal approval remains uncertain due to ongoing background checks. He also acknowledged the need to visit ASEAN countries before attending the UN General Assembly meeting in the US, highlighting the importance of this global gathering for engaging with world leaders. [ThaiPBS]

Thailand: Pheu Thai to discuss the public referendum in its first cabinet meeting

(ak) Cholnan Srikaew, a leader of Pheu Thai and Chusak Sirinil, his deputy, addressed a group led by leaders of the Internet Dialogue on Law Reform (iLaw) as the group submitted their demands to the Pheu Thai leader to speed up the charter referendum process. They assured that the holding of a public referendum on writing a new Constitution would be discussed in the first Cabinet meeting.

ilaw reported it had gathered 205,739 names of eligible voters to submit to the Election Commission their demand for a referendum on the question whether the new charter should be prepared and passed to replace the 2017 Constitution. [The Nation]

Vietnam: Garment workers protest layoffs in Ho Chi Minh City

(km) Employees of a South Korean garment manufacturer have staged a protest at the company's Ho Chi Minh City office following the announcement of the dismissal of 611 workers, many of whom had been with the company for an extended period. The decision to lay off these employees was prompted by a reduction in orders attributed to the aftermath of the

COVID-19 pandemic and the broader global economic downturn. [VnExpress International]

Notably, the company reported the implementation of a performance-based salary system and the layoff plan to labor authorities, receiving approval from the company's labor union as well.

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

BRICS opens door for six new members

(dql) After closed-door talks at its 15th summit, held in Johannesburg, South Africa, on August 22-24, the BRICS group of nations announced their decision to invite six countries - Argentina, Egypt, Iran, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) - to become new members of the bloc from January 1, 2024, on. More importantly, among the enlarged BRICS are five of the top ten oil producing countries, with Saudi Arabia, Russia and Brazil being the second, third and eighth biggest oil producing countries, respectively, while UAE and Iran are ranked seventh and ninth respectively. The three West Asian countries are key members of OPEC. [Wire]

With the enlargement, the 11-member group will account for roughly 37 percent of global GDP when measured at purchasing power parity, while representing 46 percent of the world population. [Statista]

The issue of the expansion of the bloc dominated the summit, attended by leaders of more than 60 countries alongside member Brazilian President Luiz

Inácio Lula da Silva, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Chinese President Xi Jinping, and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa. Vladimir Putin joined the talks virtually as his in-person participation was effectively prevented by the arrest warrant of the International Criminal Court. In the run-up to the summit, over 40 countries had expressed interest in joining BRICS, while 23 formally applied for membership.

The outcome is widely seen as a big win for China that has long pushed to expand the bloc and its clout against reservations from other members such as India and Brazil. The expansion is part of China's efforts to forge the loose economic grouping into a geopolitical counterweight to the West and Western institutions such as the G7.

In this address, Xi called on the BRICS "to expand political and security cooperation to uphold peace and tranquility," arguing that the "Cold War mentality is still haunting our world, and the geopolitical situation is getting tense. All nations long for a sound security environment. International security is indivisible. Attempts to seek absolute security at the expense of others will eventually backfire," an apparent reference to the US and the war in Ukraine. [Xinhua]

Furthermore, BRICS agreed at the summit to step up the use of their local currencies in trade and for investment transactions among themselves, to further reduce reliance on the US dollar-based global payment and financial system. Ramaphosa stated in this regard: "There is a global momentum for the use of local currencies, alternative financial arrangements and alternative payments systems." [CNN] [Atlantic Council] [The Guardian] [The Globe and Mail] [Financial Times]

Given the geopolitical importance of the Suez Canal, that plays a vital role in linking the Mediterranean and Red Seas and making it simpler to export and import commodities from Asian countries to European and African countries, and vice versa, Egypt's accession to the BRICS is also to be seen in light of China's interests and its maritime Silk Road initiative.

Causing irritation, Xi Jinping failed to show up at the Brics Business Forum on the first day of the summit, at which he was scheduled to deliver a speech alongside his counterparts. On his behalf, Commerce Minister Wang Wentao delivered the speech that criticized slashed out – without naming the U.S – against one country that is "obsessed with maintaining hegemony, [and] has gone out of its way to cripple the emerging markets and developing countries." [South China Morning Post]

Indian Prime Minister Modi warns of risk of ‘new model for colonialism’ in race for critical minerals

(lm) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has raised concerns over the risk of a "new model of colonialism" if countries possessing critical minerals do not recognize their role as global custodians. Speaking at a business summit in New Delhi, Modi also highlighted China's dominance in rare earth production and processing, underlining the need for diversified and reliable supply chains to avoid vulnerabilities witnessed during the pandemic. [The Straits Times] [Mint]

Modi’s remarks come as the worldwide pursuit of critical and rare earth minerals continues to gain momentum due to a growing demand in various key industries, including renewable energy, energy story, telecommunications, defence and healthcare.

In June, India joined the exclusive group of nations known as the Mineral Security Partnership, a significant move announced jointly by Prime Minister Modi and United States President Joe Biden during Modi's recent Washington visit. Comprising 13 member states, the partnership aims to stimulate investments, both public and private, in global critical mineral supply chains, including rare earth minerals.

Indian spacecraft lands on moon’s south pole

(lf/hp) India has successfully left its mark on the moon as the Chandrayaan-3 rocket landed on the lunar south pole on August 23. The mission’s success makes India only the fourth country in history to successfully undertake a soft landing on the moon, following the United States, Russia, and China, as well as the first nation to make a landing on the lunar south pole. [BBC] [Indian Express] [Mint]

Following the successful landing, the mission now turns towards research and data collection, as the Pragyaan rover begins to collect images and samples to identify what minerals are present on the moon’s surface. The mission is also looking for samples of water, which if found would provide a massive breakthrough for scientists studying the composition of the moon.

Following the successful landing, Prime Minster Narendra Modi congratulated the entire mission team by stating that their success was a “victory cry of a developed India”. Modi maintained that the mission was not only an achievement for India, but one that “belongs to all of humanity”, and teased that further missions would “test the limits of our solar system”.

With this achievement, India has cemented itself as a key player in the growing realm of space politics, where a number of countries and large corporations have turned their attention. In fact, the the Chandrayaan-3 mission might usher in a fresh era of great power rivalry: India and Russia, collaborators on terrestrial matters, have vied fiercely to be the inaugural nation to achieve a lunar south pole landing. However, a recent Russian endeavor ended in failure. The identification of water—a potential source of refined rocket fuel—presents a prospect for additional nations to consider the lunar south pole vicinity as a launchpad for more profound ventures into space.

The world poured its congratulations to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) following Chandrayaan-3’s successful soft landing on the moon’s south pole. Many countries including India’s neighbors Nepal, Pakistan, Bhutan, Maldives and China used social media platforms such as X, formerly known as Twitter, to express their views on this new development in the space field. [ABP Live News] [Press Information Bureau]

India, European Union hold third high-level dialogue to boost bilateral trade, investment

(hp) The third High-Level Dialogue (HLD) between India and the European Union (EU) tool place on August 26, co-chaired by Piyush Goyal, India's Minister of Commerce and Industry, and Valdis Dombrovskis, Executive Vice-President of the European Commission. During the dialogue, the senior officials reviewed progress in three key negotiations: the India-EU Free Trade Agreement, a standalone Investment Protection Agreement, and a Geographical Indications Agreement.

The EU is keen on finalizing a free trade deal with India – one of the fastest growing economies of the world and open an arena for goods and investment for the EU in the areas of digital markets and energy resources. However, Brussel’s sustainability framework

is causing complications in trade negotiations with multiple nations, including Australia and Thailand.

The European Commission announced that both parties will resume talks in Brussels on October 16. [The Economic Times] [BNN Bloomberg] [MoneyControl]

UN Development Programme joins Indian Ministry to develop Northeast

(hp) The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and India's Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MDoNER) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to develop the South Asian nation's north-eastern region. [Mint]

The prime motive of the agreement is to develop and promote Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the region. Through this collaborative effort, the UNDP has agreed in this MoU to offer technical support to MDoNER in several crucial areas. Apart from accelerating the SDGs' development, it involves improving project monitoring and evaluation, and developing capacity. Support for aspirational blocks and districts is also an important aspect of this partnership. UNDP will also help in broadening effective methods and integrating cutting-edge technology into government. [APAC News Network] [Press Information Bureau]

India expands curbs on rice exports with 20 percent duty on parboiled grade

(lm) India has enacted a 20 percent duty on parboiled rice exports, a move that has triggered fears of global food inflation, as current rice prices already hover near a 12-year peak. More than three billion people worldwide rely on rice as a staple food and India contributed to about 40 percent of global rice exports. [The Straits Times] [CNN]

Earlier in July, India took industry observers by surprise with its ban on the export of widely consumed non-basmati white rice in an effort to calm rising prices at home and ensure food security [see AiR No. 29, July/2023, 3]. Consequently, buyers turned to increased purchases of parboiled rice, which escalated prices to unprecedented levels.

In May of last year, India banned wheat exports amid a record-breaking heatwave and soaring commodity

prices. As a result, New Delhi faced criticism from multiple countries, most notably the G7 nations which urged India to lift restrictions, while China backed India, citing more developed countries' responsibility [see AiR No. 21, May/2022, 4]. India is the world's second biggest wheat producer, but accounts for less than 1 percent of the global wheat trade.

Japan holds joint maritime drill with US, Australia, Philippines

(dql) Joint naval exercises in the South China Sea were conducted by Japan, the U.S. Australia and the Philippines on August 24.

The first quadrilateral drill between the four countries involved the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force's largest destroyer, Izumo, and destroyer Samidare, and the US Navy's littoral combat ship Mobile and Australia's amphibious assault ship Canberra, frigate Anzac as well as F-35A fighter jets, and the Philippine Navy's landing ship Davao Del Sur. [Kyodo News]

According to Japan's defense ministry, the exercise reflected the country's continued efforts to "strenghten corporations with allies and like-minded countries to realize #FOIP." [Ministry of Defense, Japan, twitter]

The move comes a few days after Chinese coastguard ships blocked the passage to Philippine coast guard vessels for hours near the Second Thomas Shoal, according to pictures of the Philippine Coast Guard. The area in question is claimed by the Philippines which maintains a military ship and had sent supplies there. [Euronews]

In a separate development, two F-35A fighter jets of the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force have arrived at a military base in Australia for a training exercise from August 21-26, marking Japan's first-ever deployment of the aircraft overseas and indicating efforts of the two countries to deepen security ties.

The deployment also marks the first measure under the Reciprocal Access Agreement between the two countries, that was signed in January 2022 and that outlining rules for weapon transportation during joint exercises and disaster relief operations in both countries [see AiR No. 2, January/2022, 2]. It entered into force earlier this month. [The Japan Times] [Janes]

Japan-ASEAN: Tokyo to expand assistance in various areas

(dql) According to Japanese government source cited by Kyodo News, Japan is set to expand its assistance to the ASEAN in various areas as part of Japan's efforts to strengthen its presence in the region and deepening its relationship with the Global South developing and emerging countries in a bid to counter China's influence.

Japan is said to make a related pledge at a special summit in December commemorating 50 years of relations. Tokyo's commitment would include various areas, including improving food security in the event of emergencies and advancing measures against cyberattacks and climate change as well as cooperation on maritime security, according to the sources. [Kyodo News]

Malaysian foreign minister in Iran, Iraq to explore new areas of cooperation

(lm) Zambry Abdul Kadir, Malaysia's Foreign Minister, recently embarked on diplomatic visits to both Iran and Iraq, solidifying the nation's engagement with key players in the Middle East [see AiR No. 34, August/2023, 4]. During his travels, Abdul Kadir engaged in discussions to enhance economic ties, explore collaboration in various sectors, and address mutual concerns, demonstrating Malaysia's commitment to fostering robust relationships within the region.

Iran

While in Tehran, Zambry met with Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi to discuss ways to enhance economic relations between the two countries. During their meeting, Raisi hailed the long-term strategic cooperation plan between Iran and Malaysia, emphasizing its potential to open new avenues for interaction. The Malaysian top diplomat echoed Iran's importance as a vital partner in the region and the Islamic world, affirming that his country would never recognize the United States sanctions against Iran. [Caspian News]

Iran's Parliament Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf also met the Malaysian foreign minister on the same day, expressing Iran's interest in establishing effective relationships with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). He highlighted the need to address

air transport issues to facilitate travel for business and tourism. The Malaysian minister suggested that the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the parliaments of Iran and Malaysia collaborate to resolve problems, including sanctions.

Abdul Kadir further engaged in talks with his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian. The discussions covered bilateral, regional, and international matters, leading to agreements on prisoner swaps and economic cooperation. Amir-Abdollahian noted a growing trend in the Middle East toward "indigenous" security, indicating a preference for regional stability through internal efforts. He highlighted a new phase in regional relationships based on strategic development.

Iraq

The Malaysian top diplomat arrived in the Iraqi capital Baghdad on August 23 for meetings with Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani, and Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein. He was also expected to engage with Iraqi entrepreneurs to explore potential economic partnerships. [Iraqi News]

Zambry's visit is a follow-up to discussions initiated during the Non-Aligned Movement Ministerial Meeting on July 5. Crucially, it also comes after Malaysia decided to reopen its embassy in Baghdad – twenty years after it was shut down in the context of the US invasion of Iraq –, a move that could rejuvenate various aspects of collaboration between the two nations, including trade, investment, education, tourism, and culture.

Australian defence minister travels to Malaysia, Philippines, announces increased collaboration with Manila in joint South China Sea patrols

(lm) In a bid to strengthen regional security and cooperation, Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles embarked on a diplomatic journey to Malaysia and the Philippines.

Malaysia

While in Kuala Lumpur, Marles co-chaired the third High Level Committee meeting with Malaysia's Minister of Defence, Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan, and met

Australian Defence Force personnel at Royal Malaysian Air Force Base Butterworth.

The two countries restated their dedication to the continued significance of the Five Powers Defence Arrangements (FPDA) as a crucial regional security factor. They also emphasized that all forthcoming endeavors will enhance the unity and potency of FPDA member nations. [Malay Mail]

Philippines

In the Philippines, Marles observed bilateral training as part of the so-called Indo-Pacific Endeavour, Australia's flagship regional engagement activity, and met his Philippines counterpart, Secretary for National Defense, Gilberto Teodoro.

Notably, Marles announced increased collaboration with the Philippines in joint patrols in the South China Sea due to Australia's security interests in the region. Marles emphasized the two nations' commitment to a world governed by international law and supported the 2016 arbitration ruling that rejected expansive Chinese claims in the region. [Reuters]

The move follows joint military exercises involving over 2,000 Australian and Philippine personnel, along with U.S. Marines, and Australian navy vessels engaging with the Philippine Navy, reflecting heightened tensions between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea. It also follows a recent joint patrol involving Australia, Japan, and the Philippines. Additionally, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is set to visit the Philippines to discuss defense cooperation, marking the first such visit in two decades.

US UN ambassador calls on UNSC to focus on Myanmar's deteriorating human rights

(wn) U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas Greenfield has called on the United Nations Security Council pay full attention to the deteriorating human rights situation in Myanmar, demanding not only the "full implementation" of Resolution 2669, but also to address the military's human rights abuses and atrocities. The Security Council should use all its powers to support ASEAN's efforts to resolve the Myanmar crisis, Greenfield stated.

She made this call at a UN Security Council meeting on August 23 with reference to the latest report of the UN

High Commissioner for Human Rights on Burma presented at the UN Human Rights Council's 53rd session (June 19 – July 14) 2023 and the sixth anniversary of the start of "a campaign of genocide, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing committed against Rohingya in northern Rakhine State," in this month.

In December 2022, the Security Council passed Resolution 2669, which calls for an immediate end to the violence in Myanmar and the release of all political prisoners, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, as well as the implementation of ASEAN agreements that respect the democracy and human rights of the Burmese people. [Mission to the United Nations, USA] [BBC Burmese]

Meanwhile, at a press conference in New York on August 25, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged all relevant parties to increase their efforts to identify the root cause of systematic discrimination and violence in Myanmar and find a sustainable solution.

The Rohingya refugees fled Myanmar's Rakhine state six years ago, but they are still displaced both domestically and abroad, including in neighbouring Bangladesh. [VOA]

Myanmar-UNSC: Ministry of Foreign Affairs commented on UN Security Council's statement

(sk) On August 24, Myanmar's Foreign Ministry addressed the loss of 6,300 lives in terrorist attacks and reaffirmed commitment to its Constitution. Following a closed UN Security Council consultation on August 23, a joint statement was read by Britain, representing Albania, Brazil, Ecuador, France, Gabon, Ghana, Japan, Malta, Mozambique, Switzerland, UAE, US, and UK.

Briefings by Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and Khaled Khiari, Assistant Secretary-General for Middle East, Asia and the Pacific in the United Nations Departments of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Peace Operations, informed the consultation. [Eleven Myanmar 1]

Calling the statement "biased," the ministry criticized it for overlooking terrorism, emphasizing its security

measures that has been taken “with utmost restraint to protect the lives and properties of its people.” The ministry, further, stressed prisoner releases, political engagement, and adherence to repatriation agreements with Bangladesh as well as collaboration on humanitarian aid, including with British and Swiss diplomats, and the facilitation of a UN visit.

It also concluded that it sees its internal situation as not threatening regional peace and views UNSC Resolution 2669 as politicized. [Eleven Myanmar 2]

North Korea: Kim Jong Un criticizes officials' response to flood damage

(tms) North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has criticized top officials for their inadequate response to flood damage, accusing them of harming the national economy, according to state media KCNA reports.

Kim inspected a flood-damaged tideland on the west coast and expressed dissatisfaction with officials' negligence of their duties. He specifically singled out Kim Tok Hun, the premier of the cabinet, for inspecting the site with a passive attitude. Kim mentioned that the administrative and economic discipline of the cabinet has deteriorated, leading to irresponsible work practices that are hindering state economic efforts. [KCNA]

This visit is part of a series of inspections Kim has conducted in flood-affected agricultural areas, reflecting growing concerns over a potential food crisis in North Korea.

The criticism from Kim has raised speculation about a potential cabinet reshuffle and suggests that the country's economy is not progressing as intended. North Korea has a history of food shortages, often exacerbated by natural disasters, with border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating the situation. [Reuters]

North Korea: Hyesan authorities intensify crackdown on money changers

(tms) Authorities of Hyesan, a city in the northern part of Ryanggang province, are launching a heightened crackdown on money changers, prompting a shift within the underground currency exchange market.

Law enforcement has detained money changers, sending them to labor centers, disrupting the industry. Initial targets were prominent changers, causing a ripple effect. Raids on their homes led to confiscation of foreign currency and North Korean won, eroding confidence in the national currency.

The crackdown stems from distrust in official banking, exemplified by the arrest of around ten Hyesan money changers sent to labor camps.

Public mistrust in banking indicates the eventual resurgence of the money changer market's vital role in North Korea's informal finance. [Daily NK]

North Korea: Security agencies exploit defectors' families to apprehend remittance brokers

(tms) Security branches of North Korea's Ministry of State Security in border regions adjacent to China have begun using the relatives of defectors to track down and capture remittance brokers, anonymous sources reveal.

On August 6, a remittance broker was captured while delivering money to a defector's family, falling into a Ministry of State Security's trap. Prior to this, agents had coerced defectors' families into extracting money by falsely claiming it was needed for medical reasons.

This deception led a broker to deliver the money to the family's home, resulting in immediate arrest. The confiscated evidence included RMB 10,000 (USD 1,390) and two foreign mobile phones used to confirm remittances. The broker is currently detained at a local Ministry of State Security branch.

Despite heightened crackdowns on foreign mobile phone use, North Korea's covert phone activity persists, pushing authorities to involve defectors' families in capturing remittance brokers during money deliveries, enabling the capture of foreign mobile phone users and accessing defectors' funds.

Other recent cases include arrests of individuals sent by remittance brokers, making brokers more cautious and complicating fund reception for defectors' families. [Daily NK]

North Korea: Government ramps up punishment for consuming South Korean entertainment

(tms) North Korea has recently heightened the severity of penalties for individuals caught watching "impure videos," including South Korean dramas and movies.

A source from North Pyongan Province revealed that a young man in Cholsan County was sent to a political prison camp in July after being accused of viewing South Korean content after previously receiving a sentence of reform through labor for a similar offense.

Another incident involved a man in his twenties from Sinuiju who was apprehended for watching pornography. The court's ruling also sentenced him to a political prison camp.

On July 20, the central government issued an order to provincial, city, and county party committees' propaganda departments, directing them to bolster ideological education to counter the influx of foreign information.

In late 2020, North Korea introduced the "Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act," commonly referred to as the anti-reactionary thought law which categorizes viewing, possessing, or distributing South Korean media as a criminal offense punishable by five to 10 years of reform through labor. [Daily NK]

North Korea: Second spy satellite launch fails due to emergency blasting system error

(tms) North Korea reported its second endeavor to launch a spy satellite has encountered failure due to an "error in the emergency blasting system during the third-stage flight."

The launch involved the Malligyong-1 satellite mounted on the Chollima-1 rocket. The failure was attributed to a specific problem that, according to the North's official news agency KCNA, doesn't significantly impact the reliability of cascade engines and the system.

The nation's aerospace agency intends to investigate the cause of the emergency blasting system malfunction and is planning a renewed satellite launch attempt in October. The recent launch took place at the Sohae satellite launching station, occurring around

three months after a previous failed spy satellite launch in late May [see AiR No. 22, May/2023, 5]. [Yonhap]

Meanwhile, North Korea has informed Japan of its intention to launch a satellite between August 24 and August 31, marking its second such attempt this year.

The announcement has drawn criticism from Japan and South Korea, who find the planned launch "extremely regrettable." The launch is expected to traverse the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and Pacific, prompting Japan to ready its PAC-3 missile defense system and gather information.

This development follows the recent standalone summit of the United States, Japan, and South Korea, where leaders sought to present a unified stance against North Korea's nuclear threats and China's influence [see AiR No. 34, August/2023, 4]. [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2] [Reuters 3]

North Korea: Entry ban lifted for citizens abroad after three years

(tms) North Korea' national emergency epidemic prevention headquarters has announced the lifting of the entry ban for its citizens who were staying abroad due to COVID-19 concerns following the resumption of commercial flights between North Korea, China, and Russia, marking the end of over three years of border closure.

This decision comes in response to the improved global pandemic situation. However, those returning will undergo a week of medical observation in quarantine wards. [Yonhap]

North Korea warns 'Thermonuclear War' amid US-South Korea military drills

(tms) North Korea has strongly condemned the annual joint military exercises between the United States and South Korea, characterizing them as a threat of "thermonuclear war."

The denunciation comes in response to recent trilateral agreements formed during the summit between the US, South Korea, and Japan at Camp David.

The agreements were viewed by North Korea as provocations aimed at fueling a nuclear conflict. The Ulchi Freedom Shield summer exercises, aimed at enhancing coordination in response to North Korea's nuclear and missile activities, have long been criticized by Pyongyang as rehearsals for war. [Reuters]

As the tensions intensifies, North Korea has also announced its intent to launch a satellite in the coming days. The international community is closely monitoring these developments as tensions continue to rise (see entry in this edition).

North Korea accuses US of pushing Ukraine crisis toward nuclear catastrophe

(tms) North Korea has accused the United States of dangerously escalating the Ukraine crisis by providing F-16 fighter jets to Kyiv's forces. The North's defense minister, Kang Sun Nam, contended that the US lacked the right to criticize North Korea's military collaboration with Russia, given its own involvement in arms supply to Ukraine.

Kang emphasized that the US holds no legal or moral authority to judge the defense cooperation between sovereign nations.

North Korea has been striving to strengthen its ties with Russia, a relationship further underscored by its recent invitation to Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu for commemorations marking the 70th anniversary of the Korean War's end [see AiR No. 31, August/2023, 1].

While Russia's actions are termed an unprovoked war of conquest by Kyiv and its Western allies, the US has approved the dispatch of F-16 fighter jets from Denmark and the Netherlands to Ukraine to aid in its counter-offensive against Russian forces. [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2]

UN Security Council holds discussion on North Korea's failed satellite launch

(tms) The UN Security Council convened to discuss North Korea's recent unsuccessful satellite launch, requested by several council members including the US, UK, Japan, and South Korea.

US ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield condemned the launch, considering it a violation of UNSC resolutions and an act that prioritizes the regime's interests over the well-being of its citizens.

While many council members criticized Pyongyang's actions, the meeting did not result in a concrete outcome due to opposition from China and Russia.

South and North Korea, though not council members, participated in the discussion, with differing perspectives on the issue. [KBS]

South Korea-Japan-US: Coordinate trilateral response to North Korea's latest space launch

(cx) Following North Korea's latest failed spy satellite launch (see article in this edition), South Korea, Japan, and the US have strongly condemned the launch and agreed to review additional sanctions against Pyongyang.

On August 24, South Korea, Japan, and the US' top nuclear envoys held a trilateral conference call where they delivered a joint statement deploring the launch. They emphasized that the launch is a violation of UN Security Council resolutions which prohibit North Korean launches using ballistic missile technology. The top diplomats of all three countries also held phone consultations the same day. They agreed to deliver a unified response and consider unilateral sanctions against North Korea.

President Yoon Suk-yeol, meanwhile, ordered the National Security Council to share Seoul's intelligence on the failed launch with the US and Japan. The South Korean military has deployed ships and aircraft to search and salvage the fallen parts of the rocket.

The launch came amid the ongoing Ulchi Freedom Shield exercise and a landmark trilateral summit among Seoul, Washington and Tokyo, where each country committed to bolster cooperation against Pyongyang's evolving military threats [see AiR No. 34, August/2023, 4]

Officials from the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff shared that there is a possibility the North will make its third launch attempt around the founding of the North's ruling Worker's Party on October 10. [Yonhap 1] [Yonhap 2] [Yonhap 3] [The Associated Press] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South

Korea 1] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea 2] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea 3]

South Korea chairs the 9th meeting of the Arms Trade Treaty

(cx) South Korea chaired the 9th meeting of the States Parties to the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) held in Geneva, Switzerland from August 21-25. The ATT, with a total of 113 signatories, was established in December 2014 as the first legally binding international agreement to regulate cross-border trade of conventional arms.

The conference serves as a key decision-making body for the ATT, making recommendations to member states. As the presiding country, South Korea led discussions focused on universalizing and effectively implementing the Arms Trade Treaty.

South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin emphasized the ongoing armed conflicts in Ukraine and the Sahel region, where unregulated arms usage has led to increasing civilian casualties. Park advocated for nations to establish robust export control systems, enhance involvement from various stakeholders in the implementation process, and promote the universalization of the treaty.

Park also noted that North Korea's arms trade violates a number of UN Security Council resolutions and the ATT itself and emphasized the responsibility of the ATT member countries to address such challenges.

South Korea aims to leverage the outcomes of this conference to contribute to international discussions on arms control and non-proliferation. The country seeks to enhance their status as a leader in responsible arms exports. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea]

South Korea-G20: Trade ministers agree to enhance ties

(cx) South Korea's Trade Minister Ahn Duk-geun met with his US and Chinese counterparts on August 24 to discuss deepening trade and investment cooperation.

The meeting was held on the sidelines of the two-day Group of 20 Trade and Investment Ministerial Meeting in Jaipur, India. Ahn and US Trade Representative Katherine Tai agreed to implement the joint efforts

that their leaders agreed to push for during the recent trilateral summit with Japan, which include securing resilient supply chains, accelerating the clean energy transition, and promoting sustainable economic growth. Ahn and Tai also agreed to boost cooperation on the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.

Ahn held a separate meeting with Wang Shouwen, the deputy secretary of China's commerce ministry. They discussed ways to facilitate bilateral trade and investment through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. They also pledged to continue consultations through high-level trade talks.

Ahn also met with his counterparts from Saudi Arabia, India and the United Arab Emirates to discuss bolstering trade ties. [Yonhap]

Central American Parliament expels Taiwan and makes China a permanent observer

(ed) On August 21, the Central American Parliament (Parlacen) voted to expel Taiwan as a permanent observer and replace it with China.

Taiwan had been a permanent member in the six-nation parliament for more than two decades, but growing economic influence in Central America has increasingly marginalized Taiwan in favor of China.

Parlacen made its decision to expel Taiwan based on the United Nation's expulsion of Taiwan in 1971, which deemed Taiwan to be a province of China and not an independent country. Taiwan announced its immediate withdrawal from Parlacen in the interest of upholding "national dignity" and criticized China for working to stymie Taiwan's participation in international organizations. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of China (Taiwan)]

Currently, the sole Parlacen member to officially recognize Taiwan is Guatemala. Guatemala's new president-elect Bernardo Arévalo had advocated switching diplomatic allegiance to China in the run-up to the election, but later promised to maintain ties with Taiwan [see AiR No.34, August/2023, 4]. Meanwhile, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Panama and the Dominican Republic have all severed ties with Taiwan in recent years.

The US condemned Parlacen's decision and praised Taiwan as having encouraged good governance and economic development in the western hemisphere

prior to its inclusion as a permanent member of the parliament in 1999. [Reuters]

UNICEF warns of deteriorating development in breastfeeding in Cambodia

(dql) The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has warned of an alarming decline in breastfeeding rates in Cambodia and demanded the Cambodian government take immediate action to counter the trend.

The UN agency cited finding of the Cambodia Demographic Health Survey (CDHS 2021-22) that revealed that early breastfeeding – giving a baby breast milk within one hour of birth – has dropped from 66 percent to 54 percent in the last decade, while exclusive breastfeeding – feeding babies only breast milk for the first six months of life – has fallen from 74 percent to 50 percent. [Khmer Times]

Indonesia will not take on the BRIC's open-door policy

(ys) The BRICS bloc of developing nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) has decided to admit Saudi Arabia, Iran, Ethiopia, Egypt, Argentina and the United Arab Emirates to as new members, for the first in 13 years.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo, who was among the attendees of the BRICS summit in Johannesburg (see article in this edition) stated that Indonesia has no interest in applying for membership and that his presence at the meeting was to boost solidarity among the world's developing nations. [The Jakarta Post]

For a discussion of how Widodo's decision to stay out of the BRICS reflects Indonesia's longstanding non-aligned policy, see [Al Jazeera].

President Biden will not attend the upcoming ASEAN Summit

(ys) United States President Joe Biden will not attend the upcoming ASEAN Summit in Jakarta, Indonesia, as confirmed by the White House.

President Biden will travel to India for the Group of 20 leaders' Summit in New Delhi, India, from September 7 to 10.

Vice President Kamala Harris will be taking his place and will travel to Jakarta from September 4 to 7 for US-ASEAN and the East Asia Summits.

This would be Harris' third visit to the region after Singapore and Vietnam in August 2021 as well as Thailand and the Philippines in November 2022. [The Jakarta Post] [The White House]

Laos, Thailand, and China collaborate to combat illegal gambling and fraud in Myanmar

(ws) On August 22, ambassadors from three countries, namely, Laos, Thailand, and China convened a meeting to deliberate on a collaborative effort, aimed at eradicating illegal gambling and fraudulent activities that adversely affect the life and property of their citizens living in Myanmar.

Previously, these three nations, along with Myanmar, convened and collectively agreed to establish a dedicated coordination center in Chiang Mai. The objective is to combat gambling-related fraud and apprehend criminal groups through deepened cooperation and coordination. [Laotian Times]

US President Biden to visit Vietnam after G20 summit in India as Washington seeks closer ties

(lm) United States President Joe Biden will travel to Vietnam on September 10 following a Group of Twenty (G20) summit in India to meet with General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong and other leaders for discussions on technology, economy, regional stability and climate change.

With U.S.-China tensions escalating, Washington is keen to enhance ties with Hanoi, viewing Vietnam as a crucial regional partner. Furthermore, the Biden administration has been working to reinforce its relationships in the Asian region. Notably, however, Vice President Kamala Harris will represent the U.S. at the ASEAN meetings next month instead of President Biden. [South China Morning Post] [Reuters] [CNN]

State Bank of Vietnam joins Regional Payment Connectivity initiative

(km/lm) Vietnam's central bank has officially joined the Regional Payment Connectivity (RPC) initiative. This recent development, which was sealed on during a recent meeting of the ASEAN finance ministers and central bank governors, is an expansion of the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Regional Payment Connectivity that was initiated by the central banks of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand at the sidelines of the G20 Leaders' Summit in November last year. [VietnamPlus] [Bank Indonesia]

Bangladesh one of four elected candidate countries for Japan's Official Security Assistance

(tms/lm) The Japanese Ambassador to Bangladesh, Iwama Kiminori, has announced that Dhaka has been chosen as one of the four candidate countries for Tokyo's recently established Official Security Assistance (OSA), a decision that follows Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's trip to Japan in April. Furthermore, the two countries have started negotiations on an agreement concerning the transfer of defense equipment and technology. [The Daily Star]

The concept of OSA is featured in Japan's "National Security Strategy," officially approved by the Cabinet on December 16, 2022. Distinct from the existing "Official Development Assistance," which primarily focuses on the economic and social advancement of developing nations, the OSA intends to offer support to armed forces and related entities by furnishing materials, equipment, and aid for infrastructure development. The other three candidate countries are the Philippines, Malaysia, and Fiji. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan]

Trade between Japan and Bangladesh has reached an annual figure of nearly USD 4 billion, marking a significant bilateral economic engagement. Japan's support for Bangladesh extends beyond trade, with the country providing the largest quantum of overseas development assistance, totaling USD 24.72 billion, since Bangladesh's inception in 1971.

Japan is actively involved in several substantial infrastructure projects in Bangladesh, including the

development of the Matarbari power plant, the metro rail system, and the construction of the third terminal at Dhaka airport.

Bangladesh seeks enhanced welfare initiatives for its citizens in Saudi Arabia

(tms) Bangladesh's President Mohammed Shahabuddin emphasized the need for more effective welfare measures for Bangladeshi expatriates during a visit from Saudi Arabia's Minister for Hajj and Umrah, Dr Tawfiq Bin Fawzan Al-Rabiah.

The President hailed the strong relationship between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia, highlighting the latter's role in socio-economic development and as an export destination for Bangladeshi workers while also expressing gratitude for Saudi Arabia's hospitality during Hajj.

Minister Al-Rabiah echoed the growing partnership between Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh, emphasizing their importance in trade, investment, and development. [BSS]

Cambodia-South Korea: Strengthening bilateral cooperation and trade discussed

(dql) During a meeting between Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet and visiting South Korean Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs Chung Hwang-Keun on August 28 in Phnom Penh, both sides concurred to further deepen and expand bilateral cooperation and trade.

Manet reassured Chung Cambodia support for South Korea's bid to host the World Expo in 2030, while requesting the Seoul's assistance in boosting South Korean investments in his country.

The meeting was part of Chung's visit to the Southeast Asian country on August 26-28. [Khmer Times]

China-India: Half-baked attempts to resolve border disputes

(ic) In the lead-up to the 15th BRICS Summit (Aug 22-24), China and India held border talks to signal the

resolve to build unity at the BRICS Summit. [South China Morning Post]

On the sidelines of the BRICS Summit, President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi held talks to engage in a focused de-escalation of tensions along the border. [BBC]

On Aug 28, China would announce the publication of its 2023 standard map, compiled by the Ministry of Natural Resources per the Surveying and Mapping Law of the People's Republic of China. [China Daily] [Ministry of Natural Resources, in Chinese] This drew the ire of several Indian news publications as a few disputed provinces were included on the map as part of China's territory: specifically, the state of Arunachal Pradesh and the Aksai Chin region. [Mint] [NDTV] [The Wire India]

China-Japan: Brewing dispute over Fukushima wastewater release

(ic) On Aug 24, Japan began releasing more than 1 million metric tons of treated water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant; this plan had been approved two years ago and had faced opposition from China and South Korea at every step. [Reuters 1]

In response, the Chinese foreign ministry called the release an "extremely selfish and irresponsible act", announcing a ban of seafood products imported from Japan from Aug 24 on.

The dispute quickly took on a political dimension as Chinese members of the public would begin calling Japanese public institutions and businesses in both China and Japan to harass them over the decision. [Reuters 2] [Channel News Asia]

With Japanese schools in China reportedly having stones and eggs thrown at them, the Japanese government has issued a warning to citizens in China to avoid being openly identifiable as Japanese, and take precautions when visiting Japanese-affiliated locations. [Bloomberg Politics] [Embassy of Japan in China, in Japanese]

Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Okano Masataka has issued a formal request to Chinese ambassador to Japan Wu Jianghao for his assistance in preventing harassment and lifting the import ban on Japanese seafood products. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, in Japanese]

Yamaguchi Natsuo, Leader of the Kōmeitō party which is the junior partner of the ruling coalition, postponed his planned August 28-30 visit at the request of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which said that it was not a good time given the ongoing unrest surrounding Japan's activities. He was to serve as the courier for a personal letter for President Xi Jinping penned by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio. [Reuters 3]

Japanese ministers have hinted on Aug 29 that a complaint will be submitted to the World Trade Organization (WTO) regarding this ban. [Kyodo News]

China-United States: Science and technology agreement in limbo

(ic) The "Agreement Between the United States and China on Cooperation in Science and Technology," also known as the Science and Technology Agreement (STA), was signed in 1979 and is the first agreement signed between China and the US after the normalization of relations in that year. [The American Presidency Project] [United States Department of Agriculture] Since then, it has been renewed every five years.

Amidst a low point in bilateral relations, there have been concerns that the US will let the deal expire. This is because of long-standing concerns over Chinese investments and national security coming to a head. In the meantime, the US State Department has requested a six-month extension to the STA in order to secure a mandate to renegotiate the agreement. [Reuters 1]

This comes as many of the US' Western partners are also reviewing rules on foreign investment with the specific concern of intellectual property theft by China. [Reuters 2]

China, India leaders agree to 'intensify efforts' to deescalate border tensions following rare meeting

(lm) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping have agreed to "intensify efforts" to deescalate tensions along the contested Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Himalayas, in a rare face-to-face meeting since a clash in June 2020 strained relations. [CNN]

In a meeting in the leaders' lounge at the BRICS leadership summit in South Africa on August 24, the two leaders agreed to direct their officials to double down on efforts to quickly pull back troops from remaining flashpoints in the eastern Ladakh region, which borders China's Tibet Autonomous Region. [The Straits Times]

Significantly, this marked the inaugural instance when Prime Minister Modi directly conveyed to President Xi the vital importance of upholding and respecting the LAC as a prerequisite for achieving the normalization of bilateral relations between New Delhi and Beijing. During the previous year's Group of 20 nations summit in Indonesia, the two leaders engaged, but the interactions were limited to courtesies and discussions on the need for stabilizing bilateral relations.

Two weeks before the talks in Johannesburg, military commanders of both countries engaged in five days of talks along the Himalayan frontier in an endeavor to achieve progress. While both sides reported positive outcomes from the discussions, no information emerged regarding troop withdrawals on the ground. [AiR No. 34, August/2023, 4]

China donates military vehicles worth USD 6.2 million to Sri Lanka

(lf) China has donated 11 military vehicles to Sri Lanka, with a collective value of USD 6.2 million. These vehicles are intended for utilization by the Sri Lankan army in tasks related to internal security, specialized operations, and training. The donation was presented during a ceremonial event attended by both Sri Lankan military personnel and representatives from the Chinese embassy. [Daily Mirror] [Daily News]

China's decision to donate the vehicles to Sri Lanka signifies the island nation's relevance in the Indian Ocean, a region which Beijing hopes to cement its presence within to ease its trade and investment efforts. Recent weeks have seen Chinese vessels dock in Sri Lankan ports for what were claimed to be research purposes [see AiR, No. 33, August/2023, 4].

India, Philippines seek to enhance maritime cooperation

(hp) A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed by the Director General of Indian Coast Guard

and Commandant of Philippine Coast Guard in the Indian capital of New Delhi. This MoU was the first of its kind which was signed to enhance the professional relationship between the two countries. [News on Air]

It included cooperation in the fields of Maritime Law Enforcement, Maritime Search & Response and Marine Pollution Response. Through the MoU, both nations expect to cooperate on a bigger and better level while providing training programs, conducting collaborative exercises and sharing their conventions and procedures. Apart from that, the MoU sought to ensure the capabilities to provide safe, secure and clean seas in their vicinity.

A five-member delegation of the Philippine coast guard visited India from August 20th to 24th. During its visit, the delegation observed the operational capabilities of the Indian Coast Guard, both aerial and maritime. [The Hindu]

Prime Minister Modi visit Greece, eyes Piraeus port as 'gateway' to European Union market

(lf/lm) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met his Greek counterpart Kyriakos Mitsotakis in Athens on August 25, marking the first visit by an Indian leader to the Mediterranean country in 40 years. Discussions centered on enhancing bilateral relations, covering defense, security, agriculture, and the economy. [Euractiv] [Anadolu Ajansı]

Most notably, however, trade emerged as a paramount focus. Modi, accompanied by key businessmen, sought to explore leveraging the port in Piraeus – the largest Greek port – for Indian exports. For its part, Athens promoted its maritime infrastructure as New Delhi's "gateway" to the European Union market.

Both leaders agreed to work towards doubling trade between India and Greece by 2030, upgrading the current EUR 1.32 billion sum to 2.64 billion in seven years. This increase will be facilitated through direct trade on agriculture products, infrastructure materials and advanced technologies. Both countries also agreed that skilled migration was a pressing issue that needed attention and streamlining, promising to come forward with a Memorandum of Understanding on the topic soon.

As noted by Prime Minister Mitsotakis, both Greece and India have maintained relations stretching back to

the ancient world, creating a “strong foundation” for their “strategic relationship”. Greece has also historically backed India on a number of controversial issues, including on the status of Kashmir, making the Mediterranean country an important ally for India within the EU.

The two countries also agree to continue cooperating on military and defense ties. Last month, India and Greece conducted a joint naval exercise in Crete, while Greek fighter jets are expected for the first time to participate in an Indian air force exercise in September.

Agriculture cooperation, counterterrorism and cyber-security were also identified as areas for further growth in the two nations’ bilateral ties. Prime Minister Mitsotakis also congratulated Prime Minster Modi on the success of the Chandrayaan-3 mission in landing on the moon’s South Pole. [Hindustan Times] [Associated Press]

Indian delegation visits Norway to strengthen ties

(hp) In an attempt to enhance bilateral ties between the two nations, India sent a delegation consisting of high-level officials headed by the Minister of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying, and Minister of State, Fisheries, Animal Husbandry & Dairying to Norway. The visit was scheduled from August 21 to 24. This visit reflected the Memorandum of Understanding signed between India and Norway to strengthen their relation in the field of fisheries and aquaculture in March 2010.

The delegation took part in Aqua Nor 2023, a biennial aquaculture exhibition and trade fair held in Trondheim, Norway, from August 22 to 24, 2023, as part of their trip. This gathering was regarded as one of the premier trade shows for aquaculture innovation and technology worldwide. By enthusiastically taking part in one of the biggest trade fairs for aquaculture technology and innovation, the delegation hopes to create and deepen bilateral ties between India and Norway in the sector of fisheries. [DD News] [Press Information Bureau]

India promises to continue supporting Sri Lanka’s development, expresses hope for reconciliation

(lf/lm) India's Minister of External Affairs S Jaishankar maintained that his country would continue supporting Sri Lanka's development and economic recovery, while at the same time expressing hope for a reconciliation process that addresses the aspirations of the minority Tamil community. The remarks by Jaishankar came on August 23 as he updated through a video message members of the India-Sri Lanka Parliamentary Friendship Association on bilateral relations. [MoneyControl]

This year's gathering follows an increase in attention placed on Sri Lanka from India as part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'neighborhood first' policy, which prioritizes India's presence within its own region, as well as a successful meeting between Modi and Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe in New Delhi. [AiR, No. 30, July/2023, 4]

India remains one of Sri Lanka's largest international creditors, but also one of its biggest supporters on the road to economic recovery. India's advocacy in Sri Lanka's favor was essential to securing the island nation it's USD 2.9 billion IMF bailout in March, for which it is set to undergo its first review from September 14-27. Keeping Sri Lanka a friendly nation is a key priority for India's national security, who see the nation as an essential factor in controlling China's presence within the Indian Ocean. [Daily Mirror] [NDTV]

Indonesia-US: Defense ministers meet

(ys) The Indonesian Minister of Defense Prabowo Subianto met his U.S. counterpart Lloyd J. Austin III at the Pentagon to discuss ways to strengthen defense cooperation between the two countries.

Prabowo expressed his appreciation to the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) for providing education to more than 7,000 Indonesian military personnel and civilians in the U.S., as well as training and education funds that have been provided to Indonesian students by the United States, totaling more than USD 130 million since 1970.

This year, for the first time, several Indonesian military cadets also had the opportunity to enroll in the US Military Academy: three cadets in the US Naval Academy (USNA), three cadets in the US Air Force Academy (USAFA) and one cadet in the US Military Academy (USMA).

During the meeting, both parties also agreed on several issues, including the importance of a free and open Indo-Pacific, as well as how China's expansive maritime claims in the South China Sea are inconsistent with the international law as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). [Indonesian Ministry of Defense, in Bahasa Indonesia] [US Department of Defense]

Indonesia acquires Black Hawk from Lockheed Martin

(ys) Indonesian state-owned enterprise PT Dirgantara Indonesia signed a Head of Agreement (HOA) with Global Business Development Lockheed Martin to acquire 24 units of Sikorsky S-70M Black Hawk Helicopters from the latter.

The fixed-wing type is designed for the heaviest military mission that can carry personnel and supplies.

Lockheed Martin has given the green light to Indonesia to assemble the primary system, operation, modification and system upgrade in the Southeast Asian country, which would enable Indonesia to do maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) independently as well as develop its aerostructure business.

This would be in line with Indonesia's ambition to secure the transfer of technology (TOT) in every weapons acquisition it makes. Neither side has revealed the total value of the deal. [Kompas, in Bahasa Indonesia] [Reuters]

Japan-US: Sale of missiles approved by Biden administration

(dql) The potential sale to Japan of Lockheed Martin Corp-manufactured long-range air-to-surface missiles, known as JASSM-ER, and related equipment worth estimated USD 104 million, has been approved by the U.S. in a notification of the Defense Security Cooperation Agency to Congress on August 28.

According to the agency, the sale comes in response to Tokyo's request to purchase up to 50 of the missiles, which will be mounted on Japan's Air Self-Defense Force F-15 and other fighter jets. [Defense Security Cooperation Agency, USA] [Nippon.com]

Laos, China to promote further businesses along cross-border railway

(ws) Business representatives from Laos and China are actively exploring strategies to enhance their business partnerships, with a particular focus on the opportunities arising from the Laos-China railway and deeper regional economic integration.

Business leaders from both countries met in Vientiane on August 25 to delve into the feasibility of joint investment ventures along the railway, especially in the dimensions of improving logistics, agriculture, tourism, and industrial ventures.

The Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry has established a committee, aiming to facilitate business partnerships between Laos and China.

Currently, China is the largest foreign investor in Laos, and acting as a key trading partner. The value of trade between these two countries has surpassed USD 15.9 billion between 2018 and 2022. Moreover, Chinese businesses have operated over 920 development projects in Laos, which are in total worth more than USD 13 billion. [Vientiane Times]

Laos-Malaysia: Deal for cross-railway cooperation signed

(ws) The Lao National Railway Enterprise (LNRE) and Keretapi Tanah Melayu Bhd (KTMB) have formally entered a memorandum of cooperation, aiming to bolster regional trade under the Pan-Asian Initiative.

In accordance with the terms outlined in the agreement, both nations will mutually allow access for each other's trains to operate within their respective borders.

This collaborative initiative exemplifies Laos' commitment to becoming a significant contributor within the Pan-Asian Rail network. It follows the operation of the Laos-China Railway, a 409-kilometer connection linking Vientiane Capital in Laos with Kunming in China.

However, it is worth noting that the participation of Thailand is essential for further cooperation, given its geographical position, connecting Malaysia and Laos. [Laotian Times]

Malaysia maintaining ties with ‘reliable ally’ China crucial, says Johor ruler

(lm) The ruler of Malaysia’s southern state Johor, Sultan Ibrahim Ismail, has emphasized the importance of Kuala Lumpur maintaining amicable ties with China. Describing the Asian superpower as a “good and reliable” investment partner, the sultan underscored the enduring positive relationship between Johor and China, rooted in history and extending through generations. [South China Morning Post]

Maldives, Saudi Arabia sign agreement on cooperation in fighting corruption

(lm) Saudi Arabia and the Maldives have signed an agreement manifesting their commitment to collaborate on safeguarding integrity and combating corruption. The memorandum of understanding seeks to foster collaboration by facilitating the exchange of information related to corruption-related offenses, bolstering institutional capabilities, and jointly combatting corruption. [Saudi Gazette]

Mongolia-Maldives: Agreement on visa waver

(tb) An agreement for visa waiver between Mongolia and the Republic of Maldives has been concluded in Delhi on August 17.

The mutual exemption agreement facilitates visa-free travel for individuals possessing different types of passports from both nations. This allows for a stay of up to 30 days in each other's country. [Montsame]

Australia sends humanitarian aid to Mongolia

(tb) In response to the humanitarian crisis caused by severe floods in Mongolia, Australia has pledged AUD 250,000 in humanitarian aid. This assistance will be channeled through the Mongolian Red Cross Society and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Mongolia, both of which are actively aiding the affected population. [Aki Press]

US sanctions those who provide jet fuel for the Myanmar junta

(ha) On August 23, the United States (US) imposed new sanctions on two Myanmar businessmen and three companies supplying jet fuel to the Myanmar junta. Under the sanctions, any American or US company are prohibited from doing business with them.

The three banned companies include two Singapore-based companies and one Myanmar-based company which are the main suppliers of jet fuel to the Myanmar military junta.

The two Myanmar businessmen are the CEOs of Asia Sun group of companies. They have bought and distributed jet fuel needed by the Myanmar military junta through Asia Sun group's fuel oil and related companies.

The United States is trying to prevent the military junta's airstrikes by banning individuals and companies that buy jet fuel for the military junta. [The Irrawaddy]

Thailand reaffirms bond with Myanmar junta

(ha) On the occasion of the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Thailand and Myanmar which was commemorated on August 24, the Myanmar military regime leader Min Aung Hlaing and outgoing Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha – both came to power through a coup – exchanged political messages, as well as the two countries foreign ministers Than Swe and Don Pramudwinai.

While Prayuth reaffirmed that Thailand would do all it can to support Myanmar's development toward a peaceful and prosperous democratic union, Don vowed to strengthen mutual cooperation between the two countries. [The Irrawaddy]

Thai court sentences Thai citizens who protest against Myanmar coup

(ha) On August 21, a Thai court sentenced seven Thai nationals to suspended prison terms and fines for participating in a demonstration against the Myanmar military coup in front of the Myanmar embassy in

Bangkok on February 1, 2021. The verdict came after six of the seven had been in prison for more than two years.

The Thai court found the defendants guilty of violating the emergency order and interfering with the operation of the authorities. According to the court's order, the seven Thai nationals were each sentenced. [The Irrawaddy]

US 'prepared' for multilateral joint patrols in South China Sea, awaits PH decision, ambassador to the US says

(lb) Philippine Ambassador to Washington Jose Manuel Romualdez, gave an update on the status of the proposed joint patrols between the Philippines, US, Japan, and Australia.

He stated that the US is ready to conduct the joint patrols in the South China Sea. According to the Ambassador, the decision to move forward is now in the hands of the Defense Secretary of the Philippines, Secretary Gilbert Teodoro [CNN Philippines].

Philippines launches e-visa system, to pilot test in China

(lb) The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) has introduced an e-visa system enabling foreign tourists to apply for visitor's visas online. The system's purpose is to provide convenience and encourage more tourism in the Philippines.

DFA Secretary Enrique Manalo announced that the e-visa system allows remote application through personal computers and mobile devices. The system will undergo a soft launch in Shanghai, China, organized by the Philippine Consulate General there. Previously, China was a significant source of tourists for the Philippines, particularly popular destinations like Boracay Island.

While some, like Senator Nancy, support the e-visa system, there are suggestions for face-to-face interactions during the application process to prevent undesired visitors. The Bureau of Immigration is also preparing for increased traveler influx during the upcoming months, setting up special lanes for overseas Filipino workers and "balikbayans" [GMA News Online].

Philippines, Japan sign loan agreement for disaster recovery

(lb) The Philippines and Japan have signed a loan agreement worth JPY 30 billion aimed at facilitating quicker recovery for areas affected by disasters. The agreement, known as the Post Disaster Stand-by Loan Phase 3, was signed by Budget Secretary Benjamin Diokno and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Senior Vice President Nakazawa Keiichiro in Tokyo. The loan is designed to support rapid recovery efforts following natural disasters by encouraging policy measures related to disaster risk reduction and management. It also aims to enhance disaster preparedness by providing readily available funds. The signing occurred during the 14th Philippines-Japan High-Level Joint Committee Meeting on Infrastructure Development and Economic Cooperation, a forum for reviewing bilateral cooperation accomplishments. Japan is a major contributor to the Philippines in terms of Official Development Assistance (ODA), accounting for approximately 40.5% of the country's total ODA portfolio, with loan and grant commitments amounting to around $12.92 billion. Japan has also funded significant railway projects in the Philippines and is presently involved in 28 ongoing loans with the Philippine government through JICA support. [ABS-CBN News].

United States wants free, fair elections in Pakistan

(tj) The United States Ambassador to Pakistan Donald Blome met with caretaker Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar and conveyed that Washington seeks free and fair elections in the South Asian nation, amid speculations that the elections might get delayed and political parties may not get a level-playing field.

Blome said that the US also wanted Pakistan to ensure protection of religious minorities in the wake of Jaranwala incident, in which hundreds of Muslim men vandalized dozens of Christian homes and torched churches in a Christian neighborhood on the pretext of blasphemy. Furthermore, Blome encouraged Pakistan to continue partnership with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on economic recovery.

In response, Kakar emphasized that the caretaker government of Pakistan’s main responsibility is to assist the ECP in the electoral process and provide

constitutional continuity during the period of democratic transition. Kakar expressed satisfaction with the current positive trajectory of bilateral ties and reaffirmed Pakistan's desire to further strengthen cooperation with the US in key areas, including trade, investment, energy, security, and climate change. [The Express Tribune]

Singapore-Qatar: Prime ministers's meeting

(dql) Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his Qatari Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani met on August 24 to chair the Meeting of the Qatar-Singapore High-Level Joint Committee, held in Singapore.

During their meeting the two prime ministers discussed ways to advance cooperation between their countries in various areas such as energy, trade and investment, as well as counter-radicalization.

They also witnessed the signing of five new memorandums of understanding (MOUs) aimed at strengthening cooperation in social development and family; education; water-related research; enterprise digitalization and innovation; as well as commercial partnerships. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore] [The Straits Times]

South Korea observes North Korea's partial border reopening amid economic and military tensions

(tms) South Korea's unification ministry is closely monitoring North Korea's partial reopening of its border with China, which comes after a prolonged closure due to COVID-19 restrictions.

While allowing limited movement, North Korea is grappling with a food crisis and working to stabilize its economy. Trade with China has partially recovered, although exports remain sluggish.

The regime is also focusing on recovering from recent national disasters and has intensified efforts to boost crop production. [Yonhap]

South Korea accepts Japan's Fukushima decision as member of international community

(cx) During a parliamentary session on August 24, South Korea's Oceans Minister Cho Seung-hwan stated that as a "reasonable member of the international community," the country has no choice but to accept Japan's decision to discharge contaminated water from its crippled Fukushima nuclear power plant into the sea.

Cho expressed regret over Japan's controversial move as even though the discharge will not cause direct damage to the South Korean fishing industry, it could cause falling seafood consumption and damage South Korea's fishing industry.

Cho shared that USD 227.05 million has been set aside to make up for losses to fishermen. He stated the amount will be raised by around USD 151 million in 2024.

Cho also affirmed that any direct impact of the discharge on South Korea will be dealt with through international procedures with Japan. [Yonhap]

South Korea-Poland: Enhanced trade, industry ties discussed

(cx) On August 23, South Korean Industry Minister Lee Chang-yang and Waldemar Buda, Poland's economic development minister met to discuss strengthening bilateral trade, investment and overall economic relations.

Both sides agreed to expand cooperation in sectors such as nuclear energy, defense and electric vehicles. Lee voiced expectations for increased expansion of their trade and investment in advanced industry sectors. He requested the Polish government's support for South Korean companies operating there as concerns grow over the EU's new carbon tax on foreign entities. Lee also sought Poland's support for South Korea's bid to host the 2030 World Expo in Busan.

Poland has become South Korea's biggest trading partner in central Europe. Last year, two-way trade stood at a record USD 8.95 billion, with both countries seeking to increase bilateral trade by 2030 threefold. [Yonhap] [Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy, South Korea]

South Korea-India: Enhance strategic cooperation in defense, technology

(cx) Indian Deputy National Security Advisor Vikram Misri visited Seoul on August 23 to attend the 4th Korea-India National Security Office Strategic Dialogue.

Misri held a meeting with Kim Tae-hyo, South Korea's Deputy Director of National Security, and discussed cooperation in critical and emerging technologies, economic security, and defense. They also exchanged views on regional and global security environments.

Foreign Minister Park Jin held a separate meeting with Misri to discuss increased cooperation in trade, defense, supply chains, and technology. Park also requested the Indian government's continued support for South Korea companies operating in India. [Aju Korea Daily] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea]

South Korea-US: Comprehensive UFS joint military exercises continue

(cx) The annual South Korea-US Ulchi Freedom Shield (UFS) exercise continues as various branches of the South Korean military and government have been mobilized to participate in contingency drills aimed to enhance joint crisis management and response capabilities.

This year's UFS exercise runs from August 21-31, it has so far included joint urban operations training, air force combat readiness and damage recovery training, and a variety of drills on effectively responding to terrorist attack scenarios.

President Yoon Suk-yeol visited a key US-controlled wartime command bunker complex on August 23 to monitor South Korean and US troops engaging in UFS drills.

The bunker, named CP Tango, or the Command Post Theater Air Naval Ground Operations, is located in Seongnam, south of Seoul. CP Tango serves as the primary command and control center for South Korean and US forces in the event of an armed conflict. It is known to be strong enough to withstand a tactical nuclear strike.

While visiting the bunker, Yoon expressed that North Korean tactics are becoming more sophisticated and

underscored the need to punish the North decisively in case of further provocations. Yoon also stated that the South Korean-US alliance and the UFS exercise's practical training will produce a strong combined defense posture to deter North Korean threats. [Yonhap 1] [Yonhap 2] [Ministry of National Defense, South Korea 1] [Ministry of National Defense, South Korea 2] [Ministry of National Defense, South Korea 3] [Ministry of National Defense, South Korea 4] [Ministry of National Defense, South Korea 5] [Ministry of National Defense, South Korea 6]

Singapore, Sri Lanka agree on carbon credits scheme during President Wickremesinghe visit to city-state

(lf) Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe made a two-day state visit to Singapore on August 21-22, meeting with President Halimah Yacob and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. Primary amongst the discussions held was the culmination of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) regarding the collection of carbon credits between Singapore and Sri Lanka, in accordance with the terms of Article 6.2 of the Paris Agreement.

The MOU between Singapore and Sri Lanka will allow for both nations to develop trade practices and legislation to manage the amount of greenhouse gasses produced during bilateral trade, while also empowering eligible Singaporean companied to offset up to 5 percent of their taxable carbon emissions by buying carbon credits.

President Wickremesinghe also discussed topics such as food security, renewable energies and regional economic cooperation with his Counterpart and outgoing Head of State President Yacob. The two held cordial discussions, while exchanging views on international developments. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong likewise held fruitful talks with President Wickremesinghe, particularly on trade. Singapore is the only Southeast Asian nation that Sri Lanka maintains an active Free Trade Agreement with at this time. The Sri Lankan President also held brief talks with Singapore's Ministers for Defense and Sustainability respectively.

Aside from the MOU on carbon credits, there were no other major agreements signed between the two states, a sign of Singapore weariness in engaging with Sri Lanka as it undergoes a comprehensive debt restructuring and economic reshaping program. [The

Straits Times] [The Business Times] [Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

US approves USD 500 million arms sale to Taiwan

(ed) On August 23, the US State Department approved an arms sale to Taiwan with a combined value of around USD 500 million.

The sale, although modest compared to previous deals, includes infrared search tracking systems and equipment for advanced F-16 fighter jets.

The US stated that the sale will help to modernize the Taiwanese armed forces and maintain its defensive capability. The F-16 program will help Taiwan to defend its airspace and "increase interoperability with the United States". Taiwan thanked the US for helping to "jointly safeguarding the rules-based international order".

The recently approved deal is the Biden administration's 11th arms sale package to Taiwan since 2021. The US has been deepening its security cooperation with Taiwan amid rising threats from China, which claims Taiwan as its own territory and has not ruled out the use of force to take it. [AP] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of China (Taiwan)]

Taiwanese President Tsai to visit Eswatini in September

(ed) On 5 September, Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen is slated to make a four-day trip to Eswatini, which is Taiwan's last official ally in Africa.

Eswatini's King Mswati III extended an invite to President Tsai to make a visit to celebrate Eswatini's 55th anniversary of independence and the King's 55th birthday on September 6. President Tsai is expected to meet with the Eswatini's royals and Taiwanese expatriates.

The Presidential Office stated that the goal of the visit was to promote "sustainable cooperation" between the two countries. It will be the second visit made by President Tsai to Eswatini, after a five-day trip made in 2018. [Focus Taiwan] [Office of the President Republic of China (Taiwan)]

More Chinese nationals to be allowed to visit Tawain

(ed) Taiwan's government has relaxed restrictions on Chinese travelers by once again allowing entry for Chinese tourists coming from third countries and for business people on arriving on work trips.

China halted individual tourism permits for Taiwan in 2019 amid rising tensions over Taiwan's sovereignty. Since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, China has been slowly expanding the list of countries that its nationals are permitted to visit, however, Taiwan is yet to be included on the list.

Taiwan's move to allow more Chinese visitors is most likely part of an effort to reduce tension between the two sides by cooperating in less politically sensitive areas like tourism. Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council said that it hopes "the mainland side will also take steps and meet us halfway to facilitate ... the plans".

China has yet to release a statement to the new Taiwanese policy. [Asahi Shimbun]

US Congressional delegation visits Thailand

(ak) A US Congressional Delegation met with Don Pramudwinai, outgoing Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand on August 22. The meeting was part of the delegation's visit to Thailand from August 22-24.

The meeting discussed ways to strengthen the Thailand-US strategic partnership through cooperation with the US legislative branch. Among the areas of cooperation discussed were defense and non-traditional security, economic and supply chain resilience. [The Nation]

Myanmar expels East Timor diplomat for meeting with opposition

(nk) Myanmar's military government has ordered its senior diplomat from East Timor to leave the country after the East Timorese government engaged with Myanmar's main opposition organization.

East Timor had conducted meetings with Myanmar's shadow National Unity Government, which regards itself as the legitimate administration of Myanmar following the military coup in February 2021. The Foreign Ministry informed East Timor's charge d'affaires in Yangon to depart Myanmar by September 1.

This move is seen as Myanmar's response to East Timor's support for the opposition and its vocal criticism of Myanmar's military rulers.

In July, East Timor's President Jose Ramos-Horta invited the foreign minister of Myanmar's National Unity Government to attend the swearing-in ceremony of Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao.

The East Timorese government has condemned the expulsion, urging Myanmar's military junta to respect human rights and seek a peaceful solution to the crisis. [ABC]

East Timor, Asia's youngest nation, has been a vocal critic of Myanmar's military regime and has shown support for the opposition, leading to increased tensions between the two countries.

British Royal Navy's HMS Spey in Timor-Leste

(nk) In a significant diplomatic overture, the Royal Navy's newest vessel, HMS Spey, made its historic maiden voyage to Timor-Leste from August 25 to 27.

The visit underscores the UK's commitment to strengthening diplomatic, economic, and security bonds with Timor-Leste and Indo-Pacific nations. [TATOLI]

Singapore, Vietnam expand scope of economic cooperation, sign deals on sustainability, innovation

(km/lm) A recent visit to Vietnam by a high-level delegation from Singapore, headed by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, resulted in the signing of a range of agreements designed to enhance various aspects of bilateral collaboration. These agreements encompass areas such as the digital and green economies, workforce training, and an exchange program for members of the Vietnamese Communist Party.

Particularly noteworthy is the shared aspiration to elevate bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, a status that the United States is concurrently pursuing with Vietnam. President Joe Biden is anticipated to visit Vietnam in the coming month as part of these diplomatic efforts. [see entry in this edition] [Nikkei Asia]

During Lee's visit, the two countries upgraded the existing Connectivity Framework Agreement (CFA), the first upgrade and expansion of the CFA since it was signed in 2005. From the previous six sectors of cooperation outlined in the framework agreement, the upgraded version will now cover five pillars of cooperation in 11 areas, including energy connectivity, sustainability, infrastructure, digital and innovation and connectivity. [ChannelNews Asia] [Vietnam Net]

The two countries also signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the Innovation Talent Exchange Programme, an initiative designed to facilitate opportunities for professionals from Singapore and Vietnam to engage in work placements within eligible innovation-related domains in each other's country.

Australia to upgrade ties with Vietnam, foreign minister says after Hanoi visit

(km/lm) Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs Penny Wong made four-day trip to Vietnam from August 21-24. While in Hanoi, Wong co-hosted the fifth Australia-Vietnam Foreign Ministers' Meeting with her counterpart Bui Thanh Son, and met with Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh and other senior leaders to discuss a range of shared interests, including economic and security ties. [hanoitimes.vn]

Announcements

Upcoming Online Events

30 August 2023 @ 9:00 a.m. – 10.00 a.m. (GMT-4), Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), USA

A Conversation with Costa Rican President Rodrigo Chaves

This event will discuss Costa Rica's goals for the further growth and development of its cyber and digital infrastructure, efforts to fortify its systems following the 2022 cyber-attacks, and the growing partnership with the United States to support long-term cyber resiliency and digital connectivity.

Visit [CSIS] for more information.

30 August 2023 @ 11.00 a.m. – 12.15 p.m. (GMT+0), CHATHAM – Chatham House, England

What do Asian countries want in the international order?

This webinar will discuss regional support for the current order and diverging Asian perspectives on liberal values, US-China competition, and carving a bigger role for their countries at international platforms. The event will look at the views from small states like Singapore and the Philippines to Japan and major states like China and India.

More event details can be found at [CHATHAM].

30 August 2023 @ 18:00 - 20:00 p.m. (GMT+10), Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA), Australia

Modern Slavery: Why It's Every Australian's Business

Australian consumers and businesses are further exposed to slavery via the products we use and consume every day, such as mobile phones, computers and agricultural produce. Indeed, p.a. more than US$ 468 billion of goods at risk of being made with forced labor are imported into G20 countries alone. In short, modern slavery is all around us and exists in every country and industry. No one is

immune. This event will provide insight into what modern slavery is, how it affects you and what can be done about it.

Learn more about the event at [AIIA].

30 August 2023 @ 18:00 - 20:00 p.m. (GMT+10), Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA), Australia

National security in a disrupted world

In this event, it will be discussed how Australia's difficult strategic circumstances requires a wholly integrated approach to "national security." How do economic prosperity, social cohesion, and sustainability—the other three major components of the national interest—relate to security? What does it have to do with foreign policy? How do we link the needs of national security with Australian identity-defining values like equity, inclusion, and democracy? What are the duties and rights of our diverse civil society, the private sector, and the government?

Learn more about the event at [AIIA].

31 August 2023 @ 9:00 a.m. – 10.00 a.m. (GMT-4), Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), USA

China’s Economic Downturn: Structural, Cyclical, or Both?

This event will clarify the various perspectives and the data on which they are based, discuss metrics for how to judge the Chinese economy’s performance going forward, and consider the implications for the United States and the rest of the world.

Visit [CSIS] for more information.

5 September 2023 @ 3.00 a.m. – 4.30 p.m. (GMT+8), ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

Vietnam’s Energy Transition: Opportunities and Challenges

The Vietnamese government has set out a roadmap for the country’s energy infrastructure development and aim to mobilize international support for Vietnam

to achieve the net-zero-emission goal by 2050. This webinar aims to provide initial insights into these plans, the potential opportunities and challenges that they bring for all stakeholders, as well as their implications for the country's energy security and energy transition.

More event details can be found at [ISEAS].

5 September 2023 @ 11.30 a.m. – 12.30 p.m. (GMT+0), CARNEGIE – Carnagie Endowment for International Peace, United States

Pivotal States: Revamping the U.S.-Indonesia Partnership

Indonesia, a vast archipelago with rising geopolitical significance, significant production of vital minerals, and a booming economy, is essential to a modern U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. Jakarta insists on having a "independent and active" foreign policy despite the fact that its role in American statecraft is frequently misunderstood. What should the American policy be toward Indonesia? What compromises and difficulties will influence future American policy toward this massive Southeast Asian nation?

More event details can be found at [CARNEGIE].

5 September 2023 @ 1.00 p.m. – 2.15 p.m. (GMT+0), CHATHAM – Chatham House, England

Why do MENA countries support China's version of multilateralism?

This webinar will discuss how and why China-led multilateral organizations and initiatives are increasingly becoming attractive platforms for Middle Eastern countries.

More event details can be found at [CHATHAM].

5 September 2023 @ 18:00 - 19:30 p.m. (GMT+10), Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA), Australia

The Disintegration of the Western Alliance?

This event will explore the future of the Western alliance and the expansion NATO's mandate into the Indo-Pacific. It will also evaluate whether other democracies and America's allies embrace the existing policy.

Learn more about the event at [AIIA].

Recent and Upcoming Book Releases

Lara Monticelli (ed.), ***The Future Is Now: An Introduction to Prefigurative Politics***, Bristol University Press, 276 pages, published September 2022. For a review, see [LSE].

Hui Wang, ***The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought***, Harvard University Press, 1088 pages, published July 18, 2023, with a review in [Asian Review of Books].

Ronojoy Sen, ***House of the People: Parliament and the Making of Indian Democracy***, Cambridge University Press, 320 pages, published January 31, 2023. The book is reviewed in [LSE].

Isabela Mares, ***Protecting the Ballot: How First-Wave Democracies Ended Electoral Corruption***, Princeton University Press, 264 pages, published November 8, 2022, reviewed in [Foreign Affairs].

Stuart Ward, ***United Kingdom: A Global History of the End of Britain***, Cambridge University Press, 550 pages, published April 20, 2023. For a review, visit [The Scotsman].

Calls

The **London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research (LCIR)** invites paper proposals for its ***hybrid International "Somewhere in Between: Borders and Borderlands"*** to be held on April 27-28, 2024. The deadline for abstract submission is November 20, 2023. For more information, see [LCIR].

The **London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research (LCIR)** invites paper proposals for its ***International Conference on Gender Studies: "Gender and Power,"*** to be held on February 24-25, 2024. The deadline for abstract submission is November 10, 2023. For more information, see [LCIR].

The **International Association of Constitutional Law (IACL), Iraqia University, Doha Institute for**

Graduate Studies, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Rule of Law Programme Middle East & North Africa, the Arab Association of Constitutional Law and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance invite paper proposals for the ***IACL Conference on "The Relationship Between Democracy and Systems of Government,"*** scheduled for January 18-19, 2024, in Baghdad. The deadline for abstract submission is September 1, 2023. For more information, see [IACL].

Jobs and Positions

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a ***Program Specialist*** to be based in Ankara, Turkey. Applications are accepted until September 15, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a ***Project Associate*** to be based in Jakarta, Indonesia. Applications are accepted until September 7, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a ***Project Manager*** to be based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and United States. Applications are accepted until September 6, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a ***Communications Intern*** to be based in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Applications are accepted until September 3, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a ***Procurement Associate*** to be based in Cairo, Egypt. Applications are accepted until September 6, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks an ***IT Operations Assistant*** to be based in Zambia. Applications are accepted until September 7, 2023. More information is provided as [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a ***Program Assistant*** to be based in Mao, Chad. Applications are accepted until September 7, 2023. More information is provided as [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks an ***Editor*** to be based in Rome, Italy. Applications are accepted until September 18, 2023. More information is provided as [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a ***Programme Policy Officer*** to be based in Madagascar. Applications are accepted until September 10, 2023. More information is provided as [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a ***Senior Program Associate*** to be based in Haiti. Applications are accepted until September 7, 2023. More information is provided as [WFP].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks an ***International Consultant,*** to be based in Uzbekistan. Applications are accepted until September 7, 2023. More information is provided as [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a ***Consultancy,*** to be based in Consultancy. Applications are accepted until September 6, 2023. More information is provided as [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a ***Driver,*** to be based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Applications are accepted until September 8, 2023. More information is provided as [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks an ***Advocacy Specialist,*** to be based in New York, United States and Spain. Applications are accepted until September 5, 2023. More information is provided as [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a ***Programme Associate,*** to be based in Kaduna, Nigeria. Applications are accepted until September 5, 2023. More information is provided as [UNICEF].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a ***Social Anthropologist,*** to be based in Douala, Cameroon. Applications are accepted until September 6, 2023. More information is provided as [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a ***Consultant,*** to be based in Multiple locations. Applications are accepted until September 7, 2023. More information is provided as [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a ***Technical Officer,*** to be based in Baku, Azerbaijan. Applications are accepted until September 15, 2023. More information is provided as [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a ***National Consultant***, to be based in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Applications are accepted until September 6, 2023. More information is provided as [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a ***Tradutores***, to be based in Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo. Applications are accepted until September 12, 2023. More information is provided as [WHO].

The **United Nations Secretariate (UN)** seeks a ***Communications Specialist*** to be based in not specified. Applications are accepted until September 1, 2023. More information is provided as [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariate (UN)** seeks a ***Movement Control Assistant*** to be based in Sanaa, Yemen. Applications are accepted until September 4, 2023. More information is provided as [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariate (UN)** seeks a ***Vehicle Technician*** to be based in Jerusalem, Israel. Applications are accepted until September 20, 2023. More information is provided as [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariate (UN)** seeks a ***Document Management Assistant*** to be based in Nairobi, Kenya. Applications are accepted until September 20, 2023. More information is provided as [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariate (UN)** seeks an ***Editorial Assistant*** to be based in New York, United States. Applications are accepted until September 19, 2023. More information is provided as [UN].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a ***Youth Education Aide***, to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until October 23, 2023. More information is provided as [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a ***Family Wellbeing Supervisor***, to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until October 23, 2023. More information is provided as [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a ***Director***, to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until October 23, 2023. More information is provided as [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a ***Women Empowerment Specialist***, to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until October 22, 2023. More information is provided as [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks an ***Education Officer***, to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until October 23, 2023. More information is provided as [IRC].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks an ***Emergency and Rehabilitation Officer***, to be based in Rome, Italy. Applications are accepted until September 13, 2023. More information is provided as [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a ***Junior Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist***, to be based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Applications are accepted until September 8, 2023. More information is provided as [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a ***Crop Production Specialist***, to be based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Applications are accepted until September 7, 2023. More information is provided as [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a ***National Project* Coordinator**, to be based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Applications are accepted until September 7, 2023. More information is provided as [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a ***Data Processing Specialist***, to be based in Remote Work. Applications are accepted until September 6, 2023. More information is provided as [FAO].

The **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)** seeks a ***Climate Adaptation Specialist***, to be based in Panama City, Panama. Applications are accepted until September 3, 2023. More information is provided as [UNEP].

The **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)** seeks an ***Associate Program Management Officer***, to be based in Nairobi, Kenya. Applications are accepted until October 6, 2023. More information is provided as [UNEP].

The **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)** seeks a ***HR Assistant***, to be based in Nairobi, Kenya. Applications are accepted until September 21, 2023. More information is provided as [UNEP].

The **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)** seeks a ***Legal Officer***, to be based in Nairobi, Kenya. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [UNEP].

The **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)** seeks a ***Graphic Designer***, to be based in

Panama City, Panama. Applications are accepted until August 30, 2023. More information is provided as [UNEP].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a ***Human Resources Senior Associate***, to be based in Haiti. Applications are accepted until September 8, 2023. More information is provided as [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks an ***ICT Senior Assistant***, to be based in Valencia, Spain. Applications are accepted until September 11, 2023. More information is provided as [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a ***Project Management Support***, to be based in Ukraine. Applications are accepted until September 6, 2023. More information is provided as [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a ***Senior Driver***, to be based in Ukraine. Applications are accepted until September 6, 2023. More information is provided as [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a ***HR Senior Assistant***, to be based in Remote Work. Applications are accepted until September 6, 2023. More information is provided as [UNOPS].

The **World Bank (WB)** seeks a ***Program Assistant***, to be based in Washington DC, United States. Applications are accepted until September 15, 2023. More information is provided as [WB].

The **World Bank (WB)** seeks an ***Operations Analyst***, to be based in Astana, Kazakhstan. Applications are accepted until September 17, 2023. More information is provided as [WB].

The **World Bank (WB)** seeks a ***Transport Specialist***, to be based in Baku, Azerbaijan. Applications are accepted until September 6, 2023. More information is provided as [WB].

The **World Bank (WB)** seeks a ***Consultant***, to be based in Manila, Philippines. Applications are accepted until September 15, 2023. More information is provided as [WB].

The **World Bank (WB)** seeks an ***IT Officer***, to be based in Chennai, India. Applications are accepted until

September 5, 2023. More information is provided as [WB].

The **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)** seeks a ***Senior Engineer,*** to be based in Mons, Belgium. Applications are accepted until September 10, 2023. More information is provided as [NATO].

The **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)** seeks a ***Staff Officer,*** to be based in Norfolk, United States. Applications are accepted until September 18, 2023. More information is provided as [NATO].

The **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)** seeks an ***Assistant,*** to be based in Brussels, Belgium. Applications are accepted until October 1, 2023. More information is provided as [NATO].

The **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)** seeks a ***Programme Coordinator,*** to be based in Brussels, Belgium. Applications are accepted until September 30, 2023. More information is provided as [NATO].

The **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)** seeks a ***Staff Assistant,*** to be based in Norfolk , United States. Applications are accepted until September 18, 2023. More information is provided as [NATO].

The **Spadoni College of Education and Social Sciences at Coastal Carolina University** in Conway, South Carolina is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor of Political Science.*** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Coastal Carolina University].

The **Department of Materials Science and Engineering at the Missouri University of Science and Technology** in Missouri, United States is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Research.*** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Missouri University of Science and Technology].

The **Department of Political Science at Colgate University** in New York, United States is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor in American Politics.*** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Colgate University].

Rollins College in Florida, United States is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor.*** Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [Rollins College].

The **University of Wyoming** in Wyoming, United States is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor***. Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [University of Wyoming].

The **Hood College Department of Political Science and Global Studies** in Maryland, United States is inviting applications for an ***Adjunct Position in Political Theory***. Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [Hood College].

Harvard University, Faculty of Arts & Sciences in Massachusetts, United States is inviting applications for a ***Director***. Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [Harvard University].

The **School of International Service at American University** in District of Columbia, United States is inviting applications for a ***Postdoctoral Fellowship***. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [American University].

The **Department of Global Inquiry in the School of International Service at American University** in District of Columbia, United States is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor***. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [American University].

The **Department of Foreign Policy and Global Security in the School of International Service at American University** in District of Columbia, United States is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor in Foreign Policy & Global* Security**. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [American University].

The **Department of Peace, Human Rights, and Cultural Relations in the School of International Service at American University** in District of Columbia, United States is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor in Indigenous Studies***. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [American University].

The **Department of Political Science in the College of Social Sciences at California State University, Fresno** in California, United States is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor in Public Administration***. Application submission deadline is Mar 31, 2024. For more details, see [California State University].

The **Department of Classics, Archaeology, and Religion at the University of Missouri** in Missouri,

United States is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor of Religion***. Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [University of Missouri].

The **Department of Political Science at Barnard College** in New York, United States is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor in the subfield of American Politics***. Application submission deadline is September 16, 2023. For more details, see [Barnard College].

The **Department of Political Science at the National University of Singapore** in Singapore is inviting applications for an ***Associate Professor in International Relations***. Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [National University of Singapore].

The **Department of Political Science at the National University of Singapore** in Singapore is inviting applications for a ***Lecturer in Comparative Politics***. Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [National University of Singapore].

The **University of California, Department of Political Science** in Davis, California is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor in American Politics***. Application submission deadline is June 30, 2024. For more details, see [University of California].

The **Syracuse University's Autonomous Systems Policy Institute** in New York, United States is inviting applications for a ***postdoctoral associate in the interdisciplinary study of autonomous systems and/or artificial intelligence***. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Syracuse University].

The **Syracuse University** in New York, United States is inviting applications for a ***Senior Director Government Affairs***. Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [Syracuse University].

The **Government Department at The University of Texas** in Texas, United States is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor***. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [University of Texas].

Team:

Aimpavee Kiratiakkrasak (ak), Collin Xia (cx), Dan Kristian Rivera (kr), Duc Quang Ly (dql), Edward Green (ed), Griffin Allan (ga), Hanzaw Aung (ha), Harshita Prashar (ph), Isabelle Chua (ic), Kanokphong Visetvoharn, Khin Ohnmar Moe (km), Lachlan Foster (lf), Lawrence Brenner (lb), Lucas Meier (lm), Morten Strantzen (ms), Nath Kusolsong (nk), Noor Afrose (na), Sai Laung Kam (slk), Tatjana Buehring (tb), Tarazi Mohammed Sheikh (tms), Tomwit Jarnson (tj), Venus Phuangkom, Wai Yan Phyo Naing (wn), Worrawit Sirijintana (ws), Yesi Riana Yusnita Sari (ys)

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