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CPG

# Asia in Review

*Grasp the pattern, read the trend*

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to this week's issue of the Asia in Review (AIR) covering 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 Bahrain, Bhutan, Burkina Faso, and Kazakhstan 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: Economy still “at a critical stage”, according to Xi

(ms) During a symposium of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on December 8, President Xi Jinping has sounded a warning about China's economic recovery, characterizing it as being "still at a critical stage." Xi acknowledged that although there has been improvement in the economic rebound from the pandemic, the situation remains complex.

China's economic landscape has faced hurdles in bouncing back from the impacts of the almost three years of Zero-COVID and a liquidity crisis in the property sector. To counter these challenges, the government has gradually implemented monetary and fiscal stimulus measures, including interest rate cuts and issuing USD 140 billion in central government

bonds [see AiR No. 44, October/2023, 5]. These measures have yielded only moderate success so far.

In response the meeting, chaired by Xi, doubled down on its commitment to sustaining support for growth through "proactive" fiscal and "effective" monetary policies. The meeting also emphasized the need to improve the quality and efficiency of fiscal policies, while monetary policy should be "flexible, appropriate, precise, and effective." Additionally, there was a call to “strengthen economic propaganda and public opinion guidance,” possibly indicating a push to maintain a positive narrative about the economic situation.

This is in line with China's ongoing "shared prosperity" initiative, which aims for a fairer distribution of wealth and opportunities and promotes social harmony and sustainable development while condemning a "hedonistic" lifestyle [see AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1]. [Bloomberg] [Financial Times] [Reuters] [Xinhua]

## China: Surprisingly weak trade data signals ongoing economic struggles

(ms) In November, imports unexpectedly contracted by 0.6 percent from the previous year, falling short of the consensus forecast of a 3.9 percent gain. On the export front, there was a marginal improvement, with a 0.5 percent rise from a year ago, slightly surpassing expectations for no change.

Economists express concerns over China's economic outlook, indicating a potential need for stimulus measures to invigorate domestic spending. Despite policymakers' efforts throughout the year to stimulate growth, the focus has leaned more towards stimulating supply and stabilizing the property market than boosting demand.

The lackluster performance in trade, even during the expected seasonal surge, raises worries about global demand and the overall health of the Chinese economy. Exports typically strengthen in the final months of the year, yet weak global demand, exacerbated by disruptions from the pandemic in the previous year, hindered the anticipated boost.

The muted reaction in the stock market reflects the market's prior pricing in of the softness in trade data. Chinese stocks listed in Hong Kong sustained earlier losses, influenced by Moody's decision to lower its outlook on several banks and review some local government financing vehicles for a potential downgrade. The Hang Seng China Enterprises Index,

tracking the performance of mainland companies listed in Hong Kong, was down about 1.7 percent, making it one of the worst-performing key indexes in the Asia Pacific region.

Investors are keenly observing President Xi Jinping's government for signals on how economic activity will be boosted in 2024. This comes after a challenging post-pandemic recovery in 2023. China is expected to convene key economic policy meetings this month, providing insights into the nation's pro-growth stance and potential stimulus plans.

The trade data reveals that net exports, which played a crucial role in driving China's economy during the pandemic, have turned into a drag on growth this year. Analysts caution that the uptick in November's exports might be driven by price cuts, which are not sustainable and negatively impact firms' profit margins.

Looking ahead, uncertainties persist regarding the contribution of exports to China's growth in the coming year. Exports to the US and European Union have declined, while those to Russia have surged. The property downturn has led to a significant drop in imports of steel and chips. With the cooling of the European and US economies, China's growth in 2024 may heavily depend on domestic demand as the primary driver. [Bloomberg 1] [Bloomberg 2] [Reuters]

## China: November sees 25.5 percent surge in passenger vehicle sales

(ms) China's automotive market experienced a substantial uptick in November, with passenger vehicle sales surging by 25.5 percent compared to the same period last year.

Data from the China Passenger Car Association (CPCA) reveals a total of 2.1 million units sold, surpassing October's growth of 9.9 percent. This growth trend extended to new energy vehicles, including electric and plug-in hybrid cars, which recorded a notable 39.8 percent increase, outpacing the 37.5 percent rise in October. New energy vehicles accounted for a significant 40 percent of total car sales.

Automakers intensified price competitions to achieve pre-set sales targets for the year, with sales promotions by major players like BYD even continuing into December. The CPCA predicts China's passenger vehicle sales to reach 22.2 million in 2024, marking a 3 percent increase from the current year. If exports to

Russia maintain their robust rise, the growth could increase to even 5 percent.

In sight of the ambitious sales targets, however, dealers in China face considerable pressure to meet year-end goals, impacting their earnings. Notably, Tesla, a prominent player, initiated a price war earlier in the year but has since adjusted prices upward five times since late October. [Reuters]

## China: New backup coal-production system to strengthen energy security

(ms) The Chinese government is set to establish a backup coal-production system by 2027 to enhance energy security and stabilize prices, as announced by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) to secure the country's energy security.

The new system aims to generate 300 million metric tons of "dispatchable" annual coal production by 2030. Mines with an annual production capacity of at least 3 million tones can apply to be included. The NDRC emphasizes that these mines must fulfill their responsibilities to ensure coal supply and stable prices, prioritizing supply in line with relevant state policies.

The move comes as China, the world's largest coal consumer, grapples with ongoing power concerns and seeks to address energy security. China has been contending with significant power shortages, exacerbated by factors such as extreme heatwaves in recent years. The planned coal reserves are primarily intended to ensure power generation, heating, and energy consumption for livelihoods.

The NDRC's target for annual production capacity reserve would account for about 6,5 percent of the country's total output, providing improved supply elasticity and resilience. [South China Morning Post]

## China: "Major cybersecurity incidents" must be reported within one hour, according to new draft law

(ms) A draft law presented on December 8 by the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), the country's top internet authority, requires internet service providers to report "major cybersecurity incidents" within one hour.

According to the law, cybersecurity incidents are defined as "incidents that cause harm to networks, information systems or data because of human factors, software or hardware failures or natural disasters." The law provides a three-tier classification based on the magnitude of the incident. The most serious level includes leaks that affect the personal data of more than 100 million people, "affect the work and lives of more than 30 percent of the population in a province", "disable critical information infrastructure for six hours" and harmful information that is accessed more than one million times or displayed on news media or government websites for more than six hours.

While China has increasingly emphasized the importance of internet security, especially in recent months, it is once again resorting to a very vague formulation, especially with regards to "harmful information." This vague formulation provides considerable discretion to security authorities and raises concerns about potential overreach by internet providers, given the restrictive one-hour time limit.

The law not only requires internet service providers to report damages and the actions taken in the event of an incident but also mandates the disclosure of all accessible personal information about the alleged offender to security authorities. This aspect of the legislation could signify a further tightening of internet control. [South China Morning Post]

## China: Worlds's first fourth-generation nuclear reactor starts operation

(ms) China has achieved a major milestone in nuclear energy with the commencement of commercial operations at the world's first fourth-generation nuclear reactor, the Shidaowan high-temperature gas-cooled reactor (HTGR) in Shandong Province.

Developed jointly by China Huaneng Group, Tsinghua University, and China National Nuclear Corporation, the 200-megawatt modular plant is said to represent a new era of nuclear power, designed to enhance efficiency, safety, and environmental sustainability.

Unlike traditional water-cooled reactors, the Shidaowan plant employs helium gas for cooling, allowing for more flexibility in plant locations without the need for proximity to water sources.

The reactor's "inherent safety" feature is noteworthy, as it is said to ensure the core remains stable even in

the face of sudden failures or external disturbances, addressing concerns related to nuclear accidents. Furthermore, the HTGR can produce not only electricity but also heat and hydrogen, offering multifaceted benefits for power generation and industrial applications.

While China aims to produce a significant portion of its electricity from nuclear sources to realize its commitment to carbon neutrality by 2060, challenges persist, including the need for safeguards, waste management, and regulatory frameworks. [Reuters] [South China Morning Post] [Xinhua]

## China: Plan for world's largest nuclear-powered containership

(ms) China State Shipbuilding Corporation (CSSC) has revealed plans for a potentially world's largest nuclear-powered containership during the Marintec China expo in Shanghai. The proposed vessel belongs to the 24,000 Twenty-Foot Equivalent Unit (TEU) class.

CSSC emphasized its ambition to ambition to achieve 'zero emissions' throughout operating cycle of the ship. The proposed nuclear containership aims to utilize Molten Salt Reactors (MSRs), a type of small-scale modular nuclear reactors that use a liquid mixture of salts as both fuel and coolant. This approach is expected to enhance control, efficiency, safety, and fuel utilization in the nuclear reaction. CSSC underscores the safety features of the MSR, highlighting its operation at high temperatures and low pressure, theoretically avoiding core melting, and incorporating anti-proliferation measures.

The use of nuclear propulsion in the maritime industry has been under consideration for its potential to increase efficiency and reduce carbon emissions and achieving a net-zero world.

While CSSC's project signals a noteworthy advancement in green technologies for the shipping industry, questions and challenges regarding safety, efficiency, and public acceptance of nuclear-powered vessels remain. [gCaptain] [SeaNews]

## China: Former Xinjiang official arrested on suspicion of corruption

(ms) Li Pengxin, the former former deputy secretary of the northwestern Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Regional

Committee, was taken into custody on December 11, according to a statement by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), China's top anti-corruption body.

Li is suspected of "serious violations of discipline and law", an often-used euphemism for corruption. Li would be another high-ranking official to fall victim to the anti-corruption campaign that began when President Xi Jinping took office as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012.

In addition to Li's case, the CCDI announced January 8-10 as the date for the body's plenary session, during which the strategy for the coming year will be determined. [South China Morning Post] [Xinhua]

## China: Record low voter participation in first “patriots-only” election

(ms) Hong Kong's District Council election witnessed the lowest post-colonial turnout as only 1.19 million eligible electors cast their votes on December 10, marking a mere 27.5 percent participation rate. This drastic drop from the 2019 election's 71.2 percent turnout can be attributed to significant changes made to the electoral system in May, aimed to ensure the election of only "patriots" following the pro-democracy landslide in in the wake of the anti-government protests 2019.

Hong Kong's Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu, introduced the reform in early May, which has now come into effect for the first time during the election, drastically reducing the number of popularly elected seats in the 479-seat District Council from 452 to 88. In addition, all candidates standing for election must be nominated by the District Fight Crime Committees, District Fire Safety Committees and Area Committees, as well as undergo a background check to ensure that only "patriots" stand for election [see AiR No. 19, May/2023, 2].

The Chairman of the Electoral Affairs Commission (EAC), Justice David Lok, tried to put the low voter turnout into perspective by emphasizing that a direct comparison of this year's turnout with that of 2019 would not appropriate, as there are differences in the composition, the electorate and the electoral system.

The election saw 10,000 police officers deployed and six arrests were made on election day, with three members of the pro-democracy group League of Social Democrats (LSD) apprehended for alleged incitement

to intervene in the election. Also a government employee and her husband were arrested for allegedly encouraging others to cast invalid votes through social media, and the activist Koo Sze-yiu, was charged with attempting seditious acts, with plans to protest the perceived unfairness of the election due to the absence of pro-democracy candidates. [Hong Kong Free Press 1] [Hong Kong Free Press 2] [Hong Kong Free Press 3] [Reuters]

## China: Jimmy Lai, Martin Lee, and Tiananmen vigil organizers among others appeal convictions

(ms) Seven prominent anti-government activists, including media tycoon Jimmy Lai and famous democratic activist Martin Lee, have been granted a chance to appeal convictions related to a 2019 protest. Simultaneously, organizers of the city's Tiananmen vigils, including former vice-chairperson Chow Hang-tung, are challenging convictions and sentences in a national security case.

The seven-member group was given the opportunity to appeal against their conviction in connection with a demonstration in 2019. The Court of Appeal issued, on December 8, a certificate allowing them to challenge their conviction for the unauthorized assembly in August 2019. The activists convicted in April 2021 were accused of organizing and participating in the assembly, which resulted in prison sentences of up to 18 months. While the Court of Appeal acquitted them of the charge of organizing in August, the charge of participating in the gathering was upheld, triggering the recent appeal. With the certificate, the activists can now seek permission for a final appeal to the Court of Appeal. [Hong Kong Free Press 1]

Two days earlier, organizers of Hong Kong's Tiananmen vigils are challenging their convictions and sentences over a national security case. Three activists from the now-disbanded Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements, including former vice-chairperson Chow Hang-tung and two members, appeared at the Court of Appeal on December 6. The three members were sentenced to four and a half months in prison in early March this year for failing to comply with a national security police request for information [see AiR No. 11, March/2023, 2] [Hong Kong Free Press 2]

## China: Breakthrough in microwave weaponry for drones

(ms) A team of Chinese military scientists and defense industry engineers claims to have achieved a groundbreaking advancement in microwave technology for drones, claiming it would reshape the landscape of military power.

While traditionally high-powered microwave devices tend to be bulky and carried by large military aircraft or warships, the new Chinese technology is said to enables smaller entities to carry the weaponry.

The implications of this breakthrough extend beyond electronic warfare capabilities. The compact and versatile nature of the technology allows drones to serve dual purposes—jamming enemy communications and acting as radar systems for target detection. The researchers emphasize that the technology could provide a significant advantage to the Chinese military in the South China Sea and Taiwan.

Moreover, the team envisions expanding the application of these microwave weapons to hypersonic aircraft and near-space platforms, positioning China as a global player in electronic warfare. [South China Morning Post]

## China: First successful satellite launched by methane-powered rocket

(ms) The Chinese private space company, LandSpace Technology achieved what it calls a historic milestone with the Zhuque-2 Y-3 carrier rocket, powered by methane and liquid oxygen, successfully lifting three satellites into orbit.

This landmark event not only positions LandSpace as a pioneer in methane propulsion but marks the world's first successful launch of satellites using this technology. The breakthrough is expected to bolster investor confidence in methane as a cost-effective and cleaner alternative, supporting the development of reusable rockets.

Just in July of this year, the company was the first in the world to launch a methane-liquid oxygen rocket and is now underlining its pioneering position in comparison to western competitors such as SpaceX with the satellite launch. LandSpace plans to provide three launches in 2024 and double that in 2025, thereby

aiming to manifest itself as a major player in the competitive commercial space industry.

Despite the success for the company, the launch also underscores the achievements of the Chinese Space industry as a whole, which brings itself in a competing position against the US. [Al Jazeera] [Reuters] [South China Morning Post]

## Japan: Prime Minister Kishida to step down as ruling party faction leader

(dql) Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has unveiled his decision to resign as chief of his faction in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

The move came amid mounting pressure on him to leave his faction to limit the damage in public trust in the ruling party amid corruption allegations over underreporting of revenues earned by all five major factions within the LDP from political fundraising parties, from which the extra income may have been returned to some lawmakers as kickbacks.

Kishida, who heads the fourth largest Kōchikai faction also instructed his party to temporarily suspend all fundraising activities and events, affirming that he will continue to serve as prime minister and was handling the matter "with a strong sense of crisis."

Tokyo prosecutors are set to launch this week an investigation over more than USD 680,000 of non-recorded fundraising proceeds of Seiwa Seisaku Kenkyūkai, the largest faction within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), formerly led by the late former Prime Minister (PM) Abe Shinzo now chaired by House of Representatives member Ryu Shionoya [see AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1]. The probe is expected to target several dozen lawmakers from the LDP, including current ministers.

While Kishida's predecessors typically resigned as leaders of their factions during their terms as prime minister to avoid the appearance of patronage-driven politics, he retained the position since assuming office in October 2021.

LDP factions have typically supplied their members with election funding and recommended them for ministerial posts. Around 80 percent of more than 370 LDP lawmakers have belonged to one of the intraparty groups. But critics have long pointed out that such functions of the factions have provided many LDP lawmakers with opportunities to generate secret

funds, as it is difficult to trace how exactly they receive money from their groups and how they use it. [Kyodo News] [Reuters]

In a related development, Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno is said to be sacked in the context of the underreported revenues. He is accused of failing to declare over USD 69,000 in income over the past five years.

His sacking is seen as part of a potential larger revamp of Kishida's Cabinet and LDP executives as other lawmakers of the intraparty group are accused of being engaged in similar scandals.

The departure of Kishida's right-hand man – an eight-term House of Representatives lawmaker who became chief Cabinet secretary when Kishida assumed power in October 2021 [see AiR No. 40, October/2021, 1] – would present another setback blow to the prime minister, who has seen his Cabinet approval ratings hit a record low of only 25 percent in November after more than two years in office [see AiR No. 48, November/2023, 4]. [The Japan News] [Nikkei Asia]

Further complicating the situation for Kishida, a photo has surfaced which shows him having a meeting with leaders of organizations affiliated with the controversial Unification Church in 2019 in Tokyo.

The meeting, held together with former U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Newt Gingrich, took place at the Liberal Democratic Party's headquarters in October of that year, according to a person close to Gingrich who provided the photo.

The photo shows Kishida, who was the ruling party's policy chief at the time, with Michael Jenkins, a former president of the U.S. branch of the church, and Masayoshi Kajikuri, head of the Japanese division of the Universal Peace Federation, an organization affiliated with the religious group.

Kishida, who has been struggling with falling approval ratings, has dismissed speculation about his connections with the church [see AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1]. [The Asahi Shimbun]

The LDP continues to be under public scrutiny for alleged ties with the Unification Church that has been tied with the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in August last year. A poll conducted on October 14 had linked a steep decline in the support of PM Kishida Fumio's government with suspicions that the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) continues to have ties with the Unification Church which is linked to

the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe [see AiR No. 42, October/2023, 3].

## Japan: Critical labor shortage in facilities for disabled people

(dql) According to findings of a recent survey presented by Kyosaren, a group supporting disabled people, facilities for people with disabilities in Japan are suffering under worrying labor shortages, attributed to low wages and a shrinking workforce in the graying country.

Involving nearly 1,050 facilities including those providing employment support, life nursing care and development assistance for children, the survey found that only 53.5 percent of openings for regular employees were filled at such facilities in fiscal 2022. This contrasts 81.3 percent at private firms and government institutions hiring new graduates this year. Similarly, openings for nonregular workers saw only a slightly higher figure at 59.9 percent.

To address the labor shortage and improve working conditions, Kyosaren demands a rise in state funding for welfare services for disabled people exceeding 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) as the government plans to revise its level of funding next year for the first time in three years.

Notably, while Japan's budget for welfare services for the disabled has increased over threefold in the past 15 years after new legislation came into force in 2006, the country's public spending for people with disabilities as a percentage of GDP has been very low, at 0.7 percent to 1.2 percent. The average in OECD countries stands at 2 percent. [The Japan Times]

## Japan: Court confirms constitutionality of ban on dual citizenship

(dql) The Fukuoka District Court confirmed in a ruling on December 6 the constitutionality of article 11 of Japan’s nationality law that denies dual citizenship.

Rejecting a lawsuit filed by a Japanese-born U.S. citizen, who argued that acquiring U.S. citizenship should not automatically lead to her losing her Japanese nationality, the court said the denial of multiple nationality is "rational" as the law ensures the freedom of changing one's nationality. [Kyodo News]

In an earlier development, Japan's Supreme Court, the country's highest court, decided on September 28 to dismiss an appeal by eight nationals residing in Switzerland and France who have challenged the country's ban on dual citizenship. The Supreme Court's ruling upheld lower court rulings that recognized the constitutionality of a legal requirement under which Japanese must give up their original citizenship to obtain foreign nationality [see AiR No. 40, October/2023, 1].

## Japan: Parliament approves bill on legalizing cannabis-derived medicines

(dql) A bill to legalize medical products using substances derived from cannabis passed Japan's parliament on December 6. The new law also closes a loophole in existing prohibitions against the drug by criminalizing use.

Drugs made from cannabis plants are currently only permitted in clinical trials in Japan. To enter into force within a year from promulgation, the new law now designates cannabis and tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), a psychoactive chemical found in the plant, as narcotics to be regulated.

Under the new law, there will be two kinds of licenses for growing cannabis: one allowing for growing cannabis to make medicines and another for other purposes such as hemp. [Kyodo News]

## Japan: Issuance of climate transition bonds under consideration

(dql) Japan is contemplating the issuance of USD 11 billion in climate transition bonds with five- and 10-year tenors in February. The initial auction, scheduled for mid-February, will feature 800 billion yen worth of 10-year bonds, followed by an equivalent amount of bonds with a five-year tenor.

This auction aligns with Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's initiative to issue approximately USD 138 billion in "green transition" bonds, aiming to fund investments toward achieving a carbon-neutral society. The move reflects the government's commitment to diversify energy sources, prompted by the perceived risks associated with Japan's heavy dependence on fuel imports, particularly highlighted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [Reuters]

## Mongolia: Journalist arrested

(dql) Editor-in-chief of Mongolian news website Zarig.mn Naran Unurtsetseg, was arrested last week on charges of contempt of court and spreading false information.

The arrest came after the journalist's post on her personal Facebook account about the inhumanity of a court hearing involving an elderly individual in Mongolia.

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and its Mongolian affiliate, the Confederation of Mongolian Journalists (CMJ), demanded her immediate release, denouncing the arrest as an attempt to silence and block the online publication. [International Federation of Journalists]

Established in 2017, Zarig.mn received the Transparency Award of Transparency International Mongolia in 2019 for its investigative reporting exposing corruption and unethical or illegal acts.

## North Korea: Kim Jong Un intensifies efforts against youth's exposure to foreign influence

(ap) North Korean leader Kim Jong Un declared that the government will intensify the battle against foreign influence among young people as he advised mothers to send their children to hard labor to correct their bad behavior.

The remarks were made during the final day of a large-scale national conference on improving the governmental control over child-raising and advocating for more "loyalty and patriotism" from a young age. The leaders emphasized the role of mothers to eliminate foreign influence and ideological infiltration by Western powers.

Kim Jong Un suggested sending children in difficult living conditions while working for the country or military service, which can cultivate the national spirit and will give a valuable lesson.

The North Korean leader did not mention sending his daughter to difficult worksites and she frequently accompanies her father, wearing luxury goods. [NK news]

## North Korea: More spy satellites to be launched

(ap) North Korea is reportedly determined to carry out more spy satellite launches in the near future to collect information on the military activities of enemy states.

This comes after Pyongyang successfully launched its first Malligyong-1 satellite in November, which governments in the United States, South Korea and Japan denounced as violations of U.N. Security Council resolutions [see AliR, No. 48, November/2023, 4] [Reuters]

## South Korea: President Yoon and PPP seek assistance from opposition to pass bills

(oy) On December 5, President Yoon Suk Yeol convened with key leaders of the ruling People Power Party (PPP) to address policymaking and budgetary concerns.

The discussions resulted in a mutual commitment to bolster communication between the presidential office and the party. Emphasizing collaboration, Yoon and the party leaders expressed their intention to seek cooperation from the opposition Democratic Party (DP) in passing essential bills related to people's livelihood and the 2024 national budget, acknowledging the prevalent financial challenges faced by Koreans.

Notably, the DP currently commands a controlling majority with 169 seats out of 298 in the Assembly.

President Yoon further urged party officials to actively support South Korean exporters and eliminate regulatory impediments. The meeting also delved into the implementation of the "Special Act on Global International Hub City" for Busan, aimed at transforming the city into a prominent economic, cultural, and educational hub. [Yonhap]

## South Korea: PPP and DP to hold two plenary Assembly meetings

(oy) On 7 December, the ruling People Power Party (PPP) and the main opposition Democratic Party (DP) agreed to a specially convened National Assembly session this week and hold two plenary meetings on

December 20 and 28, to address the national budget for 2024 and pending bills.

DP plans to pass two special investigation proposal during the meetings. The first concerns allegations that first lady Kim Keon Hee was involved in stock manipulation. The second concerns bribery suspicions related to a development project in the Daejangdong district in Seongnam.

The DP has designated both proposals as “fast-tracked bills” despite PPP’s resistance, as it holds a controlling majority of 169 out of 298 seats in the Assembly. [Yonhap]

## South Korea: Parliament votes down bill on powers of state broadcasting regulator

(dql) On December 8, South Korea's National Assembly voted to reject a series of bills intended to grant increased authority to the Korea Communications Commission (KCC), the country’s state broadcasting regulator, in the selection of public broadcasters' heads.

These bills, initially proposed by the main opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DPK), which holds the parliamentary majority, were vetoed by President Yoon Suk Yeol of the ruling People Power Party (PPP) and consequently returned to the Assembly for a re-vote.

Opposed by the PPP, these bills elicited concerns about the potential amplification of government influence over public broadcasters, which are commonly accused by both major parties of exhibiting bias.

The proposed legislation aimed to empower the Commission, responsible for broadcasting service licensing and regulation, by enabling the formation of committees to nominate candidates for presidents of public broadcasters.

Critics from the ruling party argued that as the head of the KCC is appointed by the president, granting greater authority to the broadcasting regulator in selecting public broadcasters' leadership could potentially introduce further biases.

According to constitutional stipulations, for a bill vetoed by the president to be reconsidered by the Assembly, a minimum of two-thirds of lawmakers must provide consent. Presently, the DPK holds 167 (56

percent) of the Assembly's 298 seats. [The Korea Herald]

## South Korea: Former opposition party leader questioned over cash-for-votes scandal

(oy) On December 8, Song Young-gil, a former leader of the Democratic Party (DP), was questioned by the Seoul Central District Prosecutors Office on charges of bribery and illicit political funding.

Song is under investigation after allegations that his campaign gave cash envelopes to the sum of KRW 94 million (USD 70,996) to 20 DP lawmakers and other party members during the lead up to DP's leadership election in May 2021, which he won.

Song is also suspected of accepting KRW 40 million (USD 30,320) in bribes from an ex-chief of the Yeosu arm of the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in exchange for business favors.

Responding to the investigation, Song claimed that it was "politically orchestrated" and has strongly denied personal involvement in the scandal. Following the questioning, prosecutors are contemplating whether to issue an arrest warrant for Song given the seriousness of the charges and worries about evidence destruction. [Yonhap]

## South Korea: Accusations against former Moon government in case of death of fisheries official

(oy) On December 7, South Korea's Board of Audit and Inspection (BAI) announced the findings of its investigation into the 2020 death of a South Korean fisheries official caused by North Korea.

They concluded that Moon Jae-in government made minimal efforts to rescue him, concealed and misrepresented facts concerning the case.

The fisheries official, Lee Dae-jun, was killed by North Korea's military near the inter-Korean maritime border in the Yellow Sea.

The BAI found that the relevant agencies, such as the presidential National Security Office (NSO), the Coast Guard, the unification and defense ministries, and the

NIS, did not act before or after the Lee's death and failed to communicate and cooperate with each other.

The BAI added that after Lee's death, the government removed and misrepresented data to hide the truth and falsely claimed that Lee had attempted to defect to North Korea.

The Board called for disciplinary or cautionary actions against 13 individuals, with a record of their illicit actions to be maintained in their personnel files. It also urged the legal authorities to probe 20 individuals, encompassing former ministers and officials, with court proceedings presently in progress. [Yonhap]

## South Korea: Declining birth rate presents difficulties for conscription

(oy) In 2022, South Korea's military personnel feel below 500,000 for the first time. The declining birth rate could undermine South Korea's military recruitment and affects its defensive stance against North Korea, a source of concern as threat from North Korea has been growing.

Responding to this demographic change, the South Korean Army has been exploring different ways to effectively improve its military capabilities, such as using advance technology in combat system.

In addition, South Korea's Ministry has focused on recruiting more women into the military, disproving the prospect of conscripting women. The Military Manpower Administration is also reviewing its supplementary military system, where top athletes and classical musicians serve in an alternative service. [Yonhap]

## South Korea: Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman urges strengthened defense in Seoul

(oy) On 5 December, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, Adm. Kim Myung-soo, inspected the Capital Defense Command. Kim urged the command to develop comprehensive defense operation procedures and ordered increased vigilance against possible drone incursions from North Korea.

The Capital Defense Command is responsible for defending Seoul, which is with the range of North

Korea's missiles and artillery.

In December 2022, five North Korean drones crossed the inter-Korean border, prompting South Korea military to inaugurate a drone operations command in September. [Yonhap]

## Taiwan: Bill on minimum wage adjustment passed by parliament

(dql) Taiwan's parliament has approved a new minimum wage bill, introducing a dynamic adjustment mechanism tied to the annual increase in the consumer price index (CPI).

The legislation mandates the Ministry of Labor to establish a 21-member review committee, chaired by the labor minister. This committee comprises seven representatives each from labor and industry, four scholars or experts, and one official each from the Ministry of Economic Affairs (MOEA) and the National Development Council (NDC).

The committee is obligated to convene in the third quarter annually to assess the minimum wage, proposing adjustments primarily based on the annual CPI growth and ten other indicators, including per capita income, gross domestic product growth, and minimum living expenses.

The law emphasizes consensus within the committee for proposed adjustments, with a majority vote as an alternative.

In instances where the Cabinet does not endorse the committee's recommendations, the law mandates a follow-up review and a resubmission of proposals.

Concurrently, the legislation establishes a "research team" comprised of scholars, experts, and representatives from relevant government agencies. This team is tasked with reporting every April to the review committee on the economic and employment effects of minimum wage adjustments. [Focus Taiwan]

## Taiwan: Political disinformation cases investigated

(xc) The Taipei District Prosecutors' Office is currently investigating two cases of political disinformation. One involves a misleading list of names circulating on social

media, purportedly indicating thousands of Taiwanese citizens being wiretapped by intelligence agencies.

In the second case, an audio file falsely claimed to feature Taiwan People's Party Chairman and presidential candidate Ko Wen-je discussing secrets about Democratic Progressive Party candidate Vice President William Lai's US visit. Notably, the audio file was determined to be artificially generated using AI technology.

To address these concerns, the Supreme Prosecutors' Office is actively encouraging the public to report any suspected instances of election interference, offering rewards of up to approximately USD 635,000. [Taipei Times]

## Taiwan: Personal Data Protection Unit Preparatory Office launched

(jr) Taiwan's Cabinet on December 5 opened a preparatory office to establish a Personal Information Protection Commission.

The newly established office is designed to play a critical role in drafting and amending regulations related to personal information. It shall also oversee initiatives dedicated to ensuring the safety of data protection for the people of Taiwan and research relevant technologies to create and enhance programs for data protection.

In the initial phase, the office shall be staffed by 36 individuals, with plans to expand the available staff to 89 personnel in the future.

The formation of the Personal Information Protection Commission is expected to be completed by August 2025, as mandated by a Constitutional Court ruling in 2022.

The move comes as Taiwan have suffered in recent years incidents of data leaks in both the public and private sectors, with security breaches reported in systems such as household registration, ridesharing apps, and department stores, which have all been attributed to a lack of cybersecurity awareness and cyber security attacks within the corporate realm. [Taiwan News]

## Taiwan:  Control on defense-related technologies to protect national security

### tightened

(xc) The Taiwanese military, in alignment with the Ministry of National Defense, has endorsed stringent controls on six defense-related technologies, recognizing them as crucial for national security.

These technologies, part of Taiwan's 22 key core technologies, include military-grade carbon fiber composite, carbon/carbon composite ablation materials, and interference rejection identification friend or foe (IFF) system technologies.

The development of these technologies also holds potential for civilian applications, such as the integration of advanced infrared technology in autonomous vehicles. The National Science and Technology Council (NSTC) has identified these six defense technologies among a broader list of 22 core technologies requiring heightened controls.

This measure aims to prevent technology leaks and bolster industrial competitiveness across five industries: defense, aerospace, agriculture, semiconductors, and information and communications technology.

Under the National Security Act, unauthorized acquisition, use, or disclosure of trade secrets related to these national core key technologies could result in severe penalties, including up to 12 years in prison and fines up to USD 3.17 million U. [Taipei Times]

## Taiwan: KMT presidential candidate vows reinstall December 25 as public holiday

(jr) Taiwan’s main opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), presidential candidate Hou Yu-ih, announced that he would bring back 25 December as a public holiday if he won the presidential election.

25 December in most parts of the world is a day to celebrate Christmas, a traditional Western and Christian holiday season in Taiwan. It was launched as a day of celebration for its constitution when it was still based in mainland China.

The government of Chiang Kai-shek adopted a new Constitution on 25 December 1946, with the document going into effect precisely one year later.

From 1963, the day was a public holiday in Taiwan until the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government abolished it after coming to power in 2000. Pressure

from business associations convinced the government that there were too many public holidays, hurting the country's economic performance. [Taiwan News]

### Taiwan:  Protestors accuse government of mistreating migrant workers to benefit brokers

(jr) More than 500 people gathered in Taipei on December 10, calling on the government to end the private agency system used to hire migrant workers.

These protests have been organized by the Migrant Empowerment in Network Taiwan (MENT), which launched a press release also blaming the government for its failures for illegal fees that migrant workers pay private brokers in return for employment in Taiwan.

MENT also stated more than 1000 local intermediary firms are earning illegal profits by exploiting migrant labor within the island.

Protestors said that the government's position has been vague and inadequate in response to calls for better regulation. They said that the Ministry of Labor attempts to address abuses on a case-by-case basis when the issue is systemic.

Also, on the same day, the Ministry of Labor issued a separate press release that said incidences of unaccounted-for migrant workers were decreasing and stabilizing, with 84,000 unaccounted for in October. Migrant worker union groups have attributed the high rate of missing migrant workers to systematic problems with hiring practices, among other things. [Taiwan News]

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

## Bangladesh: Main opposition BNP party holds protest to mark International Human Rights Day

(lm) On International Human Rights Day, hundreds of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) supporters, the main opposition party, gathered in Dhaka to protest the upcoming general election scheduled for January 7. They voiced concerns about the fairness of the election under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's leadership, demanding the release of prisoners and highlighting issues related to murder and enforced disappearances.

Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, the joint secretary-general of Zia's party, accused the government of arresting and punishing political leaders and activists on fictitious charges to secure a one-sided election result. He called on people to boycott the "stage-managed election," which he believes will exacerbate the country's political crisis.

The BNP has decided to boycott the election and is calling for it to be held under the supervision of a non-partisan caretaker government. This boycott leaves voters with little choice but to re-elect Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League for a fourth consecutive term.

The BNP's decision to boycott the polls came amid a months-long crackdown on opposition politicians and critics, with reports of hundreds of opposition politicians being jailed and critics silenced. Since a massive opposition rally on October 28, thousands of party leaders and activists have been arrested, including Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir. Many others are in hiding, and hundreds have been convicted by courts on charges of violence or subversive acts that the opposition alleges are politically motivated.

The upcoming election will be the country's 12th since gaining independence from Pakistan in 1971. Critics

have criticized the election as a farce, but the government has rejected allegations of a crackdown on the opposition, asserting that the polls will be democratically conducted and inclusive. [The Independent]

## Bangladesh: Ruling Awami League not worried about sanctions, party's general secretary says

(lm) The secretary general of Bangladesh's ruling Awami League (AL), Obaidul Quader, has stated that the party is not concerned about any potential sanctions. He suggested that if any sanctions were to be imposed, they should be imposed on the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) for obstructing the electoral process. [Prothom Alo]

Quader emphasized that the AL has been working toward a peaceful, free, and fair election under the Election Commission and the constitution, suggesting that sanctions should be considered for the BNP and their collaborators due to alleged acts of sabotage, vehicle and train arson, and violence.

He also expressed confidence that no obstacles, threats, sabotage, or terrorism could prevent the upcoming election from taking place. Quader stated that despite the BNP and some of its allies not participating in the election, there is enthusiasm among the people.

Regarding the AL-led 14-party alliance, Quader mentioned that there would be no crisis over seat sharing between the Awami League and its allies after December 17. He assured that necessary actions would be taken by that time.

## Bangladesh: Those involved in rigged polls to be tried in 'people's court', secretary general of BNP says

(lm) The joint secretary general of Bangladesh's main opposition BNP has issued a warning that those involved in a one-sided election, referring to the upcoming 12th parliamentary election, will be tried in the "people's court." [Dhaka Tribune]

Rizvi criticized the current government under the ruling Awami League, stating that it is pushing for a farcical election while ignoring the opinions of the country, the

nation, and the international community. He warned that the government, the Election Commission, and those making deals with them will not be spared, and they will have to answer for their actions in the people's court.

He alleged that the government has imprisoned the BNP's high command to proceed with the farcical election and claimed that law enforcement agencies have been "disappearing opposition leaders and activists" for the past 15 years.

## Bangladesh: Ruling 14-party alliance's seat-sharing dilemma persists

(lm) The partners of Bangladesh's ruling Awami League in the 14-party alliance have confirmed their participation in the upcoming general election using the party's electoral symbol, the boat. However, a final decision on the allocation of seats among the alliance members has not yet been reached; a decision is expected by December 15. [Dhaka Tribune]

Hasanul Haq Inu, a member of the coalition, mentioned that candidates from each party will be able to contest the election with their own symbols in constituencies where seats have not been shared.

## Bangladesh: Over 560 appeals filed with Election Commission ahead of parliamentary elections

(lm) In preparation for the 12th parliamentary elections in Bangladesh scheduled for January 7, a total of 561 appeals have been submitted to the Election Commission. These appeals were made against the decisions of returning officers who scrutinized nomination papers. Of the 731 nomination papers rejected by the returning officers during the scrutiny process, 550 candidates have applied to have their nominations reinstated, while the remaining 11 petitions have been filed to validate candidatures. [NewAge]

The appeals process took place from December 5 to December 9, with the Election Commission conducting hearings on these petitions from December 10 to December 15. As of the current update, after the first two days of hearings, out of 194 appeals, 107 have resulted in the reinstatement of candidacies, 73

appeals were rejected, and 14 remain suspended. [Somoy TV]

## Bangladesh: Election schedule legal, High Court rules

(lm) The High Court in Bangladesh has dismissed a writ petition challenging the legality of the election schedule for the 12th national polls, which are set to take place on January 7. [Somoy TV]

The petitioner's lawyer argued that holding the elections without downsizing the Cabinet was not appropriate because the prime minister, speaker, ministers, and members of parliament were running for re-election without resigning. However, the court rejected the plea, stating that the election schedule was legal.

## Bangladesh: 73 opposition BNP supporters jailed in three separate sabotage cases

(lm) In Bangladesh, three separate courts have convicted and sentenced a total of 73 leaders and activists of the country’s main opposition BNP in sabotage cases.  These convictions and sentences stem from various acts of violence and obstruction of law enforcement carried out by the individuals. [Dhaka Tribune]

## Bangladesh: 10 opposition BNP supporters get three years in jail in 2013 arson case

(lm) A Dhaka court has sentenced 10 leaders and activists of the main opposition BNP to three years' imprisonment in a case related to arson in 2013. Additionally, the court issued arrest warrants for eight other fugitives accused in the case. [Dhaka Tribune]

## Bangladesh: Death penalty challenged in High Court

(lm) A writ petition has been filed with the High Court in Bangladesh challenging the legality of the death penalty. The petition argues that the death penalty is contradictory to the country's constitution and international agreements, such as the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights. It also points out that Bangladesh is obligated to prohibit the death penalty as a signatory member of these international laws. [Dhaka Tribune]

## Bangladesh: Supreme Court's Appellate Division to hear review petition on 16th amendment in January

(lm) The Appellate Division of Bangladesh's Supreme Court has scheduled a hearing for January 18 to review a petition challenging the ruling that declared the 16th amendment to the constitution, granting parliament the power to remove judges, illegal and void. [bdnews24]

In July 2017, a seven-member Appellate Division bench upheld a High Court verdict that deemed the 16th amendment illegal. The state later filed an application seeking a review of the apex court's judgment. After six years, on November 23, the Appellate Division decided that a full bench would hear the review petition.

## Bangladesh: Army to be deployed on December 29 ahead of elections if president permits

(lm) The Bangladesh Army is planning to deploy its members across the country in preparation for the national election, pending approval from the President. The proposed army deployment is expected to last for 13 days, from December 29 to January 10. [Somoy TV]

Additionally, it has been reported that a total of 750,000 members of law enforcement agencies will be deployed during the election, with various agencies contributing personnel, including Ansar Bahini, police, Rapid Action Battalion, Coast Guard, and Border Guard Bangladesh.

## Bhutan: Parties will not switch candidates for general elections

(lm) The Bhutan Tendrel Party (BTP) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) have decided not to switch candidates from other political parties as the nomination of candidates is underway for the general elections. Both parties are confident in forming the

government and have outlined their strategies for the upcoming general elections. [Kuensel]

During the preliminary round of national elections conducted earlier this month, the PDP, led by former Prime Minister Dasho Tshering Tobgay, secured 42 percent of the vote in the primary polls, while the BTP came in second with 19 percent. These results eliminated three other parties from the final round of the election to the 47-member National Assembly scheduled for January 9, including the Bhutan United Party of incumbent Prime Minister Lotay Tshering. [AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1]

## Bhutan: Thousands of postal ballots rejected in recent primary

(lm) Approximately 8,900 postal ballots were declared invalid or not counted out of the total 126,360 postal ballots dispatched for the recent primary round of National Assembly elections in Bhutan. The exact figures for the total rejected postal ballots were not available. [Kuensel]

## India: Supreme Court upholds decision to strip Kashmir of special status

(lm) India's Supreme Court on December 11 upheld the central government's contentious decision from 2019 to revoke the special status of Jammu and Kashmir. The court also ruled that the disputed region should regain its state designation and that local elections should be held next year. This case had been reserved for a verdict on September 5 after 16 days of hearings [see AiR No. 37, September/2023, 2]. [The Guardian]

In 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) scrapped Article 370, a constitutional provision that had granted special status to the former state of Jammu and Kashmir. Following the revocation of Article 370, India's parliament voted to split Jammu and Kashmir into two union territories, Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh. This move granted New Delhi greater control over the region.

Against this backdrop, during the hearings, the central government argued that the unilateral abrogation of Article 370 was necessary to fully integrate Jammu and Kashmir into India and highlighted the region's development since the article's repeal in August 2019. It also asserted that the region became a union

territory due to extreme circumstances, adding that it would regain full statehood once the situation normalized.

The petitioners, on their end, contended that the central government used its parliamentary majority and executive orders to divide a full-fledged state into the union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, which they saw as an attack on federalism and a violation of the Constitution. They further argued that Article 370 had acquired permanent status after the dissolution of the Jammu and Kashmir Constituent Assembly in 1957 and that Article 368 (Parliament's power to amend the Constitution) did not apply to Article 370.

Against this backdrop, Prime Minister Modi welcomed the Supreme court's verdict, describing it as a "resounding declaration of hope, progress, and unity." Meanwhile, some Kashmiri politicians expressed disappointment with the Supreme Court's verdict, while others vowed to continue their fight for what they see as their rights and dignity. [CNN]

## India: Parliament passed two bills on Jammu and Kashmir ahead of 2024 elections

(fd/lm) The Indian Parliament has passed two bills related to the Jammu and Kashmir union territory, which are seen as significant steps by the central government to reshape the region's political landscape, particularly with an eye on the upcoming general elections in 2024. Home Minister Amit Shah emphasized that these legislative changes signal the beginning of a "new and developed Kashmir" free from terrorism under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership.

The first of these bills, known as the J&K Reorganisation (Amendment) Bill, 2023, aims to amend the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019. It introduces notable changes to the composition of the legislative assembly by altering the allocation of seats across various regions within Jammu and Kashmir. Specifically, it increases the number of seats in Jammu from 37 to 43 and in Kashmir from 46 to 47. Importantly, the bill reserves 24 seats for representatives from Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

Moreover, this legislative assembly will now include nominated members, with their count being raised from two to five. Among these nominated members, two will be women, one will represent Kashmiri

migrants, and one will hail from Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

The second bill, titled the Jammu & Kashmir Reservation (Amendment) Bill, 2023, seeks to amend the Jammu and Kashmir Reservation Act, 2004. This legislation grants the Pahadia community, primarily residing in the hilly and border areas of the state, Scheduled Tribe status and reserves nine seats in the legislative assembly for Scheduled Tribes.

Furthermore, it alters the classification of specific groups from "weak and underprivileged classes (social castes)" to "other backward classes," enabling them to seek reservations in appointments and admissions. Under their new status, the Pahadia community will also benefit from a 4 percent job quota. [The Hindu] [The Wire] [The Indian Express]

## India: BJP appoints observers for Chief Minister selection in three states following electoral victory

(lm/fd) In the wake of their electoral victory earlier this month, India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) took a step forward over the weekend and appointed observers for the selection of the next Chief Minister in the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. [Business Today]

*Chhattisgarh*

In Chhattisgarh, a BJP legislature party meeting elected Vishnu Deo Sai, a former central minister of state, as the new Chief Minister. Sai's selection is viewed in the context of this significant tribal population and the BJP's previous success in winning all 14 assembly seats in the tribal-dominated Surguja region. Moreover, Sai is closely linked to the party's ideological mentor Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the former Chief Minister Raman Singh. [NDTV]

*Rajasthan*

At the time of writing, the BJP was set to announce the next Chief Minister of Rajasthan following a meeting of the party's recently elected MLAs on December 12. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, along with two co-observers, was set to attend the meeting to oversee the selection process. [mint]

*Madhya Pradesh*

In Madhya Pradesh, Mohan Yadav, who hails from the dominant Other Backward Class (OBC) community and has close ties to the RSS, has been chosen as the next chief minister, succeeding four-time Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan. This selection is consistent with the BJP's tradition of fielding OBC chief ministers in the state. [The Indian Express]

## India: Parliament expels opposition lawmaker following ethics panel's report on cash-for-query allegations

(lm) India's parliament on December 8 expelled Mahua Moitra, an opposition lawmaker known for her fierce criticism of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the influential Adani conglomerate. This expulsion comes after an investigation into allegations that Moitra accepted gifts from a businessman in exchange for raising parliamentary questions, including about Adani's founder Gautam Adani. Moitra vehemently denied these allegations and described the investigation as a "poorly run hatchet job." [bbc] [Bloomberg]

Opposition leaders have alleged that Moitra was targeted for her vocal criticism of Prime Minister Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party BJP. Mamata Banerjee, the leader of Moitra's party, the All India Trinamool Congress, has condemned her expulsion as a betrayal of constitutional rights and criticized the lack of opportunity for Moitra to defend herself adequately during the proceedings. [Financial Times]

Moitra herself on December 11 moved the Supreme Court challenging her expulsion from Parliament's lower house. [The Hindu]

## India: Supreme Court rejects plea seeking direction to fix limit of expenses by political parties, candidates

(lm) India's Supreme Court on December 8 rejected a petition requesting the court to establish spending limits for political parties and candidates in elections. The bench dismissed the petition, stating that these issues are related to legislative policy and not within the court's purview. [The Hindu]

The petitioner from Haryana state had sought various directions, including setting limits on expenses by political parties and candidates, restricting

expenditures on campaign materials before nominations, and calculating expenses for rallies during the nomination process. The plea also asked for high courts to resolve election petitions within six months.

The Supreme Court deemed these matters as subjects of legislative policy and emphasized that they couldn't issue directives on such issues. The bench pointed out that there is already a law in place regarding election expenses and stated that they couldn't compel Parliament to enact a specific law on this matter. The petitioner referred to Section 86 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, which deals with the trial of election petitions, but the bench ultimately dismissed the petition, stating that these issues are matters of policy.

## India: Supreme Court criticizes High Court's remarks on adolescent sexual behavior

(lm) India's Supreme Court has criticized remarks made in a Calcutta High Court judgment that advised adolescent girls to "control sexual urges." The bench took suo motu cognizance of the comments made in the High Court judgment, which was related to a Protection of Children from Sexual Offences case. The Supreme Court deemed these remarks "highly objectionable and completely unwarranted." [The Hindu]

The High Court's judgment emphasized the duty of female adolescents to protect their rights, integrity of their bodies, dignity, and self-worth. It also called on male adolescents to respect the duties of young girls or women and to respect their dignity, privacy, and autonomy. Additionally, the High Court stressed the importance of parental guidance and sex education in school curricula.

The Calcutta High Court's verdict aimed to discourage adolescents from engaging in casual sexual activity and emphasized the need for commitment and dedication in relationships. However, the Supreme Court criticized the specific language and advice used in the judgment.

## India: Advocate raises concerns over case listing in Supreme Court

(lm) Advocate Prashant Bhushan has raised concerns about the listing of a case challenging the criminal prosecution of lawyers and a journalist under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act in the Supreme Court. He referred to a rule that suggests that the same bench that hears the main case should also handle any related petitions by judicial order. Bhushan alleged that this rule was arbitrarily breached in the case's listing. [The Hindu]

However, the Supreme Court Registry has stated that seniority of judges does not influence the allocation of cases in the court. Cases can either remain with the lead judge or follow the associate judge when they head a new Bench.

This issue of case listing has drawn attention recently, with senior advocate Dushyant Dave writing an open letter to Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud, highlighting cases being "taken away" from benches originally hearing them and listed before other benches. Dave expressed concern that this was happening in cases related to sensitive issues such as human rights, freedom of speech, and the functioning of constitutional institutions. He emphasized the chief justice's role as the master of the roster and urged adherence to established practices and conventions in allocating cases.

## India: Supreme Court expresses concern over 'unlimited influx' of illegal migrants from Bangladesh

(lm) India's Supreme Court, while hearing a series of petitions challenging Section 6A of the Citizenship Act, observed that there is a concern about an "unlimited influx" of illegal migrants from Bangladesh, which not only changes demographics but also places a burden on resources meant for Indian citizens. The chief justice expressed the need to curb illegal migration due to limited infrastructure, education, and healthcare resources in India. The court ordered the Home Secretary to file an affidavit regarding the estimated inflow of illegal migrants into India, steps taken to address illegal immigration, and details about border-fencing.

Section 6A of the Citizenship Act, which applies specifically to the state of Assam, categorizes immigrants from Bangladesh into different groups based on their entry dates, with varying citizenship rights. The petitioners argue that this provision has led to an influx of illegal migrants, depriving locals of their rights and cultural identity.

The court also questioned why Section 6A was only applicable in Assam and not in West Bengal, which shares a larger border with Bangladesh. They asked the central government to provide information on illegal immigration into the West Bengal part of the border.

The chief justice emphasized that concerns about demographic changes and the erosion of cultural identity due to illegal immigration from a foreign country are different from inter-state migration within India, which is part of the country's unity and should not be a basis for cultural concerns.

## India: Delhi High Court asks central government to respond to AAP's plea to allot land for its offices

(lm) The Delhi High Court has asked the central government to respond to a petition filed by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), seeking land allotment in the national capital for constructing its offices as a recognized national party. The AAP claims it is entitled to 1,000 square meters of land for its national and Delhi unit offices, as per ministry policies. It argues that the denial of land is arbitrary and discriminatory, placing it at a disadvantage compared to other national parties. The court has scheduled further hearings for March 2024, in response to the AAP's petition. [The Hindu]

## India: Kerala Governor raises concerns Over constitutional machinery amidst ongoing protests

(lm) A political controversy has erupted in India's southernmost state of Kerala, pitching Governor Arif Mohammed Khan – a member of Prime Minister Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party - against supporters of the ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist). [The Hindu]

The controversy stems from recent protests organized by the Students' Federation of India (SFI), the student wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). During these protests, SFI activists waved black flags and allegedly attacked Governor Khan's vehicle while he was inside. These demonstrations were part of a series of protests against the governor's attempts to appoint individuals associated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak

Sangh to positions in state-funded universities. [India Today]

Governor Khan accused Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan of instigating the protests and went further to claim that Vijayan had directed the SFI to physically harm him under the guise of these black flag protests. Additionally, he alleged that government insiders leaked information about his travel route to the protesters, leading to the attack on his vehicle.

Furthermore, Governor Khan stressed that merely making token arrests of protesters would not suffice and called for a comprehensive investigation into the matter. Furthermore, he hinted at the possibility of recommending the imposition of a financial emergency in Kerala under Article 360 of the Indian Constitution.

## India: President accepts resignation of three ministers elected as MLAs; portfolios reallocated

(lm) India's President Droupadi Murmu, acting on the prime minister's recommendation, accepted the resignations of three ministers serving in the central government: Narendra Singh Tomar, Prahlad Singh Patel, and Renuka Singh Saruta. These resignations occurred as the ministers, who had previously been elected as members of legislative assemblies, stepped down from Parliament's lower house. Following their departures, changes were made to ministerial portfolios. [The Hindu]

Narendra Singh Tomar's responsibilities, including Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, were transferred to Arjun Munda, who also held the Tribal Affairs portfolio. Prahlad Singh Patel's Ministry of State for Food Processing Industries was reassigned to Shobha Karandlaje, who simultaneously held the Ministry of State for Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare. Rajeev Chandrasekhar took over Patel's Ministry of State for Jal Shakti, adding it to his existing duties. Renuka Singh Saruta's Ministry of State for Tribal Affairs was handed over to Bharti Pravin Pawar, who retained her existing portfolio.

## India: RSS trade union rallies against central government's policies; second protest in a month

(fd/lm) Thousands of Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) supporters rallied on December 11, demanding recognition as government employees and access to social security benefits. This protest comes after a late November demonstration and a joint letter from 10 central trade unions condemning police violence against workers agitated by 15,000 job terminations. The protesters, primarily public health and early education workers, play critical roles in implementing government programs such as the Integrated Child Development Services and the National Health Mission. [Organiser.org] [The Hindu]

The BMS, one of India's largest trade unions, is affiliated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a right-wing Hindu nationalist organization with a significant presence in Indian society, including the Bharatiya Janata Party, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

## India: Human rights commission issues notice to Manipur government over killing of 13 persons

(lm) India's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has issued a notice to the Manipur state government regarding the deaths of at least 13 people in a gunfight a village in Tengnoupal district on December 4. This incident marked the highest single-day loss of life in the ongoing violence in Manipur since May. [The Hindu]

The NHRC suspects that the victims may have been militants from Myanmar, as the nearby hills are a common route used by them to enter the state from Myanmar. In light of this, the NHRC believes that the incident indicates a lapse on the part of law enforcement agencies and the forces deployed to maintain peace and order in the state. As a result, the NHRC on December 8 issued notices to the Chief Secretary and the Director-General of Police in Manipur, requesting a detailed report on the matter within two weeks.

## India: 135 million people moved out of multidimensional poverty in 5 years, finance minister says

(lm) In India, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, citing a report from NITI Aayog, told Parliament on December 7 that approximately 135 million people

have moved out of "multidimensional" poverty in the past five years. The most significant reduction in multidimensional poverty was observed in states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Rajasthan. [The Indian Express] [The Hindu]

Sitharaman highlighted India's economic growth, stating that it continues to maintain the momentum of being the fastest-growing major economy, with all sectors significantly contributing to economic activities. She also mentioned that India's manufacturing sector registered the highest growth of 13.9 percent in the second quarter of the year, and she emphasized the growth of the service sector and software services.

Additionally, she noted that made in India products are increasingly being seen in American supermarkets, with US goods imports from India rising by 40 percent from 2018 to 2022. Sitharaman also mentioned improvements in direct tax collection and a decline in the unemployment rate.

## India: Government plans to reduce ethanol production in favor of sugar-sources

(fd) The Indian government is planning to decrease the usage of sugar for ethanol production due to the world's second biggest sugar producer's output being expected to fall. [Reuters]

The below average rainfall in the cane-growing states of Maharashtra and southern Karnataka spiked concerns that it would decrease this year's production volume. The lower diversion for ethanol production is intended to increase the output, nonetheless. This decision will impact the ethanol industry, which utilizes sugar cane juice and B-heavy molasses to make ethanol. Moreover, this ethanol is bought from sugar mills by India' fuel retailers at higher prices to blend with gasoline.

## India: Home Ministry takes action against non-compliant seaport immigration check-posts

(fd) India's Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has provided information to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs regarding actions taken against more than 20 seaport immigration check-posts

(ICP) found to be operating in violation of rules, potentially posing national security risks. [The Hindu]

In March, concerns had been raised regarding unregulated entry of people through the seaport ICPs that could cause national security issues. Out of the 31 authorized seaport ICPs, 10 are controlled by the Bureau of Immigration and the others are managed by the State police.

A joint team of officers visited six seaports in Gujarat, including the Adani Tuna Port, to assess their compliance with regulations. Furthermore, the MHA has requested the state governments and the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways to provide the necessary infrastructure for these ports.

## India: NIA cracks down on ISIS module, arrests 15 alleged operatives

(lm) The National Investigation Agency (NIA) in India on December 9 arrested 15 alleged operatives of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) during coordinated raids at 44 locations in Maharashtra and Karnataka states. The NIA accused these individuals of pursuing violent jihad and conspiring to disturb peace and communal harmony in India, as well as waging war against the government. The suspects were arrested for promoting terror-related activities. [The Hindu]

## India: Jammu & Kashmir police officer succumbs to wounds after being shot in October

(fd) A police inspector stationed in the Jammu and Kashmir union territory passed away on December 7, succumbing to wounds sustained when he was shot by militants while playing cricket in Srinagar in late October. [The Hindu]

Back then, the shots at the officer were fired by a police-known militant, however authorities have not yet been able to detain him. Responsibility for the attack was claimed by The Resistance Front, a branch of the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba, one of the largest and most proficient of the Kashmir-focused militant groups.

On December 6, the Union government of Jammu and Kashmir announced that in total 20 security officers

had been killed in the context of terror attacks in this year.

## India: District Reserve Guard member injured in IED blast by Naxalites in Chhattisgarh state

(lm) On December 13, a member of the District Reserve Guard was injured when an improvised explosive device (IED) planted by Maoist insurgents, the so-called Naxalites, exploded in Chhattisgarh's Sukma district. The blast occurred near Saletong village, where two security personnel were injured in a similar incident the previous day. [The Hindu]

## India: Strategic Forces Command conducts training launch of Agni-1 short-range ballistic missile

(fd) India's Strategic Forces Command (SFC) successfully conducted a training launch of the Agni-1 short-range ballistic missile off the Odisha coast from APJ Abdul Kalam Island. The test, carried out under the SFC's supervision, validated all operational and technical parameters. [The Hindu] [Swaraja]

Agni-1, part of the Integrated Guided Missile Development Program, has a range of over 700 to 900 kilometers and can carry both conventional and nuclear warheads. India is also developing an advanced version called Agni-Prime, featuring a more efficient two-stage solid-fueled propulsion system for enhanced accuracy and ease of launch.

## The Maldives: Parliament to individually approve ministers

(lm) In the Maldives, Parliament's Government Oversight Committee has decided to call for separate votes on approval for each of the 22 cabinet ministers appointed by President Mohamed Muizzu. The parliamentary term has been extended to December 18 [see article in this edition], and it is expected that the parliament will seek approval for the ministers this week. [The Edition]

This development comes after Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) interim leader and former Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih held a meeting with

members of MDP's parliamentary group to discuss current developments in parliament. While details of the meeting were not disclosed, it coincides with calls from some MDP parliamentarians to vote against granting approval to certain government ministers appointed to the cabinet by President Mohamed Muizzu. [SunOnline]

## The Maldives: Nine additional Deputy Ministers appointed, total reaches 72

(wm) President Muizzu of the Maldives has appointed nine additional Deputy Ministers in his new government. This brings the total number of Deputy Ministers across 22 government ministries to 72. The appointments come as part of the government's efforts to fill key positions and responsibilities within various ministries. [The Edition]

Prior to taking office on November 17, President Muizzu had decided to cap the number of political appointees at no more than 700. This move represents a reduction compared to previous administrations, as the budget presented under former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih indicated 1,063 political appointees, and during the tenure of former President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, there were 808 political workers in the government.

## The Maldives: Parliament's third session extended till December 18

(wm) The parliament in the Maldives has unanimously decided to extend its ongoing third session until December 18, marking the second extension to the third session this year. [SunOnline]

Disagreements over a no-confidence motion against former Speaker Mohamed Nasheed had previously stalled parliamentary sittings, but the Supreme Court ruled the motion had been unlawfully obstructed. Following the judgment, Naheed resigned to prevent a potential no-confidence motion by members of the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party [see AiR No. 47, November/2023, 3].

## The Maldives: President Muizzu appointed as PPM/PNC coalition leader

(wm) President Muizzu of the Maldives has been appointed as the leader of the Progressive Party of Maldives/People's National Congress (PPM/PNC) coalition. Muizzu expressed confidence in the coalition's ability to secure a super-majority in the upcoming parliamentary election. [The Edition]

This development follows former President Abdulla Yameen's exit from the PPM, creating a leadership vacuum within the coalition. Yameen has since founded his own political party, the People's National Front (PNF), with his lawyer citing concerns about PPM leaders attempting to control the PPM's leadership and exploiting Yameen's ideology for their own benefit. [AiR No. 48, November/2023, 4]

## The Maldives: Former MDP chairperson Ali Waheed rejoins party

(wm) Former Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) chairperson Ali Waheed has returned to the party after more than seven years as a member of another party. In a statement, he expressed his commitment to serving MDP, the country, and the Maldivian people with courage and determination for success. Ali Waheed previously served as the President of the Jumhooree Party (JP) and as the tourism minister under former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih but was dismissed due to allegations of sexual harassment. [The Edition]

During his previous tenure as MDP chairperson, he had traveled abroad due to political unrest during the administration of former President Abdullah Yameen but later resigned from the position to focus on other work. He subsequently joined the JP but lost his position following an amendment to JP's general regulation.

## The Maldives: President seeks approval for three diplomatic appointments

(wm) In the Maldives, President Mohamed Muizzu has submitted requests to the parliament seeking approval for three diplomatic appointments. The nominations include PNC deputy leader Mohamed Hussain Shareef as the Maldivian ambassador to the United Arab Emirates, former youth minister Iruthisham Adam as the ambassador to the United Kingdom, and Ambassador-at-large Ali Naseer Mohamed for the

permanent representative role at the United Nations. [Sun Online]

## The Maldives: Uz Ali Abdul Latheef elected to Judicial Service Commission as lawyers' representative

(lm) Ali Abdul Latheef has been elected as the representative for lawyers on the Judicial Service Commission (JSC), an independent constitutional body responsible to oversee appointments and dismissals of judges and ensure accountability of the judiciary. He was the sole candidate who met the requirements, while the other two candidates, former High Court chief judge Shujau Usman and former Civil Court judge Zubair Mohamed, were rejected by the Bar Council. [The President's Office]

## The Maldives: Country does not face disruptions to essential imports, economic minister says

(wm) Maldives Economic Minister, Mohamed Saeed, has reassured that essential imports remain unaffected despite India's onion export ban. Saeed acknowledged changes in global food markets and export policies but emphasized the priority placed on the Maldives by close trade partners. [Sun Online]

India has temporarily banned onion exports until March next year to manage domestic prices, but it has made exemptions for neighboring countries, including the Maldives.

## The Maldives: Maldives Development Alliance calls for solutions to address concerns in fisheries sector

(wm) The leader of the Maldives Development Alliance (MDA), a small opposition party that currently holds two seats in the 81-member lower house, has emphasized the importance of addressing challenges in the country's fisheries sector for its sustainability. He also commended President Mohamed Muizzu's efforts to address fishermen's concerns and urged cooperation between fishermen and the government. [SunOnline]

## Nepal: Political parties gear up for elections to Parliament's upper house

(lm) Political parties in Nepal are preparing for the National Assembly elections scheduled for January 25. The terms of 20 lawmakers in the 59-member upper house are set to expire on March 3, with 19 positions to be filled through elections and one to be nominated by the President based on the Cabinet's recommendation. [The Kathmandu Post]

The ruling Nepali Congress has taken the lead in preparations, recommending the withdrawal of five of its leaders' names from the closed list under the proportional representation category, as these leaders expressed interest in contesting the Assembly elections. Candidates listed for the proportional representation category for the House of Representatives elections cannot participate in the upper house polls.

Other political parties are also gearing up for the elections. The Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Unified Socialist) has scheduled a Secretariat meeting to select its candidates, and the Election Commission has called on political parties to register for the elections between December 10 and December 15.

The ruling alliance is expected to contest the Assembly elections jointly, which could pose challenges for the main opposition. Seven of the 19 lawmakers whose terms end in March are from the CPN-(Unified Marxist–Leninist) (UML). Preliminary assessments suggest that the Nepali Congress is likely to secure nine seats, the CPN (Maoist Centre) six, while the Unified Socialist and the Janata Samajbadi parties are expected to win one seat each in the upcoming elections.

## Nepal: Ruling alliance may award Speaker post in Koshi province to Unified Marxist–Leninist party

(lm) In Nepal's Koshi province, the ruling alliance led by Chief Minister Kedar Karki is considering offering the position of Speaker of the provincial assembly to the opposition Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (UML) as it continues to face challenges in forming a complete Cabinet, more than a month and a half after assuming office. [The Kathmandu Post]

Karki became Chief Minister with the support of the UML on October 14, despite the Nepali Congress party's official endorsement of Indra Bahadur Angbo from the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Maoist Centre). However, the UML withdrew from the Koshi government on November 4 after Karki expanded his Cabinet to include ministers from the Maoist Centre and the CPN (Unified Socialist), while the UML wanted a Congress-UML administration without the Maoists and the Unified Socialists.

Karki later reconciled with the Congress-Maoist Centre coalition and is now working to make his government a consensus one by including the UML and the pro-monarch and pro-Hindu Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP). With the UML holding the majority of seats in the provincial assembly (40 out of 93) and the RPP controlling six seats, the ruling alliance is willing to offer the Speaker's position to the RPP in exchange for its support.

However, the RPP is inclined towards seeking a broader power-sharing arrangement at the central level rather than joining the Koshi government. The UML, currently holding the deputy Speaker's position, has declined the offer to join the government but is interested in securing the Speaker's position.

## Nepal: Police detain 10 individuals over allegations they recruited jobless youth for Russian army

(lm) Police in Nepal have arrested 10 individuals for allegedly scamming unemployed young men by convincing them to join the Russian army. The suspects reportedly charged these individuals up to USD 9,000 for "tourist visas" and sent them to Russia through third countries, primarily the United Arab Emirates. Once in Russia, the victims were recruited into the Russian army, which authorities consider a form of human trafficking. [Al Jazeera] [Politico]

This comes after the government of Nepal had previously urged Moscow to stop using Nepali mercenaries in the conflict and to repatriate those serving in Ukraine. Six Nepali citizens have reportedly died on the front lines in Ukraine, with another captured by Ukrainian forces. Nepal has requested compensation from Russia for the families of its citizens who lost their lives in the conflict.

In related updates, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal has said the government has received information suggesting that more than 200 Nepali nationals may be

currently serving in the Russian army. [The Kathmandu Post]

## Nepal: National Human Rights Commission submits annual report to President Paudel

(wm) The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has submitted its annual report for the fiscal year 2022/23 to President Ramchandra Paudel. The report includes details on complaints, investigations, recommendations to the government, and NHRC's activities, highlighting 100 lodged complaints and 220 monitoring efforts on human rights violations throughout the fiscal year. [The Rising Nepal]

## Nepal: Families of missing and disappeared victims of civil war demand closure

(lm) Family members of individuals who went missing or disappeared during the Nepalese Civil War (1996-2006) are growing increasingly frustrated with the lack of progress in finding their loved ones. Despite government commitments to deliver justice to victims of the civil war, 17 years have passed since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2006, and not a single victim has received justice. [The Kathmandu Post]

Two commissions, the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, were established to investigate human rights violations and promote reconciliation in society following the conflict. However, many families are still awaiting answers. The Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons reports 3,289 registered reports of missing people filed after the conflict, with 2,567 individuals still missing based on these complaints.

## Nepal: Central bank unveils first quarterly review of monetary policy

(wm) Nepal's central bank (NRB) has released the first quarterly review of the monetary policy for the current fiscal year following its endorsement by the NRB Board of Directors. In response to factors influencing inflation, the NRB has reduced bank rates from 7.5

percent to 7 percent, while maintaining policy rates at 5.5 percent, down from the previous 6.5 percent. The mandatory cash reserve ratios and statutory liquidity ratios remain unchanged, with a modification in the counting of debentures issued by banks and financial institutions, now considered 50 percent as a resource until the fiscal year-end. [The Rising Nepal]

## Nepal: Hindu Kush Himalaya is resource hub, president says

(wm) Nepal's President Ramchandra Paudel stressed the importance of the Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) region during the 40th anniversary of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD). He noted that the HKH provides vital resources for a quarter of the world's population, highlighting the need for its conservation. President Paudel also called for action on climate change in the region and emphasized that despite Nepal's minimal contributions to greenhouse gas emissions, it faces significant climate-related challenges. He urged international cooperation to address these global issues and reaffirmed Nepal's support for ICIMOD. [The Rising Nepal]

## Pakistan: Court to hear ex-Premier Sharif's plea against conviction

(lm) A court in Pakistan has rejected the anti-corruption authority's plea for a retrial of the so-called Al-Azizia steel mill corruption case against the country's three-times former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who has already been convicted in the case. The Islamabad High Court (IHC) ruled that it will continue to hear Sharif's appeal against his conviction in the case on its merits and adjourned the hearing of his appeal until December 12. [The Hindu] [Anadolu Ajansı]

In December 2018, Sharif was sentenced to seven years in jail and fined after failing to convince the court that he had no involvement in the steel mill established by his father in Saudi Arabia in 2001. The National Accountability Bureau alleged that the mill was established using corrupt funds Sharif accumulated during his rule, a charge he denied.

Last month, the IHC scheduled the appeals filed by Sharif against his conviction in the Avenfield Apartments and Al-Azizia corruption cases [see AiR No. 47, November/2023, 3]. This came after the IHC had

reinstated Sharif's right to appeal the convictions [see AiR No. 44, October/2023, 5]. Sharif's ability to appeal his convictions was seen as a significant development ahead of parliamentary elections scheduled for January, not least because prosecutors did not oppose his appeals and expressed no intention to arrest him.

## Pakistan: Court rules against ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan's plea to shift case; NAB summons wife

(lm) The Islamabad High Court (IHC) has dismissed former Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's petition seeking to move an appeal filed by him in the so-called Toshakhana Case to the Lahore High Court. The case led to Pakistan's election commission disqualifying him from parliament. [Al Jazeera]

Khan has been in detention since August 5, initially for not disclosing assets earned from the sale of gifts from foreign dignitaries meant to be kept in a state depository, the so-called Toshakhana, and later in a case about revealing state secrets.

The former prime minister had filed an appeal in the IHC in October last year against that ban on his participation in electoral politics. However, Khan and his legal team sought to withdraw the appeal from the court in January this year, contending that they have filed a subsequent plea in the Lahore High Court.

The Islamabad High Court has now decided not to allow Khan to withdraw his petition, though it is yet to deliver its verdict on whether the election commission should lift its ban on Khan's participation in elections.

In related developments, the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) has summoned Khan's wife, Bushra Bibi, in connection with the Toshakhana case. Bushra Bibi has been accused of keeping various gifts from the Toshakhana, and her name was included in the Exit Control List (ECL) on the recommendation of the NAB. [Firstpost]

## Pakistan: Supreme Court to hear dispute over lifetime disqualification of lawmakers

(lm) Pakistan's Supreme Court has scheduled a hearing for January next year to address the issue of lifetime electoral disqualification of lawmakers. A three-judge

committee will establish a larger bench to determine whether individuals disqualified under Article 62 of the constitution can contest elections based on amendments made to the Election Act 2017. [Deccan Herald]

The legal dilemma arose from a Supreme Court judgment in April 2018, in the so-called Samiullah Baloch case, which permanently barred politicians disqualified under Article 62(1)(f) from Parliament. However, an amendment to the Elections Act 2017 in June this year reduced the electoral disqualification period to five years, not for life. This issue could create confusion for Returning Officers in upcoming elections as they may need to choose between the Supreme Court judgment and the Elections Act.

## Pakistan: PML-N strikes seat adjustments with PML-Q, IPP parties

(mr/lm) As political parties in Pakistan go into electioneering mode ahead of upcoming national elections scheduled for February 8 next year, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) has secured two significant political alliances.

In a significant political development on December 6, PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif visited Pakistan Muslim League (Q) President Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain at his Lahore residence, 15 years after the latter had parted ways with the PML-N and joined former army chief and military dictator Pervez Musharraf's government. During the meeting o, both parties concurred on seat adjustment for two National Assembly and three Punjab Assembly constituencies. [Business Recorder]

On December 7, then, the PML-N formed a seat adjustment deal with the Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP), during a meeting between PML-N President Shehbaz Sharif and IPP patron-in-chief Jahangir Tareen. While the exact number of seats has yet to be finalized, this alliance is expected to strengthen both parties' positions in Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province. The IPP has attracted several defectors from the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) since its launch, making it a significant player in the upcoming elections. [Geo News]

## Pakistan: Election Commission decides to hold contempt proceedings against ex-Premier Imran Khan

(lm) Pakistan's Election Commission (ECP) has decided to hold contempt case proceedings against former Prime Minister Imran Khan in jail, along with former Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry. Khan faces contempt charges after accusing the Chief Election Commissioner and the electoral body of bias. The indictment proceedings are scheduled for December 13. [Anadolu Ajansı]

Additionally, a high court rejected Khan's request to withdraw his appeal against his disqualification by the ECP last year.

## Pakistan: Election Commission to unveil poll schedule this week

(mr) Pakistan's Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) is scheduled to reveal the schedule for the national polls, scheduled for February 8 next year, this week. [Dawn]

In related updates, the ECP has appointed new provincial election commissioners in Sindh and Balochistan. Additionally, the ECP has issued notifications for the appointment of district returning officers (DROs), returning officers (ROs), and assistant returning officers (AROs) for the general polls. These officers have been directed to assume their responsibilities immediately. [Geo News]

## Pakistan: Human rights commission received 3,400 complaints in 2022

(lm) The National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) in Pakistan has received over 3,400 complaints in 2022 and has addressed various human rights issues, including forced religious conversions, safeguarding women's rights, combating torture in prisons, and advocating for the rights of transgender individuals and sacred places of worship. The NCHR's Chairperson, Rabiya Javeri Agha, shared details of the commission's performance at an event hosted by Pakistan's President, Arif Alvi, on Human Rights Day. [The News International]

## Pakistan: Media regulator warns against speculative reporting on elections

(xc) The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) has issued a directive to all satellite television channels, emphasizing adherence to its code of conduct by avoiding speculative or false reporting on the upcoming national elections. This directive, issued following a complaint by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), aims to maintain public trust in the electoral process and the integrity of media content. [Arab News]

The ECP, concerned about stories hinting at a potential election delay, has prompted PEMRA's intervention. Despite the ECP's firm announcement to hold the elections on February 8, 2024, local media outlets have continued to speculate about another postponement.

PEMRA's notification, dated November 3, warns that disseminating news about potential election delays could undermine the ECP's preparedness and negatively impact its credibility. The regulator emphasized the importance of avoiding content that could create doubts or give the impression of jeopardizing the conduct of the elections. It cautioned that any transmission infringing these guidelines would be considered a violation of PEMRA laws, and broadcasters could face strict action.

## Pakistan: One killed, three injured in bomb blast in Balochistan province

(mr) A bomb blast in Balochistan's Sohbatpur district resulted in one fatality and three injuries, including two police officers. The explosion targeted a construction company's laborer camp that was working on a road project in the area. So far, no group has claimed responsibility for the blast. [Dawn]

## Sri Lanka: President Wickremesinghe meets with representatives of Global Tamil Forum, monks

(lf) Representatives of the Global Tamil Forum (GTF) and influential Buddhist monastics met with Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe on December 8. During the encounter, they presented the Joint Himalayan Declaration, which advocates for a pluralistic Sri Lanka that promotes the well-being of all communities and emphasizes the importance of learning from historical missteps. [Daily Mirror] [Economy Next] [Tamil Guardian]

The GTF, initially a major Tamil diaspora umbrella organization, now consists of the Canadian Tamil Congress (CTC) and the Norwegian Tamil Forum (NTF), along with individual members. The GTF and Sangha for Better Sri Lanka, a group of senior Sinhala Buddhist monks, jointly formulated the Joint Himalayan Declaration after structured engagements in Nagarkot, Nepal, in April.

## Sri Lanka: Parliament approves VAT hike to 18 percent ahead of IMF review

(lf/lm) Sri Lanka's parliament on December 10 approved an increase in the value-added tax (VAT) rate from 15 percent to 18 percent, with 100 parliamentarians of the 225-member House voting in favour of the legislation. The VAT hike is expected to take effect from January 1, 2024, and will include new items such as fuel, fertiliser, and cooking gas, aiming to boost government revenue by approximately USD 1.1 billion. [Business Recorder] [Daily Mirror]

However, it is also expected to lead to a 2 percent spike in inflation, according to Finance Ministry estimates. Inflation was recorded at 3.4 percent last week, and it is expected to exceed 5 percent due to the 2.5 percent increase resulting from the VAT adjustment.

The move is part of the government's efforts to meet the targets set out under a four-year International Monetary Fund (IMF) program. Colombo has been awaiting the finalisation of its first review from the global lender on December 12, after which Sri Lanka will receive about USD 334 million as a second tranche. The IMF has been anticipating tax reform within Sri Lanka to generate a higher rate of strategic funds to be put towards debt repayments with foreign creditors.

## Sri Lanka: Country suffers brief power outage after main transmission line fails

(lm) Sri Lanka experienced an island-wide power outage that lasted several hours due to a system failure in one of the main transmission lines. [Voice of America]

The country heavily relies on hydroelectric power generation, with coal and oil used as supplementary sources. During the dry season, the country has to use more thermal power due to lower water levels in

hydroelectric dams. The power crisis is exacerbated by difficulties in importing oil and coal, as the country's foreign reserves have been depleted amid an economic crisis.

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

### Brunei: Ministry of Education lowers compulsory school age

(dql) Brunei has lowered the age for children to start school to five, with the change to take effect in January 2024.

The Ministry of Education confirmed that change received His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah's consent on the commemoration of the 33rd Teacher's Day. [Borneo Bulletin]

### Cambodia: Cambodian People's Party (CPP) denies alleged high-level bribery

(pm) Cambodia Daily shared a social media post alleging bribery within the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) in a bid to secure appointments to the Party's Central Committee.

The CPP and the Ministry of Interior promptly refuted these news reports, urging Cambodia Daily to uphold media ethics.

Authorities implicated in the allegations asserted their innocence, denouncing the news agency's dissemination of purportedly untrue and provocative information. [Khmer Times]

## Cambodia: New committee to draft report on human rights

(pm) Prime Minister Hun Manet has formed a committee, headed by Senior Minister Keo Remy, Chairman of the Cambodian Human Rights Committee, to prepare a comprehensive report on Human Rights in Cambodia for submission to the United Nations.

The committee, consisting of four vice-presidents and 41 members, is tasked with drafting the national report for the ratification of human rights treaties, reviewing and providing recommendations on other United Nations reports, and fulfilling assigned responsibilities related to human rights issues. [Khmer Times]

## Cambodia: Prime minister presents strategy to combat corruption

(pm) Prime Minister Hun Manet has outlined a comprehensive five-point strategy to combat corruption in Cambodia.

The strategies encompass establishing a code of professional ethics and adhering to transparency principles in official positions, reinforcing the inspection and audit system for public administration, strengthening public services through merit-based performance incentives to instill public trust, ensuring access to educational opportunities, and fostering collaboration between the Anti-Corruption Unit (ACU) and public institutions.

Cambodia ratified the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) in 2007. However, according to Transparency International (TI)'s 2022 Corruption Perception Index (CPI), Cambodia is ranked 150th out of 180 countries. [Khmer Times] [Phnom Penh Post]

## Cambodia: First meeting of Consultation Council held

(pm) Prime Minister Hun Manet chaired the inaugural meeting of the Consultation Council on December 6. Attended by Pa Chanroeun, president of the Cambodian Institute for Democracy (CID), Pothidey Savadey, head of the Dharmacracy Party, and representatives from 28 political parties, including the ruling Cambodian People's Party, the meeting aimed to gather insights from diverse parties.

Chanroeun emphasized the significance of involving various political parties for a democratic society, while Savadey expressed confidence in Manet's leadership, addressing concerns about monitoring inaction, corruption, and other issues.

Following the 2018 general election, the Consultation Council was established by former Prime Minister Hun Sen, with the aim to nurture a culture of dialogue among political parties contesting the polls. [Phnom Penh Post]

## Cambodia: Six priority policies implemented

(pm) The Cambodian government has implemented all six key policies that were announced when it assumed office, as stated by government.

These policies encompass the promotion of healthcare services, vocational training for underprivileged youth, the initiation of the National Social Assistance Program (NSAP), the implementation of the National Strategy for Informal Economic Development 2023-2028, and the enhancement of coordination and financing programs for the agriculture sector.

As the latest of the six policies, the NSAP was officially launched on December 5, with Minister of Social Affairs, Veterans, and Youth Rehabilitation Chea Somethy stating that the government allocated USD 1.305 billion for five social protection initiatives. [Phnom Penh Post]

## Cambodia: New working group for ECCC mission

(pm) A new working group has been established to fulfill the responsibilities of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC).

These tasks involve managing collective and psychological compensation for victims of the Khmer

Rouge regime and advancing historical knowledge for future generations.

Led by Vongsey Vissoth, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister overseeing the Council of Ministers, the group comprises 17 members. Collaborating with various entities, ministries, and institutions, the working group is dedicated to enhancing expertise in education, culture, and justice institutions. [Phnom Penh Post]

## Cambodia: Lawyer Sam Sokong resigns from Candlelight Party

(pm) Sam Sokong, director of legal and electoral affairs and the chairman of the Prey Veng Provincial Working Group of the Candlelight Party, has resigned from the party and joined the Cambodian People's Party (CPP).

Sokong said that he is satisfied with CPP's policies and strategic plans, and that he recognizes the leadership and value of former Prime Minister Hun Sen.

He also expressed his condemnation towards opposition leaders and their provocative language to impede the development of the country. [Khmer Times]

## Indonesia: Subianto strengthens lead over Pranowo

(jb) Presidential frontrunner Prabowo Subianto has strengthened his lead over rival Ganjar Pranowo, according to a recent Indikator Politik Indonesia poll. Prabowo's support surged to 45.8 percent, a 6.1 percent increase from the previous month, while Ganjar's popularity dropped by 4.4 points to 25.6 percent.

The Defence Minister and former Central Java governor are top contenders in the upcoming February 14 elections, vying to succeed President Joko Widodo.

The poll also highlights the candidacy of former Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan. Prabowo's running mate, President Widodo's son Gibran Rakabuming Raka, adds a dynamic element to the political landscape, with constitutional changes permitting his candidacy. [Reuters]

## Indonesia: Oil recovery plan for Rokan Block approved

(jb) Indonesia has greenlit a 3USD 238.71 million steam flood enhanced oil recovery plan for the Rokan block, reports the country's oil and gas regulator SKK Migas.

The initial phase at the Rantaubais field within the Rokan block holds a potential 11 million barrels in oil reserves, capable of yielding 5,500 barrels per day at its peak, according to SKK Migas deputy Benny Lubiantara.

Indonesian state-owned oil and natural gas corporation Pertamina has managed the Rokan block since Chevron's contract expiration in August 2021, securing the government's award for the block.

The Rokan block, in operation since 1951, remains a significant asset in Indonesia's energy landscape [Reuters]

## Indonesia: Draft on ethics guidance for AI developers

(jb) Indonesia is taking a proactive stance in the ethical use of artificial intelligence (AI) by drafting comprehensive guidelines for developers.

The communications ministry's draft emphasizes the necessity for AI-based programming activities to adhere to ethical standards, aiming to prevent potential misuse of this advanced technology. The guidelines prioritize the mitigation of all possible "impacts and losses" stemming from AI use, urging developers to devise risk management strategies for potential disasters.

While the draft doesn't specify the nature of these losses or disasters, it underlines the importance of preparedness and recommends the establishment of reporting and recovery mechanisms. The proposed guidelines encompass privacy protection and emphasize the role of AI in bolstering innovation without replacing human existence.

Usman Kansong, a senior communications ministry official, authenticated the draft, expressing uncertainty about its issuance date. However, the deputy minister has expressed hopes for its release this month, marking Indonesia's commitment to responsible AI development. [Reuters]

## Indonesia: Fine for Freeport's copper smelter delays under consideration

(jb) Indonesian state auditors are urging the energy ministry to impose a fine of USD 501.94 million on Freeport Indonesia for delays in constructing a copper smelter, as revealed in a report by the Audit Board of Indonesia (BPK) submitted to parliament this week.

PT Freeport Indonesia (PTFI), a subsidiary of US miner Freeport McMoran majority-owned by Indonesian state-owned company MIND ID, is currently developing a USD 3 billion copper smelter in East Java. The project has encountered setbacks, prompting the auditors to recommend the substantial penalty.

While Freeport Indonesia asserts that construction progress aligns with the government-approved plan, the BPK audit contends that PTFI has not measured its smelter progress against the initial plan, justifying the proposed administrative fine.

The company emphasizes that the delay fines are under discussion with the government. In a 2015 memorandum of understanding, Freeport committed to building the smelter, and a 2018 agreement stipulated completion within five years.

The smelter, which commenced construction in 2021 after pandemic-related delays, is slated to begin production in mid-2024 and achieve full capacity by the end of the following year. The energy ministry has yet to respond to BPK's recommendation, a mandatory step under the law. [Mining.com]

## Indonesia: Transgender group fights climate and gender stigma

(jb) In Jakarta, the Trans Superhero Climate Change Carnival is making a bold impact, led by Sanggar Teater Seroja, an arts organization predominantly comprising trans women.

This grassroots initiative creatively addresses the disproportionate impact of climate change on the trans community, blending activism with entertainment. The carnival features recycled costumes on 15 transgender climate superheroes, aiming to engage the public in climate action.

These trans women, often working on the streets, face the harsh effects of climate change. Beyond environmental advocacy, the carnival promotes acceptance, challenging stereotypes associated with

the transgender community. Through vibrant performances, the group pioneers a unique approach to raise awareness about climate change and LGBTQ+ issues, fostering positive change in Indonesia [Fair Planet]

## Indonesia: Air force capabilities to be boosted

(jb) In a significant move to bolster its air capabilities, Indonesia officially received eight H225M heavy transport helicopters in a ceremony at Atang Sendjaja airstrip, Bogor city.

The collaboration between PTDI, an Indonesian aerospace company involved in aircraft design and the development and manufacture of civilian and military regional commuter aircraft, and Airbus Helicopters, France, produced helicopters equipped for diverse missions, including special operations, search and rescue, medical evacuation, maritime surveillance, and aerial fire support.

The handover ceremony, attended by high-ranking officials, marked Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto's commitment to enhancing military equipment and services, focusing on a reliable and strong Air Force. Indonesia's growing defense budget, set to reach USD 9.7 billion by 2028, emphasizes air-focused initiatives, addressing modernization needs and challenges like natural disasters and counterterrorism. [Airforce Technology]

## Indonesia airport bolsters COVID-19 prevention amidst surge in Singapore

(jb) In response to the rising cases of COVID-19 in Singapore, the Port Health Office (KKP) at Soekarno-Hatta International Airport in Tangerang, Indonesia, is implementing measures to prevent the entry of the virus. Naning Nugrahini, the head of the office, emphasized the importance of intensifying surveillance for both domestic and foreign travelers, especially with the approaching year-end holidays.

Despite not detecting any coronavirus cases at the airport, Nugrahini stressed the need for vigilance due to the high passenger movement. The KKP office has prepared health facilities, including clinics, for passengers displaying COVID-19 symptoms. Any passengers exhibiting symptoms will undergo a

doctor's examination, including an antigen test, at the KKP clinic.

To enhance their efforts, the port health office is collaborating with a team of doctors to conduct contact tracing and health tests for passengers. The COVID-19 Control Task Force will also reinforce health protocols for passengers. This anticipatory approach during the holiday season includes the installation of body thermal scanners and the deployment of KKP officers at every terminal [Tempo.co]

## Indonesia: Rohingya refugee crisis

(yr) On December 6, various state officials, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi and the Head of Indonesian Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla), attended a closed meeting chaired by the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs Mahfud MD to discuss the issue of Rohingya refugees, who now number 1,478 people in Indonesia.

This meeting was called after President Joko Widodo directed that the Rohingya refugee crisis - especially in Aceh - be handled in a humanitarian and domestic manner. There is also resistance from residents towards refugees. [Indonesia National Police] [Antara]

Just a day before, Vice President Ma'ruf Amin said that this issue is part of a humanitarian crisis and need to be resolved by various parties. Amin also talks about the possibility that Rohingya refugees will be accommodated on Galang Island, which in 1979 was used as a shelter for refugees from Vietnam [Indonesian Vice President's Secretariat, in Indonesian].

Meanwhile, on December 8, President Widodo revealed the alleged involvement of human trafficking crime networks in the increase in the number of Rohingya refugees entering Indonesia, especially in Aceh.

Widodo committed to taking firm action against the perpetrators and providing temporary humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees, prioritizing the interests of local communities [Indonesian President's Secretariat, in Indonesian].

Indonesia, which is not a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, faces difficulties because neighboring countries such as Malaysia and Australia no longer accept refugees, and many of them

make Indonesia their final destination rather than just a transit point [see AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1].

## Indonesia: Increase in carbon emissions

(yr) Indonesian carbon emissions rose 18.3 percent to 728.9 metric tons in 2022, according to the Global Carbon Project.

This is due to land conversion, deforestation, and fossil fuel use, especially coal. Indonesia is now one of the top ten carbon emitters, with coal being the biggest contributor. However, renewable energy consumption is still low at less than 1 exajoule, despite growing 22.2 percent annually.

Indonesia contributes 19.9 percent of global land conversion emissions, averaging 930 million tonnes per year. Industrial forest deforestation and harvesting are the main causes.

In response, the Indonesian government created the Forest and Land Use (FOLU) Net Sink 2030 strategy to reduce deforestation and forest degradation emissions and promote sustainable forest management. This policy has been criticized because it still allows carbon-emitting activities. [Kompas]

## Laos: Inaugural migration profile report released

(wn) On December 8, the Laos government, and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) jointly launched the first Migration Profile in Vientiane.

This Profile is a statistical report on the migration situation in Laos. It compiles insights on migratory processes, trends, and patterns against the background of existing regulatory systems, policy frameworks, and international cooperation initiatives. The report aims to facilitate evidence-based policymaking, policy commitments, and inter-agency cooperation. Moreover, it promotes the mainstreaming of migration into broader policymaking processes.

The report is aimed at assisting the government in achieving its goals outlined in the 9th five-year National Socio-Economic Development Plan for 2021-2025. The primary focus of the report is on promoting socio-economic growth, human capital development, and improving people's overall well-being. Furthermore,

the study aligns with the government's key strategic priorities for the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework for 2022-2026.

Laos became the 171st Member State of the IOM in June 2018. [Vientiane Times]

## Malaysia: Prime Minister Anwar aims to rebuild trust with major cabinet reshuffle

(ba/lm) Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has made significant changes to his cabinet, appointing a new second finance minister and reshuffling several key positions. This cabinet reshuffle increases the number of cabinet members from 28 to 31 and separates the energy transition and digital portfolios into separate ministries.

The new second finance minister is Amir Hamzah Azizan, the chief executive of the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF). Additionally, the foreign ministry has been handed over to Mohamad Hasan, a deputy president of the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), one of Anwar's allies.

The move comes as Anwar aims to rebuild trust and address concerns over the economy, inflation, and the slow pace of promised reforms. His approval rating has dropped in recent months, partly driven by economic concerns, according to polls. [Reuters] [The Star] [New Straits Times]

## Malaysia: Prime Minister Anwar emphasizes inclusivity of MADANI concept for all communities

(ba) Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim reiterated that the MADANI concept introduced by his government is inclusive and not in conflict with non-Muslim communities, including the Chinese and Indian communities, despite its foundation in the Quran and Hadith. [Astro Awani] [New Straits Times]

MADANI is a policy framework focusing on good governance, sustainable development, and racial harmony in Malaysia. The acronym represents core values: keMampanan (Sustainability), kesejAhteraan (Prosperity), Daya cipta (Innovation), hormAt (Respect), keyakiNan (Trust), and Ihsan (Compassion).

## Malaysia: UMNO will strengthen, defend government of Prime Minister Anwar

(ba) Ahead of the one-year anniversary of Malaysia's government, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), a junior partner in Malaysia's ruling coalition government, has reiterated that all the party's federal and state lawmakers will continue to support Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. This decision was confirmed during a UMNO Supreme Council meeting, emphasizing their commitment to the unity government formed by Anwar Ibrahim's administration. [Astro Awani] [MalayMail]

The government comprises several political alliances, including Pakatan Harapan (PH), Barisan Nasional (BN), Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS), and their affiliated parties. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim currently commands the backing of 152 legislators, which includes five members from the opposing Perikatan Nasional alliance. This level of support grants the government a super-majority in the 222-member lower house of Parliament.

## Malaysia: Defence counsel accuses witness of collaboration with MACC in Najib's 1MDB trial

(ba) In one of the corruption trials linked to the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) state fund, the lead counsel of former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak has accused Bank Negara Malaysia analyst Adam Ariff Mohd Roslan of collaborating with the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) to frame Najib for his criminal charges. [New Straits Times]

Meanwhile, Malaysia has announced it will continue its probe into lawyers involved in the 2020 settlement with Goldman Sachs over the 1MDB scandal, despite withdrawing a court application to obtain related documents. The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) had filed the application in October amid festering disagreement between Kuala Lumpur and Goldman over the 2020 settlement related to the bank's role in the 1MDB scandal. [The Straits Times]

## Malaysia: Individual arrested over statements backing diplomatic ties with

## Israel

(lm) Malaysian police have arrested a man and are investigating him for sedition after he suggested in a *TikTok* interview with an Israeli social media influencer that Malaysia should establish diplomatic relations with Israel. The man was remanded in custody for three days as part of the investigation, which involves the Sedition Act, Communications and Multimedia Act, and Penal Code. [The Straits Times]

Malaysia, a predominantly Muslim country, has traditionally supported the Palestinians and criticized Israel's actions, not having diplomatic ties with Israel. Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has been a vocal supporter of the Palestinian cause and has condemned Israel's military campaigns in the past.

## Malaysia: Six arrested for alleged sale of fake federal awards

(ba) Six individuals have been remanded in Malaysia for alleged involvement in a syndicate selling fake federal awards, including titles like "Tan Sri" for around USD 230,000. Among the suspects is reportedly the president of a non-governmental organization (NGO), believed to be the mastermind of the operation. The syndicate is said to have conned several individuals by offering them awards and titles without going through the normal procedures, charging significant amounts of money for these titles. The investigation is ongoing, with the authorities looking for other individuals involved in the syndicate. [The Star]

## Malaysia: Malay language proficiency non-negotiable condition for passport holders, home minister says

(ba/lm) Malaysian passport applicants are required to be proficient in the national language, according to Home Minister Saifuddin Nasution Ismail. He cited the Federal Constitution as the basis for this requirement, emphasizing that it was essential for individuals to understand the local language to be eligible. [MalayMail]

This statement comes in response to a recent case in Johor state, where an immigration official allegedly questioned a woman's passport renewal application due to her inability to speak Malay. Saifuddin Nasution suggested that the official was likely investigating

potential identity issues, as there had been reports of forged identity cards in the past.

The case had been criticized by Senator Ti Lian Ker, who emphasized that mistreatment due to language proficiency is unacceptable, and immigration officers should focus on checking the validity of documents rather than penalizing citizens. Ti pointed out that proficiency in Malay is only legally required during citizenship applications and should not be imposed on citizens renewing their passports. He called on the government to ensure that officers follow the law and respect citizens' rights. [Free Malaysia Today]

## Malaysia: Social security organization suffers data breach; personal data shared online

(ba/lm) A group of self-described ethical hackers has claimed responsibility for breaching Malaysia's social security organization, PERKESO, and posted personal data of users, including phone number and salary, online. The breach began on December 2 and led PERKESO to put its systems on maintenance mode on December 3. Investigations into the PERKESO database site breach are being conducted by CyberSecurity Malaysia, the National Cyber Security Agency, and the personal data protection department. [yahoo! news]

Against this backdrop, Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has announced efforts to strengthen cybersecurity to prevent incidents like the hacking of PERKESO's website. He mentioned that the National Security Council (MKN) and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) will collaborate with companies capable of countering cyberattacks. [Free Malaysia Today]

## Malaysia: Prime Minister Anwar wants investment landscape, ecosystem to be more investor friendly

(ba) Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has called on all relevant parties to emphasize the need for the country's investment landscape and ecosystem to be more creative and investor friendly. [The Star]

In a post on Facebook on December 11, he said the parties involved were also called upon to continue efforts in accelerating the process of national development so that the set goals can be achieved. On

the same day, Anwar presided over the 43rd National Physical Planning Council Meeting, which is a forum for the federal government to consult with state governments regarding urban and rural planning matters and the physical development of the country.

## Malaysia: Task force to be established to expedite procurement approval for security forces

(ba) Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has announced the establishment of a task force to accelerate the approval process for procurement by the country's security forces. He has instructed the Secretary-General of Treasury, Johan Mahmood Merican, to oversee this task force to ensure swift approvals. [New Straits Times]

Speaking at the Finance Ministry's monthly assembly, Anwar, who also serves as Finance Minister, emphasized the need to revamp the procurement system for the national security forces to enhance transparency. He cited recent discussions with the Defense Ministry, the Home Ministry, and enforcement agencies, highlighting the significant expenditures involved in these procurements.

## Myanmar: Central bank no longer setting exchange rates for foreign currency

(jw) Myanmar's state media reported on December 6, that the nation's central bank will no longer set foreign exchange rates. Instead, banks and dealers will be able to independently set rates.

Myanmar's economy has been struggling since the 2021 military coup, and state officials have attempted to curb demand for foreign currencies as foreign reserves become increasingly strained. This past year, more than 140 money changer licenses have been revoked, and law enforcement agencies have attempted to crack down on black market trading. No rationale was included in the official report. Since the military coup, the central bank has maintained a fixed exchange rate through various mechanisms.

Sean Turnell, an Australian economist who previously advised Myanmar's ousted government, said on Facebook that the central bank's policy move indicates that the military regime was struggling. He writes on the social media platform, “My take: they can no longer

supply the foreign currency even their own suppliers (esp. of fuel) need." Tin Tun Naing, the National Unity Government's finance minister, told Reuters recently that the military regime was struggling with finances and supply chains. [Nikkei Asia]

## Myanmar:  Yangon grapples with fuel shortage

(sk) Yangon, the commercial hub of Myanmar, is currently facing a fuel shortage, as reported by residents and media under junta control.

The state-run Global New Light of Myanmar attributes the shortage to delays in oil deliveries from Thilawa Port to filling stations, with the situation starting on December 5. Most of Yangon's fuel supply relies on the port, but the local kyat's depreciation against the dollar since the 2021 military coup has hampered importers' capacity to pay for shipments. Early morning queues of vehicles seeking petrol have become a common sight, with some stations in the Bago region limiting sales to 20 liters per customer. This fuel scarcity adds to the economic challenges Myanmar has been facing since the coup, compounded by ongoing conflicts and disruptions in the supply chain. [Mizzima] [ElevenMyanmar]

## Myanmar: Arakan Army captures Tarunaing base in western Myanmar

(jw) The Arakan Army successfully captured the Tarunaing command base along Myanmar's western border with India and Bangladesh.

The capture of this base is seen as a significant victory for a rebel alliance that has made several critical breakthroughs over the last month. The seizure of the military base will allow the rebel armed forces to control the border.

The 21-day operation resulted in heavy casualties, with the rebel forces subject to regular artillery attacks, airstrikes, and chemical weapons. The Arakan Army is expected to attack the heavily fortified Hnonebu base next. [Burma News International]

## Myanmar: Over 300 civilians killed as military junta retreats

(jw) According to the ousted National Unity Government's Ministry of Human Rights, the civilian death toll between October 27 and November 30 has reached 309 nationwide. The Ministry furthered that at least 413 more were injured by junta attacks and that at least 11 massacres had occurred in Sagaing and Mandalay, as well as the Karenni, Rakhine, and Shan states between the aforementioned dates.

Local reports indicate that the military regime killed approximately 100 people and injured 160 in the northern Shan state. At least 67 were killed and 69 more were injured in Sagaing. In the Rakhine State, airstrikes have killed about 60 residents since November 13.  In Karenni State, 76 civilians were reportedly killed and over 70 were injured since November 11.

Overall, The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners reported on Tuesday, December 5th, that over 4,200 people have been killed by junta troops since the military coup. In addition, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army and Arakan Army accussed the junta forces of using chemical warfare. [The Irrawaddy]

## Myanmar: Military regime rewards troops with medals amid heavy losses

(jw) On December 7, Tatmadaw leader Min Aung Hlaing awarded medals for gallantry to 147 junta forces, including two colonels killed in combat, police officers, and other government employees. Min Aung Hlaing said that the medals were awarded for excellent performance in defense and security duties.

Critics of the regime see the award ceremony as an attempt to raise morale as the military junta face heavy losses against the rebel armed forces. [The Irrawaddy]

## Myanmar: Over 20 basic education schools closed amid military tension in Kyaikmaraw township

(sk) The ongoing military tension between the Tatmadaw and the KNU/KNLA/KTLA/PDF joint groups in Kyaikmaraw Township of Mon State, Myanmar, has led to the closure of more than 20 basic education schools for 25 days, according to local reports.

Villages affected include Mayangone, Chaungnakwa, Metayo, Pawlawgone, Mithwaygone, Kada, Kyantaw,

Taungkalay, Kyaukkwe, Kawtdun, and Kawtpanawt.

The conflict has forced local residents to flee, resulting in deserted villages, blocked roads, and challenging travel conditions, preventing the reopening of schools. Teachers are hesitant to resume classes due to ongoing security concerns.

The military tensions began with an attack by the KNU/KNLA/KTLA/PDF on a police station and security gate in November, leading to the temporary closure of 35 basic education schools.

Although some schools have reopened, many remain closed, impacting the education of students in the region with thousands of locals fleeing the area and requiring urgent assistance with food and medicine. [ElevenMyanmar]

## Myanmar: Pardon granted to 32 prisoners sentenced under Military Act

(sk) On December 7, in commemoration of the 103rd Anniversary of National Victory Day, a total of 32 prisoners from Mawlamyine prison, sentenced under military act Section 182(a), were granted pardon.

Former soldiers with sentences of at least one year remaining agreed to the pardon, with the condition that they must re-join the military upon release.

Similar pardons for former soldiers were reportedly granted at various prisons and detention centers across Myanmar. The announcement of the pardon followed a statement from the State Administration Council's Information Team on December 3, indicating that military absentees willing to re-join would receive clemency. [ElevenMyanmar]

## The Philippines: Ex-Senator De Lima wants to help ICC probe into former President Duterte’s drug war

(lm) Leila de Lima, a former Philippine senator and human rights advocate who has recently been released on bail after over six years in jail, plans to continue her advocacy work and assist the International Criminal Court (ICC) in its probe into former President Rodrigo Duterte's anti-drugs campaign. [The Straits Times]

Launched in 2018, the ICC's investigation into Duterte's war on drugs was initially put on hold at the request of the Philippines in November 2021. But in January this year, the ICC announced that it was resuming its investigation, and in July, it rejected the country's grounds for appeal [see AiR No. 29, July/2023, 3].

Since January 2020, the ICC is also investigating Duterte's links to the Davao Death Squad, a vigilante group implicated in summary killings, despite the Philippines having withdrawn from the ICC two years prior, because it continued to have jurisdiction over crimes committed when the country was still a member.

De Lima's investigations showed a pattern between extrajudicial killings in Davao City and Duterte's drug war, leading to her arrest on drug-related charges in 2017. While two cases have been dropped, one remains pending.

## The Philippines: Recent bombing may threaten exit from FATF gray list, central bank chief says

(lb) The recent bombing in the southern Philippines, resulting in four deaths [see article below], might impact the nation's efforts to exit the gray list of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a global money laundering watchdog, according to the country's central bank governor. [BNN Bloomberg]

The Philippines is due for an assessment by the FATF in February regarding its measures against illicit financing, following prior concerns raised in June about deficiencies in implementing laws to prevent money laundering and terrorist financing.

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. attributed the explosion in Marawi City to "foreign terrorists," further underscoring the ongoing challenges the nation faces in addressing these security and financial concerns to improve its standing with the FATF.

## The Philippines: ISIL claims responsibility for bombing at Catholic mass

(lb/lm) The ISIS group has claimed responsibility for a bombing during a Catholic mass in Marawi City, southern Philippines, that killed at least four people and injured dozens. The explosion occurred at

Mindanao State University, which was previously the site of a five-month ISIS-led siege in 2017. [Al Jazeera]

Mindanao has faced violence due to an insurgency by separatist groups, even after a peace agreement was signed with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in 2014. In light of this, the bombing has rekindled concerns of renewed violence in the region. However, experts believe the city is better fortified now due to community involvement, stronger legal measures like the 2020 anti-terrorism law, and the concerted efforts of local authorities.

Authorities in the Philippines and neighboring countries like Indonesia are monitoring the situation closely to prevent further attacks and potential inspiration for militants across Southeast Asia, emphasizing the need for regional cooperation and enhanced intelligence sharing to maintain stability and counter potential jihadist activities. [Nikkei Asia]

## Singapore: Student could face years in jail for trafficking cannabis on university campus

(lm) A student at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University (NTU) is facing eight drug-related charges, including cannabis trafficking, possession of drug paraphernalia, and consumption of a cannabinol derivative. The charges stem from an incident on the NTU campus in October 2022, where the student allegedly trafficked over 101 grams of cannabis. If convicted, the student could face severe penalties, including imprisonment and fines, under Singapore's Misuse of Drugs Act. [South China Morning Post]

## Singapore: Malaysian man jailed for taking upskirt, shower videos of flat mate's girlfriend

(lm) A Malaysian man and Singapore permanent resident has been sentenced to 45 weeks in jail for voyeurism. He secretly recorded voyeuristic videos of two of his female friends, including his friend's girlfriend, in their shared flat in Singapore. [South China Morning Post]

The man's lawyer argued for the lowest possible sentence, citing his client's remorse and cooperation with authorities. The penalty for voyeurism in

Singapore includes jail time, fines, caning, or a combination of these punishments.

## Thailand: Government's panel to review feedback on charter change on December 25

(msz/lm) The results of public hearings regarding the proposed amendments to Thailand's constitution in all four regions of the country are now available for review by parliamentarians. These hearings sought input on three key aspects of the proposal, including whether to keep Sections 1 and 2 of the constitution, which encompass general principles and royal provisions, unchanged, and whether a referendum should be deemed necessary. [Thai PBS]

The findings will be discussed at a meeting of the government's primary charter amendment committee after receiving input from all 500 Members of Parliament and 250 senators later this month, as stated by sub-committee chairman Nikorn Chamnong. Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai leads the committee responsible for considering the referendum, which will convene for its finalization on December 25.

Recent concerns have centered on the potential impact of the Referendum Act on the amendment process. Specifically, Section 13 of the Act specifies that over 50 percent of eligible citizens must cast their votes, and a majority of those participating must approve the amendment for it to become legally binding. With the double-majority requirement, at least 13 million eligible voters must vote in favor of the amendment for the result to hold legal validity. [AiR No. 47, November/2023, 3]

Meanwhile, on December 10, Thailand's Constitution Day, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin emphasized his government's commitment, along with that of all stakeholders, to enact a "People's Constitution." [Bangkok Post]

## Thailand: Main opposition Move Forward Party ready to grill government over 2024 budget bill

(lm) Thailand's main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) is prepared to engage in a debate concerning the government's budget bill for the 2024 fiscal year,

scheduled for its first reading next month. [Bangkok Post]

The MFP will focus its scrutiny on security spending, given that it is poised to rise by one-third compared to the current fiscal year. Approximately USD 840 million of the total budget of around USD 97.53 billion will be allocated for weapons procurement, with a significant portion going towards covering the salaries of a large number of active-duty soldiers.

## Thailand: Prime Minister Srettha reveals results of first cabinet retreat

(bk) On December 4, Thailand's Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Srettha Thavisin shared the outcomes of the first cabinet retreat, which was conducted in the Upper Northeastern Provincial Cluster 1 consisting of Nong Bua Lamphu, Bueng Kan, Loei, Nong Khai, and Udon Thani. During the retreat, provincial governors presented resolutions and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) aimed at addressing various pressing issues, including poverty reduction, agricultural product pricing, land tenure certification, and combating narcotics. [Royal Thai Government]

Regarding tourism development, the prime minister directed the minister of tourism and sports and the governor of the Tourism Authority of Thailand to explore the tourism potential of these secondary cities within the Upper Northeastern Provincial Cluster 1.

The cabinet also approved a significant flood and drought mitigation effort involving the construction of 92 weirs in Nong Bua Lamphu. Additionally, the Department of Fishery was instructed to release diverse species of aquatic animals into these weirs as part of the comprehensive water management plan. One of the key challenges identified for the province's prosperity has been the lack of robust transportation infrastructure. To address this, the cabinet approved new road construction projects to better connect Nong Bua Lamphu with neighboring provinces, facilitating economic growth and development.

In support of the "One Tambon One Product" (OTOP) initiative, Minister of Transport Suriya Juangroongruangkit designated Bangsue Central Station as an "OTOP Department Store" to provide dedicated sales outlets for OTOP products. Additionally, the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society, in collaboration with the Ministry of Commerce, will work on creating an online platform to

facilitate access to OTOP products from the three provinces represented in the cluster.

## Thailand: Chalermchai elected to lead Democrat Party; several senior figures quit party

(msz/lm) In a general meeting held on December 9, the Democrat Party, which currently controls 25 seats in Parliament's 500-member lower house, elected Chalermchai Sri-on as its new leader, along with a new executive committee. The newly appointed party leader has pledged to transform the party into a "strong" and "solid" opposition force. [Bangkok Post 1] [BBC Thailand, in Thai]

The party had failed in two attempts in July and August to elect a new leader to succeed Jurin Laksanawisit due to a lack of quorum and intraparty rifts. Jurin had stepped down to take responsibility for the party's underwhelming performance in the May general election, when its seat total was halved from 2019.

Leading up to the election, a group of MPs led by Dech-it Khaothong, a Democrat lawmaker representing Songkhla, attempted to challenge the leadership bid of acting deputy leader Narapat Kaeothong. Several MPs expressed reluctance to vote for Narapat and instead sought to garner support for Chalermchai to assume the role of the new party leader. [Bangkok Post 2]

During this leadership election, then, former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, a previous party leader, was nominated by party veteran Chuan Leekpai. However, Abhisit declined the nomination and announced his departure from the party. He later claimed that the Democrat Party is "beyond crisis" point, adding that the party's values are no longer clear. [Bangkok Post 3]

Watanya Bunnang was disqualified from the race for failing to meet a party regulation that required a candidate for party leadership to have been a party member for at least five years and to have served as a Democrat MP in the House of Representatives. [Thai PBS] [The Nation Thailand]

In addition to Abhisit, Sathit Pitutecha, a former deputy leader of the party, also announced his resignation as a party member after Chalermchai's election as the new leader. Furthermore, in the days following the general assembly, two other prominent members of the Democrat Party, Sathit Wongnongtoey, a former lawmaker from Trang, and Ornanong Kanchanachusak, a former lawmaker from Bangkok, also tendered their

resignations. Both Sathit and Ornanong had previously served on the Democrat Party's executive committee. [Bangkok Post 3]

Against this backdrop, Chuan expressed concerns about the party's commitment to upholding clean politics and honesty, particularly in light of some Democrat lawmakers voting in support of Srettha Thavisin for prime minister in violation of a party resolution. In light of this, it's worth noting that Chalermchai's candidacy had been endorsed by a group of 21 out of the party's 25 members of Parliament.

## Thailand: Jailed ex-Premier Thaksin has not sought second royal pardon, justice minister says

(lm) Thailand's jailed former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has not requested a second royal pardon for a further jail term reduction, since he was granted the first one which saw his eight-year jail term cut to one year by the country's king, according to Justice Minister Thawee Sodsong. [Bangkok Post 1]

Thaksin returned to Thailand in August after spending 15 years in self-imposed exile. On the same day of his return, the Supreme Court sentenced him to eight years in prison for three convictions. However, due to health concerns, he was transferred from Bangkok Remand Prison to Police General Hospital on the same night and has remained there since.

The House committee on police affairs is scheduled to review a complaint regarding Thaksin's prolonged stay at the Police General Hospital on December 14. [Bangkok Post 2]

## Thailand: Cabinet approves CEO-like powers for provincial governors in decentralization plan

(bk) In Thailand, the Cabinet has tentatively approved a proposal to grant provincial governors authority akin to that of a CEO as part of a decentralization initiative put forth by the National Economic and Social Development Council. This initiative seeks to empower provincial governors with the ability to evaluate, reward, and, when necessary, discipline senior civil servants. [Bangkok Post]

Under the approved proposal, provincial governors will be granted authority under Section 53 of the 2022 royal decree on integrated area-based administration to conduct performance assessments of senior civil servants in their provinces, adjust their salaries, offer special incentives, and impose disciplinary measures as required. The proposal is slated to commence in the fiscal year 2025, starting from October 1, 2024.

While the government asserts that this move is in line with decentralization principles, critics, including the opposition Move Forward Party, question its alignment with international standards. They point out that the proposed model does not constitute true decentralization, as governors will not be elected.

## Thailand: Deputy House Speaker denies evading summons in defamation case

(lm) Padipat Suntiphada, Thailand's first deputy House speaker, has refuted claims that he evaded a summons in a defamation case brought against him by a member of the Bhumjaithai Party, a junior coalition partner in Thailand's ruling government. [Bangkok Post]

Kasemsan Teethip, a former legislator from the now-defunct Future Forward Party who has since joined Bhumjaithai, lodged a complaint with the police on December 1, accusing Padipat, an MP representing the Fair Party, of defamation. Kasemsan posted on a Facebook page that an arrest warrant would be issued after December 11, as Padipat allegedly failed to appear before the police despite receiving two summonses. He suggested that this might be an attempt by Padipat to delay proceedings and seek protection under parliamentary immunity when the ordinary session reconvenes on December 12.

## Thailand: Questions raised about police promotions amid nepotism concerns

(lm) A member of Thailand's main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) has called for an explanation regarding the appointment of a police officer, who happens to be the nephew of the former wife of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, to a prominent position within the immigration police at Phuket airport. [Bangkok Post]

The issue revolves around the promotion of Pol Col Padthongtew Damapong to the role of immigration police chief in Phuket during the November 29 police reshuffle. This change occurred after Pol Col Thanet Sukchai, the former commissioner, resigned and was subsequently transferred to Prachuap Khiri Khan.

Pol Col Padthongtew's rapid promotion to the highly sought-after Phuket position came just 10 months after his appointment as the head of an administrative unit at the Immigration Bureau headquarters. He is the son of the older brother of Khunying Potjaman na Pombejra, the former wife of former Prime Minister Thaksin. Khunying Potjaman's father, Pol Gen Preawphan Damapong, was a former national police chief.

## Thailand: Anti-corruption body plans public hearings on government's digital wallet program

(lm) Thailand's National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) intends to conduct public hearings to gather public opinions regarding the government's controversial digital wallet program. This move is part of the NACC's ongoing efforts to monitor the implementation of the scheme. [Bangkok Post]

Since the establishment of a panel tasked with studying and overseeing the government's digital wallet initiative, the NACC has acquired and analyzed documents containing details of the program. The commission has also conducted interviews with various state officials responsible for executing the project, including personnel from the Ministry of Finance, the Revenue Department, the Comptroller General's Department, the Public Debt Management Office, and other experts.

As of now, there are still uncertainties regarding the feasibility of the scheme, particularly concerning the source of the USD 14 billion funding and the distribution of funds to the 50 million individuals covered by the program.

## Thailand: National Anti-Corruption Commission asked to rule on prime minister's silk gift

(lm) In Thailand, frequent petitioner Srisuwan Janya has submitted a request to the National Anti-

Corruption Commission (NACC) to determine the legality of Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin's purchase of silk cloth valued at approximately USD 170, which he presented to Pheu Thai Party leader Paetongkarn Shinawatra during his cabinet's visit to Nong Bua Lamphu province. The petitioner is seeking clarification on whether this gift violates any regulations governing government officials giving and receiving gifts, as governed by anti-corruption and morality laws that impose a limit of USD 170 on the value of such gifts. [Bangkok Post]

## Thailand: Criminal complaint lodged against senior officials for alleged involvement in sale of expired beef

(bk) A criminal complaint has been filed against senior officials, including the deputy director-general and an inspector from the Livestock Development Department, for their alleged involvement in allowing the sale of 80 tons of expired beef in 2020. The complaint accuses two undisclosed companies of importing the beef in 2018, obtaining a distribution license in 2020, and continuing to sell the expired meat from late 2020 to early 2021, in violation of regulations. [The Nation]

This development follows an ongoing investigation to identify an official implicated in an audio recording demanding nearly USD 285,000 in bribes from a pork smuggler. It is part of a broader investigation into the Siam Makro wholesale chain for procuring imported frozen pork from companies facing charges of illegal importation. Since September, authorities have seized a total of 161 cargo containers of frozen pork. [AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1]

## Thailand: Government now targets loan sharks

(lm) The Thai government has declared a crackdown on illegal loans and loan sharks as a top national priority. Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin has characterized these illicit lending practices as a form of "modern-day slavery" and emphasized the urgent need to eliminate them to restore normalcy and social order. [Bangkok Post 1]

To address the issue, the government has established a mechanism for affected debtors to file petitions until the end of February next year. As of December 10,

more than 82,000 individuals had enrolled in the scheme, with nearly USD 121 million in debt to be resolved. [Bangkok Post 2]

Additionally, the government will facilitate mediation between debtors and lenders, with provisions for reconciliation. A formal agreement will be drafted following the conclusion of negotiations, adhering to a system established by the Interior Ministry. The Office of the Prime Minister will monitor the outcomes, and further negotiations will be arranged if the parties do not reach a successful resolution.

## Thailand: Agriculture Minister cautions rice farmers against smuggling uncertified rice strains from Vietnam

(lm) Thailand's Agriculture and Cooperatives Minister, Thamanat Prompow, has issued a warning to rice farmers, advising them against smuggling or cultivating rice sourced from Vietnam that has not received certification from Thai authorities. He emphasized that those engaged in such activities could potentially face trouble if Vietnam were to file complaints against them. [Bangkok Post]

The minister acknowledged that rice strains from Vietnam yield higher annual crops compared to Thai rice strains, potentially resulting in increased income for farmers. However, he stressed that it is impossible for the Department of Rice to certify rice strains that have been smuggled in from neighboring countries.

## Thailand: Three policemen to face disciplinary actions over escape of German, American suspects

(msz/lm) Three Pattaya policemen are set to face disciplinary actions following the escape of two suspects, one German and one American, who were arrested on charges of engaging in sexual activities with underage girls.

The case was brought to attention due to allegations made by a German national, who claimed to have paid nearly USD 55,000 in bribes to authorities in exchange for his release from charges related to pedophilia. The foreigner had been apprehended following a raid on a Pattaya nightclub in September of the previous year. The German suspect revealed that he contributed around USD 20,000 for his bail and legal expenses and

an additional USD 55,000 in cash to officials before leaving the country seven days after being charged. [AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1]

After discussions with officials from the German Embassy in Bangkok, Deputy National Police Chief Pol General Surachate announced on December 8 that the German suspect was already undergoing legal proceedings in Germany. Surachate himself would travel to Germany next month to question the suspect regarding the alleged bribery and provide investigation documents and evidence to German prosecutors. [The Nation Thailand]

Surachate also stated that Thai police, in collaboration with Interpol, would issue a red notice for an American suspect, who is also connected to the case and believed to have fled the country, next week.

## Thailand: Seven police officers accused of rape, extortion of female drug suspect

(lm) Seven police officers in Pathum Thani have been reassigned to inactive duty pending an investigation into disturbing allegations of rape and extortion involving a female drug suspect. The woman asserts that she was coerced into a sexual encounter and compelled to surrender approximately USD 9,200 in cash in exchange for a lesser charge of possessing two meth pills, rather than facing a ketamine possession charge and potential asset seizures. [Bangkok Post]

## Thailand: Four teachers, two students jailed for sexual abuse of three female students

(lm) In Thailand, four teachers and two students have been sentenced to life imprisonment for their involvement in the prolonged sexual abuse of three female students. The six individuals found guilty have also been collectively ordered to pay financial compensation of approximately USD 84,000, along with an annual interest rate of 7.5 percent, to the victims. [Bangkok Post]

It's important to note that the student victims were all under 15 years of age when the sexual abuse initially commenced. Additionally, two teachers were acquitted due to insufficient evidence to establish their involvement in the case.

## Thailand: Managers aim to raise USD 284 million through new ESG funds by year-end

(lm) The Thai Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) has launched 22 new mutual funds aimed at supporting Thailand's environmental, social, and governance (ESG) goals. The managers of these funds are targeting investments of approximately USD 284 million by the end of the year. This move is in response to increasing demand for financial products focused on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, as Thailand seeks to become a regional leader in sustainability. [Nikkei Asia]

The SEC approved new criteria for these Thailand ESG (TESG) funds on December 1, following a proposal by the Federation of Thai Capital Market Organizations (FETCO). To qualify, funds must invest in Thai bonds or the listed stock of companies meeting specific emissions disclosure and reduction targets or displaying exceptional environmental sustainability performance.

Global net inflows into ESG funds have been on the rise since 2018, but they experienced a 76 percent drop in the previous year due to tighter monetary conditions. However, they remained positive in 2022 and 2023.

Thailand's commitment to carbon neutrality by 2050 and achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2065 has spurred regulatory changes, including ESG and climate-risk disclosure requirements for listed companies. An analysis in 2022 found that among Thailand's largest listed companies, ESG disclosures focused on social impact, followed by governance standards and environmental impact.

## Thailand: New investor relations panel to boost Eastern Economic Corridor

(lm) Thailand is establishing a new investor relations panel to boost the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), according to Transport Minister Suriya Jungrungreangkit. The EEC Policy Committee, the Board of Investment (BoI), and the Industrial Estate Authority of Thailand (IEAT) have come together to create this joint panel. The objective of this panel is to streamline processes and make the EEC more appealing to both domestic and foreign investors, with

the aim of accelerating investments within the corridor. [Bangkok Post]

The EEC is an initiative focused on developing and revitalizing Thailand's Eastern Seaboard, encompassing the provinces of Rayong, Chonburi, and Chachoengsao.

## Thailand: Minimum wage set to increase by about 2.4 percent starting January 1

(msz) Thailand's daily minimum wage is set to increase nationwide from January 1, 2024, with rates ranging from approximately USD 9.30 to roughly USD 10.40 per day, depending on the province. The tripartite committee on minimum wage, representing employers, employees, and the government, finalized the wage adjustments for all 77 provinces on December 8. The new rates will be submitted to the Cabinet for approval, with the changes taking effect in the new year. [Bangkok Post] [The Nation Thailand 1]

The highest daily minimum wage of USD 10.40 will apply to Phuket, while the lowest rate of USD 9.30 will be in Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala. This comes after the government initially aimed to raise the minimum wage to about USD 11.40 per day by January 1, 2024, a target that was later deemed unlikely due to various factors, including inflation.

Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin responded that the pending increased wage rate was “too small” and said that he made a few suggestions to the committee, which will present the new rates to the cabinet by December 25 (Christmas Day) for a potential New Year announcement. [The Nation Thailand 2]

## Thailand: NESDC to push Cabinet to apply for OECD membership

(msz) Thailand's National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC) plans to propose to the cabinet that the country applies for membership in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Currently, the OECD has only two permanent members from East Asia, Japan, and South Korea. [The Nation]

The application process involves submitting a letter of intent to join the OECD, which will be reviewed by OECD committees, with approval expected to take around 5-7 years. Thailand will need to work with the

OECD to meet the organization's requirements, including legal and regulatory reforms.

## Thailand: Police launches investigation into Chinese tourist uniform scandal

(bk) The Royal Thai Police is currently conducting an investigation into a social media post featuring a video clip of a Chinese tourist donning a complete Thai police uniform, complete with all the insignia. The incident appears to be in jest or for amusement purposes. The police officer responsible for providing the uniform has asserted that it was solely intended for the tourist's entertainment and has denied any financial motive. The inquiry into the officer's explanation is projected to conclude within a span of 15 to 30 days. [Bangkok Post]

Furthermore, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin has confirmed that he has directed the Tourism and Sports Minister to take action against the dissemination of false information online that could negatively impact the nation's reputation.

## Thailand: Prime Minister Srettha instructs army to beef up drug and unrest fight

(tt) In Thailand, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin has issued instructions to bolster the armed forces in their efforts to combat drug smuggling along the Myanmar border and address unrest in the country's Deep South. This directive came during a meeting with army chief Gen Songwit Noonpackdee. [Bangkok Post]

Meanwhile, the army has announced plans to offer rehabilitation facilities for individuals suffering from mental health issues caused by illicit drugs. The Royal Thai Army Medical Department will initiate a pilot project, commencing this month and continuing until February of the following year. During this phase, four military hospitals located in Prachin Buri, Nakhon Ratchasima, Ubon Ratchathani, and Kanchanaburi will establish mental health rehabilitation and recovery centers. The project is set to expand next year to encompass an additional five hospitals in Udon Thani, Nakhon Sawan, Phitsanulok, Lampang, and Nakhon Si Thammarat, with each army hospital capable of accommodating up to 10 patients.

## Vietnam: 14th National Party Congress socio-economic subcommittee meets

(lm) The 14th National Party Congress subcommittee for socioeconomic affairs held its first meeting in Hanoi, chaired by Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh. The subcommittee, consisting of 53 members, is tasked with creating a five-year report on the implementation of the 10-year socioeconomic development strategy (2021-2030) and devising the 2026-2030 socioeconomic development plan, which will be presented at the 14th National Congress. [VietnamPlus]

## Vietnam: Resilient economy faces challenges amid positive indicators

(wn) The Vietnamese Ministry of Planning and Investment recently reported that the country's economy has shown resilience in the past 11 months, with positive indicators including a Consumer Price Index increase of 3.46 percent in November and a trade surplus of USD 25.83 billion. Committed Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) increased by 15 percent, driven by newly registered capital. [Hanoi Times]

Despite these positive trends, challenges remain, including market uncertainties, cash flow issues, and administrative hurdles. Exports fell by nearly 6 percent, imports dropped by almost 11 percent, and credit growth was modest.

The government aims to confront these challenges head-on and prioritize national interests. On December 7, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh chaired a conference aimed at finding solutions to remove obstacles to credit for production and business activities. The event was attended by leaders of various ministries, sectors, 38 commercial banks, and representatives from the Vietnam Banks Association. [Nhân Dân]

Furthermore, Vietnam recently launched its first-ever Digital Transformation Review Toolkit for the manufacturing and supporting industries, a resource aimed at accelerating the journey of local enterprises towards smart and sustainable production models. The toolkit is part of the Digital Transformation Pilot Program, which aims to help Vietnamese manufacturers integrate deeper into global value chains and improve FDI linkages. [Hanoi Times]

Despite facing challenges such as falling orders and difficult business conditions, some companies in Vietnam are determined to provide Tet bonuses (traditional Lunar New Year bonuses) to their workers. In addition, for those who are jobless or in difficult circumstances, the HCMC Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs will work with unions to provide support in 139,000 cases, amounting to roughly USD 2.9 million. [vnexpress]

# International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

### China expands its presence in the leading cobalt-producing countries DRC and Indonesia

(ms) China in form of its state-owned enterprises are significantly increasing cobalt mining activities in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Indonesia, the two biggest cobalt producing countries in the world, despite a sharp decline in prices over the past 18 months.

The move is driven by China's desire to secure a larger share of the cobalt market, crucial for its electric vehicle (EV) industry. Chinese cobalt producers were able to resist the severe price drops due to large state support. CMOC, Chinas biggest cobalt producer for example increased its in cobalt output in the first three quarters of 2023 by 144 percent and is on the way to surpass Swiss-based multinational mining company Glencore as the world's leading cobalt producer. CMOC aims to raise its global market share from 11 percent in 2022 to nearly 30 percent by 2025.

The surge in cobalt production may be a strategic move by China to gain control over the market and influence prices in the medium to long term, according to industry analysts. Despite concerns about oversupply, Chinese companies like MMG Group and Jinchuan Group International Resources are expanding operations, emphasizing China's determination to dominate the cobalt market.

The cobalt market has experienced a boom to bust cycle, with prices soaring in 2022 due to high demand for EV batteries. However, slowing EV sales, inflation, and ethical concerns on the extraction of the element have led actors to explore alternative battery compositions that reduce or eliminate cobalt. [Reuters]

China's foray into the cobalt industry is a recurring theme for the country, particularly in the EV industry. In addition to cobalt, China also possesses more than half of the global refining capacity of lithium and graphite, other materials essential for the production of batteries. This dominance gives the country leverage over other countries, leverage that it is not shy about wielding, as seen in late October when China restricted exports of graphite products to the US in response to the latter's tightening of export restrictions on China's semiconductor sector [see AiR No. 43, October/2023, 4]. [more on China's position in the EV industry via China Briefing]

## Japan International Cooperation Agency, Asian Development Bank launch new private infrastructure fund

(dql) The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) have finalized an agreement to launch a new fund aimed at fortifying private infrastructure in the Asia-Pacific region.

Unveiled on December 8, the fund, named the Leading Asia's Private Infrastructure Fund 2 (LEAP 2), is endowed with up to USD 1.5 billion, provided by JICA, succeeding the initial LEAP fund.

LEAP, in its seven-year tenure, allocated over USD 1 billion in co-financing across 35 projects in 14 developing countries within the region. Notably, Japan and the US, as the principal shareholders in the ADB, navigate a competitive landscape, particularly with Chinese investment entities, despite China's membership in the bank. [Reuters]

## Japan, UK, Italy to launch inter-governmental body to oversee joint fighter jet development project

(dql) Japan, Britain and Italy are reported set to conclude a treaty to establish a joint organization and industry group for developing their planned advanced jet fighter.

The planned inter-governmental body will oversee the industry group venture led by Britain's BAE Systems PLC (BAES.L), Japan's Mitsubishi Heavy Industries (7011.T) and Italy's Leonardo (LDOF.MI).

That group will distribute work to teams in different parts of the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), such as the engine and avionics. [Reuters]

In December 2022, the three countries announced to jointly cooperate in the development of sixth-generation fighter jets by 2035, aimed at rivaling warplanes of Russia and China. Currently, all three countries are flying US fifth-generation F-35 stealth fighters, with versions of the warplane being assembled in Italy and Japan [see AiR No. 50, December/2022, 2].

## Mongolia seeks green finance to shape its economy

(ap) At COP28 in Dubai, which concluded on December 12, Mongolia actively sought USD 11 billion in green finance to facilitate the decarbonization of its economy and initiate a shift towards sustainability with reduced reliance on fossil fuels, according to Bloomberg.

Given its heavy dependence on mining, energy, coal exports to China, and livestock farming, Mongolia is determined to boost its renewable energy share to 30 percent by 2030, incorporating hydropower, solar, and wind sources.

Mongolian Minister of Environment and Tourism Bat-Erdene Bat-Ulzii emphasized the country's vulnerability to the impacts of climate change and advocated for increased financial solutions to address and mitigate environmental damages. [Bloomberg] [Aki Press]

## Mongolian judge elected to the International Criminal Court

(ap) During the 22nd session of the Assembly of States Parties (ASP22) to the Rome Statute in New York, Mongolian Supreme Court Justice Erdenebalsuren Damdin was elected as an International Criminal Court (ICC) judge with 81 votes from 114 States Parties in the first round.

This decision makes him the first Mongolian to secure a seat on the ICC bench.

The ASP 22, held from December 4-11, saw the election of 6 ICC judges for the 2024-2033 term on December 5, with 13 countries presenting candidates.

With a noteworthy 30-year career in criminal law, Judge Damdin previously presided over the Criminal Chamber of the Supreme Court of Mongolia. [Montsame]

## First South Korea-US-Japan trilateral working-level talks on anti-North Korea cyber threat cooperation held

(oy) On December 7, South Korea, the US and Japan held their held their first trilateral working-level talks on enhancing cooperation against North Korea's growing cyber threats.

The talks were attended by Lee Jun-il, South Korea's director-general for North Korean nuclear affairs; Jung Pak, U.S. Deputy Special Representative for North Korea; and Ishizuki Hideo, Japan's ambassador responsible for cyber policy.

During the meeting, the three countries explored strategies to combat the theft of cryptocurrencies by North Korea, along with other illicit cyber activities that fund its nuclear and missile development initiatives.

Furthermore, they pledged to enhance collaboration with both the global community and private sector to prevent the employment of unauthorized North Korean workers in the IT sector.

Separately, South Korea is seeking to host the summit next year, according to a senior presidential official. [Yonhap_1] [Yonhap_2]

## South Korea, US and Japan agree to strengthen cooperation on security issues

(oy) On December 9, South Korea, US and Japan announced their commitment to enhancing their cooperation on several key security issues during trilateral talks between South Korea's National Security Adviser Cho Tae-yong, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Japan's National Security Secretariat Secretary General Takeo Akiba.

Cho said that the three countries "reaffirmed North Korea's obligation under U.N. Security Council resolutions to denuclearize and ban military cooperation". The three countries agreed to enhance cooperation on missile warning, joint-military exercises and illegal cyber activities from North Korea.

Meanwhile, Sullivan said that the three countries are committed to cooperating on regional and economic challenges, such as a new early warning system for supply chain and joint global development projects.

He added that the three countries "will continue to stand together against economic coercion... we will continue to stand up for peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and freedom of navigation in the East and South China seas". [Yonhap]

In a separate meeting on December 8, Cho and Akiba agreed on the importance of strengthening cooperation with the international community to respond to North Korea's nuclear and missile provocations. Both sides agreed that North Korea's provocation were "unprecedented" and a "serious threat" to regional peace and stability and reaffirmed the importance of South Korea-Japan and South Korea-U.S.-Japan cooperation in responding to such provocation.

Cho and Akiba also discussed South Korea-Japan relations and agreed to increase cooperation in security and economic issues and people-to-people exchanges. They also reaffirmed both countries' openness to dialogue with North Korea. [Yonhap]

## NATO delegation to visit South Korea this week

(dql) Indication the NATO growing interest in the Indo-Pacific region, a delegation of representatives from eight NATO member countries is set to visit South Korea this week from December 13-15.

Among the participating countries are the US, the UK, Italy, Denmark, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Romania and Poland, according to the ministry.

During the three-day visit, the group is scheduled to meet with South Korea's Vice Foreign Minister Chang Ho-jin and Defense Minister Shin Won-sik and to discuss the security situation on the Korean Peninsula and surrounding areas, with a focus on defense cooperation between the NATO and South Korea. [The Korea Herald]

## Taiwan's NGOs and research institutions at COP 28

(xc) While not a member of the United Nations, Taiwan has been engaging in the 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28) through NGOs and research institutions.

During his stay in Dubai, Taiwan's Minister of Environment Shieu Fuh-sheng emphasized Taiwan's determination to meet climate change challenges, citing the country's recent legislative achievements, like the Climate Change Response Act, which sets a goal for net-zero emissions by 2050.

Further highlighting Taiwan's green transition, the National Development Council outlined "Taiwan's Pathway to Net-Zero Emissions in 2050," focusing on technology R&D and innovation.

The minister also expressed optimism about Taiwan's decarbonization efforts, citing advancements in various renewable energy sources and technologies. A notable innovation includes a method developed by Academia Sinica and the Taiwan Power Company to produce zero-carbon electricity by removing carbon from natural gas.

The minister also addressed the global declaration to triple nuclear energy capacity by 2050, acknowledging Taiwan's challenges in nuclear energy development, including safety concerns, nuclear waste management, and consensus on waste storage.

## Taiwan to provide USD 2 Million to fisheries fund

(jr) Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement on December 5, confirming that Taiwan will donate USD 2 million to a Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) trust fund for five years.

The WCPFC, which Taiwan is a formal member of, held its annual meeting between the 4 and 8 December in Cook Island.

The commission entered into force on 19 June 2004 and is dedicated to addressing the issues of high sea fisheries management, including over-capitalization, excessive fleet capacity, unregulated fishing, and other issues. Taiwan's Pacific Island allies, Nauru, Palau, the Marshall Islands, and Tuvalu, are all members of WCPFC. [Taiwan News]

## Countries uphold commitment to United Nations Peacekeeping at Ministerial in Ghana

(lm) At the fifth United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping Ministerial Meeting in Accra, Ghana, representatives from more than 85 countries reaffirmed their support for UN peacekeeping missions and discussed the necessity for reforms. Key goals included ensuring the safety of troops and civilians, improving operational security, and adopting efficient technological tools.

The meeting witnessed various commitments, including the provision of personnel and training to address current and future challenges. Thirty-three UN member states pledged more than 110 new military and police units, while 45 countries committed to offering specialized training in areas such as peacekeeping intelligence, civilian protection, gender-responsive leadership, and preventing sexual exploitation and abuse.

UN Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, acknowledged the difficulties faced by peacekeeping operations, including heightened conflicts and growing demands for withdrawal from countries like Mali and Congo. Nevertheless, he emphasized the critical role of these missions in upholding global peace and security.

Lacroix also highlighted the cost-effectiveness of UN peacekeeping, as it operates on a relatively modest budget of USD 5.5 billion, significantly lower than the New York City Police Department's budget. Despite its smaller budget, the UN peacekeeping force, with 70,000 personnel deployed worldwide, plays a crucial role in saving lives and preventing conflicts, making it a valuable investment.

Moreover, discussions during the meeting underscored the environmental impact of peacekeeping operations, emphasizing the need to

adopt practices that reduce their carbon footprint and promote sustainability. [Deutsche Welle] [Voice of America] [UN News]

## Many countries have double standards on human rights, Bangladesh's president says

(lm) During a function organized to mark Human Rights Day in Bangladesh, President Mohammed Shahabuddin called on the international community to ensure permanent solutions to conflicts and stand by oppressed and underprivileged people, emphasizing that human rights are universal and eternal. [Dhaka Tribune]

President Shahabuddin expressed concern over indiscriminate civilian casualties and massive destruction in conflicts such as those in Palestine and the Russia-Ukraine war, condemning the attacks by Israeli occupation forces. He thanked the government of Qatar for its recent ceasefire initiative in Gaza and called on countries, human rights bodies, and activists worldwide to protest against human rights violations.

## Multiple international development banks to enhance development in key sectors in Pakistan

(xc) Pakistan is witnessing a significant influx of international support as seen in recent agreements and funding from various international organizations and banks.

Pakistan's planning ministry has approved 21 development projects worth USD 3 billion for areas affected by the 2022 floods. These projects, executed by provincial governments and funded by institutions like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, aim to rebuild homes and rehabilitate millions affected by the disaster. The Central Development Working Party (CDWP) has secured pledges from Geneva for these projects, crucial for the nation's recovery. [Arab News 1]

The Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) announced a USD 100 million loan to support Pakistan's polio eradication efforts. This funding, complemented by a USD 35 million principal buydown from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, will be used for polio vaccines. With only 5 reported cases in 2023, the

efforts, in collaboration with global partners, aim to make Pakistan polio-free. [Arab News 2]

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) approved USD 659 million for three projects in Pakistan. These initiatives focus on improving domestic resource mobilization, rehabilitating schools damaged by floods, and enhancing agricultural productivity. The funding includes USD 275 million for rebuilding climate-resilient schools in Sindh and 80 million USD for the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Food Security Support Project. [DAWN]

The German Development Bank (KfW) signed an agreement with Pakistan's Ministry of Economic Affairs to enhance the power transmission sector and support the health sector. A grant of USD 2.6 million will assist the National Transmission and Despatch Company (NTDC) in integrating renewable energy into the transmission system, contributing to sustainable economic growth and climate protection. [Pakistan Observer]

## IMF to consider Sri Lankan debt deal with major creditors

(lf) The International Monetary Fund (IMF) Executive Board was set to convene on December 12 to review Sri Lanka's 48-month Extended Fund Facility (EFF) arrangement. This meeting is of significant importance as it will likely determine the release of the second tranche of USD 330 million, as stipulated in the agreement reached in March. [Business Recorder]

Back in March, the IMF approved a USD 2.9 billion bailout package for Sri Lanka, with the first payment disbursed shortly afterward. However, the second tranche was delayed by the IMF due to concerns about oversight and the need for debt restructuring. In a review conducted by the IMF in September, it was noted that Sri Lanka's economy was showing signs of recovery, but the country needed to enhance its tax administration, eliminate exemptions, and address tax evasion.

Recent weeks have seen Sri Lankan government officials expressing confidence that the IMF will release the USD 334 million installment before the year's end. This optimism stems from the island nation securing the necessary financial assurances from its bilateral creditors, including China, Japan, and India [see AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1].

## Asian Development Bank approves USD 200 million to sustain economic stabilization efforts in Sri Lanka

(lf) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved a concessional loan of USD 200 million to Sri Lanka to help stabilize the country's finance sector amid its sovereign debt and economic crises. This loan is part of an initiative titled “Financial Sector Stability and Reforms Program”, comprising two subprograms, each funded at USD 200 million. The first subprogram, executed in 2023, focuses on short-term stabilization and crisis management within the financial sector, while the second, slated for 2024, will aim to implement structural reforms for long-term growth in the banking sector. [ABC News] [Asian Development Bank]

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) noted initial signs of stabilisation in Sri Lanka's economy following a deal the country reached with a number of international creditors [see AiR, No. 49, December/2023, 1], though full recovery remains uncertain.

The ADB’s loan is consistent with the Wickremesinghe government's reform agenda, which includes strengthening the operational independence of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) and designating it as the country's economic authorities, although critics have noted that current actions have not gone far enough.

## India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh face escalating cases of dengue fever amid rainy season

(lf/lm) During the current rainy season, India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh are grappling with a concerning surge in dengue fever cases.

In India, as of November 30, a total of 234,427 dengue cases have been reported, with the majority occurring between August and December. This increase is attributed to global climate change, the El Nino effect, uneven rainfall patterns, and a rise in vector density. [Business Standard]

The Sri Lankan government, for its part, has urgently shifted its focus towards implementing immediate measures to address the escalating infections. The country has witnessed a record-breaking 78,000 dengue cases, the highest in three years, with 46

fatalities reported from January to November. The Western Province, the most densely populated region in the country, accounted for nearly half of all cases. [Daily Mirror] [Daily Excelsior] [CBC]

Meanwhile, in Bangladesh, the number of fatalities from this mosquito-borne disease has increased by four this year, reaching a total of 1,665. Currently, there are 2,047 dengue patients receiving treatment in hospitals across Bangladesh, with 591 of them in the capital. [United News of Bangladesh]

## Indonesia, ADB agree to accelerate closure Cirebon-1 coal plant

(jb) In a groundbreaking move announced at the COP28 climate talks in Dubai, Indonesia and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) have agreed to accelerate the closure of the Cirebon-1 coal power plant in West Java by seven years. This landmark deal is the first under the ADB's Energy Transition Mechanism (ETM) program.

David Elzinga, the ADB's senior climate change energy specialist, emphasized the urgency of addressing coal plants to meet climate goals. The ADB, with its USD 20-billion Just Energy Transition Partnership, aims to advance the sector's peak emissions date to 2030, setting a precedent for other countries in the region.

Under the non-binding framework deal, signed by the ADB, Indonesian state-owned power utility PT PLN, independent power producer PT Cirebon Electric Power (CEP), and the Indonesia Investment Authority (INA), the power purchase agreement for the 660-megawatt Cirebon-1 plant – a crucial energy source for Jakarta – will conclude in December 2035, seven years earlier than the original plan of July 2042.

This proactive measure, subject to due diligence, is anticipated to prevent over 15 years of greenhouse gas emissions from the relatively young plant, which began operations in 2012 [Asia Financial]

## Indonesia: More nationalities to be allowed to enter without visa

(jb) Indonesia is set to expand its visa-free entry to attract tourism revenue by including 20 countries, such as the US, China, and India, according to Tourism Minister Sandiaga Uno.

The move aims to reverse previous restrictions imposed earlier this year on Southeast Asian countries due to misconduct by foreign tourists. Uno highlighted the importance of reciprocity and security while seeking visitors who spend more, stay longer, and are less likely to engage in disruptive behavior.

The government, targeting 11.5 million foreign tourists this year, anticipates a significant contribution of USD 13 billion to the economy from the tourism sector next year [BNN Bloomberg]

## Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam hold first parliamentary summit

(wn) The inaugural Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam (CLV) Parliamentary Summit, held on December 4, underscored the significance of regional cooperation by bringing together the chairmen of the National Assemblies from these three Southeast Asian nations.

Prior to the summit, these legislators held discussions with Thongloun Sisoulith, the general secretary of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and president of the state.

During the summit, the parliamentary representatives from the three countries reached a consensus to strengthen collaboration across various domains, encompassing politics, foreign affairs, economics, socio-cultural matters, national defense, and security.

This collaborative effort is aimed at benefiting the residents of the Development Triangle Area, a region that originally covered just 10 border provinces within the three countries but has been agreed upon for gradual expansion to encompass all the territories of the three nations. [Laotiantimes] [Vientiane Times]

## Laos expresses interest in joining BRICS

(wn) Khamjane Vongphosy, the Minister of Investments and Planning of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, has expressed his country's interest in joining BRICS. [Sputnik]

In August, Argentina, Ethiopia, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates were added as new members of the BRICS group, effective January 1, 2024. This expansion marks the group's first added new members since South Africa joined in 2010.

Pakistan has also recently applied for membership [see AiR No. 48, November/2023, 4].

## World Bank urges Laos to address economic instability, stabilize national economy

(wn/lm) The World Bank has urged Laos to take immediate steps to stabilize its national economy, citing concerns over public debt exceeding 100 percent of GDP and a decline in revenue collection. The rapid devaluation of the Lao kip and fiscal challenges are seen as hindrances to poverty reduction and inclusive development in the country.

A Fiscal Incidence Analysis conducted by the World Bank has revealed that while income distribution improves after taxes and government transfers, the impact on reducing poverty is limited due to poor revenue collection and low social spending.

The proposed policies include enhancing tax collection, reforming the management of state-owned enterprises and public-private partnerships, targeting public spending more efficiently, and addressing the challenge of high public debt. These measures aim to increase government revenue, improve fiscal system equity, and ensure public funds are directed towards critical development areas.

The World Bank also stressed the importance of collaboration with Lao government institutions, specifically the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Planning and Investment. [The World Bank] [Laotian Times]

## Asian Development Bank approves two funding initiatives for sustainable urban development in Luang Prabang

(wn) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved a concessional loan of USD 35 million and a grant of USD 10 million to develop pilot projects under the Luang Prabang Integrated and Smart Urban Strategy. The initial plans include developing solid waste management and wastewater treatment facilities, urban roads and footpaths, and public green spaces.

ADB is committed to promoting resilient communities through an innovative project. The project encompasses home, community, and training facility-

based childcare pilots explicitly designed for individuals pursuing higher education. Additionally, the initiative will provide vocational training scholarships to female professionals engaged in critical sectors such as water supply, sanitation, public works, and tourism.

A women-led creative industries business development network will be established as a crucial component of the project. Furthermore, Laos' inaugural creative city strategy and action plan will be formulated.

Luang Prabang, a province that has been a tourist attraction since its inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1995, has received a continuously increasing number of domestic and international visitors. In the first nine months of 2023, Luang Prabang welcomed 210,129 tourists.

However, the Bank has observed that the province's lack of success in developing facilities with increasing tourists has caused environmental degradation and diminished livability. [Asian Development Bank] [The Laotian Times]

## Job scam syndicates from Myanmar expected to shift operations to Laos, warns Malaysian NGO

(ba) A Malaysian non-governmental organization, the *Malaysia International Humanitarian Organisation* (MHO), has raised concerns about the likelihood of job scam syndicates originally based in Myanmar relocating their operations to Laos. This move is attributed to the ongoing civil conflict in Myanmar. The MHO is urging authorities to proactively gather intelligence and take action to thwart these syndicates, thereby safeguarding citizens from falling prey to job scams. [The Star]

## Asian Development Bank approves USD 450 million loan for Philippines healthcare program

(lb) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has sanctioned a $450 million loan for the Philippines to bolster its universal healthcare program, aiming to enhance health policy reforms and broaden access to medicines and health services for Filipinos.

The loan intends to support the country's efforts in strengthening its healthcare system, ensuring better

healthcare accessibility and affordability for the populace. This financial assistance underscores the commitment to advancing healthcare initiatives and improving overall health outcomes in the Philippines. [Reuters]

## Philippines seeks greater regional cooperation on South China Sea disputes

(lb) The Philippines, led by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., is actively seeking regional cooperation with neighboring countries like Malaysia and Vietnam amidst escalating tensions in the South China Sea. Concerned about China's assertiveness in disputed waters, Marcos aims to establish a separate code of conduct involving Vietnam and Malaysia in response to the slow progress of negotiations between China and ASEAN.

Despite recent discussions with Chinese leader Xi Jinping, China's aggressive actions in Philippine waters, including interference with resupply missions and territorial encroachments, remain a significant concern for Manila.

Highlighting the challenges faced by ASEAN in addressing South China Sea disputes and recognizing the limitations of the ongoing negotiations, Marcos advocates for bilateral engagements among claimant nations to form a more practical approach toward fostering regional unity and countering China's forceful claims in the region. [The Diplomat]

## Singapore suspends poultry imports from parts of Japan, US, Canada, France, other countries over bird flu fears

(lm) Singapore has temporarily suspended the import of raw poultry and poultry products from various regions in several countries due to the outbreak of highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza, commonly known as bird flu. The affected areas include parts of Japan, the United States, Canada, France, Belgium, and Germany. Heat-treated poultry products that comply with guidelines for inactivating the avian influenza virus will not be subject to the import restriction. [South China Morning Post]

## Singapore to take AI questions to UN body in hopes of shaping agenda

(lb) Singapore has formulated a list of 12 questions about artificial intelligence (AI) that it intends to present to the United Nations High-Level Advisory Body on AI. These questions were generated during the Singapore Conference on AI (SCAI), where 42 delegates from around the world convened to discuss the crucial issues surrounding AI. The questions address matters such as appropriate development, usage, evaluation, and governance of AI, aiming to guide AI's application for the global good. [The Business Times]

## ASEAN Plus Three agree on new financing facility to fend off crisis

(lm) The ASEAN Plus Three group of nations, which includes Japan, China, South Korea, and the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has agreed to establish a new regional lending facility called the Rapid Financing Facility to respond to emergencies in the region. [The Straits Times]

The new facility will complement the existing multilateral currency swaps known as the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralisation (CMIM). It aims to enhance the use of existing currency swap lines, making it more accessible for member countries to access funds in emergencies. This move comes amid concerns about a global economic slowdown and rising United States interest rates.

## UNESCO recognizes Thailand's Songkran Festival as intangible cultural heritage

(msz) On December 6, Songkran Festival, the Thai water-splashing festival celebrating Thai New Year in April, was announced to be listed in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The announcement came after the UNESCO Intergovernmental Meeting Committee meeting for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Botswana. Songkran Festival marked the fourth cultural heritage of Thailand to be recognized by UNESCO after Khon (masked dance drama) in 2018, Naud Thai (traditional Thai massage) in 2019 and Nora (dance drama in Southern Thailand) in 2021. [Thai PBS]

Considering the UNESCO recognition, Thai Culture Ministry called on the Thai people to participate in the celebrations on December 7 at the Lan Khon Maung grounds opposite Bangkok City Hall. Earlier this month, the National Soft Power Strategy Committee announced Songkran to be celebrated for the entire month of April under the new soft power plan. [The Straits Times] [see AiR No.49, December/2023, 1]

## Vietnam repatriates more than 1,000 of its citizens from Myanmar

(wn) Vietnam has carried out a successful repatriation operation, bringing home more than 1,000 of its citizens who were stranded in conflict-ridden Myanmar, particularly in the volatile northern Shan State. In a display of international solidarity, Vietnam has also extended its support to Egypt, Malaysia, and Singapore, aiding in the evacuation of their citizens from Myanmar. [Viêt Nam New] [Radio Free Asia]

A significant number of the repatriated individuals had fallen victim to fraudulent casino operations in northern Myanmar. They were left abandoned by their employers and found themselves stranded in the country amid the ongoing armed conflicts between the Myanmar military and various ethnic minority groups in the region.

## Japan shows interest in observing Bangladesh parliamentary elections

(lm) Japan has expressed interest in observing the upcoming general elections scheduled for January 7 in Bangladesh. Tokyo intends to send a 16-member team to observe the elections and has shown its interest to the Election Commission. [Dhaka Tribune]

Other countries and organizations that have confirmed their intention to send observation missions include India, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Arab Parliament, Palestine, and the European Union, which will send an expert team. [NewAge]

## Cambodia-China: People's Liberation Army (PLA) at Ream Base for training

(pm) Cambodia's Navy is set to undergo training provided by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of

China, with Chinese warships having recently arrived at the Ream naval base for the preparatory phase last week.

Although the specific details regarding the number of naval ships involved and the duration of the training were not disclosed, this development underscores the deepening defense ties between Cambodia and China, aligned with their broader economic and infrastructure development cooperation.

The strategically situated Ream naval base in the Gulf of Thailand serves as a crucial maritime access point for Cambodia. However, the heightened Chinese presence has sparked concerns among some observers, who fear that Cambodia's close relationship with China might compromise its sovereignty and independence.

There are also apprehensions regarding China's expanding military influence and the potential regional security implications. [Khmer Times]

## Cambodia-Laos: MoU on prison cooperation signed

(pm) On December 5 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and Laos formalized a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to enhance cooperation in their prison systems. This MoU signifies an extension and reinforcement of the longstanding and comprehensive strategic cooperation between the two nations. It outlines mutual assistance in addressing crimes and other shared concerns. As part of the signing event, both sides exchanged insights on their experiences with prison management and discussed the prevailing situations in their respective regions. [BNN] [Phnom Penh Post]

## Cambodia, Cuba discuss to sign MoU on inspection

(pm) Cambodia and Cuba discussed a potential Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on inspection during a meeting between Huot Hak, Minister of Inspection, and Liurka Rodriguez Barrios, Ambassador of Cuba to Cambodia, on December 5.

Both sides also agreed on organizing exposure visits to exchange views and experience in inspection. [Khmer Times] [Phnom Penh Post]

## Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi talks on phone with U.S. Secretary of State Blinken

(yq) On November 6, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held a phone talk with the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

During the conversation Wang expressed the willingness to extend the "San Francisco Vision" established by the Biden-Xi summit on the sidelines of the APEC meeting in November, aiming to stabilize and improve China-U.S. relations. [see AiR No.47, November/2023,3]

Wang restated China's position on Taiwan, demanding that the US refrain from interfering in China's internal affairs or supporting any "Taiwan independence" forces.

Both sides exchanged views on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Wang emphasized the need for a ceasefire to stop the war and prevent a larger-scale humanitarian disaster. Any solution to the current crisis in Gaza must respect Palestine's right to self-determination and the will of the Palestinian people.

Wang reaffirmed that China believes in the two-state solution and is committed to working with all parties to achieve peace in the Middle East.

Blinken discussed his recent visit to the Middle East and the United States' support for the implementation of the "two-state plan". [Foreign Ministry, People's Republic of China, in Chinese]

Blinken discussed his recent visit to the Middle East and the United States' support for the implementation of the "two-state plan". He also emphasized that the recent Houthi attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea represent an unacceptable danger to maritime security and international law, which all nations must uphold. [Department of State, United States of America]

## China-US: Military-to-military talks have not been resumed, White House says

(yq) On December 8, the White House confirmed that military-to-military communication remains suspended due to the absence of General Li Shuangfu, the former defense minister dismissed in October.

The White House emphasized the importance of talks to mitigate miscalculation and misunderstanding, urging China to promptly designate a replacement and resume communication to alleviate tensions, [The White House, USA] Reuters]

The decision to restart military-to-military talks, severed after former House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022, was reached during the summit between Chinese President Xi and American President Biden in November [see AiR No.47, November/2023,3].

## US announces fresh sanctions on China

(yq) Leading up to the 75th anniversary on December 10 of the United Nations' adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, also known as the International Human Rights Day, the United States, as asserted by Secretary Antony Blinken, undertook a series of actions addressing various forms of human rights abuse. [U.S Department of State]

Sanctions were imposed on two Chinese officials, Gao Qi and Hu Lianhe, citing their involvement in severe human rights abuses against Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Gao, the leader of the northern Xinjiang Yili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture Public Security Bureau, was linked to arbitrary detentions, while Hu, deputy office director for the Xinjiang Work Coordination Small Group of the Central Committee, played a role in formulating and implementing Xinjiang policies according to Blinken. [Free Radio Asia]

Simultaneously, the U.S. Department of Homeland took measures against forced labor by blocking imports from three Chinese companies: Cofco Sugar Holding, Sichuan Jingweida Technology Group, and Anhui Xinya New Materials.

The companies are among a total of 30 companies barred from exporting goods to the U.S. under the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, enacted in 2021. The legislation prohibits the import of goods produced in Xinjiang or by entities on the Department of Homeland Security's entity list unless proof is provided that the goods were not produced by forced labor.

In response, the Chinese embassy in the US reportedly accused the action of being "based on lies" and claimed that the U.S. was "essentially undermining the prosperity and stability of Xinjiang and curbing China's development." [Reuters]

Expanding its efforts, the U.S. Treasury Department, on December 4, imposed sanctions on nine companies and five individuals accused of aiding Russia in procuring electronic devices for weapons programs. Hong Kong-based M & S Trading, notably implicated in a global network for defense procurement led by Belgium-based Hans De Geetere, was involved in unlawfully exporting military-grade technology from the U.S. to China and Russia. The Hong Kong company coordinated electronics orders for Russia, including integrated circuits identified in Russian-made unmanned aerial vehicles found in Ukraine. [Hong Kong Free Press]

## China accuses US of violating WTO rules

(yq) On December 7, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce stated that the US government's implementation rules for the Electric Vehicle Subsidy Policy of the Inflation Reduction Act discriminate against Chinese enterprises by excluding their products from the scope of subsidies.

It added that this violates WTO principles, disrupts international trade and investment, and destabilizes the global industrial chain supply chain and such a policy is non-market-oriented [Ministry of Commerce, China, in Chinese]

It is requested by China that the United States respect market principles, strictly adhere to WTO regulations, rectify the wrongful practice of offering discriminatory subsidies, and establish a business environment that is fair, impartial, and non-discriminatory. China will persist in evaluating the implementation of the measures taken by the US and will take appropriate steps to protect its legitimate rights and interests. [Ministry of Commerce, China, in Chinese]

This statement came in response to recent rules proposed in the US, which aim to shift more production of electric vehicle batteries and materials to the United States, reducing reliance on China. The rules are intended to limit the role of Chinese firms in supplying materials for electric vehicles that are eligible for federal tax credits [see AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1].

## China expresses disappointment over US veto on Gaza cease-fire

(yq) China has expressed its disappointment and regret over the U.S. veto of a UN Security Council resolution calling for an immediate humanitarian cease-fire in Gaza, which was proposed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and backed by over 90 member states.

China's permanent representative to the UN Zhang Jun twitted on X "It's extremely disappointing and regrettable that a UN Security Council draft resolution demanding an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza was vetoed." [X]

He also criticized Israel for condoning fighting while claiming concern for humanitarian needs. In addition, the statement urged an end to "collective punishment" in Gaza and support for diplomatic efforts to release captives. [Anadolu Agency]

## China and Iran pledge diplomatic support for peace amid Israel-Gaza war

(yq) Chinese Communist Party International Department chief Liu Jianchao visited Tehran to meet with several senior Iranian politicians, including Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr, Iran's secretary of the Expediency Council, and Ghodrat Ali Heshmatian, the chairman of Iran's House of Parties.

During the meetings, both countries pledged diplomatic support and coordination amid the Israel-Gaza conflict. Beijing expressed its commitment to "strengthen communication and cooperation" with Tehran, supporting Iran's efforts in "maintaining regional peace and stability and a firm defense of international justice."

In response, the Iranian side voiced its support for China, stating that Iran is "ready to cooperate with China to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, resolve the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and achieve justice" [CPC News, in Chinese; Morning China South Post].

While Iran is suspected of supporting Hamas, it has denied any involvement in the group's surprise attack on Israel on October 7, which triggered the Gaza conflict. [CPC News, in Chinese] [Morning China South Post]

Iran is suspected of being a supporter of Hamas, but it has denied any involvement in the group's surprise attack on Israel on October 7 that triggered the Gaza conflict. [Morning China South Post]

## Italy to withdraw from China's Belt and Road Initiative

(yq) Italy has formally informed China of its decision to exit the Belt and Road Infrastructure Initiative (BRI). The automatic renewal of Italy's BRI membership, slated for March next year, hinged on the country's withdrawal by the year-end.

While Italy is the sole G7 nation to have joined the BRI in 2019, the initiative has faced criticism from the United States, primarily characterized as "debt trap diplomacy". [BBC]

Upon assuming office last year, Prime Minister Georgia Meloni expressed her intent to disengage from the BRI. Despite this decision, Meloni affirmed Italy's commitment to enhancing trade and economic relations with China. She noted that the BRI has not yielded anticipated outcomes. [Reuters]

In response, the Chinese Foreign Ministry underscored its firm opposition to any disparagement of the collaborative nature of the 'Belt and Road' initiative. The ministry rejected the notions of camp confrontation and the creation of cleavages. [Foreign Ministry, People's Republic of China, in Chinese]

## EU-China Summit in Beijing

(yq) On December 7, the 24th EU-China summit occurred in Beijing, marking the first in-person meeting since 2019. Chinese President Xi Jinping held discussions with the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen [The European Commission].

The summit transpired amid Europe's reassessment of its China policy, evident in the initiation of an anti-subsidy investigation into Chinese battery electric vehicle (BEV) imports [see AiR No. 38, September/2023, 3].

The EU, emphasizing the need for a more balanced economic relationship, urged China to enhance market access and improve the investment environment. Xi, for his part, advocated dialogue for conflict resolution but expressed concern over what Beijing perceives as an increasingly competitive approach by the EU. China also hoped that the EU would avoid adopting trade protectionist measures under the pretext of

"overcapacity" in response to the anti-subsidy investigation

Discussions included Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with the EU urging China to uphold UN Charter principles. China committed to facilitating talks and promoting a political solution to the Ukraine crisis. However, the Chinese Foreign Ministry later emphasized Russia's sovereignty and President Putin's decision-making.

On the Middle East issue, the EU condemned terrorist attacks by Hamas against Israel, supporting Israel's right to defend itself. Both sides prioritized delivering aid to the vulnerable and advocated a two-state solution.

Climate change and health were also on the agenda, with the EU acknowledging China's progress in renewable energy and calling for further commitments. Collaboration on global health and the promotion of a positive outcome at COP28 were highlighted.

Despite resuming human rights dialogue, the EU expressed deep concerns about rights violations in Xinjiang and Tibet. The 'one China' policy was affirmed, but worries were raised about tensions in the Taiwan Strait and the East and South China Seas. China stressed adherence to the one-China principle and non-interference. [The European Commission] [Foreign Ministry, People's Republic of China 1, in Chinese] [Foreign Ministry, People's Republic of China 2, in Chinese] [ABC News]

Analysts warn that significant differences persist between the two sides during the summit, making resolution a challenging endeavor. [AP News] [France 24]

## Singapore and China to offer reciprocal 30-day visa-free entry and trial cross-border usage of digital CNY

(yq) Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced on December 7 that China and Singapore will implement a 30-day mutual visa waiver program early next year during Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's visit to China.

Both sides agreed to deepen the cultural and educational communications and will work on the details, aiming to implement them in early 2024.

The meeting also announced that it will trial Cross-border Usage of digital CNY for Tourism. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore] [South China Morning Post]

In response, the Chinese Foreign Ministry confirmed the agreement and that both sides are in close communication on the details. [Foreign Ministry, People's Republic of China, in Chinese]

This follows China trails one-year waiver for six countries in Asia and Europe, seen as a measure to revive tourism and globalize the e-CNY currency [see AiR No. 48, November/2023, 4].

The application of E-CNY in small transactions may lead to its usage in high-value scenarios, according to an expert's opinion. [South China Morning Post]

## China denounces Costa Rican President's cybersecurity claims on Huawei

(yq) Costa Rica's President, Rodrigo Chaves, faced a swift rebuke from China over his concerns about Huawei's eligibility to develop the country's 5G mobile data networks. President Chaves on December 7 cited national security and China's supposed lack of a robust judicial framework to prevent spying as reasons for Huawei's exclusion. [Reuters]

In response, China's embassy in San Jose labeled the accusations as baseless and lacking reason, cautioning against the politicization of scientific and technological matters.

The dispute, originating from U.S. military concerns over Huawei's suitability, escalated in August when President Chaves signed a decree targeting tech companies, including Huawei, from participating in 5G development.

As Huawei awaits a constitutional court ruling on potential unfair treatment, the tensions risk straining diplomatic ties between China and Costa Rica, the first Central American nation to formally recognize Beijing in 2007. [Reuters]

## China-Russia: Police chiefs meet

(yq) On December 5, State Councilor and Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong held discussions with Russian Interior Minister Kolokoltsev in Beijing,

following his meeting with Russian Prosecutor General Krasnov.

Wang conveyed a commitment to enhancing practical cooperation with Russia across various domains, including combating transnational crime, cybersecurity, counter-narcotics, and law enforcement capacity-building.

Kolokoltsev emphasized the importance of heightened communication and collaboration with China to uphold security and stability. [Xinhua, in Chinese]

Observers have noted that this development signifies Beijing's expanding law enforcement influence into neighboring countries. [South China Morning Post]

## China-Russia: Record bilateral trade 2023

(yq) China and Russia have exceeded their 2019 target by achieving USD 218.2 billion in bilateral trade during January-November 2023, surpassing the total for the entire year of 2022.

In November alone, trade surged to USD 21.5 billion, highlighting the robustness of their collaboration, especially in the context of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war facing Western sanctions.

Notably, Chinese shipments to Russia rose by 34 percent to USD 10.3 billion in November, driven by Russia's role as a major buyer of Chinese cars. China seeks policy support from Russia for its automobile enterprises to expand operations in the Russian market.

This trade performance further cements the economic lifeline that China represents for Russia, as both nations navigate geopolitical complexities and strengthen their strategic partnership amid Western sanctions. [Reuters 1] [Asia Financial]

In a latest development, the Russian government confirmed Deputy Prime Minister and President Vladimir Putin's top oil and gas point man Alexander Novak will lead a Russian delegation of 20 officials to China for participation in a four-day inter-governmental commission on energy cooperation this week.

The visit comes as Russia seeks to boost its natural gas supplies to China to via the Power of Siberia 1 and Power Siberia 2 pipelines, with the latter designed to carry Russian natural gas from northern Siberia - a

source base for dwindling deliveries to Europe - to China via Mongolia. [Reuters 2]

## China to exempt tariffs on imports from six African countries

(yq) The Chinese Customs Tariff Commission of State Council has announced that starting from December 25, 98 percent of taxable products from six African least-developed countries including Angola, Gambia,

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Madagascar, Mali, and Mauritania will be exempt from tariffs when entering China. According to the Commission, the recent move is aimed at promoting the spirit of friendship and cooperation between China and Africa.

As per the latest exchange of letters, it has been decided to gradually provide zero-tariff treatment to 98 percent of the tariff lines of products in the future from all the least developed countries that have diplomatic relations with China. [Ministry of Finance, People's Republic of China, in Chinese]

This will help China increase African food imports after more than 20 years of mostly buying raw materials from the continent while exporting electronics, machinery, and textiles.  China has eliminated tariffs on 98 percent of products from 21 African nations in the last two years. Their exports made up almost 60 percent of the USD 282 billion two-way trade with Africa in 2019.

However, China has faced critiques accusing the unhealthy balance of exporting finished goods while importing mostly raw materials. [South China Morning Post]

## China-Germany: Volkswagen faces investor scrutiny after Xinjiang audit

(yq) Volkswagen is under pressure from investors, including Union Investment and Deka Investment, to conduct regular checks on its operations in China to ensure compliance with human rights laws and safe supply chains.

The demand was made by Union Investment and Deka Investment on December 6, reflecting ongoing concerns over Volkswagen's engagement in Xinjiang, where human rights abuses are being reported. China denies any such abuses.

This demand follows an audit of Volkswagen's Xinjiang site, which found no evidence of forced labor. Despite the audit results, concerns persist over Volkswagen's engagement in Xinjiang.

Investors emphasize the need for ongoing scrutiny and transparency in Volkswagen's supply chain to address broader governance issues and ensure sustainable practices. [Reuters]

Relating to Xinjiang's human rights issue, the US announced on December 8 sanctions against related Chinese officials and companies [see article above],

## China-Mexico: Foreign ministers' meeting

(yq) Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held a meeting on December 5 with Mexican Foreign Minister Alicia Barcena.

During the meeting, Wang emphasized that the China-Mexico cooperation has great potential and huge room for development, and the two sides vowed to strengthen bilateral ties.

Barcena thanked China for helping Mexico rebuild after Hurricane Otis in October. She also expressed the willingness to strengthen the bilateral tie with China and welcome the Chinese industries to invest in Mexico, adding that she hopes to strengthen cooperation to battle illegal drug trafficking. [Foreign Ministry, People's Republic of China, in Chinese].

The pledge to jointly fight drug trafficking comes after Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Mexican counterpart Andrés Manuel López Obrador agreed on the importance of fighting fentanyl trafficking together during their meeting on the sidelines of the APEC summit last month [see AiR No. 47, November/2023, 3].

According to Mexico, the governments of both countries have given great importance to the visit of a Mexican delegation to China in October. This visit has resulted in the establishment of a working group that will focus on preventing the trafficking of precursor chemicals, which are used in the production of synthetic drugs such as fentanyl. [Reuters]

## China and Japan blame over confrontation near disputed islands

(yq) China and Japan have accused each other of maritime incursions in the disputed waters around the Diaoyu (called by China)/Senkaku (called by Japan) Islands in the East China Sea. The uninhabited islands are under the control of Japan but are also claimed by China.

On December 10 China's coast guard claimed that a Japanese fishing boat and patrol vessels intruded into the waters around the contested islands. In response, China stated that it had taken necessary measures in accordance with the law to warn away the Japanese vessels.

Japan's coast guard countered, stating that two Chinese maritime patrol boats left Japan's territorial waters after receiving warnings, with its patrol vessels protecting a Japanese fishing boat.

This incident adds to a series of similar confrontations in October and November, raising concerns over the ongoing maritime disputes in the region. [Reuters]

## Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit Vietnam

(yq) The Chinese Foreign Ministry stated on December7 that Chinese President Xi Jinping will pay a state visit to Vietnam on December 12-13. [Foreign Ministry, People's Republic of China 1, in Chinese]

The Foreign Ministry added this meeting will focus on six major areas: politics, security, practical cooperation, public opinion base, multilateralism, and maritime issues. [Foreign Ministry, People's Republic of China 2, in Chinese]

Xi's visit follows Chinese Commerce Minister Wang Wentao's visit to Vietnam in November, pledging to strengthen trade ties [see AiR No. 48, November/2023, 4].

## Philippines and China accuse each other of incidents involving several vessels in the South China Sea

(yq)The South China Sea witnessed heightened tensions as both the Philippines and China accused each other of dangerous maneuvers and causing a collision in contested waters. [CNN]

The ongoing maritime dispute involves the Philippines maintaining troops on the BRP Sierra Madre. This area is known as Ayungin Shoal to Manila and Ren'ai Reef to Beijing. The Philippines' claim to the region is contested by China, resulting in frequent and escalating encounters in the hotly contested waters. [CNN]

The Philippine Coast Guard reported damage to its vessels due to water cannon fire from the Chinese ships. The spokesperson for the National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea (NTF-WPS) Jay Tarriela posted on X that Chinese Coast Guard and maritime militia vessels had "harassed, blocked and executed dangerous maneuvers on Philippine civilian supply vessels.[X]

The Philippine Coast Guard reported that at least two of its vessels sustained damage due to water cannon fire from the Chinese ships. [CNN].

The Philippines has announced a recent incident where its military chief was on a ship that was hit by Chinese vessels and "this is a serious escalation on the part of the agents of the People's Republic of China". [Reuters]

In response, China asserted on December 11 that Philippine ships illegally intruded into its waters and claimed responsibility for the collision, accusing the Philippines of unprofessional and dangerous conduct. China also urged the Philippines to stop its "maritime violations and provocations" and stop its "groundless attacks and smears" against China.[Foreign Ministry, People's Republic of China, in Chinese]

This incident, part of a series of maritime confrontations, underscores the increasing frequency of run-ins between the two nations in the highly contested South China Sea. This comes less than a month after leaders of both nations met on the sidelines of an economic summit in San Francisco to formulate ways forward in the South China Sea [see AiR No. 47, November/2023, 3].

## Papua New Guinea clarified no security talks with China

(yq) Reflecting efforts of Papua New Guinea (PNG) to strategically navigate the complex geopolitics of the Pacific region through security alliances, Prime Minister James Marape clarified that while PNG has recently signed a security deal with Australia, it has not engaged in security discussions with China.

The country's approach involves a dual-security arrangement, with an external defense agreement signed with the United States and an internal security-focused deal with Australia.

PNG, actively seeking foreign investment, is also exploring a potential free trade agreement with China, a major market for its produce. Marape emphasized the importance of security improvements to attract foreign investors, especially in the context of PNG's resource-driven exports. [Reuters]

## Saudi investment minister meets Chinese commerce and industry chiefs

(yq)On November 10th, Chinese Commerce Minister Wang Wentao and China's Minister of Industry and Information Technology Jin Zhuanglong met in Beijing with the Saudi Arabian Investment Minister Khalid Al-Falih. The meeting encompassed a wide range of areas such as trade, investment, technology, energy, and infrastructure.

Wang expressed his willingness to jointly promote the in-depth dovetailing of the Belt and Road Initiative with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. [Ministry of Commerce, People's Republic of China, in Chinese]

Jin emphasized China's openness to collaboration in new energy vehicles, aircraft, photovoltaics, and artificial intelligence, while also emphasizing the joint commitment to uphold global industrial supply chains. [Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, People's Republic of China, in Chinese]

Falih, for his part, announced that the BRI has provided a new impetus for bilateral economic and trade cooperation, and China has become a trustworthy partner of Saudi Arabia in realizing the "Vision 2030". He conveyed Saudi Arabia's hopes to further expand the scale of bilateral trade and investment cooperation and is willing to work with China to continuously explore the potential for cooperation. [Ministry of Commerce, People's Republic of China, in Chinese]

The deepening ties between China and Saudi Arabia underscore a comprehensive strategic partnership initiated in December 2022, marking an expansion beyond traditional hydrocarbon connections.

The ongoing collaboration reflects a commitment to mutual growth and shared interests in fostering economic and technological advancements. [Reuters]

## 25 Indian fishermen from Tamil Nadu state arrested by Sri Lankan Navy

(fd) 25 Indian fishermen from coastal villages in Nagapattinam and Mayiladuthurai districts in Tamil Nadu and Karaikal were arrested by the Sri Lanaken navy mid-sea. The arrest on December 9 follows several more similar ones this week which led to more than 20 fishermen from Rameswaram and Pudukottai districts and their boats in detention. [The Hindu]

The Indian National Fishermen Union has implored the Union and Central government to find a solution to the ongoing issue and to urge Sri Lanka to release both the detained fishermen and their boats. Although the fishermen had been released in previous incidents, their boats and fishing equipment had often been held back which threatened their livelihood.

## India will address European Union's carbon tax issue; will retaliate if required, minister says

(fd) India’s Commerce and Industry Minister, Piyush Goyal, has stated that his country will address the European Union's plan to impose a carbon tax on certain imported goods, and he is prepared to retaliate if necessary. [The Hindu]

The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) is set to take effect from January 1, 2026, and domestic companies from carbon-intensive sectors are required to share carbon emissions data with the EU from October 1. CBAM could result in a 20-35 percent tax on select imports into the EU, affecting Indian exports of iron ore pellets, iron, steel, and aluminum products, worth USD 7.4 billion in 2023.

Goyal also highlighted India's efforts to promote electric vehicles (EVs) and urged the industry to support the country's EV mission. He emphasized the need to replace old vehicles with EVs, especially in public transportation, and suggested that the adoption of electric mobility could help save on foreign exchange reserves by reducing oil imports. Additionally, the minister mentioned the potential for India to achieve USD 2 trillion in exports by 2030 and highlighted upcoming events to promote various sectors, including startups and investments.

In response to Goyal's remarks, the European Commission said on December 8 that CBAM aims solely to prevent carbon leakage, which occurs when companies move their production out of countries with strict climate policies. European Commissioner Wopke Hoekstra emphasized the importance of CBAM in funding the EU's climate goals and reducing emissions by 55 percent by 2030, and warned that any attempt to dismantle CBAM would have broader consequences. [abp live]

## United Kingdom senior officials visit India as talks on multibillion-dollar Free Trade Agreement accelerate

(fd) British senior officials are currently in India to negotiate the India-United Kingdom Free Trade Agreement (FTA) further. The Indian government has signaled its eagerness to conclude this agreement in the next three months - coinciding with the commencement of Indian Prime Minister Modi's general election campaign - marking a notable shift from the previous outlook where such a deal appeared remote. [Mint] [The Guardian]

The pursuit of an FTA between India and the UK has been in the works since Britain's departure from the European Union (EU), granting it the freedom to negotiate its own trade arrangements. The initial discussion began in January of last year, with the deadline set to Diwali 2022 by then Prime Minister Boris Johnson. However, that deadline was missed the deadline due to challenges in reaching consensus on key aspects, such as visa arrangements and access for British services companies to the Indian market [see AiR No. 41, October/2022, 2.

The negotiations were put on hold by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak after he assumed office in Downing Street, with his initial focus on renegotiating Britain's relationship with the EU. However, renewed interest in the trade deal between India and the UK emerged this summer, bolstered by a meeting between the two Prime Ministers during the G20 summit in Delhi in September.

The current discussions on the table during this 13th round of talks include provisions for lower tariffs on British goods in India, such as automobiles and whisky, as well as expanded access for British legal and financial services providers. In return, India seeks streamlined and expedited processing for its companies to send workers to the UK.

## FBI Director calls on India's CBI chief following US assassination plot indictment

(fd/lm) A United States delegation, headed by FBI Director Christopher A. Wray, held discussions with India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) chief and senior officials to strengthen their cooperation in combatting transnational crimes. [The Hindu] [CNN]

Crucially, this visit by Wray comes shortly after US federal prosecutors accused an Indian government official of involvement in a conspiracy to assassinate Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a Sikh separatist, on American soil. Pannun, wanted in India for being considered a terrorist and national security threat, was allegedly the target of a murder-for-hire plot in New York City. [AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1]

These developments occurred within a month of Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau publicly suggesting India's involvement in the murder of another Sikh separatist, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, on Canadian soil, leading to a diplomatic dispute between the two nations. India has strongly denied any involvement in Nijjar's murder. [AiR No. 38, September/2023, 3]

In a related update, India's External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, informed Parliament on December 7 that the government's varying responses to the allegations regarding the plot to kill Pannun, as raised by the Canadian government and the indictment by the U.S. Justice Department, were due to the fact that Canada did not share any "specific evidence," whereas Washington provided "inputs" concerning the nexus of "organized crime, trafficking, and other matters." [The Hindu]

## Russia's Putin praises Indian leader Modi, says he is 'main guarantor' of steady bilateral ties

(mz/lm) Russian President Vladimir Putin has lauded Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his resolute defense of India's national interests, asserting that Modi remains unfazed by external pressures and intimidation. Putin made these remarks during the "Russia Calling!" forum, emphasizing that Modi's policy stance serves as the primary guarantor for the steadily progressing bilateral relations between Russia and

India. This praise comes amid criticism from Western countries for India's independent stance, including continued imports of discounted Russian crude oil despite Western sanctions against Russia for its actions in Ukraine. [The Hindu]

## Indian ambassador granted consular access to 8 death row prisoners in Qatar

(lm) The Indian Ambassador to Qatar has been granted consular access to eight Indian prisoners on death row in Doha. This development followed an informal meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Emir of Qatar, Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani, during the COP28 summit in Dubai. [The Hindu]

The prisoners, who were formerly Indian Navy officials working with the Dhoa-based security company Al Dahra, were arrested in August 2022 and sentenced to death by a Qatari court on October 26 [see AiR No. 44, October/2023, 5]. Appeals have been filed by their family members, and the case involves sensitive security-related matters that have not been disclosed by the Indian government [see AiR No. 48, November/2023, 4].

## Indonesia seeks enhanced cooperation with Saudi Arabia in aviation and railway

(jb) Indonesia is exploring enhanced cooperation with Saudi Arabia in the aviation and railway sectors, according to the Ministry of Transportation.

During a recent meeting in Riyadh, Indonesian Transport Minister Budi Karya Sumadi and his Saudi counterpart Saleh bin Nasser Al-Jasser discussed potential collaboration opportunities between the two nations.

Sumadi sees this as a significant moment to strengthen transportation cooperation, especially after the success of discussions during President Joko Widodo's state visit in October.

The focus includes potential Saudi investment in Indonesia's railways, leveraging Saudi Arabia's experience in developing urban railways as a benchmark. The possibility of a joint venture for domestic flights with Saudi airlines is also under consideration, particularly to facilitate Umrah and Hajj flights due to the substantial number of Indonesian pilgrims.

The collaboration aims to improve transportation links and benefit both nations economically and culturally. [Arab News]

## Huawei reiterates commitment to Indonesia's digital transformation at Media Camp 2023

(jb) Huawei, a global technology giant, has reiterated its commitment to collaborating with stakeholders to drive Indonesia's digital transformation.

During the Huawei Media Camp 2023 in East Sumba, the company emphasized its 23-year presence in Indonesia and its dedication to synergistic collaborations with diverse stakeholders, including industry, academia, and media.

Guo Hailong, CEO of Huawei Indonesia, outlined the company's focus on contributing to Indonesia's progress through innovation in Carrier Network, Enterprise, Consumer, Cloud, and Digital Power business groups. The aim is to support the country's digital transformation and achieve Indonesia's Golden Vision 2045, positioning it as a key player in the global economy.

In Indonesia, Huawei has partnered with Mastel and Telkomsel to establish a 5G network at Solo Technopark, showcasing its commitment to modern connectivity. [Antara News]

## Sweden expresses interests to increase Indonesian imports

(jb) In a bid to strengthen economic ties, the Swedish Ambassador to Indonesia, Daniel Blockert, has expressed Stockholm's interest in increasing imports from Jakarta.

Presently, Indonesia primarily exports goods like palm oil and leather footwear to Sweden, resulting in a trade deficit for Jakarta over recent years, according to Trade Ministry data.

Ambassador Blockert emphasized the need for a balanced trade relationship, stating, "We want to increase Indonesian exports to Sweden as well. It should go in both directions." He highlighted the potential to expand the import of agricultural products from Indonesia, seeking mutual benefits.

Palm oil emerged as Indonesia's top export to Sweden in 2021, valued at USD 58.9 million, as reported by the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC). The OEC also identified key Swedish imports from Indonesia, including delivery trucks, chemical wood pulp, and steam turbines.

Despite the trade deficit, bilateral trade between Indonesia and Sweden grew from USD 801.4 million in 2021 to USD 873.7 million in the following year. The deficit, which stood at USD 319.3 million in 2021, increased to USD 367 million in 2022.

Blockert also commented on the ongoing Indonesia-European Union (EU) Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) negotiations. While he expressed hope for a swift resolution, he doubted the possibility of concluding the negotiations before Indonesia's presidential election in February, citing unresolved issues. Blockert acknowledged the potential benefits of a free trade agreement between Indonesia and the EU [Jakarta Globe]

## Indonesia top importer of Thai rice

(jb) Thailand has experienced a significant surge in rice exports to Indonesia due to the severe drought affecting the island nation. While Indonesia ranked 20th on Thailand's list of rice importers last year, recent months have seen a substantial increase.

In the first 10 months of this year alone, Indonesia emerged as the top importer of Thai rice, purchasing 1.05 million tons worth USD 523.45 million, compared to 91,714 tons valued at USD 42.24 million in the previous year. The drought has particularly impacted Indonesia's rice-growing regions, leading to a shift in cultivation practices to crops with lower water requirements.

Thailand's overall rice exports from January to October rose by 11.4 percent to 6.92 million tons, amounting to USD 3.96 billion.

With concerns about food security amid drought and El Nino's influence on rice production, the demand for rice is expected to rise globally, prompting countries to import to meet domestic needs.

To further boost exports, the Thai Deputy Commerce Minister emphasized the importance of developing competitive rice varieties to meet evolving consumer demands and addressing climate change challenges in agriculture. [Vietnam Plus]

## Japan-South Korea: Tokyo does not appeal ruling on “comfort women”

(dql) A South Korean court's ruling that ordered Japan to compensate 16 "comfort women," a euphemism for those who suffered under Japan’s military brothel system before and during World War II, has been "finalized" as Tokyo let the period for an appeal elapse.

The November 23 ruling overturned a lower court's decision that had dismissed the case, ordering Tokyo to pay around USD 152,000 to each of the Korean complainants [see AiR No. 48, November/2023, 4].

In an immediate response to the ruling, Japan’s Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa had rejected the court’s verdict as "absolutely unacceptable" and "clearly contrary to international law and agreements between the two countries."

Tokyo has so far persistently insisted that a 1965 treaty, under which the two countries restored diplomatic ties with a reparations package of about USD 800 million in grants and cheap loans, settled all claims relating to the colonial period. [The Japan Times]

## US grounds tiltrotor military aircraft fleet in Japan

(dql) US Air Force and Navy officials have declared a comprehensive grounding of the V-22 Osprey helicopter fleet after a recent crash off the coast of Japan, attributed to a malfunction [see No. 49, December/2023, 1].

The incident resulted in the loss of eight crew members, with six recovered thus far. The entire fleet is anticipated to stay grounded pending the conclusion of the ongoing investigation.

Concurrently, Japan, the only other nation acknowledged to operate Ospreys, has taken a similar precautionary measure by grounding its fleet of 14 Osprey helicopters. [BBC]

## Japan’s prime minister Kishida urges Israel to minimize civilian casualties in the conflict with Hamas

(dql) On December 6 Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida held a summit telephone talk with his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu.

During the conversation, Kishida called on Israel to minimize civilian casualties in the conflict between Israel and Hamas, urging it to “act in accordance with international law including international humanitarian law." He added that Japan is supportive of a “two-state solution.”

Netanyahu responded by outlining Israel's position on the military operation in Gaza.

Both leaders agreed to continue close communication and cooperation on the situation in the Middle East, including in the Gaza Strip. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan] [Reuters]

## Japan, Marshall Islands to strengthen cooperation on free and open Indo-Pacific

(dql) On December 8, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida held bilateral talks with President of the Republic of the Marshall Islands David Kabua. The meeting was part of Kabua’s visit to Japan.

During the meeting, both sides reaffirmed their commitment to deepen cooperation to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Kishida and Kabua also discussed the release of treated water from the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, with the Japanese prime minister reassuring that the water discharge has been conducted safely and has gone as planned. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan] [The Japan News]

## Japan-Norway: Bilateral ties upgraded

(dql) During bilateral talks on December 7 in Tokyo, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and his Norwegian counterpart Jonas Støre reached an agreement on elevating Japan-Norway relations to a strategic partnership.

A joint statement, the first such document issued by leaders of the two countries, expressed opposition to "any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion anywhere in the world," and also called for further talks between their nations' defense authorities.

In addition, Kishida and Støre reaffirmed their determination to collaborate in promoting clean energy transitions globally and in achieving climate neutrality. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan] [Nippon.com]

## Japanese lobby group opposes EU plan for new cybersecurity labelling rules

(dql) The Japan Association of New Economy, a prominent Japanese economic lobby group, has expressed concerns regarding the proposed cybersecurity labelling rules put forth by the European Union (EU). In a letter addressed to the EU industry chief, the group contends that these regulations may impede their entry into the EU market.

This apprehension arises amidst the EU's plans to establish an EU certification scheme (EUCS), designed to validate the cybersecurity of cloud services. The EUCS aims to assist governments and companies within the bloc in making informed decisions when selecting secure vendors for their operations.

Notably, a stipulation within the proposed rules requires non-EU cloud providers like Amazon (AMZN.O), Alphabet's Google (GOOGL.O), and Microsoft (MSFT.O) to form a joint venture with an EU-based company to qualify for the EU cybersecurity label. This particular requirement has drawn criticism from various EU countries and foreign vendors.

The Japan Association of New Economy, focusing on e-business and the development of emerging industries, boasts a membership that includes several influential business leaders. [Reuters]

## 2nd Laos-China Belt and Road Cooperation Forum held

(wn) The second Laos-China Belt and Road Cooperation Forum was held in Vientiane on December 7 to promote communication and cooperation between the two countries further.

Representatives from the two countries met to discuss opportunities for cooperation. They shared recommendations from officials, experts, and representatives of chambers of commerce, financial institutes, the tourism sector, Chinese enterprises investing in Laos, and Chinese investors interested in doing business in Laos. [Lao News Agency]

## Malaysia and Namibia to deepen collaboration in education

(ba) Malaysia and Namibia have the potential to deepen collaboration in the field of education to further foster global understanding and cooperation, said Acting High Commissioner of Malaysia in Namibia Datuk Dr. Mohammad Ramees Yahaya.

Speaking at a Malaysia Education Faor held in Namibia's capital Windhoek on Thusday, he said such collaborative efforts will mutually benefit both sides by empowering youth and creating opportunities for knowledge exchange, cultural understanding, and economic development. [Bernama]

## Malaysia probes local charity's alleged ties to Hamas amid concerns of misused funds

(lm) The Malaysian government is currently conducting an investigation to determine whether a local charity organization, Aman Palestin Berhad, played a role in channeling millions of dollars to Hamas, a group designated as a terrorist organization by both the European Union and the United States. This inquiry was prompted by concerns of alleged support for a conservative Islamist organization within Malaysia by Aman Palestin Berhad. [Bloomberg]

On October 17, Malaysia's anti-graft body took action by freezing as many as 41 bank accounts associated with the charity, containing a total of nearly USD 5 million. The freeze was initiated due to suspicions of the charity's misappropriation of public donations. Additionally, authorities conducted a raid on the charity's office as part of an investigation into potential offenses related to money laundering and terrorist financing laws.

It's noteworthy that Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has been a vocal supporter of the Palestinian cause in Southeast Asia. He recently stated that Malaysia would not recognize what he perceives as a unilateral attempt by the US to restrict support for Hamas. Malaysian leaders have a long history of maintaining friendly relations with Hamas, despite its terrorist designation by Western nations.

However, the primary focus of the Malaysian government's investigation appears to be on whether

the charity Aman Palestin Berhad has ties with Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia, an organization advocating for the imposition of Sharia law within the country. While the government has oversight over state donations directed towards Palestinian causes, officials are concerned that funds from charities could be misused or diverted to unintended purposes.

This investigation is taking place against a backdrop of potential consequences for Malaysia's relations with the United States. Any evidence suggesting that money from Malaysia reached Hamas following its recent actions could further strain relations between the two countries.

It is important to note that, while Iran is widely considered the primary financial backer of Hamas, Aman Palestin is one of two Malaysian-based entities listed by Israel's National Bureau of Counter Terror Financing as organizations accused of directly aiding Hamas' military activities.

## Myanmar government repatriates over 300 Vietnamese citizens from conflict zones

(jw) On December 5, the Vietnamese government repatriated 338 of its citizens who had been trapped in Myanmar's northern Shan state due to the escalating civil conflict.

Many of them were trafficked or had been deceived into working for online gambling businesses.

According to the United Nations' human rights office, approximately 120,000 people are being held in compounds and forced to work for these online scam organizations in Myanmar. [The Manila Times]

## Chinese diplomat hopes Myanmar achieves national reconciliation as soon as possible

(jw) Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed hopes that Myanmar will be able to achieve rapid national reconciliation and continue its political transformation, during a meeting with Myanmar Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Than Swe in Beijing.

The two ministers discussed how both countries can improve law enforcement cooperation to reduce

telecom fraud syndicates that have scammed Chinese nationals. Wang also stated that recent cooperation between the two countries on rescue operations along the border and telecom fraud crackdowns have produced positive results.

Last month, Myanmar turned over 31,000 telecom fraud suspects to the Chinese government. In addition, state media reported that more than 100,000 individuals participate in telecoms fraud daily, operating from at least 1,000 scam centers in Myanmar. [Reuters]

## Myanmar at 8th Mekong-Lancang Cooperation Foreign Ministers' Meeting

(sk) On December 7 Deputy Prime Minister and Union Minister for Foreign Affairs U Than Swe participated in the 8th Mekong-Lancang Cooperation Foreign Ministers' Meeting (8th MLC FMM), in Beijing, China, at the official invitation of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

Co-chaired by Wang and U Than Swe, the meeting included the participation of high-ranking officials from Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam.

The ministers reviewed the progress of Mekong-Lancang Cooperation and discussed future directions for the regional cooperation mechanism, established in 2016 to enhance socio-economic development.

Following the meeting, a joint press briefing was held to share the outcomes of the discussions. [ElevenMyanmar]

Meanwhile, Justice for Myanmar, a covert group of activists campaigning for justice and accountability for the people of Myanmar, is urging the cancellation of the 26th Ministerial Conference of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), slated to be hosted by the Myanmar junta in Naypyidaw on December 15.

The Asian Development Bank, acting as the GMS Secretariat, has opted not to attend or provide support. Justice For Myanmar called for GMS countries to cancel the conference, ban the junta's participation, and urges the ADB to reconsider its support for the program.

The conference, organized by junta officials and featuring sanctioned individuals, is criticized for its timing amid junta losses and human rights abuses. The junta-controlled Myanmar Police Force is overseeing

security, and the event is held at a hotel linked to the junta's crony conglomerate.

Justice For Myanmar emphasized the need to recognize the National Unity Government as Myanmar's legitimate authority. [Mizzima]

## Mongolia, Botswana establish diplomatic ties

(ap) Mongolian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Amartuvshin Gombosuren and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Botswana Lemogang Kwape signed the Joint Communique on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations in New York on December 6.

By signing the agreement with Botswana, Mongolia has established diplomatic ties with all 192 UN member states.

During the signing ceremony, the two countries agreed to cooperate with each other and adhere to the norms of international law. [Montsame]

## Mongolia-Qatar: Talks on strengthening military cooperation held

(dql) Mongolian Minister of Defence Gursediin Saikhanbayar had a meeting with Qatari Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Defence Affairs Khalid bin Mohammed Al Attiyah on December 12. The meeting was part of Gursediin's visit to Qatar.

The two sides discussed issues of mutual interests, including military cooperation relations between the countries and ways to strengthen and develop them. [Aki Press]

## South Korea accuses North Korean hackers of theft of data on laser weapon

(ap) The South Korean police are currently investigating a potential data breach perpetrated by the North Korean hacker group Andariel, which may have compromised information from 14 entities, including details on defense technology such as an anti-aircraft laser.

Collaborating with the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the inquiry seeks to ascertain the extent of data accessed by Andariel, previously identified in 2019 by the US Department of Treasury as a North Korean state-sponsored hacking group dedicated to staeling data from government agencies and foreign businesses.

The Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency disclosed that 250 files or 1.2 terabytes of information related to South Korean defense secrets were leaked. The breach occurred through a proxy server located in Pyongyang, utilized for unauthorized access to research institutes, South Korean defense firms, and pharmaceutical companies.

Furthermore, Andariel faces allegations of stealing KRW 470 million (USD 357,866) worth of bitcoin from three South Korean firms. [Reuters]

## North Korean military activity increased at inter-Korean Joint Security Area, military observers say

(ap/dql) North Korea has intensified its activities at Joint Security Area (JSA) following the recent annulment of the inter-Korean deal [see AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1] designed to ease military tensions, as reported by Swedish and Swiss military generals.

The 2018 agreement encompassed the disarmament of the JSA, alongside provisions for no-fly zones and the cessation of military drills.

Expressing apprehension, Swedish Maj. Gen. Lena Persson Herlitz and Swiss Maj. Gen. Ivo Burgener from the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) voiced concerns over the termination of the inter-Korean agreement. They foresee its termination leading to heightened military confrontations and stressed the importance of buffer zones to maintain a balance between South and North Korea.

Formed following the Korean Armistice Agreement of July 27, 1953, the NNSC, in conjunction with the Military Armistice Commission, was instrumental in regulating relations between Pyongyang and Seoul. Its primary mandate involved inspections and investigations to enforce Armistice stipulations preventing the influx of additional military personnel or new weaponry into Korea, except for the replacement of damaged or worn-out equipment on a like-for-like basis. [Yonhap]

## North Korea closes embassies in Guinea and Senegal

(ap) North Korea, facing economic challenges, has opted to shut down its embassies in Guinea and Senegal as part of an overarching effort to curtail overseas expenditures.

This move follows the recent closure of diplomatic missions in Angola, Spain, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Congo [see AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1].

Establishing diplomatic relations with Senegal in 1972 and Guinea in 1969, North Korea's decision to close these embassies underscores the financial strains imposed by global sanctions on its struggling economy, as noted by the South Korean unification ministry. [Yonhap]

## Pakistan State Oil denies plans to sell stake in refinery limited to Chinese firm

(xc) Pakistan State Oil (PSO), the largest oil marketing company in Pakistan, has denied media reports suggesting that it plans to sell its 30 percent stake in Pakistan Refinery Limited (PRL) to United Energy Group (UEG), a Chinese energy firm. [Pakistan Today]

Earlier reports had indicated that PSO was considering divesting its stake in PRL to address a liquidity crisis and that it had agreed to sell the stake to UEG for an investment of USD 1.5 billion to expand refining capacity and produce Euro 5 compliant fuel. PSO clarified that it has not made any decision to divest its equity in PRL and described the reports as incorrect and misleading.

## United Kingdom seeks Pakistan's help to advocate for women's education with Afghan Taliban

(mr/lm) The British envoy to Pakistan recently met with the chief of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) party, Maulana Fazlur Rehman, and urged him to use his influence with the Afghan Taliban to promote women's education in Afghanistan. However, Maulana Fazlur Rehman expressed that the Western model of education might not be suitable for Afghanistan due to cultural and traditional norms. He suggested giving the

interim Taliban government time and space to address various issues, including women's education. Maulana Fazlur Rehman also mentioned that the Taliban was working on a plan to allow women to study within the cultural and traditional norms of Afghans and Pashtuns. [DAWN]

## Pakistan's COAS commences first official visit to United States amid high-level diplomatic engagements

(tj/lm) Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Syed Asim Munir, has embarked on his inaugural official visit to the United States, marking a significant diplomatic engagement between the two nations. During this visit, General Munir is scheduled to hold meetings with senior military and government officials in the United States. [The Express Tribune]

This visit follows a series of high-level visits by US officials to Pakistan in recent weeks. Between December 9-9, the US special representative for Afghanistan, Tom West, visited Islamabad as part of a regional tour that included stops in Qatar and Saudi Arabia. During his visit, he engaged in discussions with his Pakistani counterpart, Ambassador Asif Durrani, and senior military and security officials. Additionally, Julieta Valls Noyes, the US Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, also visited Pakistan. [Malaysia Sun] [U.S. Department of State]

One key issue that has been the subject of discussion is Pakistan's move to evict foreigners residing in the country without legal documentation, a group that includes an estimated 1.7 million Afghans [see AiR No. 47, November/2023, 3]. Washington has been engaged in talks with Islamabad to ensure the protection and welfare of approximately 25,000 Afghans who were eligible for immigration to the US.

The US seeks to find a workable solution to prevent the deportation of these Afghans to Afghanistan, especially in light of the ongoing tensions between Pakistan and the Taliban government in Afghanistan. However, Pakistani officials have made it clear that any improvement in bilateral relations depends on Kabul taking decisive action against the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

## United States resolution urges Pakistan to uphold democratic institutions, human rights, rule of law

(lm) A resolution has been introduced in the United States House of Representatives, urging Pakistan to preserve democratic institutions, human rights, and the rule of law as the country prepares for general elections in February. [Firstpost]

Additionally, the resolution condemns any efforts to suppress the participation of the Pakistani people in their democratic process, whether through harassment, intimidation, arbitrary detention, or violations of their fundamental human, civil, or political rights. It also denounces any attempts to subvert Pakistan's political, electoral, or judicial processes.

## Philippines gets USD 5.3 billion climate finance commitment from Canada

(lb) During the ongoing 28th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Philippines and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) have garnered a substantial commitment of USD 5.3 billion in climate finance from Canada, as disclosed by Malacañang. This funding, pledged until 2026, is designated to aid the Philippines in advancing biodiversity conservation, climate change mitigation, adaptation, resilience, and gender equality initiatives.

Emphasizing collaboration, the project encompasses research, knowledge-sharing endeavors, and aims to engage both international and domestic private sector investors in supporting sustainable solutions. The executive director of Global Affairs Canada Climate Finance, Andrew Hurst, highlighted the project's ambition to address persistent issues through integrated interventions while expressing optimism that the outcomes will foster innovative solutions with potential longevity beyond the project's duration. [Philstar]

## China, Singapore forge digital Yuan pilot program, expand financial cooperation

(lb/lm) China and Singapore recently held their 19th Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) meeting in Tianjin, co-chaired by Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Lawrence Wong, and

China's Executive Vice Premier, Ding Xuexiang. This meeting resulted in several significant agreements and initiatives designed to enhance cooperation between the two nations.

One of the notable initiatives is a pilot program that allows tourists from China and Singapore to use the digital yuan (e-CNY) for their spending while traveling in both countries. This collaboration between the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) and the Digital Currency Institute of the People's Bank of China (PBOC) is expected to bring greater convenience to travelers when making purchases abroad.

Additionally, MAS unveiled further digital finance and capital markets initiatives aimed at expanding financial cooperation with China. This includes the launch of an Exchange Traded Funds (ETF) Product Link between the Singapore Exchange (SGX) and the Shanghai Stock Exchange (SSE). Furthermore, an MOU was signed between SGX and the Guangzhou Futures Exchange (GFEX) to foster collaboration in information exchange, mutual visits, and joint research efforts.

Singapore's local banks and China's UnionPay International are also exploring the possibility of creating a remittance linkage between Singapore's PayNow and UnionPay, which would facilitate secure cross-border payments.

Moreover, both nations have agreed to implement a mutual 30-day visa exemption agreement, set to commence in early 2024, with the goal of enhancing personnel exchanges. This development aligns with an upgraded protocol for the China-Singapore Free Trade Agreement, which provides Singapore with improved access to China's services sectors. [Reuters] [Monetary Authority of Singapore] [yahoo! finance]

## China, Singapore launch new sustainability initiatives under Tianjin Eco-City bilateral project

(lb) During the 15th Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City Joint Steering Council, 15 new initiatives were unveiled as part of the Tianjin Eco-City project, aiming to expand opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to pilot low-carbon solutions and establish a green and digital shipping corridor between Singapore and Tianjin. [The Business Times]

Launched in 2008, the Tianjin Eco-City project is a government-to-government collaboration fostering sustainable development practices and innovation

between Singapore and China. Under the new project collaboration framework, this initiative seeks to elevate the eco-city's role as a model for climate-friendly urban development, emphasizing green growth, low-carbon living, ecological resilience, innovation, talent development, and governance.

## Indonesia's Batam city tightens entry controls as COVID-19 cases soar in neighboring Singapore

(lb/lm) The Batam Port Health Office in Indonesia is increasing supervision at international entry points due to rising COVID-19 cases in neighboring Singapore. While there are no special requirements for travel from foreign countries to Indonesia, health checks are being conducted at entry points, and the public is reminded to maintain health precautions and complete their COVID-19 vaccinations. [Antara]

## Singapore, United States sign Security of Supply Arrangement for defense supplies

(lb) Singapore and the United States have signed a bilateral, non-binding Security of Supply Arrangement (SOSA). The agreement aims to facilitate both nations in seeking priority delivery of critical and urgent industrial resources essential for meeting defense needs, particularly to address unexpected supply chain disruptions. Singapore is the seventeenth country to enter into such an agreement with the US. [Anadolu Ajansı] [U.S. Department of Defense]

## South Korea, US discuss economic cooperation

(oy) On December 7, South Korea's foreign ministry and the U.S. State Department co-hosted the 7$^{th}$ ROK-US Joint Public-Private Economic Forum, attended by over 100 government, academic and diplomatic personnel.

During the forum, the two sides discussed ways to enhance cooperation in advanced digital and green technologies, such as semiconductors and batteries, to advance "economic security and prosperity".

Both countries agreed on the importance of effective communication between their public and private

sectors in responding to shared global challenges and conveyed their expectation that the Korea-U.S. free trade agreement would evolve to better accommodate the current circumstances and contemporary needs.

Kang Jae-kwon, South Korea's Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Affairs, said that semiconductors, batteries, and electric vehicles are core industries that will spur South Korea and US economies, emphasizing their importance to national security and green transformation. He added that with ongoing changes and disruptions to global supply chains and technological innovations, South Korea will continue economic cooperation with the US in these industries.

Jose Fernandez, U.S. Undersecretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment, highlighted that mutual investments have resulted in the creation of over 70,000 new jobs across both countries, while also strengthening essential supply chains. [Yonhap]

## South Korea, US agree to enhance technological cooperation

(oy) On December 9, South Korea and the US agreed to enhance cooperation in high-end technologies, such as artificial intelligence and semiconductors. The agreement came following the Next Generation Critical and Emerging Technologies Dialogue between both countries.

South Korea and US agreed to explore paths for cooperation between semiconductor technology centers; support joint research projects in the bio sector; inaugurate a civilian-government meeting for the medical and pharmaceutical sectors; and expand research and development collaboration for new batteries and clean energy.

The US will also work with South Korea on various international AI-related meetings it is hosting in 2024. Both countries also agree to work together in developing information and communications technology infrastructure in third countries and in establishing international standards, such as 5G and 6G. [Yonhap]

## Korea National Diplomatic Academy, U.S. State Department's Bureau of Intelligence

## and Research agree to further cooperation

(oy) On December 6, Park Cheol-hee, Chancellor of the Korea National Diplomatic Academy, and Brett Holmgren, Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research, signed the terms of reference (TOR) to strengthen cooperation between both agencies in the field of diplomacy research.

According to the TOR, both institutions agree to host a strategic dialogue on a regular basis, at least once annually. The dialogue will focus on exchanging insights and viewpoints on strategically important matters, including issues on the Korean Peninsula, Indo-Pacific and global strategies.

The academy anticipates that the Terms of Reference (TOR) will bolster its capabilities in diplomatic research. Additionally, it is expected to enhance the foreign ministry's proficiency in analyzing diplomatic information and planning policies. [Yonhap]

## South Korea-The Netherlands: President Yoon to strengthen semiconductor cooperation

(oy/dql) South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol kicked of his four-day state visit to the Netherlands by meeting with a group of Korean residents on December 11, at which he pledged to elevate the two countries' relations to a "semiconductor alliance."

Yoon's visit aims at deepening cooperation between South Korea, a leading chip manufacturer, and the Netherlands, home to chipmaking equipment companies such as ASML.

During his stay in the Netherlands, Yoon is scheduled to visit the ASML headquarters, accompanied by Samsung Electronics Executive Chairman Lee Jae-yong and SK Chairman Chey Tae-won. The two Korean companies are among the world's leading chipmakers. [The Korea Times]

In a statement last week, Yoon told representatives of South Korea's defense industry that he will discuss with the Netherlands ways to strengthen both countries cooperation in semiconductor during his state visit, highlighting the importance of a stable semiconductor supply chain in helping the country's defense industry to develop further.

This comes after South Korea's defense industry exported USD 17.3 billion worth of weapons in 2022, up from USD 7.25 billion in 2021. In addition, the Dutch government has recently joined the U.S.-led effort to curb China's access to advanced chipmaking technology amid intensifying Sino-U.S. competition in the critical industry and other advanced technologies. [Yonhap 1] [Yonhap 2]

## South Korea proposes trade deal with Bulgaria

(oy) On 6 December, South Korea's Trade Minister Ahn Duk-geun met Bulgaria's Economic and Industry Minister Bogdan Bogdanov. During the meeting, Ahn proposed signing a Trade and Investment Promotion Framework with Bulgaria, to improve economic cooperation and exchanges.

Anh also urged stronger collaboration on supply chains of major industries and high-end sectors, such as nuclear power, hydrogen, and bio fields.

He also asked Bulgaria to join the South Korea-led "Carbon Free Alliance" which aims to achieve lower carbon emission through alternative energy sources like nuclear power and green hydrogen. [Yonhap]

## South Korea, Vietnam agree to enhance cooperation on minerals

(oy) On December 7, South Korea and Vietnam signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to collaborate on joint research pertaining to key minerals like rare earth elements and tungsten. The agreement includes plans to establish a research center and advance related technologies.

The MoU was formalized during a meeting between South Korea's Industry Minister Bang Moon-kyu and Vietnam's Minister of Industry and Trade Nguyen Hong Dien.

This MoU serves to expedite the execution of a previous agreement between the two nations. Under the earlier accord, South Korea and Vietnam committed to close cooperation in the exploration and development of significant minerals, reinforcing supply chains, and promoting investments in the minerals sector.

Additionally, the ministers set bilateral trade goals, aiming to achieve USD 150 billion in two-way trade by 2030, a substantial increase from the USD 87.7 billion recorded in 2022.

Vietnam, home to the world's second-largest rare earth element deposits and the third-largest tungsten reserves, complements South Korea's advanced technologies for mining and refining these minerals, as highlighted by the ministry. [Yonhap]

## South Korea-Mexico: Foreign ministers discuss deepening trade and investment cooperation

(dql) On December 8, South Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Park Jin held a meeting with his Mexican counterpart Alicia Bárcena Ibarra. The meeting was part of Bárcena Ibarra's visit to South Korea on December 7-10.

The two sides discussed bilateral relations, substantive cooperation and cooperation on the international stage.

Citing the USD 20 billion trade volume between the two countries in 2022, Park affirmed Seoul's commitment to deepening cooperation in trade and investment, adding the importance to resume talks on a free trade agreement.

Bárcena Ibarra, in response, assured Mexico's utmost efforts on resuming of FTA negotiations and facilitating South Korea's accession to the Pacific Alliance (PA) as an associated state. She welcomed the participation of South Korean companies in the Olmeca refinery facility project and expressed hope for their participation in Mexico's project to construct an Inter-Oceanic Corridor.

On the security situation on the Korean Peninsula, the two ministers agreed to continue joint efforts to induce North Korea to halt provocations and return to denuclearization negotiations. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea]

## Sri Lankan Air Force receives two Harbin Y-12-IV jets from China

(lf) The Sri Lanka Air Force advanced its capabilities with the reception of two Harbin Y-12 IV aircraft

purchased from China. The Harbin Y-12 is a light multi-role aircraft used for passenger and cargo transportation. [Daily Mirror] [Tamil Guardian] [The Island]

Negotiations for the purchase of the aircrafts began in 2017, resulting in the signing of a contract in December 2019 between the Secretary to the Ministry of Defence on behalf of the Sri Lankan Government and the China National Aero-Technology Import & Export Corporation.

## Sri Lanka to receive USD 3.4 million worth of medical equipment from Japan

(lf) The Japanese government will donate USD 3.4 million worth of cutting-edge medical equipment to Sri Jayawardenepura General Hospital in Sri Lanka to combat non-communicable diseases and reduce associated fatalities. The first phase of the donation, valued at roughly USD 335,000, includes essential modification equipment for the Angio-CT machine, ophthalmic equipment, and intensive care unit beds. [Daily Mirror] [Adaderana]

## Sri Lankan, Russian officials discuss deepening security ties

(lf) Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolay Patrushev visited Colombo on December 7 with an envoy of diplomatic personnel, engaging in meetings with Sri Lankan senior officials. President Ranil Wickremesinghe, along with other senior government officials, including Secretary of Defence General GDH Kamal Gunaratne, welcomed the Russian delegation upon their arrival. [Daily Mirror] [Adaderana] [News First]

Notably, the Russian delegation, including officials from various ministries, met with counterparts in Sri Lanka's ministries of Economic Development, Industry and Trade, Agriculture, Energy, and Transport. Besides the security discussions, Patrushev's visit included the humanitarian gesture of delivering a shipment of the Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine to Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, a special discussion on enhancing bilateral security relations and international information security occurred at the Public Security Ministry. Minister Tiran Alles chaired the meeting, joined by Nikolai Patrushev and Dr. Wijeyadasa

Rajapakshe, Minister of Justice, Prison Affairs, and Constitutional Reforms.

## Sri Lankan High Commissioner to Kenya visits Guinea-Bissau

(lf) Sri Lankan High Commissioner to Kenya, Kana Kananathan, held bilateral talks with Guinea-Bissau Foreign Minister Carlos Pinto Pereira during a brief trip to the nation on November 6. The discussions primarily revolved around fostering bilateral ties and enhancing economic diplomacy between the two nations, both of whom belong to the Global South and enjoy similar stances on international developments. The visit is part of Sri Lanka's emerging relations with African countries, which is spearheaded by Kananathan as the senior-most diplomatic representative on behalf of his nation to the continent. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

## Taiwan hosts Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue with US

(jr) The United States of America and Taiwan held a fourth round of talks under the Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue (EPPD) on December 8.

Discussions included talks on sustainable development, supply chains, energy transition, and investments. Both sides also exchanged views about increasing information sharing.

A key topic for discussion was also for semiconductor talent featured on the EPPD agenda, as did the topics of AI and zero carbon emissions.

The two sides also agreed they would draw up a list of plans for the next two years. [Taiwan News]

## Taiwan spots 26 Chinese military aircraft, ten naval ships

(jr) Taiwan's Ministry of National Defence has tracked 26 Chinese military aircraft and 10 military vessels around Taiwan between December 7, 6 am, and December 8, 6 am.

According to Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense, 13 aircraft cross the Taiwan Straits medium line, which

included eight Chengdu J-10 fighter jets, four Sukhoi Su-30 combat jets, and one BZK-005 reconnaissance drone.

One Shaanxi Y-9 aircraft and one KJ-500 airborne early warning and control plane entered the southwest corner of Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ).

One People's Liberation Army air balloon crossed the median line.

In response, Taiwan sent aircraft and naval ships and deployed air defense missile systems to monitor PLA activity.

So far this December, the People's Republic of China sent 57 military aircraft and 43 naval ships around Taiwan. [Taiwan News]

## Taiwan-India: MoU on science research signed

(jr) Taiwan's government signed an MOU concerning scientific research and cooperation with India during the 2023 Indian-Taiwan joint conference on cooperation in science and technology on December 6.

This event also marked the first bilateral and interpersonal ministerial-level talks since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Under the agreement, research centers affiliated with NAR Labs can freely exchange scientific research with 37 research centers under CSIR without needing individual cooperation agreements. This move is expected to strengthen scientific cooperation between the two countries.

Taiwan and India have a close technological partnership, having held 12 ministerial-level bilateral meetings, 29 bilateral forums, and seminars. They have executed over 115 cooperation projects to date.

During the meeting, both sides also discussed biotechnology, nanoelectronics, space technology, green energy, and cyber security. [Taiwan News]

## Taiwan Legislative Speaker expresses gratitude for Czech Support

(jr) The speaker of Taiwan's Legislative Yuan Speaker You Si-kun, has thanked the Czech Republic for its continuous support of Taiwan during a meeting with Czech Senate Foreign Affairs, Defense and Security Committee Chair Pavel Fischer on December 6.

You also highlighted the growing support for Taiwan among democratic nations and that Taiwan is committed to making this world safer for democracies.

Fischer, for his part, said there was still much work to be done to have more cohesion and cooperation within the global democratic alliance, but it was possible to achieve.

He added that Czech Republic and Taiwan must uphold human rights, democracy, the sharing of universal values, and the rule of law.

Fischer was in Taiwan for a three-day visit to exchange views about bilateral cooperation and regional security developments with Taiwanese leaders.

He met with Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu December 5, and was awarded the Friendship Medal of Diplomacy for his work to deepen ties. [Taiwan News] [Taiwan Today]

## Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin to commence five-day visit to Japan on December 14

(tt) On December 14, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin will be heading to Japan to meet with top automakers and express support for their transition to manufacturing electric vehicles (EVs) in Thailand. This trip includes a meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to discuss various matters, including economic cooperation. He will be accompanied by senior officials from the Finance and Transport ministries, as well as the Board of Investment. [The Nation]

Additionally, Srettha plans to showcase the Land Bridge Project, which is designed to provide a new trade route between the Indian and Pacific oceans, bypassing the Malacca Strait. Srettha, who is also finance minister, touted the grand vision to Chinese investors when he attended the latest Belt and Road Forum in China in mid-October before pitching the USD 28 billion megaproject to Middle Eastern investors a few weeks later. He took the idea to San Francisco on November 12 when he attended the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, where he spoke to

American businesses during his "Thailand Land Bridge Roadshow."

In related updates, Thailand's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs met with the Presidents of JETRO Bangkok and the Japan Chamber of Commerce Bangkok (JCCB) on December 4. The latter's visit was to pay a courtesy call and report the results of JETRO's regular Survey on Business Sentiment of Japanese Corporations in Thailand for the first half of 2023, as well as to convey JCCB member companies' economic policy suggestions to the Thai government. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

Additionally, on December 12, the Thai Cabinet announced that Japanese making business trips to Thailand of no longer than 30 days will be exempted from requiring a visa. The exemption was proposed by Foreign Affairs Ministry to boost and facilitate Japanese investments and will be effective from January 1, 2024, to December 31, 2026. [Bangkok Post] [Thai PBS]

## Head of Thailand's Peace Dialogue Panel for Deep South conflict meets with Malaysian facilitator

(lm) The newly appointed head of the Peace Dialogue Panel, a government-appointed entity responsible for conducting discussions with insurgents in the southern region of Thailand, has visited neighboring Malaysia for a meeting with facilitator Gen Zulkifli Zainal Abidin as part of his familiarization process. [Bangkok Post]

Chatchai Bangchuad, who serves as a deputy secretary-general of the National Security Council, assumed the position late in November, succeeding Gen Wanlop Rugsanaoh. During his meeting with Gen Zulkifli Zainal Abidin, Chatchai reaffirmed his commitment to advancing the peace process through the Joint Comprehensive Plan Towards Peace. He emphasized the importance of reducing violence and involving the public in the peace negotiation process.

One notable initiative on the agenda is a Ramadan peace effort, aiming to halt violence during the Islamic month of fasting. This initiative is expected to create a conducive atmosphere for public consultations. In terms of public engagement, the panel is dedicated to inclusivity and ensuring that the voices of all stakeholders are taken into account. A working committee under the panel is scheduled to hold discussions with various parties in January next year, followed by a comprehensive team discussion.

## Former Thai opposition party leader Pita meets with representatives of Thai workers in South Korea

(bk) Pita Limjaroenrat, the former leader of Thailand's main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) and now chief adviser to the party's leader, met with representatives of Thai workers in South Korea to address their concerns about unfair treatment by their employers.

The issues raised by the workers included unfair treatment of Thai women in the agricultural sector, seasonal layoffs leading to illegal immigration, and unfulfilled welfare promises. Despite being suspended as a Member of Parliament, Pita expressed his commitment to addressing the issues troubling the workers so that other Move Forward MPs can seek solutions. [The Nation]

He also pledged to push for clear visa classifications for Thai workers to prevent exploitation upon their arrival in South Korea. In fact, in an interview with *The Korea Times* on December 6, Pita pointed out that the Thai government should negotiate with South Korea to establish a fair labor export system.

Pita's trip also included a scheduled lecture "Towards a Brighter Horizon: Thai Democracy and the Future of Thai-Korea Relations" at Korea University, and meetings with managements at YG Entertainment and Krafton, an e-sports company. [The Korea Times] [The Standard]

## Laos, Thailand close ranks on drug smugglers

(lm) Pol Lt Gen Panurat Lakboon, Thailand's Assistant National Police Chief and Acting Secretary-General of the Office of the Narcotics Control Board, held a meeting on December 6 with Public Security Minister Maj Gen Khamking Phuilamanyvong and the Chief of the Lao police. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss bilateral cooperation in drug suppression efforts and to coordinate the search for 48 Thai drug suspects who are currently fugitives in Laos. [Bangkok Post]

This year, Thailand has successfully intercepted 4.8 million methamphetamine pills from smugglers, leading to the arrest of five suspects. An ongoing investigation is underway to locate and apprehend the leader of the drug trafficking ring involved.

## Myanmar, Thailand foreign ministers meet, agree to form aid task force

(tt/lm) Myanmar and Thailand have agreed to establish a task force aimed at enhancing humanitarian assistance for individuals displaced by the ongoing conflict in Myanmar. This decision was made during discussions between Myanmar's junta-appointed foreign minister, Than Swe, and Thailand's foreign minister, Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara, at the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation meeting in China. [Reuters]

The initiative may also explore the possibility of involving other humanitarian aid organizations, as noted by Thailand's foreign ministry. Bangkok envisions that this collaborative effort will promote constructive engagement among Myanmar's military-controlled government, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the international community, as outlined in the official statement. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

## Thai Prime Minister deems additional hostage releases uncertain as talks await next Israel-Hamas truce

(bk) Thailand's Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin expressed his view that there is no current information on when the remaining Thai hostages in Gaza will be freed. Their release might depend on the next truce between Israel and Hamas. Discussions on negotiating the release of the hostages will take place between Prime Minister Srettha and General Songwit Noonpackdee, the chief of the Royal Thai Armed Forces. [Royal Thai Government] [The Nation]

## Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet on first visit to Vietnam to bolster ties

(wn/lm) Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet made his inaugural visit to Vietnam with the aim of strengthening bilateral ties between the two nations.

During his two-day visit from December 11 to December 12, Hun Manet held meetings with Vietnam's top leaders, including General Secretary of the Communist Party Nguyen Phu Trong, President Vo Van Thuong, and Assembly Chairman Vuong Dinh Hue. These discussions resulted in the signing of

memorandums of understanding covering various fields such as trade, diplomacy, technology, and science. [The Nation]

They have jointly proposed a substantial boost in bilateral trade, aiming to reach a target of USD 20 billion soon. Additionally, they expressed a shared commitment to promote and facilitate investment and business collaboration between the two nations. Regarding defence and security matters, both leaders affirmed their adherence to a fundamental principle: preventing hostile entities from utilizing the territory of one country to harm the other. [VNEXPRESS]

Vietnam and Cambodia established diplomatic relations in 1967, and their two-way trade reached USD 11 billion in 2022. Vietnam is currently the largest investor in Cambodia within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) bloc, with nearly USD 3 billion in registered capital across 205 projects.

## Chinese President Xi makes first state visit to Vietnam in years after Hanoi strengthened ties with US

(lm) China's President Xi Jinping arrived in Vietnam for a two-day state visit on December 12, his first as China's leader to Hanoi in six years, seeking to "manage differences" with Beijing's strategically important Southeast Asian partner. On the first day of the trip, the two countries signed 37 cooperation deals; the details of all the agreements have not yet been made public. [Reuters]

The visit coincides with the 15th anniversary of the establishment of a "comprehensive strategic partnership" between the two countries. Crucially, it also comes just three months after Vietnam upgraded its relationship with the United States to that same partnership level, putting Washington on an equal footing with Beijing in Hanoi's diplomatic hierarchy.

Against this backdrop, China and Vietnam signed 37 agreements on December 12, including a memorandum of understanding on cross-border rail development. One of the key projects under consideration is the enhancement of the rail link between Kunming in China and Haiphong in Vietnam, which passes through regions rich in rare earths. While the specifics of grants and loans from China for rail development are not clear, the improved transport links would benefit both nations.

Additionally, Vietnam stands to increase its exports to China, particularly in the area of agricultural products, while China aims to integrate its northern regions with its southern supply chain networks. This move has been driven by Chinese firms relocating some operations to Vietnam to be closer to Western clients, mitigate risks associated with US-China trade tensions, and reduce exposure to China's economic challenges.

In addition to economic cooperation, the two countries are exploring broader collaboration in security, connectivity, green energy, and critical minerals, with a particular focus on rare earths, of which China is the leading refiner and Vietnam holds significant reserves.

## India, Vietnam hold joint peacekeeping exercise

(lm) India and Vietnam are conducting their fourth Joint Military Exercise, VINBAX-2023, with a contingent of 45 personnel from the Indian Armed Forces in Hanoi. The exercise, which began on December 11 and will continue until December 21, includes a representation of 45 personnel from the Vietnam People's Army. [Business Standard] [VietnamPlus]

Initiated in 2018, Exercise VINBAX is an annual training event alternately held in India and Vietnam. The previous edition took place at Chandimandir Military Station in August 2022.

The exercise's main objectives are to foster collaborative partnerships, enhance inter-operability, and facilitate the sharing of best practices between the Indian and Vietnamese armed forces, aligning with Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter on Peacekeeping Operations.

## Thailand, Vietnam foster security cooperation

(lm) On December 8, Vietnam's Deputy Minister of Public Security, Sen. Lieut. Gen. Luong Tam Quang, held separate meetings with Thailand's Deputy Commissioner-General of the Royal Thai Police, Pol Gen Surachate Hakparn, and the Deputy General Secretary of the National Security Council, Voranut Khongmuang, in Bangkok. [VietnamPlus]

The discussions focused on enhancing cooperation in crime prevention and combat, especially regarding transnational crimes. Both sides committed to not

allowing their territories to be used for harming the other country and agreed to improve information exchange, arrest and repatriate wanted criminals, and expedite negotiations for an extradition agreement.

They also discussed security and anti-terrorism measures, with plans to hold the 12th meeting of the Joint Working Group on Political-Security Cooperation in Vietnam in July 2024.

## Vietnam, Germany step up cooperation via party channel

(lm) A delegation from the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), led by Le Quoc Minh, a member of the CPV Central Committee and Deputy Head of its Commission for Information and Education, recently visited Germany from December 4 to December 9. [VietnamPlus]

The delegation participated in the fourth policy dialogue between the CPV and Germany's left-wing Die Linke Party. Additionally, Le Quoc Minh had meetings with Tobias Bank, the Secretary-General of the German Die Linke Party, and held discussions with leaders of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and the Fraunhofer Institute for Wind Energy Systems IWES.

Additionally, during their visit, the delegation learned about industrial transformation in Sachsen-Anhalt and met with the Vice President of the state parliament. They also had a working session with representatives from Lausitz and Central-German Mining Administration Company.

## Vietnamese delegation visits United Kingdom to promote people-to-people relations

(lm) A delegation from the Vietnam-UK Friendship Association (VUFA), led by VUFA Vice President Nguyen Van Phuc, conducted a working visit to the United Kingdom from December 3 to December 10. Overall, the visit aimed to enhance bilateral ties, facilitate cultural and academic exchanges, and promote friendship and cooperation between the two countries. [VietnamPlus]

### Vietnam's Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh receives President of US Semiconductor Industry Association

(lm) Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh welcomed the President of the US Semiconductor Industry Association (SIA), John Neuffer, and leaders from major US semiconductor companies during their visit to Vietnam. [VietnamPlus]

Prime Minister Chinh highlighted Vietnam's potential in the semiconductor industry and its goal to train 50,000 engineers by 2030, focusing on chip design. John Neuffer, on his end, praised Vietnam's progress in semiconductors and expressed US companies' readiness to cooperate with Hanoi, especially in talent development and workforce training.

# Announcements

## Upcoming Online Events

**13 December 2023 @ 9:00 - 11:30 a.m. (GMT-5), Brookings, USA**

### Redefining US-Japan-South Korea relations in an era of economic security

The leaders of the United States, South Korea, and Japan announced a new chapter of their partnership built upon common recognition of challenges to regional stability, enhanced trilateral consultation, and policy coordination. The goal of the conversation is to assess current trends in economic security and their implications for U.S.-Japan-South Korea relations. The first panel will address technological competition with China and the redesign of export controls, and the

second one will discuss the efforts to curb economic coercion and sustain a rules-based trading system.

Learn more about the event at [Brookings].

**13 December 2023 @ 12:00 p.m. – 1:00 p.m. (GMT-5), RAND Corporation, USA**

## China, Taiwan, and the United States: The Coming War?

The discussion will be built on the examination on how the United States figures into the defense of Taiwan and breaks down the possibility of a large-scale Chinese military attack on the island.

Learn more about the event at [RAND Corporation].

**13 December 2023 @ 9:00—10:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Center for Global Development (CGD), USA**

## What Does the Future of Global Health Financing Look Like?

The disadvantage of the modern structure of global health system is its high complexity, and the proliferation of the initiatives in this field has led to the verticalization of aid, circumventing government systems. The event will bring together key voices from the Future of Global Health Initiatives (FGHI) process, which has convened a group of countries, global health leaders, and experts to reflect on how global health initiatives can best support national health priorities and progress universal health coverage.

Learn more about the event at [CGD].

**13 December 2023 @ 8:00 a.m. – 2:50 p.m. (GMT-5), Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), USA**

## Action now: Combatting corruption to protect the environment

The event and presentation of research findings will set the scene for discussion on the role of corruption in forest loss and exploitation of minerals, and the good practices and emerging opportunities to address such corruption. Additionally, the discussion will centre

on safeguarding a just energy transition, drawing lessons from efforts to combat illegal gold mining.

Learn more about the event at [EITI].

**13 December 2023 @ 9:00 - 10:00 a.m. (GMT+1), German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), Germany**

## Franco-German Observatory of the Indo-Pacific

The event accents on growth of the meaning of the Indo-Pacific region. Thus, there will be presented different visions of the region, its geo-strategical value and the place of China, the US, and Europe within this framework. Also, the experts will consider economic interdependence and independence, of trade and investment, and the expectations the countries of the Indo-Pacific might have towards the "West" in general, and Europe, in particular.

Learn more about the event at [GIGA].

**13 December 2023 @ 9:00 - 10:15 a.m. (GMT+8), ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore**

## A Near-Term Economic Outlook for Myanmar in 2024

The conversation will focus on the analysis of Myanmar's business environment, including private sector development and foreign direct investment.

Learn more about the event at [ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute].

**14 December 2023 @ 10:00 - 11:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Middle East Institute, USA**

## The Middle East and Navigating the U.S.-China Tech Cold War

The discussion will revolve around emerging technology trends and associated risks likely to dominate next year, from the rise of increasingly convincing generative Artificial Intelligence to more prevalent use of smart sensors to the impact of dual-use technologies and beyond. There will be raised the

following questions: (1) How do these new technologies impact the ongoing U.S.-China "Technology Cold War," and what are the ripple effects of this evolving rivalry on third countries, particularly in the MENA region? (2) What opportunities do the latest technological advancements offer to the Middle East and the broader world, and what are the challenges? (3) How do technologies like 'deepfakes', continually improving chat bots, machine-generated imagery and advanced photo editing, as well as improved surveillance shape and shift regional conflict narratives?

Learn more about the event at [Middle East Institute].

**14 December 2023 @ 3:00 - 4:00 p.m. (GMT+1), Bruegel, Belgium**

## Industrial Policy, Green Subsidies, and the WTO

The experts will analyze the modern green industrial policies and different options for international cooperation aiming at combating tensions between countries over the globe.

Learn more about the event at [Bruegel].

**14 December 2023 @ 2:00 - 4:30 p.m. (GMT+8), Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS), The Philippines**

## Enhancing Conflict Resolution through the Barangay Justice System: The Impact of Project BRAVE in BARMM

The event will highlight the results of the impact evaluation conducted by Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) on "Project BRAVE: Breaking Ascent of Violent Extremism" in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). This initiative aims to strengthen local governance in settling disputes and resolving conflicts through the Barangay Justice System (BJS). The webinar aims to evaluate the effectiveness of Project BRAVE in increasing community awareness and trust in the BJS. It also explores the knowledge and capacity of service providers in mediating conflicts through formal BJS processes.

Learn more about the event at [PIDS].

**14 December 2023 @ 10:00 - 11:15 a.m. (GMT-5), Stimson Center, USA**

### The Climate Crisis and Gender: Regional, National and Local Approaches

The central issue this discussion explores is what action is required to strengthen approaches to address the gendered dimensions and impact of climate insecurity, particularly efforts to end violence against women and girls and embed the participation of women peace-builders in these processes.

Learn more about the event at [Stimson Center].

**14 December 2023 @ at 4:00 p.m. (GMT+1), Istituto Affari Internazionali, Italy**

### Nuclear Non-Proliferation and the Global South: Understanding Divergences and Commonalities

The event aims to give selected speakers and the public a fruitful occasion to discuss new trends occurring in the global nuclear order, with a special focus on actors from the Global South.

Learn more about the event at [Istituto Affari Internazionali].

**14 December 2023 @ 10:00 - 11:30 a.m. (GMT+8), ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore**

### Structural Transformation and Inclusive Growth in Cambodia: The What, How and When

The webinar is dedicated to transformation of Cambodia. There will be addressed such questions as (1) How can structural transformation deliver more inclusive growth in Cambodia? (2) What are the key constraints to such diversification and how can they be overcome? (3) What is required to ensure that future growth is more sustainable and resilient?

Learn more about the event at [ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute].

**15 December 2023 @ 10:00 – 11:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Asia Society, USA**

### Taiwan Elections in 2024: Who is Running and What to Expect

Taiwan will hold a landmark presidential election on January 13, 2024. The outcome of the election will have major implications for the trajectory of peace and stability between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan for years to come. There will be analyzed the candidates to be the president and possible consequences of voters` choice.

Learn more about the event at [Asia Society].

**15 December 2023 @ 10:00 - 11:15 a.m. (GMT-5), Brookings, USA**

### A conversation with US Ambassador to China R. Nicholas Burns on US-China relations

President Joe Biden and President Xi Jinping participated in a summit meeting November 15 in Woodside, California in which U.S. Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns participated. This event will offer a unique opportunity to gain insight from a participant in the talks about the impact of the summit on the direction of U.S.-China relations. The questions, will be revealed, are (1) Will any stabilization of relations resulting from the summit endure? (2) What issues will animate the relationship in the year ahead?

Learn more about the event at [Brookings].

**18 December 2023 @ 11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. (GMT-8), Asia Society, USA**

### Perpetual Foreigners or Americans? Asian Americans' Views of Their Motherlands

The key issue of the meeting is perception of current and former motherlands by migrants and their tensions with indigenous inhabitant. The focus will be on the specific views of Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese and Vietnamese adults in the U.S.

Learn more about the event at [Asia Society].

**19 December 2023 @ 10:00 - 11:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Brookings, USA**

### Global actors in the war in Israel and Gaza

The war in Israel and Gaza has impacted many countries far beyond the combatants or their immediate neighbors. Major global actors are now both involved in and affected by the crisis. Key states including Russia, China, India, and Turkey are deeply engaged with the developments in the Middle East and with the U.S. response to them. The webinar aims to delve into the foreign policies of key global actors to analyze the international aspects of the Middle East crisis.

Learn more about the event at [Brookings].

## Recent Book Releases

**Greta L. Uehling, *Everyday War: The Conflict Over Donbas, Ukraine,*** Cornell University Press, 210 pages, published February 15, 2023, reviewed in [Foreign Affairs].

**Robert D. Kaplan, *The Tragic Mind: Fear, Fate, and the Burden of Power,*** Yale University Press, 152 pages, published February 14, 2023. Visit [Foreign Affairs] to read a review.

**Elliott Prasse-Freeman, *Rights Refused: Grassroots Activism and State Violence in Myanmar,*** Stanford University Press, 366 pages, published September 5, 2023. Find a review in [LSE].

**Sinae Hyun, *Indigenizing the Cold War: Nation-Building by the Border Patrol Police in Thailand,*** University of Hawaii Press, 248 pages, published April, 2023, with a review in [LSE].

**Luke Munn, *Technical Territories: Data, Subjects, The Age of AI and Our Human Future and Spaces in Infrastructural Asia,*** University of Michigan Press, 200 pages, published July 11, 2023, with a review in [LSE].

**Pinelopi Koujianou Goldberg & Greg Larson. *The Unequal Effects of Globalization. MIT Press*,** 136 pages, published August 15, 2023, with a review in [LSE].

## Calls

The **Chair of Political Science and Comparative European Research of Saarland University** invites paper proposals for its ***conference on "Emotional Dynamics of (In)security and Politics,"*** to be held on June 11-13, 2024, at the Saarland University. The deadline for abstract submission is December 15, 2023. For more information, see [Saarland University].

**Quilting Points** invites paper proposals for its ***2024 symposium "Racial Capitalism and Cultural Resistance,"*** to be held on May 1, 2024, at the University of Leeds. The deadline for abstract submission is December 15, 2023. For more information, see [Quilting Points].

The **Chair of the Social Justice in Education department at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto**, invites paper proposals for its ***conference "Black/ African Feminisms,"*** to be held on April 19-20, 2024. The deadline for abstract submission is December 18, 2023. For more information, see [OISE].

## Jobs and Positions

The **German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance (CPG)** seeks an **Office Manager** to be based in Bangkok, Thailand. Applications are accepted until not specified. More information is provided as [CPG].

The **German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance (CPG)** seeks a **Asia Weekly Regional Editor (South-, Southeast-, or East Asia)** to be based in Remote Working. Applications are accepted until open until filled. More information is provided as [CPG].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Human Resources Analyst** to be based in Lusaka, Zambia. Applications are accepted until December 24, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Procurement and Supply Chain Management (PSM) Specialist** to be based in Kabul, Afghanistan. Applications are accepted until December 17, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Analyste Justice** to be based in

Abidjan, Ivory Coast. Applications are accepted until December 22, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **WPS Programme Specialist** to be based in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Applications are accepted until December 27, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Project Admin & Finance Associate** to be based in Tbilisi, Georgia. Applications are accepted until December 22, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Programme Associate** to be based Tuguegarao, Philippines. Applications are accepted until December 25, 2023. More information is provided as [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Head of Partnerships, Communications and Reports** to be based in Zambia. Applications are accepted until December 22, 2023. More information is provided as [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **System Integration Project Manager** to be based in Italy. Applications are accepted until December 29, 2023. More information is provided as [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Head of Governmental Services** to be based in Johannesburg, South Africa. Applications are accepted until January 16, 2024. More information is provided as [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Business Support Assistant** to be based in Ambovombe, Madagascar. Applications are accepted until December 22, 2023. More information is provided as [WFP].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **Partnerships Specialist** to be based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Applications are accepted until December 24, 2023. More information is provided as [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **Health & Nutrition Officer** to be based in Syria. Applications are accepted until December 23, 2023. More information is provided as [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks an **Investigation Specialist** to be based in New York, United States. Applications are accepted until

December 24, 2023. More information is provided as [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **Consultancy**, to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until January 1, 2024. More information is provided as [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **Consultant** to be based in Switzerland. Applications are accepted until December 23, 2023. More information is provided as [UNICEF].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Health Policy Advisor**, to be based in Micronesia. Applications are accepted until December 24, 2023. More information is provided as [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **HR Associate**, to be based in Istanbul, Turkey. Applications are accepted until December 22, 2023. More information is provided as [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Partnerships and External Relations Specialist**, to be based in Hanoi, Vietnam. Applications are accepted until December 28, 2023. More information is provided as [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Medical Officer**, to be based in Mogadishu, Somalia. Applications are accepted until December 25, 2023. More information is provided as [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Regional Advisor - Risk Communication and Community Engagement Officer** to be based in Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo. Applications are accepted until December 27, 2023. More information is provided as [WHO].

The **United Nations Secretariate (UN)** seeks a **Psychosocial Support Expert** to be based in Geneva, Switzerland. Applications are accepted until December 31, 2023. More information is provided as [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariate (UN)** seeks an **Executive Director, United Nations Human Settlements Programme** to be based in Nairobi, Kenya. Applications are accepted until January 8, 2024. More information is provided as [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariate (UN)** seeks a **Secretary to a Member of the Court** to be based in The Hague, Netherlands. Applications are accepted

until January 5, 2024. More information is provided as [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariate (UN)** seeks a **Secretary to a Member of the Court** to be based in The Hague, Netherlands. Applications are accepted until January 5, 2024. More information is provided as [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariate (UN)** seeks a **Finance and Budget Officer** to be based in New York, United States. Applications are accepted until December 20, 2023. More information is provided as [UN].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Child Protection Manager**, to be based in Poland. Applications are accepted until February 29, 2024. More information is provided as [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks an **Additional Ukrainian Supplemental Appropriations Social Adjustment Services Case Worker** to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until February ค, 2024. More information is provided as [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Medical Caseworker** to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until February 1, 2024. More information is provided as [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Business Development Manager**, to be based in Niger. Applications are accepted until January 8, 2024. More information is provided as [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Policy Advocacy & Communication Advisor**, to be based in Jordan. Applications are accepted until January 7, 2024. More information is provided as [IRC].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **Senior Emergency and Rehabilitation Officer,** to be based in Rome, Italy. Applications are accepted until December 29, 2023. More information is provided as [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **Project Coordinator**, to be based in Mandaluyong City, Philippines. Applications are accepted until December 22, 2023. More information is provided as [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **National Forest Inventory Advisor,** to be based in

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Applications are accepted until December 27, 2023. More information is provided as [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **FAO Representative**, to be based in Kingston, Jamaica. Applications are accepted until January 5, 2024. More information is provided as [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **Programme Associate** to be based in Rome, Italy. Applications are accepted until December 22, 2023. More information is provided as [FAO].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks an **Administrative Assistant**, to be based in Costa Rica. Applications are accepted until December 24, 2023. More information is provided as [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Business Analyst,** to be based in Geneva, Switzerland. Applications are accepted until December 24, 2023. More information is provided as [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Project Associate**, to be based in Costa Rica. Applications are accepted until December 31, 2023. More information is provided as [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Departmental Support and Coordination Officer**, to be based in Geneva, Switzerland. Applications are accepted until December 28, 2023. More information is provided as [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks an I**nformation Management Office**, to be based in Geneva, Switzerland. Applications are accepted until December 24, 2023. More information is provided as [IOM].

The **Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO)** seeks **a Performance Monitoring Officer**, to be based in Vienna, Austria. Applications are accepted until January 8, 2024. More information is provided as [CTBTO].

The **Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO)** seeks **an Atmospheric Sciences Officer**, to be based in Vienna, Austria. Applications are accepted until January 12, 2024. More information is provided as [CTBTO].

The **Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO)** seeks a **Logistics Support Unit**, to be based in Vienna, Austria. Applications are

accepted until December 30, 2023. More information is provided as [CTBTO].

The **Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO)** seeks a **Senior Legal Officer**, to be based in Vienna, Austria. Applications are accepted until January 14, 2024. More information is provided as [CTBTO].

The **Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO)** seeks an **Associate Telecommunications Officer**, to be based in Vienna, Austria. Applications are accepted until January 12, 2024. More information is provided as [CTBTO].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a **Grant Monitoring Advisory Specialist** to be based in Geneva, Switzerland. Applications are accepted until January 7, 2024. More information is provided as [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks an **ICT Associate**, to be based in Valencia, Spain. Applications are accepted until December 26, 2023. More information is provided as [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a **Journalist Radio** to be based in Democratic Republic of the Congo. Applications are accepted until January 15, 2024. More information is provided as [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a **Senior Finance Advisor**, to be based in Geneva, Switzerland. Applications are accepted until January 7, 2024. More information is provided as [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a **Partnerships Officer**, to be based in Tokyo, Japan. Applications are accepted until December 28, 2023. More information is provided as [UNOPS].

The **Family Health International (FHI 360)** seeks a **Technical Officer, to** be based in Abuja, Nigeria. Applications are accepted until not specified. More information is provided as [FHI 360].

The **Family Health International (FHI 360)** seeks a **Procurement Assistant,** to be based in Addis Ababa , Ethiopia. Applications are accepted until not specified. More information is provided as [FHI 360].

The **Family Health International (FHI 360)** seeks a **Safety and Security Officer,** to be based in Ethiopia. Applications are accepted until not specified. More information is provided as [FHI 360].

The **Family Health International (FHI 360)** seeks a **Program Assistant**, to be based in Washington DC, United States. Applications are accepted until not specified. More information is provided as [FHI 360].

The **Family Health International (FHI 360)** seeks a **Strategic Information Manager**, to be based in Yangon, Myanmar. Applications are accepted until not specified. More information is provided as [FHI 360].

**New York University's Program in International Relations** in New York is inviting applications for a **Visiting Assistant Professor in International History**. Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [New York University].

The **Department of English at Southern Methodist University** in Dallas, Texas is inviting applications for a **Full Professor to the Edmund J. and Louise W. Kahn Chair.** Application submission deadline is open until December 15, 2023. For more details, see [Southern Methodist University].

**Albion College** in Albion, Michigan is inviting applications for a **Visiting Assistant Professor position in English**. Application submission deadline is open until January 22, 2024. For more details, see [Albion College].

**Santa Barbara City College** in California, United States is inviting applications for a **Part-Time Instructor Pool - Ethnic Studies**. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Santa Barbara City College].

**Santa Barbara City College** in California, United States is inviting applications for a **Part-Time Instructor Pool - Sociology**. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Santa Barbara City College].

**Santa Barbara City College** in California, United States is inviting applications for a **Part-Time Instructor Pool - Global Studies**. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Santa Barbara City College].

The **American Studies Program at Williams College** in Massachusetts, United States is inviting applications for a two**-year Visiting Assistant Professor (VAP) of American Studies.** Application submission deadline is

open until January 19, 2024. For more details, see [Williams College].

**Daley College City Colleges of Chicago** in Illinois, United States is inviting applications for a **part-time Faculty to teach Child Development.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [City Colleges of Chicago].

The **Department of Psychology at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC) College of Arts & Sciences** in Tennessee, United States is inviting applications for Lecturer in Psychology. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [UTC].

The **College of New Jersey** in New Jersey, United States is inviting applications for an **Adjunct School of Humanities & Social Sciences**. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [TCNJ]

**Syracuse University** in New York, United States is inviting applications for a **Part-Time Faculty of Psychology. Application** submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Syracuse University].

**University of South Carolina Upstate** in South Carolina, United States is inviting applications for an **Instructor of Criminal Justice and Director of the Upstate Crime Analysis Center**. Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [University of South Carolina Upstate].

**Alcorn State University** in Mississippi, United States is inviting applications for a **Teacher, Child Development**. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Alcorn State University]

The **Department of Environmental Studies and Science at Saint Michael's College** in Colchester, Vermont is inviting applications for an **Environmental Studies and Science Teaching Fellow**. Application submission deadline is January 15, 2024. For more details, see [Saint Michael's College].

**Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at University of Missouri-Kansas City** in Missouri United States is inviting applications for an **Adjunct Faculty Teaching Position**. Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [University of Missouri-Kansas City]

**Department of Social and Cultural Analysis at New York University** in New York, United States is inviting

applications for an **Assistant Professor in Black Cultural Studies**. Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [New York University].

The **School of Animal Sciences** in Virginia, United States is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor of Meat Science**. Application submission deadline is open until January 14, 2023. For more details, see [Virginia Tech].

**University of Cincinnati** in Ohio is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor Anthropology - African and African Diaspora Archaeology.** Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [University of Cincinnati].

**University of Central Florida** in Hattiesburg, Mississippi is inviting applications for an **Associate Professor or Professor and Director, National Center for Integrated Coastal Research.** Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [University of Central Florida].

**Brookdale Community College** in Lincroft, New Jersey is inviting applications for an **INSTRUCTOR - CRIMINAL JUSTICE** Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [Brookdale Community College]

The **Cornell University Department of Information Science (IS) in the Ann S. Bowers College of Computing and Information Science** in New York is inviting applications for a **tenure-track and tenured faculty positions**. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Cornell University]

**Department of African American Studies at Princeton University** in New Jersey, United States is inviting applications for a **Visiting Research Position**. Application submission deadline is January 4, 2024. For more details, see [Princeton University].

The **Department of Political Science at Northwestern University** in Evanston, Illinois is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor of Instruction in Computational Social Science**. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Northwestern University].

**Grossmont College-Cuyamaca College** in San Diego County is inviting applications for a **Part-Time Instructor Pool - Anthropology**. Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [Grossmont- Cuyamaca Community College].

**Team:**

*Aida Pachedji (ap), Bintang Wicaksono Ajie (ba), Busawan Kachonnarongvanish (bk), Duc Quang Ly (dql), Felicitas Diecke (fd), Harshita Prashar (hp), Isabelle Chua (ic), Jason Wang (jw), Jia Yue Ong (oy), Jonathan Riley (jr), Joseph Black (jb), Lachlan Foster (lf), Lawrence Brenner (lb), Lucas Meier (lm), Mariam Rehman (mr), Morten Strantzen (ms), Muhammad Hussain Amin (mha), Myat Sandar Zaw (mz), Olena Krytska, Philipp Schüßler (ps), Phoo Wai Yan Myint (pm), Sai Laung Kam (sk), Saranya Setthi, Teerada Thammapoonphol (tt), Tomwit Jarnson (tj), Venus Phuangkom, Wai Yan Phyo Naing (wn), Xiangyi Chen (xc), Yudo Rahmadiyansyah (yr)*

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