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Asia in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

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

I wish you an informative read and extend special greetings to everyone celebrating Comoros' and Libya's Independence Day as well as Nepal's and Qatar's National Day in this week.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

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Main Sections

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

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

China: Verdict in biggest corruption case in country's banking sector

(ms) A Chinese Court has sentenced former Chinese banker Xu Guojun to life imprisonment, marking the country's largest-ever corruption case within the banking sector. Xu, the former head of a Bank of China Kaiping branch, faced charges of embezzlement and misappropriation of public funds spanning from 1993 to 2001, involving sum of over USD 483 million.

The court found that Xu, along with his accomplices Yu Zhendong and Xu Chaofan, orchestrated their corruption through fraudulent loans, misappropriated loan repayments, and the diversion of bank funds to various accounts. His two main accomplices, Yu and Xu, were already sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment

in 2006 and 13 years' imprisonment in 2021, respectively

After evading authorities for two decades, Xu was extradited from the United States in 2021. The court not only sentenced him to life in prison but also stripped him of political rights, confiscated his personal assets, and mandated the surrender of all ill-gotten gains. Xu accepted the sentences without appeal. [South China Morning Post 1]

At the same time, a 15-year prison sentence was imposed on the former Chinese railroad minister Sheng Guangzu. 74-year-old Sheng was found guilty of accepting bribes totaling USD 9 million from 2004 to 2022. Until his retirement in 2016, he managed the transition of the Ministry of Railways to the China Railway Corporation. [South China Morning Post 2]

China: New internet crackdown censors' "pessimism"

(ms) The Cyberspace Administration of China, the country's top internet regulatory body, has intensified its focus on short videos disseminating misleading content, rumors, and incorrect values, including pessimism for the first time.

The latest campaign includes addressing alleged made-up stories about social minorities, fake plots causing panic, and the promotion of extremism or inappropriate career values. The crackdown also targets AI-generated fake videos. The annual initiative, known as "Qing Lang," aims to enhance mental health, foster a healthy competitive space in the short video industry, and eliminate incorrect values from the internet.

"Incorrect values" serves as a very broad umbrella term to which new content is added over time depending on the current situation, such as a hedonistic lifestyle or, in the current case, pessimism.

The addition of pessimism is probably due to the country's still difficult economic situation after three years of zero COVID, which has led to a lack of confidence in the Chinese population's consumer behavior. This is supported, among other things, by the fact that the crackdown also extends to videos depicting the challenges faced by those affected by the crisis in the real estate sector, probably the biggest cause for concern for an actual economic recovery. [South China Morning Post]

In addition, the changes come on the first anniversary of the "white paper" protests that broke out across the country at the end of November last year, in which clear criticism of the government and Xi Jinping himself was articulated, particularly in response to the strict zero-COVID measures still in force at the time. The government's immediate reaction was to step up its crackdown on dissent, as well as an even stronger censorship offensive, which, it can be argued, continues to this day in the shape of e.g. a ban on "pessimism" [see AiR No. 48, November/2022, 5]

China: “Xizang“ instead of “Tibet“

(ms) Chinese state institutions and media has begun in the last weeks and months to use the term "Xizang" instead of "Tibet" in English articles, signaling a significant linguistic shift.

This transformation, evident since the release of a white paper by the State Council, in November, titled "CPC Policies on the Governance of Xizang in the New Era: Approach and Achievements," has sparked discussions about the underlying motives and potential implications.

The white paper, detailing developments in Tibet since President Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012, breaks from tradition by using "Xizang" as the English translation for the Tibet autonomous region. This departure has been reflected in China's state media, where "Xizang" has largely supplanted "Tibet" in numerous reports, with the latter now reserved for specific instances like established geographical terms and institutional names.

China's push for using "Xizang" gained momentum in August, with scholars advocating for its official English designation, contending that it would reshape the region's image. The United Front Work Department, China's foreign propaganda machine, echoed this sentiment on its WeChat account, asserting that "Tibet" could be misleading and therefor advocated for a shift to "Xizang" to align with the region's “true cultural and historical boundaries.”

Critics argue that this attempt to alter historical and geographical perceptions reflects China's broader strategy to exert influence and control over especially ethnic minority regions. Similar linguistic assimilations can be seen, for example, in the use by the state of the name Wulumuqi instead of Urumqi for the capital of the north-western Xinjiang region, which is home to Uyghurs, as well as Kashgar instead of Kashi.

The shift is attributed to Beijing's emphasis on asserting sovereignty over Tibet and exercising what is termed "discourse power." Experts argue that this linguistic transition is primarily political, aiming to align international discourse with China's official language and reinforce its sovereign claim over the region.

Despite the noteworthy change, experts suggest that the international community is unlikely to adopt the new terminology to a significant extent. Tibet, which was incorporated into China in 1950, remains a topic of global interest, particularly with the impending succession challenge after the passing of the Dalai Lama. The revered spiritual leader fled to India in 1959, and his influence persists in Tibetan affairs. [Radio Free Asia] [South China Morning Post] [The Times of India]

China: Economic recovery remains sluggish in November

(ms) China's economic landscape in November presented a mixed picture, revealing both signs of progress and persistent challenges. Key economic areas, including real estate and private investment, faced headwinds, prompting calls for supportive policies. Despite a 10.1 percent year-on-year growth in retail sales, concerns lingered about the recovery's breadth and resilience.

Real estate investment took a notable hit, declining by 9.4 percent in the first 11 months of 2023. This extended a trend seen a month earlier, with a 9.3 percent fall, emphasizing the sector's vulnerability. Private investment remained in decline, dropping by 0.5 percent for the seventh consecutive month. These setbacks countered the 2.9 percent growth in fixed-asset investment.

The weakening trends in property and private investment raised concerns about the overall recovery's narrow base. Analysts point out that while China's recovery is ongoing, it remains susceptible to further declines in the real estate sector, signaling the need for robust policy responses.

China's retail sales, growing by 10.1 percent in November, provided a bright spot, but the growth was partially supported by a low base from the previous year due to Zero-COVID. Excluding seasonal factors, retail sales experienced a mild contraction, indicating fragile consumer sentiment. The weak trend in the property and private investment sectors prompted Beijing and Shanghai to roll out stimulus measures,

including cuts to down payment ratios and extended mortgage repayment deadlines (see entry below).

The report by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBS) accentuated positive aspects of economic development, citing achievements in agriculture, industrial production, services, market sales, stable employment (excluding youth unemployment), and controlled inflation.

As the government signals pro-growth measures and injects liquidity in form of a record USD 112 billion stimulus program, the delicate balance between stabilization and reform remains pivotal for China's economic trajectory. [Bloomberg] [National Bureau of Statistics] [Reuters] [RTHK] [South China Morning Post]

China: USD 112 billion stimulus program to revive markets

(ms) On December 15, China's central bank, the People's Bank of China (PBC), made funds available to the banking system in the form of one-year loans totaling USD 112 billion through the medium-term lending facility (MLF) - more than ever before.

China's commitment to fiscal stimulus underscores the realization that substantial measures are necessary for the country's economic growth. While the country struggles with challenges such as a sluggish economy and an ongoing real estate crisis, investors remain cautiously optimistic.

The focus on the unprecedented USD 112 billion in loans represents a much-needed bold move and there is hope that this massive stimulus can pave the way for a sustained market recovery, although there is a consensus on the need for additional measures to consolidate the positive momentum. [Bloomberg]

China: Beijing and Shanghai relax home buying restrictions

(ms) In an effort to support the struggling Chinese housing markets, both Beijing and Shanghai have taken steps to loosen home buying restrictions, including reduced deposit ratios and extended mortgage terms.

Effective immediately, Beijing has slashed the minimum deposit ratio for first homes from the previous range of 35-40 percent to 30 percent.

Simultaneously, the deposit ratio for second homes has been revised downward to 50 percent in urban districts and 40 percent in non-urban areas, down from the prior 60-80 percent range.

In addition to these adjustments, the maximum term for personal housing loans has been extended to 30 years, up from 25 years. Furthermore, new mortgages issued by commercial banks will see a reduction in the floor interest rate, providing additional financial relief to prospective homebuyers.

Shanghai, echoing Beijing's initiative, has followed suit by lowering the minimum deposit ratio for first homes to 30 percent and for second homes to 40-50 percent, depending on the location. These measures mark a concerted attempt to support the real estate sector, a vital component that contributes approximately 20 percent to China's overall economy.

This coordinated easing of home buying restrictions underscores the gravity of the challenges faced by the property market, which has struggled to regain after close to three years of Zero-COVID. Despite prior support measures, including those targeting the heavily indebted real estate developers, the market has experienced prolonged declines in property sales, investment, and home prices.

International credit rating agencies, including Moody's and Fitch Ratings, have expressed concerns about the potential impact of the property crisis on China's overall economic health [see AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2]. In response to these challenges, Chinese leaders have recently pledged to expedite the establishment of a new property development model and accelerate affordable housing construction.

Analysts carefully anticipate that these policy adjustments may not only alleviate financial burdens on homebuyers but also inject fresh momentum into the housing market, providing a much-needed catalyst for a better economic recovery in 2024. [Channel News Asia] [Global Times] [Strait Times]

China: Country Garden's struggle amidst financial turmoil

(ms) In an effort to settle its mounting debts, Country Garden has transferred over USD 111.42 million to fully reimburse bondholders to Country Garden, as reported in a filing to the Shenzhen Stock Exchange on Dec. 13. This repayment relates to 8 million bonds with

a par value of USD 100 each, for which bondholders opted to exercise the put option by November 28.

Despite this onshore repayment, Country Garden remains embroiled in major financial distress. The company has defaulted on its USD 11 billion offshore bonds, necessitating a comprehensive debt restructuring plan. To raise funds for the offshore restructuring, Country Garden has decided to sell a USD 420 million stake in Zhuhai Wanda Commercial Management Group, a shopping mall operator affiliated with Dalian Wanda Group. The move follows the company's default in October, which drew international attention to China's troubled real estate market [see AiR No. 43, October/2023, 4].

In addition, the construction company is dealing with challenges by having its top managers take drastic pay cuts to ease the financial burden. The salaries of the president, CEO and two other executives will be reduced to USD 16,900 per year, with the president's salary cut amounting to a whopping 96 percent. This cost-cutting measure is part of Country Garden's broader strategy to manage its finances and repay outstanding debt.

Although the company is under scrutiny and facing financial setbacks, there are signs that Country Garden may avert a default on its yuan-denominated bonds. According to reports, most investors have agreed to waive a put option that expired on December 13, allowing the company to avoid an immediate repayment demand. This development has contributed to a more positive market reaction, with Country Garden shares closing up over 8 percent in Hong Kong.

While Country Garden struggles with its financial problems, the broader context of China's property crisis and the government's efforts to deleverage the once-thriving real estate sector complicate the company's road to recovery. The unfolding events underscore the complex challenges facing one of China's former real estate giants in a changing economic landscape. [CNBC] [Financial Times] [Fortunes] [Reuters]

China: President Xi aims at digital bureaucracy with streamlining initiative

(ms) China's Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission (CCAC) has unveiled a five-year campaign to reduce digital red tape—a term that encompasses bureaucratic procedures and excessive formalities that impede efficiency. This initiative aims to streamline

government apps and social media platforms, addressing concerns raised by President Xi Jinping about the increasing workload on grass-roots officials due to digital bureaucracy.

The term "red tape" in this context specifically refers to the unnecessary and cumbersome digital bureaucratic processes and formalities that hinder effective governance. The directive underscores the need to regulate government apps and social media platforms, transforming them into user-friendly tools for the public rather than showcases for officials' digitalization efforts.

President Xi Jinping emphasized the importance of combating "formalism on the fingertips," describing it as crucial for the party's image, public favor, and the modernization of national governance. The campaign seeks to eliminate "meaningless labor" for local cadres, allowing them to focus on substantive tasks and improve convenience for the general public.

To achieve these goals, the CCAC directive mandates the creation of a feedback mechanism for digital tools within two years and the implementation of measures within five years to prevent the resurgence of formalism. Software governing the system should prioritize convenience, eliminating duplicated functions in apps, and scrapping those deemed impractical. [South China Morning Post]

China: Trials for first ultra-deepwater drilling ship

(ms) China is set to embark on December 22 on sea trials for its first ultra-deepwater drilling vessel, marking a significant advancement in the nation's deep-sea oil and gas exploration capabilities.

The vessel, named Mengxiang, is said to be capable of drilling depths exceeding 10,000 meters and has a operational range of 27,780 kilometers, with the ability to function continuously for 120 days without returning to port. According to the developers, this should enable it to traverse any sea in the world.

This development comes amid escalating tensions in the resource-rich South China Sea, where China, the Philippines, and other nations have conflicting territorial claims. The sea trials coincide with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s announcement of potential energy exploration projects in the disputed waters. While China and the Philippines have engaged in discussions on joint exploration of oil and gas

resources in the South China Sea, progress has been slow, as acknowledged by Marcos, raising geopolitical implications in the region. China's pursuit of ultra-deepwater drilling capabilities underscores its strategic focus on securing energy resources in challenging maritime environments. [Reuters]

China: High-profile national security trial against Jimmy Lai begins

(ms) On December 18, the long-awaited national security trial of democracy activist, media tycoon and founder of the now defunct Apple Daily newspaper, Jimmy Lai, started under heavy police and media presence.

The 76-year-old faces several national security charges, including conspiring to collude with foreign forces to endanger national security and conspiring to publish seditious material. If convicted, he could potentially receive a life sentence.

The trial of Lai is of immense significance as it is a symbol of the general erosion of freedoms and crackdown on dissent in the city. Lai is a prominent target in the government's efforts to stifle opposition voices under the, from the mainland implemented, National Security Law and underscores Beijing's increasing control over Hong Kong and the erosion of the autonomy of the city. The trial of Lai is not just a legal proceeding, but a defining moment for Hong Kong's struggle for democratic values, challenging the city's historic commitment to freedoms and the rule of law and raising concerns about the future of political dissent and media freedom in the region. The international community is following this process closely as it is seen as an indicator of China's approach to human rights and its compliance with international agreements, particularly the Sino-British Joint Declaration.

The proceedings are presided over by three national security judges handpicked by the government and is expected to span several months. [Deutsche Welle] [Hong Kong Free Press] [The Guardian]

China: Hong Kong adds five activists to wanted list in connection with anti-government protests

(ms) Hong Kong police on December 14 imposed a bounty of about USD 130,000 on five activists abroad in connection with the 2019 anti-government protests, adding them to a list of eight activists who received the same bounty in early July [see AiR No. 27, July/2023, 1].

The activists Simon Cheng, Frances Hui, Joey Siu, Johnny Fok and Tony Choi are accused of various offenses under the National Security Law introduced in the wake of the 2019 anti-government protests, in the course of which they left the city and went into self-exile.

Simon was accused of foreign collusion and inciting secession, Hui and Siu of colluding with foreign forces, Fok and Choi of inciting secession and inciting subversion. In addition to these existing charges, other "offenses under the national security law that seriously endanger national security, including incitement to secession, incitement to subversion, and collusion with foreign country or external elements to endanger national security" are said to have been added during their time abroad, according to Chief Superintendent Steve Li of the Hong Kong's National Security Department. [Hong Kong Free Press]

Cheng and Siu commented on the bounty via their social media platforms. Cheng described it as „a lifelong honour“ and adds „[i]f the government deems the quest for democracy and freedom a crime, we embrace the charges to reveal the genuine face of social justice, unyielding to authority.“ [Simon Cheng via Twitter] Siu wrote: „I will never be silenced, I will never back down.“ [Joey Siu via Twitter]

The bounty announcements once again drew criticism, with the US and British governments in particular condemning the Hong Kong government's action, with the latter describing it as "a threat to our democracy and fundamental human rights". However, the Chinese central government rejected these accusations, pointing out that "Hong Kong affairs are purely China's internal affairs that brook no external interference", that Hong Kong act in a "necessary and legitimate" manner and that "the US and the UK, also have extraterritorial effect." [FMPRC] [RTE]

China: Hong Kong unveils draft of new Civil Service Code

(ms) A draft of a revised Civil Service Code [see full text] unveiled by the Hong Kong Civil Service Bureau on December 13 requires civil servants to be "loyal"

and prohibits them from criticizing the government in the course of their duties.

The 30-page draft, which is about twice as long as the current code, obliges civil servants to show greater alinement with the Hong Kong government and the National Security Law introduced in the wake of the anti-government protests.

The 2019 protests in particular could be decisive for the draft, as civil servants played an important role in the protests alongside students and organized themselves in criticism of the city's political developments. In order to counteract such mobilizations, the draft stipulates that civil servants will no longer be allowed to criticize the government or support opposition positions or forces either online or offline as part of their employment.

In addition, the new code is committed to the "one country, two systems" approach, which was not mentioned in the version in force to date.

The draft is now in the public review phase. If, as expected, it does come into effect in the same or a slightly modified form, this would be the first adjustment to the Civil Service since 2009 and is in line with the city's generally recognizable alignment with the Chinese mainland. Even if at first glance the introduction of the "one country, two systems" approach seems to contradict a rapprochement, it implies a decisive role for the mainland within the city and it must be borne in mind that the implementation of the National Security Law also took place within the framework of this approach.

In conclusion the draft significantly restricts the ability of civil servants to articulate criticism and, in addition to the "one country, two systems", the draft places great emphasis on maintaining "national security", seen by critics as the buzzword in the persecution of forces critical of the government within Hong Kong. [Hong Kong Free Press]

China: Hong Kong government amends National Security Law, extending asset freezing powers

(ms) On December 15, the Hong Kong government has amended with immediate effect the national security law imposed by Beijing in June 2020 [see AiR No. 26, June/2020, 5], granting authorities the right to freeze assets of suspects and defendants until the conclusion of all legal proceedings against them.

Previously, the freeze notice had a maximum duration of two years, as outlined in the implementation rules for Article 43 of the security law.

The government argues that the amendments are narrow in technique and scope and emphasize the continued protection of property rights of suspects and defendants in cases involving crimes that pose a danger. [Hong Kong Free Press]

Japan: Offices of ruling party factions raided in fundraising scandal investigation

(dql) On December 19, the Tokyo District Public Prosecutors Office conducted raids on the offices of two prominent ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) factions amid a growing political fundraising scandal [see AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2].

The targeted factions encompass the largest LDP faction, previously led by the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, and another led by former LDP Secretary General Toshihiro Nikai.

The purpose of the raid was to gather evidence for potential legal action against accountants associated with the factions, accusing them of neglecting to declare approximately JPY 500 million (USD 3.5 million) over a five-year period through 2022. Sources indicate that the accountants have already admitted to the omission. [Kyodo News 1]

For Prime Minister Kishida, who leads the LDP and recently stepped down as the head of his own faction, this raid marks a significant political setback. The latest polls reveal a decline in Cabinet approval ratings to a new low of 22.3 percent, down from 28.3 percent in early November. Furthermore, the party's support rate dipped below 30 percent for the first time since its return to power over a decade ago. [Kyodo News 2]

Further complicating the situation for the Prime Minister, the Tokyo District Public Prosecutors Office has questioned LDP lawmaker Mito Kakizawa regarding allegations of vote-buying in connection with a Tokyo mayoral election held in April.

Kakizawa is under scrutiny for providing cash to Koto Ward assembly members before the mayoral election, ultimately won by the candidate supported by Kakizawa.

Prosecutors have conducted searches at Kakizawa's offices and the residences of both Kakizawa and his secretary, suspecting that he unlawfully distributed cash to secure votes for the mayoral race, violating the public offices election law. [Nippon.com]

Japan: Record defense budget for fiscal 2024 earmarked

(dql) According to government sources, Japan is poised to allocate a record defense budget of JPY 7.7 trillion (USD 54 billion) for fiscal year 2024, marking a substantial increase from the previous high of JPY 6.8 trillion in the current fiscal year's initial budget through March.

This budget encompasses expenditures for domestic long-range missiles, aligning with the government's strategy to enhance capabilities for striking enemy territory.

The country's draft budget for the upcoming fiscal year is expected to receive approval at a Cabinet meeting this week. [Kyodo News]

In a significant policy shift announced in December 2022, the government updated key security policy documents, setting a target to expand Japan's annual defense budget to 2 percent of its gross domestic product by fiscal year 2027. This shift also involved the decision to develop "counterstrike capabilities," enabling Japan to destroy targets in enemy territory [see AiR No. 51, December/2022, 3].

Japan: Landmark court ruling against former soldiers in sexual assault case

(dql) Last week, the court in Fukushima sentenced three former soldiers to two-year suspended jail terms for the sexual assault of their female colleague, Rina Gonoi, in 2021.

This landmark ruling is significant as it has shattered taboos, bringing the issue of sexual violence to the forefront in Japan's predominantly male-dominated society.

The case gained national and global attention when Gonoi shared her account on YouTube in 2022, following the abandonment of an internal military investigation.

The widespread public awareness generated by the viral video, along with a petition signed by over 100,000 individuals, compelled the Ministry of Defence to acknowledge the assault, issue an apology, and dismiss five of the involved men.

In March, an earlier decision was reversed by prosecutors to chargee three assailants with "forced indecency." [Al Jazeera]

Mongolia: Gender equality law discussed at parliament

(ap) The Standing Committee on Social Policy and the Standing Committee on Justice of the State Great Khural, the Mongolian parliament, discussed at a joint meeting the report on the implementation of the country's Gender Equality Law on December 12.

Revival B. Tulga, Minister of Mongolia and Chairman of the National Committee for Port, presented a review of Mongolian policies between 2021 and 2022 that focused on ensuring gender equality. Tulga noted that gender gap is still persistent in all sectors, with Mongolia ranking 70th out of 145 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2022.

Tulga announced that the government is implementing two national programs, one strategic plan and gender programs in 15 sectors. He added that the National Committee on Gender Equality is going to implement an Intersectoral Gender Equality Strategy for 2022-2031. [Aki Press]

Mongolia: Power supply restricteddisruptions to continue in December

(ap) Mongolia's energy ministry announced last week that electricity use will be restricted in the capital Ulaanbaatar and several other reas of the country, citing reduction of electricity supply due to operational issues at two power plants in Russia which account for 20 percent of the country's electricity supply. [Xinhua] [Crisis 24]

Mongolia: No bond repayment in 2024 and 2025

(ap) During a regular session of the Cabinet on December 13, Finance Minister B. Javkhlan announced the successful implementation of debt management measures aimed at securing refinancing for the Khuraldai and Nomad sovereign bonds, with repayments scheduled for 2024 and 2026, respectively.

Javkhlan confirmed the effective execution of debt management measures in late October to refinance the remaining USD 392.5 million of the overdue "Khuraldai" bond. A significant portion of these bonds, maturing in March 2024, was repurchased through the issuance of USD 350.0 million "Century III" bonds in November.

These new bonds, with an interest rate of 7.875 percent and a term of 5.5 years, successfully facilitated the repayment. As a result of these measures, Mongolia is relieved of the bond debt obligations in 2024 and 2025.

The "Century III" bonds garnered substantial interest from international investors, with total orders reaching USD 4.8 billion, marking the highest order in history and an impressive 13.7 times higher than the bond's actual value. [Montsame]

North Korea: Development of AWACS jets, images suggest

(ap) Satellite images from the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies indicate that North Korea is repurposing an Il-76 aircraft at Pyongyang International Airport, potentially transforming it into an airborne early warning and control system (AWACS) or airborne early warning (AWE).

While Russia utilizes Il-76 aircraft as a platform for AWACS and AWE functions, there is currently no evidence suggesting the transfer of this technology from Russia to North Korea. [Defence Blog]

South Korea: Preliminary candidate registration opened

(oy) On December 12, preliminary candidate registration for South Korea's general election in April commenced.

Established in 2004, the primary goal of preliminary registration is to provide young and inexperienced politicians with the opportunity to promote themselves

ahead of the election's official campaign period. Preliminary candidates are permitted to conduct limited campaigns following their registration.

Separately, the electoral district maps are still unfinalized due to disputes in the National Assembly over the numbers of seats and the electoral system. [Yonhap]

South Korea: People Power Party transition to emergency leadership system after leader resignation

(oy) On December 14, lawmaker Yun Jae-ok announced that the People Power Party (PPP) leadership and senior members agreed to transition to a system of emergency leadership committee following the resignation of party leader Kim Gi-hyeon.

Yun said that the PPP would appoint a new leader for the emergency committee to prepare the party for the upcoming general elections in April. Yun added that the committee will be formed by January 10, with Justice Minister Han Dong-hoon, the PPP's Innovation Committee Chairman Ihn Yohan, and the Head of the Presidential Committee on National Unity Kim Han-gil, mentioned as potential candidates.

Kim, a close confidante of President Yoon Suk Yeol, resigned on December 13, following increasing pressure to introduce reforms in the PPP to improve their trust amongst voters. His resignation came after another close confidante of Yoon, lawmaker Chang Je-won, announced his resignation on December 12. Chang had earlier stated that he resigned to help the ruling party succeed in the upcoming parliamentary elections and support Yoon's administration.

Yoon's supporters have said that gaining a parliamentary majority is crucial for advancing Yoon's reform agenda, currently hindered by the main opposition Democratic Party's control of the National Assembly. [Yonhap_1][Yonhap_2][Yonhap_3] [Yonhap_4]

South Korea: Ruling party expected to make decision on interim party leader

(oy) South Korea's ruling People Power Party (PPP) is expected to announce the next interim party leader on December 25 following an important meeting with

PPP-affiliated lawmakers and electoral district chiefs on December 18. This comes after former leader Kim Gi-hyeon resigned on December 13 under party pressure to reform.

Party members closely aligned with President Yoon Suk Yeol has urged PPP to appoint South Korea's current Justice Minister Han Dong-hoon as the next leader, citing the benefits of improving PPP's relations with the presidential office.

Meanwhile, opposition within the PPP highlights concerns over Han's political inexperience as a potential obstacle in the upcoming parliamentary elections in April. Additionally, critics point to his close ties with Yoon, seeing them as impediments to improving PPP's image among voters. [Yonhap]

South Korea: Former Democratic Party leader to form new party

(oy) On December 13, former leader of the main opposition Democratic Party (DP), Lee Nak-yon, announced his plan to form a new political party early next year before the April general election.

Lee stated that the new party will seek to cooperate with those not aligned with either the ruling People Power Party (PPP) or the DP, aiming to become the dominant party in the new National Assembly.

Lee has recently criticized DP leader Lee Jae-myung and his supporters for undermining intra-party democracy.

Lee previously served as the prime minister in the Moon Jae-in administration. His recent announcement is indicative of potential shifts in South Korean politics, hinting at the emergence of new political parties that challenge to the established political party landscape. This trend is further underscored by the indications from other influential political figures considering the formation of new parties. [Yonhap 1]

Lee's move has sparked criticism from within his own party, with many DP members accusing him of dividing the party before the upcoming April general elections to further his personal political agenda. [Yonhap 2]

South Korea: Former DP chief arrested over cash-for-votes

(oy) On December 18, the Seoul Central District Court decided to grant an arrest warrant for Song Young-gil, a former leader of the main opposition Democratic Party (DP).

This comes after Song attended a court hearing that day concerning the arrest warrant, over cash-for-votes allegations during DP's 2021 leadership election.

Song has been under investigation since April after allegations surfaced that his campaign gave cash envelopes worth a total of KRW 66 million won (USD 50,613) to 20 sitting DP lawmakers and other party members leading up to the 2021 leadership election, which he won.

Song is also suspected of receiving KRW 763 million won (USD 586,136) worth of illegal political funds and bribes from several people.

Song has denied any wrongdoings, claiming the investigations to be politically motivated. [Yonhap_1] [Yonhap_2][AiR No. 50, November 2023/3]

Taiwan: New laws on military security and firearm control in public passed

(xc) Taiwan's Legislative Yuan has passed two bills to enhance national security and public safety. The first bill focuses on tightening security at military bases, while the second amends existing laws to curb the use of firearms in public.

The military security bill mandates that unauthorized photography, video recording, or reconnaissance within a military facility can lead to a jail sentence of up to three years. Similar actions conducted outside a military facility will result in fines ranging from USD 958 to USD 4,790. The law also covers drone intrusions, empowering solders to use all necessary equipment, including weapons, to disable drones. Trespassing in military areas will incur fines between USD 1,277 USD and USD 6386.

The firearm control bill amends the Controlling Guns, Ammunition and Knives Act and introduces sentences for using various arms in public. Discharging a standard firearm in public now could be punished with a minimum jail sentence of seven years and a fine up to 479,085 USD. The amended law also regulates non-standard firearms imitation guns and ammunition. Manufacturing, selling, or transporting these items without approval could result in fines between USD

31,933 USD and USD 319,333. [Focus Taiwan 1] [Focus Taiwan 2]

Taiwan: 1 million social housing units to be supplied by 2032

(xc) Taiwan's Cabinet has approved a plan to significantly increase the supply of social housing in the country, aiming to reach 1 million units by 2032. This initiative was outlined in the 2025-2032 report on the promotion of social housing, presented by the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) during a recent Cabinet meeting. It has reached the target of 200,000 social housing units by the end of 2024, which was set in the 2017 plan.

The new plan expands to 1 million units including 250,000 newly constructed homes and 250,000 units under the "subleasing and management service system". This system involves a government-sponsored program where landlords rent out units at discounted rates, either directly to tenants with government agency assistance or through subletting via government-commissioned agencies. [Foucs Taiwan]

Taiwan: DPP presidential candidate's lead in polls less that margin of error

(jr) Less than a month until the 2024 presidential elections, Eric Chu, chair of the main opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), claimed that the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) is increasingly nervous at the prospect of a KMT victory.

The statement comes as support for KMT's presidential candidate Hou Yu-ih has grown in latest polls, with the lead of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party's candidate Lai Ching-te having fallen to less than the margin of error.

Lai is still leading with in the lead with 35.1 percent, while support for Hou stands at 32.5 percent, marking a gap between them at only 2.6 percent, which is less than the 2.8 percent margin of error. [Taiwan News 1] [Taiwan News 2]

Taiwan: Foreign minister announces post-election resignation

(jr) Taiwanese Foreign Minister Joseph Wu is set to resign from his position following the presidential and legislative elections scheduled for January 13, 2024.

In an interview with The Wall Street Journal, Wu unveiled his intention to step down, irrespective of the election outcome.

Titled "One of the World's Hardest Diplomatic Jobs Is About to Open Up," the interview stresses Taiwan's challenging endeavors to join international organizations and maintain diplomatic alliances amid pressure from China.

Wu, who has served as foreign minister for six years, holds the record for the longest-serving diplomat since Taiwan's democratization in the 1990s. [The Wall Street Journal] [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: 2024 GDP expected to be lower than 3 percent

(jr) Economists at Cathay Financial Holdings have forecast that Taiwan's gross domestic product (GDP) will not reach 3 percent growth in 2024.

This contradicts government predictions of an increase in growth next year from 3.32 percent to 3.35 percent from 3.32 percent, while an estimate of the Central Bank sees the GDP growth for 2024 at 3.08 percent

However, Cathay Financial cut its forecast to 2.8% Wednesday, 13 December, from 2.9%, while reducing its 2023 prediction to 1.2% from 1.3%, per CNA. Experts working together at the financial group and National Taiwan University (NTU) believe lower-than-expected growth will be caused by the Chinese and the United States economies next year, affecting the estimates due to the lack of growth in those nations. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: High-level science and technology advisory meeting resumed after 12 Years

(xc) Taiwan has reconvened its high-level science and technology advisory board meeting after a 12-year break, gathering top scientists and industry leaders to shape the future of Taiwan's technology development for the next decade.

The Executive Yuan Science and Technology Advisory Board Meeting, last held in 2011, commenced on

December 13 in Taipei, marking a significant step in Taiwan's renewed focus on technological advancement.

President Tsai Ing-wen, in her opening remarks, announced the "Chip-Driven Industrial Innovation Plan," involving an investment of USD 9.9 billion. This initiative intends to integrate generative AI with semiconductor development.

Regarding green technologies, the government plans to mobilize resources across various sectors to promote technologies aiding Taiwan's goal of net-zero emissions by 2050.

The meeting will focus on technologies anticipated to significantly impact society and development in the next ten to 20 years. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan expands official indigenous status recognition

(xc) The Council of Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan is to increase the budget for social welfare and other subsidies, following a legal amendment that expand official indigenous status recognition to address the long-standing issues.

Previously children with only their mother having indigenous status faced challenges being recognized as indigenous if they were registered under their father's surname. This practice was recently ruled by the Constitutional Court as contrary to Article 7 of the Constitution, which mandates equality for all under the law, irrespective of gender.

Under the new legislation, a child with one indigenous parent is now eligible to gain indigenous status. This can be achieved through various registration options, including registering with the traditional name of their indigenous parent, combing an indigenous name with a Chinese name, or registering with the surname of their indigenous parent, even if not using a traditional indigenous name.

Data from the Ministry of the Interior as the end of last year shows a rise in the indigenous population of Taiwan, which currently stands at approximately 584,000 people. This accounts for 0.6 percent increase from 2021 and represents about 2.5 percent of the nation's total population. This population encompasses individuals from 17 recognized indigenous groups in Taiwan. [Taipei Times]

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

Bangladesh: 1,896 candidates to compete for 300 parliamentary constituencies in upcoming election

(kb) The 12th parliamentary election in Bangladesh will have 1,896 candidates vying for 300 parliamentary constituencies, with around 400 individuals running as independent candidates since the main opposition BNP is boycotting the polls. The election is scheduled for January 7, with concerns about competitiveness due to the absence of major opposition parties. [Prothom Alo]

Out of the 44 registered parties, 27 have fielded candidates, with the ruling Awami League having candidates in 263 seats. Additionally, 269 party leaders are contesting as independent candidates, often referred to as "Awami independent candidates." Among these independent candidates, 28 are sitting members of parliament who failed to secure party nomination this time.

Despite expectations that the Awami League might allocate seats to Trinamool BNP and other minor members of the ruling alliance, the ruling party chose not to reserve any seats for them. The party only announced six candidates from the 14-party alliance who will participate in the election under the Awami League's boat symbol. [Dhaka Tribune 1]

In separate developments, the Awami Leage announced that it will release its election manifesto on

December 27. [Dhaka Tribune 2]

Bangladesh: 40 prominent individuals call for inclusive and fair elections

(kb) Forty prominent individuals in Bangladesh have issued a joint statement urging the country's election commission and government to organize the upcoming 12th parliamentary elections with greater inclusivity, allowing the participation of all political parties for fair competition. The signatories include human rights activists, former government advisers, retired justices, economists, legal experts, and prominent figures from various fields. [Prothom Alo]

They have called for the dissolution of parliament in the third week of January and the organization of elections within the following 90 days, as per constitutional provisions. These steps, they argue, would provide ample time for discussions with the opposition regarding the polls-time government, consensus-building, and ensuring a free, fair, and competitive election.

The joint statement, sent by civic platform Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (SHUJAN), also expresses concerns about the government's actions leading up to the January 7 election, which has resulted in the removal and persecution of opposition leaders and activists.

Bangladesh: Country will never be handed over to collaborators of defeated forces, prime minister says

(kb) Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has stated that individuals involved in arson violence and sabotaging rail lines are collaborators of the defeated forces from the country's 1971 War of Liberation. During a discussion organized by the ruling Awami League, Hasina emphasized the need for vigilance against conspiracies by these forces, both domestically and abroad, and called for collective resistance against violence aimed at disrupting the upcoming general election. [Prothom Alo]

Furthermore, the prime minister criticized the acting chairman of the country's main opposition BNP, Tarique Rahman, for his involvement in such acts, highlighting that he had pledged to stay away from politics when he left the country in 2007. Hasina also

criticized the BNP-Jamaat alliance for deviating from the spirit of the liberation war and distorting the country's history, making it a hub of violence, terrorism, militancy, and corruption.

Bangladesh: Government bans election-disruptive programs

(kb) In Bangladesh, a ban on political programs has been instituted from December 18 until the upcoming election on January 7 next year. This directive was issued by the Election Commission (EC), and the public security division of the home ministry has issued a notification to enforce the ban. The EC's request to the ministry was aimed at preventing rallies and political events that could disrupt the electoral process or discourage voter participation. [Protham Alo]

Bangladesh: Train blaze kills four as opposition calls strike

(lm) In Bangladesh, during a countrywide strike called by the opposition to demand the government's resignation ahead of the January election, protesters set fire to a train on December 19, resulting in at least four deaths. [The Straits Times]

The opposition, including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), seeks the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the formation of a neutral government to oversee the elections on January 7, which the BNP has boycotted. However, Prime Minister Hasina, seeking her fourth consecutive term, has rejected these demands and blamed the BNP for recent deadly street protests supporting their cause.

The incident is the latest in a series of anti-government protests that have seen numerous buses and vehicles set on fire, resulting in six deaths since October 28 when an opposition rally turned violent. The president recently approved to deploy the army from December 29 to deter violence during the election period, a customary practice [see AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2].

Bangladesh: UPDF enforces blockade in protest of leader murders; army rescues abducted members

(kb/lm) The United Peoples Democratic Front (UPDF), a regional political party in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, has initiated a blockade in the Khagrachhari district to protest the killing of four UPDF leaders, including the organizing secretary of the party's youth wing. [Prothom Alo]

In related updates, the Bangladesh Army has rescued three members of the UPDF who were abducted in Khagrachhari district. No arrests were made in connection with the abduction as the alleged kidnappers fled the scene. [The Business Standard]

Bangladesh: BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia shifted to CCU

(kb) Bangladesh's former Prime Minister and main opposition BNP party chairperson Khaleda Zia on December 11 was shifted to the Coronary Care Unit (CCU) at Evercare Hospital due to a deterioration in her health.

Zia, a two-time former prime minister, has faced multiple health issues, including liver cirrhosis, arthritis, diabetes, kidney, lung, heart, and eye problems. In October, three doctors from the United States' Johns Hopkins Hospital arrived in Dhaka for her treatment as part of an emergency intervention.

She was sentenced to a 17-year jail term on convictions in two corruption cases and has been living under house arrest since 2020. Zia is barred from leaving the country; the BNP has been advocating for her permanent release and treatment abroad. [Prothom Alo] [The Business Standard]

Bangladesh: High Court presses lower courts to hear BNP leader's bail pleas in nine cases

(kb) The High Court in Bangladesh has instructed lower courts to address bail petitions in nine cases involving the secretary general of the country's main opposition BNP, Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, who ho has not been arrested in these cases. Additionally, the court issued a ruling asking why the rejection of bail pleas should not be declared illegal. [The Business Standard]

This decision followed a writ petition filed by Mirza Fakhrul challenging the rejection of bail applications in these cases. On December 13, Fakhrul's lawyer sought

bail in nine cases, although he had not been officially arrested. Earlier, the judicial court had stated that it lacked jurisdiction to hear the bail application until the investigation officer arrested him and advised taking the matter to the High Court.

On December 18, then, a Dhaka court denied a 10-day remand plea for questioning Fakhrul and standing committee member Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury. However, the court has allowed their interrogation at the jail gate. Their bail pleas were also rejected, and they were shown as arrested in a case filed at Paltan police station related to the attack on law enforcement during the party's rally on October 28. [The Business Standard]

Bangladesh: BNP leaders Fakhrul, Khasru denied bail; to be interrogated at jail gate

(kb) Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir and Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, leaders of the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), have been denied bail and remand in connection with a case filed at Paltan police station. The case involves an attack on law enforcement during the party's rally on October 28. Although their 10-day remand plea was rejected, the court has permitted their interrogation at the jail gate. [The Business Standard]

Bangladesh: Hearing in Niko graft case on February 13

(lm) A Dhaka court has scheduled the hearing for the so-called Niko Graft Case involving the chairperson of the country's main opposition BNP party, Khaleda Zia, and seven others for February 13. The defense concluded the cross-examination of the plaintiff and former assistant director of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), Mohammad Mahbubul Alam, leading to the setting of the hearing date. [dailyobserver]

The case, filed by the ACC against five individuals, including Khaleda Zia, in 2007, accuses them of abusing power in a deal with Canadian company Niko for gas exploration and extraction, resulting in a loss of over USD 118.4 million to the state exchequer. Charges were framed against the eight accused in March.

Bangladesh: Thousands of migrant workers return home empty-handed

(kb) Thousands of Bangladeshi migrant workers are returning home empty-handed after failing to find jobs abroad. Over 100,000 migrants have been going abroad monthly for the past two years, but many return with debt and no fortune. Reasons include lack of job opportunities, expired passports, and missing work permits. [Prothom Alo]

The Expatriate's Welfare Desk records returnees with outpasses, and sources report 250-300 migrants returning empty-handed daily. The government is working to prevent deceptive recruitment and ensure job verification before sending workers abroad. The returnees face challenges in rehabilitation, and there is a rising concern about the failed migration trend.

Bangladesh: Foreign exchange reserves increase to USD 25.82 billion following loans from IMF, ADB

(kb) Bangladesh's foreign exchange reserves have surged to USD 25.82 billion, boosted by loan disbursements from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), amounting to over USD 689.8 million and USD 400 million, respectively. However, despite this increase, a prolonged shortage of US dollars continues, as banks are acquiring the currency at rates higher than the official exchange rate. [Prothom Alo 1]

In a related development, the IMF has lowered Bangladesh's net foreign exchange reserve ceiling for December to USD 17.78 billion, down from the previous target of USD 26.8 billion. This adjustment is part of the first review report under the USD 4.7 billion loan package, with the IMF establishing net reserve benchmarks as conditions for releasing loan installments.

While Bangladesh Bank disputes the accuracy of the published net reserve figure, the IMF perceives the country's external position as vulnerable, even though the current account deficit has narrowed. [The Business Standard]

India: Security breach at Parliament on 22nd anniversary of deadly attack

(fd) Indian police have filed terrorism charges against four individuals in connection with a security breach in Parliament. The incident occurred on December 13, which marked the 22nd anniversary of a previous attack on the Parliament complex that resulted in multiple fatalities. During this recent breach, a man jumped into the Chamber, shouted slogans, and set off a smoke canister. [BBC]

Against the two individuals who had entered Parliament and two who had shouted slogans outside the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act as well as other charges such as criminal conspiracy and provoking a riot were invoked. A fifth individual was presented in court on December 15 and a sixth person who filmed the security breach and posted it on social media has been detained. Moreover, eight members of Parliament's security personnel have been suspended. [The Straits Times]

Meanwhile, 14 opposition MPs from both the Indian National Congress and the Dravidian Progressive Federation parties have been suspended until the end of the winter session on December 22. Derek O'Brien is the only member to have been suspended by the Upper House Chairman for "gross misconduct and defying the chair".

The opposition members had asked for a discussion of the security breach under Rule 267, which entails voting. Moreover, they had demanded a statement by Home Minister Amit Shah and Prime Minister Narendra Modi as well as an investigation of BJP MP Prathap Simha who had signed the passes for the two intruders. The government accused the opposition MPs of "politicizing a grave national security issue". [The Hindu]

India: Record 78 MPs suspended in a single day; Opposition terms it 'murder of democracy'

(lm) In an unprecedented move, 78 Members of Parliament (MPs) were suspended from both Houses of the Indian Parliament on December 18, escalating tensions between the opposition and the government. This suspension marks a total of 92 MPs suspended in this session, a historic figure in the Indian Parliament's history. Opposition leaders have characterized these actions as a "murder of democracy." [The Hindu]

Those suspended include key figures like the leader of the main opposition Congress in the lower house, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, Dravidian Progressive

Federation party floor leader T.R. Baalu, former Minister Dayanidhi Maran, and Trinamool Congress leader Saugata Roy.

India: Just 2 of 15 Directors on Board of NSFDC from Scheduled Castes

(lm) A Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in India has noted that only two out of the 15 Directors on the Board of the National Scheduled Castes Finance and Development Corporation (NSFDC) are from Scheduled Caste communities. The committee expressed dissatisfaction with the government's "vague" response to this issue and called for the inclusion of more Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes candidates on the NSFDC board to better serve the organization's mandate of economic empowerment for scheduled castes. [The Hindu]

India: Lawmakers to hold discussions with select banks, insurance companies

(lm) A committee of Indian lawmakers is set to hold discussions with four government-owned banks in early 2024 regarding banking laws, including those governing mergers and acquisitions. The meetings will also include "informal discussions" with the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) about its functioning and regulatory supervision, as well as separate deliberations with five insurance companies regarding the country's insurance laws. [Reuters]

The reasons for these discussions have not been specified. The Indian government has clarified that there are no proposals to merge public sector banks, and these discussions are part of a routine exercise.

India: Supreme Court extends interim bail to APP leader Satyendar Jain till January 8

(fd) India's Supreme court has extended the interim bail granted to APP leader Satyendar Jain till January 8 on grounds of a leg injury he suffered on December 8. Previously, he had been granted interim bail on health grounds on May 26 for six weeks which has since then been extended occasionally. [The Hindu]

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) had arrested Jain in May last yer under money laundering charges in connection with four companies allegedly linked to his person. Moreover, the Central Investigation Bureau (CBI) had arrested the former Delhi Minister on a First Information Report that had been registered against him in 2017 under the Prevention of Corruption Act. Jain has denied the allegations and had received regular bail in 2019 on the CBI charges.

India: High court allows court-monitored inspection of Mathura's Shahi Idgah mosque

(fd) The Allahabad High Court on December 14 granted permission for the appointment of a court commission to inspect the 17th century Shahi Eidgah mosque adjacent to the Krishna Janambhoomi temple in Uttar Pradesh for Hindu relics. [Reuters]

The order follows a petition filed by representatives of Hindu deity Bhagwan Shri Krishna Virajman and seven others, who claim that the mosque was constructed on the Krishna Janmabhoomi land in 1670 by the order of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. The primary lawsuit seeks the removal of the mosque from the over 13-acre complex it occupies.

The respondents, including the Uttar Pradesh Sunni Central Waqf Board, objected to the appointment of the commission, citing a delay in the application, but the court allowed it, emphasizing that the commission's work would not prejudice either party.

It should be noted that a local court in Mathura dismissed the suit in September 2020, citing the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991. However, this decision was overturned by a Mathura district judge in May 2022. In May this year, the Allahabad High Court allowed the transfer of the suit from the trial court to the High Court and consolidated it with other related cases. On December 15, then, the Supreme Court refused to stay the high court's order. [Deccan Herald]

In Varanasi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's constituency a similar ruling had been made concerning the Gyanvyapi mosque. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) believes that Islamic invaders destroyed Hindu temples and erected mosques instead. In Ayodhya, the Babri mosque was destroyed in 1992 by Hindu mobs who claimed that it was built over a temple to Ram. In a Supreme Court ruling in 2019, the site was declared Hindu and next month the Prime Minister will inaugurate a new Ram temple.

India: Kerala Governor ‘unfit for post,’ says state’s ruling CPI(M)

(lm) The politburo of Kerala state’s ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) has issued a statement criticizing Kerala Governor Arif Mohammed Khan for his consistent political attacks on the elected state government and what it describes as his "grossly erratic behavior." The statement asserts that Governor Khan has overstepped his boundaries and is "unworthy of continuing in the post." [The Hindu]

The statement is a reaction to Governor Khan's accusation that Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan instructed members of the Students' Federation of India (SFI), affiliated with the CPI(M), to display black banners during recent protests. Furthermore, Khan alleged that confidential government information regarding his travel route was leaked to the protesters, resulting in an attack on his vehicle. These protests were part of a series of demonstrations opposing the governor's efforts to appoint individuals linked to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh to positions in state-funded universities. [AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2]

India: Chhattisgarh Cabinet expansion soon, says chief minister

(lm) The chief minister of India’s Chhattisgarh state, Vishnu Deo Sai, has announced that the state cabinet will soon be expanded to include both existing and new members. He made this statement upon returning from New Delhi, where he had taken oath as Chief Minister on December 13, along with two Deputy Chief Ministers. The Chhattisgarh cabinet can have a maximum of 13 ministers, including the Chief Minister, in accordance with constitutional norms. [The Hindu]

There is speculation about the potential cabinet members, including former ministers from various communities and new faces, including women leaders. Chief Minister Sai indicated that the cabinet expansion would be a mix of old and new faces and assured that the BJP's promises, such as paddy procurement, would be fulfilled as per their poll manifesto.

India: Opposition alliance rallies around expelled lawmaker but analysts see tough road ahead for grouping

The Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), a coalition of 28 opposition parties, is throwing its support behind Mahua Moitra, a former lawmaker who was expelled from Parliament earlier this month amid a cash-for-query scandal. [The Straits Times]

Moitra, a member of the Trinamool Congress, was accused of sharing her parliamentary log-in details with a Dubai-based businessman and receiving cash and gifts in exchange for asking questions targeting businessman Gautam Adani. She has appealed to the Supreme Court against her expulsion. [AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2]

Her expulsion has raised questions about the INDIA alliance's ability to unite and challenge the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party as Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeks a third term in power. Some analysts note that the alliance is still grappling with issues like seat sharing and has not made significant progress ahead of the 2024 elections.

India: Opposition Congress party launches crowdfunding campaign, seeks help of common people

(lm) India's main opposition National Congress (INC) party has launched a crowdfunding campaign, titled "Donate for Desh." The campaign seeks to fight unemployment and rising costs by collecting funds from small donors, aiming to reduce dependence on the wealthy and their policies. Anyone can contribute to the campaign with donations of ₹138 (USD 1.66), ₹1,380 (USD 16.61), or ₹138,000 (USD 1,661), symbolizing the completion of 138 years of the INC. [The Hindu]

India: Supreme Court tells Punjab, Haryana states to take steps to prevent stubble burning

(lm) India's Supreme Court has directed the Punjab and Haryana state governments to halt stubble burning to improve air quality in the upcoming winter season. The court was addressing a series of pleas aimed at controlling air pollution in the capital, Delhi, especially during the winter months when the city experiences severe pollution. [scroll.in]

The court took note of an affidavit submitted by the Punjab government, stating that 53 percent of

penalties imposed on farmers for burning crop residue have been collected. The government also claimed that farm fires between September 15 and November 20 have decreased this year compared to 2020. However, the court emphasized that despite these improvements, farm fires remain a significant concern.

The court acknowledged that a committee led by the cabinet secretary has held several meetings and prepared action plans for states, including Punjab and Haryana, to address air pollution. The bench instructed the state governments to implement these action plans and provide progress reports within two months, with the aim of making the upcoming winter season less polluted.

India: Dalai Lama visits monastery in Siliguri city

(fd) The 14th Dalai Lama has visited Siliguri's Sed-Gyued Monastery in West Bengal for the first time in 13 years. During his visit, he delivered a two-hour teaching; around 20,000 devotees from various regions, including Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Dooars, Assam, Bihar, Sikkim, Nepal, and Bhutan, gathered to attend. [The Hindu]

India: BBC staff to launch new company for Indian language services

(lm) The BBC has announced that its staff will create a new company, Collective Newsroom, for Indian language services in order to comply with foreign investment rules imposed by Indian authorities. [The Straits Times]

The broadcaster has been under scrutiny for alleged foreign exchange violations in India following tax authorities' searches of BBC's offices in Delhi and Mumbai in February. These actions came after the BBC aired a critical documentary on Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in January, examining his leadership during deadly communal riots in 2002 [see AiR No. 4, January/2023, 4].

To meet India's regulatory changes, digital news content companies must be majority-owned by Indian nationals. As a result, around 250 BBC staff members will be asked to transfer to Collective Newsroom, which will be fully owned by nine Indian shareholders.

India: 10 people arrested in inter-state illegal weapon smuggling

(fd) A Central Intelligence Agency Team had arrested 10 people in connection with an inter-state illegal weapon smuggling racket. The group operated from Madhya Pradesh and included a local weapon manufacturer. In total 22 weapons were recovered by the investigation team. [The Hindu]

India: Foxconn ramps up investment in giant *Apple* plant

(lm) Foxconn Technology Group, the world's largest assembler of iPhones, has received approval to invest an additional USD 1 billion in its manufacturing plant in India. The plant, located near Bangalore's airport, will be used to manufacture *Apple* products, including the iPhone, and will become a central part of Foxconn's manufacturing operations in India. [South China Morning Post]

This latest capital injection brings Foxconn's total commitment to the Indian plant to around USD 2.7 billion, further emphasizing the company's ambition to establish a strong manufacturing presence in India. Foxconn initially planned to invest USD 700 million in the facility, but it has since increased its budget multiple times in 2023.

In addition to producing Apple devices, Foxconn is likely to utilize a portion of the investment to manufacture other electronic devices and components, such as electric vehicle parts, for various customers. This diversification aligns with Foxconn's strategy to expand its manufacturing capabilities beyond its traditional role as an assembler of electronic products.

India: Akash air defense missile system for the first time destroys four targets simultaneously

(fd) India has demonstrated the firepower of its indigenous Akash surface-to-air missile (SAM) system by simultaneously engaging and destroying four unmanned aerial targets during Exercise Astrashakti 2023. This demonstration marked the first time a single firing unit engaged four targets simultaneously at such ranges using command guidance. [Economic Times]

The Akash Weapon System was developed by the Indian Defence Research and Development Organisation and produced by the defense public sector. It has been in use by the Indian Air Force and the Indian Army for the past decade. It is one of the Indian produced systems that has been ordered by international customers.

India: Navy prevents hijacking incident in Arabian Sea

(fd) The Indian Navy has prevented the hijacking of the Malta-flagged vessel MV Ruen by pirates in the Arabian Sea. Moving towards the Somalian coast, the vessel has 18 crew members and had reported on December 14 the boarding of approximately six unknown individuals. As first responder in the region, India monitored the situation and diverted a warship on anti-piracy patrol to the MV Ruen's location. [Deccan Herald]

India: National Investigation Agency raids 19 locations for radicalized groups

(fd) The National Investigation Agency (NIA) in cooperation with state police forces has raided 19 locations in Karnataka, Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Delhi for radicalized terror groups. The individuals are suspected to be affiliated with a jihadi group. [Times of India]

The group is suspected to conduct anti-India attacks and to recruit young members. Previously the NIA had arrested 15 individuals during raids in Maharashtra and Karnataka. The police forces confiscated firearms, sharp weapons, money, digital devices and incriminating documents.

The Maldives: Obstruction to legal governance is high treason, says President Muizzu, amidst contentious parliamentary regulation amendment

(lm) Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu has described attempts to obstruct legal governance and consolidate power at the expense of the country's welfare as "high treason." [The edition]

He made these remarks amid a proposed parliamentary regulation amendment by the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) that seeks to change the calculation of the majority required for impeachment. If accepted, the change would exclude those members who resigned to become ministers from the total membership of Parliament, making it easier for the MDP to impeach the president with its two-thirds majority. [The Citizen]

The Maldivian system allows lawmakers who become ministers to resign from Parliament, which has led to confusion over the total membership when calculating majority requirements. President Muizzu may need to challenge this recommendation in the Supreme Court to clarify the definition of "full membership of the Majlis."

The Maldives: Election Commission approves allocation of funds to newly formed Progressive Nationalist Party

(lm) The Elections Commission (EC) of the Maldives has approved the allocation of funds to the newly formed Progressive Nationalist Party (PNP) based on its registration of 10,000 members. The allocation of roughly USD 19.8 million from the state budget to political parties, out of a total budget of approximately USD 3.2 billion, has drawn attention to the significant financial support the PNP is set to receive, despite its current financial status and membership size. [BNN]

One key issue is the disparity between the number of registered party members and the actual active members who vote in elections. Some parties with over 10,000 registered members may receive only a fraction of that number of votes in elections, raising questions about the efficiency and representation of such funding policies.

To address these concerns, the Political Party Funding Act is undergoing revisions to include independent candidates and combat illegal financing of political parties or individuals. The proposed amendments aim to require independent candidates to declare donations, criminalize donations made to secure benefits, and empower the electoral commission to reject funding from suspected criminal sources. This overhaul is being processed by the Maldives parliament, with a focus on upcoming elections.

The Maldives: Election Commission official highlights party autonomy in candidate selection

(lm) In the Maldives, the Vice President of the Elections Commission (EC), has emphasized that the EC does not have the authority to interfere in the internal affairs of political parties, particularly regarding the criteria for potential parliamentary candidates. Candidates must adhere to their respective party's conditions, and if they fail to meet these conditions, it is up to the party to decide whether to retain or expel them. [BNN]

The deadline for submitting candidates for parliamentary positions is May 19 next year, with the main elections scheduled for later in the month.

The Maldives: President constitutes Maldives Zakat House

(lm) Maldives President Muizzu has established the Maldives Zakat House, which will operate under the Islamic Ministry. The primary aim of this initiative is to enhance the country's zakat system, a form of almsgiving significant in Islam. The Zakat House will oversee the collection and distribution of zakat, maintain an updated registry of individuals below the poverty line, and announce the biannual minimum donation amount required from Muslims. [Sun.mv]

Nepal: Parliament’s general secretary resigns

(lm) In a surprising twist, Bharat Raj Gautam, the General Secretary of Nepal's Parliament, has tendered his resignation, sparking suspicions of political maneuvering. [The Kathmandu Post]

Gautam, who has affiliations with the main opposition Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML), had held the position of General Secretary since May 2020 and had ten months remaining until retirement. Some officials speculate that Gautam's resignation and the subsequent recommendation of Padma Prasad Pandey as his replacement are part of a strategy to install a CPN-UML loyalist in the General Secretary role.

Notably, the appointment of Gautam’s designated replacement has faced some procedural challenges. Speaker of the House of Representatives, Dev Raj

Ghimire, and National Assembly Chairman, Ganesh Prasad Timilsina, secretly recommended Padma Prasad Pandey to replace Gautam. However, President Paudel has expressed reservations about the recommendation, citing procedural flaws. The recommendation for Pandey was made before President Paudel formally accepted Gautam's resignation. Consequently, the President intends to seek advice from legal experts before making a decision.

Furthermore, questions surround Pandey's eligibility for the position, as he presently holds the position of House of Representatives Secretary. Some officials argue that Pandey may need to resign from his current position before being recommended for the new posting. The Constitution mandates that the General Secretary of the Federal Parliament is appointed in consultation with both the Speaker and the Chairperson of the National Assembly, both of whom belong to the CPN-UML.

Nepal: Main opposition UML concludes west-earch march, asserts problem-solving role

(lm) Nepal's main opposition Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML) has successfully concluded its 18-day mid-hill march, known as the "Jhulaghat-Chiwabhanjyang March for Prosperity." The march, which began on November 30, concluded with a national flag hoisting ceremony in Chiwabhanjyang, Panchthar district, near the India border in Sikkim. [The Kathmandu Post]

Throughout the campaign, CPN-UML leader KP Sharma Oli delivered speeches at various mass gatherings and corner meetings, consistently emphasizing that only a UML majority government can guarantee the country's progress and prosperity. While the party claims that the campaign aimed to understand the genuine concerns of the people, critics argue that it primarily served as a political platform to criticize the current government and present the UML as a viable alternative.

Nepal: Parliamentary committee concludes hearing of six Supreme Court justice nominees

(lm) The Parliamentary Hearing Committee has completed the hearings for six Supreme Court justice nominees. A meeting of the hearing committee, which is a joint panel of the House of Representatives and the National Assembly, has been scheduled for December 20 to determine whether to endorse the nominees. [The Kathmandu Post]

According to Article 292 of the constitution, the chief justice, justices, and nominees for constitutional commissions and ambassadorial posts must undergo parliamentary hearings before assuming their positions. President Ramchandra Paudel will appoint the justices if they successfully pass the hearing process.

Nepal: Ward chair arrested with roughly USD 3,750 bribe money

(lm) In a recent development, a ward chairman has been apprehended on allegations of accepting a bribe. An anti-corruption team detained the suspect while he was in the process of receiving approximately USD 3,750 from an individual seeking services at a local hotel. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Lenders settling for less hints at wider problem of loan sharking

(lm) Alleged loan sharks, who initially claimed as much as USD 57.3 million, have settled for only USD 12.9 million during negotiations facilitated by an inquiry commission formed to address loan sharking issues in Nepal. This significant reduction in settlement amounts suggests that lenders may have inflated their claims and lent much less than indicated in the loan agreements. [The Kathmandu Post]

The inquiry commission, formed in April, collected complaints and aimed to settle disputes through compromise decrees. It settled 5,188 complaints out of a total of 27,582, with most originating in eight districts of the Madhesh. The commission suggested further legal reforms to address loan sharking problems.

Nepal: Teacher arrested for attempted rape

(lm) A man, who works as a computer teacher, was arrested on charges of attempted rape. The arrest came after a ninth-grade student filed a police complaint on December 17, accusing the man of attempting to rape her. The accused allegedly lured the victim to an abandoned house near his residence on December 12 under the pretext of giving her a question paper. Further investigation into the case is ongoing. [The Kathmandu Post]

Pakistan: Jailed ex-Premier Khan, former Foreign Minister Qureshi re-indicted in Cipher Case

(mha) A special court in Pakistan on December 13 re-indicted former Prime Minister Imran Khan and his deputy, ex-Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, on charges related to the disclosure of classified information involving the United States while they were in office. [Voice of America]

During last week's hearing, both PTI leaders pleaded not guilty and said the indictment was "fabricated". They also stated that the indictment was 'illegal' and they would challenge it in a court of law. The court then issued a notice to the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and adjourned the hearing till December 14. [Dawn] [The News]

The charges against Khan and Qureshi stem from a classified cable sent to Islamabad by Pakistan's ambassador in Washington in March 2022. Khan alleged that this cable documented the United States' role in orchestrating the downfall of his government a month later, with the assistance of Pakistan's powerful military. The former premier claimed that the US was punishing him for visiting Moscow a day before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Both Washington and Pakistan's military vehemently deny Khan's allegations.

It is the second time Khan has been indicted on the same charges after a superior court struck down an earlier indictment on procedural grounds. The re-indictment has dealt a significant blow to Imran Khan's political career and his chances of contesting national elections scheduled for February. A guilty verdict in this case could result in a maximum sentence of 14 years imprisonment or even a death sentence under Pakistan's legal framework. [Reuters]

Pakistan: Court rejects ex-Premier Khan's pre-arrest plea in Toshakhana corruption case

(mr/lm) On December 16, an accountability court in Pakistan rejected the National Accountability Bureau's request for an extended physical remand of former Prime Minister Imran Khan in the Toshakhana corruption case. Instead, the court ordered a 14-day judicial remand for Khan. This decision follows the rejection of Khan's pre-arrest bail by an anti-corruption court in the same case.

The Toshakhana corruption case alleges that Khan failed to disclose assets acquired from the sale of gifts given by foreign dignitaries, which were supposed to be kept in a state depository known as Toshakhana. Khan has been in jail at Adiala prison in Rawalpindi since late September in a separate case related to the alleged leaking of state secrets.

In related developments, the Lahore High Court issued a notice to Pakistan's Election Commission on December 15 regarding Khan's plea challenging his five-year disqualification resulting from the Toshakhana corruption case. This disqualification would prevent him from contesting the general elections scheduled for February.

Khan and his legal team filed the plea with the Lahore High Court after the Islamabad High Court suspended Khan's sentence in the Toshakhana case in August. Khan is seeking an urgent hearing of his petition to allow him to run in the upcoming general elections, scheduled for February 8. However, earlier this month, the Islamabad High Court dismissed Khan's petition seeking to transfer the appeal to the Lahore High Court [see AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2]. [Business Recorder] [Dawn] [Tribune] [Deccan Herald]

Pakistan: Ex-caretaker interior minister joins Pakistan's People's Party

(mr) Senator Sarfaraz Bugti has joined the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) just ahead of the country's general elections scheduled for February 8. Bugti resigned as the caretaker interior minister last week, citing personal reasons. Sources suggest that he resigned to contest the upcoming elections, as members of the caretaker set-up are not allowed to participate in polls.

Formerly connected to the Baluchistan Awami Party (BAP), Bugti was Baluchistan's interior minister

following his victory as an independent candidate in the 2013 election. Prior to joining the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), he held a senate seat in 2021. [Dawn] [The Express Tribune]

Pakistan: Supreme Court suspends its order nullifying military trials

(mha) Pakistan's Supreme Court on December 13 conditionally suspended its prior decision to invalidate military trials for 103 civilians till a final judgment on the matter. The top court stated that the ongoing military trials of the civilians, accused of involvement in attacks on army installations during the unrest following the arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan on May 9, would proceed.

The majority 5-1 verdict, reached by a six-member bench, stems from a series of intra-court appeals, contesting the previous unanimous ruling nullifying the military trials, filed by the caretaker federal government and the provincial governments of Balochistan, Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. The Sindh government abstained from filing a plea. [AiR No. 47, November/2023, 3]

This decision to allow military trials comes after a recent ruling against trying civilians in military courts, leading to concerns that the military is exerting undue influence on the country's political landscape. [AiR No. 43, October/2023, 4] [The News] [Dawn] [Radio Pakistan] [Voice of America]

Pakistan: Authorities restrict internet access amid opposition PTI online rally

(lm) On December 17, Pakistan's main opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party organized a "virtual power show" in response to a government crackdown on party workers and election-related public gatherings. However, authorities temporarily slowed down internet services and blocked access to major social media platforms in response to the online rally. [Voice of America]

The online rally took place as Pakistan prepares for national elections on February 8, following a political showdown between former Prime Minister Imran Khan and the country's powerful military. Khan, who was ousted from power in April 2022, has accused the United States and the Pakistani military of

orchestrating his removal and has faced legal challenges and arrests of his key aides since then. Despite these challenges, Khan remains a popular politician in Pakistan, according to public opinion polls.

Significantly, the TI) produced a four-minute message featuring its incarcerated former chairman and ex-Prime Minister, Imran Khan, utilizing an AI-generated voice clone of Khan. Despite internet disruptions, this message was shared on social media, with the PTI clarifying that Khan had transmitted a script via his legal representatives, which was then converted into audio using an AI tool. [The Guardian]

Pakistan: Authorities in Punjab province use artificial rain for the first time to fight pollution

(lm) The provincial government of Punjab, Pakistan, has employed cloud-seeding technology to combat hazardous air pollution levels in the city of Lahore. The provincial capital has been grappling with severe air pollution in recent weeks, with levels of cancer-causing PM2.5 pollutants measured as more than 66 times the World Health Organization's danger limits. [Al Jazeera]

The cloud-seeding technology, provided by the United Arab Emirates, involves burning silver iodide in clouds to encourage condensation and rain formation. Cloud seeding has been used successfully in several countries to mitigate air pollution.

Pakistan: Police, soldiers killed as more violence flares in country’s northwest

(lm) On December 15, a wave of violence struck northwest Pakistan as armed assailants launched attacks on both a police station and an army outpost. [Al Jazeera]

In the Tank district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, the police station was the primary target, resulting in the loss of two officers' lives and injuries to three others. During the incident, three attackers were killed; two were shot by the police, and one detonated a suicide bomb. Ansar-ul-Islam claimed responsibility for the assault, although another group named Ansarul Jihad also asserted involvement. Police have yet to authenticate these claims.

In a separate occurrence on the same morning, an army post became the target of an attack, resulting in the deaths of two soldiers and injuries to five others. This attack occurred shortly after a recent suicide bombing in the same province, which claimed the lives of 23 Pakistani soldiers and was attributed to the Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistani group. This organization is believed to be an offshoot of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

Sri Lanka: Parliament passes 2024 budget with 41 vote majority

(lf) Sri Lanka's Parliament has approved the country's 2024 budget, which includes key measures aimed at implementing a reform agenda agreed with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The budget, presented by President Ranil Wickremesinghe, outlines measures to increase revenue through taxes, make tax filings mandatory, and provide salary increases for public sector employees. Out of the 225-member parliament, 122 members voted in favour of the financial plan, while 81 opposed the budget.

As part of the budget, President Wickremesinghe increased the Value Added Tax (VAT) by 3 percent to 18 percent and revoked exemptions for several goods, including fuel [see AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2]. The budget sets a fiscal deficit target of roughly USD 3 billion for 2024, equivalent to 9.1 percent of GDP, which is higher than the revised figure of 8.5 percent for the current year.

In another development, State Finance Minister Shehan Semasinghe disclosed that Sri Lanka is in active discussions with its private bond holders, anticipating the finalisation of an agreement by the end of the March quarter in 2024. The nation, having made significant progress on negotiations with bilateral creditors for debt relief, is yet to reach consensus with sovereign bond holders, who extended loans exceeding USD USD 25 billion before Sri Lanka declared default in April 2022. Semasinghe expressed optimism, stating that engagement with bond holders is progressing positively and could help ease the nation's financial troubles in the long term. [Daily Mirror] [Economy Next 1] [Economy Next 2]

Sri Lanka: President Wickremesinghe signals introduction of decentralised budgets for districts in 2024

(lf) President Ranil Wickremesinghe has announced changes in the budget allocation of Sri Lanka's finances as pertains to district funding. The president revealed plans for a decentralised budget to be assigned to each district starting from the next fiscal year. This allocation would be based on the available number of seats, marking a significant departure from the current budgetary framework.

Furthermore, President Wickremesinghe expressed plans to establish committees at the provincial level, fostering collaboration with district development committees. These committees, comprised of district chairpersons, members, and officers, would oversee development activities in their respective divisional secretariats. Provincial Council projects would be initiated through the Governor, while Central Government projects would be managed by relevant institutions. The decentralised budget would allow for districts to have far more autonomy is allocating resources and funding to targeted areas, and acknowledges the authority that local authorities have over their areas.

President Wickremesinghe, acknowledging the country's development stagnation over the past three years, noting halted projects, including highway construction. However, with successful collaboration with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), development projects are set to recommence systematically. Acknowledgment from creditors, including the Paris Organisation, India, and China, has paved the way for renewed discussions and foreign aid, providing a somewhat more optimistic outlook for the nation's economic fabric heading into 2024. [see AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2]

The President expects to provide updates on projects slated for immediate commencement in the early months of the coming year. He outlined the financial measures for development, emphasising the allocation of funds from the 2024 budget, collected through income tax, crucial for the country's developmental needs. The exact details of the decentralised district budgets have yet to be announced, but have been received with broad optimism, placing a responsibility upon the Sri Lankan government to now meet this promise through action. [Daily Mirror] [Newswire] [Ceylon Today]

Sri Lanka: 20,000 women have been victims of violence throughout 2023, report finds

(lf) The national Ministry of Health's Family Health Bureau (FHB) in Sri Lanka revealed that over 20,000 women have fallen victim to various atrocities and violence this year, in a statement on December 13.

Dr. Netanjali Mapitigama, speaking at a workshop discussing a multi-sectoral National Action Plan (NAP) targeting Sexual and Gender-Based Violence against Women launched by the government, emphasised the prevalence of violence against pregnant women in Sri Lanka. The workshop received input from Members of Parliament endorsing effective implementation of the proposed plan to combat both domestic and workplace violence against women.

Initiated by the Ministry of Women, Child Affairs, and Social Empowerment, the comprehensive NAP encompasses the curricula of 13 ministries across 18 sectors. United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Gender Advisory Ms. Sriani Perera and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Advisory Dr. Lakshman Senanayake provided detailed insights into the National Action Plan addressing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV). Support from various international institutions for the plan's objectives has been optimistic, as creating a more productive and safer future for Sri Lankan women has been emphasised as an important goal of the government. [Daily Mirror] [Adaderana]

Sri Lanka: Court of Appeals orders retirement age for specialist doctors to be raised to 63

(lf) Sri Lanka's Court of Appeal has ruled in favour of extending the retirement age for specialist doctors in the public service to 63 years of age. The decision was made during a sitting of the judges on December 15 in response to a writ application filed by 176 specialist doctors who contested the Cabinet's decision to reduce their retirement age to 60 years. [Daily Mirror] [Adaderana]

On October last year, the Cabinet of Ministers approved a reduction in the retirement age of specialist doctors from 63 to 60, eliciting widespread criticism from the medical community. According to the Cabinet's decision, doctors aged 60-62 by the end of 2022 were allowed to continue serving until 63. However, those aged 59 were mandated to retire at the age of 60.

The decline in the retirement age of specialists doctors was initially undertaken by the Sri Lankan government

in an attempt to provide opportunities for younger medical professionals to pursue a higher qualification, and bolster domestic training of specialist doctors. However, as a significant brain drain has seen Sri Lankan medical practitioners find better living conditions and working opportunities in counties like the United Kingdom and Australia, it has become necessary to raise the age once again.

Impacted doctors will theoretically not be able to access a pension until they hit the age of 63, meaning they must continue working to an older age, but maintain the ability to earn a higher wage from their practice until their retirement.

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

Cambodia: Social security for public servants to be expanded

(pm) The National Social Security Fund (NSSF) has announced the completion of a draft sub-decree focused on expanding social security for public servants, encompassing occupational risk and healthcare. The draft is now ready for submission to the government after undergoing the review process.

Comprising five chapters and nine articles, the sub-decree aims to address gaps in the existing Law on Social Security, intending to broaden the coverage of social security and related benefits provided by the NSSF to political officials at all levels.

Particularly, attention will be directed towards officials nationwide actively involved in delivering direct

services to the public, a group that has hitherto only received equity funds. [Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: Chan re-elected as chair of election watchdog body

(pm) Former lawmaker of the ruling Cambodian People's Party Prach Chan was reelected as chair of the National Election Committee (NEC) after securing a unanimous vote of the National Assembly (NA) on December 12.

Further, the NEC announced on the same day that the political party registrations and candidate lists for Senate election on February 25, 2024, have been approved, with the CPP, the Khmer Will Party, the Nation Power Party, and the FUNCINPEC each to field 116 candidates. [The Phnom Penh Post]

The election to the Cambodian Senate is held every six years on the basis of an indirect party-list proportional representation through eight multi members constituencies (regions). Eligible voters include Communal Chiefs, Communal Councilors, and Members of the National Assembly.

For the upcoming election, the Candlelight Party (CP) has instructed its nearly 2,200 commune councillors to vote for all Khmer Will Party (KWP) candidates, after endorsing the KWP candidate list. [Khmer Times]

CP candidates had been excluded from the July general election by the NEC, which cited the party's failure submit its original registration form issued by the Interior Ministry [see AiR No. 30, July/2023, 4]. Efforts by party leaders to regain official status in recent months have failed, prompting party members to leave and join smaller parties certified by the Ministry of Interior [see AiR No. 46, November/2023, 2].

Cambodia: Candlelight Party members protest and demand to dismiss the party leaders

(pm) On December 18, Candlelight Party (CP) councilors convened a protest at the party's headquarters. They called for the resignation of the party's President, Teav Vannol, and Secretary-General Lee Sothearayuth, accusing them of abusing their positions.

The protesters specifically voiced concerns over unwarranted changes to the roles of commune councilors at the grassroots level and demanded the reinstatement of roles to those who had already graduated.

A CP member revealed instances of party membership suspensions, citing threats to members and violations of party rules and procedures by the party leaders. [Khmer Times] [Radio Free Asia, in Cambodian]

Cambodia: Supreme Court to decide on case against Candlelight Party vice-president

(pm) The Cambodian Supreme Court is set to hand down its final verdict in the dud cheque case of Candlelight Party vice-president Thach Setha this week in December 22.

On December 15, On December 15, the Court considered Setha's appeal, wherein he sought the dismissal of charges, contending that the case is fabricated.

Setha was arrested on January 16 and sentenced in September by the Phnom Penh Municipal Court to 18 months in prison after finding him guilty of issuing dud cheques worth more than USD 33,000 in 2019 and ordered him to pay USD 33,400 in damages to the plaintiff [see AiR No. 39, September/2023, 4]. [Khmer Times] [Radio Free Asia, in Cambodian]

Indonesia: First 2024 presidential candidate debate held

(yr) The first of five Indonesian presidential candidate debates for the general election of 2024 in Jakarta was held on December 12.

Former Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan, former Central Java Governor Ganjar Pranowo, and Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto – the three contenders running for Indonesia's presidency in the next election – discussed a range of topics, such as human rights, corruption, and the separatist movement in Papua.

The three candidates engaged in heated argumentation. A particular point of contention was Subianto’s selection President Joko Widodo’s son Gibran Rakabuming Raka as his running mate.

Subianto – who is currently leading in the polls – emphasized the significance of continuing the outgoing president's policies and eliminating corruption.

Meanwhile, Pranowo highlighted the importance of meritocracy in appointing officials, and Baswedan emphasized justice in Papua and democracy.

The debate also highlighted the Constitutional Court's controversial decision to revise the minimum age limit rule for vice-presidential candidates, allowing Raka to take part in the election [see AiR No. 42, October/2023, 3].

This debate is part of a series of debates that will run until February 4, with future topics including defense, international relations, the digital economy and environmental issues. [Antara] [France 24] [The Straits Times]

Indonesia: Vice-Presidential nominee faces criticism for comments blaming wives

(jb) Indonesian Vice-Presidential nominee Mohammad Mahfud MD has faced widespread criticism for his comments blaming the wives of graft convicts for their husbands' corrupt actions. Mahfud suggested that pressure from wives led husbands to live beyond their means, causing corruption.

The remarks, made during a speech in West Sumatra, were labeled as sexist and misogynistic by women's rights activists and on social media.

Maidina Rahmawati from the Institute for Criminal Justice Reform condemned the statement as stereotyping women, emphasizing that corruption in Indonesia is systemic and not solely a domestic matter. The opposition campaign criticized Mahfud's remarks, likening them to victim-blaming.

As the country approaches the presidential elections on February 14, 2024, candidates, including frontrunner Prabowo Subianto, have pledged to address women's issues, emphasizing gender equality and empowerment [Benar News]

Indonesia: Ombudsman suggests unpaid leave for ministers and regional leaders contesting in elections

(yr) Mokhammad Najih, the Chairman of Indonesia's Ombudsman, has advised ministers and regional leaders who are running as presidential or vice-presidential candidates to take unpaid leave to maintain neutrality and avoid conflicts of interest.

Under the current Government Regulation 53 of 2023, ministers and regional heads only need to request leave from the president 7 days before the campaign. [Kompas]

This regulation applies to Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto, who is running for president, as well as the vice-presidential candidates, including Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs Mohammad Mahfud Mahmodin (Mahfud M.D.) and Surakarta Mayor Gibran Rakabuming Raka.

Indonesia: President Widodo urges robust anti-corruption measures

(jb) President Joko Widodo has emphasized the critical need for Indonesia to strengthen its anti-corruption measures, addressing the challenges posed by increasingly advanced and complex corrupt practices, often transcending borders and jurisdictions and leveraging advanced technology.

Speaking at the 2023 International Anti-Corruption Day event in Jakarta, the president outlined various initiatives, including the development of online platforms such as the National Public Procurement Agency's e-catalog and the Online Single Submission system for risk-based business licensing.

President Widodo highlighted the significance of the One Map Policy in preventing corruption by addressing spatial use conflicts and agrarian issues. He pointed to the effectiveness of the Mineral and Coal Information System in controlling resource exploitation, with plans to extend a similar system to nickel and bauxite.

Additionally, the president urged the prompt ratification of the Asset Confiscation Law to facilitate the return of state losses and called for the approval of the Law on the Restrictions on Currency Transactions to enhance transparency in banking transfers.

In commemorating International Anti-Corruption Day, President Widodo urged collective efforts to prevent corruption and create a deterrent effect for officials involved in corrupt practices. [Antara News]

Indonesia: Implementation of controversial fisheries policy to be postponed

(jb) Indonesia has decided to postpone the implementation of a controversial fisheries policy based on catch quotas following widespread criticism from various stakeholders.

The quota-based fisheries management policy, initially scheduled for full implementation at the beginning of the new year, has now been delayed until 2025, according to a decree issued by Indonesia's fisheries ministry on November 29.

The policy aims to maximize state revenue from the fisheries sector by introducing quota-based capture for industrial, local, and noncommercial fishers in six fishing zones covering the country's 11 fisheries management areas. However, the decision has faced near-universal opposition, with concerns raised about inadequate public outreach and the potential to favor large industrial fishing outfits over small-scale fishing communities.

Critics argue that the fundamental preparation for the new policy is lacking, including updated data on fish stocks and allowable catches. With the delayed implementation, the fisheries ministry intends to focus on improving public outreach, education, and gaining support for the policy. Some observers speculate that the postponement may also be linked to political factors, particularly with the upcoming general election, where the controversial policy could impact the government's popularity among Indonesian fishing communities, a crucial voting bloc. [Mongabay]

Indonesia: Inflation projected to maintain low trajectory in 2024

(jb) The Executive Director of the Center of Reform on Economics (CORE), Mohammad Faisal, anticipates that Indonesia's inflation in 2024 will mirror the current year's levels, hovering around 2.5-3 percent year-on-year. Speaking at the CORE Economic Outlook 2024 event in Jakarta, Faisal attributed this stability to the global economic downturn and the ongoing moderation in energy commodity prices.

Faisal highlighted the forthcoming general elections as a factor mitigating administered price hikes, particularly for goods impacting over 75 percent of fuel oil consumers. He also expects a slowdown in

imported inflation, except for the agricultural sector, which experienced an upward trend due to the El Nino phenomenon earlier in the year.

Importantly, Faisal underscored the controlled nature of core inflation from public demands, citing monetary tightening measures in October as a potential suppressor of purchasing power in the coming year. The cautious approach to interest rates in 2022, aimed at controlling fuel oil inflation, has played a role in influencing the downward trend of core inflation throughout 2023. [Tempo.com]

Indonesia: Overhaul of industrial design laws proposed

(jb) The Directorate General of Intellectual Property (DGIP) of Indonesia's Ministry of Law and Human Rights is contemplating significant amendments to the country's Industrial Design Law, with potential implications for intellectual property (IP) and innovation. Discussed during an offline workshop on November 13 the proposed changes encompass several key aspects.

The definition of an industrial design is a focal point, emphasizing the "outer appearance of a product," providing an "aesthetic impression," and allowing protection in whole or part, in both two or three dimensions. The protection period is proposed to be five years, renewable for two additional five-year terms, diverging from the current 10-year nonrenewable period.

A novel recordal system is introduced for designs with short commercial turnaround times, granting protection for three years from the first publication. Non-registrable designs are clarified, including those lacking aesthetic impression or serving solely technical functions.

The draft law establishes an Industrial Design Appeals Commission, streamlining objections, corrections, and grants, reducing the burden on commercial courts. Landlord liability provisions and government implementation of industrial design rights for national defense are introduced.

The draft law, aiming to align Indonesia's industrial design system with international standards, is expected to be finalized by the end of 2024. [Mondaq]

Indonesia: EV industry to be boosted by relaxing tax rules

(jb) Indonesia is making strategic moves to boost its electric vehicle (EV) industry by relaxing tax rules on EV imports, aiming to attract significant investments. A new presidential regulation, signed on December 8, outlines tax incentives for automakers planning to establish EV plants. Until 2025, companies investing in EV production, increasing their EV investments, or planning such ventures will enjoy exemptions from import duties and luxury-goods sales tax on completely built-up EVs. The previous rules only applied to knocked-down vehicle imports.

This initiative is part of Jakarta's broader plan to position itself as a hub for EV manufacturing in Southeast Asia. The number of vehicles a company can import under these incentives will be contingent on the investment size and plant development progress, subject to approval by the investment ministry.

Rachmat Kaimuddin, a deputy at the Coordinating Ministry of Investment and Maritime Affairs, emphasized the progressive nature of these measures during a webinar, stating that fostering the EV industry in Indonesia would attract the necessary components, including the crucial battery industry.

Additionally, the new regulations push back deadlines for local content requirements, easing the transition for automakers. Indonesia's ambitious goal of producing 600,000 EVs by 2030 is drawing investments from companies like Hyundai, Neta EV, and Mitsubishi Motors, with efforts to court major players like Tesla and China's BYD. [Reuters]

In a latest development, Mitsubishi Motors has commenced production of the new Minicab EV, marking the first local production of the vehicle outside Japan. Manufactured at PT Mitsubishi Motors Krama Yudha Indonesia, the kei-car class electric commercial vehicle is set to be available for purchase in Indonesia in the fourth quarter of the fiscal year 2023. [Green Car Congress]

Indonesia: “Digital Indonesia Vision 2045” unveiled

(yr) The Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kemenkominfo) launched the Digital Indonesia Vision (VID) 2045, a strategic

document to support Indonesia's digital transformation on December 13.

At the launch in Jakarta, Minister of Communication and Information Technology Budi Arie Setiadi emphasized that VID 2045 is designed to enrich existing digital strategies with three main approaches: ecosystem, sectoral and regional.

This document is expected to become a reference for stakeholders in implementing digital policies and promoting up to 6.2 percent annual growth in the country's economy by 2045 [Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, in Indonesian] [Antara].

Indonesia: Minister Suharso Monoarfa highlights country's blue economic potential

(jb) Minister Suharso Monoarfa has recently emphasized Indonesia's immense blue economic potential, with nearly 60 percent of the world's coral reefs residing in the country's seas. He made the statement at a the Development Forum 2023 in Batam City, Riau Islands Province, held on December 18.

Notably, Raja Ampat and Sawu Sea host a significant portion of these reefs. The seas boast extensive natural gas and fishery resources, including 222 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in the Natuna Sea.

The country's blue economic potential, valued at USD 1.3 trillion annually, is projected to create 12 million jobs by 2030 and generate USD 15.5 trillion in benefits by 2050. [Antara News]

Indonesia: 1 million hectares allocated for Papua sugar factories

(jb) In a bid to achieve sugar self-sufficiency, Indonesia is allocating one million hectares of land in Papua for investors interested in establishing sugar factories, according to Agriculture Minister Andi Amran Sulaiman. The move aims to attract both domestic and foreign investors without imposing restrictions on their number. Sulaiman envisions building 20 to 30 sugar factories with a daily capacity of 12,000 tons of cane (TCD) each, contributing to the national goal.

The estimated investment for one sugar factory with a 12,000 TCD capacity is around Rp3 trillion (approximately US$192.7 million). Sulaiman emphasized that while some companies have commenced sugarcane cultivation in Papua, achieving self-sufficiency will be a gradual process due to the annual nature of sugarcane crops and the multi-stage cultivation required.

To enhance sugar production, the proposed factories in Papua will incorporate modern technology. Sulaiman highlighted the importance of high-quality seedlings, citing India's sugar production at 150 tons per hectare compared to Indonesia's 60–70 tons. He underscored the need for superior seedlings to achieve a minimum yield of 100 tons per hectare, signaling a significant step forward in Indonesia's pursuit of sugar self-sufficiency [Antara News]

Indonesia: Campaign to eradicate extreme poverty by 2024 launched

(jb) The Indonesian government is intensifying its efforts to eradicate extreme poverty by 2024, building on the success of reducing the extreme poverty rate from 3 percent to 1.7 percent in 2022. All ministries are actively participating in this comprehensive initiative, with the Ministry of Social Affairs leading the charge.

Minister of Social Affairs Tri Rismaharini outlined the multifaceted approach, encompassing strategies to reduce the people's burden, increase income, and alleviate poverty pockets. The Family Hope Program and Basic Commodity Assistance Program aim to distribute social aid to 18.8 million beneficiary families, reaching 98% distribution by November 2023.

To boost income, the Nusantara Economic Heroes Program supports families in starting businesses. A total of 12,967 families benefited from the program in 2023, with graduates ready to overcome extreme poverty.

In addressing poverty pockets, the Ministry of Social Affairs has extended aid to different regions and implemented innovative programs for orphans, children in social shelters, persons with disabilities, and the elderly [Antara News]

Indonesia: Action on Rohingya crisis promised

(jb) In a crucial address at the Global Refugee Forum 2023, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi pledged to raise concerns about the plight of Rohingya refugees, particularly those who have sought asylum in Indonesia. The forum, initiated by five countries — Colombia, France, Japan, Jordan, and Uganda — and hosted by the UNHCR and the government of Switzerland, is the largest international platform dedicated to addressing refugee issues.

Marsudi's commitment comes as thousands of Rohingyas have arrived in Aceh, Indonesia, seeking refuge from Myanmar in phases via boats. However, their arrival has been met with resistance from the local population.

Indonesia, a non-party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, has consistently emphasized that it lacks binding responsibilities under the convention. Instead, the country has called on convention members to actively engage in the resettlement process for Rohingya refugees.

Indonesia's foreign ministry revealed that the focus, for now, is on combating human trafficking and human smuggling, which have become pressing issues alongside the movement of Rohingya refugees. Despite not being a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Indonesia, as a member of the convention against transnational organized crimes, is obligated to address these concerns. [Tempo.co]

Indonesia: Over 90 percent of Indonesians oppose same-sex marriage Pew Research finds

(jb) Despite increasing support for gay marriage across Asia, a recent survey by the Pew Research Center indicates that over 90 percent of Indonesians oppose the idea of same-sex marriage. The study, conducted in 12 Asian countries, reveals that 92 percent of Indonesians are against it, with percent strongly opposing.

Indonesia records the highest opposition, followed by Malaysia and Sri Lanka. The survey attributes these views to Indonesia's Muslim-majority population, with a similar trend observed in Malaysia.

Views on gay marriage vary widely across the surveyed countries, with Japan showing the most favorable attitudes at 68 percent, while the median support for Asia stands at 49 percent. [The Nation]

Indonesia: Military to be mobilized to counter drought-induced rice shortages

(jb/yr) In response to severe drought affecting rice production, Indonesia has enlisted the support of its military to assist farmers in planting crops.

President Joko Widodo, acknowledging the delayed planting caused by the El Nino weather phenomenon, directed military supervisory officers known as Babinsa to aid farmers in utilizing recent rainfall. The El Nino-driven dryness has disrupted planting schedules, reducing the output of the staple crop and prompting a surge in prices, necessitating increased rice imports.

To address the situation, Indonesia's military is collaborating with the agriculture ministry, deploying personnel to assist with farming and utilizing idle military land for cultivation. The involvement of armed forces aims to address labor shortages among aging farmers, with the younger generation preferring non-agricultural employment. The military's assistance is expected to alleviate manpower shortages and provide essential tools and machinery.

Indonesia, a significant rice importer, recently initiated an international tender through state procurement company Bulog to secure over 500,000 tons of rice. Despite a decline in rice-planted areas, the country remains optimistic about a 14 percent increase in rice output for the 2024 harvest, alleviating concerns about potential food security threats. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, the president distributed “El Nino cash aid” (BLT) to beneficiaries in Pekalongan, Central Java, on December 13.

This program aims to help the purchasing power of people affected by price increases due to the long drought caused by El Nino.

The President also emphasized the use of aid to meet daily nutritional needs and ensure that beneficiaries had received previous government rice reserve food assistance. Aid distribution will continue in 2024. [Indonesian Secretariat of President, in Indonesian] [BNN]

Malaysia: Debate on non-Malay prime minister

(ba) Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia President Muhyiddin Yassin asserted an implicit understanding that Malaysia's prime minister traditionally should be Malay, suggesting that this norm might be challenged amid shifts in the country's political dynamics. Muhyiddin supported his statement by noting that, historically, every prime minister in Malaysia has been Malay.

However, Malaysia's departure from single-party rule following Barisan Nasional's defeat in the 14th general election and the hung parliament in last year's edition fundamentally altered the power-sharing formula that had always put a Malay in charge of the government, he said.

The former prime minister further claimed that this was exacerbated by the constitutional amendment against political defections, which he said would bind elected lawmakers to any decision of their party. [The Malay Mail]

In contrast, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim contends that the tradition of the prime minister being Malay will persist. Responding to Bersatu Youth chief Wan Ahmad Fayhsal Wan Ahmad Kamal's proposal to amend the Federal Constitution to specify that only a Malay can become prime minister, Anwar dismissed the necessity for such a change.

Wan Ahmad's proposal emerged after Democratic Action Party (DAP) veteran Lim Kit Siang asserted in a November 30 blog entry that the Constitution allows for a non-Malay to assume the role of prime minister. Anwar, however, cautioned the Opposition against exacerbating issues that could foster racial discord and disputes. He urged the Opposition to prioritize efforts to enhance the country's economy and alleviate the burdens on the people instead. [The Star]

Malaysia: Aamendments to Federal Constitution on citizenship issues proposed

(ba) The Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC) is currently drafting amendments to the Federal Constitution pertaining to the citizenship rights of children born abroad through the marriage of a Malaysian woman to a foreign spouse.

Home Minister Saifuddin Nasution Ismail, in response to Senator Zurainah Musa's inquiry about proposed amendments presented to the Conference of Rulers,

disclosed that the revisions primarily involve amending Article 14(1)(b) to explicitly include the term “mother.”

This adjustment is aimed at facilitating the acquisition of citizenship for such children through legal mandate. Furthermore, Saifuddin Nasution emphasized that, in accordance with the guidance of the Conference of Rulers, the application of these legal amendments is prospective, not retrospective. [Astro Awani]

Malaysia: Communications Minister denies requestion X platform to delete his criticism

(ba) Communications Minister Fahmi Fadzil has refuted allegations of filing a report with the Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) to compel the X platform to remove posts criticizing him amid the recent cabinet reshuffle.

Fahmi clarified that neither he nor his office or staff has lodged any such report, asserting that the commission is at liberty to take independent action without consulting him.

Concurrently, Fahmi announced a meeting with Google to address concerns about pornographic content accessible on the YouTube streaming site. He acknowledged having received numerous reports on this issue. [Astro]

Malaysia: Arrest of more than 30 suspected of involvement in illegal rare earths mining

(dql) In Malaysia’s western state of Perak, 31 individuals, comprising 21 foreigners, were apprehended for their alleged involvement in illegal rare earths mining.

The arrests, conducted in two separate raids commencing on December 8, involved 16 Chinese nationals, four Myanmar citizens, and a Vietnamese woman.

This development coincides with Malaysia's initiative to prohibit the export of rare earth raw materials, crucially employed in semiconductor chips, electric vehicles, and military equipment, as a preventive measure against resource exploitation and depletion. [Reuters]

Myanmar: UMFCCI mandates utilization and sale of 65 percent export revenue within one month of receipt

(sk) On December 6, the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI) has communicated to exporters and importers that 65 percent of export revenue must be allocated for business-related expenses or foreign currency market sales.

As outlined in Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM) Notification No. 26/2023, exporters are required to exchange 35 percent of proceeds at the CBM-set rate, to be converted to kyats by the relevant AD licensed bank within one working day.

The remaining export earnings are designated for the entrepreneur or online trading platform sales, with completion within a month of receiving proceeds.

This scheme is applicable to earnings from export declarations released on or after December 6, 2023. [ElevenMyanmar]

Myanmar: Suspension of Myawady border trade

(sk) Border trade using the Myawady Dawna Taung Kyaw route has been suspended since December 1 due to skirmishes in Kawkareik, Kayin State.

Consequently, the Myawaddy-Htokawkoe-Nabu Road is now in use, leading to challenges for small passenger buses and six-wheeled vehicles, which must navigate through Htokawkoe, resulting in doubled transportation fees.

Traders in the border area express concerns about the difficulties in transportation, potential rotting of perishable goods, and the overall challenges posed by the altered trade route.

The Myawady Dawna Taung Kyaw route has been in use for over a century. [ElevenMyanmar]

Myanmar: Conflict erupts in various locations in Northern Shan, Kayah, and Sagaing

(sk) The State Administration Council (SAC) has reported clashes in Namkham, Muse 105 mile, near the office of the Kayah State police force, Htigyaing, and Khampat.

The incidents involved an exchange of fire between the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the military in northeastern Shan State on December 14.

While the TNLA claimed control over Khampat in the past, the military asserts ongoing security measures in that area. [ElevenMyanmar]

Myanmar: Despite ceasefire, Brotherhood Alliance continues combat along 105-Mile Trade Zone

(jw) Despite the Chinese-brokered ceasefire announced earlier last week, combat continued on December 15 between the junta and rebel armed forces.

Airstrikes and heavy artillery were reported near the 105-Mile Trade Zone, where most of Myanmar's trade with China takes place.

Town residents additionally claimed that the Three Brotherhood Alliance had taken control of a hill near the trade zone.

The military regime confirmed continued fighting in the area between Namhkam township and the city of Muse. [ABC News]

Myanmar: Rebel forces capture police station in Bago region

(jw) Rebel forces took control of a key police station in Phyu Township located in the Bago Region on December 13.

The station, located near the strategically important Yangon-Naypyitaw-Mandalay Expressway, was burned and destroyed during an operation at the Sittaung River Basin according to a representative from the Southern Regional Command at the People's Defense Force.

At least 30 junta troops and police personnel are said to have been killed during the attack by the PDF and allied resistance forces. Weapons and ammunition

were reportedly seized by resistance forces during the attack. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Military junta apprehends two additional journalists

(sk) Myanmar's military junta has intensified its assault on independent media, with the recent arrest of two journalists from Dawei Watch.

Aung San Oo and Myo Myint Oo were apprehended in night raids at their homes in Dawei on December 11.

Dawei Watch reported that the families were informed by the military about the arrests, citing the journalists' reporting as the reason. The families were left in the dark about the detainees' location, as laptops and phones were confiscated.

This incident adds to the tally of over 25,000 arrests by the junta since taking control. Myanmar currently ranks 173 out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index, with 67 journalists and one media worker currently detained.

Since The military seized power in 2021, it has arrested at least 170 journalists, according to the United Nations. [MyanmarNow]

The Philippines: Lawmakers, activists file petition challenging Vice-President Duterte's confidential funds

(lm) A group of lawmakers and activists in the Philippines has filed a petition with the Supreme Court challenging the legality of Vice President Sara Duterte's P125-million (roughly USD 2.25 million) confidential funds for 2022. They argue that this fund transfer violates the constitution, which states that no money should be paid out of the country's treasury except in accordance with an appropriation made by law. The petitioners are seeking to have the funds audited by the Commission on Audit and to compel the respondents to return the confidential funds. This is the third petition filed on the same issue, and the Supreme Court has ordered Vice President Duterte to respond to the first petition. [Rappler]

The Philippines: TV show that regularly features ex-President Duterte suspended

(lm) The Philippine television regulators have suspended the TV program "Gikan Sa Masa, Para Sa Masa," where former President Rodrigo Duterte regularly appears, citing violations of broadcast content standards. The program has been a platform for the former president to express his views on various issues since leaving office in June 2022. The suspension comes in response to complaints about alleged death threats made by a guest on the show. [South China Morning Post]

Another program, "Laban Kasama Ang Bayan," was also suspended for broadcasting unverified news. The regulators cited the need to prevent the possible repetition of these alleged infractions to protect public welfare, ethical considerations, and the reputation of the broadcasting industry.

The Philippines: Parliament ratifies global treaty on ending violence, harassment at workplace

(lb) The Philippines has ratified the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention No. 190, becoming the first Asian country to do so. This convention, known as the "Convention Concerning the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work," is aimed at protecting all workers from various forms of violence and harassment, with a particular focus on addressing gender-based violence and harassment. [Solidarity Center]

The ratification is the result of a campaign by the Philippine labor movement, which has been advocating for this measure to end violence and harassment in the workplace. It is seen as a significant step toward safeguarding workers' rights, especially in the context of organizing and collective bargaining efforts in the Philippines.

The Philippines: Human Rights remain under threat even after ex-President Duterte, rights groups say

(lm) Various groups in the Philippines have expressed concerns that the country's human rights situation has not significantly improved, despite the passage of time and a change in leadership. They argue that President

Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has carefully crafted a persona that suggests a better human rights record but that the reality on the ground tells a different story. [Inquirer.net]

In particular, they point to ongoing human rights violations in the Philippines, including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, illegal and arbitrary arrests, bombings, forced evacuations, and threats against activists and human rights defenders. The "war on drugs" launched by ex-President Duterte continues to be marred by violence, with hundreds of deaths attributed to the campaign. The organizations also express concerns about press freedom, noting that journalists in the Philippines face challenges and threats, with several journalists killed during President Marcos Jr.'s administration.

In a related context, the government reiterated its dedication to upholding human rights at the UN Human Rights 75 High-Level Event in Geneva, Switzerland. Executive Secretary Lucas Bersamin represented the nation and put forth three pledges. These commitments encompass comprehensive reforms within the justice sector, the formation of a Human Rights Coordinating Council, and the adoption of the country's fourth National Human Rights Action Plan. [Philstar]

Singapore: Ministry of Health seeks feedback on proposed Health Information Bill

(lb) The Ministry of Health (MOH) in Singapore is conducting a public consultation on the proposed Health Information Bill (HIB), which aims to establish a framework for the safe collection, use, and sharing of health information across the country's healthcare ecosystem. [Lexology]

The main objectives of the HIB include ensuring that health information is kept updated, accurate, and accessible, establishing a robust framework for sharing health information, and setting out data security and cybersecurity requirements for healthcare providers.

The MOH will have powers to enforce compliance with the HIB, including issuing directions and imposing fines for noncompliance. The HIB is intended to support the implementation of the National Electronic Health Record (NEHR), a central repository of patient summary health records, and improve the flow of data across the healthcare ecosystem.

Singapore: 3AC co-founder Su Zhu questioned in court as liquidators seek to recoup billions

(lm) Su Zhu, co-founder of the now-defunct crypto hedge fund Three Arrows Capital (3AC), underwent questioning in a Singapore court for the first time as liquidators seek to gather information on behalf of creditors owed USD 3.5 billion following 3AC's collapse last year. He is reportedly set to be released this month based on good behavior. [South China Morning Post]

Su Zhu was arrested in September and sentenced to four months in prison for failing to cooperate with liquidators. The two-day court hearing, conducted by liquidators from Teneo, aimed to gather information on the circumstances leading to the fund's failure and the location of its assets. Details obtained from questioning in court will be shared with creditors, with the objective of maximizing recoveries from the fund's collapse.

Singapore: Jail, caning for man in city-state's first conviction for importing cannabis edibles

(lm) A Singaporean man has been sentenced to five years and four months in jail, along with five strokes of the cane, for importing cannabis-laced gummies and candies, marking the first conviction involving the importation of cannabis edibles in Singapore. [The Straits Times]

Thailand: Government proposes special committee for amnesty bill talks

(bk) The government whip of the Thai Parliament has proposed the establishment of a special House committee to engage in discussions among political parties regarding the creation of a new amnesty bill. [Bangkok Post]

The committee, expected to be formed through an urgent motion, would have one member from each political party. The ruling Pheu Thai Party clarified that it has not yet drafted an amnesty bill and would refrain from proposing its own version as a model for the joint draft to be submitted later. The party asserts that the

push for amnesty is in line with its longstanding policy to address over two decades of political conflicts.

The move comes amid debates over amnesty bills presented by Pheu Thai and the main opposition Move Forward Party, with the latter advocating for coverage of lese-majeste offenses. Concerns have been raised about potential social division, and the government emphasizes the importance of careful handling to avoid new political conflicts.

Thailand: Constitutional Court to decide fate of Bhumjaithai heavyweight Saksayam on January 17

(lm) Thailand's Constitutional Court is set to determine the outcome of former Transport Minister Saksayam Chidchob, who faces allegations of share concealment. The court has announced that it will issue its ruling on January 17, following the hearing of testimonies on December 14, which included statements from Saksayam and five other individuals. [Bangkok Post]

In March, the Constitutional Court suspended Saksayam, who at the time was the transport minister in the previous coalition government under Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, due to allegations of concealing shares pending a ruling. According to the petition, Saksayam utilized a nominee to hold shares in Burijarearn, a company that had been awarded contracts worth billions of baht by his ministry.

The court issued this order following a petition by a group of 54 opposition MPs against Saksayam, a member of the Bhumjaithai Party and the brother of Bhumjaithai patriarch Newin Chidchob. The Chidchob family, based in Buri Ram province, has a significant presence in the construction industry.

Thailand: Opposition Move Forward Party reviews government’s performance after 100 days in office

(msz) On December 15, Thailand’s main opposition party, Move Forward Party (MFP), laid down the performance analysis of the Pheu Thai-led government of Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin during its first 100 days in office. Pita Limjaroenrat, advisory chairman and former leader of the MFP, said during a press conference that the analysis focused on five areas and clarified that this was just an analytical study and not

grading government performance. [Bangkok Post] [Thai PBS]

According to Pita, the safe return to Thailand of 23 Thai hostages held captive by Hamas in Gaza, government administration of a million vaccine doses to prevent human papillomavirus (HPV) and addressing of formal and informal indebtedness contributed to the first areas where the government seemed to be successful.

The second area reflected the indecisiveness of the government that covered the 10,000-baht digital wallet handout scheme and salaries for government officials. On the digital wallet scheme, Pital said that the government seemed to lack a firm and clear plan for how the scheme should proceed and kept changing the details and criteria of the plan four times resulting in widespread confusion among the public and investors.

Although the Pheu Thai Party pledged during the election campaign that the digital wallet scheme would use only state budget funds without requiring a loan, the Pheu Thai government failed to obtain the budget from the Government Savings Bank since this breached the Government Savings Bank law. Amid such legal hurdles, Pital pointed out that the government would have to seek a loan to fund the policy, which would require a loan of 500 million baht with the potential to harm state finances and overall economy. Hence, Pita suggested the government to formulate alternative plans to stimulate the economy, such as industrial investment.

As regards the third area showing the government's lack of long-term strategy on electricity charges and electric train fares, Pita cited the 20-baht fare for the purple and red lines as an example of a short-term solution without tackling the root causes of expensive fares. Besides, the government has not met people’s expectations in such areas as Thailand’s competitiveness, soft power promotion, tourism and reducing inequality. Pita recommended the government to establish a Thailand Creative Content Agency to promote movies to stimulate demand in the entertainment, while also suggesting that revising the Film and Video Act to give creative freedom to the entertainment industry is key to the promotion of Thai soft power.

Finally, Pita criticized the government regarding the charter amendment and said that the government did the opposite of what it had pledged in the election manifesto citing the composition of the constitution-drafting council and the promised military reform. All things considered, Pita expressed his hope that the

government will have a clear and resolute strategic roadmap to address pressing issues, such as drought, economic slowdown and government unity.

Thailand: Marriage equality bill heads to Parliament's lower house

(lm) Thailand's cabinet approved a marriage equality bill on December 19, and it is set to be presented to Parliament's lower house for discussion. The government-sponsored bill, which has received scrutiny from the Council of State, is scheduled for debate in the House of Representatives on December 21. This proposed legislation aims to grant same-sex marriages the same legal rights and protections as heterosexual marriages. [Bangkok Post]

Additionally, Parliament will consider two more versions of the marriage equality bill: one proposed by civil society groups and another proposed by the primary opposition party, the Move Forward Party. While all three bills share the fundamental principle of recognizing legal unions regardless of gender, there may be some differences in specific details.

It's worth noting that last year, four bills addressing civil unions for same-sex couples and marriage equality were discussed in Parliament but were not passed before the dissolution of the House, resulting in their expiration.

Thailand: Supreme Court judge Sitthichote named Election Commissioner

(lm) Sittichote Intharawiset, a senior judge from the Thai Supreme Court, has been appointed as the latest election commissioner. The upper house of Parliament voted overwhelmingly, with 175 in favor, 16 against, and eight abstentions, to confirm his appointment to the Election Commission (EC). [Bangkok Post]

Judge Sittichote, who also serves as the chairman of the Supreme Court's election cases section, takes over the role previously held by Chatchai Janprasri, who was also nominated as a commissioner from the Supreme Court. Chatchai retired from his position as a judge at the age of 70 on June 30, which automatically resulted in the end of his tenure as an EC commissioner. According to the law, one election commissioner seat must be reserved for a member from the Supreme Court.

Thailand: King's estranged second son obtains his first Thai ID card, passport

(tt) Vacharaesorn Vivacharawongse, the estranged second son of Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn, has applied for his first Thai ID card and a new Thai passport. The development assumes added significance, coming as it does just weeks after Vacharaesorn returned to Bangkok for the second time this year to observe the birthday anniversary of his grandfather, the late King Bhumibol Adulyade [see AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1]. [The Nation Thailand]

Thailand: DSI charges 22 in major pork smuggling case; links to government officials investigated

(bk/lm) In Thailand, the Department of Special Investigation (DSI) has charged 22 suspects, including 12 individuals and 10 entities, in a pork smuggling case, and seized their assets worth roughly USD 2.57 million. The DSI has reported the case to the National Anti-Corruption Commission in regard to malfeasance. [Bangkok Post]

Additionally, the DSI has proceeded to investigate nine cases involving private logistics services that allegedly imported 2,385 containers of smuggled pork. A group of public servants from two government agencies were reportedly connected to the transaction.

In related updates, a pork importer under investigation by the DSI is suing the Department of Livestock Development (DLD) for damages amounting to approximately USD 135,000, which they claim resulted from the DLD's ongoing investigation into pork smuggling. The DLD is collaborating with the DSI and the Anti-Money Laundering Office to address both criminal and civil cases related to 41 shipping containers of smuggled pork seized at Laem Chabang Port. [The Nation]

Separately, Prime Minister Srettha has reaffirmed his commitment to combat pork smuggling, emphasizing the government's dedication to addressing this long-standing issue. Representatives from the Swine Raisers Association of Thailand, representing all four regions of the country, expressed their gratitude to the government and related parties for their serious efforts in tackling the illicit swine trade. [Pattaya Mail]

Thailand: Senator Upakit indicted on drug, money laundering charges; trial scheduled for May 2024

(msz/lm) Thai Senator Upakit Pachariyangkun has been formally indicted on six charges, including drug trafficking and money laundering, in the Criminal Court in Bangkok. During the court proceedings, Upakit acknowledged the charges but denied any wrongdoing. He was released on bail amounting to approximately USD 287,000 under the condition that he would not leave the country without prior permission. The trial for is scheduled to begin in May 2024. [Bangkok Post] [Thai PBS] [The Diplomat]

The charges stem from Upakit's alleged involvement with Myanmar national Tun Min Latt, a businessman with deep ties to Myanmar's military-business elite. Tun Min Latt's arrest in Bangkok in September raised concerns due to his connections to Myanmar's junta leader, Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, and his alleged involvement in importing military weapons and equipment into Myanmar since the military coup in February 2021.

According to reports, Tun Min Latt and his associates used drug money to purchase energy from a Thai state-owned power company, which they then sent to Myanmar to be sold. This alleged scheme involved two companies: the Thailand-based Allure Group (P&E), which Upakit founded for running a casino in Myanmar, and the Myanmar Allure Group Company Limited. Upakit had served as a director of the Myanmar Allure Group before his appointment to the Senate in May 2019.

Earlier this month, the Office of the Narcotics Control Board (ONCB) ordered the freezing of 28 bank accounts belonging to Upakit, containing a total of USD 86,000, as well as 29 plots of land valued at USD 8 million [see AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1]. This action followed the ONCB's previous freezing of Upakit's bank account with USD 5,700 in October last year.

Thailand: Three police officers face probe over bribe

(lm) In Thailand, three police officers have been reassigned to inactive positions pending an investigation into their alleged extortion of approximately USD 850 from a motorist. The motorist

in question was facing difficulties with car payments and was found to be using counterfeit license plates. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Mayor in Khon Kaen province arrested for alleged bribery

(msz) The mayor of a municipality in Thailand's northeastern Khon Kaen province has been arrested for allegedly demanding and accepting a bribe amounting to 30 percent in two closed-circuit television (CCTV) camera installation projects worth approximately USD 29,000. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Opposition lawmaker Rukchanok sentenced to six years in prison over royal defamation

(msz) On December 13, Thailand's Criminal Court convicted Rukchanok Srinork, a lawmaker of the main opposition Move Forward Party, on two counts of lese majeste (insulting the monarchy) and sentenced her to six years in prison. Rukchanok was later granted bail, which would require her to pay THB 500,000 and not to participate in any activities of the same nature as the convicted charges. [Bangkok Post] [Matichon Online, in Thai] [Thai PBS] [The Nation Thailand]

The charges against her stem from her alleged posting of messages on social media that showed contempt and hatred towards Thailand's monarch, and they were brought under the country's royal defamation law and the Computer Crime Act. Rukchanok had pleaded not guilty to the charges. She had been elected as an MP for Bang Bon in Bangkok in the May 14 election, defeating Pheu Thai heavyweight Wan Ubumrung in a surprising victory.

From July 2020 to September 2023, 1,930 people have been prosecuted for political participation and expression. At least 259 are subject to lèse majesté charges under Section 112 of the Criminal Code, and 130 have been charged with sedition under Section 116 according to Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (TLHR). [Thai Lawyers for Human Rights]

Thailand: Former protest leader Shinawat sentenced to 3 years in jail on royal defamation charge

(bk) Former pro-democracy activist and protest leader Shinawat Chankrajang has been sentenced to three years in prison on a royal defamation charge for a speech he delivered at a December 2020 protest. He is currently detained at Bangkok Remand Prison due to his family's inability to post bail. [Prachatai English]

In the speech, Shinawat advocated for open discussions about the monarchy and suggested reforming it before implementing a state welfare system. Six other activists were charged for participating in the same protest, facing various charges including assembly, breach of peace, and violating disease prevention measures Chankrajang confessed, leading to his separate prosecution and a reduced sentence of three years.

Thailand: New regulation on inmate detention outside prison raises favoritism concerns

(bk) The Department of Corrections (DOC) in Thailand has introduced a new regulation allowing the detention of inmates outside of prison. The regulation sparks concerns that it may benefit former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who has been receiving medical treatment outside prison since his return to Thailand.

The regulation aims to categorize inmates for rehabilitation or medical reasons. Critics, including protesters, accuse the DOC of issuing the regulation to favor former Prime Minister Thaksin, prompting a House committee on police affairs to investigate the matter. The committee will summon officials from the Justice Ministry, Police General Hospital, and those involved in the complaint. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Election Commission to sue Pheu Thai Party MP over online canvassing outside permitted time

(msz) Thailand's Election Commission (EC) has decided to take legal action against Pattana Sapso, a Pheu Thai Party lawmaker, for violating election laws by engaging in online campaigning during prohibited hours before the May general election. [Thai PBS]

The EC investigated a complaint that Pattana re-posted campaign content on his Facebook page on election day (May 14), violating the law that prohibits

campaigning from 6 p.m. on the day before the election until midnight on election day. Despite his claim of unintentional posting, the EC found his defense baseless as he provided no evidence.

Thailand: MPs plan to visit Police Hospital as it refuses to disclose ex-Premier Thaksin's health information

(msz/lm) Thailand's House Committee on Police Affairs plans to visit the Police General Hospital to check if former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra is really there. The announcement on December 14 came after the hospital declined to disclose details of Thaksin's health condition or treatment, citing patient rights. [Bangkok Post] [The Nation Thailand]

Thaksin returned to Thailand on August 22, after spending 15 years in self-imposed exile abroad, to begin serving a prison sentence for corruption cases dating back to his tenure as Prime Minister from 2001 to 2006. Initially facing an eight-year term, his sentence was reduced to one year following a royal pardon. Notably, Thaksin has not spent a single day in a traditional prison facility; instead, he has been transferred to a prison hospital and subsequently to the Police General Hospital, citing various medical ailments requiring specialized treatment.

According to the law, the minister of justice must personally approve any day exceeding 120 days by an inmate receiving medical treatment outside a prison hospital. Hence, Thaksin's stay in the hospital would only be legal until December 21 unless he received a person approval from the minister of justice.

In related developments, former Democrat Party MP Charnchai Isarasenarak and activist lawyer Nititorn Lamlua on December 19 were planning to submit a petition to the Supreme Court's Criminal Division for Political Office Holders. Their petition seeks an investigation into the implementation of the verdict against Thaksin. [Thai PBS]

Thailand: Government leadership denies Democrat Party cabinet entry

(tt/bk) Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin and Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai have firmly dismissed speculations regarding the inclusion of the Democrat Party in the cabinet. They asserted that the

government, currently with 314 Members of Parliament, remains stable and does not require the addition of other parties or a cabinet reshuffle. [Bangkok Post] [The Nation 1]

On December 9, the Democrat Party, which currently holds 25 seats in the 500-member lower house of Parliament, elected Chalermchai Sri-on as its new leader, along with a new executive committee [see AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2]. Amidst these developments, reports emerged hinting at a possible alliance between the ruling Pheu Thai and the Democrat parties.

While Chalermchai initially committed to staying in the opposition, political analysts speculate that under his leadership, the Democrats may develop closer ties with their historical rival, Pheu Thai. Notably, in August, 16 Democrat Party MPs had defied a party resolution to abstain and voted in support of Srettha as prime minister.

In a related development, Watanya Bunnag, a Democrat Party lawmaker who had planned to contend for the leadership position but was disqualified from the race for failing to meet a party regulation, announced on December 14 that she would not participate in any activities directed by the new executive board and would relinquish all party positions. Watanya also mentioned that if the Democrats decide to join the Pheu Thai-led government under the new executive board's persuasion, she would reconsider her party membership. [The Nation 2]

Thailand: Former Democrat Party deputy leader Prinn acquitted of sexual abuse charges

(tt) Thailand's Criminal Court on December 14 acquitted the former deputy leader of the Democrat Party, Prinn Panitchpakdi, of sexual assault charges in a case involving the alleged abduction of an underage girl for sexual purposes in a case from 2018. The court ruled that the statute of limitations had expired three months after the alleged incident, leading to the acquittal of the defendant. [Thai PBS World]

Prinn had previously been sentenced to a total of four years and eight months in two other sexual abuse cases earlier this year. In the first case, he was sentenced to two years and eight months for sexually harassing an 18-year-old student in 2021, and in the second case, he received a two-year jail term for

sexually abusing an underage girl. Prinn is currently out on bail.

Thailand: Debt relief proposed for 10.3 million people

(lm) Thailand's Prime Minister, Srettha Thavisin, has unveiled relief measures, including debt suspension and reduced interest rates, aimed at addressing the debt challenges affecting 10.3 million individuals. The government's objective is to alleviate the burden of household debt, which amounts to approximately USD 458 billion, or 90 percent of the country's gross domestic product, and has been adversely impacting the economy. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Over half of country's 40.1 million workers in informal sector

(lm) Thailand's informal labor sector comprises 21 million workers, making up over 52 percent of the country's total workforce, which stands at 40.1 million. Approximately half of these informal workers fall within the age group of 40 to 59 years. Notably, a significant portion of the informal workforce, especially in the agricultural sector, earn substantially lower incomes compared to their counterparts in the formal labor sector, as reported by the National Statistical Office. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Health insurance for non-Thais to be launched on January 1

(bk) Thailand's Ministry of Public Health is set to launch the Health Insurance for Non-Thai People (Hint) system on January 1, 2024, aiming to provide healthcare coverage for stateless and non-Thai individuals. [Bangkok Post]

The Hint system offers a streamlined registration process, reducing processing time to five minutes from the previous few weeks. It also enables individuals without identification documents to register for treatment and coverage. The system is integrated with the ministry's financial data hub, facilitating prompt reimbursement of medical fees within 24 hours and ensuring transfers in 15 days.

Thailand: Commerce ministry has big plans to promote country's soft power

(tt) The Ministry of Commerce in Thailand has launched an ambitious plan to promote eleven "soft power" sectors, aiming to create 20 million jobs and generate about USD 114.4 billion in annual income. These sectors include tourism, festivals, sports, food, movies, music, arts, books, games, fashion, and design. To achieve this goal, the Department of International Trade Promotion will lead Thai business delegations in participating in international trade exhibitions, allowing Thai businesses to showcase their soft power and boost exports. [Thai PBS World]

Thailand: Gunman suspected of killing teacher, college student in November arrested

(msz) Thai authorities have successfully apprehended an individual suspected of fatally shooting a vocational student and a female teacher near separate schools in Bangkok on November 11. Additionally, law enforcement has also detained 11 men and one woman believed to have provided support in connection to the shooting incidents. [Bangkok Post] [The Nation Thailand]

Police investigations suggest that the drive-by killings were motivated by a longstanding vendetta stemming from decades-old street clashes between Uthenthawai students and students from the Pathumwan Institute of Technology (PIT).

Thailand: Soldier kills ex-wife, then himself

(lm) On December 17, a Thai army sergeant major shot his former wife, resulting in her death, and subsequently took his own life, leaving behind their two children. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: 13 bodies, 1.7 million meth pills near border; 50 million meth pills seized in Kanchanaburi

(tt/lm) Thirteen bodies and approximately 1.7 million methamphetamine pills were discovered near the

Thai-Myanmar border after a confrontation between patrolling soldiers and a group of men observed walking through a forest. [Bangkok Post 1]

In unrelated incidents, a married couple was arrested, and authorities confiscated 50 million meth pills in Kanchanaburi, marking the largest drug seizure ever recorded in the western border province. [Bangkok Post 2]

Additionally, in a separate operation aimed at apprehending small-scale drug dealers in Bangkok, law enforcement confiscated over 16,000 speed pills and 1 kilogram of ketamine, leading to the arrest of six individuals. [Bangkok Post 3]

Vietnam: 28th meeting of National Assembly Standing Committee convened

(wn) The 28th meeting of the National Assembly (NA) Standing Committee concluded in Hanoi on December 18 after three days of discussions. During the meeting, the committee addressed various issues, including approving the 2024 working program, foreign relations programs, and international cooperation programs. They also provided initial feedback on the draft Law on Litigation Costs and added four draft laws to the 2024 law and ordinance building program. [Vietnam Law & Legal Forum] [VietnamPlus]

Additionally, the committee passed resolutions on environment protection tax rates, territorial administrative changes, and the appointment and dismissal of Vietnamese Ambassadors. The members also reviewed the NA's sixth session and discussed preparations for upcoming sessions.

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

China stays away from global renewable energy pledge at COP 28

(yq) China's participation in the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) sheds light on its climate trajectory and global climate politics.

Although China expressed its willingness to see an agreement to substitute renewables for fossil fuels, with China's Climate Envoy Xie Zhenhua indicating that new targets and policy measures for 2030 and 2035 Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) would be communicated in 2025, its notable absence from the Global Renewables and Energy Efficiency Pledge is notable.

The renewable energy pledge, adopted at the climate summit by 118 countries, highlights the urgent need to accelerate the deployment of renewable energy and improve energy efficiency by committing to tripling global renewable energy capacity to at least 11,000 GW and doubling the global rate of energy efficiency improvements to over 4 percent annually by 2030.

China's reluctance may stem from skepticism about side deals' accountability and a commitment to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as the central platform. The challenge of meeting the Pledge's targets and concerns about liability for unfulfilled commitments contribute to this decision. [COP28] [The Guardian] [Asia Society Policy Insititute]

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets diplomatic envoys from ASEAN countries

(yq) Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met on December 15 with the diplomatic envoys from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Wang highlighted the growing China-ASEAN partnership, emphasizing achievements in joint Belt and Road Initiative construction and referring to Chinese President Xi Jinping's recent visit to Vietnam [see AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2] as pivotal for broader China-ASEAN relations.

Wang reiterated China's commitment to being a reliable strategic partner, contributing to Asia's modernization and reaffirmed China's support for ASEAN on the issue of the civil war in Myanmar and the willingness to promote a proper settlement.

The envoys, on their part, pledged deeper collaboration in connectivity and sustainable development.

The upcoming "Year of Cultural Exchange" was identified as an opportunity for enhanced exchanges, trust-building, and raising ASEAN-China relations to new levels. Discussions also touched on regional and international issues of shared concern. [Foreign Ministry, People's Republic of China, in Chinese] [Xinhua]

Chinese Foreign Minister urges Saudi Arabia, Iran to strengthen cooperation on ceasefire in Gaza

(yq) On December 15 Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held a collective meeting with Saudi deputy foreign minister Waleed Elkhereiji and his Iranian counterpart Ali Bagheri Kani. This is the first time since a Beijing-brokered deal in March to normalize relations between the two nations [see AiR No. 11, March/2023, 2].

Wang called on Saudi Arabia and Iran to strengthen their cooperation and prevent any misjudgments. He emphasized the urgency of an immediate ceasefire in the ongoing conflict between Israel and Gaza and stressed that the top priority should be to promote a ceasefire in Gaza, halt the fighting, and provide humanitarian aid. He added that it is necessary to resume negotiations between Palestine and Israel. [Foreign Ministry, People's Republic of China, in Chinese]

The talks also covered various aspects, including the reopening of embassies, mutual visits by foreign ministers, and broader exchanges to strengthen ties.

China expressed its readiness to play a constructive role and support both Saudi Arabia and Iran in

enhancing their relations. The exchange of ambassadors in September and invitations for leaders' visits indicate a positive trajectory in diplomatic ties. Despite reports of a potential normalization deal between Israel and Saudi Arabia, it has been put on hold due to the Gaza conflict.

Wang called for elimination external interference, specifically referencing the United States, and emphasized that the fate of the Middle East should be determined by the region's people.

The involvement of China in brokering diplomatic relations and promoting stability in the Middle East reflects its aspirations to play a significant role in regional affairs beyond economic interests. [South China Morning Post]

Belgian and German far-right politicians accused of ties with Chinese agents

(yq) The Belgian far-right party Vlaams Belang expelled former senator Frank Creyelman on December 15 following allegations that China recruited him to spy on Europe.

The move comes after an investigation by the Financial Times, Der Spiegel, and Le Monde claimed that China's spy agency used Creyelman over three years to influence European discussions on issues like Hong Kong's democracy crackdown and the persecution of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo expressed serious concern about the report, stating that it implies sabotage of prosperity, security, and democracy from within the country's parliament. The allegations include documented text messages exchanged between Creyelman and a Chinese spy agency officer, Daniel Woo.

The investigation reveals instances where Woo asked Creyelman to influence European Parliament members, demonstrating the potential danger of such alliances with extreme right-wing figures. Creyelman has not provided any comments on the allegations. [Politico]

Additionally, the German far-right politician Stefan Keuter from the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) is suspected of having ties with Chinese agents for questioning the German government about activists in the democracy movement in Hong Kong. [T-online, in German]

ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit held

(sh) On December 17, Japan and ASEAN countries agreed at the Commemorative Summit for the 50th Year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation, held on December 16-18 in Tokyo, to strengthen their ties in security and the economy, especially with changes in the world due to China's growing economy.

In a "joint vision statement" released after their meeting, the leaders promised to work together closer in various fields such as keeping the seas safe, making supply chains stronger, promoting clean energy, and increasing people-to-people exchanges.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida further unveiled that Japan plans to use more than USD 35 billion in the next five years, both from the government and private sources, to support investments in ASEAN. He added that his government also wants to encourage more young business leaders to connect with the region.

The meeting comes as Tokyo seeks to strengthen connections with developing countries, known as the "Global South," which includes the ten ASEAN countries. Japan aims to benefit from their growth and compete with China's growing economy. [Kyodo News]

On the sidelines of the summit, Japan signed a security assistance deal with Malaysia, providing the Southeast Asian country with JPY 400 million (USD 2.8 million) for maritime security equipment, such as rescue boats and supplies. The two countries also agreed to elevate relations a "comprehensive strategic partnership." [Reuters]

Prior to the summit, on December 15, Kishida met with Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in Tokyo. They welcomed the signing of a cooperation agreement to create a green and digital shipping corridor connecting ports in Singapore and Japan. This collaboration aims to promote the adoption of digital solutions and the provision of zero and near-zero emission fuels, demonstrated through specific projects. [CNA]

On the same day, Thailand's Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin, discussed tax incentives with executives from Japanese automakers in Tokyo. The aim is to encourage these companies, such as Toyota, Honda, Nissan, Isuzu, and Suzuki, to increase the production of electric vehicles in Thailand.

Srettha emphasized the need for rapid decision-making among Japanese companies in Thailand, especially as Chinese companies are rapidly gaining a foothold, holding nearly 80 percent of the Thai electric vehicle market. [Bangkok Post]

In another meeting on December 17, Kishida and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet agreed to strengthen security cooperation and to launch a vice defense minister-level dialogue. [Kyodo News]

Japan, UK, Italy sign agreement on establishing joint fighter jet development program

(sh) Defense ministers of Japan, Britain and Italy announced on December 14 that their countries have signed an international treaty to establish a program aimed at developing an advanced fighter jet.

Pending ratification by the respective parliaments of each country, the start of the joint development phase of the programme is scheduled for 2025, while operation of the combat aircraft is planned for 2035. [Reuters]

Japan seeks to lead creation of Asian market for carbon emission reduction

(sh) On December 18, at the first-ever summit of the Asia Zero Emission Community (AZEC) in Tokyo, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida affirmed his country's determination to lead the creation of a big market for reducing carbon emissions in Asia that attracts global investments, emphasizing that lowering carbon dioxide emissions is a shared challenge for the Asian countries. [AA]

Proposed by Japan in 2022 and consisting of Japan, Australia and all ASEAN member states except Myanmar, the AZEC is a framework for Asia's efforts to shift away from fossil fuels and to seek a relevant decarbonization approach for a region where many countries still rely on fossil fuels.

Japan to contribute USD 3 million to global education fund

(dql) Japan has announced to offer around USD million to a global education fund for refugees.

This pledge was made by Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa on December 13 during Global Refugee Forum in Geneva, specifying that Japan's contribution to "Education Cannot Wait," a global fund that provides education to those affected by emergencies and crises, will be used to support children in Ukraine, which has been under invasion by Russia since February 2022. [Kyodo News]

Second Joint Steering Committee of government of Mongolia and UN held

(ap) The Second Meeting of the Joint Steering Committee of the government of Mongolia and the United Nations (UN) to ensure the implementation of the Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2023-2027 was held at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mongolia on December 11.

UN actions taken in the fields of human development, sustainable growth, people-centered government, and rule of law were the main topics discussed.

Under the 2022 Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (2023-2027) between Mongolia and the UN, the role of the Joint Steering Committee is to monitor the implementation of the agreement and provide proposals in line with national development priorities and regional and international development trends. [Aki Press]

ADB approves extended support for trade and logistics projects in Mongolia

(ap) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved two projects to enhance agricultural competitiveness and trade logistics of Mongolia, amounting to USD 157.1 million. [UB post]

The first project, called “Agriculture and Rural Development Project, Phase Two,” aims to improve climate resilience and competitiveness of Mongolia’s agriculture by adopting technologies to increase manufacturing capacities. Herders and farmers will be integrated in the value chains and improve the quality of their livestock and other agricultural products. The project is for USD 57.1 million.

The second one, “Border Efficiency for Sustainable Trade Project,” aims to enhance Mongolia’s trade sector resilience, adopt climate resilience strategies, promote export diversification and improve efficiency in movement of people and goods. The project will include One Health coordination mechanisms to optimize and balance peoples’ and animals' health. The project amounts to USD 100 million.

North Korea launches most advanced long-range missile

(dql/ap) North Korea fired on December 18 its most advanced long-range missile, as confirmed by South Korean authorities.

The launch of the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), capable of reaching the North American continent, came after a December 16 joint US-South Korean statement declaring that any action that could lead to a nuclear attack from North Korean side will lead to overthrowing the Kim Jong Un’s regime and it will be met with an equal response from the US side. The statement was made at the second U.S.-Republic of Korea Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) convened in Washington to discuss talks nuclear deterrence as part of a commitment by the two countries to share more insight into planning in the event of conflict with North Korea. [Reuters]

Days earlier, US National Security Council senior director of East Asia and Oceania Mira Rapp-Hooper on December 13 announced that a real-time missile warning system between the US, South Korea, and Japan was about to be launched within a few days. [Yonhap]

Furthermore, last week 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. The three countries agreed to enhance cooperation on missile warning, joint-military exercises and illegal cyber activities from North Korea [see AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2].

Washington, Seoul and Tokyo immediately condemned Pyongyang’s move, citing a breach of United Nations Security Council resolutions (see article below). [BBC] [The White House]

South Korea, US and Japan respond to North Korean missile launch

(oy) On December 18, North Korea launched an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) into the East Sea. This comes after the 2nd Nuclear Consultative Group between South Korea and the US on December 15 as well as the docking of US nuclear submarine USS Missouri in South Korea.

South Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol called for a joint response with the US and Japan to the ICBM launch, during an emergency meeting of the National Security Council, by "utilizing the real-time information sharing system for North Korean missiles".

South Korea's National Security Adviser Cho Tae-yon also spoke with US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Japan's National Security Secretariat Secretary General Takeo Akiba. The three advisers criticized the launch for deliberately violating UN Security Council resolution and "agreed that their engagement was an important exercise of the Commitment to Consult".

South Korea's Defense Minister Shin Won-sik also told a local news interview that South Korea and the US could deploy additional US strategic assets and hold "decapitation" military exercises against the North Korean leadership if North Korea continues its provocations. Shin added that in the next 24 hours, South Korea, the US and Japan will officially announce the inauguration of a trilateral information system that provides real-time warning on North Korean missiles.

Shin suggested that the ICBM launch was for North Korea to show its progress in the developing the country's key strategic weapons projects, before North Korea's ninth plenary meeting of the eighth Central Committee.

Other observers have also described the launch as a show of force against South Korea and the US. [Yonhap_1] [Yonhap_2] [Yonhap_3] [Yonhap_4] [President of the Republic of Korea_1] [President of the Republic of Korea_2][White House]

South Korea participates in US-led humanitarian operations

(oy) From December 1 to December 6, South Korea participated in a US-led humanitarian mission

delivering aid to Micronesian islands ahead of the Christmas season.

Japan and Canada also participated in this year's mission, which was the first multinational interfly since the operation's inception in 1952.

210 bundles of humanitarian aid and other necessities were delivered by the cargo planes to over 42,000 Micronesian residents in 58 islands.

The joint operation showcased the cooperation and interoperability of the four nations' Air Forces and their solidarity with the Micronesian people. [Yonhap]

Bangladesh eyes USD 1 billion in wool garments export with Australia partnership

(kb) Bangladesh is aiming to increase its annual high-end woolen garment exports from USD 100 million to USD 1 billion within the next five years, driven by potential demand from Australia, one of the world's leading wool producers. [The Business Standard]

Entrepreneurs in Bangladesh currently import woolen fabric and produce high-value suits, shirts, pants, and knitwear sweaters for export. However, the lack of domestic raw materials, such as yarn and fabric, hinders the country's ability to fully exploit this market, which is dominated by Australia and China. Australian delegates have expressed interest in setting up wool processing units in Bangladesh, reducing their dependence on China.

Bangladesh edges Pakistan, India in per capita GDP

(kb) According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Bangladesh has had a higher per capita GDP than India for four consecutive years, with Bangladesh's per capita GDP at USD 2,621 compared to India's USD 2,612. In addition, Bangladesh has outpaced Pakistan in per capita GDP for eight years, with its per capita GDP at USD 2,621 compared to Pakistan's USD 1,471. [Prothom Alo]

In terms of social indicators, Bangladesh leads in women's empowerment, with a higher percentage of women participating in the workforce compared to India and Pakistan. Bangladesh also boasts higher life

expectancy, literacy rates, and improvements in maternal and child mortality rates.

While Bangladesh has made significant strides in various economic and social indicators, it still faces challenges in areas such as reserves, inflation, exports, infrastructure, and investment. There is also a need to address income disparity and ensure equitable distribution of wealth.

Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan among 11 countries submitting national adaptation plan to UNFCCC

(lm) Bangladesh, Bhutan and Pakistan are among a total of 11 countries that have submitted their national adaptation plans (NAPs) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) secretariat in 2023. The other countries are the Marshall Islands, Burundi, Argentina, Zambia, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, Ecuador and Haiti. [Mirage News]

These NAPs demonstrate these countries' commitment to adapting to the adverse impacts of climate change by outlining prioritized actions for a given period. NAPs are crucial for building resilience to climate change and reducing vulnerability.

The Green Climate Fund (GCF) plays a critical role in supporting the implementation of NAPs, with 44 developing countries having received approval for 83 adaptation projects from the GCF, totaling USD 18.6 billion, including USD 5.3 billion directly from the GCF.

Bhutan exits United Nations list of least developed countries

(lm) On December 13, Bhutan officially graduated from the category of least developed countries (LDCs) as recognized by the UN General Assembly. This status change makes Bhutan the seventh economy to graduate, following Botswana, Cabo Verde, Maldives, Samoa, Equatorial Guinea, and Vanuatu. [UNCTAD]

To qualify for graduation, a country must meet criteria related to income, human assets, and economic and environmental vulnerability. Bhutan has experienced impressive economic growth, with an average annual real GDP growth rate of 7.5 percent since the 1980s,

increased life expectancy, and becoming one of the world's only three carbon-negative nations.

However, as Bhutan transitions from LDC status, it will face challenges such as limited access to concessional financing, loss of trade benefits, and a need for economic diversification and resilience against external shocks. [Kuensel]

Pakistan extends deadline for Afghans awaiting third-country resettlement; premier defends repatriation

(mr/lm) The Pakistani government has extended the deadline for undocumented Afghans waiting for paperwork to resettle in a third country to stay in Pakistan by two more months, shifting the cutoff from the end of the year to February 29. [Al Jazeera]

This move comes as part of Pakistan's campaign to expel over one million foreigners residing in the country without proper documentation. According to the United Nations refugee agency, over 450,000 individuals have returned to Afghanistan since the deportation campaign began in early October, with many citing fear of arrest as the primary reason for leaving.

Pakistan estimates that more than 1.7 million Afghan nationals have been living in the country without documents, with the majority arriving in waves since the Soviet invasion in 1979. Pakistani authorities have attributed the deportation drive to a surge in violence in the country, with more than 600 attacks reported in the first 11 months of 2023.

Notably, Islamabad’s decision to extend the deadline follows a series of high-level visits by United States officials to Pakistan in recent weeks. Between December 9-10, the US special representative for Afghanistan, Tom West, visited Islamabad as part of a regional tour that included stops in Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Additionally, Julieta Valls Noyes, the US Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, also visited Pakistan. [AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2]

In related updates, Pakistan’s Caretaker Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar has again defended his government's decision to repatriate undocumented individuals, including Afghan refugees, citing national security concerns. Kakar stressed that Pakistan has accommodated a significant number of refugees over

the years but emphasized the socio-economic and security costs of this influx. [Dawn] [Pakistan Today]

IMF review of Sri Lanka finalises, USD 337 million released to nation

(lf) The International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced on December 12 that the organisation's executive board has successfully concluded the first review under its Extended Fund Facility (EFF) agreement with Sri Lanka. This approval grants Sri Lanka access to USD 337 million to support its economic policies and reforms, as the country strives to fix its economic woes. With this, the total IMF financial support disbursed thus far reaches USD 670 million, out of the total EFF Arrangement of USD 2.9 billion, as approved in March 2023.

Kenji Okamura, Deputy Managing Director of the IMF, provided an overview of Sri Lanka's progress, noting positive developments such as effective taxation reform and the gradual introduction of transparency measures to bolster trust in government. While the program demonstrated satisfactory performance, some targets have yet to be met, causing a delay in the assessment of Sri Lanka's finances which was supposed to be completed during October 2023.

Sri Lanka's agreements-in-principle with the Official Creditors Committee and the EXIM Bank of China on debt settlements for outstanding payments have aligned with EFF targets and signify progress towards gradual economic recovery. IMF officials stressed the importance of swiftly completing and signing Memoranda of Understanding with official creditors and reaching resolutions with external private creditors on comparable terms.

The IMF outlined key priorities for Sri Lanka, including advancing revenue mobilisation, aligning energy pricing with costs, strengthening social safety nets, rebuilding external buffers, eradicating corruption, and enhancing governance. Revenue-based fiscal consolidation, maintaining the disinflation strategy, and reinforcing financial sector stability were highlighted as crucial elements for a swift recovery. [Daily Mirror] [Nikkei Asia] [The Straits Times]

Cambodia, CMAC sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)

(pm) The Anti-Personnel Mines Demining Product Development (APOPO) and the Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) under which a USD 387,000 grant for training, testing and operational deployment of the APOPO's Mine Detection Rat (MDR) and Mine Detection Dog (MDD) teams will be provided for one year, starting on January 1.

The MoU allows for the continuation of the cooperation that has existed for ten years, with a mine detection rate of over 51,000 mines and unexploded ordnance during this period. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia presents its climate change strategies at COP 28

(pm) Cambodiam Minister of Environment Eang Sophalleth attended the COP 28 of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) from November 30 to December 12.

During the conference, Sophalleth outlined seven mechanisms on Cambodian's contribution, including ending the 700MW coal-fired power plant project and replacing it with a LPG-powered one to foster renewable energy; running plastic reduction campaign; constructing hydropower dams across the Mekong River; advocating for food security and nutritional well-being; to improving smart farming practices, an implementing low-carbon emissions strategies for adaptation and mitigation to climate change. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Indonesian coral reefs to get UN-backed insurance

(jb) In a groundbreaking move, a United Nations development project is exploring the possibility of providing insurance for coral reefs near Indonesia's Gili Islands, located off Lombok and near Bali. Threatened by climate change and natural disasters, including a significant earthquake in 2018, these vital ecosystems have historically relied on community-driven and self-funded efforts for repair and preservation.

Set to commence development in January, the UN-backed insurance project aims to offer immediate financial assistance for reef restoration following natural disasters, eliminating the need for post-event damage assessment. Supported by the Ocean Risk and

Resilience Action Alliance (ORRAA) and funded by the British government's Blue Planet Fund, the initiative seeks to establish a sustainable funding model for the Indonesian government and a conservation trust fund.

This move aligns with a broader trend in the Asia-Pacific region, where weather-triggered insurance schemes are gaining traction. Recognizing the limited access to coverage for vulnerable communities, these initiatives, backed by organizations like the Asian Development Bank and the Group of Seven nations, involve private insurance companies offering subsidized premiums or donor-backed projects.

The use of parametric-triggered insurance is a key feature of these schemes, providing pre-determined payouts when specific climatic or meteorological thresholds are met [Insurance Business Magazine]

Laos, International Finance Corporation sign agreement of green finance partnership

(wn) The Central Bank of Laos (BOL) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC) have signed an agreement to strengthen their partnership in promoting green finance.

Under the agreement both sides will actively participate in essential reforms, including developing guidelines and standards.

Due to Laos' heavy reliance on climate-sensitive resources such as water, forestry, and agriculture, the country's economy is significantly impacted by climate change. Laos has set a goal to dramatically reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 60 per cent before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2050.

To achieve these targets, the country has planned to invest almost USD 4.8 billion in efforts to mitigate the impacts of climate change, as outlined in its National Determined Contribution (NDC). [Laotian Times]

Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia commit to strengthening solidarity in ensuring security

(wn) On December 17, during a meeting held on the sidelines of the Commemorative Summit for the 50th Year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation in

Tokyo, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, along with his Lao and Cambodian counterparts, Sonexay Siphandone and Hun Manet, agreed to continue strengthening the solidarity among their three countries.

They discussed the importance of ensuring national security and promoting the cause of national building and development.

They agreed to hold regular high-level meetings, maintain contacts and exchanges through all channels, effectively implement cooperation agreements and mechanisms, and increase information sharing among ministries and sectors.

In addition, they agreed to improve the connectivity of the three economies in terms of both hard and soft infrastructure and provide mutual support to build an independent and self-reliant economy with extensive and effective international integration.

During their meeting, the three Prime Ministers also discussed various regional issues and agreed to work together to maintain ASEAN's unity, position, and influence in regional issues. [Lao News Agency]

UNODC reports Myanmar now world's top producer of opium

(jw) The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has reported that Myanmar is now the world's largest producer of opium, as the conflict between the military junta and rebel armed forces have driven farmers towards illicit poppy production in order to make a living.

Since the military coup opium cultivation has increased in the Shan state by 20 percent, the Chin state by 10 percent, and the Kachin state by 6 percent. [United Nations]

The Philippines in dire need of national torture prevention body, United Nations experts say

(lb) The United Nations Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture (SPT) completed its second visit to the Philippines, emphasizing the urgent need for the country to establish a national torture prevention body. The delegation called for the fast-tracked

adoption of bills currently in the House of Representatives and the Senate to create the National Preventive Mechanism, with the aim of preventing torture and ill-treatment. [United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner]

During their visit, the delegation inspected over 40 places of detention and interviewed staff and detainees, highlighting the need for safeguards in police custody and adherence to international standards. They also met with government officials, UN representatives, and civil society, with a detailed report to follow.

Japan, The Philippines, United States to boost maritime defense capabilities

(lb) In a recent trilateral conversation involving National Security Advisers from the Philippines, the United States, and Japan, a commitment was made to strengthen trilateral defense and security efforts in response to provocative actions by Chinese vessels in Philippine waters and the South China Sea. The officials also discussed enhancing trilateral cooperation in areas such as cybersecurity, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and economic order. [PhilStar]

Philippines seeks more defense pacts, hints at ‘paradigm shift’ in handling South China Sea dispute

(lb/lm) Amid recent tensions and back-to-back water cannon incidents in the South China Sea, Philippines President Marcos Jr. has highlighted the need for additional defense arrangements. Speaking at the ASEAN-Japan commemorative Summit in Tokyo, he discussed efforts to initiate talks with France for a defense agreement allowing troop visits. [BNN Bloomberg]

Using a similar language, in separate interviews with Japanese media, Marcos Jr. expressed concerns over rising tensions in the South China Sea, stating that they have "increased rather than diminished" in recent months. He also emphasized the need for strong alliances with like-minded countries and highlighted the trilateral cooperation among the Philippines, Japan, and the United States as an example. [CNBC]

Simultaneously, he called for a measured response to China's actions in the region, suggesting the potential for a "paradigm shift" in addressing the issue. While some Philippine lawmakers have urged the recall of China's ambassador, Marcos stressed the importance of maintaining diplomatic relations without losing temper over disagreements. [Rappler]

At the same time, there are reports that the Philippines has allocated funding for the construction of a structure on Ayungin Shoal. While the exact amount was not disclosed, Senator Francis Escudero had previously proposed allocating roughly USD 1.76 million for this purpose. [CNN Philippines]

In related updates, the Philippines is preparing for potential escalations in the South China Sea conflict, anticipating scenarios where Chinese forces might attempt to board Philippine vessels, according to the chief of the Philippines' Western Command, Alberto Carlos. [Saltwire]

Additionally, lawmakers in the Philippines have expressed concerns about what they view as a "creeping invasion" by China through extensive real estate acquisitions funded by laundered money.

Singapore has been named the 6th most peaceful country in the world

(lb) Singapore has achieved the sixth position in the Global Peace Index (GPI) 2023, showcasing an improvement from its ninth rank in the previous year. This index, covering 163 countries and 99.7% of the world's population, measures peace based on Societal Safety and Security, Ongoing Domestic and International Conflict, and Militarisation. Globally, peacefulness slightly decreased by 0.42%, marking the ninth consecutive year of decline, with 79 countries experiencing a drop compared to 84 countries showing improvement. Notably, the Asia-Pacific region observed a 0.32% increase in peace, primarily attributed to improved safety, reduced militarisation, fewer violent demonstrations, and increased funding for UN peacekeeping initiatives. New Zealand topped the regional ranking, followed by Singapore and Japan. The top 10 most peaceful countries globally, as per the GPI 2023, include Iceland, Denmark, Ireland, New Zealand, Austria, Singapore, Portugal, Slovenia, Japan, and Switzerland. [Time Out]

New Zealand’s Trade Minister travels to India, Singapore to advance key relationships

(lb) New Zealand's Trade Minister, Todd McClay, on December 18 embarked on his first overseas visit to India and Singapore in an effort to bolster New Zealand's relationships in the Indo-Pacific region. [Beehive.govt.nz]

In India, McClay will focus on enhancing the relationship between New Zealand and India, recognizing India as a strategic priority for the New Zealand government. He aims to strengthen cooperation across various sectors, exploring opportunities for both countries. Meeting with Minister Piyush Goyal will be a pivotal step in establishing a strong partnership that benefits both nations.

McClay will also deliver a speech outlining the New Zealand government's ambitions for its relationship with India. Additionally, he will participate in a moderated discussion alongside G20 Sherpa Amitabh Kant, engaging with national business and community leaders to further promote the partnership.

Following his engagements in India, McClay will travel to Singapore. Singapore holds a prominent position as New Zealand's most significant trading partner in Southeast Asia. It also plays a critical role as a hub for New Zealand's supply lines.

Building a robust relationship with Singapore, particularly with Minister Gan Kim Yong, is a valuable step as New Zealand seeks to strengthen the New Zealand-Singapore Enhanced Partnership. The partnership extends to areas such as the green economy and supply chain management, where both countries share common interests.

Singapore signs free trade agreement with MERCOSUR and Pacific Alliance blocs

(lb) On December 8, Singapore signed a landmark trade agreement with the MERCOSUR countries Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, marking the country's first trade pact with these member states and MERCOSUR 's first-ever agreement with a Southeast Asian nation. Additionally, Singapore inked an FTA with the Pacific Alliance, including Peru, Mexico, Chile, and Colombia. [ASEAN Briefing] [The Nation]

The Mercosur-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (MCSFTA) aims to facilitate greater trade flows by lowering tariffs, establishing transparent investment conditions, and fostering cooperation in areas such as trade facilitation. The agreement is expected to support entrepreneurship, digitalization, sustainable development, and food supply security while also benefiting small and medium-sized enterprises. The five countries will now work on their domestic ratification processes to bring the new deal into force.

Sultan of Oman scheduled to visit Singapore on December 13-15

(lb) Sultan Haitham Bin Tarik of Oman is set to undertake a significant State Visit to Singapore from December 13 to 15, 2023, following an invitation by President Tharman Shanmugaratnam. Marking Oman's inaugural State Visit to Singapore, this visit symbolizes Singapore's deepening engagement with the Middle East. During his visit, Sultan Haitham will be accorded a ceremonial welcome at the Istana and hold meetings with President Tharman, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, and Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong.

Notably, a State Banquet will be hosted in his honor by President Tharman, and Sultan Haitham will visit the Singapore Botanic Gardens, where a new orchid hybrid will be named after him. Additionally, he will receive briefings on Singapore's Smart Nation initiatives and the Future Economy Council.

Sultan Haitham will be accompanied by a high-level delegation comprising key officials and ministers from various sectors such as defense, commerce, investment, energy, and foreign affairs. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore]

Singapore expresses grave concern on worsening Gaza crisis at UN meet

(lb) In an Emergency Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly, Singapore's Permanent Representative, Burhan Gafoor, expressed grave concern over the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza, stressing the urgent need for an immediate ceasefire. Gafoor highlighted Singapore's support for a resolution demanding a humanitarian ceasefire and the release of hostages, following the recent veto by the United States of a binding UN Security Council

resolution for a ceasefire. While recognizing Israel's right to defend itself, Gafoor urged adherence to international humanitarian law to avoid civilian casualties and collective punishment, expressing regret that the resolution didn't address Hamas's actions triggering the crisis.

Singapore advocated for a negotiated two-state solution and urged leaders from both sides to pursue restraint and steps toward peace. Delegates from Israel and Palestine offered contrasting perspectives at the session, with Israel rejecting ceasefire calls and emphasizing its commitment to combat Hamas, while Palestine sought international support for the resolution. The United States' differences with Israel regarding the conflict and its aftermath, including future plans for Gaza and disagreements over a two-state solution, have come to the forefront. The UN General Assembly's emergency session serves as a platform to voice concerns when the Security Council faces deadlock, though its decisions carry moral weight rather than legal binding. [The Business Times]

United States museum to return looted ancient art to Cambodia, Thailand

(msz) The New York-based Metropolitan Museum of Art will return 16 ancient artifacts, including sculptures and statues, to Cambodia and Thailand after an investigation had concluded that the works had been stolen by an art dealer accused of running antiquities trafficking networks throughout Southeast Asia. According to the museum, fourteen Khmer sculptures will be returned to Cambodia, while two will be handed over to Thailand, although the museum is yet to announce the specific date to be returned. [Khaosod English] [NPR]

Asian Development Bank brings down Vietnam’s growth forecast for 2023 to 5.2 percent

(wn/lm) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) on December 13 revised Vietnam's GDP growth forecast for 2023 downward from 5.8 percent to 5.2 percent due to weak external demand. Vietnam's economy slowed more than expected in the first nine months of the year, growing at a rate of 4.2 percent, which is half the rate of the same period last year. The weaker growth is attributed to falling external demand, ineffective budget execution, slow job market recovery,

and sluggish domestic consumption. [Vietnam Express] [Asian Development Bank]

Despite the downward revision for 2023, the ADB is keeping its forecast for Vietnam's growth in 2024 unchanged at 6.0 percent.

United States 'deeply concerned' by reports of mass arrests, torture of opposition members in Bangladesh

(kb) The United States has issued a statement expressing profound concern over the mass arrests of thousands of opposition members and the disturbing allegations of torture within Bangladeshi prisons. Washington has called upon all parties to exercise restraint and refrain from violence while urging the authorities in Dhaka to establish an environment conducive to free and equitable participation in both pre-election and election-related activities. [The Daily Star]

Furthermore, the US has addressed the use of deep fake technology in disinformation campaigns related to the election in Bangladesh, highlighting it as part of a disturbing global trend employing artificial intelligence to manipulate and impact democratic processes.

Regarding the possibility of new sanctions against Bangladesh prior to the upcoming election, US officials have not made any specific announcements. They have, however, reiterated the government's customary practice of refraining from disclosing sanctions actions in advance.

Bangladesh’s War of Liberation the bedrock of its ties with India, New Delhi’s envoy says

(lm) The Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Pranay Verma, has expressed his country's’ readiness to support Dhaka in realizing its vision of a stable, progressive, and prosperous nation. He emphasized the significance of the 1971 Liberation War as the foundation of the strong ties between the two countries. [The Hindu]

Verma highlighted the growing partnership and connectivity between Bangladesh and India, emphasizing the importance of people-to-people relations and cross-border linkages. He also mentioned

that India is working to enhance its resources to handle the increasing volume of visa requests from Bangladeshi citizens.

Bhutan to have 1,000 square kilometer green city along border with India's Assam state

(lm) Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck has announced plans to build a massive "international city" on the border with India's Assam state, covering over 1,000 square kilometers. [The Hindu]

The project, known as the "Gelephu Smartcity Project," aims to serve as an "economic corridor connecting South Asia with Southeast Asia via India's northeastern States." It will include an international airport, "zero emission" industries, a "mindfulness city" focused on tourism and wellness, and infrastructure companies. The project is expected to attract international investment and will be run as a "Special Administrative Region" under different laws to facilitate foreign investment.

Notably, Ahead of King Wangchuck's speech on December 17, Bhutan's Royal Palace had invited guests from India and several other countries, including Japan, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and France – marking the first time such a large international contingent has been present for what is normally a domestic affair.

Brunei, Japan seek to strengthen ties

(dql) On December 17, Brunei's Second Foreign Minister Erywan Yusof met with Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa. The meeting was part of Yusof trip to Tokyo to attend the Commemorative Summit of Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

During the meeting, both sides agreed to deepen their countries' relations in areas such as energy and maritime security. [The Japan Times]

Cambodia-Vietnam: Memorandum of Understanding signed to repatriate the remains of Vietnamese soldiers

(pm) Cambodia and Vietnam signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to work together in the search of Vietnamese volunteer soldiers who lost their lives during the fighting in the 1980s.

Through the cooperation, 1,468 volunteer soldiers have been repatriated to Vietnam so far. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia sends new batch of peacekeepers to peace keeping mission in South Sudan

(pm) Cambodia has sent the 12th batch of 73 peacekeepers, including 34 females, to take part in United Nations Peacekeeping missions in South Sudan.

The cohort includes airport engineers, deminers, and military medics. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia-Thailand: Talks on maritime claims in the Gulf of Thailand in preparation

(pm) Thailand is engaging in preparations for talks with Cambodia to address overlapping maritime claims in the Gulf of Thailand and to establish a new technical panel for negotiations.

Noppadan Patama, chairman of the relevant committee in the Thai House of Representatives, made unveiled this after a meeting with representatives from the ministries of Foreign Affairs and Energy and the navy on the progress of negotiations with Cambodia. He highlighted the potential positive outcomes stemming from the new leadership in both nations, emphasizing the opportunity to develop the disputed area and ensure energy security.

The panel has urged the government to create a new joint technical committee for ongoing discussions.

The disputed area, exceeding 26,000 square kilometers in the Gulf of Thailand, is known for its abundant oil and natural gas resources. In 2001, under the Thaksin Shinawatra administration, Cambodia and Thailand signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). However, no progress was achieved within the framework, leading to the annulment of the MoU by the Abhisit Vejjajiva government in 2009. [Bangkok Post] [Khmer Times]

US Senators urge US Secretary of State Blinken to press Cambodia on release of lawyer

(pm) US Senators have submitted a letter to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on December 13 calling on him to urge the Cambodian government to release Seng Theary. In the letter, they also addressed the human rights violations against the opposing political parties and media community.

Seng Theary, a female American Cambodian lawyer, was arrested on June 14, 2022, and sentenced to six years to jail on charges of conspiracy in the case of Sam Rainsy's return in 2019. She went on a ten-day hunger strike from December 7 to 16. [Radio Free Asia, in Cambodian]

President Xi Jinping optimistic about China-US business ties

(yq) At the Jubilee Gala of the US-China Business Council on December 14, the Chinese Ambassador to the US conveyed Chinese President Xi Jinping's message, expressing confidence in the potential for stronger economic ties between China and the U.S.

Xi highlighted the benefits of Chinese modernization for global enterprises, emphasizing the country's commitment to high-level opening up. Acknowledging recent discussions with President Biden at the sideline of the APEC summit in San Francisco [see AiR No. 47, November/2023, 3], Xi called for cooperation based on mutual respect and win-win principles, emphasizing that Chinese modernization would benefit US firms.

Speaking at the same event, U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, meanwhile, voiced concerns about Beijing's "unfair economic practices," citing limited protection for intellectual property and preferential treatment for domestic competitors. Yellen also urged China to adopt a state-driven approach to economic policy and expressed hope for constructive discussions during her upcoming visit to China. [Hong Kong Free Press]

Xi Jinping meets with Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh

(yq) After his meeting with Vietnamese Communist Party chief Nguyen Phu Trong on December 12 [see AiR No. 11, March/2023, 2], Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh on December 13, reinforcing the positive trajectory of Sino-Vietnamese relations.

Both leaders celebrated the signing of numerous cooperation agreements the day before [see AiR No. 11, March/2023, 2], including the establishment of a strategic China-Vietnam community with a shared future. The leaders pledged to strengthen socialist cooperation, promote cultural exchanges, and guard against disruptions in the Asia-Pacific region.

Xi Jinping emphasized the opportunities of Chinese modernization for Vietnam's development, with agreements on the Belt and Road Initiative and strategic cooperation in emerging fields.

Prime Minister Pham welcomed Xi's visit, highlighting the historic milestone in bilateral relations and expressing Vietnam's commitment to deepening cooperation. The meeting concluded with confidence in the resilience of Vietnam-China relations and a shared vision of contributing to regional peace and prosperity. [Foreign Ministry, People's Republic of China, in Chinese]

The state visit of Xi to Vietnam comes as both China and the US are trying to strengthen their ties with the strategically important state.

China is aiming to maintain diplomatic relations with its key partners, especially in the face of economic challenges, while also navigating its rivalry with Washington. Analysts and diplomats, however, say improved relations between the two countries may be more symbolic than real. [CNN] [Reuters]

Canada condemns China's actions in South China Sea

(yq) Canada has condemned China's actions against Philippine civilian and government vessels in the South China Sea, claiming "China's actions demonstrate a clear disregard for navigational rights and freedoms and are inconsistent with its obligations under international law." [Government of Canada]

In a response on December 13, the Chinese embassy in Canada expressed its disapproval of the Canadian Foreign Ministry's endorsement of the Philippines in the South China Sea conflict, citing that it infringes on

China's sovereignty in the region. It added that Canada's behavior violates the purposes and principles of the U.N. Charter and jeopardizes regional peace and stability. [Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Canada, in Chinese]

Canada's move came after the Philippines and China accused each other of being responsible for incidents involving several vessels in the South China Sea. Manila claimed that Chinese vessels fired water cannons at its resupply boats and deliberately ramming a vessel in disputed waters, while Beijing asserted that Philippine ships illegally intruded into its waters [see AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2].

China rejects Indian Supreme Court ruling on the disputed territory

(yq) On December 13, the Chinese Foreign Ministry dismissed the Indian Supreme Court's ruling regarding the legal status of Ladakh, a region of a long-standing border dispute between India and China, and claimed that "India's domestic judicial decisions cannot change the objective fact that the western section of the Sino-Indian border has always belonged to China."[Foreign Ministry, People's Republic of China, in Chinese]

The Indian Supreme Court ruled on December 11 in favor of the Indian government's decision to unilaterally change the status of Jammu and Kashmir. In addition, the court determined that the establishment of Ladakh as an independent union territory was lawful, with the stipulation that Jammu and Kashmir would be granted statehood again "as expeditiously as possible". [South China Morning Post]

The Ladakh region has been a focal point of the border tensions between China and India, particularly following the fatal clash in the Galwan Valley in 2020, which resulted in casualties on both sides [see AiR No. 24, June/2020, 3].

Despite efforts to disengage since September 2022, tensions persist along the 3,000km Line of Actual Control. Both countries maintain a significant military presence and deploy advanced weaponry along the notional demarcation line. [South China Morning Post]

China and India held the latest, the 28th, round of diplomatic talks on November 30. While the meeting emphasized the need to maintain peace and tranquility along the border, it did not yield a specific timeline for resolving the dispute [see AiR No.49,December/2023,1].

China and Russia warplanes enter South Korea's defense identification zone

(yq) South Korea's military reported on December 14 that two Chinese and four Russian military planes entered the Korea Air Defense Identification Zone, a broader area than the country's airspace.

The flights occurred in the East Sea, also known as the Sea of Japan. Although the aircraft did not breach South Korean airspace, South Korean fighter jets were swiftly scrambled as a precautionary measure. Japan also scrambled jets to monitor Chinese and Russian planes.

China's foreign ministry argued that it was a routine flight activity above international waters, asserting its compliance with international law. [Foreign Ministry, People's Republic of China, in Chinese]

Moscow does not recognize South Korea's air defense identification zone and Beijing believes the zone doesn't constitute airspace and all nations should have the right to move freely within it. [CBS News] [Reuters]

In June four Chinese and four Russian military aircraft flew over the South Korean air defense zone. Since 2019, China and Russia have conducted joint exercises in the eastern air defense zone, sending fighter jets once or twice a year. [South China Morning Post]

China, North Korea hold diplomatic consultations

(yq) According to North Korean state media Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) a delegation of the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs visited China for talks to strengthen cooperation on December 15. [KCNA]

During the talks between the North Korea's Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs and his Chinese counterpart, both sides agreed to take the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the DPRK next year as an opportunity to deepen the friendly and co-operative relations between the two countries and strengthen strategic communication and co-ordination.

The two sides also exchanged views on issues of common concern, without giving details. [Foreign

Ministry, People's Republic of China, in Chinese]

In a recent development, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held a meeting with the Pak on December 18. Wang affirmed "China has always viewed the China-DPRK relations from a strategic and long-term perspective and hoped to strengthen the cooperation. Pak stated that the DPRK will continue to strengthen multilateral relations with China to "safeguard common interests" and "maintain regional peace and stability".[Foreign Ministry, People's Republic of China 2, in Chinese]

Notably, Pyongyang launched a missile capable of reaching anywhere in the United States during the meeting between the two sides [Reuters]

China, Serbia sign Memorandum of Understanding on yuan clearing arrangements

(yq) On December 12, the National Bank of Serbia (NBS) and the People's Bank of China signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to establish a clear arrangement and designate a clearing bank in Serbia for Chinese Yuan transactions. [The State Council, People's Republic of China]

This move is expected to facilitate cross-border transactions in yuan, enabling enterprises and financial institutions of both countries to utilize the currency for transactions and fostering bilateral trade and investment.

The MoU comes after Serbia and China signed a Free Trade Agreement in October to boost bilateral trade and business ties. The FTA aims to deepen the China-Serbia comprehensive strategic partnership and inject new impetus into Belt and Road Initiative cooperation.

The significant increase in trade volume between China and Serbia from 2018 to 2022, coupled with a 12.7 percent rise in Serbian exports to China, underscores the growing economic cooperation between the two nations. [Global Times]

Australia's Trade Minister confident of lifting Chinese tariffs on wine in early 2024

(yq) Australian Trade Minister Don Farrell expressed confidence that punitive tariffs imposed by China on Australian wine in 2021 would be lifted early next year.

He stated that a favorable result from Chinese authorities is expected in the new year, which would be crucial for Australian winemakers entering the processing season.

This optimism follows the announcement in October that both countries had reached a consensus to settle a World Trade Organisation dispute regarding wine, with a review of anti-dumping tariffs scheduled [see AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1].

The move is significant for Australian winemakers, as China was previously their top wine export market until the imposition of tariffs in 2021.

The development is seen as part of ongoing efforts to stabilize strained ties between Australia and China, with most trade blocks on Australian exports already lifted by China. [Reuters]

China donates USD 28 Million in military equipment to Zimbabwe

(yq) On December 13, Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa expressed appreciation for China's donation of military equipment worth USD 28 million to help modernize its armed force and emphasized the significance of the strategic partnership between the two countries.

China has become a key ally of Zimbabwe, especially in the wake of Western sanctions imposed on Harare over human rights violations and land seizures from white farmers during Robert Mugabe's rule. This military aid is viewed as a continuation of China's support for Zimbabwe amid strained ties with the West.

China's assistance to Zimbabwe extends beyond the military domain. The country is a major financier of Zimbabwe's infrastructure projects, including dams, airports, and roads. Chinese companies have invested billions in Zimbabwe's mining industry, particularly in lithium mining, a crucial mineral for rechargeable batteries.

The military donation coincides with China's broader efforts to strengthen its influence in the region, with Zimbabwe being a key strategic location. Zimbabwe has consistently supported China in international

forums, solidifying the diplomatic ties between the two nations.

The donation includes not only military hardware but also motorized water purifiers, which could have non-military applications, such as addressing water-related health issues. However, the overall impact and utility of the donation remain subjects of debate.

China's military assistance to African countries has been growing, with a focus on arms, training, and infrastructure development. This reflects China's broader geopolitical strategy and economic interests in the African continent. [South China Morning Post]

Chinese semiconductor design firms turn to Malaysian partners for chip assembly amid U.S. sanction risks

(yq) An increasing number of Chinese semiconductor design companies are partnering with Malaysian firms for the assembly of high-end chips, particularly graphics processing units (GPUs).

Seeking to mitigate risks associated with potential U.S. sanctions on China's chip industry, Chinese companies are securing assembly services from Malaysian chip packaging firms. These requests for assembly, which do not violate U.S. restrictions, come as Washington imposes sanctions on the sale of high-end GPUs and chip-making equipment to China.

While the focus is currently on assembly, some Chinese companies are also exploring advanced chip packaging services, an area that may face future export restrictions. The move reflects a broader trend of Chinese semiconductor firms diversifying their assembly needs outside of China.

Malaysia, a key hub in the semiconductor supply chain, is perceived as a favorable location for such partnerships due to its experienced workforce, advanced equipment, and amicable relations with China. Major Malaysian chip packaging firms, including Unisem, have reported increased business and inquiries from Chinese clients.

The trend highlights the challenges Chinese companies face in securing advanced packaging services domestically amid U.S. sanctions, providing an opportunity for Malaysia to further establish itself as a semiconductor hub. [Reuters]

China mediates ceasefire talks in Myanmar

(ms) China has successfully mediated peace talks between Myanmar's military junta and rebel groups, marking a crucial step toward de-escalating the ongoing conflict. The talks, held in recent days in China, resulted in a temporary ceasefire and a commitment to continued dialogue between the parties involved, as announced by the Chinese foreign ministry on December 14.

The conflict, primarily concentrated in northern Shan state, has raised concerns in neighboring China, with approximately 300,000 people displaced since the rebel offensive commenced on October 27. The United Nations reports that over 2 million people have become homeless since Myanmar's military coup in February 2021.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry emphasized China's efforts to halt the conflict, promote dialogue, and de-escalate the situation. It additionally noted a noticeable decline in clashes and exchanges of fire in northern Myanmar, attributing this positive development to China's mediation efforts.

A press release from the Chinese Embassy in Myanmar on December 14 stated that an agreement had been reached between the National Solidarity and Peacemaking Negotiation Committee (NSPNC) of the State Administration Council (SAC) and rebel groups, including the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and Arakan Army (AA). The agreement focused on maintaining a temporary ceasefire, with the next round of talks scheduled for the end of the month.

However, despite the ceasefire announcement, reports emerged that ethnic minority fighters, part of the Three Brotherhood Alliance, seized a trading hub in Shan state, challenging the stability of the truce. The Three Brotherhood Alliance comprises the Arakan Army, MNDAA, and TNLA, and their joint offensive has posed a significant military challenge to the junta since 2021. [Eleven Myanmar] [FMPRC] [France 24] [Reuters]

India, Oman discuss comprehensive economic partnership agreement

(fd) India and Oman are on track to sign a comprehensive economic partnership agreement, Indian Prime Minister Modi announced on December

13 during Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's historic state visit to the South Asian nation. This visit marked the first by an Omani ruler in 26 years and featured extensive bilateral discussions, including topics like the situation in Israel and the Palestinians. [The Hindu]

During the visit, the two countries signed five agreements, including one between the Financial Intelligence Unit of India and the National Centre for Financial Information to combat money laundering. Both countries also agreed to recreate a maritime voyage of a stitched ship, symbolizing their historical ties, from Mandvi in Gujarat to Muscat in 2025-26.

A vision document titled “A Joint Partnership For The Future” was agreed upon, focusing on various sectors such as digital connectivity, medical tourism, maritime security, hospitality, agriculture, and food security. The third tranche of the Oman-India Joint Investment Fund was also appreciated for its potential to attract investments from Oman and the Gulf region into India's fastest-growing sectors.

While this had been the first visit of an Omani ruler to India in 26 years, Modi had visited Oman in 2018. Modi stressed during the visit the close ties between the two countries, which had been promoted by the late Sultan Qaboos who had been posthumously awarded the Gandhi Peace Prize in 2019.

India requests FBI to share intel on Sikh separatists

(lm) India has formally requested the United States to share intelligence on Sikh separatists living in the US. The request was made during meetings between India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) and FBI director Christopher Wray, who had visited New Delhi earlier this month [see AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2]. [The Straits Times]

India’s move and Wray’s visit to the South Asian nation came as investigations continue into an accusation that an Indian official was linked to a plot 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 [see AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1]. New Delhi has been accused by the US and Canada of having officials involved in assassination plots against Sikh separatist leaders in North America, a claim that India vehemently denies.

Indonesia, Cambodia trade forum spurs trade

(jb) The Cambodia-Indonesia Business and Investment Forum have emerged as a pivotal force in augmenting trade ties between the two ASEAN member states. Soy Bopha, undersecretary of state at the Ministry of Commerce, emphasized its significance during the 16th Cambodian & Import-Export Goods Exhibition in Phnom Penh on December 16.

With the trade volume approaching USD 950 million in 2022, Bopha underscored the forum's role in fostering economic, trade, and investment sectors.

Notably, a memorandum of understanding signed earlier facilitated the export of 250,000 tons of Cambodian milled rice to Indonesia, marking a substantial leap in bilateral trade.

The General Department of Customs and Excise reported a remarkable 16% increase, reaching USD 964 million in trade exchange between the nations in the first 11 months of 2023. [Phnom Penh Post]

European defense technology company explores smart city opportunities in Indonesia's new capital

(jb) Thales, the European defense technology company, is set to play a pivotal role in the development of Indonesia's new capital, Nusantara, located on the island of Borneo. The company's president director for Southeast Asia, Olivier Rabourdin, expressed optimism about the substantial opportunities, estimating potential revenues of up to USD 300 million for Thales.

The strategic cooperation is outlined in a memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed with the Indonesian new capital city authority, focusing on smart city concepts encompassing digital identity, unmanned aircraft systems' traffic management, cybersecurity, and data centers.

As Indonesia plans to commence the relocation of key functions to Nusantara in August next year, Thales aims to contribute its expertise in engineering skills and knowledge transfer to the burgeoning smart city. Rabourdin highlighted Thales's commitment to providing what the new capital needs, emphasizing the

importance of early adoption of smart city concepts before the completion of construction.

Thales's involvement extends beyond defense and aerospace, incorporating technology in connectivity and cybersecurity crucial for a smart city's infrastructure. The collaboration envisions an automated aircraft traffic control system to optimize airspace use, collect traffic information, alleviate congestion, and manage major disasters. [Nikkei]

Indonesia and South Korea collaborate to create electric bus ecosystem in Bali

(jb) In a groundbreaking move, the Indonesian Ministry of National Development Planning (Bappenas) and the South Korean government are joining forces to create an electric bus ecosystem in Bali. The collaboration, aimed at achieving a net-zero emissions target by 2060, will initiate a pilot project in four key regions—Denpasar, Badung, Gianyar, and Tabanan (Sarbagita)—over the next three years.

Deputy Minister Vivi Yulaswati highlights the significance of this venture, acknowledging the transportation sector as a major emissions contributor. With a budget of US$8.8 million, supported by the Global Green Growth Institute, the project promises to revolutionize Bali's public transport while combating climate change [Tempo.co]

Indonesian Ambassador seeks Preah Sihanouk's support for election and investment collaboration

(jb) In a diplomatic meeting with Preah Sihanouk Provincial Governor Kuoch Chamroeun, Indonesian Ambassador Santo Darmosumarto expressed gratitude for the support provided to the substantial Indonesian workforce in the province while seeking backing for Indonesia's upcoming national election.

Ambassador Darmosumarto highlighted the excellent facilitation extended by the Preah Sihanouk Provincial Hall for the approximately 20,000 to 25,000 Indonesians employed in the province. In preparation for Indonesia's national election scheduled for February 2024, he urged the provincial administration to assist in establishing three overseas polling stations in Sihanoukville. This move aims to enable the sizable

Indonesian community in the area to actively participate in the democratic process.

Recognizing Sihanoukville as a priority investment destination for Indonesian investors, the ambassador affirmed his commitment to fostering increased investments and tourism from Indonesia to Cambodia. The meeting showcased the importance of diplomatic collaboration in strengthening economic ties between the two nations.

Governor Chamroeun welcomed the ambassador's request and assured full support for the establishment of overseas polling stations. He acknowledged the significance of Indonesian workers and tourists in the province and provided updates on the support services his administration offers to enhance their experience.

Expressing confidence in the Indonesian ambassador's ability to boost investment and tourism, Governor Chamroeun emphasized the mutual benefits of such collaborations. The diplomatic efforts aim to fortify the bond between Indonesia and Cambodia, fostering prosperity and cooperation on multiple fronts [Khmer Times]

Indonesia, South Korea forge closer ties with new local currency transactions framework

(jb) Indonesia and South Korea are set to enhance financial integration with the finalization of operational guidelines for a Local Currency Transactions (LCT) framework scheduled to launch in 2024.

This initiative facilitates direct trade transactions between the Indonesian Rupiah (IDR) and the South Korean Won (KRW), mitigating foreign exchange risks in cross-border payments. Stemming from a May memorandum of understanding between Bank Indonesia and the Bank of Korea, the LCT framework aims to foster economic stability in Asia by reducing reliance on major currencies like the US dollar.

Both central banks anticipate increased trade promotion and strengthened regional economies through this strategic collaboration. [Investing.com]

Indonesia-UK: East Java collaborates with British government to develop public transportation

(yr) East Java Governor Khofifah Indar Parawansa announced a new cooperation with the British Government to develop public transportation, especially trains, in Surabaya.

After meeting with British Ambassador to Indonesia Dominic Jermey, Khofifah confirmed that this project was supported by the decision of the Minister of Finance.

The project, which also involves collaboration with German and Japanese companies, is expected to be launched before 26 December, as part of an ongoing commitment to improving sustainable transport and cooperation in the fields of education and industry. [Republic of Indonesia Radio, in Indonesian] [Tempo]

Indonesia strengthens tourism sector cooperation with Macau

(yr) In an effort to strengthen post-pandemic economic and tourism relations, the Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia (KJRI) in Hong Kong held a series of meetings in Macau SAR, including with the Macau Airport Authority and Air Macau.

This visit aims to increase investment, tourism and trade cooperation between Indonesia and Macau, with a focus on increasing flight connectivity and promoting Indonesian tourist destinations.

The reopening of direct Macau-Jakarta flights and plans to increase flight frequency were the main topics, marking important steps in strengthening bilateral relations between the two regions. [Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

Japan goes again against Russia's invasion of Ukraine

(sh) On December 15, Japan tightened its sanctions against Russia over its invasion of Ukraine invasion, adding 57 organizations in Russia and six others in countries including the United Arab Emirates, Armenia, Syria and Uzbekistan.

This brings the number of sanctions entities over 530, including 494 Russian organizations, 27 Belarusian entities and six more in other countries.

The sanctions include bans on exports to some places outside Russia and Belarus. These new measures will

take effect on December 22 for the Russian organizations and December 27 for the others. [France 24]

Chinese-Russian joint flight over waters near Japan

(sh) On December 14, Chinese and Russian bombers flew together near Japan, a move seen as a strong display of power by Tokyo.

Two Chinese H-6 jets and two Russian Tu-95 jets flew from the Sea of Japan to the East China Sea, leading Japan to send fighter jets in response.

While Japan's airspace was not breached, it expressed serious concerns to China and Russia through diplomatic channels about the joint flight near its waters. [Kyodo News]

Nippon Steel Corps to become the world's third-largest steelmaker

(sh) Nippon Steel Corp. announcned that it will purchase United States Steel Corp. for approximately USD 14.1 billion.

Nippon Steel plans to make the major U.S. steelmaker a fully owned subsidiary to meet the rising demand for high-quality steel products in the world's market.

The deal is anticipated to be finalized in the second or third quarter of 2024, pending approval from U.S. Steel's shareholders and regulators in the United States.

In 2022, Nippon Steel was the world's fourth-largest steelmaker, producing around 44 million tons, while U.S. Steel ranked 27th with about 14 million tons. The combined output will position Nippon Steel as the world's third-largest steelmaker, following China Baowu Group and ArcelorMittal SA. [Kyodo News]

Capital cities of Vietnam and Laos seek to strengthen cooperation

(wn) On December 12, Vice Chairwoman of the Hanoi People's Council Phung Thi Hong Ha held talks with the

Vice Chairwoman of Laos's Vientiane capital People's Council Lamphoy Siakkhachanh in Hanoi.

During the meeting, Ha provided an overview of Hanoi's socio-economic development and emphasized that due to the strong friendship and comprehensive cooperation between Vietnam and Laos, Hanoi always prioritizes the development of cooperative relations with Lao localities, particularly Vientiane's capital city.

Siakkhachanh, for her part, suggested that both sides should consider directions in the future by focusing on increasing meetings and delegations exchange at all levels, supporting each other in personnel training and improving the quality of human resources.

She also expressed her hope that the People's Council of Hanoi would share its experience with Vientiane in appraising and supervising the implementation of large investment projects and building legal documents. Furthermore, she proposed enhancing mechanisms for periodically exchanging information and sharing experience in developing legal documents and supervision work. [LAO News Agency]

Laos, Botswana establish diplomatic ties

(wn) On December 11, Laos and the Republic of Botswana signed a joint statement in New York City to establish diplomatic relations and promote friendship and bilateral cooperation.

Anouphab Vongnokeo, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Laos to the United Nations (UN), attended the signing ceremony, as did Lemogang Kwape, Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Republic of Botswana. [Laotian Times]

Malaysia's Perak State Development Corporation receives USD 2 million grant from EU

(dql) The European Union (EU) has awarded a USD 2 million grant to Port of Antwerp-Bruges International (PoABI), a prominent European industrial port operator, and the Perak State Development Corporation (PKNPk), a key state agency responsible for driving economic development and socio-economic growth in the State of Perak.

The grant is designated for a study assessing Malaysia's appeal in the port and maritime sector.

Additionally, the parties have formalized their collaboration through the signing of a Shareholder's Agreement.

The Port of Lumut in Perak has been identified as a new flagship project under the EU Global Gateway strategy. [EEAS]

The Maldives seeks to terminate hydrographic survey agreement with India

(lm) The Maldives has conveyed its intention to terminate a bilateral agreement with India, which permitted India's participation in hydrographic surveys of Maldivian territorial waters. The agreement, established in June 2019 during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the Maldives, was set to expire on June 7, 2024. Under the terms of the agreement, if one party wishes to terminate it, the other party must be informed six months before the expiration date; otherwise, the agreement automatically renews for an additional five years. [The WIRE] [The Indian Express]

The decision to terminate the agreement comes in the wake of the Maldives' call for the withdrawal of Indian military personnel and assets from the country. Both decisions reflect the country’s determination to assert greater independence and sovereignty in its defense and security matters. President Mohamed Muizzu has signaled that future hydrographic work will be carried out entirely under Maldivian management, with the information being accessible only to Maldivians.

Mongolia, US hold 16th bilateral consultation

(ap) The 16th Consultation Meeting and II Strategic Dialogue between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mongolia and the U.S. State Department was held in Washington on December 12.

Chaired by Mongolian State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ankhbayar Nyamdorj and US State Department Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel J. Kritenbrink, the dialogue had three strategic focuses: trade, economy and international development with a focus on law enforcement and humanitarian aid.

Both sides emphasized the importance of bilateral cooperation and expanding economic ties as the US is a key third neighbor. “Third Neighbour” refers to a facet of Mongolian foreign relations referring to strengthening ties with countries other than Russia and China.

The 17th Consultation Meeting and Strategic Dialogue will be held in 2024 in Ulaanbaatar. [Montsame]

Thai soldiers kill 15 suspected drug smugglers at Thai-Myanmar border

(jw) On December 16, Thai soldiers killed fifteen suspected drug smugglers and seized two million methamphetamine tablets after a shootout along the northern Thailand-Myanmar border.

Phanurat Lukboon, acting secretary-general of the Thai Office of the Narcotics Control Board, said that the army encountered the smugglers after receiving a tip. No arrests have been made, and law enforcement officials are still working to identify the identities of the suspects and their origins. [Associated Press]

North Korea hosts Russian delegation for talks on economic cooperation

(ap) North Korean External Economic Relations Minister Yun Jong-ho met with Oleg Kozhemyako, Russian governor of the Russian far eastern region of Primorsky in Pyongyang on December 13 to discuss elevating economic cooperation between the two countries.

The two sides signed an agreement involving trade and economic groups, according to the state media KCNA, however details were not disclosed. [KCNA]

According to a South Korean spy agency, Russia is planning to employ North Korean workers which would be a direct violation of the UN Security Council sanctions.

In November Kozhemyako said that Russia is ready to consider giving agricultural land for farming to North Korean workers.

According to experts, due to the war in Ukraine, Russia is suffering from a manpower shortage. [Reuters] [Radio Free Asia]

North Korean, Chinese foreign ministry officials hold talks in Beijing

(ap) In a rare official visit facilitated by North Korea's stringent border control measures, high-level bilateral talks transpired between North Korea and China in Beijing.

The meeting involved Pak Myong-ho, North Korea's Vice Foreign Minister, and Sun Weidong, China's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, who convened to discuss their bilateral cooperation and preparations for the upcoming 75th anniversary of establishing diplomatic ties next year.

This notable visit is exceptional in light of North Korea's decision to close its borders in 2020 as a precautionary measure against the pandemic.

The last comparable visit occurred in 2019 when Kim Su-gil, then-director of the General Political Bureau of the Korean People's Army, engaged in military talks with his Chinese counterpart Miao Hua during a visit to Beijing. [KCNA] [Yonhap]

North Korean airliner lands in China after four years of lockdown

(ap) North Korean airliner, Air Koryo, operated its first international commercial flight to Shengyang, China after nearly four years of COVID-19 restrictions.

The airplane departed from Pyongyang and arrived at Taoxian International Airport with 120 North Korean residents, most of whom worked in China’s northeastern region. The last time Air Koryo operated a passenger flight was in 2020.

It remains unclear if flights will resume on a regular basis. Most transportation between the two countries has resumed as buses, cargo trains and trucks operate between the two cities. [Yonhap]

In a separate move, North Korea has started issuing visas for Chinese traders, investors, and technicians after three years of COVID restrictions. However, visas will not be issued for individuals who wish to visit North Korea for family and travel purposes. [Daily NK]

Pakistan presses Afghanistan to extradite planners behind deadly attack on military base

(tj) Pakistan has called on the Taliban government in Afghanistan to take decisive action against "terrorist entities" operating on its soil and to hand over fugitive militant leaders allegedly responsible for a deadly attack on a Pakistani military base on December 12. [Geo News] [Voice of America]

The attack, which occurred in the northwestern district of Dera Ismail Khan, killed 23 soldiers and wounded many others. A recently emerged militant outfit, the Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP), claimed responsibility for the attack, and Islamabad alleges that the TJP is affiliated with the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a globally designated terrorist group based in Afghanistan.

Kabuls' Taliban rulers has said it would investigate the attack if Pakistan shared details with them but rejected Islamabad's allegations of a connection to Afghanistan.

Pakistan, United States 'intend to increase interaction' as Pakistan's army chief visits Washington

(mha) On December 18, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Asim Munir, held a meeting with the Chief of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), General Michael Erik Kurilla, during his official visit to the US. The meeting between the army chiefs discussed shared interests, regional security cooperation, and the need to enhance training interactions between CENTCOM and the Pakistan Army. [Arab News]

General Munir arrived in Washington on December 12 on his first official visit to the United States since he became Pakistan's army chief in November 2022 along with head of the Inter-Services Intelligence Lt. Gen. Nadeem Anjum [see AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2]. During the ongoing visit, General Munir has met with Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Llyod J. Austin along with several other high-profile American security officials including Deputy National Security Adviser Jonathan Finer and Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff General Charles Q. Brow. [Anadolu Ajansı] [DAWN]

Throughout the high-level engagements, General Munir aimed to garner US support for addressing alleged terrorist havens in Afghanistan, claiming that

militant groups such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) pose a threat not only to Pakistan but also to the US and global security. However, while Washington has expressed sympathy and understanding, it does not appear to be considering military action specifically against TTP hideouts in Afghanistan at this time. Instead, the US is focused on diplomatic solutions and counterterrorism capacity-building programs in Pakistan. [Voice of America]

Japan, The Philippines leaders hold summit meeting; talks on reciprocal troop deal initiated

(lb) On December 17, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida held a summit meeting with his counterpart from the Philippines, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., during the latter's visit to Japan for the Commemorative Summit for the 50th Year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan]

During the meeting, they discussed various aspects of bilateral cooperation, including maritime safety capacity building, energy transition, and infrastructure development. They also exchanged documents related to bilateral cooperation, including a Memorandum of Cooperation between Japan Coast Guard and the Philippine Coast Guard and a Memorandum of Cooperation between the Ministry of the Environment of Japan and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources of the Republic of the Philippines in the Field of Environmental Protection.

In related developments, the Philippines and Japan initiated talks for a reciprocal access agreement that would allow the deployment of military forces on each other's soil amidst rising regional tensions, especially concerning the South China Sea. [Gcaptain.com]

Japan, Singapore hold Foreign Ministers' Meeting

(lb/lm) On December 16, Japan's Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa and Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan held a meeting during Minister Balakrishnan's visit to Japan for the Commemorative Summit for the 50th Year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan]

In related developments, the prime ministers of both countries on December 16 held a summit meeting to discuss various aspects of bilateral relations and regional and international challenges. They expressed their commitment to strengthening Japan-Singapore relations and addressing global challenges collaboratively, including cooperation in promising industries, energy transition, and security.

After the meeting, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong voiced support for deepening cooperation between Japan and Singapore to promote peace and stability in the region. This includes welcoming Japan's Self-Defence Forces aircraft and vessels to make port calls in Singapore. Lee highlighted the need for Japan and ASEAN to work together to promote a stable, open, and inclusive regional and international order based on the rule of law. [The Straits Times]

Furthermore, the two countries have signed a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) to establish the Singapore-Japan Green and Digital Shipping Corridor (GDSC). The initiative aims to accelerate maritime decarbonization and digitalization. The Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (MPA) will collaborate with six Japanese ports to work on pilot projects and trials for alternative marine fuels like ammonia and hydrogen. They will also develop bunkering infrastructure, standards, and training while adopting technologies to decarbonize port infrastructure. Additionally, the initiative will streamline port clearance processes and share information on maritime cybersecurity risks and digitalization best practices. [Offshore Energy]

South Korean President Yoon's four-day state visit to the Netherlands

(oy) South Korea President Yoon Suk Yeol was on a four-day state visit to the Netherlands from December 11 to December 14.

At the Netherlands-Korea Business Forum on December 14, Yoon announced that South Korea and the Netherlands agreed to enhance their collaboration in the semiconductor industry to an industrial alliance level.

During the forum, attended by 200 South Korean and Dutch entrepreneurs, 19 Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) and agreements were signed between both countries' companies and institutions, covering advanced technology, renewable energy, logistics and agriculture. This included an MOU

between South Korea's Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy and the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy on collaboration in nuclear energy.

Earlier on December 13, Yoon and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte issued a joint statement agreeing to enhance industrial collaboration in advanced technology sectors. As part of the agreement, both countries will inaugurate a biennial 2+2 foreign and industry ministerial dialogue.

Both countries also agreed to strengthen cooperation in economic and maritime security; “cooperation on international norm development on AI in the military domain, by co-hosting the REAIM Summit 2024”; strengthen their semiconductor alliance through establishing “bilateral semiconductor dialogue and a Semiconductor Talent Program, and to continue to expand business-to-business cooperation”.

During Yoon’s visit to Dutch chipmaking equipment company ASML, South Korean semiconductor companies Samsung Electronics and SK hynix signed a MOU with ASML to invest KRW 1 trillion (USD761 million) in an R&D center in South Korea and develop technology for recycling hydrogen used in extreme ultraviolet (EUV) lithography machines respectively.

Additionally, South Korea’s Presidential Office announced that South Korea plans to construct a cold chain logistics center the Dutch port city of Rotterdam by 2027, to increase “exports of fresh food and reduce the logistical costs of exporting companies”. [Yonhap_1] [Yonhap_2] [Yonhap_3] [Yonhap_4] [Yonhap_5][Yonhap_6] [Government of the Netherlands] [President of the Republic of Korea]

South Korea to hold North Korea accountable for illegally operating joint industrial park

(oy) South Korea’s Unification Minister Kim Yung-ho told foreign correspondents that South Korea will hold North Korea accountable for illegally operating South Korea-owned facilities at the Kaesong Industrial Complex.

The complex produces clothing and textiles, car parts and semiconductors, and was closed in 2016 after a series of North Korea nuclear and long-range missile tests.

Kim added that the South Korean government “will sternly respond to North Korea's escalation of

tensions" and "manage the situation in an extremely restrained attitude so that such tensions would not lead to provocation."

He called on China and Russia, both permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, to cooperate in restraining North Korea. Additionally, Kim cautioned North Korea about the potential third hereditary power succession from Kim Jong-un to his daughter Ju-ae, stating it would harm their citizens the most. [Yonhap]

South Korea, US, Japan missile warning data sharing operational in "next few days"

(oy) On December 13, Mira Rapp-Hooper, the National Security Council Senior Director for East Asia and Oceania, has disclosed that a real-time data sharing system for North Korean ballistic missile warnings, involving South Korea, the United States, and Japan, is anticipated to be operational in the next few days. Rapp-Hooper was speaking at a panel discussion organized by the Brookings Institution's Center for East Asia Policy Studies.

Rapp-Hooper highlighted that one of the most important outcomes of the summit was the three countries' pledge to consult each other during crises. She added that the trilateral cooperation has "also encouraged us to go on to have much deeper … better informed conversations about mounting challenges in the region, such as North Korea-Russia cooperation or China's recent aggression in the South China Sea."

According to observers, the system is expected to improve the countries' ability to identify and monitor incoming missiles from North Korea. [Yonhap] [Brookings]

The establishment of such a system was agreed on between South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, U.S. President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida during their trilateral summit in August. The meeting – the first standalone meeting between the three nations – has been widely seen as marking a new chapter in trilateral cooperation, as the three countries established an institutional basis to cement trilateral cooperation.

The summit produced a series of documents that solidified three-way cooperation, underscoring their deepening solidarity in the face of intensifying security

challenges posed by North Korea, China, and Russia [see AiR No. 34, August/2023, 4]

South Korea, US to cooperate on nuclear strategy

(oy) On December 15, South Korea and US agreed to "complete guidelines regarding the planning and operation of a nuclear strategy by the middle of next year… to deter and respond to North Korean threats."

The agreement was announced following the 2nd Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) meeting between South Korea's Principal Deputy National Security Adviser Kim Tae-hyo and the US National Security Council (NSC) Coordinator for Intelligence and Defense Policy Maher Bitar.

According to Kim, the guidelines would cover the exchange of sensitive nuclear information, implementation of security systems and communication channels between both countries' leaders. The guidelines also include plans for crisis management and risk reduction. Both countries also aim to establish a unified South Korea-U.S. extended deterrence system, which will allow them to respond decisively to any North Korean nuclear attack. This integrated system, expected to be completed by June next year, will leverage South Korea's conventional military assets to support US's nuclear operations.

Additionally, both countries agreed to include nuclear operations scenarios in bilateral exercises next year.

The 2nd NCG was attended by around 60 security, military and diplomatic officials from both countries. The meeting occurred a day after North Korea leader Kim Jong-un hinted at the potential launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile in December. [Yonhap_1] [Yonhap_2] [White_House]

South Korea, US officials discuss North Korea threats

(oy/dql) On December 13, South Korea's Director General for the Korean Peninsula Peace Regime, Chun Young-hee, met US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Jung Pak, to discuss North Korea's recent provocations and its publication of a human rights white paper.

Both officials expressed concerns about increased tensions following North Korea's launching of a military reconnaissance satellite in November, reemphasizing their commitment to close coordination.

Chu also expressed concerns over North Korea using human rights issues to advance its nuclear and missiles programs. This comes after North Korea claimed its citizens have genuine human rights and that it could focus on economic development and improving living standards due to strong deterrence from self-defense efforts. [Yonhap] [AiR No. 48, November 2023/3]

In a separate development, the security battalion, consisting of South Korean and US guard forces responsible for securing the Joint Security Area, has resumed armament.

The move comes in response to North Korean soldiers carrying firearms across the inter-Korean border.

Both Seoul and Pyongyang had withdrawn firearms in the JSA in the truce village of Panmunjom in late October 2018, around a month after signing the Inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement. The JSA is the sole location where soldiers from South and North Korea, as well as the United States, stand face-to-face along the low concrete border marker that divides the Korean Peninsula.

However, North Korea's has taken efforts to remilitarize the JSA since late November, following South Korea's announcement on November 22 that it was suspending part of the 2018 Comprehensive Military Agreement, specifically the no-fly zone clause. Seoul's action was a tit-for-tat measure to a spy satellite launch by North Korea on November 21 [see AiR No. 48, November/2023, 4]. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea protests Chinese and Russian unauthorized entry into air defense identification zone

(oy) On December 15, South Korea's defense ministry issued a "stern" protest with China and Russia for their warplanes' unauthorized entry into South Korea's air defense identification zone (KADIZ). The incident, which occurred on December 14, involved two Chinese and four Russian military aircraft entering and exiting the KADIZ, leading to the South Korean Air Force dispatching fighter jets.

South Korea's defense ministry expressed regret and called for measures to avoid such incidents in the future, highlighting that such actions could escalate regional tensions. The same message was conveyed by South Korea's foreign ministry through diplomatic channels.

In response, the defense ministries of China and Russia stated that the flight was part of a joint reconnaissance mission under their annual cooperation plans and was conducted in accordance with international laws. [Yonhap]

South Korea, The Netherlands defense ministers meet

(oy) On December 12, South Korea's Vice Defense Minister Kim Seon-ho met Dutch Defense Minister Kajsa Ollongren in The Hague to enhance security and arms industry ties.

They agreed to initiate working-level discussions for South Korea to observe a missile defense exercise in 2025, led by Dutch and German forces.

Both officials also agreed to expand defense cooperation and recognized the potential for bilateral arms industry collaboration based on Artificial Intelligence and other defense technologies.

In addition, the swift establishment of a joint defense logistics committee as per a bilateral MOU revised in June was agreed on. [Yonhap]

Sri Lankan Foreign Minister visits Qatar, works towards deepened investment

(lf) Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ali Sabry's made an official visit to Qatar on December 10-11 in order to attend the 21st Doha Forum as well as hold official meetings with Qatari figures to deepen bilateral ties between both countries.

Minister Sabry met with Qatar's State Minister for Foreign Affairs Soltan bin Saad Al-Muraikhi to explore avenues for the expansion and strengthening of bilateral relations, with a particular emphasis on investment and economic cooperation, a key priory of the Wickremesinghe government as they attempt to recover the nation's economic stability. Additionally, Sabry held a significant meeting with Mansoor Bin Ebrahim Al Mahmoud, the Chief Executive Officer of

Qatar Investment Authority, inviting Qatar to invest in Sri Lankan infrastructure projects and businesses, whilst assuring that a sizeable return would manifest.

Speaking to the media, Minister Sabry acknowledged the existing “good” bilateral relations between Qatar and Sri Lanka, outlining the untapped potential for growth and collaboration between both nations. He expressed the need to shift the focus from the current employment-centric relationship to a more comprehensive partnership, particularly in the realm of investment. Sabry envisioned Qatar viewing Sri Lanka as a viable destination for investment and highlighted Sri Lanka's interest in diverse areas such as renewable energy, port development, aviation, hospitality, and tourism. Sri Lankan workers are a common phenomenon in Qatar, generally working on contract for companies that supply visas and living arrangements, whilst wages are sent back to Sri Lanka.

Sabry also applauded Qatar's mediation efforts on the Gaza issue and advocated for a two-state solution, acknowledging Qatar's leadership in addressing humanitarian concerns. The minister returned optimistic about the impression the visit had made, but further action between both states is subject to Sri Lanka’s economic future throughout 2024. [Adaderana] [Peninsula Qatar]

Chinese forces spotted near Taiwan’s coast ahead of elections

(jr) Taiwanese security officials have revealed that Taiwanese military drones diverted four attempts by Chinese forces to approach Taiwan’s sensitive contiguous zone in November, which extends 44 km off its coast, and simulated an intrusion to test Taipei’s response.

According to them China’s move was part of a ramped-up campaign to "intimidate" voters before the presidential and legislative elections in Taiwan on January 13.

They reiterated warnings that China is trying to sway voters toward presential candidates seeking closer ties with Beijing, framing the elections as a choice between "peace and war" and calling Taiwanese to make the "right choice". [Taiwan News]

US approves USD 300 million military sale to Taiwan

(xc) The US Department of State has authorized a Foreign Military Sale (FMS) to Taiwan, amounting to USD 300 million.

This sale is intended to provide follow-on life cycle support and related equipment, crucial for maintaining and enhancing the C4 (Command, Control, Communications, and Computers) capabilities of Taiwan's military forces.

This approval marks the 12th FMS of its kind under the Biden Administration. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan, US discuss Taipei joining international organizations

(jr) A group meeting aimed at expanding Taiwan's participation within the United Nations system and other international forums took place on December 13 in Washington DC.

Jointly organized by the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the US – the de-facto Taiwanese embassy in the US, and the American Institute in Taiwan – the de-facto US diplomatic mission to Taiwan, the discussions focused on opportunities to support Taiwan's inclusion in the international civil aviation organization, World Health Assembly, non-UN international regional and multi-regional organizations, and global public health bodies. [Taiwan Today]

European Parliament adopts resolution on EU-Taiwan trade and investment

(xc) The European Parliament has unanimously passed a resolution on European Union (EU)-Taiwan trade and investment relations on December 13.

The resolution calls for the launch of talks between the European Union and Taiwan on the conclusion of a resilient supply chain agreement as well as for improving cooperation of digital trade, customs, and cyber resilience.

It also urges the European Commission and the European External Action Service to strengthen efforts

on Taiwan's presence in multilateral and international forums.

The resolution is the third Taiwan-focused resolution since the European Parliament adopted a report on EU-Taiwan political relations and cooperation in October 2021 [European Interest] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan]

Taiwan's premier university seeks Indonesian white-collar workers

(jr) A delegation from the National Taiwan University of Science and Technology (NTUST) has visited four sister colleges in Indonesia to discuss ways to recruit students to work in white-collar jobs in Taiwan.

The four sister colleges the delegation visited were the Sepuluh Nopember Institute of Technology, Widya Mandala Catholic University, Petra Christian University in Surabaya, and the Bandung Institute of Technology.

The visit also saw the launch of an Indonesian and Taiwan science and technology innovation center and a forum conducted with academics and businesspeople. [Taiwan News]

Thai Prime Minister Srettha invites Japanese investment in Land Bridge Project

(msz/lm) During his visit to Japan, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin extended an invitation to over 500 Japanese business leaders to invest in Thailand's Land Bridge megaproject, valued at approximately THB 1 trillion (around USD 28.6 billion).

Prime Minister Srettha's visit to Japan coincided with the Commemorative Summit for the 50th year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation, held on December 17. Accompanying the Prime Minister were a delegation of cabinet ministers, including Foreign Affairs Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara and Transport Minister Suriya Jungrungreangkit.

The Land Bridge project aims to create a new trade route connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans, bypassing the Malacca Strait. Prime Minister Srettha, who also serves as the Finance Minister, had previously presented the megaproject to potential

investors in China, the Middle East, and the United States.

Notably, Bangkok is considering awarding a 50-year concession to the project's winning bidder, with the expectation that it will turn profitable within 24 years. The project encompasses various sectors, including shipping lines, logistics, port management, property development, and industrial investments. [Bangkok Post 1]

On December 17, Prime Minister Thavisin and his Japanese counterpart Fumio Kishida reached an agreement to explore the possibility of initiating a dialogue. This dialogue aims to discuss measures that would preserve Thailand's industrial competitiveness as a significant manufacturing hub for Japanese automakers in the production and export of next-generation vehicles, including electric vehicles. [Bangkok Post 2]

In separate developments, Honda Motor has initiated the production of electric vehicles (EVs) in Thailand, with plans to launch them in the country in the first quarter of 2024. This move makes Honda the first Japanese company to manufacture passenger EVs in Thailand, while Toyota Motor also produces a limited number of commercial EVs in the country. [Nikkei Asia]

Thai, United States senior diplomats meet in Bangkok

(tt) On December 12, Thailand's Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Sarun Charoensuwan, held a meeting with Melissa Brown, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Department of State. The discussions centered on strengthening Thailand-US relations, with a focus on increasing high-level engagements, exchange of visits, and plans for the Thailand-US Strategic and Defense Dialogue involving the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense from both countries. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

The two sides also explored opportunities for enhancing economic partnerships and promoting investment prospects. Additionally, they exchanged perspectives on regional and global issues, including the situations in Myanmar, the Middle East, and Ukraine.

Thai Deputy Prime Minister meets with Saudi Arabia's Minister of Investment

(tt) Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara on December 13 met with Khalid Abdulaziz Al-Falih, Saudi Arabia's Minister of Investment. This meeting took place during Parnpree's official visit to Saudi Arabia to inaugurate the Thailand Mega Fair 2023, the world's largest exhibition of goods and services from over 120 Thai companies. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

Building on Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin's visit to Saudi Arabia in October, the discussions encompassed various aspects of bilateral collaboration. These included mutual investments, the establishment of a Board of Investment (BOI) Office in Riyadh, cooperation and investment in the energy sector, particularly in the field of green hydrogen. Additionally, Thailand expressed its intent to pursue a Free Trade Agreement with Saudi Arabia.

On this occasion, the Deputy Prime Minister reaffirmed Thailand's readiness to host the first Saudi-Thai Coordination Council (STCC) meeting in January 2024, with the Foreign Ministers of both countries co-chairing the meeting and the Saudi Ministry of Investment participating as the co-head Committee of Economic and Trade under the STCC.

China, Vietnam hail upgrade of ties, agree to boost security efforts as President Xi wraps up Hanoi visit

(wn/lm) China and Vietnam have advanced their collaboration on security issues and committed to fostering a "shared future" as Chinese President Xi Jinping concluded a pivotal two-day visit to Vietnam on December 13. Despite historical conflicts and ongoing disputes in the South China Sea, the two neighboring nations inked a series of cooperation agreements and pledged to strengthen their defense industry connections and intelligence sharing. [Reuters] [Vietnam News]

President Xi had arrived in Vietnam 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. His visit coincided with the 15th anniversary of the establishment of a "comprehensive strategic partnership" between the two countries. Crucially, it also came 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. [AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2]

The cooperation agreements between China and Vietnam span various sectors, including potential investments in rail infrastructure and security, as well as telecommunications and digital data cooperation. While specific details of these agreements have not been disclosed, they could potentially pave the way for Chinese involvement in developing Vietnam's 5G network and investments in undersea infrastructure, aligning with the interests of both nations.

Notably absent from the list of agreements is a pact related to rare earth minerals, despite President Xi's prior call for broader cooperation on critical minerals. However, the joint statement highlights their intention to explore opportunities for collaboration in this strategic area. To enhance trade and investment, China and Vietnam have also agreed to establish a dedicated zone focusing on agriculture, infrastructure, energy, digital economy, and green development.

Importantly, one of the key motivations behind the deepening collaboration is their shared interest in mitigating the risk of what they term a "color revolution" orchestrated by external forces. The phrase "color revolution" typically refers to popular uprisings and protests that have unsettled and reshaped political landscapes in several countries, primarily in the post-communist space and other authoritarian regimes.

European Union enterprises show strong interest in investing in Vietnam’s Đà Nẵng city

(wn) Enterprises from the European Union (EU) are showing strong interest in investing in Đà Nẵng, the fifth-largest city in Vietnam by municipal population. They are particularly keen on collaborating with the city in the fields of education and training, green energy, and environmental protection, according to the Head of the EU Delegation to Hanoi, Julien Guerrier. [Vietnam News]

The EU is a major partner of Vietnam, ranking third in trade, and has signed comprehensive cooperation agreements with the country in various areas. Đà Nẵng's exports to the EU in 2023 are estimated to reach USD 290 million, with imports at USD 138 million. In the 2020-23 period, EU agencies and NGOs committed over USD 1 million to 37 programs and projects in Đà Nẵng from 2020 to 2023.

Announcements

Upcoming online events

20 December 2023 @ at 8:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

Countering Beijing's economic coercion in the Indo-Pacific

The focus of the discussion will be on countering Beijing's economic coercion in the Indo-Pacific. In particular, such aspects as key implications for the future security of Taiwan and the path forward in the region for the United States, allies, and partners will be covered. The speakers will share their expert insights on past events of economic coercion, the nature of the current and future threat, along with the path forward.

Learn more about the event at [Atlantic Council].

20 December 2023 @ at 10:00 a.m. (GMT-5), International Crisis Group, USA

The Latest Round in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Crisis Group's Perspective on Events in Gaza and the Region

The experts will discuss Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and its implications for the Region. Despite of the area of the conflict, consideration of all possible consequences following from the analyzed situation is valuable for each country over the globe.

Learn more about the event at [International Crisis Group].

22 December 2023 @ 3:30 – 5:00 p.m. (GMT+8), NUS East Asian Institute, Singapore

The Effects of Host Country Regime Change on the Completion and Duration of Cross-border Mergers and Acquisitions

Political uncertainty brought about by regime change in the host country is an important factor influencing the outcome of cross-border mergers and acquisitions. The speaker is going to examine how different degrees of regime change in the host countries affect the completion and duration of cross-border mergers and acquisitions of Chinese firms. There will be proposed the understanding of how political factors influence the outcome of cross-border mergers and acquisitions and provides practical implications to firms on how to mitigate political risks in their internationalization endeavours.

Learn more about the event at [NUS East Asian Institute].

Recent book releases

Tim Marshall, *The Future of Geography: How Power and Politics in Space Will Change Our World*, Elliott & Thompson, 356 pages, published October 1, 2023, with a review in [LSE].

Eviane Leidig, ***The Women of the Far Right: Social Media Influencers and Online Radicalization*,** Columbia University Press, 288 pages, published September 19, 2023, reviewed in [LSE].

Elizabeth Anderson, *Hijacked: How Neoliberalism Turned The Work Ethic Against Workers and How Workers Can Take It Back*, Cambridge University Press, 384 pages, published September 21, 2023. Visit [LSE] for a review.

Henry Farrell, and Abraham Newman, *Underground Empire: How America Weaponized the World Economy*, Henry Holt and Co., 288 pages, published September 12, 2023, with a review in [Foreign Affairs].

Kristin Surak, ***The Golden Passport: Global Mobility for Millionaires,*** Harvard University Press, 336 pages, published September 19, 2023, reviewed in [Foreign Affairs].

Robert Lighthizer, ***No Trade Is Free: Changing Course, Taking on China, and Helping America's Workers***, Harper Collins, 384 pages, published June 27, 2023, with a review in [Foreign Affairs].

Calls

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 an **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 **Regional Technical Specialist** to be based in Bangkok, Thailand. Applications are accepted until December 29, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Humanitarian Affairs Associate** to be based in Aleppo, Syria. Applications are accepted until December 29, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Finance and admin Assistant** to be based in Bonn, Germany. Applications are accepted

until December 29, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Gender Advisor on Women Economic Empowerment to the Ministry of Economy of Ukraine** to be based in Kyiv, Ukraine. Applications are accepted until December 29, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Project Manager** to be based in Tbilisi, Georgia. Applications are accepted until December 29, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Programme Policy Officer** to be based in India. Applications are accepted until December 29, 2023. More information is provided as [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks an **Internal Auditor** to be based in Zambia. Applications are accepted until February 01, 2024. 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 **Programme Policy Officer** to be based in Bangui, Central African Republic. Applications are accepted until December 29, 2023. More information is provided as [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Monitoring and Evaluation Officer** to be based in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. Applications are accepted until December 29, 2023. More information is provided as [WFP].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks an **Education Officer** to be based in Pristina, Kosovo. Applications are accepted until December 29, 2023. More information is provided as [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **Logistics Officer** to be based in Ivory Coast. Applications are accepted until January 2, 2024. More information is provided as [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **Procurement Associate** to be based in Belarus.

Applications are accepted until January 1, 2024. 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 **Child Protection Officer** to be based in Kingston, Jamaica. Applications are accepted until January 13, 2024. More information is provided as [UNICEF].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Media Communication Specialist and Spokesperson**, to be based in Cairo, Egypt. Applications are accepted until January 13, 2024. More information is provided as [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **consultant**, to be based in Manila, Philippines. Applications are accepted until December 31, 2023. More information is provided as [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Programme Area Manager**, to be based in Cairo, Egypt. Applications are accepted until January 4, 2024. More information is provided as [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Programme Coordinator**, to be based in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Applications are accepted until January 14, 2024. More information is provided as [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Technical Officer** to be based in Copenhagen, Denmark. Applications are accepted until January 3, 2024. 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 **Field Interpreter** 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 a **Sanctions Expert** to be based in New York, United States. Applications are accepted until October 22, 2024. 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 a **Regional Content and Digital Coordinator** to be based in Colombia. Applications are accepted until April 15, 2024. More information is provided as [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Casework Supervisor** to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until February 15, 2024. More information is provided as [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Regional People & Culture Director**, to be based in Jordan. Applications are accepted until February 13, 2024. More information is provided as [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Finance Manager**, to be based in Somalia. Applications are accepted until January 13, 2024. More information is provided as [IRC].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **Gender and Community Engagement Specialist,** to be based in Syria. Applications are accepted until December 31, 2023. More information is provided as [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **National Operations Specialist**, to be based in Kigali, Rwanda. Applications are accepted until December 29, 2023. More information is provided as [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **Procurement Assistant,** to be based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Applications are accepted until December 29, 2023. More information is provided as [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **National Administration and Procurement Support Specialist**, to be based in Bangkok, Thailand.

Applications are accepted until January 5, 2024. More information is provided as [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **Dietary Assessment Specialist** to be based in Rome, Italy. Applications are accepted until January 15, 2024. More information is provided as [FAO].

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) seeks a Deputy Programme Coordinator, to be based in Pretoria, South Africa. Applications are accepted until January 3, 2024. More information is provided as [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks an **International Migration Law Officer,** to be based in Geneva, Switzerland. Applications are accepted until January 3, 2024. More information is provided as [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Head of Programmes** to be based in Panama City, Panama. 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 a **Chief Data Officer**, to be based in Geneva, Switzerland. Applications are accepted until January 7, 2024. 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 **Chief, Public Information Section**, to be based in Vienna, Austria. Applications are accepted until January 29, 2024. 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 **Programme Management Senior Officer** to be based in Yangon, Myanmar. Applications are accepted until January 7, 2024. More information is provided as [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks an **Associate Administrative officer**, to be based in Nairobi, Kenya. Applications are accepted until January 7, 2024. 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 **Finance Assistant**, to be based in Bangkok, Thailand. Applications are accepted until January 7, 2024. 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 **Deputy Chief of Party,** 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 **Monitoring & Evaluation** to be based in Yemen. Applications are accepted until not specified. More information is provided as [FHI 360].

The **Family Health International (FHI 360)** seeks a **Youth and Gender Advisor**, to be based in Nampula, Mozambique. Applications are accepted until not specified. More information is provided as [FHI 360].

The **Family Health International (FHI 360)** seeks a **Senior Youth Employability and Livelihoods Coordinator**, to be based in Thailand. Applications are accepted until not specified. More information is provided as [FHI 360].

Chabot-Las Positas Community College District in California, United States is inviting applications for an **Instructor, Ethnic Studies.** Application submission deadline is open until February 2, 2024. For more details, see [Chabot-Las Positas Community College District].

The **Fashion Institute of Technology** in New York is inviting applications for an **Adjunct Faculty Pool - English Composition and Rhetoric.** Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [Fashion Institute of Technology].

Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey, United States is inviting applications for an **Adjunct Professor of Philosophy**. Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [Fairleigh Dickinson University].

Purdue University Fort Wayne in Fort Wayne, Indiana is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor of Women's Studies.** Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [Purdue University Fort Wayne]

Austin Community College in Texas is inviting applications for a **Faculty, Philosophy**. Application submission deadline is open until January 29, 2024. For more details, see [Austin Community College].

Texas State University-San Marcos in Texas is inviting applications for a **Lecturer in Early American and U.S. History to 1877.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Texas State University-San Marcos].

Wayne State University in Michigan is inviting applications for a **Research Assistant - Dept. of Psychiatry**. Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [Wayne State University].

University of Pennsylvania in Pennsylvania, United States is inviting applications for a **South Asia Studies Department, Tenure-track Assistant Professor of**

South Asia Studies. Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [University of Pennsylvania].

Johns Hopkins University in Maryland, United States is inviting applications for a **Mental Health Services Clinician.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [John Hopkins University].

Syracuse University in New York, United States is inviting applications for an **Assistant Director Research Development.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Syracuse University].

Cornell University in Ithaca, New York is inviting applications for a **Lecturer or Senior Lecturer in Race/Racism or Global Policy**. Application submission deadline is open until February 1, 2024. For more details, see [Cornell University].

Durham University in United Kingdom is inviting applications for a **Postdoctoral Research Associate**. Application submission deadline is open until January 5, 2024. For more details, see [Durham University]

Boston College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor of the Practice in International Studies (International Economics)**. Application submission deadline is open until January 15, 2024. For more details, see [Boston College].

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].

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].

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].

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]

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].

The **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]

The **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 **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].

The **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**. The position is open until filled. For more details, see [Northwestern University].

Team:

Aida Pachedji (ap), Bintang Wicaksono Ajie (ba), Busawan Kachonnarongvanish (bk), Duc Quang Ly (dql), Felicitas Diecke (fd), Harshita Prashar (hp), Jason Wang (jw), Jia Yue Ong (oy), Jonathan Riley (jr), Joseph Black (jb), Kishwer Baqar (kb), 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, Phoo Wai Yan Myint (pm), Sai Laung

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We would greatly appreciate your feedback! Please send any feedback you have regarding this newsletter to: info@cpg-online.de

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