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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 who celebrates Bahrain's National Day, The Gambia's Independence Day, Lithuania's Statehood Restoration Day, and Serbia's Statehood Day this week.

With best regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

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

China: Former Defense Minister missing from key list

(ms) The absence of former Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe from a prominent list of retired senior officials has sparked speculation about his fate.

Wei, who served as defense minister until March 2023, was notably missing from a list of around 100 figures who received Lunar New Year greetings, a customary gesture extended to retired officials of comparable rank. This absence raises questions about Wei's status following the abrupt removal of his successor, Li Shangfu, last year (see AiR No. 44, October/2023, 5).

Wei's predecessors, including Chang Wanquan and Liang Guanglie, were included in the list, underscoring

the peculiarity of Wei's omission. His disappearance from public view since retiring adds to the intrigue surrounding his situation.

Moreover, the recent dismissals of several senior military figures, including rocket force commanders, without explanation further deepens the mystery. This wave of removals, intertwined with President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign, suggests a significant shake-up within China's military hierarchy (see AiR No. 32, August/2023, 2).

The upcoming meeting of the National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee later this month to discuss "appointments and dismissals" hints to even further changes at the top. However, the lack of transparency surrounding these personnel changes underscores the opaque nature of China's political system.

President Xi Jinping's recent remarks emphasizing the ongoing battle against corruption indicate the broader context within which these developments are unfolding. With amendments to the law on state secrets also on the agenda, there are indications of a wider restructuring within China's political and military spheres. [Bloomberg] [South China Morning Post 1] [South China Morning Post 2]

China: “Broker Butcher” appointed in bid to boost struggling stock markets

(ms) China has appointed Wu Qing, known as the "Broker Butcher" for his tough enforcement of trading regulations, as the new chairman and Communist Party chief of the China Securities Regulatory Commission (CSRC), the highest regulatory authority for the securities industry.

The appointment underscores Beijing's urgency to address the persistent downturn in the nation's USD 8 trillion stock market. Wu Qing's moniker, 'Broker Butcher,' was earned during his tenure at the CSRC in the mid-2000s when he shut down 31 securities firms for financial misconduct, earning him a reputation for zero tolerance towards wrongdoing. He has a background in economics and extensive experience in China's financial sector, including serving as the deputy head of the Shanghai Stock Exchange.

The Chinese stock market has been on a downward trend for the past four years, facing significant challenges including a USD 5 trillion rout, a real estate crisis, deflationary pressures, and geopolitical tensions.

President Xi Jinping has prioritized averting major financial risks, placing immense pressure on Wu to restore confidence in the market and attract foreign financial firms amidst consistent doubts into the country's economic stability and predictability.

Wu's appointment has already sparked a small rally in China stocks, indicating investor optimism about his ability to navigate the market's complexities. However, the task ahead is formidable, requiring not only short-term measures but also long-term reforms to address systemic loopholes and bolster market stability.

In response to the market downturn, Beijing has rolled out a series of measures, including caps on cross-border total return swaps, a government rescue package worth about USD 280 billion, and efforts to guide institutional investors towards increasing A-share holdings. Despite these efforts, skepticism remains regarding the effectiveness of these measures in the face of ongoing economic challenges.

While China's stock market downturn may benefit global markets in the short term by diverting Chinese investors towards foreign indexes, the long-term implications remain uncertain. As the Chinese government strives to stabilize its financial markets, developments in the country are closely watched across the globe for potential ripple effects on the global economy. [Bloomberg] [CNBC] [Reuters] [South China Morning Post]

China: Monthly bank loans reach record high in January

(ms) China's push to invigorate economic growth has led to a record high in new bank loans during January, signaling Beijing's efforts to stabilize the world's second-largest economy.

According to data from the People's Bank of China (PBOC), yuan-denominated new loans surged to an unprecedented USD 684 billion (RMB 4.92 trillion) in January, surpassing both the previous year's figure of RMB 4.9 trillion and December's RMB 1.17 trillion yuan.

While January typically sees increased lending activity due to seasonal factors and government-backed projects, the scale of the surge underscores policymakers' determination to bolster economic momentum. The central bank's efforts to support financial institutions in meeting credit demands reflect a strategic approach to maintain "reasonable growth" in bank credit while ensuring stability in loan growth.

President Xi Jinping's directives to prioritize support for the real economy have prompted financial authorities to intensify financing for key sectors such as technology innovation, green development, and affordable housing projects. However, Beijing has refrained from implementing expansive stimulus measures due to concerns over the country's high debt levels and diminishing returns on investment projects.

Instead, policymakers have adopted a monetary policy stance that emphasizes targeted support and better coordination between government departments to sustain pro-growth initiatives. The recent reduction in the reserve requirement ratio for commercial banks and adjustments to lending rates underscore the government's commitment to providing timely liquidity support to small businesses and agriculture-related sectors.

While the Chinese government is continuing last year's trend of providing large-scale financial support for the country's economic sector, all eyes are now on the "Two Sessions" - annual plenary sessions of the National People's Congress (NPC) and of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) - scheduled for early March, during which both the economic growth target, which is likely to be around 5 percent again, and a clearer outlook for the country's economic strategy for 2024 will be revealed. [Reuters] [South China Morning Post]

China: Deflation fear amid steepest consumer price decline in 15 Years

(ms) China's consumer prices have plunged at an alarming rate, marking the steepest decline in 15 years as the country battles deepening deflation fears. The latest data, released by the National Bureau of Statistics of China on February 8, reveals a 0.8 percent drop in the consumer price index compared to the previous year, reflecting the fourth consecutive month of decline and the sharpest drop since the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis.

The primary driver behind this deflationary trend is the significant decrease in food prices, particularly pork, which experienced a staggering 17 percent decline. Vegetables and fruits also saw notable drops, falling by 12.7 percent and 9.1 percent, respectively. Analysts attribute these price declines partly to seasonal factors, including the timing of the lunar new year holiday, which fell in February this year instead of January, distorting the comparison.

Beyond seasonal influences, China's economy has been grappling with multiple challenges, including the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and a contraction in the indebted property sector, exemplified by the recent liquidation order for Evergrande (see AiR No. 5, January/2024, 5). These factors have compounded the deflationary pressures, with the producer price index indicating a 2.5 percent annual drop in prices for January.

Despite the gloomy outlook, some economists remain cautiously optimistic, suggesting that the worst may be over. Some emphasize for example that the current data may not fully capture the rebound expected in February, especially considering the heightened demand during the Lunar New Year festivities. Indeed, preliminary indications suggest robust consumer spending during this period, potentially buoying prices and stimulating economic activity.

However, the specter of prolonged deflation looms large over China's economic landscape, raising concerns about its impact on investor and consumer confidence. [CNN] [Financial Times] [National Bureau of Statistics] [The Guardian]

China: First nationwide review of retractions and research misconduct close to an end

(ms) Chinese universities are currently undertaking a comprehensive audit of retracted research papers and potential cases of research misconduct. Mandated by a notice from the Ministry of Education's Department of Science, Technology, and Informatization from the end of November last year, universities are required to submit a detailed list of academic articles retracted from both English and Chinese-language journals within the past three years by February 15.

The initiative followed a pattern highlighted by a Nature analysis that revealed more than 17,000 retractions since 2021, with a significant number of Chinese co-authors involved. The decision was triggered by a series of retractions by London-based publisher Hindawi, which impacted China's academic reputation. In addition, it calls into question the country's recent achievement of overtaking the US as the country of origin of most published papers, by raising questions about the average quality of these.

There are concerns regarding the effectiveness of the mandate, especially regarding possible time

constraints and potential repercussions for non-compliance.

While the notice signifies a step towards addressing misconduct systematically, its success depends on subsequent actions and whether similar reviews become regular practice. [Nature]

China: New report exposes government digital surveillance in Tibet

(ms) In a new investigative report titled "Surveillance Unveiled: Tibet's Digital Dystopia," jointly released by Tibet Watch and the research organization Turquoise Roof (see full report), the extent of China's digital surveillance apparatus in Tibet has been illustrated.

The report presents a system of intrusive monitoring and control tactics employed by the Chinese government, creating a state of constant surveillance in the Southwestern Autonomous Region of Tibet.

At the forefront of this revelation is the National Anti-Fraud Centre app, touted as a tool to combat fraud but suspected to serve as a mechanism for state surveillance. Tibetans are reportedly being compelled to install this app, granting authorities access to their personal data, including text messages, call logs, and internet browsing histories. The app's face recognition feature further raises concerns about the potential for mass data collection and tracking of individuals.

Additionally, the report delves into the "Tibet Underworld Criminal Integrated Intelligence Application Platform," a sophisticated big data policing system developed with technology from American company Oracle. This platform aggregates data from various Public Security Bureau systems, enabling authorities to target individuals based on their cultural and religious activities, language advocacy, and social work.

The implications of these surveillance measures are profound, and are, according to the report, creating a pervasive atmosphere of fear and self-censorship among Tibetans. Communication within Tibet and with the diaspora communities all around the world is becoming increasingly difficult.

The report's findings come at a critical juncture, as China faces mounting international scrutiny over its human rights record. During the recent Universal Periodic Review session at the United Nations Human Rights Council, concerns were raised about China's

intrusive surveillance methods in Tibet (see AiR No. 5, January/2024, 5). [BBC] [VOA News] [Free Tibet]

However, the actions seen in Tibet are not exclusive to the region and similar allegations have already been made in the north-western Xinjiang region. In November 2022, a report revealed that the Chinese government had hidden surveillance software in popular voice apps used by the Muslim minority in order to gain access to individuals' devices and the information on them (see AiR No. 47, November/2022, 4).

China: Breakthrough in military surveillance technology

(ms) Chinese scientists have reportedly achieved a significant breakthrough in military surveillance technology, potentially altering the landscape of electronic warfare. Researchers from Beijing claim to have developed a game-changing device capable of seamless, wide bandwidth, real-time monitoring, and analysis of the electromagnetic spectrum.

This breakthrough, if operational, is expected to provide the Chinese military with unparalleled capabilities in detecting and tracking enemy signals swiftly, decoding their physical parameters, and effectively suppressing them. The technology's range covers everything from amateur radio broadcasts to advanced systems like Starlink satellites.

The device, characterized by its compact size, high performance, and low energy consumption, represents a significant leap forward in electronic warfare capabilities. Traditionally, spectrum monitoring systems have been limited in their real-time analysis bandwidth, typically ranging from 40-160 MHz. However, the new Chinese equipment reportedly extends this range seamlessly into the gigahertz zone, offering comprehensive monitoring across various frequencies.

This advancement enables the device to capture and analyze signals emitted by the US military, even if they rapidly switch frequencies. The integration of artificial intelligence further enhances the device's capabilities, facilitating automatic analysis of processed signals to extract valuable information.

If confirmed, this development could mark a significant shift in the balance of electronic warfare capabilities, with implications for military operations and communications strategies. However, details regarding

the full extent of China's electronic warfare arsenal remain largely undisclosed, leaving room for speculation about the broader impact of this technological advancement. [Interesting Engineering] [South China Morning Post] [The Economic Times]

China: Startup prepares to launch first Chinese reusable rocket

(ms) Chinese space startup Galactic Energy is on the cusp of a milestone as it gears up to launch its reusable rocket, Pallas-1, later this year. If successful, Pallas-1 will mark a significant achievement as the first reusable rocket developed in China to reach orbit, highlighting the nation's growing prowess in space exploration.

Pallas-1 is set to take off from a spacecraft launch center in Hainan in November this year. The 49-meter kerosene-liquid oxygen rocket is designed for multiple uses, with the capability to lift 5 tons into low-Earth orbit, or 3 tons into a sun-synchronous orbit.

Galactic Energy's CEO recently briefed staff on the rocket's progress during a visit to the launch center, emphasizing its readiness for flight. However, details about whether Pallas-1 will be recovered during its maiden voyage remain undisclosed, adding an air of anticipation to the launch.

While Galactic Energy leads the charge in China's quest for reusable rocket technology, it faces competition from other domestic players like iSpace and LandSpace Technology. These companies are also striving to develop reusable rockets, reflecting the fierce competition driving innovation within China's space industry. [BNN] [South China Morning Post]

China: Advancement in high-power microwave weapon

(ms) Chinese scientists have recently unveiled a significant advancement in weaponry technology, introducing a high-power microwave (HPM) weapon driven by Stirling engines.

Developed by a research team in China, this weapon stands out for its alleged compact design and efficient energy consumption. Unlike traditional HPM weapons known for their high energy demands and large size, this new system is said to consume only one-fifth of the energy of existing methods while maintaining

continuous operation for up to four hours. The use of Stirling engines, which efficiently convert thermal energy into mechanical energy, is responsible for this achievement.

The breakthrough comes amidst growing tensions and technological competition, with external factors such as sanctions playing a role in driving domestic research and development initiatives. In particular, restrictions on the export of certain materials to China have prompted the country to enhance its capabilities in key technological areas, to achieve the goal of technological self-sufficiency declared by President Xi Jinping (see AiR No. 12, March/2023, 3).

While specific details regarding the deployment of this new technology remain undisclosed, ongoing testing have highlighted areas for further refinement, including refrigeration power and system stability. [South China Morning Post]

Japan: Education minister admits to signing an agreement with controversial religious group

(sh) Education Minister Masahito Moriyama acknowledged that he had signed a "policy pact" with a group linked to the Unification Church ahead of the 2021 Lower House election, as reported by Asahi Shimbun. The pact, titled "Confirmation of Recommendations," outlined policies supported by the Unification Church.

Moriyama, a five-term Lower House member of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), admitted to potentially signing the document without thoroughly reading its contents during a Budget Committee meeting. He mentioned being invited to a rally in his constituency, where he may have been asked to sign the document unexpectedly. [Asahi]

Prime Minister Kishida Fumio declined the opposition's demand for Moriyama's dismissal, stating that his cabinet appointments were made assuming ministers have no current ties with the religious group, regardless of past connections.

This incident had again brought to light the relationship between the ruling party lawmakers and the Unification Church, raising concerns about the organization's influence on Japanese politics. Some LDP lawmakers admitted to signing policy documents with the Unification Church around election time.

The religious group has come under heightened scrutiny after the deadly shooting of former Prime Minister by a man admitted that Abe's link to the Unification Church for which his mother donated money that caused her bankruptcy was the reason for the assassination (see AiR No. 28, July/2022, 2).

Moriyama's ministry had previously sought a court order to revoke the Unification Church's status as a religious corporation due to alleged solicitation of large donations and questionable sales practices (see AiR No. 42, October/2023, 3). [NHK] [Kyodo News]

Japan: Labor union demands rise in salary

(sh) On February 9, members of Japanese steelmakers' labor unions advocated for a significant base pay increase of JPY 30,000 (USD 201) per month, aiming to ensure that workers' wages outpace inflation.

Coming amid the ongoing annual talks with the management side, this demand marks a substantial 10 percent surge in base salaries, the largest demand on record. Blue-chip companies are set to present their offers for pay raises to union representatives on March 13. [The Business Times]

Typically, smaller firms follow suit, presenting their offers around the middle of the year, thereby potentially spreading the wage hikes across the workforce, especially in regional Japan where many workers are employed by such companies.

Policymakers and central bankers are closely monitoring the labor talks, emphasizing that sustainable wage and price increases are necessary for the Bank of Japan to consider ending negative interest rates. The BOJ had been signaling its intention to move away from negative rates, particularly as major firms have begun to announce substantial wage hike offers, setting the stage for potential policy adjustments by April. [Reuters]

Japan: Tokyo stocks surges

(sh) Tokyo stocks surged to 34-year highs as a weaker yen against the U.S. dollar, following Bank of Japan Deputy Governor Shinichi Uchida's comments on maintaining accommodative policies, boosted exporter shares.

The Nikkei Stock Average soared 2.06 percent, marking its largest daily gain in nearly three months, closing at 36,863.28, while the broader Topix index climbed 0.50 percent to 2,562.63. Both indices reached their highest levels since February 1990.

Gains were led by transportation equipment, electric appliance, and pharmaceutical sectors. Uchida's remarks, suggesting a prolonged accommodative stance, drove the Nikkei up by over 800 points briefly. The dollar strengthened against the yen, reacting to Uchida's speech earlier in the day. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Chip-plants to be subsidized

(sh) Japan has announced a subsidy of up to JPY 243 billion (USD 1.64 billion) to support Kioxia Holdings Corp. and Western Digital Corp. in mass-producing cutting-edge chips at their jointly operated plants in Mie and Iwate prefectures.

These plants manufacture 3D flash memory chips, anticipated for use in technologies such as artificial intelligence and automated driving, aligning with Japan's goals of bolstering domestic chip production and enhancing economic security.

In addition to supporting Kioxia and Western Digital, Japan has allocated funds to aid other chip manufacturers, including Rapidus Corp.'s plant in Hokkaido and Micron Technology Inc.'s plant in Hiroshima Prefecture. [Kyodo News] [Japan Today]

Japan: New foreign training programs approved

(sh) On February 9, the Japanese government approved a policy to overhaul its controversial trainee program for foreigners, aiming to enhance rights protection while offering more flexibility in job changes and stricter oversight.

This decision, made at a ministerial meeting, was based on proposals from a government panel in 2023, with input from discussions within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, which sought to limit trainees' job transfers to a maximum of two years. [Kyodo News]

The approval sets the stage for the government to present bills to parliament, possibly as early as March, to implement the new system to replace the current

program, which has been facing criticism for widespread abuses and labor rights violations.

Under the current program, trainees are barred from changing workplaces, dragging them into dependency on the job and leading to numerous cases of unpaid wages and mistreatment.

The revamped system will allow job changes after one to two years, albeit limited to the same job category. Additionally, applicants must pass a Japanese language proficiency test to qualify for the new trainee system [ABC]

Meanwhile, the new program would maintain restrictions on the types of jobs available to foreign trainees, reflecting the conservative stance of the governing party towards immigration. Japan's limited diversity, coupled with relatively low wages, has made it less appealing to foreign workers, who increasingly opt for other Asian countries like South Korea. [AP]

Japan: Frist woman elected president of legal association

(sh) Lawyer Reiko Fuchigami became the first woman to be elected president of the Japan Federation of Bar Associations.

She defeated her opponent Satoshi Oikawa in the election to succeed outgoing president Motoji Kobayashi.

Observers see in her election possible turning point towards gender equality and diversity within the for the legal profession in Japan where only 20 percent of lawyers are women. [Japan News] [BNN]

Japan: Transgender man obtains official recognition without surgery

(sh) On February 7, a Japanese court granted a transgender man's request to change his gender in official records without undergoing sterilization surgery, marking the first ruling of its kind following a landmark decision by Japan's Supreme Court (see AiR No. 44, October/2023, 5).

Tacaquito Usui had his gender updated to male in his family registry by the Okayama Family Court's Tsuyama Branch, after his original application was rejected five years ago. [NBC]

In October, Japan's Supreme Court deemed the provision requiring sterilization surgery for legal gender changes unconstitutional. The Okayama court recognized the hormone therapy received by Usui as qualifying for gender affirmation, indicating a potential evolution in Japan's laws and public awareness regarding transgender rights. [US News]

Japan: Government appeals court decision of passport issuance for former captive journalist

(sh) On February 7, the Japanese government appealed a district court's ruling that deemed its refusal to reissue a passport to a journalist illegal.

Yasuda, who had been held captive in Syria for over three years, filed a lawsuit in 2020, arguing that the decision violated his right to travel abroad guaranteed by the Constitution. The court, on January 25, found the government's denial of Yasuda's passport to be an abuse of its discretionary power. [Kyodo News]

Although the court acknowledged the illegality of the government's action, it did not agree that the law itself violated the Constitution, sparking debates over its constitutionality. Yasuda, dissatisfied with the ruling, has appealed for further redress, highlighting the complexities of international travel bans and citizens' rights. [BNN] [Mainichi]

Japan: High number of online scams recorded for 2023

(sh) According to data from the National Police Agency, in 2023 Japan experienced an 8.3 percent rise in cyber and phone scams, reaching 19,033 cases, the highest in a decade.

Overall crime in Japan climbed for the second consecutive year, totaling 703,351 offenses in 2023. Telecommunications fraud, which increased for the third consecutive year, incurred a 19 percent rise in costs for victims, amounting to JPY 44.1 billion (USD 295.3 million)

Online transaction scams more than doubled, resulting in victims losing JPY 2.13 billion, marking a 115 percent increase. Despite fewer overseas-based members of crime rings operating in Japan, their numbers abroad

are growing, with police identifying 69 members in Southeast Asian and other countries. [AA].

Japan: Underwater abilities upgraded

(sh) On February 7, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) has taken a step to improve its underwater abilities by signing contracts with local electronics NEC company for new underwater equipment.

The Gliders Type I and II, also known as "Underwater Gliders," are reportedly essential tools for studying the ocean. They help measure things like water temperature, salinity, and currents, which is important for understanding the environment and improving maritime awareness.

Another important purchase is the Long Distance Underwater Acoustic Communication Module that helped control unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs), kept track of their location, and allowed communication underwater from ships.

Testing for this module is set to start in 2025. [DB] [Asian Military Review]

Japan: Launch of H3 rockets postponed

(sh) On February 13, the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) announced that it would postpone the launch of its new H3 flagship rocket's second model, originally scheduled for February 15, due to expected bad weather. The new launch date would be announced later.

This launch delay follows an unsuccessful first flight of Japan's new rocket in March 2023, resulting in the loss of a land observation satellite and disruptions in satellite and planetary exploration plans. [Reuters]

Mongolia: Government discusses with Space X development of first national satellite

(ap) Mongolia is set to advance its efforts to improve connectivity and develop its "domestic space economy," as the government is in talks with Elon Musk's SpaceX about the launch of the country's first

national telecommunications satellite as a move to develop its country's domestic space economy.

French company Thales Alenia Space is currently constructing the satellite which is expected to improve the country's disaster management and emergency response, increase broadband internet access and support its scientific research and education, among other objectives. [Reuters]

Prior to the talks, Mongolia granted two licenses for SpaceX which will enable millions of internet users to have access to a high-speed connectivity. Starlink is going to start operating in late February.

North Korea: Growing discontent with hereditary succession of leadership, South Korea claims

(ap) According to the Unification Ministry of South Korea, discontent with the hereditary succession of leadership is growing in North Korea, along with negative view towards North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. [Korea Herald]

The claims are made in report of the ministry and are based on interviews with 6,351 North Korean defectors between 2013 and 2020.

According to a senior official, more than thirty-seven percent support the family succession due to nostalgia toward the system after they defected to South Korea. However, the longer a defector has experienced Kim Jong Un's regime, the higher the negative rate is.

More than ninety percent of the respondents pointed out that wealth disparities are a big factor of dissatisfaction.

North Korea: New multiple rocket launcher and ballistic control system shells developed

(dql) North Korea announced on February 12 that it has successfully developed new controllable shells for a multiple rocket launcher and its ballistic control system after test firing of 240 mm-caliber controllable multiple rocket launcher shells a day earlier. [KCNA]

South Korea: Political parties agree to merger

(oy) Four political parties and factions, including former members from the ruling People Power Party (PPP) and the main opposition Democratic Party (DP), have agreed to merge into a new party called the Reform Party.

This merger, set to be officially marked after the Lunar New Year holiday, comes amid South Korea's upcoming April general elections. The Reform Party will be co-led by former Prime Minister and DP leader Lee Nak-yon and former PPP leader Lee Jun-seok, with Lee Nak-yon heading the election preparation committee.

Lee Nak-yon formed the New Future Party following his departure from the DP. Lee Jun-seok formed the Reformative Conservative Party after leaving PPP. The Reformative Conservative Party later merged with the Hope of Korea party in January 2023 (see AiR No. 5, January/2024, 5). [Yonhap]

South Korea: President Yoon addresses first lady's luxury bag controversy

(oy) On February 7, Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) aired an interview with South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, where he addressed the controversy surrounding the first lady, Kim Keon Hee, acceptance of a luxury bag (see AiR No. 4, January/2024, 4).

Kim was caught accepting a luxury bag worth KRW 3 million (USD 2,200) from a Korean American pastor, Choi Jae-young. The whole exchange between Kim and Choi was secretly recorded by a hidden camera on Choi's wristwatch. Choi gained access to Kim as he was a friend of Kim's father. The whole footage was later released by the YouTube channel Voice of Seoul.

In the interview, Yoon described the incident as a "political maneuver". Yoon stated that the scheme was pre-arranged and highlighted that the footage was released ahead of an election year, despite the incident happening in 2022. He emphasized the need for clear conduct to prevent such incidents in the future.

Responding to Yoon's statement, lawmakers from Yoon's own party, the ruling People's Power Party (PPP) have expressed mixed reactions.

Han Dong-hoon, leader of PPP, and several other PPP lawmakers said that Yoon was sincere in stating his

position on the controversy during the interview. However, some PPP members stated that Yoon's response could have been better, such as a direct apology.

Meanwhile, the main opposition Democratic Party (DP) criticized Yoon's response, accusing Yoon of failing to provide the public with a sincere apology and having a "shameless attitude".

The New Future Party also criticized the interview, suggesting it served as a public relations stunt for the presidential family. The New Future Party was established by former DP leader Lee Nak-yon after leaving DP due to dissatisfaction with DP's current leader Lee Jae-myung management of the party. (see AiR No. 2, January/2024, 2). [npr] [Yonhap_1] [Yonhap_2] [Yonhap_3][The Korea Times] [The Korea Herald] [BBC]

South Korea: President Yoon outline policy priorities in interview

(oy) Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) interviewed President Yoon Suk Yeol, which was aired on February 7. The interview discussed a range of issues including inflation, education, South Korea's low birth rate, working with an opposition-controlled National Assembly, and the upcoming elections.

On North Korea, Yoon stated that an inter-Korean summit with leader Kim Jong-un is possible, but only if it can guarantee results. He emphasized the need for preparation and dialogue at the working level before any summit.

Yoon acknowledged that South Korea has the capability to develop nuclear weapons quickly due to its advanced science and technology levels. However, he deemed this as "unrealistic" due to the potential economic sanctions and stressed the importance of adhering to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).

Regarding China, Yoon shrugged off criticism that his focus on enhancing ties with the US and Japan has led to an emerging split between Seoul and Beijing. He referred to his meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Chinese Premier Li Qiang, where both sides expressed their commitment to preserving the free trade system and multilateralism. Yoon concluded that there is no need for excessive concern about South Korea-China relations. [Yonhap_1] [Yonhap_2] [Yonhap_3]

South Korea: President Yoon promise support for small business owners

(oy) Speaking at a government-public debate on February 8, President Yoon Suk Yeol pledged to implement various support measures to assist small business owners and vulnerable groups facing difficulties with repaying loans due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

These measures include refunding interest, averaging KRW 1 million (USD 753) per person, which is expected to help around 2.28 million small business owners. The government will also support those who have taken out high-interest loans to switch to low-interest loans.

The tax burden for small business owners will be reduced by increasing the current threshold for levied taxes. Additionally, 1.26 million small business owners will receive a deduction of up to KRW 200,000 (USD 150.36) on each of their electricity bills this year. The government also plans to review and abolish any unreasonable business regulations for small business owners and self-employed individuals. [Yonhap]

South Korea: People Power Party chief addresses core party issues and policies a journalists' forum

(oy) On February 7, the chief of South Korea's ruling People Power Party (PPP), Han Dong-hoon, attended a debate forum organized by the Kwanhun Club, an association of senior journalists.

At the forum, Han emphasized his trust in President Yoon Suk Yeol amid tensions over allegations that the first lady, Kim Keon Hee, received a luxury bag as a gift in 2022. He contended that the bag was purchased to create a negative situation and criticized the main opposition Democratic Party (DP) recent attempt to override presidential vetoes of two special investigation bills related to the incident. Despite the controversy, Han believes that Yoon will properly address the issue.

Han refuted DP Chairman Lee Jae-myung accusation of a prosecution dictatorship and criticized the DP's recent attacks on the police. He added that DP's actions should not undermine established social systems, citing the promulgation of conspiracies

surrounding Lee's stabbing incident (see AiR No. 3, January/2024, 3).

Han reaffirmed his commitment to regaining the majority from DP in the upcoming April elections. He pledged that PPP is committed to political reforms, encouraging fair competitions, and responding quickly and transparently to public criticism. In a recent survey, Han and Lee had similar approval ratings of 36 percent. Regarding his future political plans, Han stated that he is focused on the upcoming general election and has not made plans beyond that.

Han also voiced opposition to South Korea acquiring its own nuclear weapons in response to North Korea. He stated that the country is not at a stage where it can officially declare the need for nuclear armament, despite public polls indicating that over 60 percent of people believe South Korea should develop nuclear capabilities independently.

Han cited geopolitical factors and the importance of international cooperation as reasons for his stance. He also reiterated that North Korea is not a nuclear power as per the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and his support for the current administration's firm stance against North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. [Yonhap_1] [Yonhap_2] [Korea Joongang Daily] [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Disagreements between government and doctors on medical school quota

(oy) Medical doctors in South Korea, led by the Korea Medical Association (KMA) are planning nationwide protests against the government's decision to increase the enrollment quota for medical schools by an additional 2,000 places next year. Meanwhile, the Korean Intern Resident Association (KIRA) are expected to take similar collective actions.

The increase in medical school quota is intended to tackle the shortage of doctors servicing rural areas and essential healthcare sectors. However, the medical community argues that this will compromise the quality of medical education and services. They suggest that the government should instead improve physician allocation and increase compensation.

In response, the South Korean government has issued a stern warning that they would act under the Medical Service Act. The Act provides the government with the power to potentially revoke doctors' licenses if they are

criminally punished after failing to follow orders to return to work. [Yonhap_1] [Yonhap_2] [Yonhap_3]

South Korea: Seoul High Court upholds two-year prison sentence for former Justice Minister Cho

(oy) The Seoul High Court upheld a two-year prison sentence for South Korea's former Justice Minister Cho Kuk. Cho was found guilty of academic fraud involving his children and illegally interfering with a government inspection.

Cho, a former law professor and senior presidential secretary during the Moon Jae-in presidency (2017 to 2022), was indicted on charges including falsifying documents to aid his children's university admissions and receiving a kickback for his daughter's scholarship. He was also charged with misusing his power to end a probe into bribery allegations surrounding a former Busan vice mayor.

Cho plans to appeal to the Supreme Court. [Yonhap] [Korea Joogang Daily]

South Korea: Supreme Court finalizes Representative Lim Jong-seong's suspension

(oy) The Supreme Court of South Korea has finalized a suspended prison term for Representative Lim Jong-seong of the main opposition Democratic Party for violating election law.

Lim was sentenced to four months in prison, suspended for two years, for offering payments or meals to campaign staff, which contravenes election law.

Following this ruling, Lim automatically lost his seat in the National Assembly. Under the Public Official Election Act, lawmakers are removed from their National Assembly position if a KRW 1 million (USD 753) fine or heavier sentence is confirmed, and they are barred from taking part in election for the next five years. [Yonhap]

South Korea: Prosecutors appealing Samsung Chairman acquittal

(oy) On February 8, the Seoul Central District Prosecutors Office appealed against the Seoul Central District Court acquittal of Samsung Electronics Co. Chairman Lee Jae-yong.

Lee was initially charged for allegedly taking part in stock price manipulation, breach of trust, and accounting fraud, concerning a controversial 2015 merger of two Samsung affiliates, Cheil Industries Inc. and Samsung C&T Corp. The prosecutors had argued that the merger was designed to strengthen Lee's control over Samsung at a lower cost and demanded a five-year prison sentence for Lee.

Lee's acquittal was expected to strengthen his leadership within Samsung, allowing him to focus on the company's business and management. He is anticipated to play a key role in addressing competition in the semiconductor and smartphone industries, helping Samsung regain its leading position in these sectors.

The prosecutors' appeal has raised concerns within the business community about the legal risk surrounding Samsung's Chairman. This comes amid a trend towards emerging technology like artificial intelligence and global supply chain restructuring. Lee's ongoing legal case could potentially restrict Samsung's business activities. [Yonhap_1] [Yonhap_2]

South Korea: New appointments of officials

(oy) On January 12, former Minister of Trade, Industry and Energy Joo Hyung-hwan was appointed as the Vice-chairman of the Presidential Committee on Aging Society and Population Policy. Joo is known for his expertise in economic policy strategies and planning.

Joo emphasized the need for long-term efforts to address South Korea's low fertility rate and aging population. He proposed a comprehensive review of existing measures and developing practical solutions to address the issue.

Separately, President Yoon Suk Yeol appointed Yun Oh-jun, the Presidential Secretary for Cybersecurity, as the Third Deputy Director of the National Intelligence Service. Yun will be in-charge of overseeing science and cyber intelligence operations. [Korea JoongAng Daily] [Yonhap]

Tawain: Government faces backlash over decision to halt tour groups travelling to China

(dql) Taiwanese travel agencies have strongly criticized the government for its decision to order a stop to tour groups heading for China.

According to the order, fully booked tours of China could still go ahead between March 1 and May 31. However, beginning June 1, no Taiwanese groups can travel to the other side of the Taiwan Strait.

The government decision comes in response to Beijing's continued refusal to allow Taiwan visits by Chinese tour groups, as well as to its unilateral alteration of flight routes over the Taiwan Strait (see AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1). [Taiwan News]

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

Bangladesh: Parliament debate heats up over money laundering, human trafficking

(lm) In Bangladesh, during a parliamentary session lawmakers engaged in intense debates over the issues of money laundering and human trafficking. [Dhaka Tribune]

An independent lawmaker vehemently demanded accountability for individuals involved in the illicit transfer of funds abroad, urging a comprehensive

investigation and disclosure of their identities within the Parliament. Emphasizing the government's commitment to zero tolerance towards corruption, the MP underscored the necessity of taking strict action against loan defaulters and those who have unlawfully siphoned funds overseas.

Meanwhile, the opposition chief whip echoed concerns about the rampant problem of human trafficking, criticizing the lack of effective measures and accusing some members of the ruling Awami League of complicity. The lawmaker highlighted the alarming rise in trafficking cases and urged better coordination between law enforcement agencies, urging the Home Minister to prioritize addressing these challenges.

Bangladesh: Government prioritizes commodity prices over concerns by opposition BNP

(lm) Obaidul Quader, the general secretary of Bangladesh's ruling Awami League party, emphasized the government's focus on maintaining commodity prices and fulfilling campaign promises, rather than being preoccupied with the reaction of the boycotting opposition BNP to the election. [Dhaka Tribune 1]

Despite global food price drops, Bangladesh has not witnessed significant reductions at the retail level. The country's heavy reliance on wheat imports, compounded by recent global price hikes due to events like the Ukraine war, has increased import costs. Ongoing conflicts in the Middle East have further escalated shipping charges, contributing to the overall cost burden. [Dhaka Tribune 2]

Bangladesh: BNP alleges torture of party leaders in prison, says cells have become 'concentration camps'

(lm) Bangladesh's main opposition party BNP has alleged that the deaths of 13 party leaders in the past three months are due to torture in prisons. Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, BNP Senior Joint Secretary General, made the claim at a press conference, asserting that prison cells have become "concentration camps" where inmates are subjected to brutal oppression. [Dhaka Tribune]

He accused government officials of violating human rights, employing former members of the Chhatra

League, the student wing of the ruling Awami League, to oppress BNP leaders in custody. Additionally, Rizvi criticized the denial of bail to BNP members while others were released under similar circumstances, urging the unconditional release of BNP activists by withdrawing "false cases" filed against them.

Leading up to the general election in January, the BNP leveled accusations against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government, alleging a significant crackdown aimed at its supporters and opposition politicians under what they consider to be fabricated charges. They asserted that more than 20,000 of their members have been incarcerated in recent months. However, government officials countered, asserting that the actual number of arrests is substantially lower and emphasizing that individuals were apprehended not due to political allegiances but rather in connection with specific criminal offenses such as arson.

Bangladesh: Awami League prepares for election to reserved parliamentary seats

(lm) The ruling Awami League party in Bangladesh is preparing to nominate candidates for 48 out of the 50 seats reserved for women in the 12th parliament. The party's Parliamentary Nomination Board will convene on February 14 to finalize its nominees for the upcoming election scheduled for March 14. [Dhaka Tribune]

This decision follows discussions between independent MPs, largely aligned with the Awami League, and the party's president and Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, who has been entrusted with the responsibility of nominating independent candidates for reserved seats. During the meeting, Hasina indicated that descendants or spouses of veteran party leaders and certain professionals who have contributed significantly to the party would be given consideration for the reserved seats. [The Daily Star]

At the national level, 50 seats out of a total of 350 are reserved for women members of Parliament. According to the law, a party or coalition is allocated one reserved seat for every six seats secured in general elections. With the Awami League winning in 223 constituencies and 62 independent MPs empowering Hasina to elect members for the reserved seats on their behalf, the party will be able to fill 48 seats, while the Jatiya Party will have the remaining two.

It's worth noting that a total of 1,549 nomination papers were sold for the 48 seats, indicating an average of 32 women competing for an Awami League ticket per seat, compared to an average of 11 aspirants seeking the party ticket for a seat ahead of the January polls.

Bangladesh: Jatiya Party chairman GM Quader unfazed by intraparty divisions

(lm) The chairman of Bangladesh's Jatiya Party (JaPa), GM Quader, has expressed his lack of concern about the party splitting, emphasizing that while others might form new parties under similar ideals, he sees no immediate risk of division. [Dhaka Tribune]

JaPa, founded in 1986 by Hossain Mohammad Ershad, a former military leader and president of Bangladesh, currently holds the position of the largest opposition party in the lower House of Parliament, controlling 11 seats in the 300-member legislature. Last month, Quader, Ershad's younger brother, was appointed as the leader of the opposition in parliament, with Anisul Islam Mahmud, the co-chairman of JaPa, being appointed as the deputy leader of the opposition.

However, the small opposition party is experiencing internal discord. Following the general election, Rowshan Ershad, the widow of the party founder and chief patron of JaPa, declared herself as the chairwoman of the party and appointed Kazi Mamunur Rashid, a presidium member, as the secretary-general, thereby removing Quader and Mujibul Haque from their respective roles as chairman and secretary-general. [AiR No. 5, January/2024, 5]

Against this backdrop, Quader last week warned against the perception of JaPa being influenced by other parties and emphasized the need to address this issue promptly to prevent the party from fracturing and losing public trust. Additionally, he criticized the governance of the ruling Awami League, likening it to a medieval system, particularly condemning delays in the justice system.

Bangladesh: Focus on rural development along with infrastructure, prime minister tells economic council

(lm) Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina emphasized the importance of rural development

alongside infrastructure projects during a meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC), a high-level government body responsible for approving major development projects and allocating funds for them. Hasina urged quick completion of delayed projects and expressed concern over increased costs and delays. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Case filed against armed Burmese nationals who entered country illegally

(lm) Legal action has been initiated by police in Bangladesh against 23 Myanmar nationals, accused of illegal entry into Bangladesh with weapons. Local representatives and residents detained them, suspecting them to be associated with a terrorist group operating within the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh's Cox Bazar district. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bhutan: Integrated taxation system incomplete two years after implementation deadline

(lm) An audit report has criticized the Bhutan Integrated Taxation System (BITS) development project, noting that despite spending approximately USD 133 million, it remains incomplete, causing delays in implementing the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in Bhutan. The report urges the government to demand accountability from the company responsible for developing the system and expedite the completion of BITS to enable GST implementation. [Kuensel]

In response, the Department of Revenue and Customs defended its actions, stating that preparatory activities for GST were completed and efforts were made to build local capacity. They attributed the failure to deliver BITS to the complexity of modern taxation systems and an overestimation of local capabilities.

Bhutan: Anti-graft body targets faster case closure amid increased proactive investigations

(lm) The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) in Bhutan has been striving to expedite case closures, reducing turnaround time from 90 days to 65.5 days.

Furthermore, proactive investigations increased by 25 percent between 2022 and 2023, a positive trend according to ACC officials, although the commission aims for 95 percent proactive investigations in the future. [Kuensel]

Bhutan scored 68 points in *Transparency International*'s Corruption Perceptions Index 2023, ranking 26th least corrupt. However, there are concerns about delays in resolving corruption cases, impacting the rule of law and the integrity of the criminal justice system.

Bhutan: Public outcry as kerosene price spikes unchecked

(lm) The price of kerosene, an essential commodity for heating during winter, has been steadily increasing in recent years, causing concern among households and businesses in Bhutan. Last month, it was priced at USD 0.80 higher than petrol, dropping slightly this month. However, users note a consistent upward trend in prices over the past few years, and businesses and households, especially in high-altitude areas, are grappling with the high costs. [Kuensel]

India: Police block roads as farmers march for better crop prices

(ff) Ahead of national elections, thousands of farmers from neighboring states are marching towards India's capital, Delhi, demanding higher support prices and guaranteed income, promises made by the government in 2021. Over 200 farmer unions are participating in the march, and a rural strike is planned for 16 February, during which agricultural activities will cease, and major roads across the country will be blocked. [Al Jazeera] [Reuters] [Associated Press]

Crucially, this agitation follows a year-long protest launched in late 2020 against contentious agricultural reforms, which resulted in several deaths. The farmers' demands center around ensuring a minimum purchase price for essential crops, which serves as a safety net against drastic price fluctuations and considers the cost of production. Despite the repeal of the contentious agricultural laws in 2021, talks between farm leaders and government officials have failed to yield concrete solutions, leading to continued agitation.

The current protest has been met with heavy police resistance, including the use of tear gas and detainments, as authorities have fortified entry points into the capital with barriers and suspended internet services in some areas to deter communication among protesters.

India: Uttarakhand passes Uniform Civil Code; four dead in clashes over mosque demolition

(fd/fd) India's northern Uttarakhand state, has passed a groundbreaking law known as the Uniform Civil Code Bill (UCC), which imposes common rules for all communities in the state, except for Scheduled Tribes, in terms of marriage, divorce, inheritances and live-in relationships. [The Hindu] [TIME]

The bill's passage was seen as a significant milestone in the campaign of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), dating back to the 1980s, to implement a UCC. Thus, with the bill's passage near-complete, the stage is now set for other BJP-ruled states to pass similar legislation ahead of the next general election, which could see current Prime Minister Narendra Modi win a third term in office.

However, critics argue that the law targets Muslims who follow Sharia law and raises concerns about government intrusion into personal relationships, especially regarding unwed couples living together. Additionally, the bill's hasty passage on the eve of national elections and the lack of public consultation have raised concerns about its true intentions and potential repercussions. [The Wire]

Crucially, in the context of the passage of the UCC, a significant escalation of violence unfolded in the town of Haldwani during what authorities termed an "anti-encroachment drive" aimed at clearing illegal constructions in the area, including a mosque and an adjacent madrassa. Reports indicate that clashes erupted between protesters and law enforcement personnel, resulting in six deaths and 60 injured. [BBC]

The district administration asserted that the anti-encroachment drive was not aimed at any specific community but rather targeted illegal structures. They cited a high court order mandating the removal of such constructions from government land. However, local residents contested this claim, arguing that the mosque was demolished before the court could issue a final decision.

In response to the violence, authorities imposed a curfew in the affected area and issued "shoot at sight" orders to restore order. Additionally, internet services were suspended, and schools in the vicinity were closed temporarily.

India: Government tables white paper on 10 years of UPA, hours after Congress's black paper on government's failures

(lm) The unveiling of the "White Paper on the Indian Economy" by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and the "Black Paper" by opposition Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge has ignited a fierce political discourse as the country braces for impending parliamentary elections. [The Wire] [MoneyControl]

Both papers provided detailed analyses of the respective governments' performances, with the White Paper focusing on economic indicators and policy decisions, while the Black Paper emphasized social and political issues.

The White Paper, presented by Sitharaman, painted a grim picture of the economy inherited by the Modi government from the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, which was a coalition government led by the Congress party that governed India from 2004 to 2014. The paper highlighted issues such as high inflation, fiscal deficits, and policy missteps, and accused the UPA of leaving behind a damaged economy plagued by corruption and policy paralysis.

In contrast, the Black Paper released by the Congress alleged that the Modi government's tenure had been detrimental to the country's economy, exacerbating unemployment, agricultural distress, and crimes against marginalized communities. It criticized the government for favoring large corporations at the expense of small businesses and for employing divisive tactics to suppress opposition.

India: Former Maharashtra chief minister quits Congress party; likely to join BJP

(ff) Ashok Chavan, a former Chief Minister of India's Maharashtra state, dealt a blow to the opposition Congress party by resigning as a member of the state's assembly and exiting the party. Chavan's departure follows a series of high-profile exits from the party in recent weeks, further weakening its position and

raising questions about its ability to retain key leaders. [NDTV]

Chavan's decision to quit the Congress comes amidst speculation about his potential switch to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), although he has not yet confirmed any such move. The timing of his resignation, shortly after the BJP-led government tabled a 'white paper' in Parliament highlighting alleged irregularities during the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government's tenure (2004-2014), has raised eyebrows. However, Chavan has refuted claims that his decision is linked to the white paper.

India: Politician shot dead during Facebook live with ‘old rival’

(ff) In India’s city of Mumbai, a politician, Abhishek Ghosalkar, was shot dead during a Facebook Live stream meeting with a local businessman, who then took his own life. The two appeared to reconcile in the video before the shooting occurred. Police are investigating the incident as a murder-suicide, with a history of past disputes between the two. [Independent]

India: Parliament passes stringent law to prevent cheating in exams

(ff) India's Parliament passed a new law aimed at preventing cheating in exams for government jobs and public college admissions, which imposes strict penalties, including jail sentences of three to 10 years and fines for facilitators of cheating. However, critics argue that severe punishment alone may not effectively address the issue, citing instances of cheating already punishable under existing criminal laws. [BBC]

Cheating is prevalent in India due to the highly competitive nature of government job exams and college admissions, where millions compete for limited positions. Despite the existence of anti-cheating laws in some states, cheating cases persist, indicating limited effectiveness.

India: Jammu & Kashmir National Conference president skips second summon by investigators

(ff) For the second time in a month, Farooq Abdullah, the president of the Jammu & Kashmir National Conference party and former chief minister of the Jammu and Kashmir union territory, did not appear at the Enforcement Directorate (ED) office in Srinagar despite being summoned. The ED had summoned Abdullah for questioning regarding alleged financial irregularities in the Jammu and Kashmir Cricket Association. [Hindustan Times] [Kashmir Life]

India: *India Today* poll forecasts victory for Modi's BJP in upcoming elections

(fd) A poll conducted by *India Today* comprising 35,801 respondents across India indicates that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is poised to secure a clear majority in the upcoming general elections, ensuring Modi's comfortable third term. [Reuters]

Although there's no religious breakdown of respondents, the BJP and its allies are projected to win around 335 of the 543 directly elected seats in the lower house of parliament. While the BJP aims for over 400 seats, the opposition Congress-led alliance, INDIA, is forecasted to secure 166 seats. Notably, regional parties may dominate in southern states where the BJP's influence could be limited.

Of note, the survey also found that 42 percent of respondents admired Modi this year for his decision to inaugurate a grand temple to Hindu deity Ram in Ayodhya, built on the site of a centuries-old mosque razed by hardline Hindus in 1992.

India: Supreme Court rules designation of Deputy Chief Ministers does not violate constitution

(ff) The Supreme Court of India dismissed a public interest litigation challenging the appointment of of deputy chief ministers, stating that while the post may not be defined under the constitution, it is not unconstitutional to appoint senior leaders of the ruling party or coalition as deputy chief ministers. [Hindustan Times]

This decision affirms the current practice in 14 of India's 28 states, including Andhra Pradesh which holds the record with five deputy chief ministers. While it doesn't explicitly endorse the practice, it removes the

legal hurdle and allows states to continue appointing deputy chief ministers as a means to accommodate key figures within their governments, particularly in coalition settings.

India: Supreme Court grants protection to entities in Uttar Pradesh halal ban case

(ff) India's Supreme Court has granted protection to two organizations involved in halal certification from coercive action in connection with a criminal case pending against them in Uttar Pradesh over the ban on halal-certified products. [Hindustan Times]

The court's decision came after the two organizations had challenged the state government's ban on the manufacture, sale, storage, and distribution of halal-certified products, arguing it discriminates against Muslims and has nationwide implications. It also follows a similar order issued earlier for another Muslim organization [see AiR No. 5, January/2024, 5].

India: Supreme Court extends interim bail of minister's son in Lakhimpur Kheri violence case

(ff) India's Supreme Court has extended the interim bail granted to Ashish Mishra, the son of Minister Ajay Mishra Teni, in the so-called Lakhimpur Kheri violence case. Initially restricted from Delhi and Uttar Pradesh, Ashish's bail conditions have been relaxed, allowing him to attend trial proceedings in Uttar Pradesh. Additionally, the court has requested a progress report from the trial court as no updates have been received since September 2023. [Hindustan Times] [The Wire]

The case pertains to an incident that occurred in October 2021, in Lakhimpur Kheri district of Uttar Pradesh. During a protest by farmers against the farm laws enacted by the Indian government, a convoy allegedly belonging to Ashish drove through the protest site, resulting in the deaths of eight people, including farmers. Ashish was arrested later the same month and surrendered in April next year, after the Supreme Court canceled his bail.

India: Parliament clears bills to add Pahari, Valmiki communities to ST, SC lists in Jammu and Kashmir

(fd) India's Parliament recently passed several bills related to the Jammu and Kashmir union territory, including the grant of the Scheduled Tribes status to the Pahari ethnic group and three other tribes. The bills also include provisions for reservation to Other Backward Classes in local self-government bodies and municipalities, as well as the inclusion of the Valmiki community in the Scheduled Castes list of Jammu and Kashmir. [The Hindu]

Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled Castes (SC) are categories of historically marginalized communities in India. Both ST and SC lists are maintained by the government and are periodically updated to include new communities or tribes based on their socio-economic and demographic characteristics. These lists are crucial for implementing affirmative action policies.

In response to the passing of the bills several protests broke out in Jammu and Kashmir. Critics see the move as a ploy for electoral gains, especially in light of upcoming elections. This sentiment reflects broader concerns about the politicization of reservation policies and their impact on marginalized communities in the region. [The Wire]

India: BJP releases candidates list for upper house elections; former Congress President Gandhi possibly to contest

(fd) India's ruling con February 11 announced 14 candidates for elections to 65 seats in the 245-member upper House of Parliament on February 27. The candidates who replace the retiring members are not renominated ministers and come from the states Uttar Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Karnataka, Haryana, Uttarakhand, West Bengal and Bihar. [The Hindu]

Meanwhile, Sonia Gandhi, former president of the main opposition Indian National Congress, is likely to contest the upcoming Rajya Sabha election, potentially paving the way for her daughter Priyanka Gandhi to contest the upcoming elections to the lower house from Rae Bareli, a traditional stronghold of the Gandhi family in Uttar Pradesh. If elected, this would mark Sonia Gandhi's first term in the Rajya Sabha, having previously served five terms as a lawmaker in Parliament's lower house. [WION]

India: BJP earns 7-times more through electoral bonds in 2022-23 than Congress

Party

(fd) In the fiscal year 2022-23, India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has received around USD 157 million through electoral bonds, marking a sevenfold increase compared to the main opposition Congress party, which earned USD 21 million through the same route, down from USD 28 million in the previous fiscal. According to the annual audited report, which was submitted to the Election Committee, 61 percent of the BJP's total contribution was collected through electoral bonds. [Hindustan Times]

The Electoral Bond Scheme, a method of political funding introduced in India, has raised concerns regarding its transparency and potential to influence elections. Despite being challenged in the Supreme Court, the scheme continues to operate, allowing for the purchase of bonds during specific periods, including before the upcoming general elections in 2024.

India: Prime Minister-led panel clears names for anti-corruption body, vigilance commissioner

(fd) Former Supreme Court judge Ajay Manikrao Khanwilkar has been elected as the new chairperson of Lokpal, India's anti-corruption ombudsman institution, while Aeratu S. Rajeev, managing director of Bank of Maharashtra, was selected as the Vigilance Commissioner (VC). This decision was made by a committee led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. [Hindustan Times]

This committee was composed of Prime Minister Modi, Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud and Leader of the largest Opposition party, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury. Chowdhury gave a short opposing note on Rajeev's selection but did not contest Khanwilkar's candidate because he had been informed of it at the last moment.

The Lokpal oversees investigations into allegations of corruption and maladministration by public officials. On the other hand, the VC is responsible for supervising and guiding the vigilance activities aimed at preventing corruption and promoting good governance within various government departments and agencies.

The Maldives: People have ‘zero confidence’ in PPM-PNC administration, MDP claims

(aa) The Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), which currently controls 41 seats in the 87-member Parliament, has expressed confidence in securing a supermajority in the upcoming parliamentary elections, citing a loss of confidence in the PPM-PNC administration of President Mohamed Muizzu among the public. [SunOnline]

MDP's parliamentary candidates aim to win all contested seats and potentially surpass the supermajority achieved in 2019. Back then, the party secured a total of 65 out of the 87 seats in the Parliament.

The Maldives: IMF delegation completes visit, warns of ‘debt distress’

(aa) An International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission visited the Maldives from January 23 to February 6 to assess the country's economic situation and policy priorities for consultations in 2024. According to the official communiqué, increased fuel prices, high import demands, and climatic vulnerabilities need to be addressed urgently by the government in policy formulation. [IMF]

The mission noted the Maldivian economy's rebound from the pandemic-induced contraction, with growth at 13.9 percent in 2022 and projected at 4.4 percent in 2023 and 5.2 percent in 2024. However, fiscal deficits and public debt remain high, posing risks of external and overall debt distress.

The World Bank earlier assessed a fiscal strain, estimating that the Maldives’s debt-to-GDP ratio will remain over 115 percent this year. These predictions were picked up by President Mohamed Muizzu in Parliament. His government will seek policies that bring about better budgetary measures and sustainable debt and fiscal standards, he said. Muizzu announced possible Chinese assistance in the archipelago’s airport expansion and is holding discussions on debt deferment. [The Hindu]

The Maldives: President reaffirms defense strengthening efforts

(aa) Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu has reiterated his commitment to bolstering the country's defense capabilities, assuring that efforts are underway to enhance local capabilities for medical evacuations and surveillance. Additionally, plans are in motion to assume sole regulation of Exclusive Economic Zones and to improve underwater survey capabilities. [Business Standard]

The statement comes at a time of agreement between India and the Maldives on troop withdrawal. New Delhi will withdraw its military personnel from the Maldives between March and May. 88 Indian military personnel who carried out medical evacuations and humanitarian missions are to be gradually replaced by "competent Indian technical personnel" and trained Maldivian defense personnel. [AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1]

Nepal: Partnership with Congress party not beneficial, Prime Minister Dahal says

(lm) On February 12, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal of Nepal's Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) for the first time addressed echoed dissatisfaction within his party with the Nepali Congress, the largest party in Parliament's lower house and a coalition member.

Dahal expressed concerns about the alliance's future, citing the loss in the upper house election in Koshi Province, and criticized past betrayals by the Congress. However, he clarified that this unease does not necessarily indicate an imminent breakup of the alliance. [The Kathmandu Post]

During the Koshi elections, one candidate from each party had contested for two vacant assembly seats. The Maoist Centre's candidate lost, while the Congress candidate was elected. This defeat was taken seriously by the Maoist Centre and discussed in a meeting of the ruling alliance.

Nepal: Maoist Centre Standing Committee unable to sort out differences ahead of statute convention

(lm) Ahead of a crucial statute convention, the Standing Committee of Nepal's Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) faced challenges in resolving key issues, including the party's core political principle, during a recent meeting. Despite efforts, no consensus

was reached on these matters. Consequently, the Standing Committee authorized office bearers to prepare draft proposals for the upcoming statute convention. [The Kathmandu Post]

Most notably, there was disagreement on whether the party should adopt multi-party democracy or a line of "revolutionary communism." Additionally, discussions centered on leadership development, the necessity of district committees, and the party's link with production.

The convention, commencing on February 13, aims to finalize the party's statute and strategic direction. Proposed changes include downsizing the central committee and ensuring representation for marginalized groups and women. Additionally, there are ongoing discussions regarding leadership selection methods, with some advocating for elections to determine leadership roles. [AiR No. 4, January/2024, 4]

Nepal: Maoist Centre declares intent to claim upper House chair

(lm) The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) has announced its intention to vie for the chairmanship in Parliament's upper House, adding a new layer of complexity to the ruling alliance dynamics. This decision came after the Nepali Congress expressed its interest in the position, setting the stage for a potential standoff within the coalition. The election for the chair is scheduled for March 12. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Supreme Court annuls Oli Cabinet's decision to allow swapping of *Giri Bandhu Tea Estate* land

(lm) The Supreme Court of Nepal has annulled the decision made by the then-KP Sharma-led government to allow a large tea company, Giri Bandhu Tea Estate, to relocate its land. [The Himalayan Times]

The court declared the government's decision as inconsistent with the provisions of the Land Act. It also issued a writ of mandamus instructing the government to manage the land while considering various factors such as land area, tea estate's capacity, and ensuring proportional land swap and pricing. Additionally, the court revoked the Cabinet decision and halted any construction activities on the Tea Estate Land.

The petitioners argued that the government's approval of land lease for residential purposes exceeded the agricultural land limit set by the Land Act, aiming to exchange prime land for lesser-valued plots.

Nepal: Koshi provincial government, agitating group ink five-point deal on naming dispute

(lm) The Koshi Province government and the Province 1 Renaming Joint Struggle Committee, an organization protesting the naming of the province as Koshi, have signed a comprehensive five-point agreement. [The Kathmandu Post]

The renaming of the province to Koshi was endorsed by the provincial assembly in May of last year. The Renaming Joint Struggle Committee emerged in response to discontent among various ethnic groups, particularly the Rai and Limbu communities, who felt that the name Koshi did not adequately reflect their indigenous identity. They advocated for a name that would better represent the major ethnic communities residing in the region. Their discontent escalated into street protests, which occasionally turned violent, targeting leaders of major political parties visiting the eastern districts.

The signing of the five-point agreement marks a significant shift in approach, with the struggle committee agreeing to modify its protest strategies and adopt peaceful demonstrations instead. In return, the provincial government has committed to providing free medical treatment to those injured during the protests and to withdrawing all cases filed against protesters. Both sides have also agreed to engage in further discussions before February 22, aiming to find a permanent resolution to the naming issue.

Nepal: CIAA sues 249 people in connection with Tikapur land scam

(lm) The Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) filed a corruption case against 249 individuals implicated in the Tikapur City Development Committee land scam. Among those charged are former chairs of the committee. The accused are alleged to have sold committee land using fake receipts and documents, violating the Town Development Act and the Urban Development Directive. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Prime Minister advocates public release of report on 2015 Madhesh protests atrocities

(lm) Nepal's Prime Minister, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, has once again voiced his support for the public release of the Lal Commission report. This report delves into the deadly violence that occurred during protests leading up to the promulgation of Nepal's constitution in 2015. [The Kathmandu Post]

The protests were sparked by regional parties representing the Madheshi people, who opposed the expedited finalization of the constitution in the Constituent Assembly. The report documents that 66 individuals, including 10 police personnel, lost their lives during these protests.

Formed in September 2016 and chaired by a former Supreme Court justice, the Lal Commission submitted its findings in 2017. Despite assurances from previous administrations, successive governments have yet to make the report public.

Pakistan: In shock result, allies of jailed ex-Prime Minister Khan secure most seats in national polls

In Pakistan's general election, independent candidates affiliated with the imprisoned political leader Imran Khan's party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), secured a surprising victory despite a massive crackdown on the party in the lead-up to the polls. But independents cannot form a government, and the country faces weeks of political uncertainty as rival parties negotiate possible coalitions. [CNN] [The New York Times] [NBC News]

Around 60 million, or approximately 47 percent, of nearly 129 million voters casted their ballots. The PTI-affiliated candidates won 101 of 255 parliamentary seats. The Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) trailed with 75 seats, despite initial expectations favoring the party, while the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) followed with 54. Ten minor parties mopped up the remaining 17 seats, with two remaining vacant.

To become Prime Minister, a candidate has to show they have a simple majority of 169 seats out of the 336-member National Assembly when it is called into session in the next few weeks. Thus, the election

results have scrambled the plans of PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif — and the military establishment backing him — forcing him to announce plans on January 9 to try to form a coalition government with the PPP of Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, the son of assassinated former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. A day earlier, Sharif had rejected the idea of a coalition, telling reporters after casting his vote that he wanted a single party running Pakistan for a full five-year term. [Associated Press]

Observers had expected Sharif's PML-N to prevail and put him on track for a fourth term as prime minister due to the disadvantages faced by Khan's party. Along with Khan imprisoned and facing more criminal convictions, election officials and police blocked his party from holding rallies and opening campaign offices, and its online events were blocked.

Crucially, on election day, authorities suspended mobile phone services nationwide on election day, citing security concerns after recent attacks. Additionally, internet blackouts were also widely reported in multiple regions in Pakistan, in addition to mobile services being cut. Both these developments were criticized as undemocratic by rights groups, who raised concerns about communication and access to information for voters – around 40 percent of which are illiterate - and election observers. [Al Jazeera] [Committee to Protect Journalists]

Amidst these circumstances, the PTI claimed that it had initially secured a lead of 170 parliamentary seats before purported vote rigging shifted the balance in favor of the PML-N. The party called for the immediate resignation of the chief election commissioner and all members of the Election Commission. [The Express Tribune]

Additionally, the PTI urged its supports to protest alleged rigging in the election, but police warned on February 11 that they would come down hard on these gatherings, saying so-called Section 144 orders were in place under a colonial-era law banning gatherings of two or more people. [South China Morning Post]

Despite allegations of rigging and suspicions of election manipulation due to result delays, Pakistan's election regulatory body has rejected such claims, while the caretaker Prime Minister described the February 8 polls as largely fair, acknowledging some incidents of irregularities that could be addressed by election commission tribunals.

Pakistan: Election results across four provinces

(lm) Concurrently with nationwide general elections, Pakistan held elections on February 8 in four of the country's five provinces – Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, and Sindh. The elections pitched the three major parties, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), and Pakistan People's Party (PPP), against each other, as well as against regional parties. [NDTV]

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

At the time of writing, the results of 112 out of 115 seats of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly have been announced and the PTI-backed independents have secured 83 seats, followed by independents and candidates of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) party, who each secured seven seats. In response to the election outcomes, Ali Amin Khan Gandapur, a former federal minister in the Cabinet of Prime Minister Imran Khan, has been nominated by the PTI as the candidate for the chief minister position. [SAMAA]

Punjab

In Punjab, the most populous province of the country, elections were held for 296 out of 297 constituencies. The PML-N, led by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, secured 137 seats. PTI-backed independent candidates secured 112 seats, while independents won 26 seats in the Punjab Assembly. The PPP won 10 seats, while candidates from the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam, a rival of the PML-N, clinched eight seats.

Sindh

In Sindh, the PPP has secured the majority to form the government for the fourth consecutive time in the province by winning 84 seats out of the 129 announced so far. The results of one constituency have been withheld. The second-highest number of seats were secured by the Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan, a social liberal and secularist party, with 28 seats. PTI-backed independents have managed to win 11 seats.

Notably, a coalition of seven regional parties in southern Sindh province announced their decision to relinquish two provincial assembly seats on February 12 in protest against alleged election manipulation during the polls. This move came after Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) vacated its seat in favor of an independent

candidate supported by former Prime Minister Imran Khan. [Arab News]

Balochistan

In Balochistan, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) (JUI-F), a party representing conservative religious interests, both secured 11 seats each. Additionally, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) secured 10 seats, while six independent candidates emerged victorious in the provincial assembly elections.

Pakistan: Chairperson of Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party announces retirement from politics

(lm) Jahangir Khan Tareen, the founder and chairperson of the Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP), a centrist party established shortly before the national elections, has declared his retirement from politics. [Twitter]

Tareen, one of the wealthiest industrialists in the country, joined the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) led by imprisoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2011 and served as the party's general secretary. He played a pivotal role in PTI's electoral victory in 2018.

Once considered one of Imran Khan's closest confidants, Tareen formally parted ways with PTI in 2023 and founded IPP. The party attracted several politicians who defected from PTI following the violent incidents in May of the previous year.

Pakistan: Two blasts kill 28 in Balochistan province day before national polls

(lm) Two bomb explosions targeted candidates' offices in Pakistan's Balochistan province, resulting in at least 28 deaths and numerous injuries on February 7, just one day before national polls. The first blast occurred in Pishin district, killing 16 people, while the second explosion in Qila Saifullah left 12 dead. The Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for both attacks. [bbc]

Pakistan: Three killed, 12 injured in protest over alleged manipulation in vote counts in northwest

(lm) The aftermath of Pakistan's recent general elections has been tumultuous, with allegations of electoral misconduct and violence erupting in various regions across the country. [Arab News]

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Shangla district, supporters of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party staged protests against the victory of the candidate from the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N). The PTI backers claimed that the results had been tampered with, alleging foul play in the vote count. The situation escalated into violence, resulting in three fatalities and injuries to 12 others during clashes between protesters and law enforcement.

Similar accusations of electoral misconduct surfaced in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city, where the Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P) was accused of attempting to rig polls. Leaders from rival parties, such as the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), claimed that the MQM-P engaged in ballot stuffing and other fraudulent activities to influence election outcomes. Tensions flared as polling stations were reportedly seized by MQM-P supporters at gunpoint after the official polling hours, raising concerns about the fairness of the electoral process.

In Balochistan, significant delays in announcing election results sparked protests and accusations of widespread rigging by nationalist and mainstream political parties. Supporters from various factions, including the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI F), the Balochistan National Party Mengal (BNP M), and the Hazara Democratic Party (HDP), gathered at the Deputy Commissioner's Office to demand the release of final polling results.

Sri Lanka: Former naval commander announces support for opposition SJB party

(lm) Daya Sandagiri, the 14th Naval Commander of Sri Lanka, has announced his support for the opposition Samagi Jana Balawagaya (SJB) party led by Sajith Premadasa, who appointed Sandagiri as an advisor on maritime and naval policies. He becomes the third senior Sri Lankan military figure to join the party, following Daya Ratnayake, a former army commander, and Sarath Fonseka, the former head of Sri Lanka's army. The latter two stand accused of war crimes. [Tamil Guardian]

Sandagiri served as the Commander of the Sri Lanka Navy from 2001 to 2005 and later as Chief of Defense

Staff with the rank of admiral. In 2015, he was appointed Vice Chancellor of Kotelawala Defense University.His history is not without controversy. In 2006, then-president Mahinda Rajapaksa announced that he would appoint a Presidential Commission of Inquiry (PCoI) to investigate military procurement deals entered into by Sandagiri. At the time, Sandagiri had stepped down as Commander of the Navy and was serving as Chief of Defense Staff.

Sri Lanka: Government finalizes draft law for NGO monitoring

(aa) Sri Lanka's government has completed the drafting of a new bill that mandates the compulsory registration of all NGOs with the National NGO Secretariat. The draft is currently being circulated among NGOs and individual activists for their feedback before being presented to the Cabinet for approval. NGOs have a three-week window to submit their views for consideration in the bill. [Daily Mirror]

The objective of this legislation is to address concerns related to money laundering and terrorist financing risks associated with NGO activities, in line with requirements set by the International Monetary Fund. Officials stress the importance of this law in response to worries regarding the unmonitored flow of funds to NGOs, estimated at USD 320 million annually.

Currently, there are 1,786 registered national-level NGOs, 1,636 district-level NGOs, and 38,524 divisional-level NGOs operating in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka: Forum organized to discuss bill for Commission for Truth, Unity, and Reconciliation

(aa) Conditions on how to achieve reconciliation and the enactment of transitional justice were discussed during a forum organized by the Interim Secretariat for the Truth and Reconciliation Mechanism (ISTRM), an organization established to lay the groundwork for the establishment of a Commission for Truth, Unity, and Reconciliation (CTUR). [The Island]

The meeting discussed various aspects of the draft bill for an independent CTUR in view of the conflict in the North and East. Stakeholders, including government officials, civil society representatives, media personnel and experts in the field of law and transitional justice,

agreed on an inclusive victim-centric approach with as much transparency as possible whilst protecting sensitive information. The draft CTUR bill is now available for review and feedback from the stakeholders.

Sri Lanka: Over 50,000 arrested in first 50 days of ongoing major drug operation

(lm) The Sri Lankan government announced on February 6 that the police, conducting a nationwide anti-crime operation called Yukthiya, had arrested 56,541 suspects within the first 50 days since the launch of the operation. Out of the total arrests, 49,558 suspects were apprehended for drug offenses, while others were arrested for various criminal activities. The seized drugs have an estimated market value close to USD 25 million. [The Island]

The operation, initiated on December 17 last year, has faced concerns regarding human rights violations, including reports of arrests without search warrants and allegations of ill-treatment and torture.

Sri Lanka: First six months of 2024 dedicated to debt restructuring

(aa) President Ranil Wickremesinghe proclaimed the implementation of a debt restructuring framework within the first six months of 2024. The main goal is to achieve a three percent growth in GDP and surpass the World Bank's prediction for Sri Lanka of 1.7 percent growth this year. Debt restructuring remains at the top of the government's agenda, especially since the financial crisis in 2022 when the island defaulted on its foreign debt. Foreign Minister Ali Sabry confirmed his efforts to conclude bilateral agreements with all key creditors. [Reuters]

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

Brunei: Ministry and Legislative Council forge alliance to drive sustainable economic growth

(ms) Brunei's Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism (MPRT) has partnered with the Legislative Council (LegCo) to address sustainable growth in key sectors like agriculture, fisheries, forestry, and tourism. During a recent dialogue, Minister Haji Abdul Manaf bin Haji Metussin and LegCo members discussed strategies to tackle challenges facing these sectors.

The dialogue emphasized the importance of collective efforts in enhancing food production, exploring new export markets, conserving natural resources, and boosting tourism. Achievements in 2023 included progress in the food industry, strengthening value chains, and a notable increase in tourism arrivals.

The MPRT's initiatives extend to neighboring export markets with plans to enter the Chinese market. Additionally, efforts by the Forestry Department in tree planting and conservation have been recognized. The dialogue highlighted a collaborative approach among senior officials and department heads to address challenges in Brunei's primary resource sectors, aiming for sustainable growth and economic stability. [BNN]

Cambodia: King approves Committee for Legal Reform

(pm) King Norodom Sihamoni has issued a Royal Decree establishing a Committee for Legal Reform. The move intends to frame new laws, enhance law enforcement, and modernize the rule of law in the country.

Led by Vongsey Vissoth, the Minister of the Council of Ministers, the Committee will coordinate and promote legal reforms. It will be made up of four vice-chairmen

and 29 members from various ministers and national institutions, has duties including leading, coordinating, monitoring, and evaluating legal reform efforts, as well as disseminating information on legal reforms and regulations, among others.

This decree supplements the Committee for Judiciary reform established in December 2023, demonstrating Cambodia's commitment to comprehensive legal reform. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Party and candidate registration date of council elections announced

(pm) The National Election Committee (NEC) has announced on February 8 that the political parties and candidates who are running in the May 26 Council elections will have to register from March 2 to 6.

Council elections will be held in 1,652 communes. [Khmer Times]

Communes form the third-level administrative divisions in Cambodia and are the subdivisions of the districts and municipalities of Cambodia. Depending on the population, communes can consist of as few as 1 or as many as 33 villages.

Cambodia: Senate election campaign period start

(pm) For the upcoming 5th Senate election in Cambodia, the campaign period kicked off February 10. It will run for 14 days and end two days before the election day February 25.

The ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) started their campaign with a large rally of 10,000 supporters in Phnom Penh.

All 125 members of the National Assembly and 11,622 commune councilors will be voting at 33 polling stations. Out of 62 Senate seats, the commune councilors will elect 58 seats, while two will be appointed by the King and the remaining two elected by the National Assembly. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Labor ministry launches strategic policy plan

(pm) The Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training has launched the strategic plan for employment, development, social security and vocational training for 2024-2028.

The plan consists of six chapters and focuses on priority programs, clusters of activities and work activities that the Ministry and other actors are intending to establish in the next five years.

The plan seeks to promote the quality and productivity of human capital in various sectors such as labor market policy, digital economy, development of working conditions, labor migration, enhancement of social security system, the modernization of institutions and public service. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Wrongdoing in Prince's Group offshore dealings alleged

(pm) According to Radio Free Asia (RFA), Cambodia's Prince Group, one of the country's conglomerates and well linked to the nation's authorities and officials, with its Chairman Chen Zhi being a top adviser to Cambodia's current and former prime ministers, in involved in money laundering and other illicit activities.

RFA is citing its own investigation that focuses on the company's offshore dealings, particularly in tax havens, and has identified assets and investments worth USD 1.5 billion of in 31 countries in which senior Prince Group executives have a stake.

RFA claims that a company controlled by Chen, registered in the Isle of Man, is in fact a shell company using money laundering tactics. [Radio Free Asia]

Cambodia: Human rights group vice president sued by ruling party

(pm) Cambodian People's Party (CPP) has sued Soeung Sen Karuna, deputy president and spokesman of ADHOC, Cambodia's oldest human rights organization. Karuna is accused of defaming the party through his comments made in an interview with Radio France International (RFI).

Sen Karuna called for political parties to resolve differences through political means, while also speaking about Son Chhay, vice-president of the opposition Candlelight Party, who was sued by both the CPP and the National Election Committee (NEC) after he publicly voiced allegations of irregularities and vote rigging in the June 5, 2022, commune council elections.

In their complaint to the court, the CPP argued that the comments were aimed at slandering the party and to foment ill-will and discrimination against the ruling party, coming shortly ahead of the February 25 Senate election. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Opposition party member sentenced to three years in prison

(pm) Opposition Candlelight Party (CP) official Chao Veasna has been sentenced to three years in prison for incitement after posting a photo of his spoiled election ballot on Facebook during the 2023 general election.

The court further deprived him of voting rights and eligibility to stand for election for five years.

Chao Vaesna's daughter claimed that the charges were based on private conversations on the Telegram messaging app and believes the sentence was politically motivated.

Chao Vaesna had previously been sentenced to five years in prison in 2018 for "incitement to violence" related to a protest in 2015. [Radio Free Asia]

Cambodia: Sam Rainsy accused alleged for invoking Buddhism to target government

(pm) Sam Rainsy, a prominent Cambodian opposition figure living in self-imposed exile in France has been accused of invoking Buddhism to attack the government.

Speaking at forum held in a pagoda in Paris, Rainsy criticized the Cambodian government for destroying the national religion and using Buddhism as a steppingstone to serve its interests. [Khmer Times]

Indonesian transport minister calls for port efficiency emulation from Laem Chabang

(jb) Around 11 February 2024, Indonesia's Transportation Minister, Budi Karya Sumadi, advocated for Indonesian ports to take cues from Laem Chabang Port in Thailand, one of the busiest in the world, to enhance global competitiveness. Sumadi's visit to Laem Chabang revealed insights into its robust cargo capacity of 14 million TEUs, showcasing effective management.

With Indonesia's vast archipelago, Sumadi stressed the pivotal role of ports in fostering connectivity and logistics. Laem Chabang's success in easing import-export congestion from Bangkok serves as a model for Indonesia's port development strategy. Sumadi anticipates Indonesia's ports can rival Southeast Asian counterparts with improved management practices. [Tempo.co]

Indonesia: Presidential candidate's latest election campaign pledges

(yr) On February 10, the three presidential candidates carried out their last grand campaigns in three different places, with the February 14 election day a few days away.

In North Jakarta, Anies Baswedan promised solutions for the "sandwich generation," 67 percent of the population aged 24–58 who face the double burden of caring their parents and children. He acknowledged their economic burdens and pledged to create opportunities for them to pursue their dreams more freely. Baswedan also described himself as a protective father figure who is ready to support the aspirations of young Indonesians. [Kompas 1] [Kompas 2, in Indonesian]

Meanwhile in South Jakarta, Prabowo Subianto, in his campaign speech, emphasized the importance of continuing the development that had been started by all previous presidents. Subianto promised to lead Indonesia towards prosperity and eliminate poverty, by respecting and continuing the existing legacy of development. [Kompas 3]

Ganjar Pranowo, who was campaigning in Semarang, Central Java, expressed people's anxiety regarding democracy and economic justice which they feel is weakening. By promising the development of stronger

democracy and superior pro-people programs, Pranowo has the ambition to overcome injustice and ensure that every citizen feels the benefits of development. [Kompas 4]

On February 9, Indikator Politik Indonesia released its final pre-election survey, showing Subianto and his running mate, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, leading with an electability of 51.8 percent. They were followed by Baswedan-Muhaimin Iskandar, at 24.1 percent, and Pranowo-Mahfud Mahmodin, at 19.6 percent [CNA]. This suggests that the Subianto and Raka could potentially win the election in a single round.

Indonesia: Police deploy 25,000 personnel for election security

(yr) As part of "Mantap Brata Operation 2023-2024." the Indonesian National Police (Polri) has mobilized 25,000 members of the Mobile Brigade Corps (Brimob) to safeguard the presidential and legislative vote on February 14.

On February 7, Head of Operations for the Mantap Brata Operation, Comm. General Fadil Imran, stated that the Brimob personnel deployed have various special qualifications, such as anti-riot, search and rescue, drone operations, rapid response, handling anarchy, and bomb disposal. In addition, 4,500 special forces from regional police forces and the Sabhara patrol unit have been trained. [The Indonesian National Police, in Indonesian] [Antara]

This operation, which began on October 17, 2023, and is scheduled to end on October 22, 2024, aiming to proactively ensure security and peace during the 2024 elections. This comprehensive operation involves various divisions, including the Criminal Investigation Department, Intelligence and Security, Public Security, Mobile Brigade Corps, Logistics, and Public Relations, to address any potential threats and maintain public order throughout the election process. [Indonesian National Police, in Indonesian]

Indonesia: Students demand President's impeachment

(yr) Hundreds of students from various universities held a demonstration in Jakarta on February 7, demanding the impeachment of President Joko Widodo for alleged ethical violations and partiality in

the 2024 elections. This is related to Widodo's statement that he, as president, and his ministers may participate in the campaign and take sides in the 2024 elections (see AiR No. 5, January/2024, 5).

In their speeches, the students highlighted criticism from academics regarding the government's performance and urged the Indonesian House of Representative (DPR-RI) to carry out supervisory functions (including the impeachment procedure).

In addition, students stated four demands: the impeachment of President Jokowi on charges of election partiality and ethical violations; a boycott of political parties that do not advocate for impeachment; ministerial resignations; and nationwide demonstrations. [Tempo] [CNN Indonesia, in Indonesian]

Previously, scholars from various universities in Indonesia also have voiced their concerns for Widodo's position and urging Widodo to return to Indonesia's "democratic corridors" (see AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1).

Indonesia: Government tightens foreigner supervision for election

(yr) The Indonesian government has established Foreigner Monitoring Teams (Tim PORA) in Central Sulawesi, Lampung, and Karawang to anticipate foreigner negative influence before the 2024 elections.

This initiative monitors foreigners which considered can influence election dynamics through casting votes, unbalanced reporting, surveys, or foreign NGO activities. The government hoped that the Tim PORA would ensure a safe, peaceful, and fair election without foreign influence, as only Indonesian citizens (WNI) can vote. [Republic of Indonesia National Radio, in Indonesian] [Indonesian General Election Supervisory Agency, in Indonesian] [Indonesia Expat]

Indonesia: Unilever Indonesia discusses boycott

(jb) Unilever Indonesia's President Director, Benjie Yap, disclosed a significant impact of the boycott targeting products or companies linked with Israel over the Israel-Hams conflict.

Yap noted that the boycott hit hardest in Padang and Aceh, with a noticeable decline in domestic sales. The negative sentiment surged following a fatwa issued by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) and was exacerbated by alleged misinformation.

Despite challenges, Unilever took measures to counter the boycott, including dispelling alleged rumors and collaborating with influencers and community leaders. [Reuters] [Tempo.co]

Indonesia: Antitrust watchdog accuses Shopee and Google of monopoly practices

(jb) The Indonesian Business Competition Supervisory Commission (KPPU) has raised concerns about potential monopoly practices by PT Shopee International Indonesia and PT Google Indonesia.

The country's antitrust watchdog highlighted Google's dominance in payment services through Google Pay and Shopee Indonesia's alleged monopoly in goods delivery via Shopee Xpress. It also confirmed that the cases are in the filing stage and will progress to investigation.

Shopee's policy restricting users from choosing delivery providers has drawn attention, with accusations of violations emerging. [Tempo.co]

Indonesia: Digital ID drive launched

(jb) In a bid to streamline access to public services, Indonesian authorities are urging citizens to activate their Citizen Identity Digital (IKD), which was implemented by the Minister of Home Affairs Regulation Number 72 of 2022. The initiative aims to eliminate the need for physical visits to government offices for services.

Teguh Setyabudi, Director General of Population and Civil Registration, emphasized the convenience of the digital ID, which utilizes passwords and biometrics on mobile devices. Less than 4 percent of the targeted 220 million citizens are currently enrolled.

The IKD project marks a significant step in Indonesia's digital infrastructure development, aligning with broader government digitization initiatives. [Biometric Update]

Indonesia: Government considers temporarily stopping rice aid before election

(yr) The Indonesian government, through the Head of the National Food Agency (Bapanas), Arief Prasetyo Adi, announced consideration of temporarily stopping the distribution of rice aid during the election silence period from 11 to 14 February 2024. This decision was taken as an anticipatory step to maintain the neutrality and integrity of elections. [Antara]

Indonesia: Defense Ministry cancels the Mirage jet purchase

(yr) On February 12, the Indonesian Ministry of Defense canceled its controversial plan to purchase twelve used Mirage 2000-5 fighter jets from Qatar worth USD 790 million. The planned purchase of the fighter jet was canceled amid criticism of its old condition and corruption allegations.

The Ministry of Defense also denied corruption allegations related to this cancellation. Deputy Minister of Defense, Muhammad Herindra, emphasized that the cancellation of the purchase was due to budget limitations, not because of corruption issues.

He also added that allegations of corruption (in the form of bribery) circulating in the media were said to be an attempt to damage the Defense Minister's reputation ahead of the presidential election.

Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto, who is also a presidential candidate, previously defended the purchase plan, citing the need to retrofit existing Sukhoi and F-16 aircraft while waiting for the arrival of the new Dassault Rafale jets. [Reuters] [Jakarta Globe] [Antara, in Indonesian]

Laos: Local police officers fired over underreporting drug seizures

(wn) The Lao government has disciplined a lieutenant colonel and four subordinates from the Savannakhet Provincial Police Department for underreporting drug seizures and selling the surplus for personal profit.

The lieutenant colonel was fired, while the four subordinates were demoted and relocated. Although the decision to remove a high-ranking police officer is

seen as a positive step, some public members have expressed their dissatisfaction that these officials are not facing criminal charges.

The case draws attention to the issue of rampant corruption in Laos and the problem of impunity of involved officials. Transparency International ranked Laos 136th out of 180 countries regarding corruption perception in its 2023 index. Last year, the Lao State Inspection Authority identified nine corrupt officials who embezzled USD 36 million in state funds. From 2021 to 2022, it was reported that 74 officials committed financial crimes that led to a loss of USD 52 million. The central government is accused of failing to address the root causes of corruption in Laos, which observers suggest is part of the problem. [RFA]

Laos: Opium poppy cultivation still ongoing among the Hmong community in northern Laos

(wn) According to officials and residents, ethnic Hmong villagers living in remote regions of northern Laos are still cultivating opium poppies despite government eradication efforts due to their long-standing beliefs about the plant's medicinal properties.

Lao authorities have recently announced that they had destroyed 2,590 square meters (two-thirds of an acre) of Hmong-grown opium poppy fields in Luang Namtha province, which is located along the border with China and Myanmar. They also reported destroying another 11,000 square meters (2.7 acres) in Xieng Khouang province, which borders Vietnam.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's World Drug Report 2023, there are approximately 5,700 hectares (14,100 acres) of opium poppy cultivation in Laos. Most of these poppy fields are found in the northern provinces of Phongsaly, Hua Phane, Luang Prabang, Oudomsay, Bokeo, Xieng Khouang, and Luang Namtha.

Until 1998, Laos used to be the third-largest illicit opium poppy-producing country in the world. However, due to the government and international partners' eradication efforts, the cultivation has been reduced to marginal levels, according to the UNODC. Nevertheless, the northern part of Laos is still recognized as one of two opium-producing countries in Southeast Asia, with poverty being the primary driver of cultivation in the area. [RFA]

Malaysia: Opposition reveals newly appointed Shadow Cabinet

(ba) Perikatan Nasional, Malaysia's opposition coalition – composed of the Malaysian United Indigenous Party (Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia; BERSATU), Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia; PAS), Malaysian People's Movement Party (Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia; GERAKAN) and Sabah Progressive Party (Parti Maju Sabah; SAPP) – has unveiled the new 18-member shadow cabinet, yet has kept the identity of its prospective shadow prime minister undisclosed.

Opposition leader Hamzah Zainudin explained that the updated lineup aligns with the modifications made in the recent Cabinet reshuffle on December 12, 2023 (see AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2). During a media conference on February 8, the secretary-general of Bersatu declined to reveal the identity of the shadow prime minister, emphasizing that Muhyiddin Yassin, who served as the eighth prime minister, remains Perikatan chairman.

Hamzah asserted that there was no internal conflict among component parties regarding the choice of the prime minister, emphasizing their harmonious collaboration.

When questioned about Muhyiddin's previous statement during the Kemaman district assembly by-election campaign on November 27, suggesting First Minister of Terengganu and PAS vice-president Ahmad Samsuri Mokhtar as a potential prime minister candidate for Perikatan, Hamzah evaded the inquiry and shifted the focus to party hierarchy.

Recent discussions have hinted at Ahmad Samsuri being groomed as Perikatan's next prime ministerial candidate, especially after securing victory in the Kemaman election last year. Speculations about disagreements between Perikatan component parties PAS and Bersatu regarding the potential prime minister have circulated. Hamzah clarified that the selection of MPs in the shadow cabinet was based on their expertise and experience. [The Star]

Malaysia: Opposition to refrain from participating in any protests or rallies that do not align with its constitution

(ba) Hamzah Zainudin, the secretary-general of Perikatan Nasional (PN), Malaysia's opposition coalition – composed of the Malaysian United Indigenous Party

(Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia; BERSATU), Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia; PAS), Malaysian People's Movement Party (Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia; GERAKAN) and Sabah Progressive Party (Parti Maju Sabah; SAPP) – declared on February 8 that the coalition will refrain from participating in protests or rallies that deviate from its constitution.

This statement comes in response to the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih 2.0), Bersih constitutes a coalition of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to enhancing Malaysia's democratic framework by advocating for reforms in the existing electoral system. Established officially on November 23, 2006, as a collaborative initiative, Bersih brings together leaders from political parties, civil society groups, and NGOs. The coalition's primary objectives include striving for free, transparent, and equitable elections, alongside other comprehensive reforms. Bersih which announced its readiness to organize a large-scale demonstration against the government if tangible steps toward promised institutional reforms are not taken in the upcoming parliamentary sessions.

On February 7, Bersih Chairman Faisal Abdul Aziz emphasized the demand for the government to initiate the delivery of reforms pledged during the 15th general election in 2022. These reforms include the separation of the attorney general's functions and the restoration of Parliament's independence from the executive.

Faisal highlighted that these reforms were part of the election manifestos of the current ruling coalitions and insisted on their prompt implementation. He stressed the importance of structural reforms and indicated that Bersih would vigilantly monitor the progress of these promises during the next parliamentary meeting. Expressing concern over recent developments indicating a deviation from the reform agenda, Faisal issued this warning as a preemptive measure. [The Malay Mail] [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysia: Mixed reaction on mediation on labor wages

(ba) The Ministry of Human Resources celebrated the successful outcome of a mediation involving a recruitment company.

In a statement released on February 8, the ministry described the negotiations as a "landmark case," emphasizing its potential to establish a significant precedent that holds foreign worker hiring firms

accountable for ensuring employment for their workers.

While the statement did not explicitly mention the initiation of criminal proceedings against the company, despite allegations of fraudulent practices, the Johor Labour Department (JTSKM) directed general trading company MuliaOne Energy Sdn Bhd on February 5 to disburse USD 216.000 in backdated pay to the 733 Bangladeshi workers brought to Pengerang, Johor. This directive was part of an agreement reached during the mediation between the recruiting company and the JTSKM.

On the other hand, advocates collaborating with laborers, who originally sought USD 440.000 in unpaid wages, denounced the mediation as a charade that might embolden unscrupulous recruitment firms to persist in exploiting an industry deemed by human rights organizations as akin to human slavery. [The Malay Mail]

Malaysia: Top court invalidates Islamic laws

(ba) On February 9, the Federal Court, Malaysia's highest declared over a dozen Islamic laws enacted by the state of Kelantan unconstitutional.

In an 8-1 decision, the court invalidated 16 laws within Kelantan's sharia criminal code. These laws included provisions criminalizing activities such as sodomy, incest, gambling, sexual harassment, and the desecration of places of worship.

Chief Justice Tengku Maimun Tuan Mat, delivering the majority judgment, emphasized that the state of Kelantan lacked the authority to enact these laws, as such matters fell within the purview of the federal parliament's law-making powers.

A Kelantanese lawyer and her daughter had filed the constitutional challenge targeting laws covering sharia offences that were passed by the state and came into force in 2021. The case stirred controversy among conservative Muslim groups, fearing potential repercussions for Islam and sharia courts in Malaysia.

This landmark ruling is seen among observers as having the potential to impact similar sharia laws across the Muslim-majority nation which operates with a dual-track legal system, where Islamic criminal and family laws applicable to Muslims coexist with secular laws enacted by the national parliament.

Following the ruling, Religious Affairs Minister Mohd Na'im Mokhtar stated that the government's Islamic authorities would promptly reinforce sharia courts, assuring that the Islamic judiciary remained protected under the federal constitution.

On the other hand, Kelantan government official Mohamed Fazli Hassan expressed disappointment with the decision and announced the state's intention to consult with its royal ruler, Sultan Muhammad V, on the ruling and other matters related to Islamic law.

Notably, nine of Malaysia's 13 states are led by monarchs who serve as guardians of Islam. [Reuters]

Malaysia: Opposition leader refutes allegations of meeting with Prime Minister over potential government post

(ba) Opposition leader Hamzah Zainuddin emphasized on February 8 that he has never encountered Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim at the Prime Minister's Office in Putrajaya to discuss potential positions.

Hamzah, the secretary-general of opposition collation Perikatan Nasional (PN) and a member of Parliament for Larut, dismissed such claims as "fitnah" (slander). He further clarified that he has not participated in any meetings with Anwar since the latter assumed the role of the country's 10th prime minister in 2022.

According to an online news portal citing party insiders, a prominent figure from the opposition Bersatu (Malaysian United Indigenous Party) was reportedly seen at the Prime Minister's Office recently, suspected to be negotiating a proposal for political survival of some party leaders till the next Bersatu elections. Additionally, the reports indicated that these party insiders affirmed the likelihood of more Bersatu leaders declaring their support for Anwar Ibrahim in the near future. [Free Malaysia Today]

In a related development, Bersatu is set to initiate legal proceedings against its Members of Parliament accused of betraying the party by publicly declaring support for the unity government of Prime Minister Anwar. Hamzah Zainuddin confirmed on February 8 the appointment of legal representation in this matter.

This decision was reportedly reached during a special meeting of the Bersatu Supreme Council on January 29, as stated by Hamzah in a released statement. The legal action aims to compel the implicated elected representatives to vacate their seats, with Bersatu

expressing readiness to contend in any potential by-elections that may arise in the future. [New Straits Times]

Malaysia: Former Vice-president of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) resigns

(ba) N Surendran, the former vice-president of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), the party of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, has resigned from the party, citing its failure to implement promised reforms.

On February 5, the ex-Member of Parliament for Padang Serai expressed his dissatisfaction with the "shameful" silence of the Pakatan Harapan (PH), the largest coalition in Malaysia's lower hours and part of the Unity Government, regarding the sedition investigation into former Damansara MP Tony Pua.

The Royal Malaysia Police is probing Pua for his comments on the commutation of former Prime Minister Najib Razak's sentence in the SRC International money laundering case. Pua had expressed his dissatisfaction on the jail term and fine reduction handed down to Najib by the Pardons Board (see AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1) in a cynical statement in which he asked for someone to send him to prison in return for payment of MYR 50 million, the amount Najib has now to pay following the fine reduction. [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysia: Recovery of USD 5 million in misappropriated assets from 1MDB over the past 13 months

(ba) Malaysia has declared the successful retrieval of assets and property associated with 1MDB, the state fund implicated in a massive corruption scandal spanning various countries and jurisdictions.

The recent recoveries, occurring from 2023 until now, amount to over USD 5 million, as disclosed by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) in a statement on February 8.

These developments transpired after the trial and conviction of former Goldman Sachs banker Roger Ng, who was sentenced by a New York court last year for his involvement in the scandal. The extensive corruption within the fund, initially established for economic development, triggered a political upheaval,

leading to the historic defeat of then-Prime Minister Najib Razak's party in the 2018 elections.

US and Malaysian investigators estimate that at least USD 4.5 billion from 1MDB were embezzled. [Aljazeera]

Malaysia: Former prime pinister mulls a fresh appeal for comprehensive pardon

(ba) Najib Razak, the imprisoned former Prime Minister of Malaysia, is contemplating filing a fresh petition for a complete pardon.

This comes less than a week after a special panel agreed to halve Najib's jail term (see AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1). Najib, who received a 12-year sentence in connection with the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal, had previously sought clemency. However, the pardons board, chaired by Malaysia's king, chose last week to reduce his sentence. [Channel News Asia]

The 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal is a corruption, bribery and money laundering conspiracy in which the Malaysian sovereign wealth fund 1MDB was systematically embezzled, with assets diverted globally by the perpetrators of the scheme.

Meanwhile, a coalition of civil society groups has called for accountability from Malaysia's government regarding its involvement in securing a reduced sentence for former leader Najib Razak and other corruption-affected "political elites." Expressing their discontent on February 7, the groups hinted at potential street protests as public anger grows over the perceived leniency towards corrupt politicians.

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim is under scrutiny following the recent decision by the country's pardons board to cut in half the 12-year prison term handed to former premier Najib in the 1MDB case.

Critics argue that Anwar, despite his previously emphasized reform agenda, is now accused of prioritizing political expediency, especially given his coalition's association with Najib allies.

The civil society group, known for organizing significant street protests against Najib during his tenure, perceives the reduced sentence as the latest "reward" from Anwar's administration to favored "political elites." [South China Morning Post]

Malaysia: Former finance minister faces charges over Pandora Papers disclosures

(ba) Former Malaysian finance minister Daim Zainuddin and his wife are facing charges for alleged failure to disclose assets, following an anti-corruption investigation sparked by revelations in the Pandora Papers.

The Malaysia's Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) launched the probe in 2023 after media partner Malaysiakini, collaborating with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), exposed their connections to various British Virgin Islands entities and trusts holding assets valued at USD 31 million.

Daim, an 85-year-old businessman who served as finance minister from 1984 to 1991 and from 1999 to 2001, maintains his innocence and pleaded not guilty. Daim's wife, Naimah Khalid, has also entered a plea of not guilty.

The couple is currently seeking a court order to dismiss the charges, according to Malaysian media reports.

The MACC disclosed ongoing inquiries into an additional offshore family trust, valued at approximately USD 52.5 million, recently brought to light by ICIJ and Malaysiakini. This Cayman Islands-registered trust, with Daim and Naimah's two youngest sons listed as beneficiaries, was reportedly utilized for investments in U.K. and U.S. properties, based on documents obtained by ICIJ.

The MACC stated its commitment to investigating individuals named in both the Pandora Papers and the Panama Papers, another set of leaked financial records central to a 2016 ICIJ-led investigation. The agency has already questioned ten individuals, including Daim, based on information derived from these two ICIJ investigations. [International Consortium of Investigative Journalists]

Malaysia: Trial of former Prime Minister Mahathir's defamation lawsuit postponed

(ba) The trial for the legal action initiated by Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad against Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, involving alleged defamatory remarks related to the "kutty" issue, has been rescheduled to July 19.

In his official complaint, Dr. Mahathir asserted that Ahmad Zahid had made defamatory remarks during a Umno divisional meeting in Kelana Jaya on July 30, 2017. These statements were subsequently disseminated on Astro Awani's YouTube channel and various online news portals, easily accessible to internet users without restrictions. According to Dr. Mahathir, the slanderous comments insinuated that he was not of Malay or Muslim origin, having an alleged original name of "Mahathir son of Iskandar Kutty." The statement further implied that he falsely claimed Malay identity when assuming the role of prime minister, exploiting it for political and personal gain while disparaging Malaysians of Indian Muslim descent.

Dr. Mahathir filed the lawsuit against Ahmad Zahid as the sole defendant on July 20 last year. Originally scheduled for February 13, the hearing was postponed due to Dr. Mahathir's ongoing treatment at the National Heart Institute (IJN). [The Star]

Malaysia: Law enforcement authorities apprehend undocumented immigrants

(ba) A total of 263 individuals were apprehended in “Ops Noda and Limau” an operation to arrest illegal immigrants on February 7 along Pasar Pudu Street. The raid was carried out by a squad of city police targeting an abandoned hotel building suspected of engaging in prostitution and harboring undocumented immigrants. The detainees comprised 229 men and 34 women, encompassing both locals and individuals from Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Myanmar, Indonesia, India, Vietnam, China, and Thailand. Among the detained women, 20 out of the 34 were suspected to be involved in prostitution activities.

Additionally, during the operation, the team examined 14 children believed to be residing in the building.

The police stated that all individuals were transported to the Kuala Lumpur police headquarters for further investigation, including urine screening tests to assess their potential involvement in drug abuse. [New Straits Times]

Myanmar: Military lose control of two more towns in Rakhine State

(mg) The Arakan Army (AA), the military wing of the United League of Arakan, an Arakanese political organization based in Laiza, Kachin State, have secured effective control of Minbya township after capturing Infantry Battalions 379 and 541 on 6 February in the Rakhine State.

Military experts suggest this could have included up to 200 men per battalion. 379 and 541 Battalions had remained in Minbya when the AA captured the 380th Battalion on January 28. [RFA]

In a statement, the AA said it had captured every military "base in Minbya, Kyauktaw, and Mrauk-U except the one in Mrauk-U under Police Battalion 31." [Myanmar Now]

The Three Brotherhood Alliance, an alliance between the Arakan Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army formed in June 2019, also released a statement on February 6 saying it expects the AA to fully capture two border outposts north of Rakhine's Maungdaw township in days.

This all comes as the latest in a series of successes for the ethnic alliance, 'rebel troops', and follow the AA's occupation of the entirety of western Chin's Palestwa region.

Myanmar: Internally displaced people killed by junta forces

(mg) Six women and children, and one man were killed by regime forces as they fled a junta offensive in the Karenni State's Shadaw Township on February 4.

Reports indicate that the seven IDPs who have not been named were killed by some of the 70 regime reinforcements that arrived by helicopter from Mong Ping in the Shan State that day. [Myanmar Now]

One rights groups in the Township accused the troops of using the seven killed IDPs as "human shields". According to local sources, two of the women had disabilities, and one was pregnant. The three children were between the ages of three and seven.

First Secretary of the Karenni State Interim Executive Council Zue Padonmar urged the international community "not to cooperate with the junta", asserting the actions were "a war crime".

In addition to this, four children were reportedly killed during an aerial bombardment on a school the following day in the western Demoso township. These two incidents bring the total civilian deaths in Myanmar over the last three years up to 4,500, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, an an independent non-profit organisation founded by Burmese former political prisoners living in exile. [RFA]

Myanmar: More than 18 million people in need of humanitarian assistance

(jw) 17 million more people than before the coup are now in need of humanitarian aid in Myanmar. The United Nations released a report highlighting the rise from 1 million in 2021, to currently over 18 million, equivalent to one third of the country's population.

The situation prompted the UN Security Council to hold a meeting on February 5, where they called for the “immediate provision of humanitarian assistance”.

Radio Free Asia was told that food shortage is so prevalent in the Chin state’s Mindat township, that residents can’t afford rice. In response to the UN report, the regime released a statement saying that Foreign Minister Than Swe met with the head of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) office in Myanmar on February 6 to discuss a cooperation between the two to provide aid. [RFA]

Myanmar: Military junta to enforce mandatory service

(jw) On February 11, Myanmar's junta began to conscript the nation’s young men and women as the military struggles to contain the rebel forces seeking to end the military regime.

According to state media, all men aged 18 to 35 and women aged 18 to 27 must serve for up to two years. Skilled professionals like doctors and engineers must serve for five years.

A law mandating military service was introduced in 2010 but has not been enforced until now. Individuals who fail to comply with the draft may face up to five years in prison.

Since October 2023, the Tatmadaw has faced significant personnel losses in its fight against the rebel armed forces of the ethnic Brotherhood Alliance. Analysts report that the military has been struggling to recruit soldiers and has started forcing non-combat personnel to the frontlines. [Reuters]

Civilians have stated that they would resist the order and rather leave Myanmar than serve in the military.

Overall, analysts have criticized the move as a desperate attempt to bring the public into the conflict. Sai Kyi Zin Soe, a political commentator, said that the law may fuel armed conflict in Myanmar. Legal analyst and human rights lawyer Kyee Myint additionally stated that the junta's enforcement of the law is illegitimate because the military regime violated the 2008 constitution when it usurped the democratically elected government in a coup. [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: Human rights group calls for probe over junta bombing of church

(jw) Amnesty International has called for investigations into Myanmar's military junta for war crimes over a church attack in January that killed 17 villagers, nine of whom were children.

The human rights organization said that photo and video analysis, in addition to interviews with witnesses, suggested that Myanmar's air force had dropped bombs on three locations near the St Peter Baptist Church in Kanan village on January 7. The Myanmar military has previously denied responsibility for the attack and claimed that no aircraft were operating in the area at that time.

Since the 2021 coup, at least 4,485 civilians have been killed. [Al Jazeera]

Meanwhile, a video has gone viral showing that two resistance fighters belonging to the local Yaw Defence Force in the central Magway region being burned alive in November last year. [RFA]

The Philippines: Calls for Mindanao independence a ‘constitutional travesty’, President Marcos Jr.

(lb) Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, for the first time, addressed the issue of calls for independence for the southern island of Mindanao, describing it as a "constitutional travesty" and destined to fail. He stressed that the Philippines is striving to build a new future, one that is not marred by separatist movements that could potentially lead to the country's fragmentation. [The Straits Times]

These calls emerged amidst a public fallout between Marcos and his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte, whose alliance collapsed amid public disputes, particularly over constitutional reform [see AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1]. Duterte, the first president from Mindanao, had raised the issue of secession, citing regional disparities and historical grievances.

The Philippines: Government asserts ICC's lack of jurisdiction amid possible arrest of ex-President Duterte

(lm) Amidst reports that former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte might face imminent arrest in the context of an ongoing investigation by the International Criminal Court (ICC) into his administration's "war on drugs," Justice Secretary Jesus Crispin C. Remulla has reaffirmed the Philippines' stance. Remulla emphasized that Manila believes the ICC lacks jurisdiction to investigate or prosecute individuals within the country. [Inquirer]

The Philippines, under then-President Rodrigo Duterte, withdrew from the Rome Statute, the treaty that established the ICC, in September 2019 after the tribunal began a pre-trial investigation into covering crimes allegedly committed in the country between November 2011 and March 2019. This scope included the Duterte presidency's "war on drugs" as well as alleged killings by the so-called Davao Death Squad (DDS), when Duterte was still the mayor of the southern Philippine city of Davao. The ICC has since ruled that prosecutors may still investigate the alleged "crimes against humanity of murder" in the country, because they occurred when the Philippines was still a party to the statute.

Notably, Remulla's remark came days after a former senior police officer from Davao, an alleged member of the DDS, accused Vice President Sara Duterte, the daughter of the former president, of involvement in extra-judicial killings in Davao. Sara Duterte, for her part, said she had yet to receive any documents indicating that she was a respondent in the ICC probe,

adding that she would only face any allegation linking her to the DDS before a Philippine court. [PhilStar 1]

Meanwhile, former Supreme Court Associate Justice Antonio Carpio has suggested that the issuance of an arrest warrant for former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte could signify the government's cooperation with the ICC. Carpio referenced a Supreme Court ruling indicating that despite the Philippines' withdrawal from the ICC, it still has an obligation to cooperate with the international tribunal regarding offenses committed while the country was a member state. This obligation may include implementing an arrest warrant. [PhilStar 2]

However, the Philippine National Police (PNP) stated on February 7 that it would not enforce any arrest warrant issued by the ICC against Duterte, emphasizing that it would adhere to President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr.'s directive, which stated that the Philippine government would not assist in any ICC investigation. [Philippine News Agency]

The Philippines: Court orders cancellation of former lawmaker Teves' passport

(lm) In the Philippines, a court has ordered the immediate cancellation of the passport of former congressman Arnolfo Teves Jr., who is considered a fugitive and is believed to be out of the country. The court justified the cancellation based on the severity of charges against Teves, including his designation as a terrorist by the Anti-Terrorism Council. [Rappler]

Teves is alleged to be the mastermind behind the assassination of Negros Oriental Governor Roel Degamo in March 2023, and there are standing warrants against him for various charges related to this incident. He had sought asylum in Timor Leste but was denied, and he was expelled from Parliament's lower House last August after failing to physically show up during session days.

The Philippines: Supreme Court orders suspension of trial court judge for sitting on rape case

(lm) In the Philippines, the Supreme Court has suspended a trial court judge for two years due to gross neglect of duty. This suspension came after the

judge sat on a rape complaint for over 10 years without resolving the case. [PhilStar]

The judge cited heavy workload and logistical challenges, including limited travel to the city where the case was being heard. Despite these challenges, the Supreme Court found the judge guilty of gross neglect of duty for failing to resolve the case within the required period. The court emphasized that judges must dispose of cases promptly and decide them within the mandated periods, as outlined in the constitution and judicial codes of conduct.

The Philippines: Finance secretary does not expect rate hike as inflation eases

(lb) In the lead-up to a rate-setting meeting of the Philippine central bank on February 15, Finance Secretary Ralph Recto has expressed his optimism about interest rates remaining stable, citing easing inflation as a key factor. He suggested the possibility of rates decreasing in the latter half of the year, noting that current policy rates are adequate given the downward trend in inflation. [Reuters]

In January, annual inflation slowed to 2.8 percent, its lowest level in over three years, down from 3.9 percent in December. This marks the second consecutive month that inflation has remained within the central bank's target range of 2.0 percent to 4.0 percent.

Despite the positive outlook on inflation, Recto suggested the need to revise this year's growth target of 6.5 percent to 7.5 percent to a more realistic figure, without specifying a new target. The Philippine economy grew by 5.6 percent in 2023, falling short of the government's growth goal of 6.0 percent to 7.0 percent.

The Philippines: PSG, ISAFP chiefs to undergo screening by bicameral appointment commission

(lm) Two newly appointed military officials, Maj. Gen. Edmundo Peralta and Maj. Gen. Jesus Nelson Morales, are scheduled to undergo vetting by the bicameral Commission on Appointments (CA). Peralta, from the Philippine Army, is appointed as the chief of the Intelligence Service of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, while Morales, from the Philippine Air Force, is appointed as the commander of the

Presidential Security Group. The CA, chaired by Camiguin Rep. Jurdin Jesus Romualdo, will scrutinize their credentials and qualifications. [PhilStar]

Singapore: Opposition MPs debate reserves accumulation and use

(lb) In a seven-hour debate on February 7, Parliament discussed the use of Singapore's national reserves. Opposition MPs raised concerns about transparency, the rate of accumulation, and the allocation of returns. The government defended its policies, emphasizing the need for strategic reserve management. Key points included ensuring stability in the Net Investment Returns Contribution and addressing concerns about the impact on Central Provident Fund savings.[The Straits Times]

Speaking against this backdrop, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong emphasized the importance of prudent management of the nation's reserves, highlighting that the reserves serve as a financial safety net for future generations, with the government able to spend up to 50 percent of the net investment returns from state investment entities. [BNN]

Singapore: Ex-Transport Minister allowed to leave country temporarily; case transferred to High Court

(lm) Singapore's former Transport Minister S. Iswaran, facing 27 charges to which he pleaded not guilty, has been granted permission to leave the city state and travel to Australia for about two weeks, to help his son settle into university. [The Star]

Iswaran resigned from his government positions in mid-January amid the charges against him. These include two counts of corruption, 24 counts of obtaining items from someone he had business dealings with as a public servant, and one count of obstructing the course of justice [see AiR No. 3, January/2024, 3]. His case will be transferred to the High Court due to public interest.

Singapore: Electoral Boundaries Review Committee yet to convene for next election

(lb) The Electoral Boundaries Review Committee (EBRC), responsible for determining electoral boundaries for future general elections in Singapore, has not yet been convened, although the next election must be held no later than November 2025. This contrasts with the last convening in August 2019 before the general election in July 2020. [Business Times]

Singapore: Prime Minister urges young couples to have more babies amid declining birth rate

(lb) Against the larger backdrop of a declining birth rate, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has encouraged young couples in the city-state to consider having more babies. In his annual Lunar New Year message, he suggests that now is an opportune moment to expand families, referring to the upcoming lunar year of the dragon, known as a symbol of power, strength, and good fortune. [Time]

Singapore has implemented measures such as easing egg freezing rules and increasing government-paid paternity leave in response to the low birth rate, a trend also observed in countries like South Korea, China, and Japan, all grappling with falling fertility rates and aging populations.

In related developments, Lee has also hinted at forthcoming measures in the 2024 budget to support couples in marriage and parenthood aspirations. While visiting workers, the premier also expressed optimism about the country's economic growth in 2024, stating that it is expected to be stronger than the previous year despite uncertainties. He highlighted positive signs, such as the recovery in the manufacturing sector, a robust construction pipeline, and ongoing progress in services and tourism. [Business Times]

At the same time, Lee emphasized that the outlook depends on external factors like the United States managing inflation and avoiding a recession and China's economy experiencing a strong revival.

Thailand: Jailed ex-Prime Minister Thaksin's parole confirmed, but investigation opened into royal insult

(lm/msz) Thailand's jailed former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was among 930 inmates whose

release on parole was approved by a parole committee. Thaksin met parole criteria for being aged over 70, suffering serious illness and having served at least six months of his one-year prison term; he will be released on either February 17 or 18. [Bangkok Post] [Reuters]

Thaksin returned to Thailand in August last year, 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. He will complete half of his prison sentence on February 18.

Against this backdrop, a group of Thaksin opponents announced plans to protest against parole for the former premier by submitting a petition to Justice Minister Tawee Sodsong this week. [Thai PBS]

Despite this development, Thaksin's legal ordeal may not be over, as state prosecutors have reopened an investigation into whether the former premier violated the law against defaming the monarch nearly nine years ago. Thaksin was charged in 2016 for remarks he made to journalists in Seoul, South Korea, the previous year. [Associated Press]

Thailand: Move Forward Party remains committed to amending royal defamation law, despite court ruling

(bk) Thailand's main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) has announced that it remained committed to amending Section 112 of the Criminal Code, the royal defamation law, despite a recent ruling by the Constitutional Court against the party's advocacy efforts, which deemed such attempts to overthrow the constitutional monarchy. [Thai PBS World]

On January 31, the Constitutional Court in a unanimous decision said that the MFP covertly pushed an agenda to "destroy" the form of government with the king as head of state, under the guise of a proposal to amend Section 112. Thus, the MFP must "stop expressing opinions, speaking, writing, printing, advertising and communicating by any other means" in an attempt to change the law, the ruling said. In the aftermath of the court's ruling, two petitioners were filed with the Election Commission seeking the dissolution of the MFP. [AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1]

Despite the ruling, the MFP now announced its intention to continue its efforts within the boundaries set by the court's ruling, aiming to address concerns regarding the misuse of the royal defamation law. The party emphasized its opinion that advocating for legislative changes does not equate to overthrowing the monarchy.

Thailand: UTNP pushes for Parliament discussion on improving royal motorcade security

(msz/tt) The United Thai Nation Party, a junior member of Thailand's ruling coalition government known for its pro-military and pro-monarchist stance, is pressing for an urgent parliamentary debate on bolstering security measures for royal motorcades. [Bangkok Post 1]

This move follows an incident where a vehicle, reportedly carrying a political activist, persistently honked and trailed behind a motorcade of HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn on a Bangkok highway on February 4. During the event, law enforcement had to intervene to prevent the vehicle from overtaking the convoy. The activist involved, Tantawan Tuatulanon, previously charged with royal defamation for conducting an opinion poll on royal motorcades, later claimed ignorance of the motorcade's identity. [The Nation 1]

Days after the incident, on February 10, clashes broke out between royalists and pro-democracy demonstrators, led by Tantawan, at a sky train station in Bangkok. The anti-monarchy group organized a rally to address accusations against Tantawan of honking at the royal convoy. However, the rally faced hostility from royalists, resulting in a confrontation and the abrupt end of the rally. [Thai PBS]

In response to these events, the United Thai Nation Party has announced its intention to propose to relevant House standing committees a comprehensive review of security arrangements for the royal family. [The Nation 2]

Of note, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin announced on February 12 that he had instructed the National Police and the National Intelligence Agency to tighten security for royal motorcades and urged all political parties not to support Tantawan and her group, which had been campaigning against the preferential treatments of the royal family. Srettha's remark was seen as referring to former Move Forward Party leader Pita Limjaroenrat,

who bailed Tantawan in 2022 in a royal defamation charge by using his lawmaker status. [The Nation 3]

Along the same vein, national police chief Pol Gen Torsak Sukvimol announced that the people involved in the February 4 incident would be legally charged. Torsak said that legal charges and arrest warrants would follow after the police had gathered enough evidence. According to Torsak, prosecution would lead to the revocation of temporary release on bail for certain suspects, including Tantawan. [Bangkok Post 2]

Deputy Interior Minister Chada Thaiset issued a stern warning against disrupting royal motorcades, emphasizing severe repercussions for such actions. [Bangkok Post 3].

Thailand: Pita Limjaroenrat clarifies family heritage amidst Aphaiwong family ties speculations

(tt) Pita Limjaroenrat, former leader and prime ministerial candidate of Thailand's main opposition Move Forward Party, has clarified rumors regarding his family's heritage, specifically addressing his grandmother's ties to Cambodia. He emphasized that he has never claimed any affiliation with the House of Aphaiwong, which includes Khuang Aphaiwong, the founder of Thailand's Democrat Party. [The Nation]

In a social media post, Pita confirmed his grandmother's birthplace as Bangkok, refuting any suggestions of Cambodian descent. However, he acknowledged that his grandmother had lived in Battambang, a city in Cambodia that had been governed by the Aphaiwong family for six generations from the late 18th century until 1907.

In 2015, Pita had visited Battambang and shared a photo of his grandmother alongside a grand mansion built by Choom Abhaiwong, the final ruler of the House of Aphaiwong, in 1905. In his recent social media post, Pita admitted that he had been misinformed at the time about the mansion's connection to his family and expressed regret for the misinformation.

Thailand: Special House committee begins amnesty bill study

(lm) A special House committee recently set up to study an amnesty bill expects to produce its findings within 60 days. The committee, which consists of a 35-member panel and which was proposed by the ruling Pheu Thai Party, held its first meeting on February 8 to choose its chairman and other positions as well as

discuss a broad framework for how it function. [Bangkok Post 1]

The main opposition Move Forward Party, which submitted its amnesty bill to Parliament's lower House in October of last year, has insisted that any amnesty bill should seek to absolve royal defamation offenses. The party's version of the bill would offer amnesty to all individuals charged in politically motivated cases since February 2006 up until the present time. [Bangkok Post 2]

In a related development, *Amnesty Thailand* last week submitted a petition to the government demanding an amnesty for activists and people who face legal actions for political expressions and gatherings. The group also demanded that people prosecuted for political offences should be temporarily released without condition.

Thailand: Government to urgently move bill to ban recreational use of cannabis

(bk) The Thai government has announced its intention to expedite the introduction of legislation aimed at banning the recreational use of cannabis, a significant reversal from its decision to decriminalize the drug back in 2022. This move comes amid growing concerns over the proliferation of cannabis shops across the country, particularly in Bangkok, which has raised alarm bells among critics who argue for tighter regulations. [France24]

Health Minister Chonlanan Srikaew revealed that the proposed bill, set to be presented at the next cabinet meeting, will seek to amend existing laws to restrict cannabis use solely to medicinal and health-related purposes. Cannabis plantations might need permits and advanced agricultural practices for medical-grade production.

The fate of over 7,000 cannabis retailers operating since cannabis was delisted as a controlled substance in 2022 remains uncertain pending regulatory clarity. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government willing to reconsider new drug possession limit amid public backlash

(lm) Thailand's Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin announced on February 12 that the government is prepared to reassess a recently introduced ministerial policy regarding drug possession. The policy, unveiled just days earlier, drew significant backlash on social media for its decision to lower penalties for individuals found in possession of up to five methamphetamine pills. Critics argue that given the country's ongoing struggle with drug-related issues, the proposed possession limit is too lenient. [Bangkok Post]

Under the new policy, individuals found with no more than five pills will be classified as psychiatric patients and will be required to undergo rehabilitation. Refusal to comply with rehabilitation will result in legal action. Those caught with more than five meth pills will be charged with drug possession, facing penalties equivalent to those for drug distribution, export, or import, with potential jail sentences ranging from one to ten years. Additionally, regardless of quantity, individuals deemed to have the intent to distribute will face severe punishment.

Thailand: Election Commission files case against PPRP candidate over alleged voter bribery

(msz) Thailand's Election Commission (EC) has lodged a case with the Supreme Court against Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) MP candidate Pornwisit Jaemsai and his assistant for purportedly breaching the Organic Act on the Election of Members of the House of Representatives. The EC accuses Pornwisit's assistant of offering bribes to potential voters, allegedly including a payment of THB 10,000 (approximately USD 278) to attend a campaign rally. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Anti-graft watchdog raises reservations over government's digital wallet scheme

(msz) Thailand's National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) has not yet approved or rejected the government's digital wallet scheme but has expressed concerns regarding its constitutionality, fiscal discipline, and potential for corruption. [Bangkok Post 1]

NACC Secretary-General Niwatchai Kasemmongkol said that the government's plan to borrow THB 500

billion (USD 13.9 billion) in the absence of an economic crisis would not only violate the laws but also create a long-term public debt. In light of this, the NACC advised that the implementation of the scheme through the regular budget process would mitigate the risk of violating the laws.

Niwatchai also suggested that the Election Commission investigate whether the scheme violates constitutional and political party laws, as it was part of the Pheu Thai Party's election campaign. Furthermore, the NACC questioned the feasibility of using blockchain technology for a one-time handout within six months.

In response, the Pheu Thai Party stated that the government had considered input from various agencies and downplayed any discrepancy between its election promises and the proposed policy. However, Ruangkrai Leekitwattana from the Palang Pracharath Party threatened to request an NACC investigation if the government proceeds with the scheme as planned for May. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Two senior prosecutors claim their live were threatened by policemen involved in gambling sites

(lm) In Thailand, the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) is investigating claims made by two senior prosecutors, including the head of the OAG's investigation office, who stated that they received threats to their lives from a group of policemen associated with online gambling sites. [Bangkok Post]

These websites are reportedly connected to Suchanun Sucharitchinsri, who has been previously accused of operating multiple online gambling platforms involving high-ranking police officials. Suchanun is the daughter of Chatchada Jansawang, a prominent figure in Thailand's Loei province known for her cotton and cassava trading businesses.

Thailand: Deputy Agriculture Minister denies political link to ministry fire amid extortion scandal

(bk) Deputy Agriculture Minister Chaiya Promma has rebuffed speculation linking him to a recent fire at the ministry's building and firmly denied any involvement in a significant extortion attempt against a senior

official at the ministry, underscoring his lack of authority over relevant departments. [The Nation]

The fire occurred amidst an ongoing investigation into an alleged extortion attempt of THB 1.5 million from the director-general of the ministry's Rice Department by a group led by political activist Srisuwan Janya and an advisor to Agriculture Minister Thammanat Prompao. This group purportedly sought money in exchange for withholding an exposé on alleged corruption within the department. [AiR No. 5, January/2024, 5]

Against this backdrop, the timing of the fire raised suspicions, particularly as it followed the arrest of members of the group, who claimed they were acting as middlemen for someone within the Agriculture Ministry.

In related developments, the assets of Srisuwan may be frozen by the Anti-Money Laundering Office at the request of police working on the extortion case against him. The move comes after investigators examined Srisuwan's money trail and found many assets, including at least five houses worth an estimated THB 15 million, were suspected to have been acquired illegally. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Activists push for improved abortion access

(lm) Activists advocating for abortion rights have submitted a petition to a member of the House committee on public health, urging for easier access to abortion services. They are calling on the committee to press the Ministry of Public Health to expand the number of safe abortion facilities funded by the National Health Security Office nationwide. Additionally, they seek the establishment of a comprehensive list of safe abortion service centers and the implementation of measures to promote safe terminations. [Bangkok Post]

Despite existing laws permitting abortions, the activists argue that many women face challenges accessing legal abortion services when dealing with unwanted pregnancies.

Thailand: Journalist arrested for reporting protest graffiti

(lm) In Thailand, a journalist was arrested on February 12 for his alleged involvement in a graffiti incident at Bangkok's Temple of the Emerald Buddha. The journalist's arrest follows that of an independent photographer, who faces similar charges. The incident, which occurred in March 2023, involved the spray-painting of an anarchist symbol and the number 112, a reference to Thailand's royal defamation law, on the temple's wall. [Bangkok Post] [Thai PBS]

Thailand: 15 years jail for five immigration officers who extorted THB 10 billion from Chinese

(lm) Five immigration officers have been sentenced to 15 years in prison for extorting THB 10 billion in cryptocurrency from a Chinese businessman discovered in possession of an illegal Thai ID card in March last year. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Cabinet greenlights draft bill for indigenous ethnic group protection

(bk) The Thai Cabinet has approved a draft bill aimed at safeguarding and supporting indigenous ethnic groups in Thailand. The bill addresses issues faced by the estimated 10 million indigenous ethnic people in Thailand, including lack of Thai nationality and resulting rights disparities. If passed by Parliament, the bill would allow ethnic minorities to reside and work in Thailand under certain conditions, such as preserving forests, and would facilitate their registration to ensure official recognition and protection of their habitats. [Thai PBS World]

Thailand: Slight decline in population in 2023

(lm) Thailand experienced a minor decrease in its population in 2023, according to civil registration data. As of December 31, 2023, the official population stood at 66,052,615, representing a decrease of 0.06 percent, or 37,860 individuals, compared to the previous year. [Bangkok Post]

Among this population, 5.47 million resided in Bangkok. The total population consisted of 65,061,190 individuals with Thai nationality and an additional

991,425 with non-Thai nationality. Gender-wise, there were 32,224,008 males and 33,828,607 females.

Thailand: Ministers advocate integrating disability status into ID cards for enhanced services

(bk) Social Development and Human Security Minister plans to aims to streamline services for disabled individuals, including all disabled inmates, by integrating disability status into ID cards. Interior Minister supported the idea of merging the cards, proposing collaboration between relevant departments. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Jailed activist on hunger strike taken to hospital

(msz) An imprisoned political activist, Netiporn Sanesangkhom, was taken from prison to the Correctional Hospital after eleven days of a hunger strike due to symptoms of hepatitis and cystitis, rendering her too weak to walk. Since late January, Netiporn had been on a hunger strike to protest against the justice process and the imprisonment of individuals with political dissent. [Bangkok Post]

Netiporn's imprisonment stemmed from her involvement in a protest supporting another activist convicted of royal defamation, which escalated into a scuffle with guards outside the Bangkok South Criminal Court in October 2023. She was subsequently charged with royal defamation under Section 112 of the Criminal Code. Additionally, her bail was revoked for participating in a protest at the Ministry of Culture in August the same year.

Thailand: Bank of Thailand keeps policy rate unchanged despite calls for cut

(bk) The Bank of Thailand maintained its benchmark interest rate at 2.50 percent on January 7, 2024, despite pressure from Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin for a rate cut to stimulate economic growth. The premier suggested that lower rates would boost domestic demand amidst declining consumer prices. However, the central bank attributed the ongoing deflation to state subsidies rather than an economic crisis, advocating for structural reforms instead of

immediate monetary adjustments. This decision aligns with a Reuters poll that predicted no change.

The Monetary Policy Committee ceased rate hikes in November 2023 after multiple increases since August 2022. Thailand's 2024 growth forecast was revised to 2.5 to 3 percent, with challenges in exports and tourism anticipated. Inflation is expected to rise gradually, pending official GDP figures from the National Economic and Social Development Council. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Major data breach exposes personal data of 20 million individuals

(msz) In a significant breach of digital security, personal data of approximately 20 million elderly Thai citizens was leaked from the Department of Older Persons (DOP) within the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security in Thailand. The breach exposed sensitive information such as names, ID card numbers, phone numbers, emails, salaries, and personal photographs, comprising a total of 19,718,687 records. This breach has led to at least 14 reported cases of cybercrime, although the source of the breach remains unidentified. [Bangkok Post]

Against this backdrop, the DOP director-general on February 7 filed a complaint with the Cyber Investigation Bureau and the Personal Information Protection Committee about the violation of the Personal Data Protection Act.

Thailand: Defense Ministry vows legal actions against fake military certificate sales

(msz) Thailand’s Defence Ministry has announced its intention to take legal action against military personnel, both current and former, implicated in the sale of counterfeit military conscription certificates. This announcement follows allegations lawmaker of the main opposition Move Forward Party, who revealed that fraudulent documents, complete with official signatures, were being sold for up to THB 50,000 each, amounting to an estimated THB 3 billion (around USD 83 million) in illicit transactions annually. [Bangkok Post]

The defence minister also said that the Territorial Defence Command (TDC) had been working on this

issue on an ongoing basis, with arrests being made each year without having been publicized.

Thailand: Three-month commercial fishing restrictions in Gulf of Thailand starting February 15

(tt) Thailand's Fisheries Department has announced a three-month ban on commercial fishing in the Gulf of Thailand starting February 15, to protect spawning mackerel. Only small boats are allowed to fish with restricted gear. The restrictions cover approximately 26,400 square kilometers initially and another 8,100 square kilometers from May 16 to June 14. [ThaiPBS]

Thailand: Government, southern separatist BRN agree to endorse peace roadmap

(bk) Representatives of the Thai government and Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Patani (BRN), a separatist movement active in Thailand's Malay-speaking south, concluded two days of peace talks in Kuala Lumpur with an agreement to endorse a comprehensive peace roadmap "at the earliest opportunity." Details were not disclosed, but measures for fostering a conducive environment for peace will be discussed by a technical team to be established by both sides in February and March. [Thai PBS World 1]

The talks focused on the Joint Comprehensive Plan toward Peace (JCPP), addressing violence cessation, public consultation, and a political solution. Both sides agreed in principle on the JCPP and reaffirmed their commitment to involve stakeholders in the dialogue for sustainable peace. However, representatives from the separatist group expressed concerns over legal actions by Thai authorities against Muslim activists in southern Thailand, which they fear could escalate the conflict.

The most recent talks came after a year-long hiatus due to elections in Thailand in May [see AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1]. In the previous round of talks, the BRN had requested permission to enter southern Thai border provinces for in-person public consultations, a request that was denied by the Thai Army.

Following this round of talks, civic groups in the restive Deep South are advocating for parallel peace talks alongside government-BRN negotiations, stressing the

necessity for additional space in these talks due to persisting conflicts between the government, the people, and among various groups. According to the Thai delegation, a public forum is expected to be established in the future to enable broader participation from all stakeholders. [Thai PBS World 2]

Thailand: Air force agrees to open three facilities to support state projects development under conditions

(lm) The Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) has decided to open three facilities for state project development under specific conditions. [Bangkok Post]

This comes after Parliament's lower house last month approved the establishment of a standing committee, proposed by the main opposition Move Forward Party, to explore the feasibility and process of transferring military-linked enterprises to government supervision, with a specific focus on sectors like electricity generation, golf courses, and airports. [AiR No. 5, January/2024, 5]

More recently, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin requested the RTAF to allow the usage of the Kantarat Golf Course to support the expansion of Don Mueang Airport and other RTAF properties for state project development.

While the RTAF has agreed to this request, issues concerning access through RTAF properties must be addressed before any projects can commence. Furthermore, the RTAF would want to retain full ownership of the Kantarat Golf Course. Additionally, measures such as vehicle registration, background checks, and security inspections may be implemented for motorists entering areas opened up to support state project development.

Thailand: Submarine procurement panel 'must put national interest first', navy chief says

(lm) Thailand's navy chief expects a panel reviewing a 2017 procurement contract for purchase of a submarine from China to make recommendations based on national interests, stressing that that submarines have an integral role in the navy's strategy. The panel, which first met on February 6, is expected to deliver recommendations in 30 days. [Bangkok Post]

Initiated by the Prayuth administration, the submarine deal hit a snag when China couldn't provide the contracted S26T Yuan-class submarine with a German-made diesel engine due to Berlin's restrictions on such engines being used in Chinese military hardware.

Defence Minister Sutin Klungsang, who previously said he favored shelving the project and buying another frigate instead, formed the submarine procurement review panel last month to review the procurement. The panel, chaired by Sutin's advisor Gen Somsak Roongsita, a former secretary-general of the National Security Council, includes the navy chief, naval academics and representatives from the Finance Ministry, the Office of the Attorney-General and several politicians.

Speaking ahead of the panel's second meeting on February 14, navy chief Adm Adung Phan-iam said the navy is ready to address all questions about the submarine program and urged panel members to give honest opinions that will determine submarine project's future.

Vietnam: Ethnic Khmer Krom man sentenced to three and a half years in prison for defamation

(wn) A court in Vietnam's Soc Trang province sentenced an ethnic Khmer Krom man to three-and-a-half years in prison for "abusing democratic freedoms" by posting comments and live-stream videos on his personal Facebook account that were deemed defamatory. [RFA]

The Khmer Krom community, comprising nearly 1.3 million people who live in a region formerly part of Cambodia, has faced significant restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and movement in Vietnam.

Vietnam: Court sentences Khmer Krom man to prison for social media activity

(ms) A court in Vietnam's Soc Trang province has sentenced Danh Minh Quang, a man belonging to the ethnic Khmer Krom, to three-and-a-half years in prison for "abusing democratic freedoms" under Article 331 of the country's criminal code for allegedly posting content on his personal Facebook account.

According to prosecutors, Quang's posts between 2021 and July 2023 contained comments, photos, and videos deemed to be “negative, propagandistic, and distorting reality, particularly targeting state officials' honor and dignity.”

The case has drawn criticism from international human rights groups, with calls for the charges against Quang to be dropped and for his immediate release. This incident sheds light on ongoing concerns regarding freedom of expression and the treatment of minority groups in Vietnam, particularly the Khmer Krom community. [Bao Soc Trang in Vietnamese] [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Death penalty commutations: progress, or PR strategy?

(ms) Vietnam's recent decision to commute the sentences of several death row inmates to life in prison has sparked debate among rights campaigners and legal experts. While some view this as a positive step towards reform, others argue it's merely a strategic move by the government to maintain control and enhance its international reputation.

Critics assert that Vietnam's frequent use of the death penalty serves as a tool of intimidation, with occasional acts of clemency aimed at portraying a humane image. They highlight the country's high number of death sentences, particularly for drug-related offenses.

Legal experts contend that these commutations do not signify progress or judicial reform, citing discrimination in the selection process and the execution of individuals despite concerns about fair trials.

Amnesty International acknowledges the potential for positive change but emphasizes the need for transparency and adherence to international human rights standards, urging Vietnam to consider an official moratorium on executions. [Radio Free Asia]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

China surpasses US and Russia presence at Saudi Arabian defense show

(ms) The World Defense Show held from February 4 to 8 just outside Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh provided a platform for China to showcase its military prowess, outpacing traditional heavyweights like the US and Russia. Armed and unarmed drones, fighter jet models, air-to-air missiles, and long-range defense systems were among the array of equipment displayed by Chinese defense firms.

China's dominating presence was evident not just in the sheer number of exhibitors but also in the floor space they occupied. With over 4,668 square meters, China boasted after host nation Saudi Arabia the largest area. This assertive display reflects Beijing's ambition to expand its influence globally, especially in regions like the Middle East.

Although American defense giants like Lockheed Martin and Boeing were present in numbers, Chinese companies claimed more floor space, signaling a shift in the dynamics of the defense industry. Moreover, China's aerial demonstration featuring J-10 jets from the People's Liberation Army Air Force added to its show of strength.

While concerns linger among US officials regarding China's growing presence in the Middle East, no new orders were publicly recorded during the show.

China's close military ties with Saudi Arabia remain a focal point of concern for Western allies. Despite this, there's little evidence to suggest that Beijing is disrupting US-Saudi defense business significantly. With the US still leading global arms exports, China has ground to cover if it aims to challenge Washington's dominance in this arena.

Meanwhile, Russia also made its presence felt at the show, albeit with a smaller footprint compared to China. The doubling in scale of its exhibit since 2022

underscores Moscow's intent to maintain its foothold in the Gulf region. [Breaking Defense] [China's Central Military Commission]

First Chinese Antarctic station opened

(yq) China is set to expand its presence in Antarctica, as it opened a new research station on Inexpressible Island in the Ross Sea region on February 6. This marks the first time that China has established an outpost in this part of the Antarctic, which is located south of Australia and New Zealand.

Named Qinling and situated near the permanently inhabited U.S. McMurdo station, the station aims to support comprehensive research in polar climates, biology, and geology, marking China's fifth Antarctic base, underscoring its growing interest in polar science. [Reuters]

The move comes amid concerns from South Australia and New Zealand regarding China's expanding influence in the region, following a report last year that highlighted that Qinling would be capable of collecting signals intelligence over Australia and New Zealand.

In a regular press briefing, the Chinese Foreign Ministry noted that the construction of China's Antarctic station is in full compliance with international rules and procedures concerning Antarctica. [Foreign Ministry, China, in Chinese]

Chinese banks exercise caution amidst western sanctions against Russia

(ms) Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko indicated that some Chinese financial institutions are refraining from conducting transactions with Russia, fearing repercussions from Western sanctions.

The decision of Chinese banks to suspend transactions with Russia highlights the cautious approach adopted by financial institutions in navigating geopolitical uncertainties. While Russian officials express confidence in resolving payment issues, concerns persist regarding the broader implications for bilateral trade and financial stability.

China has become a critical economic partner for Russia, especially since Russia's expulsion from the Swift financial messaging system. The reliance on Chinese trade and the yuan has become essential for

Russia's economy, particularly in light of mounting Western sanctions.

Despite China's reluctance to condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine, Chinese financial institutions are facing pressure to comply with international norms and avoid involvement in sanctioned activities. Major banks, such as Bank of China and Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, have reportedly limited financing for Russia, reflecting the pragmatic considerations of the banking sector. [South China Morning Post]

Japan reports nuclear plant incident to International Atomic Energy Agency

(sh) On February 7, Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), the operator of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station (FDNPS), reported to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) a leakage incident involving water containing radioactive materials.

The approximately 5.5 cubic meters of leaked water stemmed from a valve inadvertently left open during cleaning operations at a caesium absorption tower. This tower is integral to the ongoing decommissioning process at the site.

TEPCO confirmed that despite the leak, radiation levels remained stable on-site, posing no discernible risk to public safety or the environment beyond the plant. The leaked water, a combination of contaminated absorption system water and filtered cleaning water, totaled an estimated 0.022 Terabecquerel (TBq) of radioactive substances.

While TEPCO acknowledged potential minor soil contamination around the tower, precautionary measures, including restricting access and soil analysis, have been swiftly implemented. Japan's Nuclear Regulatory Authority has been notified, initiating on-site inspections to assess the situation further. [IAEA]

Japan and Pacific Islands Forum to deepen cooperation

(sh) On February 12, during a ministerial meeting in Suva, the capital of Fiji, Japan and Pacific Island nations united in expressing their resolute opposition to any unilateral efforts aimed at altering the status quo through force or coercion.

Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa affirmed her agreement with counterparts from the 18-member Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) regarding the significance of upholding the "international rules-based order," while reaffirming Japan's commitment to providing ongoing support to the strategically vital region.

The meeting also addressed concerns surrounding Japan's discharge of treated radioactive wastewater from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant into the Pacific, with ministers emphasizing the necessity for Japan to furnish explanations grounded in "scientific evidence" to assuage any apprehensions expressed by forum members [Kyodo News].

Japan perceives its partnership with Pacific nations as integral to preserving a free and open Indo-Pacific amidst China's growing maritime assertiveness and economic influence.

Japan extended assistance to the nations of the PIF across various domains, including economic development, climate change mitigation, and disaster resilience.

However, recent developments, such as Nauru's decision to sever ties with Taiwan in favor of mainland China, underscore Beijing's expanding reach into the Pacific, where geopolitical competition between China and the United States intensified [Japan Times].

Japan drops in ranking of world economies

(sh) Japan's recent growth figures indicate that Japan has dropped to the rank of the world's fourth-largest economy in 2023.

The Japanese economy showed signs of recovery with an expected annualized growth rate of 1.2 percent in the fourth quarter. However, yearly data suggested Japan's economic output fell behind Germany's in dollar terms, with India poised to surpass both in the coming years. [The Edge]

On the investment front, Japan is re-emerging as an attractive market for asset managers. Recent developments include Actis establishing Nozomi Energy, CDPQ's substantial investment in Shizen Energy, and Frontier Advisors opening a Tokyo branch. These, along with ongoing offshore wind auctions, highlight lucrative opportunities for foreign investors, particularly in energy transition and digital infrastructure sectors [Infrastructure Investment].

Russia accused of using North Korean missiles in war against Ukraine

(ap) According to the Ukrainian police, Russia is using North Korean KN-23 missiles to strike over the city of Kharkiv in Ukraine, injuring civilians. **[NK News]**

Lead investigator of the Kharkiv State Police Serhii Bolvinov affirmed that according to specialists the ballistic missiles in the area are North Korean Hwasong 11GA (KN23) missiles, solid-fueled tactical ballistic missiles. It is believed that they are the first used in combat in the war in Ukraine.

Last month the United States had speculations that Russia uses North Korean missiles, claiming that the country shipped more than one million rounds of artillery to Russia. Russia denied the allegations.

UN experts investigate North Korean cyberattacks worth USD 3 billion

(ap) According to *Reuters* citing excerpts of an unpublished United Nations (UN) report, UN experts are investigating North Korean suspected cyberattacks that are believed to be worth USD 3 billion and that helped North Korea develop its nuclear weapons program. [Reuters]

North Korea has been banned from conducting nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches by the 15-member Security Council and since 2006 the country has been subject to sanctions by the UN.

The UN sanctions monitor stated that they are investigating 58 cyberattacks on cryptocurrency-related companies between 2017 and 2023 which help fund Pyongyang's development of weapons of mass destruction.

The UN is going to release a full report on North Korea's cyberattacks by the end of the month.

South Korea participating in Cope North military exercise

(oy) South Korea is currently participating in the US-led multinational air exercise, Exercise Cope North, in Guam alongside Japan, Australia, France, and Canada

(see. AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1). The exercise involves more than 80 military aircraft and around 3,000 troops from the six countries. The exercise aims to practice combat air forces and mobility air forces dispersal activities. South Korean troops will participate in various drills, including aerial medical evacuation, personnel and cargo drops, and joint formation flights with French troops. The exercise, which began earlier this month, will run through February 23. [Yonhap]

South Korea's Economic Development Cooperation Fund raises KRW 13.8 trillion loans

(oy) South Korea plans to allocate KRW 13.8 trillion (USD 10.39 billion) by 2026 for low-interest loans to developing countries for projects related to green growth, digital transition, and other areas, including reconstruction efforts in Ukraine.

This initiative is under the Economic Development Cooperation Fund (EDCF), with new projects worth KRW 4.5 trillion (USD 3.38 billion) planned for 2024, and KRW 4.6 trillion (USD 3.46 billion) and KRW 4.7 trillion (USD 3.53 billion) for 2025 and 2026, respectively.

The three-year budget represents a 17.9 percent increase from the previous plan. The loans will primarily focus on addressing climate change, digital transition, and public health. South Korea also plans to finalize details of projects worth USD 2.1 billion in Ukraine and sign new deals with India, Bolivia, and the Ivory Coast.

ECDF was established in 1987 to assist developing countries in building their basic infrastructure. South Korea's goal has been to become one of the top 10 global contributors to development aid. [Yonhap]

India, European Free Trade Association finalize major trade agreement

(ff) India is nearing the finalization of a major trade agreement with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), comprising Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland, potentially unlocking investments totaling USD 100 billion over 15 years. [Bloomberg] [Reuters]

The agreement, currently in advanced negotiations, is expected to spur the creation of over 1 million jobs in

India, with investments primarily directed towards manufacturing projects. Key components of the deal include market access for select agricultural products and facilitation of easier movement for Indian professionals to EFTA nations.

While India's Commerce Ministry and EFTA declined to comment, the reported investment aligns with India's broader aim to attract significant foreign direct investment, including interest from countries like the United Arab Emirates, which is contemplating investments of up to USD 50 billion.

Indian Prime Minister Modi embarks on visits to United Arab Emirates, Qatar

(ff) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi embarked on a two-day visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar on February 13, indicating New Delhi's proactive engagement with key Gulf allies, aiming to strengthen bilateral relations. [WION]

United Arab Emirates

This marks Modi's seventh visit to the UAE since 2015 and his third visit in the past eight months. While in Abu Dhabi, the premier is scheduled to hold bilateral meetings with UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and UAE's vice president, prime minister, and defense minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Ai Maktoum.

Of note, this visit will also see the inauguration of the BAPS Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi, the largest Hindu temple outside India, symbolizing the transformation of ties fostered by Modi and UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. [Hindustan Times]

Qatar

On February 14, Modi is scheduled to travel to Qatar for talks with Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar, to enhance bilateral relations. Their previous encounter was during the COP28 summit in Dubai last year. [The Hindu]

Crucially, Modi's visit coincides with Qatar's release of eight Indian Navy veterans who were detained on espionage charges. [see entry in this edition]

United States, United Kingdom, European Union urge Pakistan to probe election

irregularities

(lm/tj) The United States, United Kingdom, and the European Union separately expressed concerns about Pakistan's electoral process following the February 8 vote, urging an investigation into reported irregularities. Washington and Brussels highlighted allegations of interference, including activist arrests, emphasizing the need for thorough investigations into irregularities, interference, and fraud. However, all three parties also stated their willingness to work with the next government. [Arab News] [European Parliament]

In related news, the *Free and Fair Election Network* (FAFEN) reported on February 12 that its observers were denied access to witness the vote tabulation process in 135 constituencies. FAFEN demanded an investigation into this violation of election law, highlighting provisions that require transparency in the tabulation process.

Additionally, prior to the elections, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights denounced violence against political parties and candidates in Pakistan. It also noted that some parties did not meet the legal quota of 5 percent of women candidates on their lists, despite 22 percent of parliamentary seats being reserved for women. [UNHCR]

Sri Lanka charts ambitious free trade deal course amidst RCEP aspirations

(aa) Sri Lanka is strategically positioning itself for significant economic integration, as announced plans unveil ambitions for establishing a comprehensive network of free trade agreements (FTAs) with key neighboring and regional partners by the end of the year.

Notably, Sri Lanka aims to finalize an FTA with neighboring India, alongside similar agreements targeted for Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and China. This comes after Sri Lanka already concluded an FTA with Thailand earlier this month, which gives the island nation access to a USD 2.2 billion market [AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1]. [Economic Times]

Sri Lanka and India resumed talks on the Economic and Tecnology Cooperation Agreement in Colombo at the 12th round in October last year. The original talks were stalled after several rounds of talks between

2016 and 2018 due to political and trade union opposition.

Meanwhile, China has displayed flexibility in its approach to free trade negotiations with Sri Lanka following a temporary pause in discussions by the island nation, according to Colombo's chief negotiator. Disagreements over tariff lists, liberalization levels, and review processes led to the suspension of talks after seven rounds. [The Island]

In related developments, President Ranil Wickremesinghe has underscored Sri Lanka's plan to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the first free trade agreement among the largest economies in Asia, including China, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea. [Daily News]

Chinese ship en route to Maldives raises concerns in India

(aa) The anticipated docking of a Chinese scientific vessel in the Maldives this week has stirred a complex web of diplomatic tensions between Beijing, Delhi, and Malé. [Hindustan Times]

While China asserts that the purpose of the visit of the Xiang Yang Hong 3 is intended only for crew rotation and resupplying, India perceives the move with suspicion. It views the vessel's presence as potentially more than routine, raising concerns of data collection for future military operations, particularly submarine activities. Notably, the vessel's transponder was intermittently turned off during its journey from the port of Sanya in China to the Sunda Straits, raising further questions.

Previous Chinese naval visits to Sri Lanka near Indian territorial waters have already unsettled India, amplifying the geopolitical complexities at play. Additionally, recent decisions by Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu, including demands for the withdrawal of Indian military personnel and termination of agreements with India, have heightened concerns in Delhi about China's expanding influence in the region.

Indonesia leads UN alliance against tuberculosis worldwide

(jb) Indonesia has spearheaded the creation of a global coalition at the United Nations in New York to address

tuberculosis (TB) systematically on a worldwide scale. Backed by Poland, the Philippines, and Nigeria as Co-Chairs, alongside the World Health Organization (WHO), the initiative aims to galvanize consistent attention towards TB.

Around 11 February 2024, Ambassador Arrmanatha Nasir emphasized the absence of a UN framework dedicated to TB, underscoring the significance of this alliance. WHO endorses the effort, highlighting its potential to drive TB discussions at the UN. [Tempo.co]

ADB greenlights USD 419 million loan for Indonesia sanitation overhaul

(jb) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has greenlit a USD 419.6 million loan for Indonesia's Citywide Inclusive Sanitation Project. This initiative targets the expansion of climate-resilient sanitation services in Mataram, Pontianak, and Semarang.

While 77 percent of Indonesian households have basic sanitation, only 7 percent njoy safely managed systems. The project addresses this disparity, aiming to enhance sanitation for 2.5 million residents. It integrates sewerage and non-sewered systems to ensure inclusive access.

Jiro Tominaga, ADB's Indonesia country director, underscored the project's alignment with climate change initiatives. It involves constructing wastewater treatment plants and sewer networks, incorporating resilience measures against flooding and environmental risks. [The Asset]

Indonesia sues EU over fatty acid import duties at WTO

(yr) Indonesia filed a complaint with the World Trade Organization (WTO) against the European Union (EU) regarding the imposition of import duties on fatty acids, with tariffs ranging from 15.2 percent to 46.4 percent since January 2023.

The Indonesian government assesses that the European Union's policy violates WTO provisions.

Indonesia's fatty acid exports to the EU fell by almost 60 percent to USD 154 million in 2023 from USD 373 million in 2022. [Reuters]

Indonesia records USD 3.16 million transactions at health exhibition

(jb) Indonesia's Trade Ministry reported transactions totaling USD 3.16 million at the Arab Health exhibition held in Dubai from January 29 to February 1, 2024. This marks a significant 43.83 percent increase from the previous year's achievements, highlighting growing interest in Indonesian medical equipment.

Director General Didi Sumedi revealed deals with Qatar, UAE, Bahrain, Ethiopia, and Oman, alongside a contract worth USD 1.07 million and furniture procurement from the Czech Republic valued at USD 25 thousand. Notable interest was observed in syringes, sphygmomanometers, and hospital equipment, with major buyers from Mauritius, Morocco, UAE, India, and Saudi Arabia. [Antara News]

Indonesian ministry addresses Israel's alleged opposition to OECD membership

(jb) The Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded to claims that Israel is obstructing Indonesia's bid to join the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Reports suggest Israel raised concerns citing Middle East tensions and lack of diplomatic ties. Indonesia, a staunch supporter of Palestine, faces challenges as OECD decisions require unanimity, including Israel's consent. [Tempo.co]

Indonesia, Laos, and Malaysia strengthen troika mechanism for Myanmar crisis

(yr) Indonesia, Laos and Malaysia are strengthening collaboration in the ASEAN troika mechanism to handle the crisis in Myanmar, an initiative that was formalized at the ASEAN Summit in Jakarta in September last year (see AiR No. 37, September/2023, 2).

Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi on February 6 underlined the importance of this mechanism involving three countries – Indonesia as ASEAN chairman last year, Laos this year, and Malaysia next year.

Indonesia has sent Laos all records of stakeholder interactions in Myanmar through the troika

mechanism, hoping Laos can continue diplomatic efforts.

Malaysian Foreign Minister Mohamad Hasan stressed ASEAN cooperation to prevent the Myanmar crisis from spreading, demonstrating a shared commitment to civil rule. [Indonesian Presidential Secretariat, in Indonesian] [Antara[YR1]]

Laos pledges to collaborate with other ASEAN countries to improve biosafety measures

(wn) Representatives from the health sectors of Laos and other ASEAN countries recently gathered in the Lao capital, Vientiane.

The purpose of the meeting was to report on the progress of their activities and share the future.

Lao Minister of Health, Bounfeng Phoummalaysith, addressed the conference during the two-day event, which took place on February 6 and 7. The Ministry of Health in Laos has pledged to collaborate with other ASEAN countries to enhance health security and resilience by improving biosafety and biosecurity. [The Star]

China warns Philippines against 'playing with fire' as Manila boosts military presence near Taiwan

(lb) Amidst reports suggesting the Philippines' intention to bolster its military presence on strategically significant islands near Taiwan, China issued a cautionary statement, warning against what it termed as "playing with fire," emphasizing Taiwan's pivotal status within Beijing's core interests and underscoring its non-negotiable sovereignty. [Bangkok Post]

The tensions between the Philippines and China heightened following Filipino Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro's announcement to increase the number of troops stationed on Batanes Island, which lies merely 200 kilometers from Taiwan and just north of the Luzon Strait, a choke point for access between the South China Sea and the Philippine Sea, and China's navy uses it to move carrier strike groups and destroyers out to the open Pacific. [The Maritime Executive]

More recently, reports suggested that Mavulis Island in Batanes is being considered as the next location for the annual United States-Philippines joint military exercise Balikatan [see AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1].

France to join Balikatan joint military exercise in The Philippines

(lb) France has confirmed that it will join the Balikatan military exercise - the most prominent annual military exercise between the Philippines and the United States -, without specifying the number of personnel or ships. Additionally, Manila is also working on involving the Japanese Defense Force. Last year, over 17,600 troops from the Philippines, the United States, and Australia participated. [Naval News]

Singapore's foreign minister meets with Gulf Cooperation Council secretary-general

(lb) During the 7th Indian Ocean Conference in Perth, Australia, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Secretary-General Jasem Mohamed Al-Budaiwi met with Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan. In their meeting, they reiterated the commitment of the GCC and Singapore to strengthen strategic relations, with a particular focus on enhancing economic, trade, and investment ties. The officials also discussed ongoing efforts to update the free trade agreement that was initially signed between the GCC and Singapore in 2008. [Arab News]

ASEAN, China hold 5th round of free trade agreement upgrade negotiations

(tt) During the 5th round of negotiations for the upgrade of the ASEAN-China free trade agreement (ACFTA), substantial progress was reported across multiple key areas, including small and medium-sized enterprises, trade competition, consumer protection, and technical regulations. The negotiations, crucially, aim for completion within the year, aligning with directives from the economic ministers of both ASEAN and China. [Thai PBS]

The upcoming talks, scheduled for April in Singapore, are anticipated to finalize discussions on crucial elements like trade in digital economy goods,

investment protocols, customs procedures, and fostering a green economy.

ACFTA was signed in November 2002 and came into effect in January 2010, marking the first FTA with external parties to be signed by ASEAN. The economic significance of ASEAN-China trade relations underscores the importance of these negotiations. China stands as ASEAN's largest trading partner, with substantial bilateral trade reaching USD 104.9 billion last year.

European Union proposes curbs on two dozen firms accused of supporting Russia's war in Ukraine

(lm) The European Union has put forward a proposal to impose trade restrictions on around two dozen companies, including companies based in mainland China, India, and Hong Kong, for allegedly supporting Russia's actions in Ukraine. The proposal faces scrutiny from member states and could undergo changes before adoption. [Luxembourg Times]

This proposal represents the EU's first attempt to target mainland Chinese firms since the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In total, the EU has listed over 620 companies, primarily from Russia, for sanctions related to the Ukrainian conflict. Additionally, the EU is contemplating sanctions on more than 110 individuals and entities as part of measures marking the two-year anniversary since Russia's invasion.

ASEAN, Australia hold 36th Forum in Melbourne

(lm) Senior officials of ASEAN and Australia on February 5-6 held the 36th bilateral forum in Melbourne to review relations and discuss future direction of the partnership, including preparations for the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit to commemorate the 50th anniversary of dialogue relations, which is scheduled to be held in Melbourne on 5-6 March. [ASEAN]

The forum highlighted progress in bilateral relations and the effective implementation of the ASEAN – Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Both sides agreed to deepen cooperation in various fields and prioritize collaboration in economy, trade, education, disaster management, climate change response, and energy transition. They also discussed

regional security concerns and emphasized peaceful conflict resolution in accordance with international law.

Bangladesh foreign minister visits with senior Indian officials in New Delhi

(lm) Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud last week held a series of meetings in New Delhi, discussing mutual interests with various senior officials. This visit, at the invitation of his Indian counterpart S Jaishankar, marks Hasan's first bilateral visit since assuming office as Bangladesh's foreign minister. [Dhaka Tribune]

On January 7, Hasan met with Jaishankar and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval. Two days later, the Bangladeshi top diplomat met with Indian President Droupadi Murmu and Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal. Hasan also met with Deputy President of India Jagdeep Dhankhar during his visit.

Notably, Hasan's visit to New Delhi came just days after Doval had made a quiet and brief visit to Dhaka to meet with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and other senior officials to discuss issues of strategic significance. Doval became the first high-ranking Indian official to visit Bangladesh since Hasina's election victory. [The Economic Times]

Anti-India sentiment simmering in Bangladesh over perceived interference in domestic affairs

(lm) A movement to boycott Indian goods has gained momentum in Bangladesh amid accusations of New Delhi's interference in Bangladesh's political affairs, including the latest general election held in January. Despite concerns about the economic repercussions, the boycott call has garnered support from various quarters, including the Bangladeshi diaspora and opposition groups, who accuse India of favoring the ruling Awami League government. [Al Jazeera]

After Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League party secured a decisive victory in Bangladesh's general election, India welcomed the election results, emphasizing its commitment to strengthening its partnership with Dhaka – despite concerns about democratic backsliding and criticism of Hasina's authoritarian tendencies. The victory was viewed as crucial for New Delhi's security interests,

given the countries' shared border and the potential for security challenges such as infiltration and terrorism.

Senior leaders of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), including Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, have criticized India for allegedly supporting what they describe as a "stage-managed and rigged" parliamentary election in Bangladesh. They argue that India's backing of the election suggests a preference for "plastic democracy" in neighboring countries. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh's ruling party claims West not as concerned with Pakistan polls as with

(lm) The general secretary of Bangladesh's ruling Awami League party, Obaidul Quader, has criticized a perceived contrast between Western reactions to elections in Bangladesh and Pakistan, noting that while Bangladesh faced scrutiny and sanctions, Pakistan's recent election received less international attention despite reports of violence and rigging. [Dhaka Tribune]

In May of last year, the U.S. State Department announced a visa policy designed to "promote democratic elections" in Bangladesh, under which it could deny visas to Bangladeshis deemed to be undermining the electoral process. The announcement sent shock waves through Dhaka's corridors of power, as countless Bangladeshi officials have family and economic interests in the US, as well as other Western countries.

Turkish language course launched in Brunei's defense ministry

(ms) The recent inauguration of a Turkish Language Course at Brunei's Ministry of Defense marks the next step in cultural exchanges between Brunei and Turkey.

Spearheaded by Turkish Ambassador to Brunei, this initiative is the first collaboration between the Turkish embassy and Brunei's defense ministry, and is, according to him, reflecting a burgeoning interest in Turkey history and culture within Brunei.

The course aims to deepen mutual understanding and foster stronger bilateral relations through language and cultural education and to offer participants not

only language proficiency but also recognized certificates.

Beside the bilateral implications the program is part of a bigger campaign from Turkey, as one of the leading Muslim countries to expand its influence in other Muslim-majority countries. [BNN]

Cambodian, Thai prime ministers agree on joint energy resource exploration on disputed maritime area

(pm) On February 7, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet met with his Thai counterpart Srettha Thavisin for bilateral talks. The meeting was part of Manet's visit to Thailand, mark his trip to the neighboring since he assumed office in August last year.

The agenda was topped by the issue of a 27,000 sq km disputed energy-rich area in the Gulf of Thailand that is claimed by both countries. Following the meeting, Srettha unveiled that while both sides had agreed to deepen bilateral energy security cooperation and to further talks on the joint exploration of the hydrocarbon resources in the overlapping claims area between the two countries, they would also seek progress on the maritime delineation. [Nikkei Asia]

In addition, both sides vowed to expand bilateral trade and deepen security cooperation, especially along the shared border.

With regards to the haze problem, the two sides agreed on setting up a joint working group for information sharing, emergency response coordination and exchanging best practices in agricultural burning management. Srettha extended an invitation to Cambodia to join the Clear Sky Strategy, a regional initiative to combat air pollution. [The Star]

Furthermore, the prime ministers reached agreement on not allowing their own territories to be used for political activities against and interference in the internal affairs of the other country.

This mutual reassurance came after three Cambodian dissidents, seeking asylum in Thailand, were arrested for planning a protest and detained. [Benar News] [Khmer Times]

The two leaders also witnessed the signing of five Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) which essentially upgrades bilateral relations between the two countries to a "strategic partnership".

The agreements cover cooperation in disaster reduction and emergency response; science and technology education, transit goods and the MoU between the Cambodian Chamber of Commerce and the Export-Import Bank of Thailand, and the promotion trade and investment between the two countries as well as an MoU between the Board of Trade of Thailand and the Cambodia Chamber of Commerce. [The Nation]

Cambodia, Brunei pledge to enhance cooperation

(pm) Cambodia and Brunei declared their commitment to bilateral ties in trade, investment, agriculture, tourism, and culture between two nations.

This was affirmed during a meeting between Pengiran Kasmirhan Bin Pengiran Haji Tahir, the Ambassador of Brunei to Cambodia, and Sok Chenda Sophea, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cambodia on February 6.

The countries expressed their support to each other and to strengthen regional bilateral and multilateral partnerships. [Khmer Times] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Cambodia]

Cambodian peacekeepers leaving for Lebanon

(pm) On February 8, Cambodian troops left for Lebanon to join the "United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon" (UNIFIL).

The unit will focus on advancing women's empowerment, particularly through increased participation of women in UN peacekeeping missions. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia and US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to continue health partnerships

(pm) Cambodian health authorities and US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have reaffirmed their commitment to continuing their cooperation of prevention and early detection of respiratory diseases along with public health emergency preparedness and response.

This was expressed during a visit of CDC Director Mandy Chen to Cambodia from February 7 to 8.

The partnership aims to strengthen the responses to HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, influenza and rabies. [Phnom Penh Post]

Law enforcement collaboration between Cambodia and India to be deepened

(pm) Cambodia and India have agreed to deepen their relations in law enforcement sector. This was affirmed during the meeting between Devyani Khobragade, Indian Ambassador to Cambodia and Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior.

India pledged to offer continuous support in police training and scholarships to Cambodians for professional studies. [BNN Breaking]

Cambodia and Uganda seek to cooperate

(pm) Cambodia and Uganda are planning to enhance bilateral cooperation in trade, investment, and tourism, along with fostering closer ties between their chambers of commerce and supporting each other internationally.

This agreement was reached at meeting between Chum Sounry, Secretary of State for Cambodia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ugandan Minister of Foreign Affairs Okello Henry Oryem on February 6 in Phnom Penh.

Both parties discussed promoting relations in both bilateral and multilateral frameworks and are considering signing various bilateral documents, including a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on bilateral consultations.

The collaboration focuses on trade, particularly in the food sectors, and boosting tourism. [Phnom Penh Post]

China, US trade concerns during economic talks

(yq) China has raised concerns with the U.S. regarding tariffs and investment restrictions, especially

restrictions on semiconductors, cloud services, photovoltaics, and fair treatment of Chinese companies in the US, calling them attempts to "suppress" Chinese companies.

The criticism was expressed during the third Meeting of the Economic Working Group between the US and China, held on February 6 in Beijing between Chinese financial officials and visiting U.S. Treasury representatives.

The U.S., for its part, “frankly raised issues of concern, including China’s industrial policy practices and overcapacity, and the resulting impact on U.S. workers and firms,” according to the readout of the meeting released by the U.S. Treasury Department.

Described as "in-depth, frank, pragmatic, and constructive," the talks during the meeting covered various topics including the macroeconomic situation and policy and developing countries' debt issues.

Both nations agreed to continue maintaining communications, signaling a mutual interest in stabilizing and developing their economic relationship despite existing trade tensions. [Ministry of Commerce, China, in Chinese] [U.S. Department of the Treasury] [Reuters]

Xi and Putin pledge to deepen ties in Lunar New Year greetings

(yq) On February 8, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin exchanged Lunar New Year greetings, reaffirming their commitment to strengthen the bond between their nations. This exchange, part of a growing tradition, signifies the enduring alliance and shared vision of both leaders. They also exchanged greetings on December 31, ahead of the calendar year (see AiR No. 1, January/2024,1).

During their conversation, Xi emphasized the resilience of the Sino-Russian relationship, acknowledging the challenges both nations have navigated together. The past year marked significant advancements in trade, exchanges, and bilateral cooperation, with Xi advocating for an even closer strategic partnership.

Both leaders expressed a mutual interest in promoting multilateralism and agreed to maintain robust collaboration on strategic issues. Putin reiterated Russia's support for the one-China principle, denouncing any provocations against China over Taiwan.

Amidst these developments, Xi is expected to engage in discussions with US President Joe Biden according to a US official. [South China Morning Post][Foreign Ministry, China, in Chinese]

Russia deepens cooperation with China in the Arctic

(yq) A report released by Strider Technologies Inc., a US company specializing in strategic intelligence and security in the technology sector, highlights the increasing collaboration between China and Russia in the Arctic, particularly since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, emphasizing a mutual reliance on each other's resources and capabilities to develop and control the Arctic.

This partnership is driven by both nations' desire to exploit the Northern Sea Route (NSR) for infrastructure development, energy exploration, and trade, significantly impacting Arctic nations and private-sector companies.

China's role in the Arctic is becoming increasingly prominent, marked by a substantial rise in PRC-owned companies operating in Russian-controlled Arctic territories. This surge in activity indicates a departure from Russia's previous efforts to limit China's involvement in the region in the past decades. The collaboration extends beyond commercial interests, encompassing security dimensions with unprecedented activities such as joint naval exercises and agreements on maritime law enforcement.

Analysts said that the synergy between Russia's need for investment and goods to circumvent Western sanctions and China's quest for resources and geopolitical influence has led to a robust partnership.

However, this cooperation raises concerns about the environmental and security risks in the Arctic, challenging the established norms and efforts of Arctic states to maintain the region's stability and ecological integrity.

In November 2023, the US House Homeland Security Committee members and expert witnesses expressed concerns about Russian-Chinese cooperation in the Arctic and its implications for U.S. national security. [NBC News] [PR Newswire]

For deeper insight into security and geopolitical dynamics in the Arctic and the Sino-Russian “delicate dance” in geopolitics therein, see the recent report of

Iselin Németh Winther and Andreas Østhagen in [Fridtjof Nansen Institute].

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi urges South Korea to adopt a new policy towards China

(yq) In a recent diplomatic exchange, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi called for South Korea to pursue a "positive, objective, and friendly" policy towards Beijing during a phone call with South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul on February 6, emphasizing the importance of stable economic ties and industrial supply chains between the two nations.

Cho, for his part, urged China to contribute constructively to mitigating North Korean military threats and to prevent the forced repatriation of North Korean defectors.

The dialogue also opened doors for further discussions on Cho's visit to China, reflecting a mutual interest in addressing regional security and bilateral relations. [Reuters][Foreign Ministry, China, in Chinese]

Chinese coast guard vessels enter disputed waters in East China Sea

(yq) Chinese coast guard vessels recently entered on February 6 the disputed waters around the Diaoyu (China)/Senkaku (Japan) Islands in the East China Sea, territories claimed by China, Japan, and Taiwan.

This move prompted Japan's Coast Guard to issue warnings to the Chinese vessels to leave what Japan considers its territorial waters. The Chinese vessels departed after two hours, marking another incident in the ongoing territorial dispute. [Reuters]

The incident followed Chinese coastguard patrols in the disputed waters near the Diaoyu Islands in January, asserting its "right protection" (see AiR No. 3, January/2024, 3).

China criticizes Japan over Fukushima leak, calls for international oversight

(yq) The Chinese Foreign Ministry criticized the Tokyo Electric Power Company (Tepco) and the Japanese

government following a recent leak of radioactive water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant on February 8.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry highlighted the repeated mishaps in Fukushima's water treatment as evidence of Tepco's disorganized internal management and the Japanese government's inadequate supervision. [Foreign Ministry, China, in Chinese]

Emphasizing the global significance of the issue, Beijing linked it to human health, marine environment, and international public interests and called on Tokyo to address international concerns transparently and responsibly.

The incident involved the leakage of approximately 5,500 liters of contaminated water due to a valve being inadvertently left open during cleaning procedures at the plant.

Tepco disclosed that the leaked water, a mix of contaminated and filtered water, contained about 0.022 Terabecquerels of radioactive substances. Despite assurances from Tepco that there was no risk to the public or significant environmental impact, the incident prompted an immediate response, with the leak halted within 23 minutes of detection.

Tepco also reported the incident to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Japan's nuclear regulator, which is now investigating.

This latest incident adds to the ongoing dispute between China and Japan over Tokyo's decision to release treated wastewater from Fukushima into the Pacific Ocean – a plan that has been met with international criticism, particularly from Beijing. China, questioning the safety and transparency of the treatment process, has accused Japan of using the ocean as a "sewer" and has banned all seafood imports from Japan in response in August 2023 (see AiR No. 35, August/2023, 5). [South China Morning Post]

Unrest among North Korean workers in China reported by South Korea's intelligence agency

(yq) South Korea's intelligence agency reported growing unrest among North Korean workers in China, with rare protests and signs of dissatisfaction.

This is a significant deviation from the usual controlled demeanor of North Korea's overseas labor force.

North Korean workers employed overseas face poor working conditions, strict surveillance, and limited freedoms. China plays a crucial role in economic interactions between the two nations by hosting a considerable number of North Korean workers who contribute to China's economy and serve as a vital source of foreign currency for Pyongyang.

The incidents reported by researchers and acknowledged by South Korea's intelligence agency hint at a complex mix of economic desperation, political control, and human rights concerns. The rare protests by North Korean workers in China could be seen as a cry for help, signaling severe issues within the system that sends them abroad. This development could potentially strain the diplomatic and economic ties between North Korea and China, two countries historically allied against Western pressures.

This situation has caught the attention of international human rights organizations and governments, urging a reevaluation of policies related to the employment of North Korean workers abroad. The focus is on improving their living and working conditions, ensuring their rights are protected, and addressing the broader implications of their employment on international labor standards. [Reuters] [BBC]

China, Indonesia plan to drastically reduce Nickel production in wake of low prices

(ms) The nickel industry is bracing for significant reductions in output as China and Indonesia, two major players in the market, seek to address the sharp decline in nickel prices. Following a slump in the metal's value, attributed to oversupply and weakened demand, producers are expected to slash production by at least 100,000 metric tons this year.

This move comes as a response to the current state of the nickel market, where prices have plummeted from a peak of over USD 100,000 per ton in 2022 to around USD 16,000 per ton today. Indonesia, responsible for more than half of global mined supplies, has seen a surge in production, exacerbating the oversupply situation. As a result, Western mining companies like BHP have been forced to mothball assets and delay projects.

According to analysts, the cuts implemented thus far have only scratched the surface of the problem, removing around 6 percent of potential supply for the year. Deeper reductions exceeding 250,000 tons may be necessary to bring the market back into balance. Most of the excess supply is attributed to nickel pig iron (NPI), a cheaper alternative favored in stainless steel production.

With NPI prices hovering around USD 11,000 per ton, many mills in China are facing profitability challenges, as production costs remain high. This has prompted discussions about potential differentiation in nickel pricing based on its end-use, particularly in battery applications. [Reuters]

The Netherlands accuses China of cyberattack

(yq) Dutch intelligence agencies disclosed on February 6 that Chinese state-backed cyber spies infiltrated a Dutch military network last year, marking a concerning escalation in national security tensions between China and the Netherlands.

The cyber espionage operation utilized malware to penetrate a network designated for unclassified research, marking the first time the Netherlands publicly accused China of cyber espionage.

Dutch Defense Minister Kajsa Ollogren stated that China's cyber espionage activities public knowledge is vital as it will boost international resilience to such activities, while the intelligence agencies added that the attack was part of China's political espionage against the Netherlands and its allies. [Reuters]

In response, China's foreign ministry denied all the accusations and stated that China takes strong action against cyberattacks in compliance with the law and accused the Netherlands of applying the tactic of anti-China confrontation to the area of cybersecurity. [Foreign Ministry, China, in Chinese]

China-Germany: Chancellor Scholz to visit China in mid-April

(ms) German Chancellor Olaf Scholz is set to travel to China with a business delegation from April 15 to 16, as confirmed by a source involved in the planning to Reuters. The trip aims to strengthen economic ties between the two countries.

The Asia-Pacific Committee of German Business and the BDI Federation of German Industries have invited companies to join Scholz, though specific firms were not disclosed.

Scholz's last visit to China was in November 2022, where he met with Chinese President Xi Jinping. During that visit, he urged China to use its influence to end Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Despite China being Germany's primary trading partner, concerns about overreliance on Chinese markets have prompted calls for diversification and “de-risking”. [Global Times] [Reuters]

India suspends free movement regime with Myanmar

(fd/ff) India has announced the termination of the India-Myanmar Free Movement Regime (FMR), citing security concerns and the need to protect the demographic composition of its northeastern states. The decision reflects India's concerns about potential security risks stemming from the unrest in Myanmar, particularly in border regions like Rakhine state. [mint] [JURIST]

The decision, which comes alongside plans to erect a fence along the border, has raised concerns about its impact on cross-border relations, trade, and the plight of refugees fleeing Myanmar's turmoil. Additionally, it marks a significant shift in India's approach to border management and regional security dynamics, signaling a departure from the previously liberalized movement regime established under the Act East policy in 2018.

Under the FMR, established in 2018, individuals from hill tribes residing within 16 kilometers on either side of the border could cross over with a valid border pass for up to two weeks. However, with the termination of the FMR, all Myanmar nationals will be required to obtain visas for entry into India and use designated border crossing points or integrated check posts.

India, Russia strengthen nuclear cooperation

(fd) Russia and India have strengthened their nuclear cooperation with the signing of a new protocol to the intergovernmental agreement on the Kudankulam nuclear power plant. During a visit by Rosatom Director General Alexei Likhachev to the Indian plant,

the protocol was finalized following discussions with Ajit Kumar Mohanty, Chairman of India's Atomic Energy Commission. [World Nuclear News]

India has ambitious plans to significantly increase its nuclear generating capacity by 2031-32, with agreements in place for cooperation with foreign countries, including Russia, for nuclear power projects. The agreement aims to expedite the construction of units 3 to 6 at the Kudankulam site, which is already home to two operating Russian reactors and is set to expand with the construction of additional units.

Israeli chipmaker proposes USD 8 billion plant in India

(ff) Israeli chipmaker *Tower Semiconductor* has proposed to the Indian government the construction of an USD 8 billion chipmaking facility in India, seeking government incentives for this initiative. However, neither *Tower Semiconductor* nor India's IT ministry have responded to requests for comment on the matter. [Reuters]

Chip manufacturing is a priority in India's business agenda under Prime Minister Modi, but previous attempts to offer incentives to the industry have faced challenges, with some proposals being delayed or scrapped.

India: Scottish official urges India to expedite case of detained Scottish man

(ff) The United Kingdom has urged India to accelerate the resolution of the case involving Jagtar Singh Johal, a Scottish man detained in India for over six years who faces the death penalty as a result of terror charges stemming from his alleged involvement in political violence in the South Asian country. [BBC]

Johal's trial for the serious charges against him began in 2022, but he has yet to be convicted of any crime. The case has drawn international attention, with human rights experts and advocacy groups calling for Johal's release and criticizing the lack of due process in his detention. Despite assurances from Indian authorities that due process is being followed, concerns persist about Johal's prolonged detention and the fairness of his trial.

Johal's family contends that his life is in danger and claims he was tortured by Indian authorities after his

arrest in 2017. These allegations have been denied by the Indian government.

Qatar frees eight ex-Indian navy officers previously on death row

(ff) In a significant turn of events, a Qatari court has freed eight former Indian naval officers who were previously sentenced to death. While seven of the men have already returned home, details surrounding their release remain somewhat opaque. The men, who were employed by a private company in Qatar, found themselves at the center of a highly publicized legal ordeal, facing unspecified charges that were later rumored to involve espionage for Israel - a claim that has not been officially confirmed by India, Qatar, or Israel. [CNN] [BBC]

The Indian government pursued diplomatic channels to secure their release, ultimately leading to the conversion of their death penalties into varying prison terms in January [see AiR No. 2, January/2024, 2]. This move, while a welcome development, left many questions unanswered regarding the nature of the charges and the length of the new sentences.

India, Saudi Arabia finish first joint military exercise

(fd) India and Saudi Arabia have completed their first-ever joint military exercise, named "Sada Tanseeq," which began on January 29th and lasted for 12 days. [Foreign Brief]

The drills took place against the backdrop of the ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict. While India has maintained a relatively pro-Israel stance, unlike Riyadh, which has longstanding political support for Palestine, the joint military exercise can be seen as a gesture to strengthen defense ties between India and Saudi Arabia while also assuaging Riyadh amidst India's growing relationship with Israel.

Indian oil giants eye return to Libya after 13 years, seek to ramp up production in Venezuela despite sanctions

(ff) Indian energy giants Oil and Natural Gas Corp (ONGC) and Oil India are currently in discussions to resume operations in Libya, marking a potential return

after thirteen years of absence due to political instability. [Reuters]

Furthermore, both companies are engaged in negotiations with operators to increase oil production in Venezuela. This comes despite the United States' recent decision to reinstate sanctions on Venezuela, which had been temporarily lifted in October last year following an agreement for upcoming elections.

Indonesia, Lithuania explore AI collaboration opportunities

(jb) Indonesia's Vice Minister of Communication and Informatics, Nezar Patria, has engaged in talks with Lithuania's Vice Minister of Cultural Affairs, Vygintas Gasparaviius, exploring collaboration opportunities in artificial intelligence (AI).

Patria highlighted Indonesia's strategic position and significant population as key factors driving Lithuania's interest in cooperation. He appreciated Lithuania's willingness to share expertise, underscoring mutual learning opportunities for both nations.

Following Indonesia's participation in UNESCO's global forum on AI Ethics, collaborative avenues with the EU have opened, positioning Indonesia as an attractive partner for technological advancements.

Lithuania sees this collaboration as a chance for equal partnership, particularly in AI development for health and defense sectors. [Tempo.co]

Indonesia among countries Sri Lanka pursues free trade agreements with

(jb) Sri Lanka Minister of Foreign Affairs Ali Sabry has announced plans to establish Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with Indonesia, as well as India, Malaysia, Vietnam, and China, by the end of 2024.

These agreements aim to bolster Sri Lanka's economy by opening new markets for businesses, aligning with President Wickremesinghe's economic vision.

Sabry highlighted the recent FTA with Thailand as a significant milestone, granting access to a USD 2.2 billion market. The government emphasized diversifying trade partnerships to enhance economic resilience. [The Island]

Indonesia pledges full cooperation in KF-21 tech theft probe

(jb) Indonesia has assured full cooperation in the investigation into alleged technology theft related to South Korea's KF-21 fighter jet. Engineers, suspected of storing development data on a USB, are under scrutiny by Seoul's Defense Acquisition Program Administration.

Seoul's defense officials disclosed the probe last month at Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI). The focus lies on whether the data contains strategic technologies vital to the KF-21's development. Indonesian engineers remain barred from leaving South Korea amidst the investigation. [Yonhap News Agency] [Firstpost]

Malaysian foreign minister strengthens ties with Indonesia on inaugural visit

(jb) Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan, Malaysian Foreign Minister, has visited Indonesia to bolster bilateral ties and ASEAN cooperation.

Highlighting his courtesy call with President Joko Widodo, discussions focused on enhancing trade along the Indonesia-Malaysia border to reach a USD 30 billion annual target.

Meetings with Indonesian counterpart Retno L. P. Marsudi covered regional and global issues, including Myanmar's crisis and Palestinian rights. Both nations reaffirmed their commitment to combat palm oil discrimination, reflecting their status as key exporters.

The visit underscores Malaysia's prioritization of ASEAN unity and collaboration, with Indonesia ranking as its third-largest ASEAN trading partner in 2023. [New Straits Times]

Indonesia, China pledge enhanced strategic partnership

(jb) At the 15th Diplomatic Consultation Meeting held in Xiamen on 3 February 2024, Indonesia and China reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening bilateral ties.

Both parties agreed to implement prior cooperation agreements and enhance people-to-people relations through dialogue and exchanges. Discussions also encompassed ASEAN collaboration, regional, and multilateral affairs. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia]

Indonesia, China forge deeper ties in AI sector

(jb) On 6 February 2024, Indonesia agreed to collaborate with China to advance its national artificial intelligence (AI) ecosystem. Nezar Patria, Deputy Minister of Communication and Information, highlighted China's pivotal role in AI technology implementation. Special programs for AI development are on the agenda to bolster cooperation.

With scientific data and machine learning at the forefront, Indonesia aims to enhance its global political standing. Nezar underscored the significance of Indonesian students in China, emphasizing mutual learning. [Tempo.co]

Australian government issues travel warning for Indonesia ahead of presidential election

(jb) The Australian government has issued a travel warning for Indonesia, including popular destinations like Bali, ahead of the presidential election on February 14. Travellers are advised to exercise caution due to potential security risks, including traffic delays and restricted access in areas where protests may occur.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) highlighted the likelihood of political rallies and protests leading up to the election, with demonstrations often occurring near government buildings and embassies. Australians are urged to avoid protests, monitor local media, and plan activities to avoid potential unrest. [Karryon] [Smartraveller.gov.au] [New Zealand Herald] [Australian Embassy Indonesia]

Japan-Russia: Prime Minister Kishida pledges to solve territorial dispute

(sh) On February 7, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio emphasized his government's commitment to resolving the territorial dispute with Russia during a national meeting in Tokyo commemorating the Northern Territories Day, which refers to the Treaty of Shimoda signed between Japan and Russia on February 7, 1855. The treaty defined the borders between the two countries and led to the opening of the ports of Nagasaki, Shimoda and Hakodate to Russian vessels and the introduction of nhe position of Russian consuls in Japan.

The dispute concerns the ownership of four islands controlled by Russia but claimed by Japan, which asserts they were unlawfully occupied by Moscow after World War II.

Kishida vowed to persist in seeking a resolution despite strained Japan-Russia relations due to Russia's actions in Ukraine.

He highlighted the importance of bilateral exchange programs, particularly for former residents of the Northern Territories, many of whom are elderly. Kishida pledged to advocate for the resumption of such exchanges. [NHK] [Office of the Prime Minister, Japan]

Japan seeks meeting with North Korea over abducted citizens

(sh) According to British newspaper Financial Times Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida seeks a meeting with North Korea's Kim Jong Un to achieve a diplomatic breakthrough in negotiations over the release of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea decades ago.

Observers, however, have cautioned against too high hopes for results, citing Kim's lack of cooperation in this matter. [Financial Times]

Japanese Prime Minister meets Kenyan President

(sh) On February 8, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida engaged in a Japan-Kenya summit meeting with President William Samoei Ruto of Kenya.

During the meeting, Kishida emphasized Japan's desire to enhance ties with Kenya, emphasizing shared values such as the "rule of law" and cooperation in promoting

the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)" initiative. President Ruto reciprocated this sentiment, expressing gratitude for the warm reception and echoing the commitment to bolster bilateral relations.

The Japanese leader announced financial aid to help Kenya address its increasing debt, partly from China, aiming to balance China's influence. They stressed the significance of fair development finance.

Key agreements were exchanged, including Memoranda of Cooperation (MoCs) related to Public-Private Partnership (PPP) in infrastructure, cooperation in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and collaboration on financial instruments. Both leaders affirmed their commitment to bolstering economic ties.

Additionally, discussions extended to international affairs, with a focus on upholding international order, ensuring peace and stability, and addressing regional challenges.

They exchanged views on the reform of the UN Security Council, the situation in East Asia, particularly concerning North Korea, and issues in the Horn of Africa and Sudan.

Amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing disruption of food supply chain for Kenia, Kishida and Ruto united against forceful changes to the status quo, committing to bolster food security in Africa. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan] [Japan News]

Japanese, Latvian foreign ministers agree to deepen cooperation

(sh) Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa and her Latvian counterpart, Krisjanis Karins, confirmed bilateral cooperation in supporting Ukraine against Russia’s invasion.

During their meeting in Tokyo, they emphasized the inseparable security of the European-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions.

With Latvia bordering Russia, Kamikawa and Karins agreed to enhance bilateral cooperation in economic sectors like energy and digital technology, but also in security and infrastructure. They also discussed China’s escalating military activities in East Asia.

Kamikawa welcomed Minister Karins’ first visit to Japan, highlighting shared values of freedom,

democracy, and the rule of law and the aim to strengthen cooperation for a free and open international order.

Minister Karins expressed Latvia's desire to deepen ties with Japan, focusing on economic partnerships and security issues. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan] [Japan News]

Japanese defense minister receives German parliamentarian delegation

(dql) On February 8, Japanese Defense Minister Kihara received a courtesy call from a German parliament delegation.

The two sides discussed defense cooperation and regional affairs, with Kihara reaffirming Japan's commitment to deepen bilateral defense cooperation and exchanges. [Ministry of Defense, Japan, via X]

Japan to support Ukraine's reconstruction

(sh) On February 11, Japan has reportedly committed to provide Yen 15.8 billion (USD 106 million) in aid to Ukraine This funding would support reconstruction efforts across seven areas, including agriculture and rubble disposal.

The news come as Prime Minister Fumio Kishida of Japan and Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal of Ukraine are expected to attend the Japan-Ukraine Conference for Promotion of Economic Reconstruction in Tokyo on February 19, along with representatives from both governments and industries.

Both governments are anticipated to finalize agreements regarding Japan's participation in Ukraine's post-war reconstruction. They are also set to sign over ten memorandums of cooperation covering various sectors such as medical care, cybersecurity, and wind farm projects.

Additionally, negotiations will commence on an investment accord aimed at facilitating Japanese company involvement in reconstruction initiatives. Furthermore, a treaty aimed at eliminating double taxation for companies operating in Ukraine is expected to be signed, signaling a deepening of economic ties between Japan and Ukraine.

However, Japan's legal restrictions prevent direct weapon shipments to countries at war, though indirect support through arms sales to the U.S. could bolster military aid capacity for Ukraine. [Reuters] [Kyodo News]

In December, announced that Patriot air defence missiles to the United States ship would Patriot air defence missiles to the United States, following a revision of the country's arms export guidelines (see AiR No. 52, December/2023, 4).

In a separate development, Japanese government officials have advocated for loosening travel restrictions to Ukraine to encourage corporate investment. Currently, Ukraine faces Japan's strictest travel advisory due to Russia's invasion, by ordering all Japanese nationals to evacuate and avoid travel there. [Japan Times]

Laos-China: Bokeo International Airport opens

(wn) Bokeo International Airport, the third largest airport in Laos, officially opened on Monday. The China-funded airport in the Tonpheung district of Bokeo province is expected to process over 2 million passengers annually. [Aviation Week] [Xinhua]

Laos, Luxembourg pledge to strengthen cooperation

(wn) Laos and Luxembourg have agreed to strengthen their education, health, economics, trade, and investment cooperation.

The agreement was reached during a meeting between Laos' Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Saleumxay Kommasith and his counterpart Xavier Bettel. The meeting was part of Bettel's visit to the Southeast Asian country on February 5-9.

During the meeting, Bettel reaffirmed Luxembourg's continued support for Laos in building the capacity of doctors by sending medical specialists from Europe and providing medical equipment.

Saleumxay, for his part, asked Luxembourg for cooperation in digital finance and e-payments to facilitate trade, investment, and tourism.

Luxembourg is a major European donor to Laos and leads the Team Europe Strategy for Laos (2021-2025), funding various programs in health, education, tourism, social welfare, banking, rural development, rule of law, and infrastructure. [Vientiane Times]

Malaysia announces consensus between Thailand and Muslim separatist rebels

(ba) On February 7, Malaysia announced that the Thai government and Muslim separatist rebels in southern Thailand have tentatively agreed on a roadmap aimed at resolving a longstanding Muslim insurgency.

Following two days of discussions in Kuala Lumpur both parties plan to reconvene over the next two months to finalize the details of the peace plan.

While Malaysia has been hosting and facilitating talks between the separatist groups and the Thai government since 2013, progress has been slow. The insurgency in Thailand's three southernmost provinces, characterized by intermittent but brutal violence such as drive-by shootings and bombings by separatists and allegations of torture and abuses by the government, has claimed nearly 7,000 lives since 2004.

The predominantly Muslim population in the southern Thai provinces, distinct in ethnicity, culture, and language from the Buddhist majority, perceives themselves as second-class citizens, garnering sympathy from many Malaysians, 60 percent of whom are Muslim.

Anas Abdulrahman, the leader of the Barisan Revolusi Nasional, the largest insurgent group in southern Thailand, expressed optimism about a lasting solution under the leadership of Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin in the new Thai government. Chatchai Bangchuad, the first civilian appointed to head the talks by the Thai government last year, emphasized that the signing of the peace plan would hinge on the outcomes of the technical discussions. [APNews]

Malaysia, Brazil agree to advocate interests of developing nations

(ba) Malaysia and Brazil have collaboratively pledged to advance and protect the interests of developing nations, with a specific focus on addressing poverty and hunger.

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim disclosed that this commitment following his discussion with Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva during a telephone conversation on February 9.

They also affirmed their dedication to bolster bilateral relations, particularly in the realms of forest management, green energy, climate change, the halal industry, science, and innovation.

Anwar further revealed that he received an invitation from President Lula to embark on an official visit to Brazil in November. [The Malay Mail]

United States affirms importance of cooperation with The Maldives

(aa) The US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Donald Lu, has confirmed that Washington is committed to strengthening cooperation with the South Asian island nation, which it views as a a key partner in ensuring a free, open, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. These remarks come after Lu completed a two-leg tour to South Asia late last month, which included visits to India and the Maldives. [NDTV]

During his time in Male, discussions centered on security priorities, economic growth, and the establishment of a permanent US embassy. Additionally, democratic governance and transparency were key topics during engagements with President Muizzu, senior state governors, civil society representatives, and higher education officials.

Mongolia, Germany elevate ties

(ap) Mongolia and Germany have elevated their bilateral ties to a strategic partnership. The move came during German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier's state visit on February 7 and 8 to mark the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

The "Joint Declaration regarding the Strategic Partnership between Mongolia and the Federal Republic of Germany" was signed by Mongolian Foreign Minister Batmunkh Battsetseg and German Minister of State at the Federal Foreign Office of Germany Tobias Lindner on February 7.

Under the new partnership the two countries agree to strengthen their cooperation in politics and security, expand their economic cooperation, and deepen their mutual interests in education and science, among others.

This includes Mongolia's support for Germany's ambition for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, while Germany will assist the East Asian country in its judicial and legal reform efforts. Further, both sides agree to expand Mongolia's vast potential for wind and solar energy assist the country in tackling climate change. Berlin also wants to provide help to improve education and to promote small and medium-sized companies. [Montsame 1][Reuters]

Besides the joint declaration, bilateral agreements were signed covering cooperation in transporting international passengers and cargo by road, archaeological cooperation, and projects to enhance the legal environment and capacity of court authorities.

During their talks, the two presidents discussed cooperation in the implementation of initiatives in international cooperation to address global challenges including climate change and desertification. [Montsame 2]

Mongolian President meets with Russian Deputy Prime Minister

(ap) Mongolian President Khurelsukh Ukhnaa met with Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexey Overchuk in Ulaanbaatar on February 6.

During the talks both sides agreed to strengthen their countries' strategic partnership and to further deepen trade and economic cooperation, with Khurelsukh Ukhnaa referring to his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2023 in Beijing which led to an agreement on reducing taxes and implementing major infrastructure projects.

Overchuk, for his part, affirmed that those agreements reached during that meeting are being implemented and put into action. He also expressed satisfaction about expansion in cooperation in energy, infrastructure, education, and humanitarian sectors. [Aki Press]

Myanmar junta issues warrant for the arrest for Casino boss wanted by Thai government

(mg) The owner of the Grand Andaman Hotel in the Tanintharyi Region is wanted by the Thai government for online gambling and tax fraud.

U Kyaw Lwin is a duel national of Myanmar and Thailand, casino owner, and reportedly has a 'near monopoly' over the fuel market in Kawthaung on the Thai border.

The resort at the southern tip of Myanmar was recently closed after Thai authorities issued the warrant, during a wider crackdown by Thailand's Department of Special Investigations on the 'Kofuk' network[DL2] .

According to reports, the network launders money from online gambling. The two regimes had agreed to cooperate in their missions to target online fraud syndicates along the border, and U Kyaw Kwin is the first target. [The Irrawaddy]

Bangladesh summons Myanmar ambassador over casualties along shared border

(jw) Bangladesh summoned Ambassador Aung Kyaw Moe to receive a protest note regarding the escalating border violence between the rebel armed forces and military regime that killed two people in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's Border Guard said that at least 264 Myanmar border guards and police have fled to Bangladesh last week.

Simultaneously, several hundred people, primarily Chakma and some Rohingya groups, are trying to enter Bangladesh from Myanmar. [Reuters]

Bangladesh refuses entry of more Rohingya refugees

(jw) Bangladesh said on February 7 that it will not allow any more Rohingya refugees from Myanmar to enter the country.

Currently, about one million Rohingyas live in cramped, bamboo-and-plastic camps in border districts of Cox's

Bazar. Myanmar's military regime has denied the Rohingya citizenship, preventing Bangladesh from repatriating the ethnic group back to the Rakhine State in Myanmar.

Mohammad Mizanur Rahman, Bangladesh's refugee relief and repatriation commissioner in Cox's Bazar, that Bangladesh was "overburdened" by Rohingya, adding that keeping the Rohingya there has become a threat to Bangladesh's border security. Instead, he called on humanitarian organizations to assist the refugees. [Reuters]

China assures Nepal that six key projects will be expedited

(lm) China has assured Nepal that six key projects will be expedited, signaling a renewed commitment to advancing infrastructure initiatives in the country. The assurance was conveyed by China's envoy to Nepal in a recent meeting with Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, with plans for groundwork to commence after the conclusion of the Chinese New Year holidays. This pledge comes amidst criticisms of slow progress in Chinese-funded projects in Nepal and concerns over Beijing's adherence to past agreements. [The Kathmandu Post]

This assurance comes after Nepal's Deputy Prime Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha said late last month that the two countries would sign the implementation plan of the Belt and Road Initiative very soon, nearly seven years after the two neighbors inked an agreement to undertake ambitious Beijing-backed infrastructure projects in the Himalayan nation. [Business Standard]

Of note, both of these developments follow a visit to Nepal by Sun Haiyan, the Vice Minister of the International Liaison Department of the Communist Party of China.

USAID announces USD 1.37 million to support earthquake recovery efforts in Nepal

(lm) The United States government, through USAID, has pledged USD 1.37 million to aid recovery efforts in Jajarkot, Nepal, following the devastating earthquake in November last year. USAID's assistance, facilitated by Save the Children, aims to help affected communities

endure the winter, rebuild from the earthquake's destruction, and ultimately enhance resilience. Immediate relief efforts included distributing essential supplies, water quality kits, and support for physical rehabilitation. Additionally, USAID has invested over USD 23.3 million in disaster risk reduction and resilience in Karnali since 2019, with ongoing plans for long-term recovery, reconstruction, and rehabilitation efforts. [The Himalayan Times]

Nepal, Australia sign trade and investment framework arrangement

(lm) Nepal and Australia have signed a trade and investment framework arrangement. Nepali Ambassador Kailash Raj Pokharel and Australian Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs Tim Watts signed the agreement, witnessed by Foreign Minister NP Saud and his Australian counterpart Penny Wong. The ministers discussed mutual interests during a bilateral meeting following the signing. [The Kathmandu Post]

Foreign Minister Saud is in Australia to attend the 7th Indian Ocean Conference. Additionally, he will hold meetings with delegates from various countries and visit New Zealand for bilateral discussions with Foreign Minister Winston Peters. Minister Saud is accompanied by officials and is expected to return to Nepal on February 15.

North Korea and Russia plan new agreements

(ap) President Vladimir Putin is expected to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, according to the Russian Ambassador to North Korea Alexander Matsegora.

Matsegora unveiled this in a February 7 interview with Russian news agency TASS, adding that the meeting will see the signing of a package of agreements between the two sides, currently being prepared.

Matsegora's announcement came just after a day earlier Deputy U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Robert Wood claimed at an UN Security Council meeting that Russia used Pyongyang-supplied ballistic missiles against Ukraine at least nine times. [NK News] [Reuters]

North Korea scraps inter-Korean economic cooperation

(ap) The North Korean parliament decided to abolish the law on economic cooperation with South Korea. The Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) unanimously scrapped the law on inter-Korean cooperation and the legislation on the Kumgangsan special tourism zone.

The assembly also put an end to laws on the operation of the Mount Kumgang tourism project that involves tours to the scenic mountain just north of the eastern border and that was a symbol of economic cooperation. It commenced during a period of engagement between the two Koreas in the early 2000s and has seen some two million South Korean visitors. [NK News]

This announcement comes amid deteriorating inter-Korean relations after North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in a speech in the parliament in January called for a change in the constitution to designate South Korea as the "principal enemy", with which unification was no longer possible (see AiR No. 3, January/2024, 3).

Germany commits EUR 45 million for bilateral projects in Pakistan

(nw) Germany has committed EUR 45 million to Pakistan for launching new bilateral cooperation projects focusing on climate and energy, economic development, social protection, and population policy issues. The newly commissioned projects align with Germany's thematic areas of development cooperation, covering climate and energy, sustainable economic development, health, and social protection. [Dawn]

Pakistan, Russia discuss security issues, military use of artificial intelligence

(nw) The 14th round of the Pakistan-Russia Consultative Group on Strategic Stability convened in Moscow, chaired by Pakistan's Additional Foreign Secretary Mohammad Kamran Akhtar and Deputy Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs S.A. Ryabkov. [Anadolu Ajansi] [MOFA Pakistan]

The discussions delved into a wide array of critical issues concerning international security and regional stability, including arms control, disarmament, and

non-proliferation. Moreover, the consultations extended to contemporary security domains like biological, space, and international information security, with special emphasis on emerging technologies, including the military applications of artificial intelligence.

The 15th meeting of the Group is scheduled to take place in Islamabad next year.

Kyrgyzstan interested in boosting business ties with Pakistan

(nw) Kyrgyzstan's ambassador to Pakistan has emphasized the importance of enhancing business ties between the two countries, highlighting the potential for cooperation across various sectors. He encouraged the exchange of business delegations to explore joint ventures and partnerships. Currently, Kyrgyzstan imports pharmaceuticals, sports goods, and other products from Pakistan while exporting dry fruits and agricultural products. [Tribune]

The Philippines, United States hold third joint patrol in South China Sea in less than three months

(lm) The Philippines and the United States last week conducted their third joint patrol in the South China Sea within a span of three months, demonstrating enhanced interoperability amidst tensions with China. The maritime activity involved combat and patrol ships, as well as helicopters. [Bloomberg]

Military drills with Philippines unaffected by Washington's focus on Ukraine, Gaza, US general says

(lb) Despite ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, the United States remains committed to its annual combat exercises with the Philippines, its oldest treaty ally in Asia, according to Maj. Gen. Marcus Evans, commanding general of the U.S. Army's 25th Infantry Division. These exercises, involving thousands of troops, are pivotal for strengthening military alliances in the Indo-Pacific region and enhancing deterrence against potential adversaries, particularly China. [ABC News]

The annual drills, such as Salaknib and Balikatan, serve to improve interoperability between US and Philippine forces. Balikatan, in particular, has seen significant participation from both sides, with over 17,600 military personnel involved in recent years. These exercises, which include jungle training and evaluations of joint operational capabilities, underscore the importance of readiness and cooperation in addressing regional security challenges.

Canada pledges USD 28.15 million to the Philippines for climate, healthcare efforts

(lb) Canada has pledged USD 28.15 million to support climate adaptation, disaster resilience, and healthcare in the Philippines. Initiatives include projects by Forest Foundation Philippines, Alinea International, and Plan International Canada. [Philstar]

Singapore's ambassador stresses three prominent areas for closer cooperation with Vietnam in 2024

(lb) Singapore's ambassador to Vietnam has highlighted innovation energy connectivity, and sustainability as key areas for closer collaboration between the two countries in 2024, while also emphasizing the importance of leveraging bilateral cooperation, particularly in areas like the Green and Digital Economic Partnership.[Vietnam Plus]

Kazakhstan ratifies agreement with Singapore on promotion, mutual protection of investments

(lb) President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan has signed a law ratifying an agreement with Singapore on the promotion and mutual protection of investments. The agreement aims to encourage and create favorable conditions for investors from both countries, aligning with national legislation and economic policies. It ensures fair and equitable treatment for investments, along with full protection and security in accordance with international law. [Astana Times]

This follows a similar agreement signed with Qatar on February 2.

Russian Ambassador Georgy Zinoviev on South Korea-Russia relations

(oy) On February 6, South Korean news outlet Yonhap News Agency interviewed Russian Ambassador to South Korea Georgy Zinoviev. The interview comes a few days after South Korea and Russia sparred over President Yoon Suk Yeol's remarks on North Korea. Yoon had criticized North Korea for ignoring international law and UN Security Council resolutions, leading Russian foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova to label Yoon's comments as "blatantly biased" (see. AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1).

Zinoviev said that South Korea-Russia bilateral relations has worsened but has yet to "hit rock bottom". He added that Russia is prioritizing maintaining the South Korea-Russia relations status-quo and does not want a worsening of relations, hoping to "bring the relationship back to a constructive and normal trajectory" [**Yonhap**]. Zinoviev added that there are still communications between South Korea and Russia, despite the recent spat over Yoon's remarks.

South Korea-Russia relations has been strained due to Russia's war in Ukraine and Russia's growing military cooperation with North Korea. Tensions increased after South Korea's Defence Minister Shin Won-sik previously suggested providing military aid to Ukraine [Asia News Network]. Zinoviev said that South Korea providing weapons to Ukraine would be a "red line" to Russia and should not be crossed. He emphasised that South Korea-Russia relations can be maintained due to South Korea only providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

On South Korea being on Russia's list of unfriendly nations, Zinoviev urged South Korea to remove its sanctions on Russia. South Korea has imposed sanctions and tightened export controls of sensitive items to Russia, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Zinoviev said that sanctions were unhelpful towards maintaining South Korea-Russia relations.

When asked about Russia's military cooperation with North Korea, Zinoviev denied them, describing claims of military cooperations as "groundless and unverified" accusations. Russia's official position has been to deny the existence of any military cooperation with North Korea. [Anadolu Agency]

Zinoviev concluded the interview by expressing his commitment to making positive progress with South

Korea during his ambassadorship, highlighting the long history between the two countries. He claimed that Russia is ready to improve bilateral relations but also "needs the same mindset" from South Korean officials. [Yonhap]

South Korea expresses regret over comments by Russia's ambassador to North Korea

(oy) On February 8, South Korea has expressed strong regret over comments made by Russia's Ambassador to North Korea, Alexander Matsegora.

In an interview with Russian news agency TASS, Matsegora suggested that North Korea might conduct another nuclear test is US "continues taking provocative steps in the region." [TASS]

He criticized the US and its allies for speculating about North Korea's nuclear activities and justified North Korea's nuclear development as a defensive measure.

In response, South Korean foreign ministry spokesperson Lim Soo-suk defended South Korea-US security measures as necessary for the safety of the South Korean people and emphasized the increasing need for trilateral security cooperation among South Korea, the US, and Japan in light of ongoing military threats from Russia and North Korea. [Yonhap] [South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs] [Yonhap]

South Korea, Qatar sign agreement to enhance defense cooperation

(oy) South Korea and Qatar have signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to strengthen bilateral defense cooperation. This agreement was reached during a meeting between South Korean Defense Minister Shin Won-sik and Qatari Deputy Prime Minister Khalid bin Mohamed Al Attiyah.

The MOU will facilitate regular ministerial-level discussions on defense and the establishment of a structural basis for defense cooperation. South Korea and Qatar also agreed to enhance cooperation in several defense sectors, such as promoting interaction between defense-related institutions and broadening joint exercises. This agreement follows a state visit to Qatar by South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol in October 2023, where an agreement was reached to

elevate their relations to a “comprehensive strategic partnership.”

Shin’s visit to Qatar was part of a week-long visit to Middle East countries as part of efforts to boost defense cooperation. Shin had earlier visited the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, where he met the respective defense ministers of both countries (see. AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1).

During Shin’s visit, he secured a USD 3.2 billion deal to export the Cheongung II ballistic missile interceptor system to Saudi Arabia. [South Korea Ministry of National Defense] [The Korea Herald]

South Korea foreign minister holds phone discussion with Canadian counterpart

(oy) On February 8, South Korea’s Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul held a phone discussion with Canada’s Foreign Minister, Melanie Joly. Both ministers discussed bilateral relations and ways to enhance cooperation in various fields.

Cho and Joly agreed to continue efforts to implement action plans in five areas, including security, defense, climate change, and technology, following up on last year’s summit between South Korea President Yoon Suk Yeol and Canada’s Prime Minister Justin Trudeau; where both countries bilateral status was elevated to a “comprehensive strategic partnership”. [Prime Minister of Canada]

Both ministers also discussed North Korea’s recent provocations and its growing military cooperation with Russia. Cho acknowledged Canada’s efforts in joining the international community to condemn North Korea’s actions and monitor North Korea’s illicit activities. Additionally, Cho sought Canada’s support for South Korea’s efforts to expand cooperation with the Group of Seven countries. [Yonhap] [South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

South Korea Chief Nuclear Envoy meets Swedish Special Envoy

(oy) On February 7, South Korea’s Chief Nuclear Envoy, Kim Gunn, met Swedish Special Envoy for the Korean Peninsula Peter Semneby.

Kim reaffirmed South Korea’s commitment to halting North Korea’s missile provocations and resuming

denuclearization talks with North Korea. He emphasized that denuclearizing North Korea is crucial for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and is a shared goal of the international community.

Semneby outlined Sweden's diplomatic efforts regarding North Korea's nuclear and missile issues and pledged to maintain close communication with South Korea. Sweden has previously hosted talks between North Korea, South Korea and US in 2019 [Reuters], although no progress was achieved. [Yonhap] [South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

South Korea foreign minister meets Swiss foreign minister

(oy) On February 7, South Korea Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul met Switzerland Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis in Seoul. They discussed bilateral relations, international cooperation, and major regional developments.

Cho praised Switzerland's chairmanship of the UN Security Council, where South Korea and Switzerland are both currently non-permanent members. Both ministers agreed to work closely for international peace and security.

Cho and Cassis discussed North Korea's nuclear program and human rights record, with Cassis pledging Switzerland's continued support for South Korea's efforts to denuclearize North Korea. They also discussed the situation in Ukraine and agreed to participate in international efforts to end the war and restore peace.

Cho and Cassis also agreed to further deepen bilateral cooperation, particularly in high-tech fields such as quantum technology and biotechnology. [Yonhap] [South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

South Korea begins joint exercise with US Marines

(oy) South Korean and US Marines have begun a three-week combined exercise in Pohang, a southeastern coastal city in South Korea, to enhance their joint combat capabilities. The exercise involves around 400 marines from both countries and various military equipment, including amphibious assault vehicles, unmanned aerial vehicles, K1A2 tanks, and helicopters.

The focus of the exercise is to improve combined operational capabilities and strengthen South Korea-US alliance. A US Marine Corps Major, Joshua Burchfield, said that their continuing alliance with the Republic of Korea Marine Corps is crucial for maintaining regional security and stability. [Yonhap]

Sri Lankan court releases six Indian fishermen; protests by Indian fishermen in Tamil Nadu state

(lm) A Sri Lankan court on February 6 released six Indian fishermen who were arrested last month on charges of poaching in the territorial waters of the island nation. The fishermen were handed over to the Indian consulate general office in Jaffna after their release. [adaderana.lk]

Meanwhile, fishermen in India's southern town of Rameswaram staged a strike on February 3 following the arrest of 23 fishermen by the Sri Lankan navy earlier the same day. They urged the state government of Tamil Nadu and the central government to secure the release of the detained fishermen and their 150 boats currently in Sri Lankan custody.

Chief Minister of India's Tamil Nadu state writes to prime minister for release of fishermen from Sri Lanka

(aa) The chief minister of India's southern Tamil Nadu state, M K Stalin, has urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to intervene diplomatically to secure the release of Tamil Nadu 77 fishermen and 151 fishing vessels detained by Sri Lankan authorities. [Sunday Observer]

Stalin highlighted distressing statistics: 243 fishermen and 37 boats were seized by the Sri Lankan navy in 2023, with an additional 88 fishermen and 12 boats detained in the past 28 days. Furthermore, the chief minister drew attention to the rising frequency of attacks on Tamil fishermen and the damages inflicted on their vessels and equipment by unidentified assailants at sea.

Additionally, Stalin highlighted the detrimental impact of Sri Lanka's amended Fisheries Act of 2018, which enables the nationalization of foreign fishing vessels. This legislation has led to the confiscation of Indian fishing boats in good condition, preventing their salvage and return to Tamil Nadu.

In addition to the Sri Lankan situation, Stalin also called upon the prime minister to initiate diplomatic efforts to secure the release of fishermen from Gujarat who were detained by Pakistani authorities on in January as well as the four fishermen detained by Kuwait Coastal Police in December last year.

Sri Lankan President, Western Australia Premier discuss renewable energy, agriculture

(aa) During his visit to Australia for the Seventh Indian Ocean Conference, Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe met with the premier of Australia's Western Australia state, Roger Cook, in Perth. [Daily News]

Premier Cook expressed interest in renewable energy and agricultural development, as well as establishing direct aviation connections between Sri Lanka and Perth. He highlighted Perth's strategic location on the Indian Ocean as an opportunity for closer ties with South Asian nations. President Wickremesinghe discussed Sri Lanka's efforts in renewable energy development and modernizing agriculture, inviting investment in these sectors.

US senate approves comprehensive 95 billion USD foreign aid that includes Taiwan

(xc) The US Senate has passed a substantial foreign aid bill, totaling 95.34 billion USD, aimed at supporting key international allies and humanitarian efforts. The bill, which saw a vote of 67-32 in favor, earmarks significant funds for Ukraine, Israel, Taiwan, and other Indo-Pacific partners, reflecting the United States' strategic priorities and commitments abroad.

The allocation includes 61 billion USD for Ukraine, underscoring continued US support amidst ongoing conflicts. Israel is set to receive 14 billion USD, reinforcing the longstanding US-Israeli partnership. Taiwan and other Indo-Pacific allies are allocated 4.83 billion USD, highlighting the region's importance to US foreign policy and security interests.

Senator Chuck Schumer praised the bill as a crucial step for national and allied security, as well as for providing much-needed humanitarian aid. The Senate's approval marks the beginning of further

negotiations to finalize the bill's provisions, with its progression through the House of Representatives yet to be determined. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan monitors Chinese military and balloon activities

(xc/jr) Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND) reported heightened surveillance activity, tracking five Chinese military aircraft and four naval vessels around its borders from February 9 to 10.

Notably, two of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) aircraft breached the median line of the Taiwan Strait, venturing into the southwest sector of Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ), prompting Taiwan to deploy its own aircraft, naval ships, and land-based missile systems in response.

Adding to the complexity of the situation, the MND also observed eight Chinese balloons at various times on February 9, marking an unusual addition to the usual military presence. These balloons were monitored closely until they disappeared later in the day. [**Taiwan News**]

Guatemala reaffirms ties with Taiwan

(jr/dql) Guatemalan President Bernardo Arevalo reaffirmed in a statement on February 8 that he is not intending to severe breaking diplomatic relations with Taiwan although his country is seeking to deepen economic links with China. He vowed to strengthen ties with each side in parallel. [Reuters]

Arevalo's remark comes after Nauru in January severed ties with Taiwan to establish diplomatic relations with China, reducing the number of Taiwan's allies to 12 (see AiR No. 3, January/2024, 3).

In a separate move, Taiwan's foreign ministry condemned a call of China's to Guatemalan Foreign Minister Carlos Martinez that followed a media interview of Martinez on trade relations with Beijing and in which China urged Taiwan's Central American ally to make a "right decision," in line with the "one China principle." [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan] [Taiwan Today]

Tokyo governor advocates for stronger Taiwan-Japan collaboration

(xc) During her visit to Taipei on February 7, Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike, alongside a delegation, emphasized the importance of enhancing Taiwan-Japan cooperation in various fields, including digital development and startup incubation.

Koike's remarks came during her meeting with Taiwan's President-elect Lai Ching-te at the Presidential Office, highlighting the longstanding collaborative efforts between the two regions, especially in disaster response and search and rescue operations.

Governor Koike's visit, marked by discussions on mutual support and learning from past disaster management experiences, sets the stage for future collaborative ventures that promise to strengthen ties and foster innovation.

President-elect Lai, who will assume office on May 20, expressed optimism for expanded cooperation with Japan, aiming to contribute to regional peace and stability while reaffirming his commitment to protecting Taiwan and maintaining the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. [**Taipei Times**]

Canada criticizes China for unilateral flight route changes around Taiwan

(jr) More than 20 Canadian lawmakers urged the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to address China’s unilateral modification of flight routes in a letter published on February 8.

The Canada-Taiwan Parliamentary Friendship Group Chair, Judy Sgro, demanded a response of ICAO head Salvatore Sciacchitano to China changing its M503, W121, W122, and W123 flight routes without prior consultations with Taiwan, calling it a move that “seriously jeopardizes aviation safety, peace and stability in the region but also undermines the status quo across the Taiwan Strait.”

The move came after the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) announced that effective 1 February, the flight "offset measure" for its M503 route, which operates from north to south, will be canceled.

Chinese flights flying southbound over the Taiwan Strait would now be closer to the median line, Taiwan's flight information region, and air defense identification zone.

The CAAC also said it would allow its W122 and W123 routes to run eastward to "improve the efficiency of airspace operations."

In the USA, the Department of State expressed concern about the changes without consulting Taiwan. [Taiwan News]

92 Thai nationals rescued from forced labor in Myanmar

(bk) 92 Thai nationals, lured to work in Myanmar's casinos in the Myawaddy district, are set to return home next week after being rescued by Myanmar authorities. Promised high wages, they became victims of forced labor with little to no pay. [Thai PBS World]

The group of Thai nationals were among many, including Chinese nationals, exploited in illegal enterprises controlled by criminal syndicates. The casinos were part of the Yatai special economic zone, across from Thailand's Mae Sot and Mae Ramat districts. The zone was developed by Chinese businessman She Zhijiang, who was arrested by Thai police in 2022 and deported to China for operating illegal gambling businesses.

Thailand-United State talks set to address Myanmar crisis, security partnership, regional connectivity

(lm) Thailand's Foreign Affairs Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara is currently on an official visit to the United States, with discussions set to cover a range of crucial topics including the Myanmar civil war, enhancing security partnership, and regional connectivity through Thailand’s proposed Land Bridge project. Key figures from both countries, including US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, Senators Chris Van Hollen and Tammy Duckworth, and Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo, are expected to participate in the talks. [Thai PBS World] [Thaiger]

Thailand’s deputy foreign affairs minister meets with senior Luxembourg officials

(tt) On February 9, Thailand's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Jakkapong Sangmanee hosted a luncheon for Luxembourg's Deputy Prime Minister and

Minister for Foreign Affairs, Xavier Bettel, during his official visit to Bangkok. Discussions centered on trade, investment facilitation, pending bilateral agreements, and cooperation in various sectors such as high-performance computing, AI, and infrastructure development in Laos. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

Vietnam's foreign minister hosts Chinese senior diplomat in Hanoi

(lm) Vietnam's Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son held discussions with China's Assistant Foreign Minister Nong Rong, who also serves as the Secretary General of the Steering Committee for China-Vietnam Bilateral Cooperation, on February 5 in Hanoi. The focus was on intensifying strategic cooperation, emphasizing the implementation of agreements made by senior leaders, and enhancing practical cooperation across different sectors. [Voice of Vietnam]

China, Vietnam resume irregular passenger transport route between Gejiu and Sa Pa

(wn) Local transport departments in China and Vietnam have agreed to reopen an irregular passenger transport route between Gejiu, China, and Sa Pa, Vietnam. The route, previously operational from July 2018 to late 2019, was suspended in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This decision is anticipated to foster socio-economic growth, tourism development, and cultural exchanges between the two provinces. [The Star]

South Australia halts central Vietnam students' admittance amid disappearances

(wn) The education department in Australia's southern state South Australia has halted applications from students in three central Vietnamese provinces – Nghe An, Ha Tinh and Quang Binh – due to recent disappearances. Since December last year, four Vietnamese students have vanished in South Australia and authorities believe the students may be avoiding detection. As of October 2023, Vietnam ranked sixth in the number of students studying in Australia. [VnExpress]

Announcements

Upcoming online events

14 February 2024 @ 9:30-11:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Wilson Center, USA

What's Next for Pakistan, Post-Election?

This online event will bring together a panel of current and former Wilson Center fellows to discuss the election outcome and what it might mean for Pakistan's politics, society, economy, security, and foreign affairs, including relations with the United States.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

14 February 2024 @ 2:00-3:00 p.m. (GMT-8), The Heritage Foundation, USA

Securing Sovereign Borders in an Age of Mass Migration

Join this event to get an overview of the U.K. border crisis, and discuss a way forward for the U.S. and U.K. to secure their borders.

For more information, visit [**The Heritage Foundation**].

14 February 2024 @ 8:30-9:30 a.m. (GMT-8), Stimson Center, USA

Japan as a Defender of a Liberal International Order

Join this online event for a discussion on Japan's role in defending the liberal international order with Dr. Yuichi Hosoya.

For more information, visit [**Stimson**].

14 February 2024 @ 12:00-1:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Belfer Center, USA

AI Cyber Lunch: "The Future of AI in Cybersecurity"

Join the Science, Technology, and Public Policy Program for an AI Cyber Lunch featuring information security executive and social scientist Tarah Wheeler.

For more information, visit [Belfer].

14 February 2024 @ 3:00-4:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Venezuela's Deteriorating Electoral Conditions: A Conversation with María Corina Machado

This event will feature opposition leader María Corina Machado, who won over 90% of the votes in the opposition's primary election but who remains barred by the Maduro regime from participating in the presidential election. Machado will discuss the presidential campaign, necessary electoral reforms, and the state of play in Venezuela.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

14 February 2024 @ 8:30-9:30 a.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Building International Support for Taiwan - Report Launch

The discussion will feature author Jude Blanchette, Freeman Chair in China Studies at CSIS, who will distill takeaways and explore implications for Washington, Taiwan, and partner capitals.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

14 February 2024 @ 10:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

A new era for US-Guatemala economic relations

In this event, speakers will discuss, in what ways can Guatemala's government foster an environment that encourages economic growth and development. What role does public and private sector collaboration play in fostering economic opportunities and attracting foreign investment? How can the High-Level Economic Dialogue enhance US and Guatemalan efforts and synchronize their strategies for economic-related goals, including those about nearshoring?

For more information, visit [Atlantic Council].

15 February 2024 @ 12:30 p.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

Containing the Kremlin: How to stop Russia's revisionism

This conference demonstrates expert and bipartisan congressional support for exploring a renewed policy of containment towards Russia and its partners' policy of encroaching authoritarianism and revanchist foreign policy.

For more information, visit [Atlantic Council].

15 February 2024 @ 1:00-2:30 p.m. (GMT-5), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA

Should Ukraine Have Kept Nuclear Weapons? Deconstructing the Decision to Disarm

This talk features Dr. Mariana Budjeryn. In her new book Inheriting the Bomb: The Collapse of the USSR and the Nuclear Disarmament of Ukraine, she uses extensive archival research to shed light on the perceptions and decisions of Ukrainian leaders as they sought to secure Ukraine's independence. Her research provides a timely, nuanced understanding of how Ukraine's nuclear story should inform states

contemplating the acquisition of nuclear weapons and those seeking to persuade them not to.

For more information, visit [Carnegie].

15 February 2024 @ 2:30-4:30 p.m. (GMT-5), United States Institute of Peace, USA

The Indo-Pacific Strategy in Action: Commemorating the Second Anniversary

Join USIP, in collaboration with the U.S. State Department, for a conversation on the economic components of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the strategic alliances formed under this framework, and the milestones achieved since its inaugural date.

For more information, visit [USIP].

15 February 2024 @ 3:00-4:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Report Launch: China's Role in Democratic Backsliding in Latin America and the Caribbean

Join the CSIS Americas Program for the launch of a new report assessing China's role in democratic backsliding observed in Latin America and the Caribbean, followed by an in-depth expert discussion on democracy, autocracy, and the evolving role of China in the Western Hemisphere.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

15 February 2024 @ 10:00-11:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Perspectives on Trade: A Conversation with Rep. Earl Blumenauer

This webcast will offer a discussion with Earl Blumenauer of Oregon's 3rd District about the role of Congress in crafting and enacting trade policy.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

15 February 2024 @ 10:00-10:45 a.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Fireside Chat with Luca De Angelis on AI Governance at the Italian G7 Presidency

In this talk, Mr. De Angelis will outline Italy's role in leading international AI governance efforts and offer new insight into Italy's vision for this year's G7, including for upcoming platforms such as the March Ministerial meetings on Industry, Tech, and Digital.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

15 February 2024 @ 10:00-11:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Foreign Policy Research Institute, USA

The BRICS Expansion: What Are the Implications?

In this panel discussion experts will discuss the implications of the BRICS expansion for the global economy.

For more information, visit [FPRI].

16 February 2024 @ 1:00-3:30 p.m. (GMT+9), Asian Development Bank, Japan

Online Book Launch – Building Resilient Societies: Insights from Post-Disaster Recovery in Asia and the Pacific

Navigating Resilient Post-Disaster Recovery in Asia and the Pacific, a new book published by ADBI Press, addresses the importance of resilient recovery in the aftermath of disasters, emphasizing the Asia and Pacific region while holding global relevance. It explores the complex process of post-disaster reconstruction, drawing from various expert analyses and real-world case studies to offer actionable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and academics.

For more information, visit [Asian Development Bank].

16 February 2024 @ 10:00-10:45 a.m. (GMT-5), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA

U.S. Policy and the Israel-Hamas War: A Conversation with Ambassador David Satterfield

In this talk, Ambassador David Satterfield, the State Department special envoy for Middle East humanitarian issues, will answer to questions: What is the future for Palestinians in Gaza? How does the Biden administration envision the proverbial day after? And what are the prospects for converting this crisis into a better pathway to a two-state solution and closer ties between Israel and the Arab world?

For more information, visit [Carnegie].

16 February 2024 @ 3:00 p.m. (GMT+1), International Crisis Group, Belgium

The War in Ukraine Two Years on Today's Challenges and Europe's Future

In this event, Crisis Group experts will discuss the biggest challenges facing Kyiv and its Western backers and options to address them; the uncertain future of U.S. support and its implications for Ukraine and Europe; the sustainability of Russia's war of attrition; and prospects for diplomacy and the future of European European security.

For more information, visit [Crisis Group].

19 February 2024 @ 5:00-6:00 p.m. (GMT), Chatham House, UK

The case for conservative internationalism

In this roundtable, the discussion will be about The US Republican party which is undergoing a transformation that will have long-lasting implications for the future of the party. Historically, the Republican Party has advocated for a foreign policy that advances US interests globally, including working with allies to promote shared values and advocating for free trade. What prospect is there for a Republican party that embraces an internationalist foreign policy?

For more information, visit [Chatham].

20 February 2024 @ 1:00-8:30 p.m. (GMT+9), Asian Development Bank, Japan

JICA-NHSRCL-ADBI-JARTS Knowledge-Sharing Workshop: Quality Control of Steel Bridges during Construction and Achieving Durability of Assets

Join this event for a groundbreaking workshop and field trip bridging Japanese expertise with Indian aspirations in high-speed rail construction. Delve into global perspectives, explore steel bridge construction insights, and engage in dynamic discussions to drive quality and innovation in India's high-speed rail endeavors.

For more information, visit [Asian Development Bank].

20 February 2024 @ 12:30-2:00 p.m. (GMT+1), Bruegel, Belgium

Navigating public opinion dynamics for responsive governance

This upcoming event aims to delve into how survey data can improve evidence-based policy-making.

For more information, visit [Bruegel].

20 February 2024 @ 3:30-4:30 p.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

A Conversation with U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield on U.S. Diplomacy in the Pacific Islands

During this talk, Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield will share her thoughts on priorities for U.S. engagement in the Pacific and discuss how the United States and the international community can best meet the needs of this critical region.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

20 February 2024 @ 2:00-3:15 p.m. (GMT-5), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA

Pivotal States: The Iranian Challenge

Join the director of the Carnegie Endowment's American Statecraft Program, Christopher S. Chivvis, for a special in-person edition of the Pivotal States series and a discussion of Washington's strategic alternatives in its policy toward Iran with Suzanne Maloney and Karim Sadjadpour.

For more information, visit **[Carnegie].**

20 February 2024 @ 9:30-10:15 a.m. (GMT-5), Wilson Center, USA

Is China Hungry for Low-Carbon Beef?: A Green Tea Chat on Deforestation and Agricultural Commodities with André Vasconcelos and Ren Peng

In this talk, Jennifer Turner will sit down with André Vasconcelos (Global Canopy) and Ren Peng (Global Environmental Institute) for a Green Tea Chat to discuss how the carbon footprint of major agricultural commodities is a key issue that needs cooperation between producer and consumer countries.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

Recent book releases

Dirk-Jan Koch, ***Foreign Aid and Its Unintended Consequences***, Routledge, 236 pages, published September 27, 2023. For a review, see [LSE Review of Books].

Ed Atkins, ***A Just Energy Transition: Getting Decarbonisation Right in a Time of Crisis***, Bristol University Press, 248 pages, published July 28, 2023, reviewed in [LSE Review of Books].

Robert D. Kaplan, **The Loom of Time: Between Empire and Anarchy, from the Mediterranean to China**, Random House, 348 pages, published August 22, 2023. Find a review at [Asian Review of Books].

Isaac McKean Scarborough, ***Moscow's Heavy Shadow: The Violent Collapse of the USSR***, Cornell University Press, 294 pages, published August 15, 2023. For a brief review, see [Foreign Affairs].

David Keen, ***When Disasters Come Home: Making and Manipulating Emergencies In The West***, Polity, 288 pages, published July 3, 2023, reviewed in [Foreign Affairs].

Shibani Mahtani, and **Timothy McLaughlin**, ***Among the Braves: Hope, Struggle, and Exile in the Battle for Hong Kong and the Future of Global Democracy***, Hachette Books, 336 pages, published November 7, 2023. A review is available at [CHA].

Marlene L. Daut, ***Awakening the Ashes: An Intellectual History of the Haitian Revolution***, The University of North Carolina Press, 440 pages, published October 17, 2023. For a review, visit [Los Angeles Review of Books].

Calls

The **National Changhua University of Education, Taiwan**, invites paper proposals for its ***Twenty-First International Conference on Technology, Knowledge, and Society on "Learning from Artificial Intelligence: Pedagogical Futures and Transformative Possibilities,"*** to be held on April 25-26, 2025, in Changhua City, Taiwan. The advance abstract submission deadline is June 25, 2024, the late abstract submission deadline is March 25, 2025. For more information, see [techandsoc.com].

The **Erasmus School of Law** invites paper proposals for its ***conference "Law, Regulation and Technology: Healthy, Sustainable, and Safe Smart Cities"*** to be held on 26-27 June 2024. The deadline for abstract submission is March 25, 2024. For more information, see [Erasmus School of Law].

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 at [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 at [CPG].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Youth Economic Empowerment Specialist** to be based in Jordan. Applications are accepted until February 25, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Project Analyst** to be based in Amman, Jordan. Applications are accepted until February 25, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Project Associate** to be based in Kabul, Afghanistan. Applications are accepted until February 23, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Procurement Analyst** to be based in Yangon, Myanmar. Applications are accepted until February 23, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **National Project Officer: Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrants Smuggling** to be based in Juba, South Sudan. Applications are accepted until February 23, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Food Security and Nutrition Junior Consultant Consultant** to be based in Italy. Applications are accepted until February 24, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Programme Policy Officer** to be based in Abuja, Nigeria. Applications are accepted until February 23, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Programme Policy Officer** to be based in Indonesia. Applications are accepted until February 23, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Social Protection Junior Consultant** to be based in Italy. Applications are accepted until February 23, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Programme Assistant** to be based in Sonipat, India. Applications are accepted until February 22, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **WASH Cluster Coordinator** to be based in Gaza, Palestinian Territory. Applications are accepted until February 21, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **Programme Assistant** to be based in New York, United States. Applications are accepted until February 26, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks an **Administrative Assistant** to be based in Panama City, Panama. Applications are accepted until February 23, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **Fundraising Specialist** to be based in Panama City, Panama. Applications are accepted until February 26, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **Child Protection Officer** to be based in Ciudad Guayana, Venezuela. Applications are accepted until February 23, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **communications Manager**, to be based in Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo. Applications are accepted until March 1, 2024. More information is provided at [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks an **Advisor, Professional Education in Human Resources for Health** to be based in Washington DC, United States. Applications are accepted until March 1, 2024. More information is provided at [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Programme Management Officer** to be based in Multiple locations. Applications are accepted until March 2, 2024. More information is provided at [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks an **Advisor, Environmental Public Health** to be based in Bridgetown, Barbados. Applications are accepted until March 1, 2024. More information is provided at [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Communications Support Officer** to be based in Moscow, Russia. Applications are accepted until March 1, 2024. More information is provided at [WHO].

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 at [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariate (UN)** seeks a **Legal Officer** to be based in New York, United States. Applications are accepted until March 23, 2024. More information is provided at [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariate (UN)** seeks a **Communications Officer** to be based in New York, United States. Applications are accepted until March 24, 2024. More information is provided at [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariate (UN)** seeks a **Leave No One Behind Assessment Coordinator - National Consultant** to be based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Applications are accepted until February 20, 2024. More information is provided at [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariate (UN)** seeks a **LIAISON OFFICER** to be based in Abyei, Sudan. Applications are accepted until February 25, 2024. More information is provided at [UN].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Caseworker**, to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until March 25, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Program Specialist** to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until April 9, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Rohingya Interpreter** to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until April 1, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Youth Success Specialist** to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until April 9, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Global Data Scientist**, to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until July 8, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **Regional GIS Assistant** to be based in Afghanistan. Applications are accepted until February 23, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **Communication Specialist** to be based in Brasilia,

Brazil. Applications are accepted until February 25, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **Communication Specialist,** to be based in Rome, Italy. Applications are accepted until February 23, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **National Specialist for AFFRIM Lao PDR** to be based in Vientiane, Laos. Applications are accepted until February 23, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks an **Office Assistant** to be based in Bangkok, Thailand. Applications are accepted until February 23, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks an **Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) Policy and Programme Officer** to be based in Geneva, Switzerland. Applications are accepted until February 25, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Data Research and Analysis Officer,** to be based in Vienna, Austria. Applications are accepted until February 22, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Project Officer** to be based in Doha, Qatar. Applications are accepted until February 22, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Project Officer** to be based in Bor, South Sudan. Applications are accepted until February 22, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Project Officer,** to be based in N'Djamena, Chad. Applications are accepted until February 22, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO)** seeks **a Senior Advisor to the Executive Secretary (P-5)**, to be based in Vienna, Austria. Applications are accepted until March 10, 2024. More information is provided at [CTBTO].

The **Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO)** seeks **a Senior Policy and Programme Officer**, to be based in Vienna, Austria.

Applications are accepted until March 10, 2024. More information is provided at [CTBTO].

The **Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO)** seeks a **Finance and Accounting Officer**, to be based in Vienna, Austria. Applications are accepted until March 10, 2024. More information is provided at [CTBTO].

The **Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO)** seeks an **Associate Budget and Planning IT Officer,** to be based in Vienna, Austria. Applications are accepted until March 10, 2024. More information is provided at [CTBTO].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a **Programme Management - Senior Officer** to be based in Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo. Applications are accepted until March 3, 2024. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks an **Administration Associate** to be based in Copenhagen, Denmark. Applications are accepted until February 23, 2024. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a **Finance Officer** to be based in Bangkok, Thailand. Applications are accepted until February 22, 2024. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a **National Programme Officer** to be based in Juba, South Sudan. Applications are accepted until February 18, 2024. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a **Finance Assistant (Finance and Admin)** to be based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Applications are accepted until February 23, 2024. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The **Family Health International (FHI 360)** seeks a **Chief of Party to** be based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Applications are accepted until not specified. More information is provided at [FHI 360].

The **Family Health International (FHI 360)** seeks a **Security Coordinator,** to be based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Applications are accepted until not specified. More information is provided at [FHI 360].

The **Family Health International (FHI 360)** seeks a **Monitoring, Evaluating, Adapting, Learning, and Data System Strengthening Advisor** to be based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Applications are accepted until not specified. More information is provided at [FHI 360].

The **Family Health International (FHI 360)** seeks a **Deputy Chief of Party**to be based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Applications are accepted until not specified. More information is provided at [FHI 360].

The **Family Health International (FHI 360)** seeks a **Protection Team Leader – Mekelle** to be based in Ethiopia. Applications are accepted until not specified. More information is provided at [FHI 360].

Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania is inviting applications for a **Visiting Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Dickinson College].

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University in Hong Kong is inviting applications for a **Presidential Young Scholars Scheme.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [The Hong Kong Polytechnic University]

Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio is inviting applications for a **Visiting Assistant Professor and Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in Food Justice.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Oberlin College].

Center for Retirement Research at Boston College in United States is inviting applications for a **2024 Grant and Fellowship Programs.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Center for Retirement Research at Boston College]

Arcadia University in Glenside, Pennsylvania is inviting applications for a **Visiting Assistant Professor, Criminal Justice.** Application submission deadline is open until March 15, 2024. For more details, see [Arcadia University]

Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor in Sport Psychology.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Florida State University]

Texas State University-San Marcos in Texas, United States is inviting applications for a **Research Scientist,**

Qualitative & Mixed Methods. Application submission deadline is open until February 22, 2024. For more details, see [Texas State University-San Marcos]

Bates College in Lewiston, Maine is inviting applications for a **Visiting Assistant Professor of History.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Bates College]

Auburn University in Alabama, United States is inviting applications for a **Development Programs Administrator- Human Sciences.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Auburn University]

Yale Program for the Study of Antisemitism in New Haven, Connecticut is inviting applications for a **Postdoctoral Associate, Whitney Humanities Center at Yale.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Yale University]

The Program in Asian American Studies (ASAM) at Penn in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania is inviting applications for a **Panda Express Postdoctoral Fellowship in Asian American Studies.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [University of Pennsylvania].

Virginia Tech's Urban Affairs and Planning Program in the School of Public and International Affairs, in Virginia, United States is inviting applications for an **Assistant or Associate Professor of Environmental Law and Policy.** Application submission deadline is open until March 1, 2024. For more details, see [Virginia Tech]

The University of Chicago in Chicago, Illinois is inviting applications for an **Instructional Professor – Sociology.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [The University of Chicago]

The University of Chicago in Chicago, Illinois is inviting applications for an **Instructional Professor – Political Science.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [The University of Chicago]

The University of Chicago in Chicago, Illinois is inviting applications for an **Instructional Professor – Psychology.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [The University of Chicago]

Harvard University in Massachusetts, United States is inviting applications for a **Lecturer or Senior Lecturer in Spiritual Care.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Harvard University]

Rancho Santiago Community College District in California, United States is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor.** Application submission deadline is open until February 21, 2024. For more details, see [Rancho Santiago Community College District]

Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina, United States is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor-History Politics & Social Justice.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Winston-Salem State University].

Middlebury College in Vermont, United States is inviting applications for **Mellon Humanities for All Times Post-Doctoral Fellowship.** Application submission deadline is open until May 1, 2024. For more details, see [Middlebury College]

University of North Dakota in Grand Forks, North Dakota (US) is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor of English.** Application submission deadline is open until March 18, 2024. For more details, see [University of North Dakota]

Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, United States is inviting applications for the **Guarini Dean's Dissertation and Postdoctoral Fellowship in Asian American Studies.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Dartmouth College]

Morgan State University in Maryland, United States is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor in School of Education and Urban Studies- Center on Urban Violence and Crime Reduction.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Morgan State University]

The University of Washington School of Law in Seattle, Washington State is inviting applications for a **Visiting or Acting Assistant Professor and Residential Legal Fellow.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [The University of Washington].

West Valley-Mission Community College District in California, United States is inviting applications for **Ethnic Studies Full-Time Instructor.** Application submission deadline is open until February 29, 2024.

For more details, see [West Valley-Mission Community College District]

University of North Carolina at Pembroke in Pembroke, North Carolina is inviting applications for a **Lecturer in Criminal Justice.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [University of North Carolina at Pembroke]

University of South Carolina in South Carolina, United States is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor of History and African American Studies.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [University of South Carolina]

University of New England in Maine, United States is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor, Environmental Social Sciences (Global Ecology and Social Justice).** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [University of New England].

University of New England in Maine, United States is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor, Environmental Social Sciences (Climate Change).** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [University of New England].

California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, California is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor in Modern.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [California Polytechnic State University].

Team:

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