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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 Ghana's Independence Day this week.

With best wishes,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

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

China: Premier Li Qiang sets economic goals for 2024 as “Two Sessions” set off

(ms) On March 4, the “Two Sessions” consisting of the meetings of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), China’s top political advisory body, and of the National People's Congress (NPC), China’s legislature, kicked off with the commencement of for the former. The latter commenced on March 5. Running for approximately two weeks, China’s landmark political event of the year will see new laws, political appointments and government work reports approved.

As usual, the starting point was the Premier's work report. Premier Li Qiang's in his speech shed light on China's objectives for 2024, revealing a focus on stability and growth amidst ongoing economic hurdles.

In a speech that mirrored last year's targets, China aims for an economic growth rate of “around 5 percent”, acknowledging the enduring impact of the pandemic and external economic pressures. Premier Li emphasized the need for perseverance in the face of these challenges. Other set goals include commitments to create over 12 million new urban jobs, maintain urban unemployment at 5.5 percent, and curb inflation to around 3 percent. Additionally, the military budget is set to increase by 7.2 percent.

Apart for the inflation targets, the targets set are almost or exactly the same growth targets as in 2022, which indicates that the country's economic problems triggered and revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic continue to plague the country.

In addition to the set goals, Premier Li reaffirmed China's commitment to opening up sectors to foreign investment, boosting domestic consumption and promoting technological innovation. He also addressed geopolitical tensions and reaffirmed China's stance on Taiwan and Hong Kong, emphasizing adherence to the one-China principle. [Bloomberg] [CNN] [South China Morning Post 1]

In addition to the economic goals, two other topics played a major role in the context of the "Two Sessions": firstly, the personnel issue of the foreign minister and, secondly, the announcement that the Prime Minister's traditional press conference at the end of the "Two Sessions" would no longer be held for the first time in decades.

Starting with the latter one, the NPC stated that Li will not hold a press conference at the end of this year's annual parliamentary sessions in Beijing, marking the first such instance in thirty years. The practice would be discontinued for the remainder of the current NPC term, except under extraordinary circumstances.

The press conference, established in 1988 and formalized as a customary practice in 1993, has been a highly anticipated event during the "two sessions," providing a rare opportunity for local and international media to pose questions to a top Chinese leader. However, it often featured pre-selected questions, limiting spontaneity. [South China Morning Post 2] [The Guardian]

Regarding rumors about a potential successor of Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who doubles as the Director of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Foreign Affairs Commission Office, Liu Jianchao, the current Minister of the Chinese Communist Party’s International Liaison Department, is considered the

most likely candidate for the role of foreign minister. Liu's diplomatic track record, including recent engagements with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in mid-January, has fuelled speculation regarding his potential elevation to this prominent position.

With a career spanning diplomatic postings in various countries and roles within the Chinese government, Liu poses a wealth of experience. His fluency in English and reputation for effective communication have been highlighted as notable strengths by foreign diplomats who have engaged with him.

While Liu's background in anti-corruption efforts adds an interesting dimension to his candidacy, analysts caution against overinterpreting personnel changes as indicative of broader shifts in China's foreign policy. There has been no official announcement from the Chinese government that a new Foreign Minister will be announced, but the "Two Sessions" would provide a suitable platform for such an important personnel change, which must come sooner or later, due to Wang's dual employment. [CSIS] [Reuters]

China: Former Foreign Minister Qin Gang “resigns” after sudden disappearance

(ms) Qin Gang, China's former foreign minister, who assumed the post in Dezember 2022 to be abruptly removed in July 2023, has resigned as a member of the National People’s Congress.

According to a notice by the National People's Congress Standing Committee, the Tianjin Municipal People's Congress accepted Qin's resignation, which would at least give the appearance that Qin had appeared in person, which would weaken rumors that he had passed away. However, no pictures of his actual appearance at the scene have been released, meaning questions remain about his well-being and whereabouts.

The circumstances surrounding Qin's departure as foreign minister and his subsequent disappearance from public view remain shrouded in ambiguity. Speculation initially arose shortly after his disappearance in the middle of last year, with rumors circulating about an alleged extramarital affair during his tenure as ambassador to the US with Fu Xiaotian, a Chinese journalist, who is suspected of having acted as a double agent according to further rumors.

Insights into the potential reasons for his removal and disappearance emerged from a December 2023 meeting of Politburo members. Reports suggest that during this meeting, Xi Jinping accused Qin, along with the also dismissed former Defense Minister Li Shangfu, of "betrayal" (see AiR No. 3, January/2024, 3).

This incident underscores Xi's insistence on unwavering loyalty, amid his ongoing consolidation of power, which demands absolute allegiance to his leadership. [Bloomberg] [Hong Kong Free Press] [Radio Free Asia]

China: Revised state secrets law to include “work secrets” as sensitive information

(ms) Continuing President Xi Jinping's national security agenda, China has revised the Law on Guarding State Secrets, underscoring an ongoing commitment to strengthening security measures and safeguard sensitive information.

The revised law, passed by the National People’s Congress, China's top legislative body, and immediately endorsed by President Xi Jinping, will enter into force on May 1 and will include "work secrets" as restricted sensitive information. While not classified as state secrets, these secrets are defined as information that if leaked, would have “adverse effects if leaked".

The vague definition of what constitutes "work secrets" raises further concerns about potential compliance burdens for foreign businesses and the ambiguity surrounding its application.

Observers view the expanded law as further evidence of President Xi Jinping's intensified focus on national security, which had already manifested in a series of legislative updates aimed at safeguarding China's national interests.

Last year's revision of the anti-espionage law, for instance, raised apprehensions about potential repercussions for routine business activities. Under its ambiguous formulation, the revised law expands the scope of covered materials to include all "documents, data, materials, and items related to national security and interests," subjecting them to protection akin to state secrets. The vagueness of the wording poses challenges for foreign companies working with data, making it difficult to ascertain compliance with the country's laws and potentially granting security

authorities considerable latitude in interpretation and prosecution (see AiR No. 18, May/2023, 1).

These challenges have already manifested itself for foreign businesses operating in China with raids on management consultancies and the detention of foreign executives on espionage allegations have underscored the risks associated with operating in an increasingly regulated environment.

The broadening of the state secrets law adds another layer of complexity, potentially complicating investment decisions and hampering access to essential information. [Nikkei Asia] [Reuters] [The New York Times] [Xinhua]

China: Next major developer faces liquidation petition

(ms) Following Evergrande's liquidation order at the end of January (see AiR No. 5, January/2024, 5), Country Garden, another prominent Chinese real estate developer, now faces a similar threat.

On February 28, a liquidation petition was filed against the company for failing to repay a USD 205 million loan, further exacerbating concerns about the stability of the Chinese real estate sector. The petition was filed by Ever Credit Limited, a unit of Kingboard Holdings, a major creditor of Country Garden.

Country Garden, in response, stated it would vehemently oppose the petition and seek legal recourse, with a court hearing set for May 17.

Country Garden's debt restructuring process, already underway, now faces further uncertainty in light of the liquidation petition. The company had missed a USD 15 million bond coupon repayment last October, signaling financial strain amidst a challenging operating environment.

Amidst these challenges, Country Garden has been actively engaging with advisers to assess its capital structure and liquidity position. However, the company's efforts to navigate the crisis have been hindered by prolonged restructuring talks and changing advisers, leading to frustration among investors.

The ramifications of Country Garden's predicament extend beyond its operations, with broader implications for China's economy. As one of the country's largest developers, its financial woes

contribute to the ongoing volatility in the property market, a former main pillar of the economic growth of the country. [CNBC] [Reuters] [The Guardian] [The New York Times]

China: Shenzhen unveils plan to ramp up car exports

(ms) The municipal government of Shenzhen, home to the world's largest electric vehicle manufacturer BYD, has unveiled a comprehensive plan comprising 24 measures aimed at bolstering car exports. These initiatives include support for factory construction, the establishment of new sea routes, and the authorization of an additional 20 companies to export second-hand vehicles, according to statements from the city's commerce bureau.

The policy aims to capitalize on the momentum in car exports, positioning Shenzhen as a leading global automotive hub by fostering an integrated industrial ecosystem encompassing production, shipping, and trade.

To facilitate this initiative, local officials have pledged to introduce a range of supportive services for car exporters, such as enhancing export insurance, expediting tax refunds, and incentivizing Chinese banks to offer consumer financing to overseas buyers. Additionally, the plan advocates for the acquisition of more car-carrying ships to establish a Chinese-owned fleet of roll-on, roll-off vessels.

This move comes amid growing international apprehension over China's burgeoning car industry, with concerns that excess domestic capacity may lead to a flood of vehicles into global markets. Analysts estimate that China, which surpassed Japan as the world's largest car exporter last year (see AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1), has the capacity to manufacture nearly double the number of vehicles compared to its domestic demand.

While local governments like Shenzhen are eager to bolster exports to stimulate economic growth, China's central government has urged caution, emphasizing the importance of sustainable development and cooperation with foreign partners in the overseas expansion of the electric vehicle sector. [Financial Times]

China: Volkswagen and Xpeng collaborate to develop EV for Chinese market

(ms) Despite recent announcements in mid-February regarding a reevaluation of its presence in the Xinjiang region following allegations of human rights violations (see AiR No. 8, February/2024, 3), German car manufacturer Volkswagen (VW) has forged ahead with a strategic partnership alongside Chinese electric vehicle (EV) manufacturer Xpeng. Together, they plan to collaboratively develop two mid-sized battery-powered vehicles, slated for launch in the Chinese mainland market by 2026.

The partnership, which aims to leverage joint purchasing activities and technology sharing to streamline development processes, follows Volkswagen's acquisition of a 4.99 percent stake in Xpeng last year for USD 700 million.

The first model resulting from this partnership will be an “intelligent” SUV, bearing the VW badge. Both companies emphasized the significance of speed in penetrating China's burgeoning EV market, highlighting the need for efficiency and cost optimization in a price-sensitive environment.

Volkswagen's move to team up with Xpeng underscores its ambition to regain market share in China, where local EV manufacturers, like BYD, have surged ahead in recent years.

The partnership marks a notable advancement in Volkswagen's efforts to bolster its position in the electric vehicle sector while underscoring China's increasing influence in the global EV industry. Despite lingering allegations of human rights violations, against VW’s joint venture partners and the Chinese aluminum production, both past and present, Volkswagen finds itself unable to diminish its economic footprint in China, particularly in light of its joint venture partnerships. [Reuters] [South China Morning Post] [Xinhua]

China: Sanctions on hedge fund for trading violations

(ms) China has taken disciplinary action against Shanghai Weiwan Private Fund Management for violating trading regulations, signaling an expansion of its crackdown on high-frequency trading and derivative products, after the China Securities Regulatory Commission (CSRC) issued directives prohibiting major

institutional investors from reducing their equity holdings during the opening and closing periods of each trading day (see AiR No. 9, February/2024, 4).

The China Financial Futures Exchange announced, on February 28, a 12-month ban on Shanghai Weiwan's ability to open index futures contracts and the confiscation of approximately USD 1.24 million in profits deemed to have been obtained improperly. The exchange cited the fund manager's excessive trading activities that surpassed prescribed limits and failure to disclose relevant account information as the reasons for their decision.

This move reflects China's broader regulatory efforts aimed at curbing trading practices deemed detrimental to the stability of the stock market. The CSRC announced plans to tighten oversight of derivative businesses, including products such as DMA-Swap, a financial derivative instrument in which hedge funds borrow means from brokers to trade them. These measures aim to reduce leverage in trading activities, mitigate market risks, and foster stable market operations.

The CSRC has emphasized its commitment to cracking down on illegal activities and collaborating with exchanges to ensure market integrity. Recent regulatory actions have also targeted hedge funds for engaging in practices that could disrupt market stability, with some facing trading suspensions for dumping shares. [Bloomberg] [Reuters] [South China Morning Post]

China: Subway projects halted in indebted local cities

(ms) In a bid to curb local government debt risks, China's State Council has rejected proposals for new subway projects in several cities, signaling a stronger crackdown on excessive infrastructure spending.

Among others, applications to expand the subway network in Harbin, a city in northeastern Helongjiang Province, Kunming, the capital of southern Yunnan Province, and Baotou in the northern Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region are said to be affected, with their applications rejected or the review process for approval suspended for the time being.

In the State Council's criteria for subway construction, set out in 2018, cities applying to build metros are required to demonstrate sound financial health, with requirements such as a minimum level of annual

budget revenue and gross domestic product, as well as certain urban population benchmarks. This step aims to prevent excessive indebtedness and unsustainable debt burdens for local governments.

However, the fact that these targets have now actually been enforced after local governments were previously able to freely take out loans for infrastructure, shows that the Chinese government is indeed trying harder to tackle the high level of debt of local governments.

This is an objective that was also set during the twice-a-decade Central Financial Work Conference held at the end of last year, at which the goal to "optimize the debt structure of central and local governments" was proclaimed (see AiR No. 45, November/2023, 1). [Michael Pettis via Twitter] [Yicai Global]

China: Hong Kong unveils 2024 budget amid ongoing economic challenges

(ms) In a bid to navigate through economic uncertainties and reignite growth, Hong Kong's Financial Secretary Paul Chan unveiled the city's much-anticipated 2024 budget. The budget, outlined against the backdrop of a challenging economic climate exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, aims to address key concerns such as property market stagnation, deficit management, and sustainable development initiatives.

Tackling the pressing issue of a sluggish property market, the budget scraps measures that had previously aimed to cool housing demand. Notably, the elimination of residential stamp duties is expected to directly benefit Hong Kong residents, non-local homebuyers, and property developers.

The budget also places a strategic emphasis on revitalizing Hong Kong's tourism sector, which has been severely impacted by the pandemic, with investments totaling USD 128 million earmarked for tourism measures.

Deficit management emerges as another central theme in the budget, with Hong Kong expected to log a significant deficit of over USD 12,8 billion in the current fiscal year. To address this, the government plans to issue retail bonds totaling at least USD 8.9 billion, signaling a commitment to prudent fiscal management while ensuring financial sustainability. Moreover, a review of transport subsidy schemes over their financial sustainability underscores efforts to manage

expenditure responsibly and prioritize areas of public spending.

Amidst the budget's focus on short-term economic revival, sustainability remains a key pillar. The new budget in Hong Kong also affects the plans for the Kau Yi Chau Artificial Islands project by signaling a potential delay in reclamation activities due to considerations of public finance constraints and other priorities outlined in the budget.

The project involves reclaiming land to create artificial islands off Lantau Island, aiming to address housing shortages and stimulate economic growth aiming to create between 190,000 to 210,000 new residential flats, along with approximately 4 million square meters of office space in its commercial district. Despite the delay, the project is said to remain on track, however it is unclear whether the planned finish date 2033 will be actually achievable, remains to be seen. [Bloomberg] [Hong Kong Free Press 1] [Hong Kong Free Press 2] [Hong Kong Free Press 3] [Hong Kong Free Press 4] [South China Morning Post]

China: Crackdown on dissidents before “Two Sessions”

(ms) In the course of preparations for the annual March "Two Sessions", consisting of the annual meetings of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which begins on March 4, and the National People's Congress (NPC), which begins on March 5, Chinese security authorities have begun to place potential and renowned dissidents and opposition figures[DL1] under house arrest or escort them on an "enforced" vacation.

This suppression of people who could potentially be the source of disorder is a well-known practice of the Chinese government to intimidate opposition and thus to ensure that everything runs smoothly and without signs of lack of unity within the country during the important meetings.

The reason for this heavy-handed approach, especially in China's capital and venue of the Two Sessions Beijing, is that in addition to the political importance of the meetings, they also provide an important platform for the country's and the government's external image, with a large number of journalists and observers traveling to the city to gain insights into meetings that are decisive for the political direction of the world's second largest economy in 2024. [Radio Free Asia]

China: Liaoning aircraft carrier begins sea trial featuring J-35 stealth fighter mockup

(ms) China's Liaoning aircraft carrier has embarked on a sea trial after undergoing a year-long refurbishment at the Dalian Shipyard in Northeast China's Liaoning Province. Departing on February 29, 2024, the carrier notably showcased full-scale mockups of a J-35 stealth fighter jet and a J-15 fighter jet on its flight deck.

The presence of the J-35 mockup suggests potential plans for its deployment on China's first two carriers neither of which have catapults.

Originally, it was assumed that the J-35s would be destined for China's next-generation aircraft carriers, which would use catapults instead of "ski jumps" to launch aircraft. Both the Liaoning and the Shandong carrier, appear to be adapting existing infrastructure for these advanced aircraft.

The sea trial, anticipated to last until March 9 according to navigation notices, follows a year of extensive maintenance and upgrades. Analysts speculate that this period facilitated preparations for integrating the J-35 onto the carrier, transitioning the Liaoning's role from a training vessel to one capable of combat operations.

The introduction of the J-35, developed by the Shenyang Aircraft Corporation, represents a significant milestone for China's naval aviation program. Designed specifically for carrier operations, it is expected to complement the existing J-15 fleet, enhancing the PLA Navy's aerial capabilities. [Eurasian Times] [Global Times]

China: Space program set to break records in 2024

(ms) China's space program plans for 2024 record-breaking 100 orbital launches. The ambitious agenda, outlined by the state-controlled China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC), marks a 50 percent increase from the 67 launches of 2023 and underscores the nation's growing prowess in space exploration.

Key highlights of China's space agenda for 2024 include approximately 70 launches by the CASC itself, with the remainder to be conducted by the country's rapidly expanding commercial space sector. These 100

launches will send over 300 spacecraft into orbit, covering a range of missions from crewed flights to the Tiangong space station to deep space exploration projects.

One of the most notable missions slated for 2024 is the Chang'e-6 lunar far-side sample return mission, scheduled to launch in May. This mission aims to collect samples from the far side of the moon, a region that has never been explored by any other nation. The significance of this endeavor lies in its potential to advance our understanding of the moon's composition and geological history.

In addition to lunar exploration, China's space program will focus on a variety of scientific and technological objectives. These include the deployment of ocean salinity detection satellites, collaboration with international partners on projects like the Sino-Franco Space-based multi-band astronomical Variable Objects Monitor (SVOM), and the development of new launch vehicles such as the Long March 12 and March 6C.

Noteworthy is that despite the rising numbers of launches in total, the share of commercial to state-lead launches remains similar. This shows, that unlike the United States as its biggest rival in space endeavors, where private companies like SpaceX have taken the lead in space exploration, China's space program remains predominantly government driven. [South China Morning Post] [Space News]

Japan: Hearing in Upper house over political fund scandal

(sh) On March 3, Japan’s Upper House of Japan is pushing geared up to conduct hearings regarding a political funds scandal that had stirred up turmoil within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), as disclosed by Masaji Matsuyama, the LDP secretary general in the chamber after the conclusion of following sessions held by the Lower House's political ethics committee. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida was present at one such session last week.

The scandal centers around the failure of two factions of the LDP to report over JPY 600 million (USD 4 million) in campaign funds that was used to establish illegal slush funds. 82 lawmakers belonging to the two factions are suspected of having received kickbacks from the funds.

However, Matsuyama refrained from revealing the attendees of the forthcoming hearings, citing the

necessity to verify their intentions. The opposition demanded the appearance of 32 upper house lawmakers allegedly implicated in the scandal, predominantly from two LDP factions, including former LDP upper house secretary general Hiroshige Seko.

Prime Minister Kishida, the first incumbent prime minister to appear before the parliamentary ethics panel, expressed regret for undermining trust in politics and pledged reforms to ensure compliance within the ruling party. Nonetheless, the opposition criticized Kishida for failing to unearth additional details and merely reiterating prior statements during the Diet sessions. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Government to increase the numbers of foreign workers

(sh) On March 5, Japan aims to significantly increase the number of foreign workers as it has unveiled its skilled worker visa program, aiming to accommodate up to 800,000 individuals over the next five years.

Facing a severe shortage of labor, the government intends to expand the visa system (see below) to include the road transportation, railway, forestry, and timber industries, which were not initially covered when the program was introduced in April 2019. The government also plans to incorporate operations related to textiles within the manufacturing sector, which is already part of the visa program.

This projection for the upcoming five-year period far surpasses the initial estimate made when the system was launched, which anticipated receiving up to 345,150 workers by the end of fiscal 2023 in March.

Over the next five years, approximately 34,000 workers are expected to be accepted in the four newly considered sectors, with the road transportation industry likely to face the most significant manpower shortage, requiring around 24,500 workers. The railway industry is anticipated to welcome 3,800 workers, while the forestry and timber sectors may see 1,000 and 5,000 workers, respectively. The government aims to finalize its decision on expanding the scope of eligible industries by the end of this month. [Kyodo News 1]

Moreover, Japan's immigration agency issued detailed guidelines on the same day, outlining factors for the justice minister to grant special residence permission to foreign nationals facing deportation.

The guidelines highlight positive elements such as community integration, contributions, and children enrolled in Japanese schools for an extended period. These guidelines were revised to align with the new application-based system introduced under the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Law passed in June. [Kyodo News 2]

Japan: Visa rules eased for foreign students

(sh) On February 29, the Immigration Services Agency of Japan announced that foreign students who completed studies at state-designated technical schools could now work in fields not directly related to their majors.

State-designated technical schools would provide special programs, including practical training at companies. These adjustments follow a proposal from a government panel in April 2023, aiming to facilitate job opportunities for foreign students in Japan.

The decision to change of visa regulations aims at increasing the annual number of foreign students remaining in Japan for work by approximately 3.000. Previously, many students had to return home as they couldn't find jobs matching their acquired skills or knowledge. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Government terminates medical subsidies for Covid 19

(sh) On March 5, the Japanese government announced the termination of subsidies for COVID-19 medical expenses by the end of March 2024, attributing it to the decline in cases.

From April 2024, patients would bear 10 to 30 percent of treatment drug costs based on income and age. Government support for hospitalizations and bed reservations for COVID-19 patients would also end. Health Minister Keizo Takemi assured hospitals are prepared for accommodating COVID-19 patients in general wards.

The ministry reported that, in the week ending on February 25, the average number of COVID-19 patients treated at approximately 5,000 designated medical facilities was 7.92 per institution, marking a decrease for the third consecutive week. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Okinawa government ordered to proceed US base landfill

(sh) On February 29, Japan's Supreme Court rejected an appeal by Okinawa Governor Denny Tamaki against a ruling allowing the state to override the local government and start landfill work for a controversial U.S. military base transfer.

The decision is to be seen as endorsing the central government's efforts to reinforce soft groundwork at the relocation site for the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in the southern island prefecture, ending a longstanding dispute between the central government and Okinawa Prefecture over the transfer of base from the densely-populated Ginowan to the Henoko coastal area in Nago.

The top court's ruling finalizes the decision of the Fukuoka High Court's Naha branch in December, which ordered Okinawa Governor Denny Tamaki to approve a modified plan for landfill work to relocate a key U.S. base within three weekdays.

Tamaki did not follow the high court's order to approve the plan, prompting the central government to step in and approve it instead, with the Defense Ministry starting the landfill work in January. [Kyodo News]

Okinawa has hosted most U.S. military facilities in Japan since the end of World War II.

Japan: Greenhouse-gas-emission firms to be disclosed

(sh) On March 3, Japan's Financial Services Agency, the country's financial watchdog, announced plans to make companies listed on the top-tier section of the Tokyo Stock Exchange share information about greenhouse gas emissions along their supply chains.

The plans include creating a panel to figure out the details of this idea.

The Japanese government aims to reach carbon neutrality by 2050 and attempts to encourage more investment from private companies for green growth.

In a survey last year by research firm Teikoku Databank, about 17.3 percent of roughly 11,300 companies said efforts to cut carbon emissions would

harm them, while 14.1 percent said it would help. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Prime Minister Kishida meets Meta CEO

(sh) On February 27, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida met with Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg in Tokyo to exchange views on the risks associated with generative AI, with Zuckerberg expressing interest in potential investments in Japan.

For his part, Kishida, who previously met with the CEOs of Nvidia and OpenAI, affirmed his support for the development of AI in Japan.

Amidst increased competition in generative AI among major US tech firms and growing calls for tech giants to prioritize safety and privacy measures, Meta aims to bolster its platform technologies. [NHK]

North Korea: Renovation of political prison exposed

(dql) North Korea has reportedly conducted renovation measures at a major political prison in the country's remote northeast during the pandemic.

High-resolution Google Earth satellite imagery suggest that between 2020-2023 new buildings have been constructed and security infrastructure has been upgraded at Kwalliso No. 25, also known as the Chongjin concentration camp.

Observers believe that the measures serve as preparations for an influx of prisoners. [NK News]

South Korea: President Yoon speaks at 105th anniversary of the March 1 Independence Movement

(oy) On March 1, President Yoon Suk Yeol spoke at the 105th anniversary of the March 1 Independence Movement. The March 1 Independence Movement was a series of mass demonstrations in early 1919 by Koreans against Japanese colonialism. It called for Korea's independence and an end to the forced assimilation into Japanese culture.

Paying tribute to South Korean patriots who fought for the country's independence, Yoon stated that South Korea's current position as a "global pivotal state where freedom and prosperity flourish" is a realization of the 1919 Proclamation of Korean Independence and the spirit of the March First Independence Movement, despite past hardships such as the Korean War.

On South Korea-Japan relations, he referred to the 1919 Proclamation as envisioning a mutually prosperous future for both countries, based on "understanding and empathy." He added that both countries are currently working together to overcome their painful past and move towards partnership in pursuing "global peace and prosperity".

Yoon's positive statement of ties between Seoul and Tokyo comes as both sides are seeking to strengthen trilateral security cooperation with against China and North Korea's missile and nuclear threats. Yoon has also been seeking closer relations with Japan in the economic sector, such as announcing the South Korean government plans to compensate victims of Japanese wartime labor from a government-backed fund.

In his speech, Yoon also touch upon the issue of Korean reunification, criticizing North Korea's totalitarian system, its reliance on nuclear weapons, tyranny and human rights abuses, while at the same time pledging continued support for North Koreans and North Korean defectors. He also called for international cooperation in the challenging task of unification and affirmed that South Korea's "unification efforts must become a source of hope and a beacon of light for the people of North Korea."

Yoon's insisting on unification contrast sharply with North Korea's stance. Earlier in January 2024, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un declared that reunification was no longer possible and referred to South Korea as its "principal enemy," with which Pyongyang was is a state of war (see AiR No. 3, January/2024, 3).

Addressing the South Korean society, Yoon advocated for unity and assured that the government will "lead with passion and dedication", inviting everyone to unite and work together towards a hopeful future.

Yoon's speech comes as South Korea prepares for its upcoming parliamentary election in April and amidst a fierce country-wide strike of medical doctors held to protest government plan's to increase the quota for admission to medical schools (see article below). [South Korea Presidential Office] [AP]

South Korea: Competing political parties agree to April's election maps

(oy) On February 29, political parties in South Korea agreed to an electoral district map for the upcoming April parliamentary elections. The ruling People Power Party and the main opposition Democratic Party reached an agreement on redrawing electoral districts for the 300-member National Assembly, 41 days before the voting on April 10.

Under the agreement, the number of seats chosen by direct voting in North Jeolla Province will remain at 10, while the total number of seats voted through a proportional representation system will decrease by one to 46. Consequently, the number of parliamentary seats in Seoul and the surrounding Gyeonggi Province will be 48 and 60 respectively, followed by Busan at 18. [Yonhap]

South Korea: National Assembly Deputy Speaker switches political party

(oy) National Assembly Deputy Speaker Kim Young-joo, a four-term lawmaker, defected from the main opposition Democratic Party (DP) and joined the People Power Party (PPP).

Kim's move came after the DP informed her that she ranked in the bottom 20 percent in terms of parliamentary activities, affecting her nomination chances for the upcoming April 10 general elections, in which the DP seeks to defend its majority.

Kim, who was first recruited into politics by late President Kim Dae-jung and served as former President Moon Jae-in's first minister of employment and labor, pledged to strive for victory in the next month's elections.

Her defection is seen as a reflection of the growing divide within the DP between factions aligned with DP Chairman Lee Jae-myung and those who are not. [Korea JoongAng Daily]

South Korea: National Assembly fail to approve bill investigating First Lady

(oy) A bill to launch a special counsel investigation into allegations surrounding First Lady Kim Keon-hee was rejected in a National Assembly vote on February 29 (see AiR No. 4, January/2024, 4). The bill, which required at least 188 votes to pass, was blocked with 171 votes in favor and 109 against.

The failure to pass the bill is believed to be due to a deepening divide within the Democratic Party, between lawmakers aligned with its leader Representative Lee Jae-myung and those who are not.

This internal conflict is also reflected in disagreements over the party's decision-making for the upcoming general election. The ruling party floor leader, Representative Yun Jae-ok, however, was reluctant to link the voting results with the party's internal clash. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Conflict over medical school enrollment quota

(oy) The South Korean government is facing continued resistance against its plans to increase admission quotas in medical schools (see AiR No. 8, February/2024, 3).

Most trainee doctors in South Korea extended their strike against the government's policy to increase the medical school enrollment quota, that begun on February 19, despite facing potential license suspension and indictment. Trainee doctors at 100 teaching hospitals have also submitted their resignations. [Yonhap_1]

The strike, which saw about 9,000 trainee doctors leaving their workplaces, has significantly impacted operations at major hospitals nationwide. The number of surgeries conducted at major hospitals has reportedly decreased by half. In response to the medical staff shortage, the government has allowed nurses to perform certain doctor roles in a limited capacity since February 27. [Yonhap_2]

According to the Ministry of Education, 70 percent of medical school students across South Korea have applied for a leave of absence as part of the protest. Since February 19, 13,698 students from 40 medical schools have applied for a leave of absence, but only a few requests have been approved. Students at six medical schools have also boycotted their classes. [Yonhap_3]

The Ministry of Health and Welfare has attempted to hold talks with the protesting doctors, but the response was uncertain as medical representative groups have been unresponsive. Minister of Health and Welfare Cho Kyoo-hong appealed to the doctors to return to work, assuring them they would not be held accountable if they comply with government instructions to return by February 29. However, from March 4, the government will start administering the suspension of trainee doctors' licenses if they fail to provide justifiable explanations for their actions. [Yonhap_4] [Korea JoongAng Daily_1] [Korea JoongAng Daily_2]

Earlier on February 26 at the Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters (CDSC HQ) meeting, Minister of the Interior and Safety, Lee Sang-min, urged doctors to return to work by February 28 [Ministry of Health and Welfare_1].

At a later CDSC HQ meeting on February 28 evening, South Korea's Prime Minister Han Duck-soo urged doctors who have resigned to return to work. At the meeting, the status of doctors' collective actions was reviewed and supplementary measures for emergency medical treatment were discussed. Supplementary measures include mobilizing available medical and financial resources, making healthcare delivery more efficient and the use of telemedicine. [Ministry of Health and Welfare_3] [Yonhap_6]

On February 29, Lee Sang-min renewed his call at a for doctors to return to work and expressed gratitude to the medical staff for their work amidst the strike and the people for demonstrating maturity. At this same meeting, the government announced plans to increase the number of professors at major state-run medical schools by 2027 to ensure the quality of medical education. [Ministry of Health and Welfare_2] [Yonhap_5]

Meanwhile, the Presidential office requested on February 28 for the medical community to nominate a new representative body or member to negotiate with the government, instead of the Korean Medical Association (KMA). An official was quoted as saying the KMA was not representative of the medical community at-large, and that it was difficult to negotiate with different groups with varying positions. [Yonhap_7]

Police have stated that they would take stern actions against any unlawful activities at large-scale rallies scheduled over March 2 to March 3 in Seoul. One such rally is organized by the KMA and 25,000 people are expected to turn out. The police will deploy 8,000

personnel from 134 units to maintain order and swiftly resolve any unlawful acts during the rallies. [Yonhap_8]

The police have also commenced investigation after the Ministry of Health and Welfare filed a legal complaint against KMA's emergency committee chief Kim Taek-woo; two other members of the KMA leadership; a former KMA chief; and Lim Hyeon-taek, the chief of the Korean Pediatric Society. The Ministry of Health and Welfare contended that they incited trainee doctors to resign and disobeyed government's instructions for doctors to return to work. [Yonhap_9] [Korea JoongAng Daily_3]

As of February 29, 294 protesting trainee doctors have returned to work. The Korea Alliance of Patients Organization has criticized the walkout, urging doctors to return to their patients. [Ministry of Health and Welfare_4] [Yonhap_10] [Yonhap_11]

Taiwan: High schools to offer mental health leaves to students

(fg) Taiwan has rolled out a measure to tackle the pressing issue of mental health among high school students.

With youth suicide rates and stress levels among Taiwan's youth on the rise, Taiwanese high schools have introduced mental health leave that allows students to take up to three days off per semester without requiring proof, provided parental consent is obtained.

Over 40 schools have already signed up for the trial, indicating a collective effort to address concerns surrounding academic pressure and mental well-being.

This initiative comes in the wake of concerning statistics showing a doubling of suicide rates among youths aged 15-24 between 2014 and 2022. Critics have pointed to the government's response, highlighting the detrimental effects of academic pressure on students' mental health.

Whereas some skepticism exists among students and parents regarding the efficacy of mental health leave, psychologists support the initiative, seeing it as a potential tool to alleviate stress and reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness. [The Guardian]

Taiwan: Navy to receive two more corvettes

(fg) Taiwan's Navy is prepared to receive its fifth and sixth domestically built Tuo Chiang-class corvettes by month's end, according to a military source.

The An Chiang and Wan Chiang corvettes, constructed by local ship and boat builder Lungteh Shipbuilding Co., were launched in October and November last year.

The Tuo Chiang corvettes are versatile multi-purpose vessels designed for operations in coastal and open waters, designed for their speed, agility and stealth capabilities. They are equipped with subsonic Hsiung Feng-II (HF-2) missiles, supersonic Hsiung Feng-III (HF-3) anti-ship missiles, a 76mm cannon and Sea Sword II carrier-based medium-range air defense missiles, allowing to strike against air and sea targets simultaneously.

The Navy plans to commission a total of 11 Tuo Chiang-class corvettes by the end of 2026. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Second freest country in Asia

(fg) Taiwan has maintained its position as Asia's second freest country and seventh globally in Freedom House's latest report (see full country report) on global freedom, according to the annual Freedom in the World report released on February 29.

Taiwan's score remains at 94 out of 100, trailing only Japan in Asia. Taiwan shares the seventh spot worldwide with the Czech Republic, Chile, Barbados, and Iceland. Freedom House rates Taiwan as "free," with a score of 38 out of 40 for political rights and 56 out of 60 for civil liberties.

The organization highlights Taiwan's response to the #MeToo movement in July last year, resulting in amendments to gender equality laws, but also in updates in sexual harassment laws (see AiR No.31,August/2023,1).

Freedom House notes ongoing challenges like housing costs, a key concern for younger voters, leading to protests and debates during the election campaign. [Taiwan News] [Freedom House]

Taiwan: Labor ministry apologizes for minister's "similar skin color" statement

(fg) Minister of Labor Hsu Ming-chun announced Taiwan's intention to primarily recruit migrant workers from Northeast India, citing similarities in "skin color and eating habits" with Taiwanese nationals. Additionally, she noted that most individuals in this region believe in Christianity and possess skills in manufacturing, construction, and agriculture. [Taiwan News]

These remarks were made during an interview on the Taiwan Green All YouTube channel on March 1. [YouTube]

The discussion revolved around questions regarding the Memorandum of Understanding signed between Taiwan and India on February 16 concerning labor cooperation. This memorandum is intended to serve as a framework for discussing conditions such as industries, quantities, language requirements, and source regions. [Taiwan News] [Taiwan News 2]

Kuan-ting Chen, a member of the Legislative Yuan and former special assistant to President Tsai Ing-wen, criticized Hsu Ming-chun's statement via X stating, "Taiwan's recruitment of migrant workers absolutely cannot be based on race or ethnicity." [Kuan-ting Chen via X]

In the latest development on March 5, Taiwan's Ministry of Labor issued an apology asserting that minister Hsu did not intend to discriminate against Indian People, though acknowledged the comments had been perceived in this way. [Taiwan News 3]

This apology follows a clarification statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs acknowledging that the remarks were not entirely appropriate and expressing sincere apologies. [MOFA Taiwan]

Taiwan: Live-fire drills planned

(fg) Taiwan's military is reportedly planning a live-fire missile test off the southeast coast starting at the end of March. The exercise is set to feature weapons systems such as the U.S.-developed AGM-114 Hellfire and Stinger, as well as the Taiwan-made Thunderbolt-2000 artillery rockets. Targets on land and at sea are expected to be engaged during the exercise. [Taiwan News]

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

Bangladesh: Parliamentary opposition Jatiya Party's intraparty rift widening

(lm) An internal split within Bangladesh's primary parliamentary opposition party, Jatiya Party (JaPa), which pits the younger brother of the party's founder against the founder's widow, seems to be widening.

JaPa, founded in 1986 by Hossain Mohammad Ershad, a former military leader and president of Bangladesh, currently controls 11 seats in the 300-member legislature. Thus, after the January 7 general election, Ershad's younger brother, GM Quader, was appointed as the leader of the opposition in parliament.

However, also shortly after the election, Rowshan Ershad, the widow of the party founder Hossain Ershad 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 Chunnu from their respective roles as chairman and secretary-general [see AiR No. 5, January/2024, 5]. Rowshan attributed the move to the perceived failure, particularly in the January 7 election – a justification she recently reiterated. [Dhaka Tribune]

Since then, the fronts have become more entrenched, with Rowshan saying that she would reinstate those previously excluded under her late husband's leadership. She also stated her commitment to addressing the concerns of party members and

announced plans for a qualified leadership takeover at the national council on March 9.

In contrast, GM Quader has called a joint meeting with Presidium members and parliamentarians on March 2, indicating continued involvement despite the leadership dispute. While he continues to downplay the likelihood of party division, he removed party co-chairman Syed Abu Hossain Babla and other senior leaders who supported Rowshan. [Dhaka Tribune]

Of note, Quader also recently criticized the Awami League-led government for causing divisions within JaPa. He expressed concern that the party has lost its previous flexibility and is now constrained to align with the Awami League, which controls at least 272 seats in Parliament. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Seven new state ministers sworn in

(ms) Seven new members of parliament (MPs) were sworn in as state ministers on March 1, marking an expansion of the incumbent cabinet led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. President Mohammed Shahabuddin administered the oath of office and oath of secrecy to the newly appointed state ministers at Bangabhaban, followed by the signing of the oaths.

The newly appointed state ministers and their respective portfolios are as follows: Md Shahiduzzaman Sarker, representing the Naogaon-2 Constituency, as State Minister for Planning; Md Abdul Wadud, MP for Rajshahi-5 Constituency, as State Minister for Rural Development & Co-operative Division; Md Nazrul Islam Chowdhury, MP for Chattogram-14 Constituency, as State Minister for Labour and Employment; Rokeya Sultana, MP for a reserved women's seat, as State Minister for Health and Family Welfare; Begum Shamsunnahar, MP for another reserved women's seat, as State Minister for Education; Wasika Ayesha Khan, MP for yet another reserved women's seat, as State Minister for Finance; Naheed Ezaher Khan, MP for a reserved women's seat, as State Minister for Cultural Affairs.

With this addition, the total number of cabinet ministers in the government now stands at 42. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's cabinet comprises 26 ministers and 18 state ministers. [Bangla News 24] [The Business Standard]

Bangladesh: BNP vice chairman Hafizuddin Ahmed sentenced to jail in 2011 sabotage case

(ms) Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Vice Chairman, Major (retd) Hafizuddin Ahmed, has been sentenced to 21 months in jail by a Dhaka court in connection with a 2011 sabotage case. Major Hafiz returned home after receiving medical treatment at Delhi's Fortis Hospital for two and a half months, only to face immediate legal consequences.

The case dates back to June 4, 2011, involving allegations of vandalism and obstruction of police work at Gulshan police station. Hafiz, along with other BNP figures, was accused of attacking police and vandalizing vehicles on a Mohakhali road during a protest.

Despite seeking bail upon surrendering to the court, Hafiz's request was rejected, and he was sent to jail by Dhaka Metropolitan Magistrate Rajesh Chowdhury.

This development adds to the ongoing political tensions in Bangladesh and raises questions about the impartiality of the judiciary in handling cases involving prominent political figures of opposition parties. [BD News 24] [BNN] [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: ‘Anti-India’ alliance protest

(ms) Police in Dhaka faced off against members of the 12-party alliance during an anti-India rally, resulting in the obstruction and subsequent cancellation of the event. The alliance had organized a demonstration in front of the National Press Club, demanding a boycott of Indian goods and protesting against alleged Indian interference in Bangladesh's politics.

The 12-Party Alliance is an offshoot of the now-defunct BNP-led 20-Party alliance, a prominent right-wing coalition in Bangladesh, opposing the ruling Grand Alliance led by the Awami League.

Eyewitnesses reported that when the leaders and activists of the alliance gathered to start the rally, the police forcibly removed their banners and flags with the slogan "India out, boycott India". Officers cited that the slogan as contradicting the country's foreign policy, as reason for their action.

Despite police interference, the alliance proceeded with a procession but without banners. Shahadat Hossain Salim, spokesperson for the alliance,

condemned the police action and urged people to boycott Indian products, citing Indian aggression and interference.

Amid accusations of Indian interference in Bangladesh's national elections, the "India Out" campaign gained momentum, with several opposition parties joining and social media driving the movement. This resulted in reported drops in sales of Indian products across Bangladesh. [Dhaka Tribune] [Just News] [News Age Bangladesh]

Bangladesh: Police Clash with Ganatantra Mancha protesters, prominent activist injured

(lm) Police in Bangladesh halted and charged truncheons on a procession by Ganatantra Mancha, a political platform comprising several smaller political parties and progressive organizations, marching towards the Secretariat in Dhaka to protest rising commodity prices, bank looting, and money laundering. When police baton-charged the crowd, several individuals, including Zonayed Saki, a prominent political activist, were injured. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bhutan: Import bill falls for first time since COVID-19 pandemic

(lm) Bhutan experienced a decrease in its import bill for the first time since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a decline of 8.7 percent, amounting to approximately USD 111 million compared to the previous year. Factors contributing to the decline in imports include the government's moratorium on non-essential vehicle imports and suspension of housing loans for home and hotel construction. [Kuensel]

Despite challenges, electricity exports played a crucial role in balancing trade, with exports amounting to approximately USD 210 million. Notably, fuel remained the top import, accounting for approximately USD 170 million, while the import of smartphones increased, and the import of rice decreased. Additionally, Bhutan exported significant amounts of ferrosilicon, dolomite, and boulders.

Meanwhile, exports to India and other countries also decreased by 7 percent, totaling approximately USD 695 million worth of goods. This reduction in both

imports and exports narrowed the country's trade deficit, which dropped to approximately USD 578 million.

India: Supreme Court says no immunity for lawmakers accepting bribes to vote

(ff/lm) India's Supreme Court delivered a significant ruling on March 4, overturning a 1998 judgment that shielded elected members of state assemblies and parliament from prosecution for accepting bribes in exchange for making speeches or casting votes in the lower House. The top court asserted that corruption and bribery by legislators undermine the integrity of public life and erode the foundations of Indian parliamentary democracy. [Times of India] [Independent]

The verdict marks a departure from the previous interpretation of parliamentary privileges, which provided immunity to elected representatives under articles of the Indian constitution. The court's decision to re-examine the 1998 judgment was prompted by a case involving the expulsion of Mahua Moitra, an opposition lawmaker accused of accepting bribes from a businessman in exchange for raising parliamentary questions [see AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2].

Moitra, a vocal critic of Modi's government, denied the allegations and criticized her expulsion from parliament "without proof." However, the Supreme Court's ruling now clarifies that the acceptance of bribes by elected representatives constitutes a crime, regardless of the location where the bribery occurred.

India: Opposition Congress party's manifesto committee discusses election promises

(lm) India's primary opposition party, the Congress, held a series of meetings on March 4 to prepare for the upcoming parliamentary elections. Led by former Finance Minister P. Chidambaram, the Manifesto Committee convened to review the draft manifesto. Simultaneously, screening committees worked on shortlisting candidates for the elections. It is expected that on March 7, the Central Election Committee will meet to finalize candidates for the initial parliamentary candidate list. [The Hindu]

During discussions on the manifesto, the committee managed to review about 10 pages of the 50-page document. Key focus areas included proposals for legal guarantees for the minimum support price and conducting a caste-based census. Additionally, attention was given to addressing issues of education access for marginalized groups, increasing scholarships, and offering economic packages for various demographics, such as women, youth, backward classes, and micro-entrepreneurs.

Thematically, the manifesto will center around the concept of "paanchnyay" (the five pillars of justice), which has been a focal point in the ongoing Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra (Unity and Justice March) led by former party leader Rahul Gandhi across different states of India.

India: Former Gujarat Congress chief resigns over Lord Ram dispute

(ff) Arjun Modhwadia, the former chief of India's main opposition Congress party in Gujarat state, has stepped down from the party in protest against what he perceives as an affront to Lord Ram, a revered deity in Hinduism. His decision stems from the party's refusal to participate in the consecration of the new Ram Mandir temple, a vast Hindu temple located on a contested holy site in India's northern Uttar Pradesh state [see AiR No. 4, January/2024, 4]. [Times of India] [Deccan Herald]

Modhwadia, a prominent leader in the state, previously served as the leader of the opposition during Prime Minister Modi's tenure as Gujarat's chief minister from 2007 to 2012. Additionally, he belongs to the Maher community, a social group primarily found in the states of Gujarat and Maharashtra. In light of this, his departure from the Congress party is viewed as a significant setback for the party as it prepares for upcoming parliamentary elections.

India: Supreme Court orders Aam Aadmi Party to vacate headquarters in plot meant for judiciary

(ff) India's Supreme Court has ordered the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), the ruling party in the National Capital Territory of Delhi, to vacate its headquarters in the capital by June 15. The ruling states that the party has been unlawfully occupying the premises since 2015, as

it was originally allotted to the Delhi High Court. In light of the impending general election, the court has permitted AAP to apply to the Land and Development Office (L&DO) for an allotment of alternate land in accordance with the law. [Hindustan Times]

During the proceedings, AAP argued that its office was lawfully allotted in 2015, and it was only in 2020 that the plot was earmarked by the L&DO for building additional courtrooms. The party criticized the lack of due diligence by the L&DO and highlighted unaddressed requests for alternative space. [Bar and Bench]

India: Ruling BJP suggests Election Commission to establish two-step voter verification

(fd) Ahead of general elections for Parliament's lower House, India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has proposed several measures to the Election Commission (EC) aimed at ensuring the integrity and fairness of the electoral process. [The Indian Express]

The key proposal put forth by the BJP is the implementation of a two-step verification process for voters before they are allowed to enter the voting compartment. Moreover, the BJP suggested expanding the coverage of videography and live webcasting from the current 50 percent of polling stations to encompass all polling stations across states. Additionally, the BJP advocated for the establishment of new polling booths within high-rise residential societies, echoing a directive issued by the EC to Chief Electoral Officers (CEOs) in September of the previous year.

Furthermore, the BJP raised concerns regarding delays in the approval of advertisements and publicity campaigns by the Media Certification and Monitoring Committees during elections. The party highlighted instances of arbitrary rejections and unwarranted delays in the approval process, which they believe could undermine the effectiveness of election campaigns, particularly given the short duration of campaign periods.

India: Election Commission seeks clarification from Odisha government, ruling BJD over use of party symbol in advertisement

(fd) India's Election Commission (EC) has asked initiated an inquiry into allegations regarding the use of the ruling Biju Janata Dal's (BJD) "conch" symbol in advertisements funded by public resources in Odisha state. The EC has requested clarification from both the Odisha state government and the BJD, with responses expected by March 2. These allegations surfaced amidst preparations for the upcoming Assembly elections in Odisha, which are anticipated to coincide with elections to India's lower House scheduled for April-May. [The Indian Express] [The Hindu]

India: Supreme Court rebukes son of Tamil Nadu chief minister, says he abused free speech

(ff/lm) India's Supreme Court has reprimanded Udhayanidhi Stalin, the son of Tamil Nadu's chief minister and a minister in the state, for comments in which he allegedly called for the eradication of "Sanatana Dharma", the eternal principles or duties that govern the universe in Hindu philosophy. The court stated that Stalin had abused his free speech rights and questioned if he was even aware of the consequences of his remarks, particularly given his position as a minister. [Times of India] [The Indian Express]

The incident occurred during an event in Chennai in September last year, where Stalin reportedly called for the eradication of Sanatana Dharma. His comments need to be understood within the broader political and ideological landscape of Tamil Nadu, where sentiments against Brahmin, the priestly case in Hinduism and rationalist movements have historically been strong. Additionally, Stalin himself is a prominent figure in the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party, which has a history of promoting rationalism, social justice, and secularism.

India: Online registration system for newspapers, periodicals introduced

(fd) India's central government has replaced the colonial-era Press and Registration of Books Act with the Press and Registration of Periodicals Act (PRP Act), making the registration of newspapers and periodicals a streamlined online process. The new law, effective since March 1, shifts registration responsibilities to the Press Registrar General of India and introduces an

online portal called Press Sewa Portal for applications. [Business Line]

The PRP Act eliminates manual processes, introduces paperless processing, digital payment gateways, and a chatbot-based grievance resolution mechanism. Books and journals are no longer required to register with PRGI, as per the new Act's definition of periodicals. [Business Standard]

India: Police arrests three for raising pro-Pakistan slogans on Karnataka Assembly premises

(ff/lm) Police in Karnataka state, India, have arrested three individuals for allegedly chanting pro-Pakistan slogans on the state assembly premises on February 27, coinciding with the announcement of the results of elections to the national Parliament's upper house. The Bharatiya Janata Party alleges that these slogans were raised by supporters of the main opposition Congress party. [Times of India]

India: Prime Minister Modi launches development projects worth over USD 13.3 million in five states

(ff) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently embarked on a three-day tour to five states, including Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, West Bengal, and Bihar, to inaugurate and lay the foundation stone for multiple development projects. During this whirlwind visit, Modi dedicated projects worth more than USD 13.3 million across these states, covering sectors such as power, rail, road, and renewable energy. [Times of India]

India: Core loading at country's first indigenous Fast Breeder Reactor started

(lm) India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has witnessed the commencement of "core loading" at the country's first indigenous Fast Breeder Reactor at Kalpakkam, Tamil Nadu state. The reactor was fully designed and constructed domestically with contributions from over 200 Indian industries. Once commissioned, it will make India the second country after Russia to have a commercial operating Fast Breeder Reactor.

A Fast Breeder Reactor is a type of nuclear reactor that produces more fissile material than it consumes. Additionally, these reactors can help reduce nuclear waste by burning byproducts of nuclear reactions. [The Hindu]

India: Local BJP leader killed by Maoists in Chhattisgarh state

(fd) A local leader of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was killed by suspected Maoist insurgents, known as Naxalites, in the state on March 1. This marks the first BJP leader's killing in Bijapur district this year and the eighth since last year. Reacting to the incident, Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai stated that the government's fight against the Naxalites is at a "decisive juncture." [ANI] [The Indian Express]

Last month, a member of the armed police forces in Chhattisgarh was killed in an Improvised Explosive Device blast planted by Naxalites, and a separate incident saw a CAF commander killed by Maoists in a village market in Bijapur district. [AiR No. 9, February/2024, 4]

Indian: Army opens fire at drones near disputed border in Kashmir

(fd) The Indian Army has opened fire at two drones that were spotted in the Line of Control (LoC) in the Poonch and Sarla district of the Jammu and Kashmir union territory. In both instances the drones retreated to the Pakistani side after the military personal had opened fire. Moreover, the police of the union territory have announced a cash reward for individuals who provide support in the recovery of drones in the area. [Hindustan Times]

The Maldives: Parliament passes bill to postpone elections, overrides presidential rejection

(aa) In the Maldives, Parliament has reapproved legislation to postpone the upcoming parliamentary elections, just days after President Mohamed Muizzu returned the bill without ratification, sparking a potential constitutional crisis.

The legislative tug-of-war revolves around the fifth amendment to the General Elections Act, which was proposed by the Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) and The Democrats and sought to delay elections to ten days after Ramadan's conclusion [see AiR No. 8, February/2024, 3]. Of note, the Election Commission shares concerns about holding the elections – originally scheduled for March 17 – during Ramadan due to declining voter numbers and logistical challenges. [bnn]

However, the president cited five reasons for dismissing the bill, including concerns about violating the constitution and loss of confidence in elections. This decision prompted the bill to be returned to Parliament. However, Parliament passed the bill a second time, and the constitution requires the president to ratify legislation that has been approved by the Parliament two times. [SunOnline]

The Maldives: Supreme Court upholds Mohamed Zahir Hussain as owner of *Haveeru News*

(aa) In the Maldives, the Supreme Court has overturned a previous High Court ruling, affirming Mohamed Zahir Hussain, a former minister and current chancellor of the Islamic University of Maldives, as the legitimate owner of the country's oldest daily newspaper, *Haveeru News*. [SunOnline]

The ownership dispute originated in 2013 when three former staffers of *Haveeru News* filed a case seeking a share of the paper's earnings and involvement in its operations, citing a 1983 agreement with Zahir. After the High Court divided the ownership in 2019, Zahir appealed to the Supreme Court, which ruled in his favor, emphasizing that the 1983 agreement was a Memorandum of Understanding and did not confer legal ownership rights.

Nepal: Ruling coalition collapses, Maoists join hands with

(lm) In a significant political shift, Nepal witnessed the dissolution of the year-long coalition between the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre), as Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal opted to join forces with the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (UML), hitherto the country's

main opposition party and two other coalition parties. [Fox News] [The Week]

Maoist Centre terminates coalition with Nepali Congress over growing differences

Dahal's Maoist Centre holds the position as the third-largest party in the 275-seat lower house of parliament. Nevertheless, he assumed the role of prime minister last year with the backing of the largest political party, the Nepali Congress. However, signs of strain between the two parties have emerged more prominently in recent times. A notable instance occurred on February 28 when the Maoist Centre opted to nominate its own candidate for the chairman position of the Parliament's upper House, the National Assembly. This decision marked a departure from previous collaborative endeavors and highlighted the escalating discord between the two coalition allies. [The Kathmandu Post]

New coalition government agrees on eight-point agreement

Besides the communist Maoist Centre and UML parties, the newly formed coalition comprises the Rastriya Swatantra Party and the Janata Samajbadi Party. Both were junior partners in the previous coalition and now hold 21 seats and 12 seats in Parliament's lower house, respectively. The collective strength of 142 coalition lawmakers is more than the minimum required 138 seats in the 275-member House.

The four parties solidified their alliance with an eight-point agreement, emphasizing their commitment to governance, development, and social justice. Additionally, the agreement outlines their support for the Maoist Centre's candidate for National Assembly chair and the UML's candidate for vice-chair.

Cabinet reshuffle but no allocation of portfolios

Concurrently, Prime Minister Dahal initiated a four-member Cabinet reshuffle on March 4, appointing one minister from each of the four-party coalition. However, the newly appointed ministers have not yet been assigned portfolios. Prime Minister Prachanda has retained 25 ministerial portfolios, including Home, Defence, Foreign Affairs, and Finance.

Despite the coalition change, Congress ministers opted not to resign, arguing that it was the Maoist Centre that ended the alliance, not them.

Resurrection of the Left Alliance

It is noteworthy that the coalition agreement between the Maoist Centre and the UML effectively signals the revival of the "Left Alliance," an electoral pact formed between the two parties prior to the 2017 general elections. At that time, the collaboration between Dahal and UML chair KP Sharma Oli represented a significant departure in Nepali politics, uniting two major communist parties with historically divergent ideologies.

Subsequently, the Left Alliance secured a considerable majority in the parliamentary elections, enabling them to establish a coalition government. Oli assumed the role of prime minister, while Dahal played a pivotal role within the government. However, despite their initial cooperation, tensions between Dahal and Oli surfaced over various issues, including the allocation of power within the government and party politics.

In 2018, Dahal accused Oli of failing to uphold power-sharing agreements and marginalizing his party within the government. Two years later, Dahal withdrew his support from the government, precipitating its collapse.

Nepal: Government struggles to present civil service bill, despite pledges

(lm) The Nepalese government, under Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's leadership, faces ongoing challenges in advancing the Federal Civil Service Bill, despite assurances and pledges made across various platforms. The pressure is notably heightened by provinces like Madhesh, which advocate for the full exercise of their constitutionally granted powers, including the establishment of autonomous bureaucracy and police forces. [The Kathmandu Post]

The federal civil service bill in Nepal aims to establish a comprehensive framework for civil service administration at the federal level, delineating the structure, functions, and responsibilities of civil servants. The bill has faced delays since 2017, when the initial draft was prepared. Since then, it has been amended several times, over resistance from civil servants, particularly regarding provisions related to officer recruitment and age limits for higher positions.

Meanwhile, provincial governments have been assertive in their demands, with the Madhesh provincial assembly unanimously endorsing a resolution motion emphasizing the need for provinces to have control over administrative and bureaucratic matters. Earlier this year, leaders from the six other

provinces came to Kathmandu to push Prime Minister Dahal to enact the law together with the one governing the police adjustment process.

As a result, personnel laws are government by the Civil Service Act of 1993, when Nepal was still operated under a unitary system of government.

Nepal: Prime Minister Dahal admits government failed to deliver as per expectations

(lm) At a recent mid-term review meeting, Nepal's Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal voiced his dissatisfaction with the state of public service delivery, expressing concern over the government's inability to meet its targets and objectives, particularly in areas such as good governance and social justice. [The Kathmandu Post]

One major issue highlighted by Dahal was the failure of several ministries and government entities to achieve their set targets and milestones. He cited data indicating that only 36 percent of the planned milestones had been met by the end of January, with a significant portion of projects not even getting off the ground. This failure, according to Dahal, raised serious questions about the government's organizational capacity and efficiency.

Furthermore, Dahal expressed concern over the sluggish pace of revenue collection and capital expenditure. By the end of January, revenue targets were only 74 percent fulfilled, while capital expenditure showed a meager 24 percent progress over the preceding nine months. Dahal emphasized that without adequate capital formation and expenditure, the government would struggle to accelerate development activities and maintain economic stability.

Nepal: Farmers demand land ownership from Swargadwari Ashram Trust

(lm) In Nepal, farmers who have tilled land owned by the Swargadwari Ashram Trust for generations, conducted a symbolic protest to demand ownership of the land they have cultivated, which constitutes a significant portion of the trust's property. [The Kathmandu Post]

Crucially, the protesting farmers called on the government to again table the so-called Guthi bill, which was first tabled in Parliament in 2019 and sought to nationalize centuries-old community and religious trusts. The bill triggered a public outcry and accusations of narrowing civil space and freedom. In light of major protests by thousands of Nepalis, the government eventually decided to withdraw the bill from Parliament's upper House. Prior to this, the Supreme Court in 2006 had issued a mandamus order stating that the land of the trust could not be fragmented as the trust is the private trust with specific characteristics.

Against the backdrop, the trust's management committee formed a panel in December last year to study the dual ownership of its land. The nine-member panel was given six months to study the issue and submit a report.

Nepal: Disputes among elected officials leave several local units in Madhesh province paralyzed

(lm) Disputes among elected officials have paralyzed several municipalities in Nepal's Madhesh province. [The Kathmandu Post]

In Haripurwa Municipality, tensions arose during the annual municipal assembly, where the deputy mayor and certain ward chairpersons opposed the assembly and its budget allocation. This dissent has led to the padlocking of municipal offices and the cessation of administrative work. Additionally, protests by employees and teachers demanding overdue salaries and perks have further intensified the situation.

Similarly, Parsa Rural Municipality has been at a standstill for two weeks following the padlocking of its office by a faction of people's representatives advocating for a 19-point demand. Despite attempts to resolve the situation, the rural municipality chief has yet to address the demands, leaving employees unable to carry out their duties and service seekers deprived of essential services.

In Chandranagar Rural Municipality, the situation is equally dire, with no progress made in convening the village assembly or endorsing the annual budget for the current fiscal year. Disputes between the chairman and deputy mayor have obstructed governance processes, resulting in the withholding of salaries for employees and senior citizens being denied their entitled allowances.

Nepal: Anti-corruption agency to unveil findings on Teramocs procurement case soon

(lm) Nepal's anti-graft watchdog, the Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA), is nearing completion of its investigation into alleged corruption in the Nepal Telecommunications Authority's procurement of the Telecommunications Traffic Monitoring and Fraud Control System (Teramocs). [The Kathmandu Post]

The controversy began with concerns raised by the Parliament's Public Accounts Committee regarding the procurement process of Teramocs, a technology designed for the lawful interception of domestic voice/data services and traffic monitoring, with the aim of detecting fraud and controlling the network of telecom service operators. The House committee suspected irregularities in the procurement, which was reported to cost around USD 25.5 million. After a preliminary investigation, the committee concluded that there were reasons to suspect irregularities based on the available procurement documents.

In response to the parliamentary directive, CIAA initiated an investigation into the matter. During the investigation, statements were recorded from key individuals, including Minister for Health and Communications Mohan Basnet, Chief Secretary Baikuntha Aryal, and Nepali Congress lawmaker Gyanendra Bahadur Karki. Both Basnet and Karki had initially delayed recording their statements but eventually complied after pressure from opposition lawmakers.

The controversy surrounding the Teramocs procurement also raised concerns about privacy and data protection. There were fears that the technology could enable the NTA to collect confidential personal information, such as call details and SMS messages of citizens. Telecom service operators expressed reluctance to make their systems compatible with Teramocs due to concerns about violating individuals' privacy rights.

Pakistan: Shebaz Sharif elected for second term as prime minister

(nw) Shehbaz Sharif has secured his position as Pakistan's prime minister for a second term, following

the completion of a prolonged and tumultuous electoral process. After a three-week delay due to uncertain national elections, Sharif emerged victorious in the newly formed parliament March 3, obtaining 201 votes, comfortably surpassing the required threshold of 169 votes. His main contender, Omar Ayub, backed by the incarcerated former Prime Minister Imran Khan, managed to secure only 92 votes. [The Guardian] [France24] [Reuters]

Sharif, who hails from a prominent political family, is the younger brother of Nawaz Sharif, a three-time prime minister and the leader of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). His return to the prime ministerial role marks a comeback to the position he previously held until August, when parliamentary dissolution preceded the elections and a caretaker government assumed power.

The electoral landscape after the February 8 polls did not favor any single party to secure a majority independently, necessitating coalition-building efforts. Independent candidates backed by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) of jailed former Prime Minister Khan winning 93 seats, despite the party facing a severe crackdown from government agencies and security forces in the weeks before the elections. The PML-N managed to secure 75 seats while PPP came in third place with 54 seats. Overall, a total of 13 different parties managed to win seats, of which six secured only one. [AiR No. 7, February/2024, 2]

In this context, the PML-N commenced discussions with the PPP, under the leadership of former Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, to explore the potential for forming a coalition government. As per the arrangement, Shehbaz was expected to take up the position of prime minister, while Bilawal's father, Asif Ali Zardari, was designated for the presidency [see AiR No. 9, February/2024, 4]. This agreement was not unprecedented, as both parties had previously cooperated to govern the country following Khan's ouster in 2022.

Pakistan: PPP ready to seek MQM support for Zardari's presidential bid

(nw/lm) The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) filed nomination papers for Asif Ali Zardari, father of party chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, as their candidate for the upcoming presidential election on March 9. Zardari, a former president, is poised to contest for his second term as the joint candidate of the PPP and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), under a

broader agreement between a total of eight political parties. This agreement also led to the election of Shehbaz Sharif from the PML-N as Prime Minister for a second term. [Dawn 1]

Of note, the PPP has indicated that it would seek support from various parliamentary groups, including the Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P), a political party formed in 2016 as a result of a split in the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), a party known for representing the urban population of Karachi, Pakistan's largest city.

Meanwhile, Mehmood Khan Achakzai, a prominent political figure particularly known for his Pashtun nationalist views, has submitted nomination papers to contest the upcoming presidential election against Zardari. Achakzai is backed by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) of jailed former Prime Minister Khan. [Dawn 2]

In Pakistan, the President is elected indirectly by an electoral college, which comprises the members of both houses of Parliament and the provincial assemblies. The President is elected for a five-year term, and there are no term limits. The President's role is largely ceremonial and symbolic, with most executive powers vested in the Prime Minister, who is the head of government.

Pakistan: Election Commission refuses to allocate reserved seats to Sunni Ittehad Council

(nw/lm) The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has refused to allocate reserved seats in Parliament to the minority Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) political alliance, which includes independent lawmakers backed by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) of jailed ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan. [The Express Tribune] [Pakistan Today]

In its ruling, the ECP stated that the SIC had failed to meet the necessary requirements by contesting the February 8 election without submitting priority lists. Additionally, the ECP clarified that vacant reserved seats in the National Assembly would be redistributed among other parties through a proportional representation process.

In Pakistan, political parties are granted 70 reserved seats in Parliament’s lower House - 60 for women and 10 for non-Muslims - in accordance with their performance in the general election. The issue arose

when the PTI lost its election symbol due to irregularities in its intra-party polls, making it ineligible to submit a priority list for reserved seats. As independents are not entitled to reserved seats, independent candidates supported by the PTI during the elections officially joined the SIC and agreed to receive its allocated share of reserved seats for women and minorities.

Pakistan: Jailed ex-premier Imran Khan, wife plead not guilty in Al-Qadir Trust graft case

(wa/lm) Imran Khan, Pakistan's imprisoned former Prime Minister, and his wife Bushra Bibi on February 27 pleaded not guilty in a graft case alleging acceptance of land as a gift from a real estate tycoon in exchange for laundered money. [Associated Press]

Prosecutors accuse the couple of using the Al-Qadir Trust, a non-governmental organization established by Khan and Bushra Bibi during Khan's tenure as prime minister, to establish a university on gifted land. Prosecutors claim the real estate developer, Malik Riaz Hussain, received USD 240 million in laundered money from the United Kingdom in return. [AiR No. 9, February/2024, 4]

This is the second corruption case against the couple. Separately, Khan and Bibi have been sentenced to seven years in prison each on charges that their 2018 wedding violated marriage laws, allegedly because insufficient time had lapsed between Bibi's previous divorce and their union. [AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1]

Meanwhile, leaders of Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party have expressed serious concerns over the safety and health of Bushra Bibi, who is currently under house arrest in Bani Gala sub-jail. They stated that they were denied access to her after discussing her health and food with the media during their last meeting. Despite Bushra Bibi's request to be transferred to Adiala Jail, authorities insist on keeping her in Bani Gala citing security concerns and lack of space in the jail. [Pakistan Today]

Pakistan: Over 4,000 children became victims of various from of abuse in 2023

(nw) A report by a non-profit organization working on child protection disclosed that a total of 4,213 children

suffered abuse in 2023 in Pakistan, averaging 11 cases per day nationwide. According to an analysis of the reported cases, 53 percent of victims were girls and 47 percent were boys, with the most vulnerable age group being 6-15 years. By the geographical breakdown, Punjab province reported the highest number of cases, with 75 percent of reported incidents. [The News International] [Samma TV]

Pakistan: Senator calls for social media ban amidst ongoing disruptions of Twitter

(nw) Amidst ongoing disruptions of the social media platform X in Pakistan, Senator Bahramand Khan Tangi has called for a permanent ban on all social media platforms due to their perceived negative impact on the younger generation. Tangi's resolution, which was listed for discussion in the Senate session on March 4, aims to address concerns about the use of social media for spreading negative propaganda against Pakistan's armed forces. [Dawn 1]

The disruption of the X website since February 17 has led to reports of authorities considering a blanket ban on all Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), prompting concerns from the IT and services sector. Many users have turned to VPNs to access the platform, leading to speculation about potential bans on VPNs as well.

Against this backdrop, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has strongly opposed the proposed Senate resolution calling for a ban on social media platforms, warning that such measures violate constitutional freedoms. [Dawn 2]

Pakistan: Security forces kill three militants in operation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province

(lm) Pakistan's security forces conducted an intelligence-based operation in Karak district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, resulting in the killing of three militants and injuring four others. [Arab News]

The operation aimed to address the surge in militant violence, primarily in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces, following the cessation of a ceasefire by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in November 2022. Recent months have seen multiple such operations targeting militants hiding in remote areas.

Sri Lanka: SLPP lawmakers push for early general elections ahead of presidential race

(lm) In Sri Lanka, amidst discussions surrounding potential pre-election alliances, a notable number of lawmakers from both government and opposition parties are reportedly calling for a general election to take place before the scheduled presidential ballot, slated between September and October this year. [Daily Mirror]

While smaller political parties like the opposition National People's Power (NPP) have already launched campaigns for the presidential election, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), the leading party in the governing coalition, is evaluating the political landscape before announcing support for any candidate.

The SLPP, currently divided, sees one faction strongly backing President Wickremesinghe's candidacy, while another group within the party remains aligned with the government but without a clear stance. Additionally, some MPs elected on the SLPP ticket now identify with the opposition, including Housing and Urban Development Minister Prasanna Ranatunga.

Sri Lanka: MP's secretary attempts to influence NMRA officials during pharmacy raid

(lm) During a recent raid on an unlicensed pharmacy by officials from Sri Lanka's National Medicines Regulatory Authority (NMRA), the personal secretary of MP Ali Sabri Raheem allegedly attempted to interfere with the officials' duties. Despite the attempted influence, the NMRA officials continued with the raid and seized a significant quantity of prescription drugs valued at approximately USD 14,000. It's noteworthy that Raheem has previously been detained by Sri Lanka Customs at the Bandaranaike International Airport for attempting to smuggle gold worth over USD 370,000. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Government expects 'smooth' second IMF review

(lm) (lm) The Sri Lankan government is optimistic about the forthcoming second review of an International Monetary Fund (IMF)-backed bailout program, which is scheduled to commence on March 7. Colombo anticipates a timely completion of the review, leading to the release of the third tranche of the USD 3 billion bailout package, known as the Extended Fund Facility. [Daily Mirror]

In December last year, the IMF completed the first review under the 48-month agreement, providing the country with access to about USD 337 million, bringing the total IMF financial support disbursed to that point to about USD 670 million. The upcoming second review will formally assess the progress made in meeting key commitments under the program. Additionally, it will coincide with the 2024 Article IV consultation, which evaluates Sri Lanka's overall economic health.

Speaking against this backdrop, finance officials have acknowledged that the first review posed challenges, especially as the government was in the initial stages of implementing difficult policy decisions. However, they highlighted positive indicators of economic stabilization, notably demonstrated by the third-quarter performance of gross domestic product (GDP).

Sri Lanka: Revelation of pay hike scheme provokes defensive reaction from CBSL

(aa) The Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) has defended a controversial 50-percent salary hike granted to its employees, citing consultation and agreement among all stakeholders, including trade unions affiliated with the Sri Lanka People's Front alliance and the United National Party, the two ruling coalition parties. [The Island] [Daily Mirror]

The scheme, which extends the latest collective agreement on salaries for a three-year period, is based on a formula introduced in 2000. Notably, none of the trade unions affiliated with political parties opposed the continuation of the scheme, and those trade unions could not have endorsed the pay hikes without their parties' knowledge.

However, CBSL Governors expressed a willingness to enhance transparency in the decision-making process. The institution has requested the President to allow a parliamentary committee to clarify and explain the rationale behind the recent revision before Members of Parliament. The Committee on Public Finance (CoPF) is expected to convene with a CBSL delegation soon to address the matter.

Sri Lanka: Deshabandu Tennakoon assumes duties as head of police

(lm) Deshabandu Tennakoon officially stepped into the role of Sri Lanka's police chief, assuming the position of Inspector General of Police (IGP) last week. However, his appointment in late December last year has stirred significant controversy over allegations of constitutional violations in the appointment as well has human rights abuses by Tennakoon himself. [Daily Mirror]

At the heart of the controversy surrounding Tennakoon's appointment are claims by opposition leader Sajith Premadasa. According to Premadasa, in the Constitutional Council, which oversees high-level appointments, only four votes were cast in favor of Tennakoon, while 2 votes were against, and 2 votes were recorded as absentees. Notably, among the votes in favor was that of the Speaker of Parliament, Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena, who does not have the right to vote unless it's a tie. Premadasa argued that this renders the appointment illegal.

Moreover, Tennakoon's track record has come under scrutiny, particularly regarding his alleged negligence during the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019, as highlighted in the Presidential Commission of Inquiry. Additionally, the Supreme Court's ruling in December found Tennakoon and two subordinates guilty of torturing a suspect in 2010, further tarnishing his reputation.

Criticism extends to Tennakoon's handling of the 2022 mass protests against the government of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, during which Tennakoon, then serving as senior officer in charge of the Western Province, faced accusations of excessive force against protesters at an iconic protest site at Galle Face. Tennakoon recently defended his actions, citing the need to maintain democracy and national security.

In light of this, critics argue that the government's major anti-drug operation "Yukthiya", aimed at tackling crime and drug-related activities, has been strategically used to bolster Tennakoon's public image and clear the path for his permanent appointment. The operation itself, despite claims of success, has faced significant scrutiny from human rights organizations and opposition politicians alike.

Sri Lanka: Petition filed against former Intelligence Service Chief over Easter Sunday attacks

(aa) In Sri Lanka, a writ petition has been filed with the Court of Appeal requesting legal action against a former Chief of the State Intelligence Service, Nilantha Jayawardena, for his alleged failure to prevent the 2019 Easter Sunday terror attacks despite receiving intelligence information. The petitioners seek an order instructing the respondents, namely Jayawardena and the Attorney General, to implement the recommendations of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry (PCoI) on the attacks and call for Jayawardena's arrest under criminal law, followed by legal action. [Adadenera]

The PCoI on the Easter Sunday attacks was established to investigate the coordinated terrorist bombings that occurred on April 21, 2019, and targeted churches and luxury hotels, resulting in hundreds of casualties. The commission's report, released in early 2021, detailed numerous failures within the security establishment, including lapses in intelligence sharing and coordination among relevant authorities. It also highlighted systemic issues and shortcomings that contributed to the vulnerability of the country to such attacks.

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

Cambodia: Sub-decree on civil service recruitment issued

(pm) Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet issued a sub-decree that introduces a code of conduct for civil service recruitment to ensure individual merit-based recruitment of civil servants in a transparent, fair, inclusive and effective procedure.

The move aims to tackle the issue of nepotism in the country's public administration.

This month exams will be held to hire some 200 new civil servants for three institutions of the Ministry of Civil Service including the Anti-Corruption Unit, the Ministry of Public Works and Transport, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Strict border monitoring efforts to be set up

(pm) Cambodia is set to tighten measures to protect the country from unrests of illegal immigrants.

At a meeting of the Ministry of Interior, held on February 28 assess the work results in 2023 and review the work plan for 2024, Minister of Interior Sar Sokha called for the imposition of stringent border rules, including monitoring measures such as controlling travelers flow at the borders, accommodation facilities of foreigners, in addition to preventing the entry of terrorists and illegal immigrants into the country.

The Ministry reported for 2023 that authorities cracked down on 157 human trafficking cases, resulting in the arrest of 185 suspects, among whom 11 were foreigners, while 159 suspects were arrested in 54 money laundering cases. 131 sex trafficking case were investigated leading to the arrest of 151 suspects. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Candlelight Party (CP) sentenced to jail for committing voter interference

(pm) A opposition Candlelight Party (CP) activist was found guilty of interfering with voters during the National Election in 2023 and sentenced to 18 months in jail.

Loeu Makara, a 38-year-old former prison guard and CP activist from Phnom Penh's Sen Sok district's Thmey commune, initially received an 18-month prison

sentence. Yet, the Phnom Penh Municipal Court later reduced it to eight months, with the remaining term suspended.

Makara was charged with "incitement to commit a felony or cause social unrest under Articles 494 495 of Cambodia's Penal Code and "inciting, harassing `and preventing people from going to the polls or destroying ballots," under the new Article 142 of the Law on the Amendment of the Election Law. The law came into force early July 2023, shortly ahead of the July 23 general election from which the CP was barred for participating.

Makara's July 10 post on Facebook was viewed by the court as inciting people, especially CP supporters, not to vote and destroy the ballots in the 2023 National election.

Makara, who was arrested two days after the post, admitted to committing the offense during the trial. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Appeal Court confirms Setha's three-year jail sentence

(pm) Thach Setha, vice-president of the opposition Candlelight Party (CP) has been sentenced to three years in October 2023 by a lower court for inciting people to topple the government and to discriminate against the leaders of the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP).

On February 28, the Phnom Penh Appeal Court upheld that the sentence was appropriate and correct, and that the court rejected the appeal that Setha submitted.

Setha was sentenced to three years of prison for "incitement to commit a felony or cause social unrest and incitement to discriminate" under Articles 494, 495, and 496 of the Criminal Code. Setha was also accused of inciting supporters of the former Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) to join forces with CP and oust the then Hun Sen-led government.

In a separate case, on September 21, 2023, Setha was handed down an 18-month prison sentence with five million Riel (USD 1,250). The court also ordered him to pay USD 33,400 in damages to the plaintiff Hai Vanrin as plaintiff. He was accused of violating "issuance of a dud cheque" under Article 231 of Law on Negotiable Instrument and Payment Transactions. [Khmer Times]

Indonesia: Parliament to revise election law

(yr) The Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI) will review the Election Law's parliamentary threshold after the Constitutional Court's decision on March 1 in which it ruled that “that the parliamentary threshold set at four percent of valid national votes in Law No. 7 of 2017 on General Elections (Election Law) is not in line with the principles of popular sovereignty and election justice, and in violation of legal certainty guaranteed by the Constitution.” [Constitutional Court, Indonesia]

The decision calls for a revision of the election law for the 2029 elections, including the elimination of the 4 percent parliamentary threshold and simplifying the number of political parties.

The revision is expected to be completed by the end of the 2024 legislative session, with the goals to fit the electoral system in accordance with the Constitutional Court's ruling. [Kompas] [Antara]

Indonesia: Election commission confirms simultaneous regional head elections as scheduled

(yr) The Indonesian General Election Commission (KPU) confirmed that simultaneous regional head elections will take place in November 2024, in accordance with existing regulations.

Even though there is discussion about changing the schedule, the KPU continues to refer to the applicable laws and regulations and has started preparations for the election stages.

They also emphasized the importance of this election process being carried out according to schedule and regulations to ensure everything runs smoothly [Kompas].

Indonesia: Prabowo Subianto awarded honorary four-star general title

(jb) Indonesia's President Joko Widodo has granted Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto the title of honorary four-star general, the country’s second-

highest military rank, fueling debate given Prabowo's history linked to alleged human rights abuses. Despite objections from rights groups, concerned that the award will cement the culture of impunity for human rights violations in the country, Jokowi defended the decision, citing Prabowo's honorable discharge from the military.

Prabowo, poised to become Indonesia's next president with almost 60 percent of the vote in unofficial counts, faced scrutiny for past actions, including his involvement in the 1998 abduction of pro-democracy activists, which are among the 12 severe human rights violations committed by the state since the 1960s, which Jokowi officially acknowledged last year. [Tempo.co] [Benar News]

Indonesia: Prabowo eyes former bankers for finance minister role

(jb) Indonesia's presumed President-elect Prabowo Subianto is eyeing former bankers for the crucial of post of Finance Minister, prioritizing technocrats capable of funding his ambitious agenda while ensuring fiscal responsibility.

Prabowo's proposed IDR 460 trillion (USD 29 billion) spending plan focuses on health, education, and job creation, as Indonesia faces geopolitical risks and supply chain disruptions arising from the rivalry between China and the US.

Among potential contenders are Budi Gunadi Sadikin (Health Minister in the Onward Indonesia Cabinet of Jokowi), Kartika Wirjoatmodjo (Deputy SOE Minister), Mahendra Siregar (financial regulator Chairman), and Royke Tumilaar (Bank Negara Indonesia President Director).

Discussions about the possible composition of the new cabinet are underway as March 20 as the day of the announcement of the official presidential election results is nearing. [BNN Bloomberg]

Indonesia: President to work in new capital from July 20

(yr) On February 29, President Joko Widodo announced his plans to start working in the National Capital Nusantara this July.

This announcement was made during the inauguration of the financial cluster infrastructure at Nusantara, stating that the decision was pending completion of the airport and toll road construction.

This infrastructure is expected to shorten travel time from Nusantara Airport to the city center to only 15 minutes, and from Balikpapan City, the closest major city, to Nusantara to around 45 minutes.

Widodo emphasized the importance of this facility to increase traffic to Nusantara, which is scheduled to start operating on August 17, which will mark the 79th anniversary of Indonesia's independence. [Antara]

In a separate move, Bambang Soesatyo, the Chairman of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) - Indonesia's legislative branch composed of the members of the House of Representatives (DPR) and the Regional Representative Council (DPD), also invited Singapore to invest in the development of Nusantara (see article below).

Indonesia: Social media platform action against online gambling ads demanded

(jb) Indonesia's Communications and Information Ministry (Kominfo) has demanded action from social media platform X, formerly Twitter, to combat the surge in online gambling advertisements. Semuel Abrijani Pangerapan, director-general at Kominfo, emphasized the need for an automated system to swiftly remove such content, citing the challenge of repetitive takedown notices.

A recent survey revealed 63 percent of internet users encountered online gambling ads, with 41 percent expressing interest in visiting gambling sites after exposure. In 2023, Kominfo removed over 810,000 online gambling-related pieces, a significant increase from the previous year. Strict warnings from Kominfo have prompted Meta to remove 1.65 million gambling content pieces. [VN Express]

Indonesia: Beef production to be boosted to reduce imports

(jb) Vice President Ma'ruf Amin unveiled plans to bolster Indonesia's beef industry, eyeing reduced imports through domestic cattle farming.

In a statement on February 29, made during his working visit to New Zealand, Amin highlighted Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and East Nusa Tenggara as prime regions for cattle rearing, citing vast grasslands.

The National Food Agency forecasts 145,250.60 tons of beef imports for 2024. With targets set for beef independence by 2026, the government is seeking strategies to boost cattle populations, including improved breeding practices and disease control regulations. [Antara News]

Indonesia: Ministry seeks to stabilize food prices ahead of Ramadan

(yr) The Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs has directed all regional inflation control teams (TPID), especially on the island of Java as the most populous island with around 116 million people, to ensure food prices and supplies stable before Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr.

The government claims that it is working hard to control inflation and food prices, including accelerating the distribution of stabilized rice to traditional and modern markets, as well as providing rice assistance to 22 million families to maintain stability of national inflation at 2.5 ± 1 percent in 2024. [Antara] [Statistics Indonesia]

Indonesia: Air Force strengthens defense with additional drone squadron

(yr) The Indonesian Air Force (TNI AU) plans to strengthen its defence capacity by adding two new drone squadrons in Tarakan, North Kalimantan and Malang, East Java.

The Head of the Air Force Information Service, Air Commodore (Marsma) TNI Agung Sasongkojati, made the announcement, bringing the total number of Indonesian drone squadrons to four. This new squadron will be equipped with Turkish ANKA drones as part of the Indonesian Air Force's efforts to keep up with the latest developments in military technology.

This is a follow-up step after purchasing 12 ANKA units for around IDR 4.5 trillion (approximately USD 321 million) from Turkish Aerospace, confirming Indonesia's commitment to modernizing its defence equipment. [Antara, in Indonesian]

Laos: Prime Minister calls for efficient administration and funding in energy and mining sectors

(wn) During a meeting with top officials from the Ministry of Energy and Mines on March 1, Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone emphasized the need for effective management of investment projects in the energy and mining sectors.

He urged the ministry to review policies related to electricity supply, adhere to government resolutions on electric vehicles and clean energy, and assess progress in mineral exploration. Additionally, the ministry was tasked with establishing specific criteria for licensing mining development and investment companies [Vientiane Times]

The prime minister's statements come as the country faces challenges in the development of administrative mechanisms, management, monitoring and law enforcement with regard to mining operations.

Laos: House church reopens after attack by non-Christian villagers

(wn) A house church in a village in Southern Laos has reopened and is undergoing repairs following an attack by a mob of residents and village authorities in early February.

The incident, during which Bibles were burned, highlights the repeated assaults on Christians and churches in Laos, despite the existence of national laws protecting the free exercise of faith. It also underscores the issue of impunity regarding the harassment of Christians. [RFA]

Laos: Fifth rank in economic participation and opportunity in Global Gap Index 2023

(wn) Laos has secured the fifth position in the 145-country Global Gender Gap Index 2023 of the World Economic Forum for "economic participation and opportunity", with a score of 85.1 percent, for equal access to economic opportunities for both men and women.

Other Southeast Asian countries, such as Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, were ranked 23rd, 24th, and 31st, respectively.

Despite progress in economic participation and opportunity, Laos faces challenges in other areas, assessed in the Index. Educational attainment ranks 107th, health and survival rank 50th, and political empowerment is at 101st. To address these disparities, Laos must intensify efforts to provide education and healthcare access to women, particularly in rural areas, and enhance women's empowerment in politics. Laos is committed to gender equality through the implementation of CEDAW, which has positively impacted women's rights.

The Index also confirms that gender gaps persist, with women earn 77 percent of men's income, have fewer opportunities in low-skill jobs, and face violence. Although improvements have been made in girls' education and maternal health in rural areas, more must be done to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women. Efforts should focus on promoting women's economic empowerment, increasing their representation in leadership roles, and combating gender-based violence. [World Economic Forum] [The Laotian Times]

Malaysia: Agreement on recovery of 1MDB assets questioned

(ba) The agreement inked in 2020 between the Malaysian government and Goldman Sachs Group Inc (Goldman Sachs) for the recovery of 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB) assets lacked specificity, according to Johari Abdul Ghani, Chairman of the 1MDB Asset Recovery Taskforce. Johari was appointed to lead the task force by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim on 10 March 2023 to resolve matters involving the 1MDB scandal.

Johari pointed out that this ambiguity allowed Goldman Sachs to exploit the situation, leading to its reluctance to fulfill the USD 1.4 billion asset recovery guarantee owed to the Malaysian government. He highlighted that Goldman Sachs included Malaysia's settlement with the International Petroleum Investment Company (IPIC) as part of its USD 1.4 billion asset recovery guarantee, then asserted that its obligations were fulfilled through fines and settlements.

Previously, Johari, also the Plantation and Commodities Minister, disclosed that the August 2020 settlement

required Goldman Sachs to make a USD 2.5 billion cash payment and provide a USD 1.4 billion asset recovery guarantee.

Johari stated that the task force is currently pursuing arbitration to address the matter, emphasizing that obtaining the USD 1.4 billion recovery asset guarantee depends on Goldman Sachs' decision to contest the Malaysian government's claim through legal proceedings or settle. He cautioned that the process might be protracted due to the significant sum involved.

The 1MDB scandal saw Goldman Sachs receiving unusually high advisory fees of USD 606 million, leading to various fines totaling USD 2.9 billion from regulators, including the Department of Justice (DOJ). Despite these fines exceeding the USD 2.5 billion cash payment to Malaysia, the nation bore the brunt of the scandal, paying a principal amount of USD 6.5 billion and an interest of USD 3.2 billion over a decade to service 1MDB debt.

The current dispute centers around Goldman Sachs' attempt to offset the fine imposed on AMMB Holdings BHD (Ambank; USD 591 million) and the settlement agreement with IPIC (USD 1.8 billion) within the USD 1.4 billion asset recovery guarantee.

While Goldman Sachs contends that its obligations are fulfilled, the Malaysian government disputes this, asserting that the Ambank fine and IPIC settlement are not covered by the USD 1.4 billion asset recovery guarantee. [The Star] [New Strait Times]

Malaysia: Former prime minister seeks redress from abuse of power charges

(ba) Former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin has lodged an appeal against the Court of Appeal's decision to reinstate four abuse of power charges against him.

Last August, the High Court had acquitted Muhyiddin of all four abuse of power charges, granting his request to have them struck out. However, a three-judge panel from the Court of Appeal unanimously overturned this decision on February 28, thereby compelling Muhyiddin to face trial at the Sessions Court for the reinstated charges.

Muhyiddin's appeal to the Federal Court challenges the entirety of the Court of Appeal's ruling, contesting its assertion that the four charges are unambiguous and

clear. Additionally, he disputes the court's opinion that the prosecution does not need to provide further details on how the alleged offenses were carried out.

The Court of Appeal also criticized the High Court's judgment, contending that it was erroneous in determining that the four charges against Muhyiddin did not constitute a legally recognizable offense. Muhyiddin is appealing this aspect of the decision as well.

Last month, the prosecution successfully obtained a stay on court proceedings at the Sessions Court until the Court of Appeal reaches a decision on their appeal against striking out of the four charges and Muhyiddin's acquittal. [AiR No. 8, February/2024, 3]

The halted proceedings at the Sessions Court included the consideration of Muhyiddin's application to dismiss his three remaining charges related to money laundering. Muhyiddin's legal team argued for these charges to be set aside since the initial four charges had been struck out. The four charges Muhyiddin faces allege that he utilized his position to secure bribes totaling USD 49 million from three companies and one individual. [The Malay Mail]

Meanwhile, the Deputy Public Prosecutor's Office is set to oppose Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin's appeal seeking to overturn his corruption charges at the Federal Court. Datuk Wan Shaharudin Wan Ladin, the deputy public prosecutor, asserted that as Muhyiddin's case had been deliberated at the Sessions Court and the Court of Appeal had reversed its decision, his avenue for further appeal should conclude there. Subsequently, Judge Azura Alwi scheduled April 3 for case management. [The Malay Mail] [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysia: Malaysian United Democratic Alliance set to conduct party elections ahead of schedule

(ba) The Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (Muda), a multi-racial and youth-centric political party, is set to advance its party election timeline, shifting it from the initially scheduled year of 2025 to the conclusion of this current year, as revealed by Secretary-General Amir Hadi.

Amir cited discontent among members with the existing leadership as the primary reason for this early election decision.

In the preceding year, there were reports indicating numerous complaints from Muda members who felt uninformed about the party's direction and the specifics of its constitution. Furthermore, grievances were expressed about the lack of communication regarding decisions made by the party's top leadership reaching the grassroots level.

Among those dissatisfied, Muda member Danial Jafri called for party elections following the party's defeat in all 19 seats contested during the six state polls in August 2023. Danial asserted that this call aligns with the grassroots' demands for addressing internal issues and enhancing the party's structure. [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysia: Former UMNO leaders lash out against Bersih's rally

(ba) Khairy Jamaluddin and Shahril Hamdan, former leaders of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) - the leading party in Barisan Nasional, Malaysia's third largest coalition in the House of Representatives – have characterized The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih) rally on February 27 as "frivolous."

Approximately 100 protesters participated in the rally in front of Parliament, urging the government to implement political reforms. Bersih chairman Faisal Abdul Aziz presented a memorandum outlining their demands to People's Justice Party (PKR) Selayang MP William Leong, who accepted it on behalf of the government.

Khairy, a former UMNO Youth chief, dismissed the march to Parliament due to the electoral reform group's perceived close association with Pakatan Harapan (PH), the largest coalition in the House of Representatives, backing Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, Chairman of PH.

He expressed that the rally was insubstantial because of Bersih's affiliation with the government, stating, "They (Bersih) are all PH buddies; it's frivolous because they're friends with the government." Khairy added that Bersih "did not go all-out" and suggested that the gathering merely aimed to demonstrate the group's continued existence.

Shahril criticized the rally's low turnout and lack of vibrancy, asserting that its call for comprehensive reform lacked impact. The former Umno Youth vice-chief remarked that Bersih failed to generate public

enthusiasm for participating in the demonstration. Notably, past Bersih rallies featured the involvement of several Pakatan Harapan leaders, including economy minister Rafizi Ramli, agriculture and food security minister Mohamad Sabu, and DAP veteran Lim Kit Siang. [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysia: Sultan of Selangor criticizes PAS chief over statements on status of Islam in Malaysia

(ba) Halim Tamuri, the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) chief in Selangor, has officially acknowledged the receipt of a letter from the Selangor Sultan, rebuking his party's president Abdul Hadi Awang regarding recent statements concerning the status of Islam in Malaysia.

In this communication, the Selangor Sultan criticized Hadi's February 20 statement, denouncing his "cynical" remarks as disrespectful and inappropriate. The Sultan urged Halim to advise Hadi to exercise greater caution in the future to avoid making statements that could potentially divide Muslims in Malaysia, emphasizing the need for more respectful discourse.

Previously, on February 20, Hadi made a statement entitled "The height of Islam must be maintained" which stated that the Malaysian Federal Constitution was drafted by colonialists who planned independence and deceived Muslims, with the aim of not giving power to Islam. [Berita PAS]

Additionally, the Selangor Sultan's letter emphasized a decree that all politicians and political leaders should refrain from manipulating Islam and tarnishing its sanctity for the political interests of their respective parties. [The Malay Mail]

Malaysia: 14-day suspension for non-compliant Members of Parliament lauded by NGOs

(ba) Enforcing a 14-day suspension on misbehaving federal lawmakers and senators during parliamentary sessions could enhance the quality of policy discussions, according to various non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

However, these organizations also emphasized that the effectiveness of debates is contingent on the

competence of Members of Parliament (MPs). Jason Wee, co-founder of the youth group Architects of Diversity Malaysia (AOD), asserted that the improvement of debate quality relies on a more informed public capable of evaluating MPs' performance. Wee further emphasized the necessity for increased political education funding to reach out to the younger population.

Former Petaling Jaya MP Maria Chin Abdullah commended the King of Malaysia's warning as a positive step to guide MPs away from "embarrassing" behavior in both the Dewan Rakyat (House of Representatives) and Dewan Negara (Senate). Maria observed that the conduct of MPs during parliamentary sessions reflects the leadership of each political party. She proposed capacity-building sessions for all MPs and their staff, involving collaboration across political parties to elevate the caliber of MPs. Maria highlighted the significant role of well-researched staff in enhancing the quality of debates.

Qyira Yusri, co-founder of the Undi18 movement, a civil society organisation (CSO) focused on Malaysian youth political empowerment, voter education and electoral reform, and a public policy consultant with Asia Group Advisors, interpreted the Agong's stern warning as a measure to ensure the focus remains on debating policy matters without deviation. Qyira suggested that the Standing Orders should serve as the official guide for managing parliamentary matters and expressed concern that some MPs exhibited "embarrassing" behavior due to a lack of seriousness in fulfilling their responsibilities.

In his inaugural royal address at the opening of the First Meeting of the Third Session of the 15th Parliament on February 26, King of Malaysia Sultan Ibrahim expressed support for the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of Senate to take strict action against any member exceeding boundaries. The King decreed that such action may include a 14-day ban if the behavior persists. Sultan Ibrahim urged the parliamentary leaders to ensure MPs and Senators adhere to the rules and reminded government and opposition MPs to remain united for the country's collective benefit. [The Malay Mail] [AiR No. 9, February/2024, 4]

Malaysia: Bersatu criticized for being stagnant

(ba) The opposition Malaysian United Indigenous Party (Bersatu) is currently stagnant, according to an

anonymous grassroots leader in Perak.

The top leadership is perceived to be in a "honeymoon" phase, contrasting with the National Alliance (Perikatan Nasional) notable surge in approval ratings post the 2022 general election and six state elections. The Perikatan Nasional consists of Bersatu, Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), Malaysian People's Movement Party (Gerakan), and Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP). Despite this, Bersatu appears to be lagging behind the PAS in terms of membership, activities, programs, and grassroots empowerment. The Perak leader, while acknowledging PAS's growth, does not see it as a direct threat. Instead, he views PAS's actions as essential for its own advancement.

These observations coincide with Bersatu President Muhyiddin Yassin's recent announcement regarding the party's strategic focus over the next three to four years – aiming to solidify its appeal among Malay voters. Muhyiddin emphasized the need to build on the substantial Malay support garnered in the previous year's six state elections, citing a significant increase of 70 percent to 80 percent in Malay votes for Bersatu and Perikatan Nasional.

Another grassroots leader from Selangor expressed concern that despite having experienced leaders in governance, Bersatu's grassroots members lack a comprehensive understanding of politics and party structure. He stressed the importance of leaders actively engaging with the grassroots and building connections to avoid leaving them behind.

Warning against complacency, he urged leaders to focus on recruiting more members and strengthening Malay support, emphasizing that an excessively relaxed approach could hinder progress. Additionally, he criticized internal disputes, suggesting that the recent Bersatu retreat had already addressed many of the prevailing issues, making further arguments among leadership counterproductive. [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysia: Children's Commissioner advocates for the expansion of the Child Sex Offenders Registry

(ba) Plans are underway to broaden the scope of the Child Sex Offenders Registry to encompass offenses like physical abuse against children. Presently, the registry exclusively focuses on sexual offenses.

Farah Nini, entrusted with the task of expanding the current registry crimes, has been at the forefront of this initiative. The Children's Commission, established in 2019 as an autonomous entity dedicated to safeguarding children's rights, appointed Farah Nini for a three-year term as the Children's Commissioner under the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) on March 8, 2023.

In an interview marking her first year in the role, Farah Nini expressed concerns about the limitations of the current Child Sex Offenders Registry, established since April 1, 2019.

Farah Nini emphasized that Section 31 of the Child Act encompasses offenses like abuse, neglect, abandonment, or any action likely to cause "physical or emotional injury" to a child, thereby covering all forms of child abuse, including physical abuse.

Citing the necessity to address rising reports of abuse, particularly in daycare centers, Farah Nini stressed the importance of incorporating other offenses, such as physical abuse against children, into the registry. This inclusive approach would enable daycare centers to request screening from the Welfare Department, the entity managing the registry, for potential hires.

Farah Nini revealed that the proposal had been submitted to the Chief Justice and received a positive response. The two primary requests were to expand the register and to include individuals charged with child abuse in the registry. [The Star]

Malaysia: Perikatan Nasional (PN) calls upon government to defer subsidy rationalization plans

(ba) Muhyiddin Yassin, chairman of Perikatan Nasional (PN) – the second largest political coalition in Malaysia's House of Representatives – has urged the government to postpone the implementation of subsidy rationalization for petrol and diesel, considering the escalating cost of living and recent tax hikes in Malaysia.

In a parliamentary address on March 5, Muhyiddin highlighted the potential impact of a two-percentage-point increase in the sales and services tax (SST), predicting widespread price hikes that would significantly affect Malaysians. Expressing concern over the impending challenges faced by the public, Muhyiddin emphasized the need for a thorough

examination of the subsidy rationalization plan amidst rising prices and various tax adjustments.

Acknowledging Malaysia's substantial fiscal burden due to extensive subsidies, Muhyiddin earlier addressed the SST hike from 6 percent to 8 percent for taxable services, such as electricity consumption exceeding 600 kilowatt-hours. He also discussed the expanded scope of services covered by SST, encompassing logistics like warehousing, in addition to forwarding agents, couriers, and air transport at a 6 percent SST rate.

While refraining from naming specific individuals, Muhyiddin referred to a deputy minister's statement on March 4, asserting that food traders should refrain from raising prices since SST hikes do not affect essential items like food and beverages. In a separate matter, Muhyiddin called on Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who serves as the chairman of the National Action Council on Cost of Living (Naccol) and the Agriculture and Food Security Minister, to provide a comprehensive explanation regarding the shortage of local rice supplies. [The Star]

Malaysia: Former Prime Minister Najib accused of orchestrating large-scale fraud

(ba) Attorneys representing SRC International Sdn Bhd in its USD 1.18 billion civil lawsuit against Former Prime Minister Najib Razak have asserted that evidence to be presented in court will unveil how the ex-prime minister manipulated the procurement of a substantial RM4 billion loan from the country's pension fund, causing losses totaling USD 120 million.

This alleged action is believed to have enriched Najib personally, to the detriment of both the company and the Malaysian public at large. The lawsuit, focusing on purported breaches of trust and statutory duty related to the USD 845 million loan from the Retirement Fund Incorporated (KWAP) to SRC International during Najib's tenure as prime minister, is currently under consideration in the Commercial High Court.

In his opening statement, lead counsel for SRC International, Datuk Lim Chee Wee, emphasized that the plaintiff would illustrate Najib's extensive influence over the company as a public officer, asserting that the former prime minister knowingly abused his authority. Lim contended that Najib was either fully aware of his actions or recklessly indifferent to the boundaries of his public power authority.

Lim further argued that contemporaneous documents and events would substantiate how Najib, while holding roles as prime minister and finance minister, exploited his positions to expedite approvals for the subsequent loans granted by KWAP. Co-lead counsel P. Gananathan added that the court would hear evidence indicating that the SRC International board of directors lacked the ability to exercise discretion or judgment. Instead, they were purportedly accustomed to acting in accordance with the directives of Najib, the first defendant. [The Malay Mail] [New Straits Times]

Myanmar: Junta promotes conscription amidst civilian resistance

(jb) Myanmar's junta has launched a propaganda campaign to promote conscription amid a widespread desire to flee the country to evade mandatory military service. Officials from various departments are reported to have handed out fliers and posters in public spaces presenting military service as attractive.

The regime's introduction of conscription laws, targeting millions, reflects its desperate need for manpower amid the ongoing conflict. Meanwhile, the civilian National Unity Government has branded conscription bodies as terrorist organizations, urging non-cooperation. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Military imposes martial law in KIA-held territories

(jb) On February 29, Myanmar's military regime announced martial law in Mongmit and Mabein townships in northern Shan State, previously seized by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA).

While Mongmit has been retaken by the regime, Mabein remains under KIA control.

The move is seen by observers as a bid to bolster security for Mandalay, the major trading and communications center for northern and central Myanmar, as Mongmit is only an hour’s drive from Mogoke, Mandalay Region’s ruby-mining hub.

With Brigadier General Soe Hlaing assuming control of the townships, fears of further crackdowns loom large. He previously served as the Sagaing Region commander, believed to have overseen terror campaigns taht saw arson attacks and massacres in the resistance hotspot. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Arakan Army seizes final junta outpost in Rakhine state

(jb) In a blow to junta forces, the ethnic armed organisation Arakan Army (AA) based in western coast Rakhine State, successfully took control of the last remaining regime outpost at a military training center in Minbya Township, Rakhine State on February 26.

The AA's assault, lasting nine days, resulted in the discovery of a substantial cache of weapons and ammunition alongside the dead bodies of numerous junta soldiers.

In response, junta airstrikes reportedly targeted nearby villages, causing civilian casualties and destroying a hospital. [Myanmar Now 1]

In a separate development, an artillery shell on February 29 hit Myoma market in Rakhine State, claiming 12 lives and injuring over 80. Among the casualties was a two-year-old child.

The shell was allegedly fired from a nearby naval base housing Infantry Battalion 20. [Myanmar Now]

Myanmar: Junta loses three bases and a dozen troops in three days of resistance attacks

(jw) The military regime lost at least three bases and over a dozen soldiers in three days of attacks, from March 1 to 4, by ethnic armed forces including the People's Defense Forces (PDF).

Three military outposts were seized in Kachin State, northernmost state of Myanmar. The ethnic Kachin Independence Army and the regional People's Defense Forces seized three bases in Maji Gung.

In the Rakhine State, the Arakan Army said it was intensifying its attacks aimed at seizing the base of the junta’s Light Infantry Battalion 550 in Ponnagyun Town near the Rakhine State capital Sittwe.

The PDF’s Southern Military Region Command said they raided a junta camp near Young Maw Village in Dawei Township on March 2. During the capture of the camp, approximately a dozen junta soldiers were killed.

The Myaing PDF coordinated an attack with 14 PDF groups to raid regime forces stationed in Myaing.

In Mandalay's Taungtha, Myingyan District Army 3 of the PDF attacked a junta patrol vehicle, killing one junta soldier and injuring three. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Hundreds held in police 'concentration camp'

(jb) Reports from Sagaing Region have revealed that Myanmar's junta police are holding around 350 civilians, including women, children, and political dissidents, in what is described as a 'concentration camp'.

According to the Political Prisoners Network (PPN)-Myanmar, detainees at the Monywa Police Station are enduring severe human rights abuses, without charges or trials.

Detainees, accused of various offenses including association with the People's Defense Forces and anti-regime activities, face appalling conditions. Witnesses describe overcrowded cells, insufficient food, denial of healthcare, and a ban on family visits. Some were even coerced into accompanying junta personnel on raids. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Junta's "Ogre Column" slays 11 people

(jb/jw) Radio Free Asia reports that the "Ogre Column" of Myanmar's military junta slayed 11 men during a weeklong rampage last month.

Victims, aged 25 to 70, suffered mutilation, with nine found decapitated and subjected to horrifying acts. In one case, a head was cut off and makeup applied.

This unit, part of the 99th Light Infantry Battalion, is known for employing extreme cruelty. The Sagaing region, has seen some of the fiercest resistance against the military junta.

The Ogre Column's most recent attack at Taze township began in Kan Htu Ma village on February 23, moved west over the course of the week, and ended on March 2nd. [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: Junta ramps up efforts to defend jade mining hub

(jw) As joint attacks by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and People's Defense Force (PDF) reached their sixth consecutive day on March 1, the military junta is doing all it can to defend a major hill outpost in Kachin state's jade mining hub.

This battle will determine who is in control of Myanmar's lucrative jade mines in Hpakant Township. The base in Hpakant Township is the last jade hub under junta control.

The nation is a major supplier of jade, with estimates indicating that 70 percent of the world's supply comes from Myanmar.

The KIA and its rebel allies have been attacking junta outposts in the jade-mining hub since January. New efforts to take Hsengtaung village began early last week. If the KIA seizes enough outposts in Hpakant, the rebels will control the major roads to the jade mines.

Residents reported that the junta's military has faced heavy losses over the last five days. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Resistance meets with junta officials for China-brokered peace talks

(jw) A Myanmar rebel alliance met with junta officials to discuss reopening borders and possibilities of a ceasefire at a China-brokered peace talk on March 4.

Deputy Commander Nyo Tun Aung said online that the talks with the ethnic rebel 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 – addressed the reopening of trade gates. He explained, "We are continuing to strengthen the ceasefire, [addressing] the China-Myanmar border issue, how to wipe out the online scamming business and how the border exits should be reopened."

In addition, junta forces relinquished control of Shan state's Kokang City to the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army. Local media reports said that the military regime requested that the ethnic rebel forces avoid harming China's interests to facilitate reopening of the border gates.

Previous ceasefire deals have been unsustainable. On January 11, the Three Brotherhood Alliance and junta representatives agreed to a ceasefire, but skirmishes erupted less than a week later.

The latest peace talks focused on a ceasefire in the northern Shan State. Although fighting between the alliance and junta there has largely disappeared since the ceasefire, the non-allied Kachin Independence Army launched an offensive shortly after. [Radio Free Asia]

The Philippines: President says proposal to hold constitutional amendment plebiscite alongside 2025 polls for 'practical' reasons

(lm) Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has confirmed that his administration is considering holding a plebiscite to ratify proposed changes to the constitution simultaneously with the 2025 midterm elections. He cited cost-efficiency as the main reason for this consideration. [Rappler]

This move comes amid ongoing discussions in both Houses of Parliament regarding amendments to the economic provisions of the constitution. While there are differing views on how both chambers should vote on the proposed amendments, the idea of a plebiscite alongside the midterm polls has gained traction.

The Commission on Elections (Comelec) has expressed its support for conducting both electoral exercises on the same day, citing potential cost savings and emphasizing the importance of massive information dissemination to ensure voter understanding. This marks a shift from earlier reservations expressed by the Comelec, as it now acknowledges the feasibility of holding a plebiscite alongside the elections.

The Philippines: President Marcos Jr. names third commissioner to Presidential Commission on Good Government

(lm) Rogelio Quevedo, a lawyer involved in the 2016 vice presidential election challenge on behalf of Ferdinand Marcos Jr., has been appointed as a commissioner of the Presidential Commission on Good Government (PCGG). Quevedo's appointment was announced by the Presidential Communications Office, but it remains unclear whether he replaces someone

or is an addition to the existing commissioners. [Rappler]

Before joining the PCGG, Quevedo served as the government corporate counsel and was previously affiliated with the Office of the Ombudsman and the Presidential Management Staff. He also held teaching positions at the University of the Philippines and served on the boards of several organizations, including the Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System.

The PCGG, established in 1986, is tasked with recovering the ill-gotten wealth amassed by the father of President Marcos Jr., the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos, his family, and associates during his presidency, which lasted from 1965 to 1986. Despite calls for its abolition, the PCGG continues its efforts, having already retrieved a substantial amount of wealth. Proposed bills to abolish the PCGG are pending in Congress, while the agency has received a significant budget allocation from the Marcos administration in recent years.

Philippines: Inflation climbs to 3.4 percent in February, breaking four-month decline

(ms) Inflation in the Philippines rose to 3.4 percent in February 2024, marking the first uptick after a four-month downtrend. This increase, reported by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), was primarily driven by accelerated growth in food prices, transportation, and utility expenses. Despite the rise, the inflation rate remains within the government's target range of 2 percent to 4 percent.

According to the PSA, food and non-alcoholic beverages saw a significant year-on-year increase of 4.6 percent, contributing to the overall inflationary pressure. Particularly noteworthy was the slower deceleration in the price growth of vegetables, tubers, plantains, cooking bananas, and pulses, which rose by 11.0 percent.

Rice prices continue to be a concern, contributing 2.1 percentage points to overall inflation. Core inflation, excluding volatile food and energy items, decelerated to 3.6 percent in February, down from 3.8 percent in the previous month and 7.8 percent a year earlier.

Year-to-date, headline inflation and core inflation were recorded at 3.1 percent and 3.7 percent, respectively. Despite the uptick, the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, the central bank of the country, has maintained its interest

rates at 6.5 percent, though there are indications it may lower them by the third quarter of the year. [GMA News] [Rappler] [The Manila Times]

Philippines: DOJ orders charges against Quiboloy day before senate hearing

(ms) The Department of Justice (DOJ) has ordered charges to be filed against Apollo Quiboloy, leader of the Davao City-based Kingdom of Jesus Christ church, and five others, just a day before a scheduled Senate hearing. The charges include allegations of child abuse and human trafficking, marking a significant escalation in the legal battle surrounding the controversial religious leader.

Quiboloy has been summoned to appear before the Senate committee to address reports of large-scale human trafficking, rape, sexual abuse, violence, and child abuse within his organization. Despite repeated invitations, Quiboloy has thus far failed to comply, prompting threats of contempt and arrest.

Especially Quiboloy's connection with former president Rodrigo Duterte, a long-time friend and political ally, has been a focal point in this unfolding saga. Duterte, in a press conference, advised Quiboloy to "get yourself arrested" if he chose not to attend the Senate hearing after however downplaying the allgetions against him as “minor crimes.”

President Marcos Jr. has advised Quiboloy to face the congressional hearings, emphasizing the importance of allowing him the opportunity to present his side of the story. Marcos's stance reflects a commitment to due process and transparency, even as Quiboloy remains entangled in allegations of wrongdoing. [Minda News] [Rappler 1] [Rappler 2]

Philippines: 139 NFA officials suspended amid rice stock sale controversy

(ms) In a significant development, the Department of Agriculture (DA) has initiated a robust response to allegations of impropriety within the National Food Administration (NFA), suspending 139 officials and employees. This action follows an investigation into the controversial sale of rice buffer stocks, prompted by concerns raised by the Office of the Ombudsman.

The controversy centers around suspicions of irregularities in the disposal of rice buffer stocks, a

critical component of the NFA's mandate to stabilize rice prices and ensure food security for Filipinos. Allegations suggest that certain NFA officials, including high-ranking administrators such as Roderico Bioco and John Robert Hermano, may have engaged in practices that circumvented proper procedures and undermined the agency's objectives.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. has emphasized the gravity of the situation, asserting the government's unwavering commitment to transparency and accountability. "Corruption of any kind is condemned and will not be tolerated," Laurel stated, underlining the imperative of rooting out malfeasance within government institutions.

The Office of the Ombudsman, in collaboration with the DA, is conducting a thorough investigation, spanning back to 2019, to uncover the truth behind the alleged wrongdoing. The controversy has prompted broader scrutiny of the NFA's operations and governance. Additionally calls arose for a Senate inquiry into the issue, highlighting concerns about the agency's ability to fulfill its mandate, particularly in the face of challenges such as the global rice shortage. [Rappler] [Sunstar] [The Manila Times]

Philippines: Major energy collaborate on USD 3.3 billion LNG initiative

(ms) Three prominent players in the Philippine energy sector, namely Aboitiz Power, Meralco PowerGen, and San Miguel Global Power, have announced a strategic partnership to establish the country's first large-scale integrated liquefied natural gas (LNG) facility. The collaboration, valued at USD 3.3 billion, signifies a significant milestone in the nation's energy landscape.

Under the agreement, Meralco PowerGen and Aboitiz Power will jointly invest in San Miguel Global Power's gas-fired power plants, including the 1,278 MW Ilijan power plant and a new 1,320 MW combined cycle power facility set to commence operations by the end of 2024.

Additionally, the three companies will acquire full ownership of the Philippines' inaugural LNG import and regasification terminal situated in Batangas Bay. This terminal, previously owned by Linseed Field, a subsidiary of Singapore's Atlantic, Gulf & Pacific Company, will serve as a crucial hub for receiving, storing, and processing LNG fuel for the partnered power plants.

The initiative reflects a concerted effort to enhance the nation's energy security and transition towards cleaner energy sources, particularly in light of the impending depletion of the Philippines' domestic gas reserves by 2027. With natural gas currently constituting only 4.2 percent of the Philippine energy mix, this collaboration aligns with the Philippine Department of Energy's goal to increase natural gas's share to 26 percent by 2040. [Argus Media] [Enerdata] [Nikkei Asia]

Philippines: House passes bill to boost Philippines' capital markets

(ms) The House of Representatives, with the aim at revitalizing the Philippines' capital markets and enhancing its investment competitiveness, has given its final approval to House Bill (HB) 9277, known as the Capital Markets Efficiency Promotion Act, signaling a potential shift in the country's financial landscape.

The bill proposes several key amendments to the Tax Code. One of the most notable changes includes a reduction in taxes on stock transactions from 0.6 percent to a mere 0.1 percent of the stock value. This reduction is vital as the Philippines currently imposes the highest stock transaction levies among major economies in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Furthermore, the bill seeks to attract foreign investors by reducing the tax on dividends received by foreign non-residents from 25 percent to 10 percent. And adjustment aiming to encourage cross-border investments and enhance liquidity in the capital markets.

Another significant aspect of the bill is its focus on supporting essential programs such as the Universal Health Care initiative and Malasakit Centers through funding from the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office (PCSO). By lowering tax rates on PCSO and lotto winnings and reducing documentary stamp taxes on lottery tickets, the bill aims to address the adverse effects of previous tax laws and bolster funding for critical social welfare programs.

In addition to its economic implications, the bill also addresses the need for digital connectivity in urban centers and residential areas. The proposed Housing Development Digital Connectivity Act mandates the allocation of space for Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure in housing projects, ensuring widespread access to digital services. [Philippine News Agency] [Business Mirror]

Singapore: Suspended human rights lawyer M. Ravi charged with assault, harassment

(lm) In Singapore, suspended human rights lawyer Ravi Madasamy (M. Ravi) is facing an escalation in legal troubles as he has been slapped with an additional 13 charges, bringing the total to 19 charges against him. These new charges include six counts of harassment and five counts of assault against a group of nine individuals. [The Straits Times]

If convicted of assault, Ravi faces a maximum sentence of two years' imprisonment and fines of up to USD 5,000 for each charge. Similarly, for each count of harassment, he could be imprisoned for up to six months and fined up to USD 5,000. Ravi's case has been adjourned to March 4 for further proceedings.

Ravi's legal woes began earlier when he was suspended from practicing law for five years in March 2023 for making "grave and baseless accusations of improper conduct" against the Attorney-General of Singapore. The five-year suspension is the maximum allowable sanction for a lawyer’s misconduct.

In November last year, Ravi was awarded the 2023 International Bar Association (IBA) Award for Outstanding Contribution by a Legal Practitioner to Human Rights for his exceptional work in defending human rights and advocating for the decriminalization of homosexuality and the abolition of the death penalty in the city-state. [AiR No. 46, November/2023, 2]

Singapore: Government to buy eight F-35A jets, boost defence spending

(lm) Singapore's government has unveiled plans to procure eight additional F-35 stealth fighters, with the aim of modernizing its air force and enhancing its defense capabilities in response to escalating regional threats. Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen announced that the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) will acquire F-35A jets, supplementing the previously ordered F-35Bs, and bolstering the RSAF's fleet to a total of 20 fifth-generation fighter aircraft. [Reuters]

The F-35Bs, distinguished by their vertical take-off and landing capabilities, are slated for delivery in 2026, while the F-35As offer extended endurance and

payload capacity. This acquisition will position Singapore among a select group of nations operating both variants of the F-35, including the United States, Italy, and Japan, among others.

Of note, when justifying the decision to purchase additional stealth fighters, Minister of Hen said that the risk for a regional or even global conflict has become "non-zero" in the next decade. [yahoo!news]

Thailand: Court acquits former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra on charges of malfeasance

(bk) On March 4, a Thai court acquitted former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, currently living in exile, on charges related to the mishandling of funds for a government project in 2013 over a lack of evidence. This marks another legal victory for the influential Shinawatra family, following the recent release of Yingluck's brother, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, on parole for corruption-related offenses. [Thai PBS World] [abc news]

Yingluck had previously been cleared of abuse of power charges in December, following two prior postponements, in a case pertaining to the transfer of Thawil Pliesnri from his position as secretary-general of the National Security Council to an adviser to the prime minister [see AiR No. 52, December/2023, 4]. However, for her to return to Thailand without facing imprisonment, she would require a pardon from King Maha Vajiralongkorn or other forms of clemency, as she was sentenced in absentia in 2017 for alleged negligence related to a rice subsidy program.

The verdict is seen by Yingluck's supporters as part of a persecution campaign aimed at dismantling Thaksin's political influence. Thaksin, who was ousted from power by a military coup in 2006, still faces legal challenges, including a charge of royal defamation [see AiR No. 8, February/2024, 3]. Despite their setbacks, parties aligned with Thaksin continue to be prominent in Thai politics, although the landscape has seen changes with the emergence of new progressive parties.

Thailand: Prime Minister Srettha admits flaws in ministers but rules out Cabinet reshuffle

(bk/lm) Thailand's Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin has admitted to the existence of flaws within his Cabinet but has decisively dismissed the notion of an imminent reshuffle, as speculation persists regarding potential changes, particularly concerning prominent figures within the Palang Pracharath Party.

There are talks that Palang Pracharath leader Prawit Wongsuwan, a former defense minister and former army commander, could assume a significant role, either as a deputy prime minister responsible for national security affairs or as a replacement for Defense Minister Suthin Khlangsang.

Moreover, there's speculation about other potential changes within the cabinet. Agriculture & Cooperatives Minister and Palang Pracharath secretary-general Thammanat Prompao might be shuffled to a different portfolio, while Prawit's brother, Natural Resources & Environment Minister Patcharawat Wongsuwan, could be replaced by the Palang Pracharath leader.

Of note, Suthin, who hails from the Srettha's Pheu Thai Party, recently draw criticism from opposition parties and even a lawmaker from his party for failing to attend interpellations in Parliament on February 29. While Suthin was not the sole Cabinet member absent from the session, his nonattendance garnered significant scrutiny. Critics, including government whip chief Wisut Chaiyarun, questioned Suthin's explanation of prior commitments, emphasizing the importance of prioritizing parliamentary duties over other engagements. [The Nation 1]

Against this backdrop, Deputy Minister Phumtham Wechayachai recently said that a cabinet reshuffle would be unlikely at any time until after the 2024 budget bill has been finally turned into law in April. [Thai Newsroom]

Thailand: Opposition Move Forward Party dissolution case 'wont drag on', Election Commission says

(lm) The Election Commission of Thailand stated on March 4 that the dissolution case against the main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) would not be prolonged. However, the commission clarified that the political party registrar is currently examining the Constitutional Court's complete ruling to prepare a report for the EC's decision. [Bangkok Post]

Two petitions were filed with the EC seeking the dissolution of the MFP after a ruling by the

Constitutional Court on January 31 determined that the party's campaign to amend the royal defamation law, or Article 112, indicated an intention to "destroy" the form of government with the king as head of state [see AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1]. The court's full ruling was published in the Royal Gazette on February 29.

Bhumjaithai Party

Regarding another dissolution case involving the Bhumjaithai Party, the second-largest coalition partner, the EC said the political party registrar was reviewing the petition to determine if there were grounds to set up a panel to investigate the case.

Former Transport Minister and ex- party secretary-general Saksayam Chidchob was found guilty by the Constitutional Court of concealing assets and using a nominee to obscure ownership of a company that won government construction projects. Allegedly, Saksayam's nominee made multiple donations to the Bhumjaithai Party, raising concerns about the practice that could lead to the party's dissolution. [AiR No. 4, January/2024, 4]

Thailand: Election Commission expects at least 100,000 individuals to seek Senate seat

(lm) The Election Commission of Thailand expects a significant influx of candidates vying for seats in the Senate, the upper House of Parliament. With the current senators' five-year term ending on May 11, at least 100,000 individuals are projected to participate in the upcoming elections. [Bangkok Post]

According to regulations, elections must take place at least 30 days before the expiration of the current senators' terms. The new Senate, as per the constitution, will comprise 200 members, marking a reduction of 50 compared to the current composition.

The process for candidate applications will commence 15 days after the enforcement of the Royal Decree on Election of Members of the Senate. Candidates must submit their applications within a window of 5 to 7 days. Subsequently, district-level elections will be held within 20 days of the application deadline, followed by provincial-level elections within seven days, and national-level elections within 10 days.

Candidates will be categorized into 20 groups based on their professions or qualifications, as outlined by the 2018 Organic Act on the Acquisition of Senators. Each

professional group will select ten candidates, with an additional reserve list of five candidates for each group.

Thailand: Deputy House Speaker requests clarification regarding progress of 31 financial bills

(lm) Thailand's first deputy House Speaker, Padipat Santipada, visited Government House, the official residence and workplace of the Prime Minister, on March 1 to inquire about the status of 31 financial bills. However, this move was met with criticism from the ruling Pheu Thai Party, which accused Padipat of breaching political etiquette. [Bangkok Post]

Padipat, an MP from the Fair Party, clarified that his intention was merely to seek updates and discuss ways to enhance coordination between the government and the House of Representatives. He emphasized that he did not aim to pressure the government. As his role involves overseeing legislation, he felt accountable for legislative affairs and sought information on the progress of each bill.

In response, the deputy secretary-general of the prime minister stated that the delay in the 31 financial bills was not intentional. Currently, these bills are undergoing review by the relevant agencies.

Thailand: Interior Ministry completes draft gun amnesty bill amid calls for gun control

(msz) Thailand's Interior Ministry has drafted a bill granting amnesty to those surrendering illegal firearms, aiming to reduce crimes committed with such weapons. Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin tasked the ministry with drafting the bill after over findings that 83 percent of violent crimes between 2016 and 2023 involved illegal firearms, including modified objects resembling guns. [The Nation Thailand]

If approved by Parliament, this bill would mark the eighth amnesty initiative concerning illegal firearms ownership, following the last one enacted by the now-defunct National Council for Peace and Order in 2014. Under the proposed legislation, owners would be required to surrender their illegal firearms, ammunition, and imitation weapons to the local registrar within 120 days of its announcement in the

Royal Gazette, at which point these items would become state property. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Main opposition party submits draft for new Labour Protection Act

(msz) Thailand's main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) submitted its proposed draft for a new Labour Protection Act to Parliament's lower house on February 28, aiming to replace the existing legislation, which has been in force for 26 years. [Bangkok Post]

While the Labour Protection Act of 1998 has played a crucial role in setting minimum standards for labor rights and conditions in Thailand, there have been ongoing discussions and calls for reforms to address its limitations and ensure that it effectively protects the rights and interests of all workers in the country.

Key amendments in the proposed bill include broadening the definition of "labourer" to encompass all forms of employment, including roles previously excluded under the 1998 edition, such as delivery riders, freelancers, and independent workers. Additionally, the draft proposes limiting the maximum weekly working hours to 40, ensuring timely salary payments and annual salary increments, providing breastfeeding facilities, and prohibiting all forms of workplace discrimination.

Thailand: New cross-border data transfer rules officially published as law

(lm) Thailand's Personal Data Protection Committee (PDPC) has published two regulations concerning cross-border transfer of personal data under the Private Data Protection Act (PDPA). The rules cover Whitelist Notification and Binding Corporate Rules (BCRs), effective from March 24. Businesses must ensure compliance with these regulations, reviewing existing BCRs and safeguard measures. [Global Compliance News]

Thailand: Conflict escalates between ALRO and National Parks chief over Khao Yai land dispute

(bk) The Agricultural Land Reform Office (ALRO), under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Agriculture and

Cooperatives, has stepped up pressure in its dispute with the chief of the Office of National Parks, moving to charge him with illegally removing markers it had placed to demarcate agricultural land adjacent to Khao Yai National Park.

The move marks the latest episode in an ongoing dispute with ALRO and the Department of National Park, Wildlife and Plant Conservation (DNP), under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, over almost 4.8 square kilometers in the national park. The land had originally selected to be incorporated into the agricultural ministry's land allocation scheme for impoverished farmers because it was deemed to be situated beyond the forest limits with ecological significance and therefore permitted for agriculture [see AiR No. 9, February/2024, 4]. However, Chaiwat Limlikit-aksorn, the Chief of the Office of National Parks, insisted the land remains within the limits of protected forest.

Against this backdrop, at a meeting on March 1, the Royal Thai Survey Department (RTSD) advised that the disputed land should be transferred back to the national park, citing a royal decree from 1962. Of note, the RTSD had previously worked on the so-called "One Map" system, a unified map which purportedly integrates maps from various agencies to sort out discrepancies. That system had originally concluded that the disputed land was not within the national park but located in a buffer zone, a conclusion that Chaiwat had contested. [The Nation 1]

In light of the RTSD's latest conclusion, Agriculture Minister Cap Thamanat Prompow announced on the same day that the contested area will now serve as a forest buffer zone. Meanwhile, Defence Minister Sutin, who chairs the One Map committee, stated that he and the committee would further investigate whether the RTSD map was flawed. [The Nation 2]

However, in an apparent tit-for-tat, the ALRO on March 3 decided to take legal action against Chaiwat for allegedly removing demarcation stones from Sor Por Kor land around Khao Yai National Park. [Thai PBS] [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: MFP launches nationwide campaign for 2025 PAO Chief Executive candidates

(bk) The main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) in Thailand has initiated a year-long campaign to promote its candidates running for the Chief Executive

position in the Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO) during the early 2025 local elections nationwide. [Phuket News] [News Directory 3]

The Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO) in Thailand is a local government body responsible for administrative and developmental functions at the provincial level. PAOs are established in each of Thailand's provinces, with the exception of Bangkok, which has its own unique administrative structure.

The current PAO Chiefs, serving a complete four-year term, will conclude their tenures on December 20. Pursuant to the Provincial Administrative Organizations Act, replacements must be elected within 45 days, essentially setting the election date to be no later than February 3, 2025.

Thailand: Surrogacy for foreign couples to be legalized

(msz) The Department of Health Service Support in Thailand is planning to amend the country's surrogacy laws to allow foreign couples access to surrogacy services. Currently, only Thai nationals can avail themselves of these services under the Protection for Children Born through Assisted Reproductive Technologies Act. These proposed revisions come against the larger backdrop of demographic challenges, including declining birth rates and an aging population. [Bangkok Post]

The department has stated that the new law will incorporate detailed measures to address various issues, such as human trafficking, illegal surrogacy arrangements, and the smuggling of frozen semen, eggs, and embryos into and out of the country. Furthermore, the amendments aim to broaden fertility treatment options by permitting biological relatives of women aged 20-40 to donate eggs and allowing women over 55 to engage surrogate mothers for their children.

Thailand: Support group for relatives of 1992 Black May victims steps up amnesty call

(lm) A support group representing the families of victims from the Black May uprising, a series of mass protests and violent clashes in May 1992 that culminated in a military crackdown on May 19, is

urging Thailand's ruling Pheu Thai Party to expedite their efforts in fulfilling their promise to advocate for amnesty for all political offenders. [Bangkok Post]

According to the group, Parliament's lower House has established a dedicated committee to deliberate on the drafting of a bill to implement a political amnesty. However, concerns have been raised regarding delays in this process. Despite an initial timeline of 60 days for completion, the committee, chaired by Pheu Thai deputy Chusak Sirinil, has recently formed a sub-committee to conduct further analysis, prolonging the timeline.

Against this backdrop, the group asserts that Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin should take action by seeking cabinet approval for an executive decree to grant amnesty to political offenders, a proposal previously endorsed by a government committee on national reconciliation. The findings of this committee, which garnered public support during hearings and received unanimous approval from the National Reform Council, were subsequently transmitted to the House of Representatives.

Should Pheu Thai fail to act promptly, the support group intends to escalate the matter by submitting a petition to His Majesty the King.

Thailand: Central bank governor discusses economic outlook, interest rate policy

(bk) Bank of Thailand Governor Sethaput Suthiwartnarueput in an exclusive interview with *Thai PBS World* recently discussed the Thai economy and interest rate policy. He highlighted the importance of balancing growth, inflation, and financial stability in monetary policy decisions. Despite challenges such as lower-than-expected exports and tourism, he forecasted GDP growth in the range of 2.5 to 3 percent for 2024. [Thai PBS World]

Notably, e also acknowledged the "creative tension" between the central bank and the government, stressing their differing roles and perspectives. In late February, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin, who also serves as the finance minister, publicly urged the central bank's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) to convene before the next scheduled meeting on April 10, to consider implementing monetary easing to help restore the lackluster economy after the MPC had kept the rate unchanged in the last meeting in January [see AiR No. 7, February/2024, 2].

In light of this, the main opposition Move Forward Party emphasized the importance of safeguarding central bank independence and cautioned that any compromise could undermine investor confidence, potentially leading to significant capital outflows, citing international examples. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Activists urge United Nations, other countries to reject Land Bridge infrastructure project

(lm) A coalition of local activists in Thailand has launched a campaign urging the United Nations and the embassies of China, Japan, and Germany to oppose the government's Land Bridge infrastructure project. The activists argue that the project would violate the human rights of residents in the affected areas. [Bangkok Post]

The Land Bridge project entails the construction of a vast seaport along both the Gulf of Thailand coast and the Andaman Sea coast. This port would be connected by a double-track railway and a 90 kilometer highway, complemented by an underground logistics system and an industrial estate catering to the petrochemical industry.

In the petition, representatives from Patoh Conservation Network, Rak Ranong and the Council of Southern People expressed their objections to the project, which they described as lacking transparency, harmful to the environment and undermining human rights principles. The groups fear local residents would be adversely affected by the construction, especially the Moken indigenous tribes who live along the Andaman coast. Many of them do not have citizenship documents, so they would not receive compensation for the land they currently inhabit.

Representatives from various groups including the Patoh Conservation Network, Rak Ranong, and the Council of Southern People have expressed their objections to the project. They criticize it for lacking transparency, posing environmental risks, and undermining human rights principles. Of particular concern are the potential adverse impacts on local residents, especially the Moken indigenous tribes residing along the Andaman coast. Many of these tribes lack citizenship documents, leaving them vulnerable to displacement without proper compensation for their land.

In addition to petitioning international bodies, the activists plan to lodge formal complaints with the Thai

government. They intend to submit a complaint to the prime minister at Government House, followed by another complaint to parliament.

Thailand: DSI seeks arrest warrants for five suspects over alleged meat smuggling

(bk) In the latest episode of an ongoing effort to combat high-profile meat smuggling cases, the Department of Special Investigation (DSI) has requested arrest warrants from the Criminal Court for five suspects allegedly involved in meat smuggling, comprising four legal entities and one individual. [The Nation]

This move follows the recent confiscation of 90 shipping containers of smuggled pork, beef, and chicken at Laem Chabang Port. The DSI's investigation revealed that the importing company had brought in thousands of containers of animal meat without paying taxes, totaling an estimated USD 38.5 million in unpaid taxes. Additionally, the DSI uncovered a list of individuals purportedly receiving bribes from the smugglers, including officials from various government departments and media personnel.

This crackdown echoes a similar operation in December 2023, targeting smuggled assets valued at approximately THB 90 million [see AiR No. 51, December/2023, 3]. According to the DSI, smugglers have imported over 2,300 containers of illicit pork, valued at approximately THB 3 billion, since 2020, negatively affecting the local pork industry and posing disease risks.

Thailand: Aviation and rail infrastructure dimension of 'Thailand Vision' initiative

(bk) Thailand is advancing its aviation and rail infrastructure as part of the "Thailand Vision" initiative, aimed at elevating key sectors to regional hub status. Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin announced plans to upgrade Suvarnabhumi Airport, aiming to place it among the world's top 20 airports within five years. The expansion entails increasing the airport's capacity to accommodate 150 million passengers annually by 2030 through the construction of additional terminals and runways, including a third runway. [The Nation 1]

In parallel, the Immigration Police committed to improving services at Suvarnabhumi to manage the

anticipated surge in passenger traffic. Other airports such as Don Mueang, Phuket, and Chiang Mai will also undergo expansions and new constructions to meet growing demand and enhance connectivity nationwide.

On the rail front, the State Railway of Thailand (SRT) is set to build a station for the Thai-Chinese high-speed train project in Ayutthaya province, despite opposition from conservation groups concerned about threats to a UNESCO World Heritage site. [Thai PBS World]

Meanwhile, Khon Kaen province in Northeastern Thailand is preparing to commence construction of its first Light Rail Transit (LRT) mass transit system in 2025, with service expected to begin in 2027. [The Nation 2]

Thailand: Interior Minister to appeals rejection of funding for Russian-made helicopter

(lm) Thailand's Interior Minister, Anutin Charnvirakul, announced on March 3 his intention to appeal a decision made by a parliamentary sub-committee to reject a funding request for a new Russian-made helicopter for the Ministry's Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation (DDPM). [Bangkok Post]

Last week, during the vetting of the 2024 fiscal budget bill, the sub-committee turned down the ministry's request for THB 950 million in funds for a helicopter procurement project. The decision was attributed to concerns about the sluggish economy, leading the government to prioritize economic stimulation policies like the 10,000-baht digital wallet scheme.

Additionally, questions arose regarding the price of the four helicopters previously procured by the DDPM. News agencies raised concerns as the same model of Russian helicopter was reportedly sold to other countries for only THB 500 million.

Thailand: Defence Ministry to resolve submarine procurement issue soon

(lm) Thailand's Defence Ministry is set to resolve the USD 310 million submarine procurement issue from China within the next two weeks, likely favoring the Chinese engine, as reported by a Royal Thai Navy (RTN) official. [The Thaiger]

The submarine deal was initiated by the Prayuth administration in 2017 but the deal was delayed when Germany forbade the use of its engines for Chinese military exports. Subsequently, Beijing offered a Chinese-made engine as a replacement, which the RTN initially rejected. However, backing out of the deal risks Bangkok losing the THB 7 billion (approximately USD 193 million) already paid to China, unless it can prove contract violation by China.

Against this backdrop, the Office of the Attorney General informed the informed the RTN that any extension of the procurement contract must receive approval from the cabinet [see AiR No. 3, January/2024, 3]. Consequently, Defence Minister Sutin Klungsang, who previously favored shelving the project in favor of purchasing another frigate, established a submarine procurement review panel in January. The panel, which convened for the first time on February 6, is expected to provide recommendations later this week [see AiR No. 7, February/2024, 2].

Thailand: Navy chief appeals decision to cut budget for new frigate

(lm) Thailand's Navy Chief, Adm Adoon Pan-iam, has written to Parliament's lower house challenge a decision made by the special committee vetting the 2024 budget to deny funding for the acquisition of a new frigate. Adm Adoon argues that a new ship is crucial for enhancing the country's maritime defenses, especially as the Navy intends to retire its current frigates in the coming years. [Bangkok Post]

The Navy initially requested THB 17 billion (approximately USD 475 million) from the 2024 budget to procure a frigate, with plans to utilize it over the next five years, allocating around 10 percent in the first year. Several shipyards, both international and local, have shown interest in constructing the frigate for the Navy, including those from the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Italy, Turkey, South Korea, and domestic companies.

Vietnam: Government orders control of workers, unions despite UN pledges, watchdog says

(wn) Vietnam's communist leadership has issued a secret directive, known as Directive 24, aimed at aimed at tightening control over civil society, particularly

trade unions and labor activism. This directive comes despite Vietnam's commitments to uphold human rights, including workers' rights, as part of its international obligations, such as its impending ratification of the International Labour Organization's Convention 87. [UCA news] [Al Jazeera]

Directive 24 includes nine orders, including provisions for closely monitoring trade unions and labor disputes. It also prohibits the establishment of new labor groups based on ethnicity or religion, indicating a clampdown on independent labor organizations. Furthermore, the directive calls for increased vigilance regarding foreign aid and foreign investors, with the aim of preventing them from dominating domestic markets or vital economic sectors.

The issuance of Directive 24 marks a significant departure from Vietnam's international commitments and signals a more authoritarian approach to governance, particularly in managing civil society and labor activism. The directive, issued by the Party's Politburo in July 2023, coincided with Hanoi's efforts to strengthen diplomatic relations, including an upgrade in relations with the United States.

Vietnam: Property tycoon on trial in USD 12.5 billion fraud case

(wn) Truong My Lan, chair of prominent Vietnamese real estate developer Van Thinh Phat, is currently on trial over allegations that she masterminded a scheme that siphoned off approximately USD 12.5 billion, a sum equivalent to nearly 3 percent of Vietnam's GDP in 2022. According to government documents, Lan is accused of utilizing a complex network of thousands of ghost companies, bribery of government officials, and circumvention of banking regulations to carry out the scheme. [Channel News Asia] [France24] [Associated Press]

The crux of the operation allegedly involved her illicit control of the Saigon Joint Stock Commercial Bank (SCB) between 2012 and 2022, during which she allegedly embezzled the aforementioned funds. As a result, SCB bondholders found themselves unable to access their investments, deprived of both interest payments and the return of their principal since Lan's arrest in October 2022.

The scope of the fraud extends beyond Lan herself, with 85 other individuals also facing prosecution in connection with the case. Among them is a former official from the State Bank of Vietnam who stands

accused of accepting bribes amounting to USD 5.2 million.

The scandal has sent shockwaves through Vietnam, with approximately 42,000 individuals identified as victims of the fraudulent scheme. This widespread impact has led to rare public protests in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, marking a significant departure from the usual political climate of the one-party communist state.

The arrests and subsequent trial are part of a broader anti-corruption campaign that has swept across Vietnam in recent years, targeting high-profile figures in both the public and private sectors. Notable among these are Truong Quy Thanh, head of the Tan Hiep Phat Group, and Do Anh Dung, chairman of the Tan Hoang Minh Group, both accused of orchestrating substantial financial frauds of their own.

Vietnam: Hanoi faces severe air pollution, leading it to top the list of the most polluted cities in the world

(wn) On February 5, the Vietnamese capital of Hanoi was covered by a dense layer of pollution, which made it challenging to see high-rise buildings. The haze also made it difficult for the city's almost nine million inhabitants to breathe clean air. Hanoi ranked first on IQAir's air-monitoring website list of the world's most polluted cities. The concentration of PM2.5 pollutants, tiny particles that can cause cancer, was classified as "very unhealthy." The levels of these particles were more than 24 times higher than the World Health Organization's annual guideline.

Hanoi is one of the world's most polluted cities due to widespread construction, vehicle emissions, carbon emissions from coal plants, and agricultural burning. People are often advised to wear masks due to poor air quality. Last month, dozens of flights were affected by air pollution. Weather forecasters regularly issue warnings of thick haze, especially in northeastern mountainous areas. According to the World Bank, 40% of people in Hanoi are exposed to concentrations nearly five times greater than WHO guidelines. Exposure to air pollution is linked to severe health conditions such as strokes, heart disease, and lung cancer. [Yahoo]

Vietnam: Talks with SpaceX regarding use of Starlink on hold

(wn) *SpaceX*, an American aerospace manufacturer and space transportation company, has halted its plans to provide communication services using its Starlink satellites. The decision has suspended support for Vietnamese coast guard drones and comes amid Hanoi's efforts to upgrade its internet infrastructure due to recent outages in underwater fiber-optic cables and the need for connectivity in remote areas. [Reuters]

Discussions between *SpaceX* and Vietnamese authorities had been ongoing for months but were disrupted in the last quarter of 2023 when it became evident that Vietnamese lawmakers would not relax foreign ownership restrictions for the company. The suspension of discussions led to the interruption of Starlink's pilot services for Vietnam's coast guard drones.

The decision to halt discussions comes amid tensions in the South China Sea, where Chinese vessels frequently enter Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone, triggering protests from Hanoi. Beijing, which claims most of the South China Sea, including areas within Vietnam's EEZ, has expressed concerns about the deployment of Starlink, describing it as a "serious threat to the security of space assets."

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

Australia gives USD 42 million to ASEAN countries for ‘free, open’ South China Sea

(lm/ms) Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong on March 3 announced USD 41.8 million in funding for maritime security during a special summit with ASEAN members in Melbourne. The funding aims to support maritime cooperation and ensure free and open sea lanes in the South China Sea. While Wong did not specify which countries would receive the funding, she welcomed efforts by Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines to delimit their maritime boundaries. [Al Jazeera]

The summit, commemorating 50 years since Australia became a dialogue partner of ASEAN, underscores Australia's ongoing commitment to fostering closer ties with Southeast Asia. However, Australia's regional engagement is complex, influenced by its alliance with the United States and membership in the AUKUS security pact. The latter has drawn scrutiny, with some regional allies expressing concerns about potential contributions to a nuclear arms race.

Beyond geopolitical tensions, concerns over human rights abuses and climate change resilience were also raised during the summit. Activists staged protests outside Parliament, criticizing Australia's perceived lack of scrutiny of its allies' human rights records and its support for climate resilience initiatives. Wong's acknowledgment of Australian funding for climate resilience efforts through the Mekong-Australia partnership underscores the intertwined challenges of security and sustainability in the region.

Philippines President Marcos Jr. tells Australia strategic partnership more important than ever

Ahead of the Australia-ASEAN summit, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. addressed a a joint sitting of both houses of the Australian Parliament on February 29, in which he emphasized the importance of the strategic partnership between the two countries in light of threats to regional peace and stability, particularly from China. The president also thanked Australia for its support, in a reference to the first joint naval and air patrols of the South China Sea of the two countries in last November. [Associated Press]

However, Marcos's address was briefly interrupted by Senator Janet Rice, who protested against human rights abuses in the Philippines. Rice's actions were later censured by her colleagues in the Senate. [Rappler]

Despite this incident, Marcos and Albanese on February 29 announced new agreements on maritime cooperation, cybersecurity, and fair trade regulation. Those agreements built on what was already a

blossoming relationship, with Manila and Canberra having elevated their bilateral ties from a comprehensive partnership to a strategic partnership when Albanese visited Manila in September last year – in what was the first visit by an Australian prime minister to the archipelagic nation in 20 years [see AiR No. 37, September/2023, 2]. [The Diplomat]

Collision between Philippine and Chinese coast guard vessels

A collision on March 5 between Philippine and Chinese coast guard vessels has escalated tensions in the South China Sea, highlighting the ongoing dispute over territorial claims in the region. The incident occurred during a rotation and resupply mission near Ayungin Shoal, where Filipino troops are stationed aboard the BRP Sierra Madre.

According to Philippine Coast Guard the collision was the result of "dangerous maneuvers and blocking" by Chinese vessels, leading to minor structural damage to the Philippine vessel. This clash comes amidst reports of Chinese maritime militia vessels establishing blockade positions in the area, hindering Philippine resupply efforts.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry, on the other hand, replied to the allegations, by merely stating that “China has taken necessary measures in accordance with the law to defend its own sovereignty, rights and interests. There is no such situation of China “harassing” the Philippines.” [FMPRC] [GMA News] [Philippine News Agency] [The Manila Times]

US introduce executive order to safeguard Americans' sensitive data from countries deemed “hostile”

(ms) On February 28, President Joe Biden issued an executive order aimed at restricting the sale of sensitive American data to countries deemed hostile, particularly China and Russia. The order marks a significant step in addressing concerns over the potential exploitation of personal information for malicious purposes, according to the Biden government.

The directive targets the business practices of data brokers and commercial entities involved in the collection and trade of personal data. These entities often amass vast quantities of information, including genomic data, biometric data, health records, geolocation data, and financial information, which can

then be sold to foreign governments or entities with ties to rivalling nations. The executive order seeks to curtail such transactions and prevent sensitive data from falling into the wrong hands.

The order singles out China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, Cuba, and Venezuela as countries of concern, reflecting ongoing geopolitical tensions and perceived national security threats. Specifically, the directive targets Chinese gene companies like BGI (formerly Beijing Genomics Institute), which have been implicated in the unauthorized collection and use of genomic data.

The executive order directs the Department of Justice (DOJ) to formulate regulations aimed at protecting sensitive data from being commercially obtained by countries of concern. Additionally, the Department of Homeland Security and the DOJ are tasked with establishing security standards to prevent hostile nations from acquiring sensitive data through investments, vendor contracts, or employment relationships. [Atlantic Council] [CNBC] [Nikkei Asia] [Reuters] [The New York Times]

China's maritime presence in South China Sea increased significantly in 2023

(ms) China's maritime militia has increasingly attracted attention due to its activities in the South China Sea, a region predominantly marked by territorial disputes involving China and neighboring nations. Providing insights into the developments of 2023, a report from the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), a project of Washington, DC-based think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) published on February 28, sheds light on the evolving role of China's maritime militia in the country's efforts in the area.

AMTI's analysis, based on satellite imagery, indicates a significant uptick in the presence of Chinese militia vessels around key features of the South China Sea in 2023. The data reveal a 35 percent increase compared to previous years.

One notable observation highlighted in the report is the substantial influx of militia vessels at Mischief Reef in the east of the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, located 250 kilometres west of Palawan Island of the Philippines, during the summer of 2023. Over 180 militia ships were identified at this location in July, indicating a considerable surge compared to previous months.

The report also underscores the close coordination between China's maritime militia and its Coast Guard. These militia vessels, which include both professional units based in Hainan and commercial fishing vessels with secondary defense missions, are frequently deployed to monitor and challenge vessels from other claimant states. Instances of tensions between Chinese militia vessels and Philippine vessels at Second Thomas Shoal are cited as examples of this dynamic.

At Second Thomas Shoal, tensions have escalated in recent times, with an increase in the number of Chinese vessels present during Philippine resupply missions. The report notes a sharp rise in Chinese vessel numbers, reaching up to 46 during a particularly intense standoff in December. This indicates the militia's readiness to support China Coast Guard operations in response to perceived challenges to Chinese interests in the region.

While the report provides valuable insights, it acknowledges limitations in the data, particularly regarding the size of vessels analyzed. The study focused on vessels of 45 meters or larger, potentially excluding smaller militia boats from the analysis. [Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative] [Bloomberg] [Maritime Executive]

Japan assumes presidency of UNSC

(sh) On March 1, Japan assumed the rotating presidency of the UN Security Council amidst growing tensions between major powers over the conflict in Gaza.

Japan's Ambassador to the UN, Yamazaki Kazuyuki, addressed reporters in New York, expressing Japan's commitment to collaborating with other member countries to fulfill the Security Council's mandate of maintaining international peace and security.

Yamazaki emphasized the importance of abiding by international law, including humanitarian law, in response to a question about the situation in Gaza. He acknowledged Israel's right to protect its people but stressed the obligation of all nations, especially UN members, to adhere to international norms.

Additionally, discussions in the council are anticipated to intensify, with the United States preparing a new resolution for a temporary ceasefire in Gaza in exchange for the release of hostages. As the rotating chair, Japan faces the challenging task of guiding the

Security Council, which some critics argue is not functioning optimally. [NHK]

Japan to host ministerial-level meeting on nuclear disarmament

(sh) On February 28, Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko announced that Japan would host a ministerial-level meeting on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation at the United Nations headquarters in New York on March 18.

She highlighted Japan's aim to expedite discussions between nuclear and non-nuclear states, drawing on outcomes from the Group of Seven nations' summit in Hiroshima the previous year, which had issued the Hiroshima Vision on Nuclear Disarmament. [NHK]

Mongolia receives additional Asian Development Bank funding for education project

(fg) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Mongolian government signed a financing agreement worth USD 15 million on March 3, aimed at improving access to better education for Mongolian children.

ADB's Director General for East Asia, Muhammad Ehsan Khan, and Minister of Finance and ADB Governor, Javkhlan Bold, signed the agreement in Ulaanbaatar.

Againts the backdrop of an economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that led to significant cuts in Mongolia’s education budget and affected especially educational opportunities for disadvantaged children, this additional financing seeks to build and modernize more schools and kindergartens, expected to benefit over 1600 children.

The USD 15 million additional financing scales up the existing USD 50 million “Sustaining Access to and Quality of Education During Economic Difficulties Project” approved in November 2017. It aims to support the access to and quality of education during economic challenges and includes constructing and expanding 21 schools and kindergartens across various provinces, alongside curriculum reforms, provision of educational materials, and training of educators and administrators.

In addition, climate adaptation measures will be integrated into the buildings to minimize disruptions and increase energy efficiency.

The project is expected to complete in February 2027. [ADB]

South Korea participates in multilateral military exercise

(oy) South Korea is participating in the multilateral Exercise Cobra Gold in Thailand. The exercise involves military personnel and equipment from Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and US.

Exercise Cobra Gold, first launched in 1982, focuses on training multinational forces to address a wide range of modern military challenges, with the aim of enhancing regional stability through collaboration. South Korea first participated fully in this exercise in 2010. [US Army]

The multinational personnel will participate in various field maneuvers, such as amphibious landing operations, special jungle warfare drills, and underwater construction training. They are also expected to conduct cyber defense drills. In addition to military training, the exercise also includes training in humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and civic aid. [Euronews] [Yonhap]

Maldives signs defense agreement with China amid decoupling from India

(aa/ms) The Maldives has signed a military assistance deal with China, the Maldivian Ministry of Defence announced on March 4. With the signing and the simultaneous call on India to withdraw all troops stationed in the archipelago, President Mohamend Muizzu is now officially following in the footsteps of his political mentor former President Abdulla Yameen and his pro-China foreign policy.

This important step comes against a backdrop of changing alliances and increasing regional rivalries. In the past, the Maldives has traditionally, due to the geographic position, maintained close relations with India, characterized by military cooperation and economic aid. However, the rise to power of President Mohamed Muizzu - like Yameen before him - has led to a recalibration of Maldivian foreign policy, tipping the scales in Beijing's favor.

Even if the social media statement of the Maldivian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in which the agreement was made public, does not provide any information on the content of the agreement, except that it is "free" and include 12 electric ambulances for the island state, the agreement and the symbolic power it contains is already of extraordinary relevance.

Since Muizzu took office, as propagated during the election campaign, he has advocated for a stronger independent Maldives, which in his opinion was undermined by the pro-Indian foreign policy of his predecessor. The most prominent example of the resulting "anti-Indian" foreign policy is his promise, repeated just recently on March 5, that from May 10 there will be no more Indian troops who have so far been used to operate reconnaissance aircraft donated by India to monitor the sea borders of the Maldives, "not even those in civilian clothing."

With the "military in civilian clothes", Muizzu is probably alluding to the arrival of a team of Indian civilian personnel to take control of one of the three air platforms previously operated by Indian military personnel. The decision to switch from military to civilian personnel follows a series of high-level meetings, including one in Delhi on February 2, where the Maldivian Ministry of External Affairs announced that India would replace its military personnel with civilians by May 10. It remains to be seen to what extent this agreement is still relevant after Muizzu's words or whether this has to be interpreted as a denunciation of it, but either way, the signing of the agreement with China represents a serious geostrategic defeat for India. [AFP] [BNN] [Mint] [Maldives Ministry of Defence via Twitter]

Thailand replaces WTO envoy after India lodges protest over remarks on agriculture subsidies

(ff) Thailand has reportedly replaced its ambassador to the World Trade Organization (WTO) following India's formal protest over the envoy's criticism of New Delhi's rice procurement program, specifically targeting its Public Distribution System (PDS). The criticism suggested that the PDS, a government-sponsored program in India aimed at distributing essential food items to the public at subsidized rates, was not aimed at benefiting the public but rather at capturing the export market. [The Economic Times] [The Indian Express]

This criticism led to a significant escalation in tensions between India and Thailand, particularly in the context of their positions as major rice exporters. The rift between the two countries was particularly evident during the recent 13th Ministerial Conference of the WTO. Indian negotiators reportedly refused to participate in discussions where the Thai representative was present, underscoring the depth of the diplomatic strain.

Thailand's stance on India's PSH program reflects broader concerns within the Cairns Group, a coalition of 20 nations that have repeatedly questioned the legitimacy of India's agricultural support measures at the WTO. The Cairns Group argues that such measures, including India's PSH program, are highly subsidized and distort global food prices, thereby adversely affecting the food security of other nations.

At the heart of the dispute lies India's adherence to WTO rules governing agricultural subsidies, particularly the de minimis limit, which stipulates that the aggregate value of product-specific support should not exceed certain thresholds. India's subsidies for rice production have exceeded these limits, leading to criticisms from exporting countries like Thailand, which find it increasingly challenging to compete with Indian rice in the global market.

India, on the other hand, has defended its subsidies, arguing that they are essential for ensuring food security and supporting its farmers. Furthermore, India has raised concerns about the outdated methodologies used by the WTO to calculate subsidies, advocating for reforms in the WTO's approach to agricultural trade negotiations.

United States urge Pakistan to continue working with IMF

(tj) The United States has urged Pakistan to continue working with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other international financial institutions to implement macroeconomic reforms for economic stability. This comes after the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) of jailed ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan wrote to the Washington-based lender requesting an audit of the 2024 elections before entering into discussions for a new bailout package. The PTI, which had faced a severe crackdown from government agencies and security forces in the weeks before the elections, emphasized that the economy should not suffer any adverse effects and reminded the IMF of its promises for free and fair elections. [Dawn]

Indonesia leads global call for disarmament commitment at Geneva conference

(jb) Indonesia, presiding over the Conference on Disarmament (CD), has advocated for a renewed commitment to global disarmament during the High-Level Segment of the CD in Geneva, Switzerland, held on February 26.

Foreign Affairs Minister Retno Marsudi urged nuclear-armed nations to honor obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty and confirmed that Indonesia has ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

Marsudi also pressed for the prompt signing of the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone (SEANWFZ) protocol. Emphasizing procedural and substantive progress, she underscored the importance of addressing agreed-upon issues like Negative Security Assurances, or the commitment made by a nuclear weapon state to not to utilize or threaten the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states. [Antara News]

In addition, she called for an immediate halt to military support and arms sales to Israel, while condemning Israel's alleged plan to threaten Gaza with nuclear weapons, highlighting Israel's human rights violations and demanding global unity against injustice.

Marsudi made these statements in Israel at a side event on Palestine during her stay in Geneva. [Arab News]

Indonesia, EU discuss protection of intellectual property rights

(yr/jb) On February 28, the Indonesian Ministry of Law and Human Rights discussed intellectual property rights (IPR) in the 17th round of negotiations on the Indonesia-European Union Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IEU-CEPA) in Bandung, West Java.

Head of Foreign Cooperation at the ministry's Directorate General of IPR Marchienda Werdany stated that this discussion aims to ensure a system of IPR protection on both sides, providing legal certainty for economic actors.

The focus of the forum included the protection of medicinal product data, the duration of the industrial design protection period, and genetic sources and traditional knowledge.

With two rounds of negotiations remaining, the target is to conclude negotiations by July 2024, followed by the signing of the agreement by the leaders of each entity. [Antara]

Myanmar rights groups urge UN action against forced conscription

(jb) In a joint appeal on March 1, 397 civil society organizations implored the United Nations Security Council to intervene and halt Myanmar's junta's forced conscription. Describing it as a tool for terror and coercion, they warned of heightened violence and ethnic tensions.

The signatories, including Rohingya groups and women's rights organizations, highlighted the junta's disregard for human life, using conscripts as disposable pawns in conflicts. They demanded accountability for decades of war crimes and genocide, urging targeted sanctions and an arms embargo.

As the regime enforces its conscription plans, mass resistance grows, with many fleeing the country to evade forced military service. [The Irrawaddy]

Philippines, India, and Japan eye strategic partnership

(ms) In a concerted effort to bolster regional security and advance economic development in the Indo-Pacific, the Philippines, India, and Japan are actively considering the establishment of a trilateral mechanism. This proposed partnership, if realized, holds the potential to significantly enhance maritime security—a key pillar of the collaboration—while also fostering economic growth and technological advancement in the region.

Officials from the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs have emphasized the multifaceted benefits of the trilateral arrangement, highlighting its capacity to drive economic prosperity and cultivate strategic partnerships. Central to the envisioned cooperation is the imperative of maritime security, given the region's critical importance as a maritime hub.

The impending delivery of BrahMos cruise missiles from India to the Philippines exemplifies the deepening maritime dialogue between the two nations. This collaboration is poised to bolster the Philippines' maritime capabilities and contribute substantially to regional security efforts. India's acknowledgment of the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling under United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) over China's claim over large parts of the South China Sea in favor of the Philippines further underscores the mutual commitment to upholding maritime norms and safeguarding maritime interests.

Japan, recognizing the strategic significance of trilateral cooperation, views the partnership as a means to strengthen maritime security and promote stability in the Indo-Pacific. Officials from Japan stress the transformative potential of collaborative efforts in addressing maritime challenges and advancing shared objectives in the region.

Amidst prevailing regional uncertainties and territorial disputes especially with, the abovementioned, China, the proposed trilateral agreement offers a strategic framework for addressing common concerns and upholding the rule-based order. [GMA News] [Philippine News Agency] [The Hindu]

Thailand facilitates transfer of 900 scam victims from Myanmar to China

(lm) Thailand recently helped facilitate the transfer of approximately 900 Chinese nationals who had been trapped in scam centers in Myanmar's border town of Myawaddy back home, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin said on March 3. [Bangkok Post]

Last November, Myanmar authorities handed over 31,000 telecom fraud suspects to China in a joint crackdown against online scams in Myanmar [see AiR No. 47, November/2023, 3]. China and Myanmar also helped facilitate the transfer back to Thailand of more than two hundred Thais, both victims and those involved with telecom fraud gangs, who were trapped in fighting between Myanmar military and armed ethnic-minority in Laukkaing in Myanmar's northern Shan State.

Vietnam calls for breakthrough in implementing cooperation agreements in CLV Development Triangle

(wn/lm) Senior officials from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam recently convened for the 13th Joint Coordination Committee Conference of the CLV Development Triangle Area, a region of cooperation and economic development involving specific provinces from each of the three countries. [The Nation Thailand]

Vietnam highlighted its significant investment in the triangle's development, totaling over USD 3.7 billion across 110 projects in Lao and Cambodian provinces since the area was established in 1999. Consequently, Hanoi urged for breakthroughs in implementing projects that have fallen short of expectations thus far.

Acknowledging the positive outcomes of investment collaboration within the triangle, other participants also recognized untapped potential in various sectors such as agriculture, clean energy, mining, and tourism. However, they identified several challenges hindering investment in the region, including inadequate infrastructure, a shortage of investment capital, unclear investment incentives, and complex administrative procedures related to goods transportation, customs, and taxation.

Bangladesh government emphasizes sovereignty after opposition meetings with United States

(ms) The general secretary of Bangladesh's ruling Awami League, Obaidul Quader, has reaffirmed the government's commitment to friendly international relations while rejecting foreign dominance. These remarks were prompted by a closed-door meeting between the United States Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia, Afreen Akhter, and the general secretary of Bangladesh's main opposition BNP, Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, along with other party leaders.

Quader's emphasis on sovereignty amidst diplomatic dialogues reflects the government's strategic approach to international relations. Despite economic challenges, he expressed confidence in Bangladesh's resilience and its people's understanding of global dynamics.

These remarks position the government as assertive in its diplomatic dealings, prioritizing national interests while engaging with foreign counterparts. [Bangla News 24] [Dhaka Tribune 1] [Dhaka Tribune 2]

Bhutan, Singapore to sign memorandum for carbon trading

(lm) Bhutan is set to enter the carbon market in partnership with Singapore, with negotiations nearing completion. The country, known for its clean energy and lush forest cover, aims to capitalize on its carbon-negative status and forest cover to engage in carbon trading. The launch of Bhutan's National Carbon Registry in December last year has enabled collaboration with global carbon markets, supporting efforts to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. [Kuensel]

Bhutan, United Kingdom force collaboration via Honorary Consul

(lm) The British High Commissioner to India, Alexander Wykeham Ellis, recently visited Bhutan on the occasion of the appointment of a Honorary Consul of the United Kingdom to Bhutan, Kalden Sonam Dorji. During his visit, Ellis had the opportunity to meet with key figures in Bhutan, including King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck and members of the royal family. Discussions centered around strengthening bilateral relations, particularly in education and tourism sectors. [Kuensel]

US fighter jets lands in Brunei for the first time

(dql) U.S. Air Force F-35 fighters landed in Brunei on March 1, marking the first time U.S. stealth jets have landed in the Southeast Asian country.

Two F-35s from the 356th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron, Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska touched down at Rimba Air Base for a familiarization with the aircraft and to build upon working relationships with the Royal Brunei Air Force.

The visit coincided with a diplomatic visit by Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Jedidiah Royal who met Minister of Foreign Affairs II Dato Erywan for a discussion about ways to enhance U.S.-Brunei cooperation.

In December 2023, Bruneian officials visited the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command to hold bilateral talks during which a "Section 505 agreement," was signed, a prerequisite to granting military training or equipment

to a foreign nation. [U.S. Embassy in Brunei Darussalam] [AiR & Space Forces] [Department of Defense, USA]

Cambodia, US to foster military cooperation

(pm) During a meeting with Jedidiah Royal, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs of the US (PDASD) on February 26, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces General Vong Pisen requested the US to provide training assistance, exchange of military visits at all levels, and to share intelligence to prevent cross-border crimes and to continue peacekeeping missions, international humanitarian work, and disaster relief.

At the same, Pisen reaffirmed that Cambodia will be continuing its independent foreign policy based on the rule of law, building friendships, and boosting cooperation with all countries.

The US Embassy Phnom Penh stated that Royal and Pisen discussed existing defense cooperation, opportunities for further engagement on regional security challenges, and the importance of ensuring Cambodia's sovereignty is protected. The statement highlighted that despite existing challenges in the defense relationship, the US side foresees to work on renewing cooperation in areas of shared concern.

In this regard, the PDASD expressed it wish to continue US-RCAF cooperation on unexploded ordinance abatement and humanitarian demining as well as to enhance Cambodian participation in event and training courses. [Khmer Times 1] [Khmer Times 2]

The meeting took place after a separate meeting between US Department of State Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet, during which Kritenbrink addressed areas for progress in Cambodia, including democracy and human rights, trafficking in persons, and building up space for a free and independent media (see AiR No. 9, February/2024, 4).

Cambodia, Lichtenstein conclude development cooperation agreement

(dql) On February 29, Cambodia and Lichtenstein signed the "Framework Agreement on Development Cooperation" that seeks to deepen bilateral

cooperation, especially in the area of human resource development. The agreement is expected to pave the way for future cooperation agreements and memoranda of understanding (MoU).

It was signed by Cambodian Foreign Minister Sok Chenda Sophea and Dominique Hasler, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education and Sports of Liechtenstein during her visit to Cambodia last week from February 29 to March 2, marking the first ministerial visit from Liechtenstein to Cambodia.

During the talks, Hasler affirmed her country's intention to establish a representative office of the Liechtenstein Development Service (LED) in Cambodia to enhance the implementation of existing projects.

In addition, the two ministers confirmed that they are committed to expanding cooperation in key areas, such as education and vocational training, and agreed to explore the potential for establishing Bilateral Consultations between the two foreign ministries.

During her stay in Cambodia, Hasler also held a meeting with Heng Sour, Minister of Labour and Vocational Training, and Hang Chuon Naron, Minister of Education, Youth and Sport, to engage in discussion about closer cooperation between their respective ministries. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Cambodia] [The Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia, Germany to cooperate in education and health

(pm) Cambodian Prime Hun Manet and Martina Stamm-Fibich, Chairwoman of the Petitions Committee of the German Bundestag, held a meeting at the Peace Palace on February 28 to discuss way to expand and deepen between the two countries.

Stamm-Fibich expressed Germany's commitment to deepening cooperation with the Southeast Asian country especially in education, human resource training, and health sectors. During the meeting she pointed to a shortage in work force in Germany health sector.

Manet also welcomed Germany's intention to expand bilateral cooperation in the areas mentioned by Stamm-Fibich, adding that his government is focusing on efforts to drive economic growth based on human resources. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia, UK agree to deepen cooperation

(dql) Cambodia and the United Kingdom have affirmed the importance of further deepening cooperation in various areas, including trade, investment, human resources, green development, and renewable energy.

This commitment was made during a meeting between Chem Widhya, Secretary of State of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, on March 4, and Anne-Marie Trevelyan, the UK's Minister for the Indo-Pacific. The meeting was part of Trevelyan's visit to Cambodia from March 2-4. [Khmer Times]

Sierra Leone leader's visit to strengthen ties with China, reflects China's broader global strategy

(ms) Sierra Leonean President Julius Maada Bio's weeklong visit to Beijing, started at February 29, has underscored the strengthening of ties between China and the West African nation. During his meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Bio and Xi discussed various areas of cooperation, particularly focusing on bolstering Sierra Leone's infrastructure, economy, and representation on the global stage.

Xi emphasized the importance of strengthening cooperation between China and Sierra Leone, particularly at the United Nations Security Council. With Sierra Leone representing African countries' interests as a non-permanent member of the council and China wielding veto power as a permanent member, the leaders discussed jointly safeguarding the interests of Africa and developing nations.

The meeting was also about China's continued investment in Sierra Leone's development projects. From infrastructure to agriculture, China has pledged support for various sectors in Sierra Leone, aiming to foster economic growth and improve livelihoods. Additionally, both leaders discussed enhancing bilateral trade relations, with China reaffirming its status as Sierra Leone's largest trading partner.

Bio's visit to Beijing also sheds light on China's broader geopolitical strategy. Over the years, China has increasingly positioned itself as a leader of the Global South, challenging Western dominance in global

governance and shaping the international order. By forging alliances with developing countries like Sierra Leone, China seeks to establish an alternative narrative to Western leadership in international affairs.

China's engagement with Sierra Leone is part of its larger efforts to expand its influence in Africa and beyond. Through initiatives such as Xi's Belt and Road Initiative, China aims to strengthen economic ties, promote infrastructure development, and create an economic network across regions, with itself in the center. Furthermore, China's investments in African nations, including Sierra Leone, serve both economic and strategic interests, enabling China to secure access to vital resources and markets while bolstering its geopolitical influence.

As Sierra Leone's visit to China demonstrates, the relationship between the two nations reflects not only bilateral cooperation but also China's broader vision for global governance and South-South cooperation. With China's growing presence in the Global South, the dynamics of international relations are evolving, posing new challenges and opportunities for traditional Western powers. [FMPRC] [Reuters] [South China Morning Post]

Australian citizen sentenced to jail term over foreign interference for Chinese government

(ms) Melbourne businessman Di Sanh Duong has been sentenced to two years and nine months in prison for attempting to influence former federal minister Alan Tudge, marking the first conviction under the newly in 2018 introduced foreign interference law in Australia.

The trial, held in the County Court, unveiled a clandestine network of activities linking Duong to Chinese intelligence operatives, contrasting with his public image as a respected member of the Australian-Chinese community and a former Liberal Party candidate.

Prosecutors argued that Duong's donation of USD 37,450 to the Royal Melbourne Hospital during a media event with Tudge was a calculated move to gain favor of the politician, whom Duong believed could become Prime Minister. While Tudge was not implicated, the prosecution alleged Duong exploited his community standing to solicit donations, masking ulterior motives. They contended that Duong's connections with Chinese intelligence posed a threat to Australia's political integrity.

Central to the case was the assertion that Duong was co-opted by the Chinese Communist Party's United Front Work Department, which is responsible for expanding influence over elite individuals and organizations inside and outside mainland China. Although Duong lacked a direct CCP link, evidence suggested his willingness to act on their behalf, raising concerns about foreign interference.

Throughout the trial, Duong maintained his innocence, claiming the funds were for COVID-19 relief and combating anti-China sentiment. However, the jury sided with the prosecution, delivering a guilty verdict in December. [CNN] [ABC News] [Financial Times] [Nikkei Asia] [The Guardian]

Chinese Premier meets US Chamber of Commerce delegation

(ms) On February 28, Chinese Premier Li Qiang held a meeting with a delegation from the US Chamber of Commerce in Beijing, addressing key economic issues and lingering concerns between the two nations.

The meeting primarily focused on the United States' economic strategy known as "small yard, high fence," which aims to restrict economic engagement, particularly in high-tech sectors, by among other things sanctioning the export of high-tech products to China.

Li Qiang expressed his disapproval of this strategy, highlighting its potential negative impacts on both countries' economies and global development. He additionally emphasized the importance of cooperation over rivalry, stressing that the economies of China and the United States are highly complementary and deeply intertwined. He advocated for enhanced economic ties between the two nations under the scope of win-win cooperation.

Amid recent trade restrictions and geopolitical tensions, the meeting holds significant importance in mending and strengthening Sino-American economic relations. Li assured the US Chamber of Commerce delegation of China's commitment to creating a favorable business environment for foreign investments, particularly from American companies. He extended invitations for American firms to invest in various sectors in China, including advanced manufacturing and green energy.

Representing the US Chamber of Commerce, Suzanne Clark expressed the organization's willingness to facilitate constructive communication and deepen

economic-commercial ties between the two nations. [BNN] [FMPRC] [South China Morning Post]

Indian tourists can now scan and pay in neighboring Nepal

(lm) Indian tourists visiting neighboring Nepal can now pay for services using their mobile phones for the first time, marking a significant milestone in cross-border digital payments between the two countries. This development comes eight years after New Delhi banned its citizens from using high-denomination Indian currency notes in Nepal. The introduction of this payment method is anticipated to bolster Nepal's tourism industry. However, the implementation of a reciprocal service for Nepali citizens in India has been delayed, reportedly due to concerns raised by Kathmandu's central bank. [The Kathmandu Post]

Talks between Indonesia and Taiwan stall

(jb) Talks between Taiwanese authorities and Indonesian union leaders in Taipei stalled on March 1 regarding a proposed memorandum of understanding (MOU) to enhance the rights of distant-water fishers.

A delegation of Indonesian unions sought protection for workers aboard Taiwan-registered vessels, previously excluded from a 2018 MOU. Demands included adherence to International Labour Organization standards, fair wages, union formation rights, and employer responsibility for recruitment fees.

Officials of Taiwan's Fisheries Agency refused to sign the petition, requesting time for reviewing the demands.

The Indonesian Economic and Trade Office to Taipei aims for formal MOU signing in May or June 2024, with Jakarta preparing a draft MOU reflecting workers' appeals. [Taipei Times]

Indonesia, UK poised to deepen cooperation in e-government development

(jb) Indonesia and the United Kingdom (UK) are poised to deepen cooperation in e-government development,

aiming to bolster technical capabilities.

Deputy Minister of Communication and Informatics, Nezar Patria, highlighted the UK's expertise in e-government implementation. Patria emphasized Indonesia's need to learn from such successes to avoid pitfalls. The ministry has prioritized infrastructure building and integration for seamless application use across ministries and local governments.

Nezar made these statements during a meeting with visiting UK Minister of State for the Indo-Pacific Anne-Marie Belinda Trevelyan.

The talks centered on increasing joint action, including telecom infrastructure strengthening and educational capacity building. [Antara News]

Indonesia: Citroen set to begin EV assembly in Indonesia

(jb) French automaker Citroen is set to commence electric vehicle (EV) assembly in Indonesia this July, according to a senior government official.

Currently, Citroen imports cars, including the EV model E-C3, from India for the Indonesian market. The shift to local assembly will involve shipping parts or completely knocked down (CKD) units to be assembled in Indonesia.

Indonesia’s Coordinating Ministry for Investment Affairs stated that while the investment value for domestic assembly may be smaller, it aligns with Indonesia's goal of increasing local EV production. [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesian Vice President visits New Zealand

(jb) Indonesian Vice President Ma'ruf Amin, during his visit to New Zealand from 25 February-2 March 2024, stressed the importance of enhancing socio-cultural cooperation between the two nations.

Meeting with New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon, Amin highlighted the significance of promoting people-to-people contact to foster tolerance in diverse societies. Amin also expressed Indonesia's willingness to share experiences in interfaith dialogue and religious moderation, aiming to contribute to global peace efforts.

Emphasizing the success of their comprehensive partnership, he underscored the need to bolster cooperation in trade, investment, tourism, and even the halal industry.

Discussions also included exploring opportunities with halal business players, specifically mutual recognition of halal products between countries. [Tempo.co] [Antara News]

Indonesia, Papua New Guinea solidify defense partnership to enhance border security

(jb) On February 27, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea officially ratified a defense deal aimed at enhancing security cooperation, particularly along their shared border.

The agreement, signed a decade ago, was announced by PNG's Foreign Minister Justin Tkatchenko and Indonesia's ambassador to PNG, Andriana Supandy.

Joint border patrols and various defense collaborations are envisioned to bolster regional stability. The 760-kilometer border, a colonial legacy dividing the island of New Guinea, underscores historical complexities in the region.

Indonesia views the pact as pivotal for regional peace and pursuing its interests between rising tensions between China and the US. PNG, with aspirations to modernize its defense force, sees it as crucial for border control amid ongoing challenges.

In earlier moves, PNG has signed defense agreements with the US and Australia. [Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade] [Agreement between the US and PNG] [Lowy Institute] [Benar News]

Singapore invited to invest in Indonesia's new capital Nusantara

(yr) Chairman of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) Bambang Soesatyo invited Singapore to invest in the development of Indonesia's new capital, Nusantara, when he met Singapore's Ambassador to Indonesia, Kwok Fook Seng, on March 1.

Soesatyo emphasized that Indonesia remains safe and peaceful after the presidential and legislative elections,

so that investors from Singapore and other countries do not need to worry about investing in Indonesia.

From 2010 to 2023, Singapore was consistently Indonesia's main investor, with exception in 2013. In 2022, Singapore's investment reaches USD 13.3 billion, followed by USD 12.2 billion from January to September 2023, and reach USD 15.4 billion at the end of 2023. Therefore, Singapore has a wide opportunity to invest in the new capital project in East Kalimantan. [MPR, in Indonesian] [Antara 1] [Antara 2]

PETA protest urges France to half frog meat imports from Indonesia

(jb) Five PETA activists donned frog masks and protested outside the French Embassy in Jakarta on February 27, urging France to cease importing frog meat from Indonesia.

The demonstration spotlighted PETA's investigation into seven Indonesian frog meat operations, revealing cruel practices such as suffocation and skinning alive.

Carrefour, a major buyer implicated in the probe, temporarily halted Indonesian frog meat imports. PETA's Senior Vice President, Jason Baker, called upon the French government to end support for this inhumane industry.

Indonesia, the world's leading exporter of frog thighs, ships millions annually to the EU, prompting calls for global action. [Tempo.co]

Japan prime minister to visit Toyota's North Carolina battery plant during April visit to US

(sh) On February 28, according to a government source, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida is planning visiting North Carolina during his April trip to the United States, noting Toyota's new battery plant construction there.

The visit aims to spotlight Toyota's contributions to job creation and US investment. The decision of the world's largest automaker by volume to manufacture car batteries in North Carolina in 2021 aims to bolster its electric vehicle segment.

Kishida is scheduled for a six-day state visit to the US starting April 9, with talks with President Joe Biden and an address in Congress to be held on April 10 and April 11 respectively.

While in Washington, the prime minster is expected to highlight Japan's commitment to its long-standing alliance with the United States to counter China's assertive actions and North Korea's weapons development. [Japan Times] [Kyodo News]

US lifts ban on Osprey flight worldwide

(sh) The United States has lifted a global flight ban on Osprey flight following a fatal crash near a southwestern Japan island in November 2023.

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin supported a cautious and secure return to Osprey operations during a s high-level meeting on March 1.

The crash occurred on November 29, when an Air Force CV-22 Osprey crashed off Yakushima Island during a routine exercise, resulting in the loss of eight airmen. It marked the deadliest incident involving the U.S.-produced Osprey since its introduction in 2007, despite its hybrid design combining helicopter and airplane features for faster flight.

The accident reignited safety concerns in Japan, a vital U.S. security partner. The head of Naval Air Systems Command is expected to visit Japan next week to update the Japanese government on the Osprey's resumption plans. [Kyodo News]

Japan navy visits to Vietnam

(sh) Two vessels from Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force visited Vietnam on February 29, aiming to strengthen bonds with the Vietnamese Navy.

The Suzunami destroyer and Shimakaze training ship docked in Hai Phong, Vietnam. The ships hosted approximately 430 personnel, including graduates from the MSDF's officer candidate training school.

Captain Yanagihara Makoto, commander of Training Division 1, emphasized the importance of the waters around Vietnam. He highlighted the existing cooperation between Japan and Vietnam, expressing optimism about deepening their relationship.

Furthermore, Japan and Vietnam had agreed to strengthen security cooperation through increased exchanges of defense personnel and transfers of equipment, aiming to enhance maritime security and stability in the region. [NHK]

MoU between Japan and Czech Republic over air services signed

(sh) On February 29, Japan's Minister for Foreign Affairs Yoko Kamikawa and her Czech counterpart Jan Lipavský held a meeting in Tokyo to discuss bilateral relations and international affairs. The meeting was part of Lipavský's visit to Japan last week.

The two ministers agreed to deepen the ties between their countries with Kamikawa expressing the wish to work with the Czech Republic as a strategic partner while Lipavský reaffirmed his country's commitment to strengthening of relations, expressing his for enhanced cooperation in economic areas, such as investment and tourism.

Referring to situations in Ukraine and the Indo-Pacific, both sides also reaffirmed that "the security of Europe and the Indo-Pacific are inseparable," agreeing to cooperate in maintaining and strengthening the free and open international order based on the rule of law. They also confirmed their cooperation in supporting Ukraine, such as joint efforts to incorporate a Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) perspective into Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan 1]

Following their meeting, Kamikawa and Lipavský signed a bilateral agreement on air services that establishes a legal framework ensuring the smooth operation of scheduled air services between the two countries. It grants mutual rights to operate scheduled air services and outlines principles for capacity determination, tariff procedures, tax exemptions, and measures for air safety and security. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan 2]

Russia's ambassador to Japan is appointed

(sh) On March 3, Nikolai Nozdrev, Russia's new ambassador to Japan, arrived in Japan following over a year of vacancy in the position due to strained relations after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Nozdrev succeeds Mikhail Galuzin, who departed Japan in November 2022, leaving the position vacant since.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi stated that Japan would uphold sanctions on Russia while continuing discussions on economic activities, such as fishing agreements off Hokkaido, beneficial to national interests. He emphasized Japan's commitment to communication through diplomatic channels with Nozdrev, aligning with this policy. [Japan Times] [NHK]

Japan, Mongolia to cooperate in transfer of defense equipment

(sh) On February 29, Japanese Defense Minister Minoru Kihara and her Mongolian counterpart Gursediin Saikhanbayar reached an agreement to explore the establishment of a framework for the transfer of defense equipment and technology. This agreement was made during their meeting in Tokyo.

Additionally, Japan pledged to enhance support for the Mongolian military's capacity-building in various areas including U.N. peacekeeping operations, humanitarian aid, and disaster relief efforts.

Kihara emphasized Mongolia's strategic significance due to its proximity to China and Russia, highlighting shared values of freedom and democracy.

The ministers also signed an updated memorandum of defense cooperation and exchange, replacing the original version from 2012. [Ji Ji Press] [Ministry of Defense, Japan]

US supports "Learn to Read" project in Laos

(wn) On February 29, Heather R. Variava, the United States Ambassador to Laos, inaugurated the "Learn to Read" project by presenting Grade 1 and Grade 2 textbooks at a Primary School in Vang Vieng District, Vientiane Province.

Funded by USAID, the "Learn to Read" project aims to enhance children's learning abilities in Laos through various initiatives. These include the donation of over 700,000 copies of Lao language textbooks, Grade 2 science textbooks, 122,000 teacher guides, and storybooks.

Implemented with a budget of USD 30 million by Save the Children, Room to Read, and Humanity & Inclusion, the program targets the improvement of reading outcomes and primary education for children in Laos, already benefiting over 61,000 students in 921 schools across 16 districts, the project provides inclusive teaching and learning materials.

The goal of the "Learn to Read" project is to directly distribute textbooks to 285,000 students across all 17 provinces of Laos and Vientiane Capital within the next two years. This initiative aims to promote inclusive education and advance educational opportunities throughout the country. [The Laotian Times]

Laos-Timor Leste relations: Presidents agree to strengthen diplomatic ties at bilateral meeting

(wn) Timor-Leste's President Jose Ramos-Horta made an official state visit to Laos from February 27 to March 2 and met with Lao President Thongloun Sisoulith.

During their discussions at the Lao National Assembly Hall, both leaders emphasized the importance of strengthening relations and cooperation between their countries.

The two presidents underscored that this is especially important considering Timor-Leste's recent accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) as its 166th member on 26 February. Additionally, both sides agreed to establish the Joint Committee on Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) the aim of which is to enhance cooperation and ensure the efficient implementation of their bilateral agreements. Furthermore, they signed Letters of Intent for future exchanges of embassy lands between the two countries.

As Laos is currently the chair of the ASEAN and Timor-Leste has observer status within the bloc, both countries affirmed their support for each other's regional efforts. [The Laotian Times]

Laos receives South Korean equipment for clearance of UXO

(wn) On March 1, the South Korean government donated equipment valued at over USD 1 million to support 13 new humanitarian demining teams

supervised by Unit 58 of the Lao People's Army, the army's humanitarian demining team.

The donated equipment includes 20 vehicles, ten off-road motorbikes, metal detectors, generators, brush cutters, laptops, and other IT equipment. These resources are intended to bolster Unit 58's operations in clearing unexploded ordnance (UXO) both now and in the foreseeable future.

In addition to equipment provision, the South Korean government, through the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), is facilitating support for national ownership of the Lao UXO sector. This assistance extends to the National Regulatory Authority (NRA) and Unit 58 through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Unit 58 conducts UXO clearance operations in four provinces and remote areas, combining its efforts with risk education to minimize accidents.

Between 2016 and 2023, UXO hazard risk education campaigns were conducted in 222 villages. Survey data revealed that 251.58 hectares of land were contaminated with munitions. Out of this area, 215.76 hectares were successfully cleared, with a total of 9,202 devices detonated, including 2,392 cluster bombs. [Vientiane Times]

Laos proposes sale of wind power to Vietnam

(wn) Vietnam Electricity (EVN) has received proposals from seven wind farm investors in Laos who intend to sell nearly 4,150 megawatts (MW) of electricity to Vietnam.

The proposal was reported by both Vietnamese and Lao state media on 27 and 29 February, citing Vietnam's Ministry of Industry and Trade (MoIT). According to the report, the wind power generated in Laos will be transmitted to Vietnam through Quang Tri province's transmission lines. Lao investors plan to offer over 682 MW of wind power before 2025, with the rest to be delivered afterwards.

EVN proposed importing wind power from Laos to Quang Tri province at a purchase price of 6.95 cents/Kilowatt hour (kWh). Recently, the Vietnamese Ministry of Industry and Trade received a request to purchase wind power from a plant in Laos' Bolikhamxay Province with a capacity of 250 MW.

Previously, the two countries had agreed on the import 1,000 MW of electricity from Laos to Vietnam by 2020, with expectations of increasing to 3,000 MW by 2025 and 5,000 MW by 2030. As of October 2023, the Vietnamese Prime Minister had approved importing electricity from Laos with a total capacity of 2,689 MW.

With seven operational projects, EVN has signed 19 power purchase agreements (PPAs) to buy electricity from 26 Lao power plants. [The Laotian Times]

Vietnam supports Laos in modernizing audit sector

(wn) The State Audit Office of Vietnam (SAV) transferred the E-office project to the State Audit Organisation of Laos on March 4, in bid to help modernize its operations.

Then move comes after Vietnam's State Audit Office (SAV) recently visited Laos to discuss cooperation with the Audit Office of Laos. Both sides discussed cooperation activities during the visit, such as audit training and experience exchange. The Lao side requested human resources training, and the SAV presented 20 laptops to the Lao audit organization. Vietnamese auditors also shared their expertise with their Lao counterparts.

The SAV aims to improve audit quality and contribute to the socio-economic development of both countries. [Vienam News]

Laos sends group of scam suspects back to China

(wn) Laos has deported 268 Chinese citizens suspected of scamming from the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone to China in January, with Chinese media only reporting about this on Febraur28.

In earlier developments, Lao and Chinese police arrested 462 Chinese nationals for call-centre scams in November. In September, Laos handed over 160 Chinese nationals suspected of telecom fraud. [RFA]

Malaysia has no problem with China, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim affirms

(dql) Speaking at joint press conference with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese during ASEAN-Australia Special Summit in Melbourne that kicked off on March 4, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim defended his country's relations with China and criticized pressure from the US and its allies on regional nations to take sides in the West's strategic rivalries with Beijing.

While Anwar assure that Malaysia would remain "an important friend to the United States or Europe and here in Australia," he insisted that they abstain from precluding his country "from being friendly to one of our important neighbors, precisely China," adding that Malaysia refuses "to be dictated by any force." [Prime Minister of Austalia]

On the relations between Malaysia and Australia, Anwar lauded four memorandums of understandings (MoUs) signed between the two countries during summit as a "remarkable milestone in charting a more progressive future."

The four MoUs include two new agreements on cooperation in science and technology and in cyber security and critical technology as well as two renewed agreements on cooperation in the field of sports and of higher education.

The MoUs were signed by the Foreign Ministers Hasan and Penny Wong following conclusion of the second Malaysia-Australia Annual Leaders' Meeting at Government House, Victoria. [The Star]

Malaysia, Cambodia to work together on cross-border QR payment scheme

(dql) On February 17, the Malaysian and Cambodian central banks signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to boost their countries' cooperation in financial innovation and payments.

Under the agreement, the Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM) and the National Bank of Cambodia (NBC) will join hands in driving financial innovation to enhance more efficient and secure cross-border payments that includes linking domestic payment systems in both countries to enable cross-border QR payments.

The MoU will also encourage the use of local currency settlement and set up a cooperative oversight mechanism to make cross-border payments safe. [Asian Banking & Finance]

Memorandum of Cooperation in labor sector between Mongolia and US signed

(fg) Deputy Assistant Secretary Patrica Silvey of the U.S. Department of Labor met the Mongolian government, unions and private addressing mining safety and labor rights.

They signed a Memorandum of labor cooperation to enhance safety measures and social protection for workers in the mining sector and other industrial sectors. Under the Memorandum, joint actions will be taken to improve labor safety by joining the International Labor Organisation's Labor Inspection Conventions 81 and 129 and developing essential standards in mining and heavy industries' working fields. Furthermore, labor rights social protection, such as approaching international regulations on wages and pensions, are outlined in the Memorandum.

Despite intensified production, extraction, and development within Mongolia's mining sector, work accidents persist without reduction. The Memorandum aims to improve the situation.

The International Labor Organisation's Labour Inspection Convention 81 and 129 are international agreements that deal with the inspection of workplaces. Convention 81 sets out the minimum standards for labor inspections. Convention 129 specifically focuses on agricultural workplaces. [AKIpress]

Myanmar's National Unity Government meets with French Senator

(jw) On March 1, the National Unity Government's Foreign Affairs Minister, Daw Zin Ma Aung, and the Ministry's French representative, Nan Su Mon Aung, met with Senator Pascal Allizard to discuss the ongoing conflict in Myanmar.

During the meeting, Daw Zin Ma Aung said that the French government ought to provide practical assistance to the rebellion against the military regime. They additionally discussed ways to cooperate. Senator Allizard, for his part, reaffirmed he would continue to stand by the Burmese people.

Allizard had previously led a submission in the Senate for the French government to recognize the National Unity Government in 2021. [Tha Din]

Myanmar: China evacuates hundreds from Myanmar's scam centers

(jb) On March 2, BBC News reported that China repatriated hundreds of human trafficking victims from Myanmar's notorious scam centers.

The evacuation flights, organized by Beijing, reflect ongoing efforts to dismantle these operations, believed to hold hundreds of thousands of victims.

The centers have long existed in the region. Recent victories by ethnic insurgents prompted the closure of some of the most notorious centers, leading to the rescue of thousands, including Chinese trafficking victims.

The repatriation flights are departing from Mae Sot, Thailand, where many Burmese have relocated to amid the ongoing crisis in Myanmar. [BBC]

Nepal continues efforts to repatriate citizens serving in Russian army

(lm) Nepal's Foreign Minister NP Saud reaffirmed the government's commitment to repatriating Nepali citizens serving in the Russian army.

When Russia offered a lucrative package comprising at least USD 2,000 salary a month and a fast-tracked process to obtain a passport in 2022, enticing foreign fighters to join amidst the Ukraine conflict, many Nepalese citizens enlisted. Kathmandu says about 200 of its citizens are fighting for the Russian army, but lawmakers and rights' campaigners say those official estimates vastly underestimate the real numbers, with some suggesting figures as high as 14,000 to 15,000 Nepalis involved.

Against this backdrop, Kathmandu has formally requested Moscow to halt Nepali recruitment and repatriate enlisted citizens, while also seeking details on casualties. Additionally, travel to Russia and Ukraine has been restricted, except for official purposes. [The Kathmandu Post]

European countries mull reopening embassies in North Korea

(dql) European countries are considering reopening their embassies in Pyongyang.

Last week, the German foreign ministry sent a team to the North Korean capital for a technical inspection of the embassy which was closed in March 2020 due to problems with staff rotation and the shipment of supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Meanwhile, the United Kingdom is reportedly in talks with North Korea to also sent a team to inspect its embassy that was closed in April 2020.

Further, Sweden disclosed that progress has been made towards the eventual return of Swedish diplomats North Korea. [DW] [NK News] [Reuters]

China, Pakistan explore cooperation in digitalization of chemical industry

(nw) A Pakistani delegation recently visited Beijing TDD E-commerce, a Chinese company specialized in facilitation online trading in the chemical industry, to explore potential cooperation. Discussions centered on building a digital trading platform, a B2B e-commerce platform, and a China-Pakistan digital supply chain service system. [BNN] [Pakistan Today 1]

In separate developments, Khalil Hashmi, Pakistan's Ambassador to China, has emphasized the enduring partnership between the two countries, highlighting consensus across political spectrums to bolster ties. He underscored the significance of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and outlined priorities for future collaboration, including industrialization, connectivity, and agriculture. [Pakistan Today 2]

Pakistan denounces India's seizure of dual-use equipment originating from China

(lm) India's seizure of goods bound for Pakistan, including a consignment of purportedly for the country's "nuclear" equipment from China, has drawn criticism from Islamabad, which denounced New Delhi's "high-handedness" in the handling of what it described as "commercial equipment." [Arab News] [MSN]

The interception occurred at Mumbai's Nhava Sheva port, where Indian security agencies on January 23

intercepted a Karachi-bound ship from China carrying a Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machine, a manufacturing tool that uses computerized controls to operate and manipulate machine tools and equipment. After thorough examination, the consignment's potential usage in Pakistan's nuclear initiatives was confirmed, notably in manufacturing crucial components for missile development.

Pakistan maintains that the CMC was intended for its automobile industry, emphasizing its purely commercial nature and transparent transaction process. It also condemned India's actions as disruptive to free trade and warned against arbitrary assumptions of policing roles by states with questionable credentials.

United States continues diplomatic balancing act with Pakistan

(wa) In the wake of Pakistan's February 8 elections, the United States last week continued its diplomatic dance, carefully balancing its relationship with Islamabad.

On February 27, state department officials dismissed allegations of interference in Pakistani politics, emphasizing respect for sovereignty and democratic processes. They also reaffirmed Washington's commitment to upholding free speech and press globally, stressing that Pakistan's future is determined solely by its people. [Pakistan Today]

The following day, however, Washington states that it continues discussing a request by Islamabad pertaining to the the construction of the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project, also known as the "Peace Pipeline". Earlier this month, Pakistan's caretaker government approved the construction of the first phase of the pipeline, following a notice of potential arbitration and a compensation claim from Tehran [see AiR No. 9, February/2024, 4]. [The News]

Later the same day, thirty-one members of the U.S. Congress penned a letter to President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, urging them to refrain from recognizing a new government in Pakistan until an investigation into alleged election interference has been conducted. The letter calls for a transparent investigation into election interference, the release of detained individuals engaged in political activities, and warns of potential consequences in military and other cooperation if relevant actions are not taken by Pakistani authorities. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, officials at the US embassy in Islamabad have stated that Pakistan needs to intensify efforts in combating human trafficking, despite acknowledging progress made. [Pakistan Today]

Pakistan, Saudi Arabia land forces conclude joint military exercise in Multan

(lm) The Pakistan Army and the Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLF) completed a joint military training exercise in the city of Multan in Pakistan's Punjab province, aimed at enhancing military capabilities and exchanging expertise. The exercise, which ran from January 15 to February 26, focused on conventional and sub-conventional operations, including field maneuvers and battle exercises involving air and ground forces. [Arab News]

Cambodia-Philippines rice deal amid El Niño threat

(ms) Amid concerns of impending food shortages due to the looming El Niño phenomenon, the Philippines is actively seeking to fortify its rice inventory through a potential bilateral deal with Cambodia. President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. expressed Manila's keen interest in engaging with Phnom Penh on agricultural matters, particularly rice trade, during a bilateral meeting with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet on the sidelines of the 50th ASEAN-Australia Special Summit on March 3.

The Philippine government, cognizant of the need to secure its food supply, acknowledges the necessity of importing rice despite efforts to enhance domestic production. With El Niño threatening agricultural output across the nation, cooperation with rice-producing countries like Cambodia becomes paramount.

Both leaders have indicated a mutual desire to explore increased rice supply cooperation, a move that could significantly bolster the Philippines' resilience against the adverse effects of climate variability. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, Marcos emphasized the importance of flexibility in diversifying and strengthening supply chains, drawing lessons from past crises like the pandemic.

Moreover, discussions between the two nations extend beyond agriculture, encompassing broader avenues of

collaboration such as air connectivity and tourism. Enhanced air travel links between the Philippines and Cambodia, coupled with efforts to modernize key airports, signify a commitment to fostering greater bilateral ties and facilitating exchanges between the two countries. [Daily Tribune] [Philstar]

South Korea hosts Indian Foreign Minister

(oy) India's External Affairs Minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, is on a four-day visit to South Korea and Japan, aimed at strengthening the Special Strategic Partnership between India and South Korea.

During his visit, Jaishankar will co-chair the 10th India-South Korea Joint Commission Meeting (JCM) with his counterpart, Cho Tae-yul. The JCM will review bilateral cooperation and explore further strengthening avenues. Jaishankar is also expected to meet South Korean dignitaries, think tank heads, and the Indian community.

Jaishankar's visit began with a meeting with South Korea's National Security Adviser, Chang Ho-jin, where they discussed shared interests in the Indo-Pacific region and other global issues. Chang and Jaishankar agreed to enhance cooperation between South Korea and India in defense, supply chains, and critical technologies. They acknowledged the active high-level exchanges between their countries, including two summits on the 50th anniversary of their diplomatic relations. Chang and Jaishankar plan to strengthen strategic communication and cooperation under South Korea-India's special strategic partnership. They also agreed to promote regional peace and stability, guided by South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy and India's vision for the Indo-Pacific.

Separately at a forum on March 5, Jaishankar highlighted the potential for South Korea's participation in the India-led Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) to further develop bilateral relations. IPOI aims to address shared challenges and ensure maritime security and stability in the region. IPOI was first proposed by Prime Minister Narendra Mod at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, covering cooperation in seven areas from maritime security to disaster and risk reduction. [Indian Express] [Yonhap_1] [Yonhap_2]

South Korea begins combined military exercise with US

(oy) On March 4, South Korea and US begun their annual Exercise Freedom Shield. The exercise aims to enhance the combined defense posture of South Korea and the US and improve both countries ability to respond to a multitude of security threats.

The exercise will involve land, sea, air, cyber and space military assets will simulate different situations, including training on detection and interception of North Korea's cruise missiles. In total, 48 field training drills will occur during Exercise Freedom Shield, twice the number in 2023. The latest drill was the air exercise Buddy Squadron, which saw 20 fighter jets from both countries training on aerial maneuvers and live firing. [Yonhap]

The exercise comes amidst increasing tension between North Korea and South Korea. Earlier in January 2024, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un declared that reunification was no longer possible and referred to South Korea as its “principal enemy” [BBC].

In addition, North Korea has fired artillery near its sea border with South Korea and conducted several missile tests. [Korea Joongang Times] [Yonhap]

South Korea: North Korea conducted cyberattacks on semiconductor firms

(oy) The National Intelligence Service (NIS) of South Korea has reported that North Korean cyber groups have been conducting attacks on South Korean semiconductor companies since 2023. These attacks, which occurred between December and February, aimed to acquire product blueprints and facility photos.

The hackers targeted companies with internet-connected servers and used an advanced technique known as “living off the land”, which makes detection of malware more difficult.

The NIS suggests that North Korea, facing difficulties in chip procurement due to economic sanctions, is preparing to manufacture semiconductors independently for satellite and missile development. NIS has provided threat information to major South Korean semiconductor companies and advised them to enhance their cybersecurity measures. [National Intelligence Service] [Yonhap]

South Korean defense minister speaks with US counterpart

(oy) On February 28, South Korea's Defense Minister Shin Won-sik and U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin held a phone discussion. They pledged to address North Korea's arms transfers to Russia, which was described by the South Korean defense ministry as a threat to "global peace and stability".

North Korea has reportedly transported about 6,700 containers of ammunitions to Russia since July 2023 to support its Ukraine War. This alleged arms deal has been criticized for violating UN Security Council resolutions. Shin and Austin also condemned North Korea's recent missile tests and reaffirmed their commitment to jointly maintain a firm defense position.

Shin and Austin also discussed "shared defense and security priorities" and pledged to strengthen trilateral security cooperation with Japan. The US also reaffirmed its commitment to the defense of South Korea and emphasized the importance of "expanding broader regional cooperation". [Yonhap] [Ministry of National Defense] [US Department of Defense]

South Korean defense minister meets top NATO Commander

(oy) On February 29, South Korean Defense Minister Shin Won-sik held talks with NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General Christopher Cavoli in Seoul. Both sides discussed the security situation on the Korean Peninsula and agreed to strengthen military cooperation between South Korea and NATO.

Shin and Cavoli discussions included the evaluation of their collaboration in military exercises, cybersecurity, and chemical, biological, and radioactive capabilities. They agreed to enhance defense relations under the Individually Tailored Partnership Program, which was signed in July 2023 and outlines 11 areas for security cooperation, including antiterrorism, nonproliferation, emerging technologies, and cyber defense.

Cavoli also met South Korea's National Security Adviser Chang Ho-jin. They discussed concerns about the military cooperation between North Korea and Russia and agreed to review ways to cooperate on this matter, including intelligence sharing.

The discussions come amidst South Korea's increasing role in global security dynamics, particularly its capacity to produce artillery and air defense systems, which are currently in demand by Ukraine. South Korean and US officials have thus far accused North Korea of providing ammunitions and other supplies for Russia's war in Ukraine, violating UN Security Council resolutions. [Yonhap] [Ministry of National Defense]

No plans for South Korea-Japan summit in March

(oy) There are currently no plans to hold a summit meeting between President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in March, according to Yoon's office.

This statement came in response to reports by the Japanese broadcaster Fuji News Network that Kishida might visit South Korea in late March.

While there are no current plans for a summit, a senior presidential official noted that the two leaders could meet at any time, as evidenced by their seven meetings in 2023 after resuming "shuttle diplomacy" between the two countries. [The Korea Times] [Yonhap]

Beijing demands questioning of Taiwanese Coast Guards officers

(fg) Beijing is demanding the questioning of Taiwanese Coast Guard officers in China on the February 14 Kinmen incident, which resulted in the deaths of two Chinese fishermen (see AiR No. 8, February/2024, 3).

This follows to previous demands for a formal apology and compensation for the fishermen. [Taiwan News]

The stance of Taiwan to this incident remains unchanged, with the Taiwanese Coast Guard asserting lawful action and citing the Chinese vessel as an unidentified one that refused to cooperate with Taiwanese authorities. [Taiwan News 2] [Focus Taiwan]

Since then, the tensions between the China and Taiwan over the Kinmen Islands have intensified. (see AiR No. 8, February/2024,3; AiR No. 9, February/2024, 4) [CNN] [The Strait Times]

Chinese PLA activities around Taiwan

(fg) The Taiwanese Ministry of National Defense reports daily military activities by the People's Liberation Army from the People's Republic of China in the sea and airspace around Taiwan.

From February 28 to March 5, a total of 49 vessels and 102 aircraft was spotted around Taiwan, of which 41 aircrafts crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait and entered Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone. [MOD Taiwan]

The median line in the Taiwan Strait is informally recognized by Taiwan as the maritime boundary between Taiwan and China. However, mainland China does not acknowledge this demarcation.

Tuvalu reaffirms shared democratic values with Taiwan

(fg) Tuvalu's newly elected Prime Minister Feleti Teo emphasized the shared democratic principles with Taiwan in an interview with the AP on March 1.

"Our ties with Taiwan are purely based on democratic principles, and they have been very loyal to us," he said. [AP]

This statement underscores the commitment outlined in the "Statement of Priorities for the New Government of Tuvalu," in which the new administration reaffirms its commitment to the long-term and lasting special relationship between Tuvalu and Taiwan. [Simon Kofe via X]

During the election campaign discussion arose regarding a potential shift in diplomatic relations from Taipei to Beijing.

Tuvalu remains one of the only 11 countries in the world to maintain diplomatic ties with Taiwan. In January Nauru, another Pacific Island nation, severed diplomatic relations with Taiwan in favor of China (see AiR No. 3, January/2024, 3). [AP] [Taiwan News]

Swiss National Council votes to deepen cooperation with Taiwan

(fg) The Swiss National Council, the lower house of the Federal Assembly in Switzerland, approved a motion to

enhance collaboration with Taiwan on February 28.

The motion calls on the parliament to expand cooperation with Taiwan in culture, education, research, and innovation. It also calls for the signing of an agreement between the Trade Office of Swiss Industries in Taipei and the Taipei Cultural and Economic Delegation to Switzerland to foster partnership in these areas.

It will now proceed to the Council of States for further review. [Taiwan News]

This move follows previous initiatives, including a motion in May 2023 to strengthen ties with Taiwan's Legislative Yuan (see AiR No.19,May/2023,2) and a 2021 vote to enhance relations with Taiwan.

Thai lawmakers hold seminar with opponents of Myanmar's de facto government despite junta's objection

(lm) A Thai parliamentary committee, chaired by the country's main opposition party, recently organized a seminar focusing on the political landscape of Myanmar three years after the military coup. The seminar featured prominent figures from Myanmar's de facto government and various ethnic armed groups, despite objections from Myanmar's ruling military junta. [Bangkok Post]

Indicative for the diplomatic balancing act the situation presented for the Thai government, Foreign Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara withdrew his participation at the last minute without providing an explanation. Still, Myanmar's foreign ministry expressed strong disapproval of the seminar through a letter addressed to the Thai government, citing concerns about potential negative ramifications on bilateral relations.

Earlier this month, Thailand announced that it planned to open up a humanitarian corridor to deliver aid to suffering civilians in war-torn Myanmar. The plan, initiated by Bangkok with the endorsement of Myanmar and other fellow ASEAN members, is relatively small in scale and initially would reach just a tiny proportion of the 2.6 million civilians the United Nations estimates are displaced throughout Myanmar.

At the same time, Bangkok is bracing for a potential refugee influx from neighboring Myanmar where the military junta last month announced plans to draft 60,000 young men and women yearly for military

service under its newly activated conscription law. [AiR No. 9, February/2024, 4]

Thailand, Switzerland sign pact to share drug trafficker's seized assets

(bk) Thailand has signed an asset-sharing agreement with Switzerland to secure assets worth approximately THB 76.8 million (USD 2.1 million) linked to drug kingpin Wei Hsueh Kang's network in the so-called Golden Triangle, the triangular area along the borders of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand.

The agreement marks the first asset-sharing pact for Thailand with a foreign country. Thus, it paves the way for similar pacts in the future with other countries where criminals have deposited gains from crimes like drug trafficking and money laundering. [The Nation]

Vietnam, Ireland agree to strengthen cooperation across various sectors

(wn) Vietnam and Ireland have committed to enhancing cooperation across various sectors following the completion of Vietnamese Foreign Affairs Minister Bui Thanh Son's two-day visit to Ireland last week. During the visit, Minister Son held discussions with several high-ranking officials, including Ireland's Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Minister for Defense Micheál Martin. [Vietnam Plus]

Key areas of cooperation between the two nations include maximizing the benefits of the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA), promoting investment in digital transformation, energy transition, and high-tech agriculture. Additionally, both countries have pledged to collaborate in education, training, labor, tourism, and people-to-people exchanges. Discussions also focused on exploring new avenues for partnership in renewable energy, the digital economy, and climate change initiatives.

Notably, Ireland has expressed its intention to advocate for the removal of the "yellow card" on Vietnam, a warning issued by the European Commission to countries with seafood exports that do not meet EU standards for illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. In return, Dublin has requested Vietnam's assistance in facilitating the import of high-quality farm produce and food from Ireland.

During the visit, Minister Son also met with the speakers of both houses of parliament and paid a courtesy call on Ireland's President Higgins on February 28. [President of Ireland]

United States extends investigation into trade remedy tax evasion with wooden cabinets from Vietnam

(wn) The U.S. Department of Commerce has extended the deadline to issue the conclusion on its investigation into potential circumvention by Vietnamese suppliers. This investigation concerns anti-dumping and anti-subsidy duties on wooden kitchen and bathroom cabinets imported from Vietnam, which may have utilized Chinese-made components covered under US tariffs. [Vietnam Plus]

The department's investigation, which was launched in June 2022, is looking into whether wooden cabinets from Vietnam and Malaysia include components imported to those countries from China. If the final products exported to the US are found to include Chinese components, the finished products would be subject to trade remedy measures such as taxes that Washington applies to similar products exported directly from China.

Vietnam, South Africa strengthen law enforcement cooperation

(wn) A high-level delegation from Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security led by Deputy Minister Lieutenant General Le Quoc Hung visited South Africa from February 24 to March 1 to enhance bilateral cooperation in law enforcement. During meetings with various South African officials, the delegation proposed signing a cooperation agreement to combat wildlife trafficking and exchange crime information. [Vietnam net]

Announcements

Upcoming online events

6 March 2024 @ 4:00-5:30 p.m. (GMT+1), Clingendael, The Netherlands

Sounding The Alarm On Sudan's Hunger Crisis

This online event is organized by ODI/Humanitarian Policy Group, in collaboration with Tufts University and the Clingendael Institute, to discuss the scale of the crisis and the urgent next steps required.

For more information, visit [Clingendael].

6 March 2024 @ 9:00-10:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Asia Society, USA

China 2024: What Does the Two Sessions Mean for the Economy, Politics, and Foreign Policy?

This online event presents a discussion with CCA Senior Fellows and world-leading China experts Christopher K. Johnson, Guonan Ma, and Jessica Chen Weiss. The conversation will be led by CCA Fellow Neil Thomas.

For more information, visit [Asia Society].

6 March 2024 @ 11:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Foreign Policy Research Institute, USA

The Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline At a Crossroads

The Algerian Ambassador to the United States, Sabri Boukadoun, and the U.S. Charge d'Affaires in Abuja,

Nigeria, David Green, will join FPRI Senior Fellow Michael Walsh and FPRI Africa Chair Charles Ray to explore the potential for broader and more profound energy infrastructure integration between Europe, North Africa, and West Africa.

For more information, visit [FPRI].

6 March 2024 @ 1:00-2:30 p.m. (GMT), ODI, UK

Sounding the alarm on Sudan's hunger crisis

Join the Humanitarian Policy Group at ODI, the Clingendael Institute, Tufts University, and the Conflict Sensitivity Facility to discuss the scale of the crisis and the urgent next steps required.

For more information, visit [ODI].

6 March 2024 @ 3:00-4:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Book Event: 'Get Me Carlucci' with Kristin Carlucci Weed

Join the Center for Strategic and International Studies for a discussion on Get Me Carlucci, a book written by Kristin Carlucci Weed in which she recounts the legacy of her late father, Frank C. Carlucci III, the 16th U.S. Secretary of Defense.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

6 March 2024 @ 2:00 -3:15 p.m. (GMT-5), Wilson Center, USA

Political Risk and Mexico's Investment Climate

Join the event for a panel with Carlos Ramirez, partner at Integralia Consultores, Professor Guadlupe Correa-Cabrera, professor at the Schar School of Policy and Government at Geroge Mason University, and Harry Krensky, founder of Discovery Americas, moderated by Christine Murray, Mexico and Central America correspondent for the Financial Times.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

7 March 2024 @ 1:30-5:00 p.m. (GMT+1), Bruegel, Brussels

Two years later: addressing long-term consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine

The event will mark the anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, focusing on discussions about sanctions, accession, and energy.

For more information, visit [Bruegel].

7 March 2024 @ 1:30-5:30 p.m. (GMT+9), Asian Development Bank, Japan

Policy Lessons for a Post-COVID-19 Recovery

This international conference aims to draw lessons about effective policy responses to maintain economic stability and growth in Asian developing and emerging economies, with a special emphasis on economic, business, and well-being issues in the course of recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as in response to geopolitical turbulence and shocks around the world.

For more information, visit [ADB].

7 March 2024 @ 8:00-9:30 p.m. (GMT), ODI, UK

Community engagement with armed actors: implications for proactive protection and violence reduction

This event will host a discussion on communities engaging in dialogue with armed actors to reduce violence and improve protection, and the implications for peace, humanitarian, and protection actors.

For more information, visit [ODI].

7 March 2024 @ 3:00-4:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Rethinking the U.S. Approach in the Global South

This discussion is part of the new CSIS event series The Great Power Dialogues, which brings together policymakers and global thought leaders to discuss the most critical questions that will define geopolitical, economic, and security competition in the 21st century.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

7 March 2024 @ 9:00-10:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Operating in the Cave: Medicine Amidst Conflict in Syria

Join the CSIS Middle East Program, the CSIS Humanitarian Agenda, and the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) for a conversation with Dr. Amani Ballour about her experience, holding the Assad regime accountable, and humanitarian needs in Syria.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

7 March 2024 @ 4:00 -5:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA

Evaluating the West's Ukraine Strategy in 2024: A Conversation With Ukraine's Deputy Prime Minister

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace will host Olha Stefanishyna, deputy prime minister for European and Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine, for a special conversation on these and other issues.

For more information, visit [Carnegie].

7 March 2024 @ 12:30 p.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

Special operations forces in an era of strategic competition

Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict Christopher Maier discusses

how US Special Operation Forces will operate in an era of strategic competition.

For more information, visit [Atlantic Council].

7 March 2024 @ 2:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

Courage to seek justice: Addressing the unjust political imprisonment of women

The Atlantic Council and the Department of State's Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues co-host a discussion with the 2024 International Women of Courage award recipients.

For more information, visit [Atlantic Council].

8 March 2024 @ 9:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

Women on the frontlines of European energy security

The Atlantic Council's Global Energy Center hosts a virtual discussion to showcase how women are driving climate and energy security action against the backdrop of Russian attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure.

For more information, visit [Atlantic Council].

8 March 2024 @ 2:00-3:00 p.m. (GMT), The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, UK

Women in Diplomacy: A Conversation with Jane Marriott

To mark International Women's Day, Her Excellency Jane Marriott, British High Commissioner to Pakistan, will discuss her varied career in His Majesty's Diplomatic Service.

For more information, visit [RUSI].

8 March 2024 @ 9:00-10:00 a.m. (GMT-5), United States Institute of Peace, USA

Fragile But Intact: Understanding India and Pakistan's Three-Year Ceasefire

Join USIP for a conversation on the LoC cease-fire that will explore findings from this new USIP report, the factors that have help keep the cease-fire in place, and what new regional dynamics could mean for its sustainability in the future.

For more information, visit [USIP].

11 March 2024 @ 4:00-6:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Book Event: The War Below with Author Ernest Scheyder

Join the CSIS Energy Security and Climate Change Program for a conversation with Ernest Scheyder on his new book, The War Below: Lithium, Copper, and the Global Battle to Power Our Lives.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

11 March 2024 @ 4:00-5:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

A Conversation with the AUKUS Army Chiefs on Land Power's Contribution to AUKUS Pillar 2

AUKUS, first announced in September 2021, is a trilateral U.S.-UK-Australia defense partnership composed of two pillars: Pillar 1 provides support to Australia in acquiring conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines; and Pillar 2 focuses on expediting cooperation in critical technologies. To date, Pillar 1 has grabbed most of the headlines. Australian Lieutenant General Simon Stuart will discuss AUKUS Pillar 2 from a land domain perspective and how the three armies can work together to enhance collaborative efforts in capability development.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

12 March 2024 @ 2:00 -3:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Wilson Center, USA

Roadmap at Three: Progress Report on a Renewed US-Canada Partnership

Ambassador of Canada to the United States Kirsten Hillman and Ambassador of the United States to Canada David L. Cohen will provide a three-year update on the Roadmap and outline ongoing avenues of collaboration.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

12 March 2024 @ 9:00-10:30 a.m. (GMT+8), Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy National University of Singapore, Singapore

Will ASEAN seek alignment or independence when pursuing emergent technologies?

Caught between resurgent geopolitical competition, Southeast Asian states face difficult choices. On the one hand, the United States and China are essential providers of technology and expertise. As such, aspirants may find alignment necessary to ensure continued access to these resources – risking the ire of the slighted great power. On the other hand, states may choose the path of independence, maximizing domestic and regional capacities and expertise to leverage novel technologies in support of their interests. Join the event for an engaging conversation on this topic.

For more information, visit [NUS].

12 March 2024 @ 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. (GMT+6), German Institute for Global and Area Studies, Germany

Franco-German Observatory of the Indo-Pacific

The Franco-German Observatory invites key actors from the Indo-Pacific to present their vision of the region, how they conceive of it geo-strategically, and the place of China, the US, and Europe within this framework. We look forward to debating questions of economic interdependence and independence, of trade and investment, and the expectations the

countries of the Indo-Pacific might have towards the "West" in general, and Europe, in particular.

For more information, visit [GIGA].

12 March 2024 @ 12:30-2:00 p.m. (GMT+1), Bruegel, Brussels

Defence as Europe's trump card: strategies to safeguard EU against potential American retrenchment

Is Europe taking steps to enhance self-reliance amidst concerns about the potential return of a Trump presidency? This event will discuss strategies for bolstering European security and addressing geopolitical uncertainties in the wake of shifting global power dynamics.

For more information, visit [Bruegel].

12 March 2024 @ 3:30-4:30 p.m. (GMT+1), Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Sweden

Security at arm's length: Global arms trade implications for peace, security and the economy

This event will examine the current state of play in the global arms trade, highlighting recent arms transfer trends and their impacts.

For more information, visit [SIPRI].

Recent Book Releases

Caty Borum, *The Revolution Will Be Hilarious: Comedy for Social Change and Civic Power*, NYU Press, 280 pages, Published February 28, 2023, For a review, see [LSE Review of Books].

Maged Mandour, *Egypt under El-Sisi: A Nation on the Edge*, I.B. Tauris, 224 pages, published January 25, 2024, For a review, see [LSE Review of Books].

Jonathan White, *In the Long Run: The Future as a Political Idea*, Profile Books, 271 pages, Published February 1, 2024, For a review, see [LSE Review of Books].

Matt Dixon, *Swamp Monsters: Trump vs. DeSantis—the Greatest Show on Earth (or at least in Florida),* Little, Brown and Company, 336 pages, Published January 9, 2024, For a review, see [New York Times Review].

Nathan Thrall, *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama: Anatomy of a Jerusalem Tragedy,* Metropolitan Books, 272 pages, Published October 3, 2023, For a review, see [**Los** Angeles Review of Books].

Calls

The **European International Studies Association's (EISA)** invites paper proposals for its ***2024 Annual Conference "Aesthetics of International Law and Politics,"*** to be held on August 27-31, 2024 at the Université Catholique de Lille. The deadline for abstract submission is March 13, 2024. For more information, see [EISA].

The **Canadian Council on International Law (CCIL)** invites paper proposals for its ***conference "International Law: Enforcement and Entanglements,"*** to be held on November 7-8, 2024. The deadline for abstract submission is March 25, 2024. For more information, see [CCIL].

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 **National Project Manager** to be based in Pokhara, Nepal. Applications are accepted until March 15, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks an **Administrative Associate** to be based in Algiers, Algeria. Applications are accepted

until March 17, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Civil Engineer (Analyst)** to be based in Sarajevo, Bosnia, and Herzegovina. Applications are accepted until March 15, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Security Operations Centre Assistant** to be based in Ankara, Turkey. Applications are accepted until March 17, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks an **Institutional Development and Capacity Building Project Manager** to be based in Chisinau, Moldova. Applications are accepted until March 15, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Partnerships and Reporting Officer** to be based in Baghdad, Iraq. Applications are accepted until March 14, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks an **International Consultant- Gender, Protection, AAP and disability inclusion** to be based in Laos. Applications are accepted until March 13, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks an **Information Management Associate** to be based in Egypt. Applications are accepted until March 12, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Data Assurance Officer** to be based in Munich, Germany and Rome, Italy. Applications are accepted until March 18, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Talent Acquisition Assistant** to be based in Kyiv, Ukraine. Applications are accepted until April 1, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **Fundraising Senior Associate** to be based in Santiago, Chile. Applications are accepted until March 29, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks an **International Consultancy - Faecal Sludge Management Consultant** to be based in Sierra Leone.

Applications are accepted until March 15, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **WASH Consultancy** to be based in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. Applications are accepted until March 8, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **Human Resources Manager to** be based in Nairobi, Kenya. Applications are accepted until March 15, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **Consultancy - Development 2024 Child Nutrition Report and knowledge management** to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until March 16, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Communications for Partnerships Officer** to be based in Amman, Jordan. Applications are accepted until March 17, 2024. More information is provided at [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks an **External Relations/Resource Mobilization (EXR) Officer** to be based in Lilongwe, Malawi. Applications are accepted until March 24, 2024. More information is provided at [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Public Health Officer** to be based in Amman, Jordan. Applications are accepted until March 17, 2024. More information is provided at [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Strategic Health Information Officer** to be based in Cotonou, Benin. Applications are accepted until March 22, 2024. More information is provided at [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Technical Officer** to be based in Washington DC, United States. Applications are accepted until March 15, 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 **Senior Development Coordination Officer** to be based in Sarajevo, Bosnia, and Herzegovina. Applications are

accepted until March 30, 2024. More information is provided at [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariate (UN)** seeks an **Associate Development Coordination Officer, Programme Communications and Advocacy.** to be based in Vientiane, Laos. Applications are accepted until April 15, 2024. More information is provided at [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariate (UN)** seeks a **Human Resources Officer** to be based in New York, United States. Applications are accepted until April 8, 2024. More information is provided at [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariate (UN)** seeks a **STAFF ASSISTANT** to be based in New York, United States. Applications are accepted until March 31, 2024. More information is provided at [UN].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Project Director** to be based in Kenya. Applications are accepted until July 29, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Program Manager, Intensive Case Management** to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until July 1, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Humanitarian Content and Social Media Advisor** to be based in Ireland and United Kingdom. Applications are accepted until July 22, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Grants Coordinator** to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until April 28, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Casework Supervisor, CMPP** to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until April 26, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **Programme Specialist** to be based in Rome, Italy. Applications are accepted until March 19, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **Specialist in rural women's issues** to be based in Brasilia, Brazil. Applications are accepted until March 19, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **Communication Specialist,** to be based in Hanoi, Vietnam. Applications are accepted until March 15, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks an **International Agribusiness Specialist** to be based in Lilongwe, Malawi. Applications are accepted until March 15, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **Project Support Specialist** to be based in Vientiane, Laos. Applications are accepted until March 15, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks an **ICT Officer** to be based in Washington DC, United States. Applications are accepted until March 7, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Monitoring and Evaluation Officer,** to be based in Algiers, Algeria. Applications are accepted until March 14, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Programme Manager** to be based in Maiduguri, Nigeria. Applications are accepted until March 14, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks an **Associate Project Officer** to be based in Doha, Qatar. Applications are accepted until March 14, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Partnerships and Programme Coordinator** to be based in Bangkok, Thailand. Applications are accepted until March 14, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO)** seeks **a Lead Waveform Analyst**, to be based in Vienna, Austria. Applications are accepted until March 27, 2024. More information is provided at [CTBTO].

The **Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO)** seeks **Maintenance Engineer**, to be based in Vienna, Austria. Applications are accepted until March 24, 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 **Senior Project Manager** to be based in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Applications are accepted until March 31, 2024. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a **Procurement Associate** to be based in Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Applications are accepted until March 24, 2024. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a **Logistics Associate** to be based in Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Applications are accepted until March 24, 2024. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a **Capacity Building Senior Officer** to be based in Helsinki, Finland. Applications are accepted until March 17, 2024. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a **Support Services Senior Associate** to be based in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Applications are accepted until March 17, 2024. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The Department of Criminal Justice & Social Sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville in Platteville, Wisconsin is inviting applications for a **Lecturer of Ethnic Studies.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [the University of Wisconsin-Platteville]

Ithaca College in New York, United States is inviting applications for **DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL LIFE.** Application submission deadline

is open until filled. For more details, see [Ithaca College]

Western Colorado University in Gunnison, United States is inviting applications for an **Assistant or Associate Professor in Behavioral Health & Criminal Justice.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Western Colorado University]

Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey, United States is inviting applications for a **Clinical lecturer in Forensic Psychology.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Fairleigh Dickinson University]

Asian University for Women in Chittagong (BD) is inviting applications for an **open-rank positions in its Politics, Philosophy, and Economics program (PPE).** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Asian University for Women].

Asian University for Women in Chittagong (BD) is inviting applications for a **Development Studies** (Assistant to Full Professor). Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Asian University for Women].

California State University in California, United States is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor, Interdisciplinary Studies.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [California State University].

California State University, Sacramento in California, United States is inviting applications for a **Tenure Track Faculty - Criminal Justice/Corrections.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [California State University].

Westfield State University in Massachusetts, United States is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor Criminal Justice, Corrections, or Institutional Corrections / Tenure Track.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Westfield State University]

Eastern Kentucky University in Kentucky, United States is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor (Sociology).** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Eastern Kentucky University]

Saint Mary's College of California in California State, United States is inviting applications for an **Assistant/Associate Adjunct Faculty in Ethnic**

Studies. Application submission deadline is open until March 11, 2024. For more details, see [Saint Mary's College of California]

Memorial University of Newfoundland in St. John's, Newfoundland & Labrador (CA) is inviting applications for a **Full Professor, Headship, Department of Sociology.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Memorial University of Newfoundland].

The United States Military Academy (USMA) in West Point, New York is inviting applications for an **Assistant or Associate Professor - Sustainability, Environmental Science, Geography, Climate Studies.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [USMA].

University of Detroit Mercy in Michigan, United States is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor of Political Science.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [University of Detroit Mercy]

Simmons University in Massachusetts, United States is inviting applications for a **Lecturer, Department of Politics and Policy.** Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [Simmons University]

College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts, United States is inviting applications for a **Visiting Full-Time Faculty Position in Political Science (Comparative Politics).** Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [College of the Holy Cross]

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University in Hong Kong is inviting applications for a **Global Search for Chair Professors / Professors / Associate Professors / Assistant Professors / Research Assistant Professors.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [The Hong Kong Polytechnic University]

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].

Williams College in Massachusetts, United States is inviting applications for a **Two-year Visiting Assistant Professor of Asian American Studies.** Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [Williams College]

Williams College in Massachusetts, United States is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor of English, Romanticism.** Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [Williams College]

Monmouth University in New Jersey, United States is inviting applications for an **Adjunct, Human Development.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Monmouth University]

Texas A&M International University (TAMIU) in Texas, United States is inviting applications for an **Assistant Professor of Social Psychology.** Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [TAMIU].

University of Idaho in Idaho, United States is inviting applications for a **Regular Faculty – Criminology.** Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [University of Idaho]

Williams College in Massachusetts, United States is inviting applications for a **Rank open professor in Queer of Color Critique, additional interest in Disability Studies/Crip Theory, and/or Feminist Technoscience Studies, and/or Migration.** Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [Williams 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]

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]

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].

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]

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]

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].

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]

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:

Alexandra Antonic (aa), Bintang Wicaksono Ajie (ba), Busawan Kachonnarongvanish (bk), Duc Quang Ly (dql), Fateen Farhan (ff), Felicitas Diecke (fd), Florian Gareis (fg), Jason Wang (jw), Joseph Black (jb), Lucas Meier (lm), Morten Strantzen (ms), Myat Sandar Zaw (msz), Nang Su Thiri Win (nw), Phoo Wai Yan Myint (pm), Saranya Setthi, Saw Lalbwel Htoo (sh), Teerada Thammapoonphol (tt), Tomwit Jarnson (tj), Venus Phuangkom, Wai Yan Phyo Naing (wn), Wutyi Aung (wa), Yudo Rahmadiyansyah (yr)

We would greatly appreciate your feedback! Please send any feedback you have regarding this newsletter to: info@cpg-online.de

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