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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 Hungary's 1848 Revolution Memorial Day, Ireland's Saint Patrick's Day, Lithuania's Independence Restoration Day, and Mauritius' 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: Two Sessions come to an end with emphasis on stronger party control and stability

(ms) China's annual parliamentary sessions, known as the "Two Sessions," concluded on March 11 with a spotlight on amendments to the State Council Organic Law, reinforcing the Communist Party's grip on power and signaling a shift towards greater centralization under President Xi Jinping. Amidst economic challenges and geopolitical tensions, the meetings underscored the Party's commitment to stability and recovery on the ongoing challenges the country faces.

The amendment to the State Council Organic Law, the first revision since its introduction in 1982, passed with resounding support, marks a significant milestone in China's political landscape. By emphasizing the Party's

leadership over the State Council, the revision solidifies Xi Jinping's authority and further consolidates power within the Party apparatus. Legal experts view this amendment as part of a broader trend of transferring executive authority from the state to the Party, eroding the traditional autonomy of government institutions.

The amended law explicitly states that the State Council must "resolutely uphold the Party Central Committee's authority and its centralized and unified leadership" and adhere to Xi Jinping Thought, the Party's ideological framework. This represents a departure from the previous balance of power between the Party and the government, with the Party now exerting greater influence over policy formulation and implementation.

Key ministries and government agencies, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Finance, and Ministry of Commerce, are now subject to greater Party oversight under the amended law. This shift in power dynamics underscores the Party's determination to ensure ideological conformity and loyalty to Party directives across all levels of government.

According to Li Hongzhong, vice chairman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee, the revision aims to deepen reforms of party and state institutions while ensuring strict adherence to Party directives. This move aligns with previous measures, such as the establishment of new Party committees overseeing various ministries and the clarification of executive decision-making power lying within the Party's domain. Since assuming power in 2012, Xi Jinping has spearheaded efforts to consolidate Party control, sidelining government entities and emphasizing ideological conformity under him (for more details on the amendment see NPC Observer). [Reuters] [South China Morning Post] [The Japan Times]

In addition to the amendments to the State Council Organic Law, the Two Sessions also highlighted China's economic priorities. Premier Li Qiang emphasized the importance of technological innovation and high-quality development, echoing Xi Jinping's vision of transforming China into a global leader in innovation. However, economic policies remained largely unchanged, with the growth target set at around 5 percent and other key financial goals mirror the number of the previous year (see more AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1).

Additionally, despite speculation, there were no major surprises or new appointments in key government

positions, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which is still lead by Wang Yi in a role originally thought of as a temporary solution. The emphasis on stability and continuity in government leadership might signal Xi's commitment to maintaining control amidst economic challenges and geopolitical uncertainties or simply a lack of trust in other party officials to fill the positions adequately.

In summary, the Two Sessions culminated in a reaffirmation of the Party's control and stability. While economic and diplomatic priorities remained consistent, the amendments to the State Council Organic Law represent a significant step towards greater centralization under President Xi Jinping's leadership. [CNBC] [CNN] [Nikkei Asia]

China's export and import exceeds expectations at beginning of year

(ms) China's trade data for January and February has shown significant growth in both exports and imports, exceeding market expectations. Exports rose by 7.1 percent compared to the same period last year, totaling USD 528 billion, while imports increased by 3.5 percent.

The growth in exports has been attributed on the one hand to strong performances in the sectors of electric vehicles (EVs), lithium-ion batteries, and solar panels. These sectors, often referred to as China's "new three," have been driving the nation's export growth and are seen as integral to sustaining economic momentum.

On the other hand, bilateral trade between China and Russia has seen a substantial increase. China's exports to Russia rose by 12.5 percent during January and February, building on robust growth seen in previous years, in particular after the begin of Russia's war on aggression against Ukraine. Bilateral trade between the two nations reached USD 37 billion in the first two months of this year. This makes Russia China's sixth largest economic partner behind Australia, whose stronger economic ties to China under the Albanese government have also contributed to the growth in exports and imports.

Geographically, China's trade patterns have shown mixed results. While exports to emerging markets like Russia, India, and Brazil have increased significantly, trade with traditional partners like the European Union has seen slight declines. [Financial Times] [South China Morning Post]

China: Finance Minister outlines plans to tackle high local government debt

(ms) Chinese Finance Minister Lan Foan has unveiled strategies aimed at mitigating local government debt risks through a focus on high-quality development. Addressing the media during the “Two Sessions” (see AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1), Lan outlined measures to refine debt management mechanisms and optimize debt structures for both central and local governments.

The Ministry of Finance intends to accelerate the formation of a debt management mechanism aligned with high-quality development principles, enhancing the management of local government liabilities. This includes the optimization of debt structures and the establishment of mechanisms to manage special-purpose bonds efficiently.

While he emphasized that local government debt risks are currently under control, Lan still underlined the need for continued vigilance, particularly in regions where risks persist. The ministry aims to foster a more robust system of accountability and oversight, with a focus on preventing and defusing hidden debts.

Lan stressed the importance of preventing a cycle of debt accumulation and repayment, outlining plans to investigate and publicly shame officials and companies found guilty of concealing new arrears. Efforts to curtail local government debt extend beyond mere oversight, with plans to transform financing platforms and reduce the number of entities contributing to debt accumulation. Premier Li Qiang echoed these sentiments, pledging concerted efforts to address local government debt risks during the government's annual work report. [Bloomberg] [Caixin Global] [The Strait Times] [Yicai Global]

This comes as China’s debt-to-GDP ratio rose a record 288 percent in 2023, indicative of the mounting challenges the Chinese economy is facing. [Time]

The ongoing efforts by Beijing to redirect local government investment towards "high-quality" projects hold the potential to sustain economic growth without further exacerbating debt levels. While productive investment can indeed lead to temporary rises in debt, it should ultimately be offset by increases in GDP.

However, questions arise regarding the availability of sufficient opportunities for such investment after

already decades of high investment rates. While targeting "low-quality" local-government investment is a positive step, the challenge remains in identifying an adequate number of "high-quality" alternatives in which the Chinese government has not yet invested.

Despite these challenges, the shift towards more sustainable investment practices is crucial for ensuring long-term economic stability and growth in the world's second largest economy. [Michael Pettis via Twitter]

China: Rare government call for support of developer Vanke

(ms) China has taken proactive measures to bolster support for major property firm China Vanke amidst the tumultuous backdrop of its real estate sector. In an exclusive report by Reuters, it is revealed that the State Council, China's cabinet, is said to spearhead efforts to coordinate support for Vanke, urging financial institutions to ramp up financing assistance and creditors to contemplate extending private debt maturities.

This intervention comes as China grapples with a wave of defaults against many property firms and even liquidation petitions and orders against Country Garden (see AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1) and Evergrande (see AiR No. 5, January/2024, 5) respectively, two of the country's largest real-estate companies. It represents a rare instance of central government involvement in aiding a specific company. Unlike its counterparts facing financial turmoil, Vanke enjoys government backing, with a significant ownership stake held by Shenzhen Metro, a state-owned enterprise.

Moody's downgrade of Vanke's credit rating to "junk" status on March 11 has, however, exacerbated concerns surrounding the firm's actual financial stability. While Vanke has sought to assuage investor apprehensions, stating that its operational and refinancing activities remain stable, analysts remain wary of the company's longer-term liquidity outlook, particularly in light of declining contracted sales.

According to some observers, the case of Vanke could be a decisive point in China's real estate crisis, because if Vanke were to default or even get an liquidation order despite government support, this would massively damage the confidence of foreign investors in one of China's former driving forces of its former unprecedented economic growth. [Financial Times] [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2]

China: Hong Kong's new National Security Law aligns itself with mainland jurisdiction

(ms) Hong Kong is on the brink of passing a new national security law, known as Article 23. The proposed legislation, which aims to address issues related to treason, sedition, and state secrets, has raised serious concerns among critics about the erosion of civil liberties in the once model city of Asia.

The draft of Article 23 was unveiled by Hong Kong's government on March 7 after a month-long public consultation period, signaling the authorities' determination to push it through swiftly. The proposed law introduces severe penalties, including life imprisonment for offenses such as treason and insurrection, and grants expanded powers to the police, allowing for extended detention periods without charge.

Critics have been quick to condemn the proposed law, arguing that it represents a significant threat to Hong Kong's freedoms and autonomy. They point to the broad and vague wording of the legislation, which they fear could be used to suppress dissent and curtail freedom of expression. Concerns have also been raised about the rapid progression of the legislation, with critics questioning the legitimacy of the consultation process and the lack of adequate time for public input.

The proposed law comes on the heels of the controversial Beijing-imposed national security law, which was enacted in June 2020 (see AiR No. 26, June/2020, 5). That law, which criminalized acts of secession, subversion, and collusion with foreign forces, triggered a broad crackdown on political dissent and curtailed freedoms of assembly, press, and speech in Hong Kong. Many civil society groups disbanded, and outspoken media outlets were forced to shut down.

The introduction of Article 23 represents a further tightening of control over the city and brings its laws closer in line with mainland China. The proposed legislation mirrors many aspects of China's national security laws, including broad definitions of offenses and harsh penalties for those found guilty (see overview of planned sentences for covered offenses Xinqi Su via Twitter). Critics argue that what the Chinese mainland views as national security offenses are far broader and more sweeping than in Western

jurisdictions, often ensnaring political criticism and dissent.

One of the most contentious aspects of the proposed law is its treatment of "foreign interference." The draft legislation introduces a new offense targeting individuals who collaborate with external forces to influence or interfere with national and local authorities. Critics warn that this provision could be used to suppress legitimate forms of advocacy and activism, particularly those critical of the Chinese government.

The proposed law is expected to pass relatively swiftly through Hong Kong's legislature, which is dominated by pro-Beijing figures, with observers considering an implementation at the beginning of April as realistic. The absence of significant opposition in the legislature, combined with the government's determination to push the law through, leaves little room for dissenting voices to be heard.

The rapid progression of the legislation has drawn condemnation from the international community, with foreign governments expressing concerns about its potential impact on Hong Kong's freedoms and its status as an international business hub. Organizations like Amnesty International have warned that the law could lead to further erosion of human rights protections in Hong Kong and called for its halt.

As Hong Kong prepares to enact Article 23, the world watches closely to see how this controversial law will shape the future of the city. For many, it represents a turning point in Hong Kong's history, marking the end of its cherished freedoms and autonomy. [Amnesty International] [BBC] [CNN] [Nikkei Asia] [Reuters] [The Guardian]

China: Hong Kong court redefines criteria for sedition cases

(ms) In a landmark decision on March 7, Hong Kong's Court of Appeal altered the legal landscape surrounding sedition convictions, with significant implications for future cases. The ruling on the failed appeal bid of pro-democracy radio DJ Tam Tak-chi, has set a new precedent by lowering the bar for sedition convictions, asserting that intent to incite violence is not a necessary element for conviction.

Tam Tak-chi, also known as "Fast Beat," faced charges of uttering seditious words, including the controversial slogan "liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times,"

and insulting the police, in the wake of the 2019 anti-government protest of 2019. Despite arguments from his defense that the sedition law should require proof of intent to incite violence, the Court of Appeal upheld his conviction, indicating that sedition offenses must adapt to the evolving legal and social landscape of Hong Kong.

The ramifications of this ruling extend beyond Tam's case. The delay in the verdict for the Stand News sedition trial, pending the outcome of Tam's appeal, highlights the interconnectedness of high-profile cases in Hong Kong's legal system and might foreshadow the final decision in the Stand News trial. Additionally, the decision will serve as a judicial benchmark as the government considers amendments to its national security law, potentially increasing penalties for sedition offenses to up to 10 years (see entry above).

This shift in interpretation also diverges from a ruling by the UK's Privy Council, which is of relevance, as the sedition law dates back to the British colonial period in Hong Kong. The Privy Council, a judicial body that serves as the highest court of appeal for certain Commonwealth countries and British Overseas Territories in among other things sedition cases, identified intent to incite violence as an essential element of sedition. The Hong Kong court expressed reservations about the applicability of this decision, emphasizing the need to interpret sedition laws within the unique legal and social context of Hong Kong.

The redefinition of sedition by the Court of Appeal raises concerns about the potential impact on freedom of speech and expression in Hong Kong. Critics argue that broadening the scope of sedition without requiring intent to incite violence could stifle dissent and legitimate political discourse. [AFP] [Hong Kong Free Press]

China: Unveiling of fourth aircraft carrier “soon”

(ms) A high-ranking official in the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy has signaled that the unveiling of the long awaited fourth Chinese aircraft carrier will happen “soon.” While no further details have been released, the repeated coverage of his statement in various Chinese government sources indicates that the statement may be true, or at least that the government wants the world to believe it.

Yuan Huazhi, a deputy in the National People's Congress (NPC) and political commissar of the PLA

Navy, disclosed the progress of the carrier's development during an interview with the Hong Kong Commercial Daily. On the interviewer's question, if the Aircraft is nuclear-powered, the Yuan said with a smirk: "You will know soon."

While specific details regarding the timeline and characteristics of the new carrier remain undisclosed, Yuan's confirmation marks the first official acknowledgment of the forthcoming vessel. The absence of a designated timeline has fueled conjecture among military analysts, particularly after the unveiling of China's third aircraft carrier, Fujian.

Images purportedly depicting the new carrier have circulated online, showcasing a vessel bearing resemblance to the Ford class carriers of the United States Navy. Speculation suggests that the Type 004 may adopt a catapult-assisted take-off but arrested recovery (CATOBAR) configuration, akin to the Fujian and distinct from the short take-off but arrested recovery (STOBAR) setup of the current Chinese carriers, Shandong and Liaoning.

Yuan emphasized that China's aircraft carrier program is not a direct competition with the United States but rather a strategic measure aimed at safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Nevertheless, Yuan did not miss the opportunity to emphasize that the PLA's naval forces are already sufficiently capable of dealing with US aircraft carriers, stationed in the West-Pacific and any other potential threats in its waters.

The impending unveiling of China's fourth aircraft carrier underscores President Xi Jinping's vision of strengthening the People's Liberation Army and elevating it to a "world-class" military force by 2049. This goal is part of the second "centenary" for the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to transform China into a "prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious" "modern socialist country." [Hua Xijin via Twitter] [Global Times] [The Eurasian Times]

China: Military cracks down on "false combat capabilities" amid waves of layoffs

(ms) General He Weidong, the second-ranked vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), thus the number three in China's military, announced on February 5 the beginning of a crackdown on "fake combat capabilities" in the Chinese military, potentially

providing much-needed background to the multitude of dismissals of and investigations into high-ranking military officials in the last months. [South China Morning Post]

The dismissal of China's Foreign Minister Li Shangfu in October last year [see AiR No. 44, October/2023, 5] after he had already disappeared from the public eye for about two months, as well as several investigations and dismissals of high-ranking personnel in the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) [see AiR No. 1, January/2024, 1] and the expulsion of the leading Chinese missile/rocket scientist from the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) [see AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1] already pointed to structural problems within the Chinese military.

He's latest comments, although not much concrete has been said, now provide information that allows a glimpse of what may have been behind the dismissals. There have long been persistent suspicions of deep corruption within the Chinese military. One department that is at the center of these suspicions is the Equipment Development Department of the CMC, whose director from 2017 until his appointment as Minister of Defense was Li himself and where at least some of the dismissed PLARF personnel worked or were related to.

The corruption in this department, which is responsible for overseeing and improving military technology, as well as in the Chinese military in general, is also said to have had an impact on the country's military capabilities, with false information being given to the Chinese leadership and President Xi Jinping himself about the operational readiness and number of military equipment available, which could pose a major threat to China in the event of an actual military confrontation, for example over Taiwan. A danger that the announced crackdown is now intended to put an end to.

Japan: Ruling party Upper House members to be questioned over political funds

The Deliberative Council on Political Ethics of Japan's House of Councillors unanimously voted on March 8 to hold a session questioning 32 House members regarding their involvement in alleged violations of the Political Funds Control Law by factions within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

This decision follows months of a political funding scandal that severely undermined public trust in Prime Minister Kishida's administration and the LDP. The scandal revolves around two LDP factions that failed to report over JPY 600 million (USD 4 million) in revenue from fundraising activities, leading to the establishment of illegal slush funds. It is suspected that 82 lawmakers associated with these factions received kickbacks from these funds (see AiR No. 10, March/2024, 10).

Among the 32 lawmakers are 31 Upper House members from the Abe and Nikai factions – referring to late former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and former LDP secretary-general Toshihiro Nikai –, along with Yasutada Ono, who was indicted without arrest and has since left the LDP. [Asia News Network]

In a separate development on March 7, the LDP agreed to update its party rules with the aim of strengthening internal governance by reducing reliance on factions for fundraising and the allocation of important government and party positions.

The proposed changes, expected to be ratified at the party's annual convention later this month, allow factions to continue as "policy groups," but urge lawmakers to take responsibility for any involvement in political funds scandals.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida was tasked by the party to finalize details of some rule amendments. At a party meeting, Kishida emphasized the seriousness of the situation and called for a fresh start.

According to lawmakers, the proposed rules would enable the party to request members to leave if their group's accountant violates political funds laws, a provision not addressed in current regulations which focus solely on situations where lawmakers themselves are arrested or indicted. [Kyodo News]

Further complicating the situation, on March 6, it was disclosed that a political organization associated with Toshimitsu Motegi, the secretary-general and second-ranking official in the LDP, transferred approximately JPY 440 million (USD 3 million) over 14 years until 2022 to a support group operating under less stringent transparency regulations. Motegi, who leads his own faction, now faces allegations of concealing the use of political funds from tax authorities. [Japan Times]

Japan: Court rejects to ban nuclear rector

(sh) On March 7, a Japanese court dismissed a lawsuit aimed at halting the operation of a reactor managed by Shikoku Electric Power. The court ruled that the plant, meeting the country's stringent safety standards, did not pose a specific threat to the plaintiffs' lives. The residents of Oita Prefecture, the plaintiffs, had requested comprehensive surveys to identify nearby active faults and assess the potential impact of a distant volcanic eruption, approximately 130 kilometers away. [Kyodo News].

In a separate development, Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), operator of the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant in Niigata Prefecture, sought guidance from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on upgraded anti-terrorism measures. This request follows security concerns raised in 2021, resulting in a temporary halt on plant operations, later lifted by Japan's Nuclear Regulation Authority in December. Industry minister Saito Ken instructed TEPCO to seek external expert advice to restore public confidence.

An international team of experts is scheduled to conduct an on-site survey at the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant from March 25 to April 2, 2024. However, pending local approval for resuming operations, the plant faces resident concerns regarding evacuation procedures in the event of an accident, amplified by a recent powerful earthquake in the nearby Noto Peninsula in January. [NHK]

Japan: Bill on post-divorce joint custody approved by Cabinet

(sh) On March 8, the Japanese government approved a bill introducing joint custody following divorce, recognizing the importance of accommodating diverse family arrangements. Under existing laws, sole custody by one parent is the only option, but the bill now allows for either sole or joint custody, with family courts tasked with resolving disputes. Notably, the bill mandates sole custody in cases where there are suspicions of abuse or violence by one of the parents.

This decision addresses criticisms of Japan's sole custody system, particularly from foreign nationals who have struggled to maintain relationships with their children when their former partners returned to Japan.

The government aims to enact the bill before the current parliamentary session concludes in June. The new regulations will take effect within two years of their promulgation. However, parents who divorced

prior to the law's implementation can opt to switch to joint custody. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Women working condition ranked as 3rd worst among OECD countries

(sh) In the recent "glass-ceiling index" by The Economist magazine, Japan ranked third from the bottom among major economies concerning the working environment for women. This survey, conducted prior to International Women's Day, assessed 29 OECD member countries using indicators like labor force participation and the gender wage gap.

Japan secured the 27th spot, with Turkey at 28th and South Korea at 29th, with the magazine highlighting significant workplace challenges for women in these nations. Japan's low ranking stems from women's minimal representation in senior management roles, standing at approximately 15percent, and their limited presence in the Lower House of the Diet, occupying just over 10 percent of seats.

In contrast, Iceland, ranking highest, boasts about 40% representation of women in senior management roles. Nordic countries dominated the top positions, with Sweden, Norway, and Finland closely trailing behind Iceland. [NHK] [Economist]

Japan: Technical recession avoided

(sh) Japan managed to avoid slipping into a technical recession after revising its official economic growth figures. The revised data revealed that the gross domestic product (GDP) had increased by 0.4 percent in the final three months of 2023 compared to the same period a year earlier.

Earlier provisional figures had suggested two consecutive quarters of economic decline, a typical indicator of a technical recession. However, the revised figures, although better than initially reported, fell short of expectations, disappointing some economists who had anticipated a more significant upward revision. While hopes were raised by a recent surge in business investments, indicating resilience, concerns persist over private consumption, which saw a slight decline.

Japan's economic outlook remains uncertain, with factors such as a slowdown in China's economy and production halts at companies like Daihatsu potentially

contributing to further contraction. The possibility of a rise in interest rates by the Bank of Japan adds another layer of complexity to the economic landscape, with negative rates having played a significant role in currency dynamics and global investment patterns. [BBC]

Mongolia: Two nanosatellites launched

(fg) Mongolia has launched two nanosatellites, produced by the Mongolian company Ondo Space, into low Earth orbit, marking a significant step towards the goal of launching its own national satellite.

The two Cubesat satellites, Ondosat-Owl-1 and Ondosat-Owl-2, were sent into space on March 4 aboard a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket from the Vandenberg Space Force Base in California.

Simultaneously, the Mongolian government announced the establishment of a so-called “space sandbox" framework aimed at fostering the development of the local space sector through regulatory and policy support. This initiative aims to offer companies the opportunity to conduct tests and research and development in a facilitated environment, leveraging the country's improved connectivity. The sandbox is designed to actively support growth and innovation in key technology areas such as space, artificial intelligence, and the Internet of Things.

The launch of the nanosatellites and the announcement of the space sandbox framework are part of Mongolia's plans to send its own satellite, named Chinggis Sat after the national hero Genghis Khan, into space. [Developing Telecoms 1]

Therefore, the Mongolian government commissioned the construction of a Ku-band satellite from the space manufacturer Thales Alenia Space in last October. [Advanced Television].

Additionally, discussions were held with SpaceX regarding the launch of the satellite [Developing Telecoms 2].

With the Chinggis Sat, Mongolia aims to enable access to high-speed internet across the entire country, including rural areas and for nomadic communities.

North Korea: Human rights situation worsened under regime's anti-pandemic border controls

(dql) According to a recently released report of Human Rights Watch (HRW), the tightening of border controls by North Korea through multiple layers of fences along the country's border to China aimed at curbing the COVID-19 pandemic, has worsened the already dire humanitarian and human rights crisis in the country.

The report highlighted that the tightened security measures between 2020 and 2023 increased the level of isolation for North Koreans, adding that the "drastically reduced cross-border movement and trade have violated human rights and increased the suffering of North Koreans." It called on the UN Security Council to review the sanctions currently placed in North Korea. [Human Rights Watch] [The Korea Herald]

North Korea: Artillery firing exercises conducted

(dql) On March 7, North Korea conducted artillery firing drills with front-line units capable of targeting the "enemy's capital," personally overseen by North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, as reported by the state-run Korea Central News Agency.

The exercise, apparently directed towards Seoul as the "enemy's capital," aimed to enhance the combat readiness and actual war capabilities of artillery troops, serving as a direct response to a joint US-South Korean Freedom Shield military exercise that commenced three days earlier on March 4 and will continue until March 14.

In response, South Korea issued a warning, stating its readiness to retaliate against any North Korean provocation, while also disclosing the detection of Pyongyang's exercise. [KNCA 1] [Yonhap]

Ahead of the drills, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un inspected troops at a military base. During the inspection he demanded the soldiers' heightened readiness for war and ordered the military to "dynamically usher in a new heyday of intensifying the war preparations in line with the requirements of the prevailing situation." [KCNA 2] [Al Jazeera]

South Korea: Two lawmakers leave Democratic Party for New Future Party

(oy) Two lawmakers and former members of the main opposition Democratic Party (DP), Hong Young-pyo and Sul Hoon, have announced that they will be joining the New Future Party (Saemirae). Saemirae is led by former Prime Minister Lee Nak-yon and was formed by Lee after he left DP in December 2023 due to disagreements with current DP leader Lee Jae-myung (see AiR No. 51, December/2023, 3).

Hong and Sul left the DP due to disagreements over the candidate's nomination process for the upcoming April parliamentary election. They accused Lee Jae-myung of removing candidates that were not aligned with Lee from contesting in the upcoming election, through the candidate nominations.

The accusations come amidst DP's announcement of candidates for 20 constituencies following party primaries. Candidates considered as Lee Jae-myung allies won the party's ticket over candidates not aligned with Lee Jae-myung. Hong and Sul had been listed by DP as underperformers in terms of legislative activity.

Hong and Sul are not the first to leave DP due to disagreement with the party's candidate nomination process. National Assembly Deputy Speaker Kim Young-joo switched from DP to the People Power Party (PPP) after she was ranked low in the party in terms of legislative activity, affecting her nomination chances for the election (see AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1). [Yonhap_1] [Yonhap_2]

Hong's and Sul's departures means a blow to the DP's efforts to defend its majority in the National Assembly National in the upcoming April 10 general election.

South Korea: Poll shows falling support for Democratic Party

(oy) In a recent survey conducted by Metrix, the support for the main opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DP) fell by 9 percentage points to 26 percent compared to the previous month. The ruling People Power Party maintained its support at 33 percent.

The survey also showed age-based preferences, with older voters favoring the ruling party and younger voters favoring the DP. Third parties, including the National Innovation Party and the New Reform Party, received some support.

Additionally, President Yoon Suk Yeol's approval rating increased by 5 percentage points to 39 percent. In a hypothetical 2027 presidential election, People Power Party Interim Chair Han Dong-hoon was slightly more popular than DP Chair Lee Jae-myung.

The poll was conducted ahead of the April general election, with most candidates already confirmed. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Democratic Party seeks impeachment of foreign and justice minister

(oy) On March 11, the Democratic Party (DP) announced that it plans to seek the impeachment of South Korea's foreign minister and the justice minister, holding them accountable for the departure of former Defense Minister Lee Jong-sup from South Korea.

Lee is under investigation by the Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials over allegations of abusing his power to withhold findings from an internal examination into the death of a Marine soldier in 2023.

The Ministry of Justice has stated that Lee's ban was lifted after considering that it had been extended multiple times without significant inquiry and Lee's promise to cooperate with investigators. Lee left to become the ambassador to Australia after his exit ban was lifted on March 8.

The DP argues that appointing a suspect as an ambassador is akin to aiding his escape overseas. They plan to file a complaint against all officials involved in Lee's appointment and departure, accusing them of abuse of power and obstruction of an investigation. DP leader Lee Jae-myung has called for the cancellation of Lee's appointment, describing the situation as a "total collapse of the constitutional order".

In response, President Yoon Suk Yeol's office has said that it was unaware that Lee Jong-sup was under investigation and an exit ban, when appointing him as South Korea's ambassador to Australia. [Yonhap_1] [Yonhap_2]

South Korea: Prosecutors search Presidential Archives over 2018 mayoral election scandal

(oy) On March 7, prosecutors searched the Presidential Archives as part of a reinvestigation into allegations of election meddling during the 2018 mayoral election in the city of Ulsan.

It is alleged that Song Cheol-ho, a friend of former President Moon Jae-in, conspired with then Ulsan police chief Hwang Un-ha and other presidential aides to investigate suspicions involving aides of then Ulsan Mayor Kim Gi-hyeon before the 2018 election.

Song, who won the election and served as Ulsan mayor from 2018-22, and Hwang were found guilty and sentenced to a three-year prison term in 2023. The reinvestigation was ordered by the Seoul High Prosecutors Office in January 2024 to verify the suspected involvement of former presidential chief of staff Im Jong-seok and former senior presidential secretary for civil affairs Cho Kuk in the scandal. [Yonhap]

South Korea: President Yoon vows strong response to doctor strikes

(oy) On March 6, President Yoon Suk-yeol vowed that he would respond firmly to the current doctor strike (see AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1). Yoon made these remarks at the Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters in Sejong.

Doctors in South Korea have been striking, with some submitting their resignations, in response to the government's plans to increase the medical school quota. The medical community has argued that increasing medical school quota will compromise the quality of medical education and services. They suggest that the government should instead improve physician allocation and increase compensation (see AiR No. 7, February/2024, 2).

Yoon criticized the doctor strikes, currently in their third week, for compromising the public's interests and safety. He reiterated the government's position that the increase is necessary to tackle the shortage of doctors servicing rural areas and essential healthcare sectors. Yoon added that he remains open to receiving suggestion from members of the medical community to improve South Korea's healthcare system and infrastructure.

Yoon vowed to take appropriate actions against the striking doctors and announced a pilot project for nurses to support medical treatment, deploy public

health doctors and military doctors, and support labor costs to recruit additional personnel.

Yoon also shared that the South Korea's cabinet will approve the spending of KRW 128.5 billion (USD 96.28 million) from the state reserve funds to minimize disruptions caused by the doctor strikes. [South Korea Presidential Office] [Yonhap_1] [Yonhap_2]

South Korea: President Yoon hosts debate on expanding transportation hub Incheon

(oy) On March 7, President Yoon Suk-yeol hosted the 18th 'National Livelihood Discussion' focusing on Incheon's role as a gateway city expanding into the world. At the discussion, Yoon pledged to boost South Korea's aviation and shipping industries.

Yoon announced the Incheon Airport will complete its fourth phase of expansion by the end of 2024 and a new high-tech aviation complex will be constructed behind the airport by 2026. Additionally, Incheon Port's Pier 1 and 2 will be upgraded into a fully automated facility.

Yoon also announced plans for urban renewal in Incheon. These include the construction of the Gyeongin Expressway and Gyeongin Line railway. Additionally, Yoon pledged to open the Great Train Express-B (GTX-B) line by 2030 connecting Incheon to Seoul, reducing commute time by 30 minutes. [Yonhap] [South Korea Presidential Office]

South Korea: Financial Services Commission discuss fund supporting middle market enterprises

(oy) On March 6, South Korea's Financial Services Commission (FSC) held a meeting on policy finance. At the meeting, FSC Vice Chairman Kim So-young emphasized the need for policy financial institutions to frontload policy funds implementation in the first half of 2024.

The meeting discussed the launch of a KRW 5 trillion (USD 3.75 billion) fund to support middle market enterprises and the operation of the innovative growth fund, which aims to provide KRW 15 trillion (USD 11.39 billion) worth of funding from 2023-2027. This year, an additional KRW 3 trillion (USD 2.28 billion) will be raised for the innovative growth fund to facilitate investment

in climate-related and artificial intelligence technologies.

The meeting also discussed refining impact analysis to improve the efficiency of policy fund allocation and the need for long-term support for climate finance. Additionally, FSC is expected to launch a task force for managing future finance challenges. [Financial Services Commission] [Yonhap]

Taiwan: Revision of presidential election laws proposed

(fg) Kuomintang party (KMT) legislator Weng Hsiao-ling has proposed amending Taiwan's presidential election laws to introduce a two-round system, replacing the current relative majority vote system.

She argues this would enhance democratic legitimacy and better match Taiwan's electoral system with presidential systems in other Western countries.

Her proposal requires the winning candidate to secure at least 20 percent of the votes from all eligible voters and 50 percent of the votes from those who voted. If these thresholds are not met, a runoff election is necessary. [Taiwan News]

This proposal follows this January's presidential election results where Lai Ching-te of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was elected as the next president with 40.05% of the total votes. Hou Yu-ih of the KMT came in second place with 33.49% of the votes (see AiR No. 3, January/2024, 3).

The proposal has been criticized by both the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and from within the KMT. Critics point out that amendments would require extensive societal debate and an in-depth analysis of the financial implications. Furthermore, it has been argued that the proposed changes would contravene the constitution. Additionally, there are accusations of Weng having political biases in proposing this alteration to the presidential voting process. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan: Opposition party reorganizes its veterans' division

(fg) The Kuomintang (KMT), Taiwan's main opposition party, has transformed its veterans' division into a "veterans service working committee" within the party.

The party seeks to more effectively integrate the division, consisting of retired military personnel and their dependents, which previously enjoyed a degree of autonomy, and to strengthen its support both within and outside the party.

KMT Chairman Eric Chu emphasized that the restructuring aims not to dissolve the division but to expand its influence and functionality, especially to attract veterans who are not KMT members, underscoring the division's historical role as the backbone of party support.

Despite a decline in membership from over 200,000 to about 80,000, the division remains a central supporter of the KMT, symbolized by conservative orientation that stands for a strong commitment to traditional values and national unity. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan: Review of Indian workers MoU demanded

(fg) Concerns have risen over the supervision of international agreements on migrant labor as Taiwan's legislative body examines a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to introduce Indian migrant workers into the country.

Currently Taiwan is employing about 700,000 migrants predominantly from Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Thailand. Labor shortages has prompted the government to sign an MoU with India on February 16 to facilitate labor migration.

Labor activists are voicing their criticisms regarding this move, highlighting a severe lack of oversight and transparency in the process. Migrants Empowerment Network in Taiwan (MENT), an alliance of 19 labor activist groups across Taiwan, has demanded a more thorough and publicly transparent review process for proposed MoUs, emphasizing the potential for continued exploitation of migrants.

Activists have called for a government-to-government (G2G) hiring process to be included in any future MOUs, adopting South Korea's kind of recruitment model.

The G2G hiring process is a recruitment model where the governments of sending and receiving countries directly manage the recruitment, selection, and placement of workers, bypassing private recruitment agencies who are criticized for exploitation of migrant workers. This model aims to guarantee transparency

and fairness in recruitment and the protection of workers' rights.

Amidst these concerns, some legislators from both the Kuomintang party (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) have also raised issues about the MoU's lack of public review and in addressing the needs and rights of Indian migrant workers in Taiwan.

The Labor Ministry stated that Taiwan's recruitment methods already encompass a G2G model, with details on hiring Indian workers to be clarified in upcoming discussions with India. [Focus Taiwan] [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: Compensation payments for halted digital identification initiative reduced

(fg) The Taiwanese government announced compensation payments to contractors for halting the digital identification initiative, reducing the amount to NTD 280 million (USD 8.87 million) from the NTD 1 billion initially demanded by the contractors. Premier Chen Chien-jen stated that taxpayers would not bear these costs.

The digital ID initiative has been paused since January 2021 due to technical issues and concerns over potential data breaches. [Taiwan News]

The project will remain suspended until an independent personal data protection commission is established, as mandated by the Constitutional Court.

Originally, the digital ID initiative aimed to modernize the identification system by replacing physical ID cards with digital versions, incorporating electronic signatures, health information, and more, utilizing biometrics to enhance security and make government services more accessible to citizens. [mobileIDworld] [Biometric Update] [Taipei Times]

Taiwan: Gender equality amendments to come into effect on Women's Day

(fg) Amendments to three gender equality laws came into effect on International Women's Day, March 8, aimed to enhance harassment protections following last year's #MeToo movement in Taiwan.

Changes target the Gender Equity Education Act, the Act of Gender Equality in Employment, and the Sexual Harassment Prevention Act, focusing on support for victims, legal aid, and stricter workplace responsibilities.

With these amendments, employers will face fines for harassment, new rules for smaller companies and mandatory counseling in larger firms will be implemented. Furthermore, education reforms forbid intimate teacher-student relationships, adjusting the legal framework within schools.

However, women's groups and activists question the impact and clarity of the amended Sexual Harassment Prevention Act, suggesting a shift from phrases like "violating willingness" to "without consent" to better address victim rights and simplify legal processes. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: No executions until inauguration expected

(fg) Taiwan's Premier Chen Chien-jen announced that no death row inmates will be executed prior to the inauguration of President-elect Lai Ching-te on May 20.

In his responses to legislators' inquiries, he noted that 37 death row inmates are currently awaiting court decisions on whether their sentences are constitutional. The Constitutional Court is set to examine the constitutionality of these sentences on April 23, particularly focusing on a notable case related to the killing of two police officers.

Premier Chen stated he is awaiting the judiciary's decisions on capital punishment and acknowledged the diverse public opinions regarding the death penalty.

Ko Chih-en, legislator from the Kuomintang (KMT) opposition party, pressed the government for a clear stance on whether it intends to abolish the death penalty, citing polls that show a vast majority, up to 88 percent, of Taiwanese citizens favor retaining capital punishment.

President Tsai Ing-wen's administration has overseen only two executions since 2016, Chen stated. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: Minister endorses TSMC's expansion

(fg) National Development Council Minister Kung Ming-hsin has backed Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company's (TSMC's) significant expansion within Taiwan, noting the company is adding new packaging and testing facilities in Kaohsiung, Hsinchu, and possibly Chiayi.

In his report delivered to the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's legislature, Kung articulated the expansion's pivotal role in catering to the surging demand for AI technologies and in reinforcing the resilience of Taiwan's industrial ecosystem.

There are worries within the Legislative Yuan that TSMC's worldwide expansion might weaken Taiwan's tech lead and a political shift in the U.S. such as a re-election of Donald Trump as president could affect TSMC's activities in the U.S.

Minister Kung assured that TSMC's strategy is to expand both domestically and overseas such as to Japan, adding thar most advanced manufacturing processes remain in Taiwan. [Taiwan News]

Due to concerns about building chip factories abroad, TSMC CEO C.C. Wei already stated last year that TSMC will remain "rooted in Taiwan". [Reuters]

TSMC's new facility in Kumamoto, Japan, opened on February 24 (see AiR No. 9, February/2024, 4).

Taiwan: Air force resumes overnight drills

(fg) On the night of March 6 to March 7, the Taiwanese Air Force conducted overnight exercises, involving various aircraft including F-16, Mirage 2000, and Indigenous Defense Fighter jets from the 5th Squadron in Hualien, the 1st Squadron in Tainan, and the 2nd Squadron in Hsinchu. The drills took place over the waters surrounding Taiwan.

The drills aimed to bolster nighttime combat capabilities and pilots' experience to be prepared for potential threats and challenges.

These overnight drills were the first in years, previously halted due to public complaints about fighter jet noise at night.

However, increasing regional tensions led to the decision to reintroduce these overnight drills, with the

air force advocating for public understanding of the necessity of these military exercises and support from the population. [MND Taiwan, in Chinese] [Taiwan Focus] [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: Ministry of National Defence extends this year's military exercise

(fg) The Taiwanese Ministry of Defense announced the extension of the annual Han Kuang military exercise to eight days, up from last year's five days, in response to rising tensions and to prepare for China's grey zone tactics in the Taiwan Strait. [Taipei Times]

The military exercise includes both computer-based tabletop simulations and practical live-fire drills, beginning with an eight-day computer simulation on April 19, and followed by a five-day live-fire segment starting July 22.

Reportedly, this year's military exercise will concentrate on testing the resilience of the nation's infrastructure and communications systems against potential enemy attacks, including efforts to combat misinformation campaigns. It also aims to improve the protection of critical utilities such as oil, gas, water, and electricity and will employ new strategies to counter potential threats like unmanned aerial vehicle attacks.

Newly acquired M1A2T Abrams tanks and F-16V fighter jets from the U.S. will be part of this exercise. [Taiwan News 1]

US military personnel have already been invited to observe this year's Han Kuang [Taiwan News 2]

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

Bangladesh: Court grants bail to Nobel laureate Yunus in graft case; charitable company ordered to pay USD 10.9 million in taxes

(lm) Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, renowned for his groundbreaking work in microcredit and poverty alleviation, was granted bail by a Bangladeshi court in a high-profile embezzlement case. Yunus, along with seven other defendants, appeared in court, while six others were absent. This legal development comes in the wake of Yunus being sentenced to six months in prison earlier for breaching labor laws, a charge he has appealed [see AiR No. 1, January/2024, 1] [QUARTZ]

The case centers around allegations of misappropriating funds from a workers welfare fund of Grameen Telecom, a major stakeholder in Grameenphone, the country's largest mobile phone company. According to prosecutors, the embezzled amount exceeds roughly USD 3 million, involving accusations of money laundering as well. The prosecution alleges that instead of benefiting the workers, the funds were directed to trade union leaders, depriving the workers of their rightful earnings.

The case has drawn international attention, with over 170 global leaders and Nobel laureates urging Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to halt legal proceedings against Yunus [see AiR No. 36, September/2023, 1]. Supporters of Yunus argue that the legal actions against him are politically motivated, stemming from strained relations with the government. However, authorities have refuted these claims, maintaining that the legal process is impartial and not influenced by political considerations.

Of note, just days after Yunus was granted bail in the embezzlement case, Bangladesh's High Court directed Grameen Kalyan, a nonprofit organization founded by Yunus, to pay roughly USD 10.9 million in income tax

to the National Board of Revenue (NBR) for seven fiscal years since 2011-2012. [Dhaka Tribune]

This decision followed a hearing on seven income tax reference applications filed by Grameen Kalyan, challenging the government's claims. The NBR had initially demanded USD 51.2 million, of which Grameen Kalyan paid USD 40.1 million, leaving a balance of USD 10.1 million. The court rejected Grameen Kalyan's income tax reference applications, prompting discussions about a potential appeal to the Supreme Court's Appellate Division.

Bangladesh: Prime Minister urges people to stay alert against BNP-Jamaat's move to destroy country

(lm) Speaking at an event commemorating the historic March 7, Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina urged the nation to stay vigilant against alleged attempts by an alliance comprising the main opposition BNP and the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami parties, to disrupt the country through arson violence and militancy. [Dhaka Tribune]

March 7 holds great significance in Bangladesh's history as it marks the day when Hasina's father, Bangladesh's founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, delivered a historic speech in 1971. This speech played a crucial role in galvanizing the Bengali population towards the struggle for independence from Pakistan, which was declared on March 26 the same year, following a nine-month struggle for liberation.

In her speech, Hasina reiterated her commitment to transform Bangladesh into a developed, prosperous, and smart nation by 2041. She also emphasized the importance of understanding Bangladesh's history, urging the youth to learn about significant dates such as February 21 and March 7, 1971, which symbolize the struggle for language rights and independence.

Bangladesh: Awami League retains power by killing people, senior BNP official says

(lm) Mirza Abbas, a member of the Standing Committee of Bangladesh's main opposition party BNP, has accused the ruling Awami League of retaining power by allegedly resorting to violence, claiming that the party uses state machinery to kill individuals. Abbas made these remarks during a financial grant

program organized by the BNP for the families of two deceased leaders of Jubo Dal, the party's youth wing. [Dhaka Tribune]

Of note, he claimed that Awami League had a history of violence, pointing to the killings of BNP activists during the period preceding the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the country's founding father and the father of the current Prime Minister, Sheik Hasina. During Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's tenure, there were accusations of political repression and violence by government forces against opposition groups. Furthermore, Rahman's establishment of a one-party system in 1975 and subsequent political actions heightened tensions and polarization within the nation, exacerbating an already volatile political climate.

Bangladesh: BNP leader Hafiz granted bail in 2011 political violence case

(lm) A Bangladeshi court has granted bail to the vice-chairman of the country's main opposition party BNP, Maj (retd) Hafiz Uddin Ahmed, in a 2011 political violence case, in which he was convicted in December last year. [The Daily Star]

In the case, Hafiz, along with BNP Vice-Chairman Air Vice Marshal (retd) Altaf Hossain Chowdhury and six others, was sentenced to various terms for allegedly gathering illegally and setting vehicles ablaze. Altaf, Hafiz, and another individual received 21-month prison sentences, while five others were handed 42-month jail terms.

Bangladesh: Foreign Ministry to form cell for global recognition of 1971 genocide, minister says

(lm) Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud has announced plans to establish a cell within the Foreign Ministry to facilitate coordinated efforts in seeking global recognition of the the mass killings, atrocities, and systematic violence committed by the Pakistani military and their local collaborators during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 as genocide. [The Daily Star]

During the nine-month-long conflict in 1971, the Pakistani military conducted a brutal campaign targeting Bengali nationalists, intellectuals, and

civilians, resulting in widespread massacres, rape, torture, and displacement. While estimates of the death toll vary widely, it is believed that between 300,000 and 3 million people were killed, with millions more displaced or affected by the violence.

The events of 1971 are widely regarded as genocide by many in Bangladesh and by various international scholars, human rights organizations, and governments. However, official recognition of the genocide varies among countries and international bodies. While Bangladesh officially recognizes the events of 1971 as genocide, some countries and institutions have been reluctant to use the term or formally acknowledge it as such due to political considerations and diplomatic relations with Pakistan.

Bangladesh: Election Commission says candidature will be revoked if black money was used in polls

(lm) In Bangladesh, one the country's four an election commissioners issued a warning during an exchange meeting with candidates for an upcoming by-election for the governing body of Sirajganj district, stating that if evidence of spending black money in the election is found, candidature will be revoked. [Dhaka Tribune]

By-elections for the so-called Zilla Parishad are scheduled for March 9, following the resignation of the previous chairman to contest the 12th national election. The warning by the election commissioner was prompted by allegations of vote-buying against two candidates.

Bangladesh: Court grants bail to advisor of ex-Premier Khaleda Zia, clearing path for release from jail

(lm) In Bangladesh, a Dhaka court has granted bail to Ataur Rahman Dhali, an advisor to the chair of the main opposition party BNP, Khaleda Zia, in a vandalism case. This marks the ninth bail granted to Dhali, who was arrested in late November 2023, among the charges against him, and there are no further obstacles to his release from prison. [Dhaka Tribun]

Bangladesh: Supreme Court Bar Association elects new executive

committee; polls marred by violence

(lm) In Bangladesh, a barrister associated with the main opposition party BNP has been elected president of the Supreme Court Bar Association for the term 2024-2025, while a candidate from the panel backed by the ruling Awami League has been elected secretary. A total of 14 candidates, with 10 from the Awami League-backed and 4 from the BNP-backed, emerged victorious in the election. [The Business Standard]

Of note, police have detained five individuals in connection with a brawl over vote counting during the elections. The case, initiated by Assistant Attorney General Saifur Rahman Siddiqui Saif, accuses two candidates, among others, of attempted murder. The incident occurred amid disagreements over the timing of the vote count, leading to physical altercations between factions and the suspension of the counting process. [bdnews24]

Bangladesh: Police thwart Women's Day march by women's wing of main opposition BNP

(lm) Police in Bangladesh intervened to halt a march organized by the Bangladesh Jatiotabadi Mohila Dal, the women's wing of the country's main opposition party BNP, on International Women's Day. BNP Standing Committee Member Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury addressed the rally, chaired by Mohila Dal President Afroza Abbas and moderated by General Secretary Sultana Ahmed. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Local Awami League leader, 3 others sued for raping woman

(lm) Four individuals, including a local leader of Bangladesh's ruling Awami League, have been accused of raping a young woman after tying her companion to a tree. The victim, aged 27, filed a case with police following the incident, which occurred on March 9. The accused perpetrators are currently at large, and the police are actively pursuing them. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Nine banks including four state-run in 'red zone'

(lm) A recent report from the Bangladesh Bank has highlighted the precarious financial health of nine banks, including four state-owned institutions, categorizing them in the 'red zone'. This classification indicates significant financial vulnerability. Moreover, the report identifies 29 other banks in the 'yellow zone', suggesting a moderate level of financial stability but still warranting close monitoring. [The Daily Star]

Conversely, 16 banks have been classified in the 'green zone', indicating a robust level of financial health. These banks are deemed to have sound performance across various financial metrics and are considered relatively stable. However, the report also reveals concerning trends, such as the deterioration of health in 38 banks over the review period, contrasting with improvements observed in 16 others.

Bangladesh: International bidding for offshore oil, gas exploration

(lm) The government of Bangladesh has launched an international bidding to invite foreign companies to explore oil and gas reserves in a total of 24 offshore blocks in the Bay of Bengal. Petrobangla, the state-owned oil company, expects substantial participation from global firms and aims to wrap up the bidding process within six months. The deadline for bid submission is September 9. [Dhaka Tribune]

A cabinet committee had previously approved the draft "Bangladesh Offshore Model Production Sharing Contract 2023" to facilitate the bidding. The new model aims to make Bangladesh more attractive to international oil companies by linking gas prices to the international market's Brent Crude prices.

Despite the resolution of maritime boundary disputes with neighboring Myanmar and India in 2012 and 2014 respectively, Bangladesh's offshore territory remains largely untapped.

Bangladesh: Cost Guard to be a three-dimensional force, prime minister says

(lm) Bangladesh’s Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has announced plans to enhance the capabilities of the Bangladesh Coast Guard, transforming it into a three-dimensional force through the acquisition of new technology and modern equipment. [The Daily Star]

Speaking at the 29th founding anniversary of the Bangladesh Coast Guard, she highlighted the government's initiatives, including the formation of an Aviation Wing with the procurement of two helicopters and the approval of a project to build nine replacement ships. Furthermore, approval has been granted for the procurement of four additional Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs) and two maritime version helicopters for deep sea patrolling.

She also outlined plans to gradually increase the manpower of the Coast Guard to 15,000 personnel in alignment with Vision 2030 and Vision 2041, aiming to modernize the force and enhance its role in ensuring blue economy and maritime security. Additionally, a dockyard is under construction at Gazaria in Munshiganj for the construction, repair, and maintenance of Coast Guard vessels.

Bhutan: Miscarriages from unintended pregnancies high, study shows

(lm) A recent study in Bhutan involving 132 women revealed a high rate of incomplete miscarriages, with 25.4 per 1,000 women aged 15-49 experiencing this condition. Notably, about 80 percent of participants reported unintended pregnancies, primarily due to a lack of awareness about contraception. The study underscores the need for policymakers to improve contraception services, provide sexual health education, and offer counseling to married couples. [Kuensel]

Miscarriages, defined as pregnancy loss up to 20 weeks, are more prevalent in developing nations like Bhutan. While induced miscarriage is illegal, medical termination is permitted under specific circumstances. In 2019, Bhutan recorded 1,271 miscarriages, contributing to maternal morbidity and mortality.

Bhutan: Labor market in crisis due to rising unemployment, migration

(lm) The 2024 World Bank Report on Bhutan's labor market paints a comprehensive picture of the country's employment landscape, highlighting numerous challenges and trends. [The Bhutanese]

Firstly, over 95 percent of registered private sector firms in Bhutan are small-scale, employing five individuals or fewer. Surprisingly, these firms exhibit

stagnant growth over time, with close to 75 percent operating for a duration of one to nine years. Geographically, 69 percent of these enterprises are clustered in Thimphu, Gelephu, or Punakha. Moreover, the private sector is heavily concentrated in sectors such as wholesale and retail trade, as well as accommodation and food services, which together account for 80 percent of all firms. However, despite their prevalence, these sectors demonstrate relatively low labor productivity.

Secondly, Bhutan's labor market faces significant challenges, notably labor shortages within the private sector despite rising unemployment rates. This paradoxical situation arises due to a mismatch between the skills possessed by job-seekers and the requirements of available vacancies. Additionally, a considerable number of potentially suitable candidates, particularly those with lower education levels, are either inactive in the labor force, predominantly women, or engaged in low-productivity self-employment. Alarmingly, over 90 percent of private firms lack connections to public vocational or training institutions, exacerbating the shortage of skilled workers.

Thirdly, the report sheds light on the quality of employment and job security issues. Notably, employment quality in nonagricultural sectors in urban centers is concerning, with 63 percent of the workforce experiencing overwork. Sectors dominated by self-employed and family workers, such as construction, wholesale and retail trade, transportation, and accommodation and food services, are particularly affected. Moreover, a significant portion of workers, especially in urban areas, lack written contracts, with one in three salaried employees in Bhutan operating without such documentation.

Furthermore, gender disparities persist in Bhutan's labor market. Women encounter obstacles in accessing meaningful employment opportunities, with limited representation in the private sector. They are disproportionately relegated to low-productivity sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and services, or find themselves employed as self-employed or family workers. Consequently, women face a heightened risk of being categorized as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) individuals.

The report also highlights migration trends, revealing a significant increase in Bhutanese workers migrating since 2022, with a monthly average exceeding 5,000 individuals in early 2023. Additionally, one in ten NEET individuals expresses intentions to migrate abroad.

Bhutan: Property tax collection expected to reach more than USD 12 million

(lm) The property tax collection in Bhutan is expected to surpass initial forecasts, with projections indicating it could reach close to USD 12.08 million, far exceeding the earlier estimate of USD 8.17 million. This surge in tax revenue is significant, considering that only USD 0.69 million was collected nationally in 2021 before the implementation of the Property Tax Act. [The Bhutanese]

Notably, urban areas are expected to contribute more than half of the total tax collection. The tax burden primarily falls on wealthier individuals in urban Thromdes, with significant sums being paid by cities like Thimphu, Phuentsholing, Gelephu, and Samdrupjongkhar.

India: Speculation surrounds potential BJP-BJD alliance in Odisha state

(lm) The political landscape in India's eastern state of Odisha is currently abuzz with speculation surrounding a potential alliance between the state's main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the ruling Biju Janata Dal (BJD) ahead of the upcoming elections to elect all 147 members of the state's legislative assembly. [The Hindu]

Amidst ongoing speculations, both the BJP and BJD have been engaged in intensive discussions at various levels to address potential obstacles to forming an alliance. Despite the BJP's efforts to rebuild itself in Odisha following its split from the BJD in 2009, there is growing concern among party workers about facing the accumulated anti-incumbency sentiment from the BJD's long-standing rule. However, recent visits by Prime Minister Modi to Odisha, where he refrained from criticizing the state government and instead praised the late Biju Patnaik and Chief Minister Patnaik, have further fueled speculation about a possible reconciliation between the two parties.

Reflective of the tension between local party representatives and the BJP's top leadership, BJP Odisha state president Manmohan Samal announced on March 8 that the party would contest the elections alone. However, shortly thereafter, the party's Odisha leadership was summoned to Delhi on March 10, amid

rumors that the top leadership might advise against making misleading comments on the potential alliance. [The Week] [The Times of India]

The primary driving force behind the rekindling of this alliance appears to be the shared objectives of Prime Minister Modi and Chief Minister Patnaik to conclude their tenures on a high note, free from any political disruptions. While Prime Minister Modi seeks a third consecutive term in office, Chief Minister Patnaik aims to solidify his position as the longest-serving Chief Minister in India's history.

Looking back at their previous collaborations, the BJP and BJD had formed an alliance for the 1998 and 1999 parliamentary elections, securing significant victories. However, rifts emerged between the two parties following the 2008 anti-Christian riots in Odisha, leading to the dissolution of their alliance. Subsequent elections saw the parties contesting separately, with varying degrees of success. Despite their occasional differences, the BJP and BJD appear to be considering the strategic advantages of reuniting forces, especially in light of their past electoral triumphs.

India: BJP, JJP heading for a split in Haryana state; chief minister asks ministers to resign

(lm) The ruling coalition between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Jannayak Janata Party (JJP) in India's Haryana state is facing internal discord ahead of the national parliamentary lower house elections. Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar reportedly instructed all ministers to tender their resignations on March 12, indicating significant rifts within the alliance. [The Indian Express]

In the October 2019 assembly elections, the BJP secured 40 out of 90 assembly seats, falling short of a majority. Subsequently, it formed a post-poll alliance with the JJP, which holds 10 seats. Dushyant Chautala, the President and co-founder of the JJP, assumed the role of Deputy Chief Minister.

Ahead of the impending elections, Chautala held discussions with the state BJP chief, Shri J.P. Nadda, regarding seat-sharing on March 11. These discussions followed closely on the heels of a BJP lawmaker defecting to the opposition Congress party. Reports suggest that the lawmaker's father, a former union minister, may also join the Congress. This development heightened tensions as the JJP sought two seats for the upcoming parliamentary elections, while the BJP,

having won all ten seats in 2019, opposed conceding any seats. [ThePrint]

India: Supreme Court orders central bank to disclose electoral bonds details

(fd) India's Supreme Court has rejected the State Bank of India's (SBI) request for an extension to reveal details about electoral bonds, a controversial funding mechanism for political parties. The court instructed SBI to provide this information to the Election Commission of India by March 12, days before the dates of the general election, due by May, were expected to be announced. [Al Jazeera]

This development comes after the apex court on February 15 had declared the Electoral Bond scheme that allowed anonymous political funding by buying bonds from the SBI “unconstitutional”. It ordered the SBI to hand the donor information to the Election Commission. Despite the ruling, the SBI sought an extension until June 30 to disclose bond details, but the court mandated compliance by March 12.

Critics argue that the system facilitates the flow of illicit funds to political parties and undermines transparency. An analysis by the Association for Democratic Reforms revealed that a significant portion of these bonds benefitted Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

India: Second-highest election official resigns ahead of polls

(lm) India's Election Commission is facing turmoil as its second-highest-ranking official, Arun Goel, resigned on March 9, leaving the commission with only one of its top three officials. His departure comes just before the anticipated announcement of general elections, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi is expected to contest for a third term. While the Ministry of Law and Justice confirmed Goel's resignation, citing personal reasons, concerns have been raised about the transparency and functioning of the Election Commission. [The Straits Times]

India: Farmer’s journey to Delhi halted by detentions; protests persist in Punjab

(fd) Protesting Indian farmers, primarily from Punjab state, faced disruptions en route to the capital, New Delhi, as reports emerged of dozens being detained by authorities. Their journey, part of the ongoing "Delhi Chalo" march initiated last month to demand better prices for their crops, encountered obstacles about 200 kilometers north of the capital when police intervened. Although protest leaders aimed to reignite the movement on March 6, urging farmers nationwide to join via alternative modes of transportation after their tractors were impeded and dispersal measures were enacted, they encountered further resistance. [Reuters]

According to statements from the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political), or United Farmers' Front, some farmers from Rajasthan were reportedly detained on March 5, while others traveling by train from the same state were allegedly held on March 6. However, Rajasthan police refuted these claims, denying any detentions related to the farmers' agitation.

Despite these setbacks, on March 10, farmers in Punjab's Tarn Taran staged protests blocking rail tracks at eight locations, demanding minimum support prices (MSP) for crops from the central government. Similar protests occurred in Tarn Taran city, where activists blocked trains for four hours, urging the government to accept farmers' demands. [The Tribune]

These developments occur against the backdrop of impending national elections, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeking reelection for a third term. The protests hold significance reminiscent of a larger-scale agitation two years prior, which led to the repeal of certain farm reform laws following sustained demonstrations by farmers.

India: Citizens have the right to criticize revocation of Article 370, Supreme Court rules

(fd) India's Supreme Court has affirmed that criticizing government actions, including the revocation of Article 370 granting special status to Jammu and Kashmir, is protected under freedom of speech and expression. The court emphasized that peaceful dissent is a fundamental aspect of leading a dignified life, as guaranteed by Article 21 of the Constitution. It clarified that expressing protest or disagreement does not constitute promoting enmity among different groups under Section 153A of the Indian Penal Code. [Times of India] [The Hindu]

This ruling was made in the context of the Supreme Court quashing a First Information Report lodged against a college professor for his remarks regarding the abrogation of Article 370 and extending greetings to the people of Pakistan. The professor had referred to the day of the abrogation as a "black day" and wished "happy independence" to Pakistanis in a WhatsApp group.

India: Prime Minister Modi opens strategic tunnel near China border

(lm) India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi virtually inaugurated the Sela tunnel, the world's longest twin-lane passageway situated near China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) at an altitude of 13,000 feet. Built by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) at a cost of around USD 9.9 million, the tunnel connects Tezpur, Assam, to Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, facilitating all-weather connectivity and reducing travel time by 90 minutes. [Bharat Shakti]

The tunnel is aimed at improving the transport of troops, supplies, and weapons to Tawang, which is located in the western part of the state and which has historical significance due to its proximity to the LAC between India and China, making it strategically important for both countries.

India: Two-decade old terror hideout in Jammu and Kashmir busted

(fd) Security forces located a terror hideout containing seven improvised explosive devices (IED) and a wireless in the Poonch region in Jammu and Kashmir. A case has been registered and the authorities believe the hideout had been actively used two decades ago. [Deccan Herald] [Times of India]

India: Tri-service exercise to show indigenous military equipment

(fd) The Indian Army recently organized a significant integrated tri-service war game exercise named "Bharat Shakti" at a field firing range in Rajasthan. This exercise, held on March 12, showcased the firepower of indigenous weapon systems and platforms, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, and top military brass in attendance.

Key equipment demonstrated included LCA Tejas, ALH Mk-IV, T90 Tanks, BMP-II, artillery platforms, UAVs, and anti-drone systems. [India Today]

India: Two members of Sikh militant organization arrested in Punjab

(fd) Two members of the Sikh militant organization Babbar Khalsa International (BKI) have been arrested with the police, which claimed to have prevented attacks in the state of Punjab. [The Indian Express] [The Hindu]

BKI is a Sikh militant organization primarily based in Canada, with roots in India. It advocates for the creation of an independent Sikh state, known as Khalistan, in the Punjab region of India. The group was formed in the late 1970s in response to perceived injustices against Sikhs in India, particularly during the time of Operation Blue Star in 1984 and the anti-Sikh riots that followed.

The Maldives: Settlement Committee under review for illegal compensations

(aa) The Settlement Committee, established during the administration former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, has been instructed to halt the implementation of decisions to compensate individuals with over USD 65 million worth of funds and goods through the state. This decision came after Solih's successor, incumbent President Mohamed Muizzu annulled the committee, which was initially created to compensate individuals facing terminated agreements but faced criticism from the Anti-Corruption Committee and the Parliament. [The edition]

The committee, amidst various complaints, had committed to issuing compensation totaling over USD 14.6 million to various parties, including funds, goods, and properties belonging to the State. The Attorney General's Office revealed that some of the cases settled by the committee were in the middle of court trials and would not have succeeded against the State. Ten cases settled by the committee are currently under review, with assessments being conducted by the Auditor General's Office to determine the justification of the settlement amounts and the process leading to them.

As a basis for the resolution of the committee in 2023 served an advisory opinion by the Attorney General stating that the guideline authorizing the committee's work does not have statutory authority. In addition, dispute settlement and disbursement of funds without the involvement or consultation of the Attorney General's Office was considered a clear violation of constitutional provisions. [The President's Office]

The Maldives: Reregistration period extended after parliamentary election postponement

(aa) After the constitution required President Mohamed Muizzu to ratify the Amendment Bill to the General Elections Act, voter reregistration was opened for another six days to adapt to the postponed elections. It gives the voters a chance to register in different locations, particularly playing a role in places where the minimum number for a voter center to be established was not reached. [The edition]

The new date for the parliamentary elections has been set for April 21 while March 11 was declared the first day of Ramadan. On the grounds of confirmation of moon sighting on the archipelago and in other Islamic states, the date was confirmed by the Islamic Ministry. [SunOnline]

The Maldives: Online hearings at Criminal Court resumed after two months of suspension

(aa) In the Maldives, the Criminal Court has resumed online hearings for trials and remand proceedings after temporarily halting them two months ago due to network interruptions caused by water leaks from heavy rain. The court's decision follows the relocation of its server to a secure location. Arrangements will also be made for journalists to observe the hearings online. [SunOnline]

The Maldives: Turkish drones procured to surveil Exclusive Economic Zone

(aa) The Maldives have acquired drones from Turkey moving towards more independence in surveillance of their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Although operations are said to commence next week, the

number of drones and the availability of operational knowledge remain unspecified. This first purchase of such drones for the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) comes after the announcement of President Mohamed Muizzu to establish a 24/7 monitoring system in the EEZ. [Hindustan Times]

Nepal: Prime Minister Dahal expands Cabinet, adds Madhesi party to ruling coalition

(lm) Following a recent change in Nepal's ruling two-party government coalition, which saw the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) breaking ties with the Nepali Congress and realigning with the hitherto opposition Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (UML), Prime Minister Dahal has expanded the Council of Ministers by inducting a total of 18 additional ministers, bringing the total number of cabinet members to 22. [The Kathmandu Post]

The first Cabinet expansion took place on March 6, with appointments including representatives from the Maoist Centre, the UML, as well as from the Rastriya Swatantra Party and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Socialist), two parties that had supported the Dahal administration prior to the shift in the ruling coalition. Three deputy prime ministers were also appointed, representing each of these parties.

On March 10, the Janata Samajbadi Party, which currently controls 12 seats in the 275-member lower House, also joined the government. Party chair Upendra Yadav assumed the roles of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Health and Population, while Nawal Kishor Sah Sudi became the Minister for Forests and Environment. [The Kathmandu Post]

This second expansion holds particular significance as the Janata Samajbadi Party represents the interests of the Madhesi and Tharu communities, predominantly located in Nepal's southern plains bordering India. The Nepali Congress, the largest party in parliament and currently the primary opposition, had also approached the party for potential collaboration to contest the legitimacy of the new coalition government.

The restructured Cabinet now comprises a blend of old and new faces, with Deputy Prime Minister Raghubir Mahaseth leading the UML faction, Narayan Kaji Shrestha representing the Maoist Centre as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Rabi Lamichhane holding the Home Ministry portfolio

for the Rastriya Swatantra Party, among others. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Prime Minister Dahal to go for constitutionally mandated floor test on March 13

(lm) Nepal's Prime Minister, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, has scheduled a vote of confidence in Parliament for March 13. This decision follows the withdrawal of support from the Nepali Congress after Dahal's Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) severed ties with them and aligned with the opposition Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (UML) and other smaller parties. [The Kathmandu Post]

The confidence vote is mandated by Article 100(2) of the constitution in situations where the prime minister's party is divided or a coalition partner withdraws support. The current coalition, comprising the Maoist Centre, the UML, and other parties, holds a comfortable majority to ensure the prime minister's confidence vote succeeds.

The Nepali Congress, meanwhile, has instructed its lawmakers to vote against Prime Minister Dahal in the upcoming floor test. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Ruling alliance, main opposition party candidates file nominations for upper House chair

(lm) In Nepal, Narayan Dahal and Yuvaraj Sharma have officially thrown their hats into the ring for the position of the chair of Parliament's upper House. With the ruling alliance holding a significant majority in the upper house, with 38 out of 59 seats, Dahal, who is also the younger brother of Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, is perceived to have an advantage in the race. The voting is set to take place on March 19. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

While the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist)'s support secures Narayan Dahal's likely victory, it is worth noting that his nomination has resulted in brewing discontent within the Maoist Centre, precisely because Prime Minister Dahal unilaterally decided to nominate his brother for the upper house chair. Party members have expressed frustration over the choice, which they perceive as nepotistic. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Maoist Centre withdraws support to two provincial governments, decides to change three heads

(lm) In the aftermath of a recent change in Nepal's ruling two-party government coalition, which saw the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) of Prime Minister Dahal breaking ties with the Nepali Congress and realigning with the hitherto opposition Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (UML), the Maoist Centre withdrew its support from the provincial governments in both Gandaki and Lumbini provinces on March 6. Both provincial governments, led by chief ministers from the Nepali Congress, are now left in the minority as a result of this decision. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Additionally, the government has decided to replace province heads in Madhesh, Gandaki, and Sudurpaschim provinces, who were appointed under the quota of the Nepali Congress when the party was part of the ruling coalition. The decision aims to ensure better coordination between the central and provincial governments and to align the provincial administrations with the decisions made by the federal government. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Despite his imminent replacement, Sudurpaschim province's Chief Minister, Kamal Bahadur Shah, took steps to expand his Cabinet on March 11, appointing four new ministers from the Nagarik Unmukti Party. This party was established by former Maoist leaders who parted ways with the Maoist Centre. With this latest addition, the provincial government now boasts seven ministers and a state minister. [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Nepal: CPN (US) to elect delegates to general convention

(lm) In Nepal, the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Socialist), a junior partner in the current coalition government, is preparing for its 10th General Convention, scheduled to take place from June 11 to 15. Party Secretary Jeevan Ram Shrestha has mandated that all central, provincial, and district committees nominate delegates before the deadline. The selection process will occur from April 28 to May 5, considering the leaders' contributions and performance. [The Himalayan Times]

Nepal: Dispute over secretary appointment divides human rights commission

(lm) The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in Nepal is facing internal turmoil over the appointment of a secretary, which has disrupted its operations during a critical period when a United Nations-supported team is conducting a capacity assessment. [The Kathmandu Post]

The conflict arose in December last year after four out of five commissioners recommended acting secretary Murari Kharel for the position, prompting objections from the fifth commissioner, who accused Kharel of misconduct. These objections, echoed by other contenders for the role, led to a delay in the appointment process as the Prime Minister's Office sought original documents from the NHRC.

Nepal: Change in government coalition casts uncertainty over amendment to transitional justice law

(lm) In Nepal, the recent change in the ruling government coalition has cast uncertainty about the passage of a crucial bill aimed at amending the Enforced Disappearances Enquiry, Truth, and Reconciliation Commission Act. The bill was discussed in the parliamentary committee on law, justice, and human rights. [The Kathmandu Post]

Prior to the coalition's dissolution on March 4, both coalition parties, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) and the Nepali Congress, were staunch supporters of the bill's endorsement. They had even proposed that the bill be put to a vote if the then-main opposition Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) did not agree to it.

After year-long discussions, the parliamentary committee had narrowed down the differences to four points. It further dropped to two in a meeting on March 3 – the day before the coalition fell apart – after the parties agreed to list arbitrary killings as serious violations of human rights (thus non-amnestiable), and to open the doors for the victims, who refuse to reconcile, for prosecution.

The committee had planned to resolve two remaining issues and endorse the bill on March 4. But the

dynamics changed with a change in the ruling coalition, which saw the Maoist Centre realigning with the UML and dropping the Nepali Congress as coalition partner, casting uncertainty on the trajectory of the bill.

As things stand, two significant issues remain unresolved. Firstly, there is contention over how to address the concerns of individuals indirectly affected by the conflict. Secondly, there is a lack of consensus on the matter of reduced sentencing for those implicated in human rights violations.

While the committee chair, a lawmaker from the Maoist Centre, has expressed confidence that the passage of the bill will not be affected by the change in the ruling coalition, leaders from the now-main opposition Nepali Congress have a different take. They would first want to see how the UML presents itself in the upcoming meetings.

Nepal: Government, loan shark victims reach agreement; inquiry commission to be formed

(lm) Nepal's government has reached a four-point agreement with victims of loan sharks. Notably, this agreement follows persistent protests by victims who walked for days from various districts to Kathmandu, demanding resolution of their plight. [The Kathmandu Post]

One of the key outcomes of the agreement is the formation of a three-member inquiry commission tasked with thoroughly investigating the practices of loan-sharking. This commission has been mandated to delve into various aspects, including whether victims were coerced into signing false documents, if loan amounts were inflated, whether lenders imposed exorbitant interest rates, and if any other illegal activities occurred within this context.

The commission's responsibilities extend to studying and categorizing documents related to these cases, distinguishing between genuine and forged documents. It will then forward relevant cases to the appropriate government agencies, such as the department of money laundering.

Nepal: Government short of nearly 190 million to pay pensions

(lm) In Nepal, the Pension Management Office has requested an additional USD 189 million from the finance ministry to cover pension payments for retired government employees. The allocated budget of nearly USD 400 million for the current fiscal year is insufficient, as the office estimates a requirement of roughly USD 586 million for the entire year. [The Kathmandu Post]

The pension burden has been increasing, yet the government reduced the allocation compared to the previous fiscal year. Around 18,000 government employees retire annually, adding USD 15.1 million to the financial burden each year. The pension liability has more than doubled in the past seven years, reaching around USD 189 million in fiscal year 2022-23.

The government is also facing challenges in sustaining other social security schemes due to increasing expenditure. In response, the government has proposed raising the retirement age of civil servants to 60 years.

Nepal: Election Commission finds Resham Chaudhary ineligible to become Nagrik Unmukti Party chief

(lm) Nepal's Election Commission has rejected the status of Resham Chaudhary as chairman of the Nagrik Unmukti Party (People's Freedom Party), citing his ineligibility based on a court order, party statute, and relevant laws. [The Kathmandu Post]

Chaudhary, a former lawmaker, was serving a life sentence for orchestrating the Tikapur massacre, a violent incident that occurred in August 2015, in Tikapur, a town in the Kailali district of Nepal. During protests against the proposed demarcation of federal states in Nepal's new constitution, a clash erupted between demonstrators, mainly from the Tharu ethnic community, and security forces. The confrontation resulted in the deaths of seven security personnel and a toddler.

Chaudhary was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for his involvement in the massacre. However, he was released from prison in May 2023 on a presidential pardon; the Supreme Court's decision on a case challenging the presidential pardon remains pending.

Nepal: Rural women deprived of reproductive health rights

(lm) In a recent family planning camp organized by a District Health Office in Nepal's Sudurpaschim province, numerous rural women spoke out about the hurdles they face in obtaining reproductive health services, despite constitutional guarantees. The women highlighted pervasive patriarchal norms and pressures to bear male children, recounting experiences of marital threats and physical abuse from their husbands. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Crucial section of Koshi Corridor Transmission Line completed

(lm) In eastern Nepal, a vital segment of the Koshi Corridor Transmission Line Project spanning 35 kilometers has been successfully completed. This section connects the Basantapur substation in Sankhuwasabha to the Dhungesanghu substation in Taplejung, enabling the transmission of power generated by hydropower projects along the Tamor River. Financed by the Export-Import Bank of India, this project is instrumental in harnessing the region's hydropower potential. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

In other news, the board overseeing the Millennium Challenge Account Nepal (MCA-Nepal) has convened to discuss the strategic progress of the Butwal-Gorakhpur power transmission line project—a crucial cross-border initiative between Nepal and India. The board has prioritized expediting the construction of the 18-kilometer section within Kathmandu's territory. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

The decision aligns with the requirements set forth by the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), a United States aid program providing USD 500 million for electricity transmission and road infrastructure projects in Nepal. However, while the focus remains on expediting the 18 kilometers segment, MCA-Nepal continues its efforts to engage design-build contractors for the remaining 297 kilometers transmission line.

Pakistan: 19-member cabinet sworn in; former finance chief takes up role as foreign minister

(nw) Pakistan's President Zardari administered the oath to a 19-member federal cabinet led by newly

elected Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on March 11. The cabinet consists of 12 members from the lower House of Parliament, three from the upper House, and three technocrats, as per constitutional provisions. [DAWN] [Reuters 1]

Notably, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the junior partner of Prime Minister Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N), adhered to its original decision and did not join the federal cabinet. PPP co-chair and former foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto Sharif cited the party's lack of mandate following the February 8 polls, which was marred by widespread allegations of rigging by the main opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party of jailed ex-Premier Imran Khan. [The Economic Times]

A significant change in the cabinet is the appointment of Muhammad Aurangzeb, CEO of Pakistan's largest bank, as the new finance minister. This move signals a departure from conventional choices, reflecting a desire for innovative approaches to tackle the country's economic challenges. Additionally, two technocrats, Mohsin Naqvi (interior, narcotics control) and Ahad Cheema (economic affairs, establishment), have been appointed to the cabinet. Although they do not hold parliamentary seats, local laws permit them to serve as ministers for up to six months.

The outgoing finance minister, Ishaq Dar, has been appointed as the foreign minister. Dar is a seasoned politician from the PML-N party and a close relative of PML-N chief Nawaz Sharif. His appointment comes at a crucial time when economic and security challenges are expected to shape Pakistan's foreign policy. [Reuters 2]

Pakistan: Asif Ali Zardari elected president for second time

(lm) Asif Ali Zardari, the co-chairperson of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the widower of the late Benazir Bhutto, has clinched his second term as Pakistan's president, a role largely ceremonial in nature. He garnered 411 votes in a vote conducted by the national parliament and four regional assemblies, while his opponent, Mehmood Khan Achakzai, supported by the party of imprisoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan, received 181 votes. [Al Jazeera] [Voice of America]

Zardari's victory follows Pakistan's February 8 elections, which were overshadowed by allegations they were rigged to enable the Pakistan Muslim

League-Nawaz (PML-N) party of three-times former prime minister Nawaz Sharif to win the polls to keep Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party out of power [see AiR No. 7, February/2024, 2].

Despite winning the most seats in the elections, the PTI fell short of the majority needed to govern, leading to the formation of a PPP-PML-N coalition government. As part of this coalition, Nawaz's brother, Shehbaz Sharif, was elected as prime minister earlier, with Zardari now confirmed as president [see AiR AiR No. 9, February/2024, 4].

Against this backdrop, Zardari's election has sparked controversy, with PTI chairman Gohar Ali Khan calling it unconstitutional. [NDTV]

The PTI is contesting the allocation of seats in Parliament reserved for women and minorities. Earlier this month, the Election Commission refused to allocate such seats to the minority Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) political alliance, which is backed by independent lawmakers affiliated with the PTI, stating that the SIC had failed to meet the necessary requirements by contesting the February 8 election without submitting priority lists [see AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1].

Zardari's political journey has been marked by challenges and scandals. He previously held the presidential office from 2008 to 2013, during which he curtailed the powers of the presidency through constitutional amendments. Despite facing corruption allegations and spending over a decade in jail, Zardari has shown resilience in bouncing back from various controversies. His political tenure has been characterized by navigating threats from the Taliban, strained relations with the military, and international incidents such as the US special forces' operation to kill Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan in 2011.

Pakistan: Supreme Court says ex-Premier Bhutto, hanged in 1979, was denied fair trial

(lm) Pakistan's Supreme Court on March 6 declared that former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was not given a fair trial in a murder case, leading to his hanging 44 years ago. The court's ruling follows years of hearings on a reference filed in 2011 by then-President Asif Ali Zardari, Bhutto's son-in-law and father of Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the former foreign minister and the current Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) chief. [Al Jazeera]

Bhutto, founder of the PPP, was executed on April 4, 1979, two months after the Supreme Court found him guilty of masterminding the killing of a political rival. The hanging came two years after Bhutto was removed from power by military dictator General Muhammad Zia-ul Haq, who ruled until he died in a plane crash in August 1988.

Following the Supreme Court's decision, the provincial assemblies of Balochistan and Punjab passed resolutions urging the federal government to officially declare Zulfikar Ali Bhutto a martyr and national hero. [DAWN]

Pakistan: Opposition PTI alleges massive tampering in election results

(nw/lm) The leadership of Pakistan's main opposition party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) has accused the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) of heavily tampering with a key document used in Pakistan's electoral process, altering results in favor of PTI's rivals and recording over 100 percent voter turnout at certain polling stations. [DAWN]

In Pakistan's 2024 election held on February 8, independents aligned with the PTI secured the majority of seats at the national level. However, despite this initial success, the PTI began protesting the election results both through street demonstrations and legal channels. Allegations of election rigging have been raised by multiple parties, prompting calls for investigations into the alleged fraud from the media, civil society organizations, and governments such as the United States and other Western nations.

Of note, the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT), a non-profit organization focused on democratic governance, recently released a report highlighting concerns over the fairness of Pakistan's recent general elections. The report indicated a significant decline in fairness scores compared to previous elections, citing delays in scheduling, lack of impartiality in the caretaker setup, and disruptions in communication services during the election period. [Arab News]

Speaking against this backdrop, PTI chairman Gohar Ali Khan, accompanied by two senior leaders, recently claimed that the PTI's victory on 180 seats in Parliament's lower House was stolen through result tampering, emphasizing discrepancies revealed in the published so-called Form-45s, which is filled out by the

presiding officer at each polling station after the votes are counted.

Additionally, PTI Senator Ali Zafar announced the party's intention to challenge the alleged tampering of Form-45s in the Supreme Court, and demanded a thorough audit of the election results. Additionally, the PTI demanded an investigation into delays in result compilation highlighted by the PILDAT report. [DAWN]

More recently, on March11, police cracked down on protests organized by the PTI over the alleged rigging. More than 100 PTI members were arrested during the protests, where supporters demanded the restoration of their "stolen mandate" and the release of party leaders, including Imran Khan. [Al Jazeera]

Pakistan: Ousted Supreme Court judge Mazahar Naqvi to be deprived of Justice title

(lm) The Supreme Judicial Council (SJC), a constitutional body in Pakistan responsible for overseeing the conduct of judges of the superior courts, released an opinion on March 8, concluding that Sayyed Mazahar Ali Akbar Naqvi, a Supreme Court judge, was guilty of misconduct and should have been removed from office. Although Naqvi had resigned a day before the proceedings began, the SJC continued, aiming to dispel the perception that the judiciary is above the law. [DAWN]

Naqvi was found guilty of five allegations, violating his oath of office and the Code of Conduct for judges. He was involved in litigation for personal advantage, received substantial unexplained gifts, and obtained properties without justification. Witnesses failed to justify transactions, raising serious questions of propriety. Naqvi's acquisition of four properties within two years, without explanation, was criticized by the SJC.

Pakistan: Anti-terrorism court judge transferred after granting bail to accused in May 9 case

(lm) The high court in Lahore (LHC), the capital and largest city of the Pakistani province of Punjab, has transferred the presiding judge of the local anti-terrorism court. This decision came shortly after the judge granted bail to 42 accused individuals involved in

the attacks on the residence of a senior military official, known as the Jinnah House, in May last year. The attacks occurred amidst nationwide street protests following the brief arrest of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) founder Imran Khan on corruption charges. [The News International] [DAWN]

In related developments, the LHC is preparing to review the bail petition of Aliya Hamza Malik, a former parliamentarian who has been incarcerated for close to 10 months. Malik was arrested for allegedly setting fire to a police station and participating in the attack on the Jinnah House during the unrest. Additionally, Ejaz Chaudhry, a PTI leader and current member of the Senate, remains in custody for allegedly inciting violence during the protests. [Al Jazeera]

Pakistan: PTI leaders not denied permission to meet party leader Imran Khan, High Court told

(lm) The Superintendent of Adiala Jail informed the Islamabad High Court (IHC) that leaders of Pakistan's main opposition party, Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), have not been denied permission to meet their party founder and former Prime Minister, Imran Khan. However, security measures are being implemented due to concerns. This response follows a petition alleging denial of access to PTI leaders to meet Khan, who has been incarcerated in Adiala since August last year on various charges. [DAWN]

In a related development, the IHC allowed Allama Raja Nasir Abbas, a prominent Shia Muslim cleric and central leader of the political and religious organization Majlis-e-Wahdat-e-Muslimeen, to meet Khan on March 11. Additionally, the IHC sought a report from jail authorities regarding a petition seeking permission for PTI leader Firdous Shamim Naqvi to meet with the jailed ex-premier.

Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government to withdraw perks, privileges of former chief ministers

(lm) The government of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province has decided to revoke the perks and privileges granted to former chief ministers due to financial constraints, including facilities like guards and government vehicles. [DAWN]

Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur, who assumed the position just last month, emphasized the government's focus on improving law and order and providing relief to people affected by inflation. He urged the federal government to clear the province's outstanding dues or subsidize power and gas.

Additionally, his cabinet approved a nearly USD 30.5 million relief package, including cash assistance for deserving households and reactivation of soup kitchens. The Cabinet also decided to fully restore free healthcare for the entire population of the province under the Sehat Card Plus, an insurance scheme introduced in Pakistan to provide free healthcare services to the population. [DAWN 2]

Pakistan: Annual Aurat March rallies held on International Women's Day

(nw) Thousands of people rallied in in major cities across Pakistan, including Islamabad and Karachi, on March 8 on the occasion of International Women's Day, calling for an end to violence against women in the home, workplace, and in politics. The theme of this year's demonstration was Politics, Resistance, and Freedom. [Geo TV] [RadioFreeEurope]

Pakistan: Student sentenced to death over WhatsApp messages deemed blasphemous

(wa) Following accusations of sharing blasphemous content via WhatsApp, a Pakistani court has sentenced a 22-year-old student to death for blasphemy. In the same case, a 17-year-old defendant received a life sentence, with the severity reduced due to his status as a minor. Both individuals denied the charges, and defense lawyers argued the case was fabricated. [BBC]

Blasphemy is a capital offense in Pakistan, and some accused individuals have faced violence, including lynching, before their trials. Pakistan's blasphemy laws have been a subject of controversy and have led to violent incidents in the past, such as the torching of homes and churches in Jaranwala last August following accusations against two Christian men.

Pakistan: Nationwide disruptions of Twitter enter fourth week

(lm) On March 9, Pakistan entered its fourth week of nationwide disruption to the social media platform X (formerly known as Twitter), with the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority facing legal action filed by journalists and academics in the Sindh High Court who that blocking X stifled public discourse. [The Straits Times]

The outage began after former Prime Minister Imran Khan's party called for protests over allegations of vote manipulation in February's election. The blackout has raised concerns about internet freedom and democratic rights in Pakistan. Critics view it as an attempt by the state to control social media narratives and manipulate information in favor of the ruling party.

Pakistan: ASER report reveals progress, challenges in education system

(nw) The latest Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), a citizen-led initiative that aims to provide reliable information about the quality of education in the country, offers a comprehensive analysis of the education landscape in Pakistan, focusing on key areas such as access, quality, and gender equity. [Dawn] [ASER]

One of its primary recommendations is the full implementation of Article 25-A of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to education for all children between the ages of five and 16. The report emphasizes the need for inclusive policies that ensure equal opportunities for learning, particularly for marginalized groups such as girls and children from low-income households.

Despite the legal framework in place, the report highlights the slow progress in achieving universal access to education, with children from poorer backgrounds disproportionately affected. Gender disparities remain a significant concern, with a higher percentage of girls still out of school compared to boys, particularly in rural areas and provinces like Balochistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Pakistan: Armed forces will support people in Balochistan province, COAS Munir says

(lm) Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir has pledged full support from armed forces and law enforcement agencies for the peace and prosperity of Balochistan, stating that the success of the province is integral to the success of the country. [DAWN]

During his visit to Awaran district, he was briefed on the security situation and efforts for socio-economic development. He emphasized the importance of agriculture, promising agricultural facilities and support for farmers under the Green Pakistan Initiative. Additionally, he inaugurated the Cadet College of Awaran, appreciating its establishment for the development of the region.

Awaran district is located in the southern part of Balochistan. In recent years, the district has been affected by incidents of violence, including attacks on security forces, tribal clashes, and incidents related to separatist movements.

Pakistan: At least two killed in motorcycle blast in Peshawar city

(nw) A motorcycle blast in Peshawar, Pakistan, has resulted in at least two deaths and one person critically wounded Peshawar, located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, has experienced increased violence, attributed to groups like the TTP and ISIS. [Al Jazeera] [Dawn]

Sri Lanka: Ruling coalition leaders hold talks, but fail to decide on election alliance

(lm) Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe met with Mahinda and Basil Rajapaksa, leaders of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), to discuss forming an alliance ahead of the upcoming presidential elections, expected between September and October this year. However, no final decision was reached during the meeting, as the SLPP leaders sought clarity on two key policy matters - the alienation of national assets and power devolution. [Daily Mirror]

President Wickremesinghe leads the United National Party, but the parliamentary majority that made him president included the SLPP, which currently controls 106 seats in the 225-member Parliament, and which is dominated by the Rajapaksas.

Prior to the polls in early 2023, the two parties' decision to contest the polls together marked an historic alliance that brought together the island's two main political camps in Sinhala polity, which have historically vied for power for over seven decades. At that time, the alliance was forged almost six months after Sri Lanka's ex-President and brother of Mahinda and Basil Rajapaksa, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, fled overseas after mass anti-government protests demanding his resignation.

Sri Lanka: Opposition parties decline president's invitation to attend IMF review meeting

(aa) Sri Lanka's major opposition parties have declined President Ranil's invitation to participate in an IMF review meeting scheduled for March 11, citing the invitation as lacking sincerity and goodwill. [Mawrata News] [Adaderana] [Moneycontrol]

The IMF commenced its second two-week review of the USD 2.9 billion bailout program on March 7, with two tranches of USD 330 million each released in the previous year. President Wickremesinghe, also serving as finance minister, oversees the program, which has implemented unpopular reforms aimed at stabilizing Sri Lanka's struggling economy. Opposition parties argue that these reforms have further burdened the population amidst an ongoing economic crisis, marked by Sri Lanka's first-ever sovereign default in mid-April 2022.

A statement issued by Wickremesinghe's office on March 7 said that the main opposition leader Sajith Premadasa, the leader of the National People's Power (NPP) Anura Kumara Dissanayake and the leader of the main Tamil minority party Sivagnanam Sritharan had been invited to attend the meeting with the IMF on March 11.

In separate but related developments, the NPP, which currently controls three seats in Sri Lanka's Parliament, stated that if it won the presidency in elections later this year, it wouldn't derail the IMF program but would renegotiate its terms and conditions due to the burdensome austerity measures and concerns over the government's sale of public assets. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Government to introduce two bills on gender equality, women's

empowerment

(lm) Sri Lanka's government announced two new legislations aimed at ensuring women's rights and economic empowerment. President Ranil Wickremesinghe revealed that two bills focusing on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment will be presented to Parliament in May. The Women's Empowerment Act was recently gazetted, while the Gender Equality Act is scheduled to be gazetted next week. [Daily Mirror]

In separate but related developments, during a recent visit to Sri Lanka, the Asia-Pacific Regional Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Pio Smith, emphasized the importance of safeguarding the rights and dignity of women and girls amid post-COVID-19 challenges and economic uncertainties. Discussions with Sri Lankan officials and international partners underscored UNFPA's commitment to supporting the country's recovery journey, with gender equality and empowerment as crucial elements. UNFPA's long-term commitment focuses on systemic change through partnerships and youth-led initiatives, with over USD 7 million mobilized in 2022. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: President Wickremesinghe addresses Parliament on economic revival progress

(aa) President Ranil Wickremesinghe addressed Sri Lanka's Parliament with a special statement on the nation's economic recovery progress. Throughout his statement, Wickremesinghe reiterated the government's dedication to systematically strengthening the economy and improving the overall well-being of the population. He emphasized that these actions are guided by a strategic plan aimed at ensuring sustainable growth and prosperity for the country, rather than personal popularity or power. [Adaderana]

Key achievements outlined by the President include the revival of the economy in the third quarter of 2023 after six consecutive quarters of contraction. He also pointed out the forecasts of potential economic growth ranging from 2 percent to 3 percent for the year 2024 by international financial institutions. Furthermore, Wickremesinghe highlighted significant growth in state revenue, a surplus achieved in the primary account, and a substantial reduction in inflation from 70

percent in September 2022 to 5.9 percent in February 2024.

Regarding foreign exchange reserves, Wickremesinghe noted a remarkable increase from less than USD 20 million in mid-April 2022 to over USD 3 billion. He also mentioned the lifting of import restrictions, except for private motor vehicles, and ongoing debt restructuring negotiations aimed at reducing annual external debt payments.

In a recent negotiation round with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Sri Lanka could achieve a softening of the annual debt payment ratio from 9.5 to 4 percent of the GDP. Difficult policy decisions from the beginning of the bailout program are now compensated for with the Urumaya program and the Suraksha health insurance system. The first ascribes ownership of freehold land deeds to mostly low-income families whereas the latter aims at offering more social security, especially to schoolchildren. [AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1] [Daily News]

In related developments, In February, expatriate workers sent a total of USD 476.4 million to the country, reflecting a 14 percent increase compared to the same month last year, according to the Labour and Foreign Employment Ministry. The ministry reported that a total of 9691.4 million US dollars has been sent to the country during the past period. [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: Consumer Affairs Authority Board resigns in response to ministry directive

(aa) In a surprising move, all 15 members of the Consumer Affairs Authority (CAA) Board handed in their resignation. The step-down follows a directive issued by the Ministry of Trade, Commerce, and Food Security without any indication of the reasons behind the decision. Comments by the Trade Minister Nalin Fernando only indicate restructuring processes following the appointment of a new Board. As an apex government organization of the Ministry, the CAA should protect consumer interests and ensure fair market competition. [Daily Mirror]

Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights

and National Security in Southeast Asia

Cambodia: Opposition party chairman accused of misuse of party donations

(dql) The president of the National Power Party, Sun Chanthy, has been summoned to appear in court on March 14 to answer questions over allegations over misuse of party donations totaling over USD 5,000.

Sun Chanthy is suspected of misusing political funds and failing to pay back funds he had collected from 19 members of the opposition Candlelight Party (CP). [Khmer Times]

Chanthy entered politics in 2000 as a member of the former Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP). Following CNRP's dissolution in 2017, he joined the CP and became the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Kampong Thom Provincial CP.

Later, Chanthy resigned from the CP to form a new political party called the National Power Party, which was officially recognized by the Ministry of Interior in October last year.

Cambodia: Top police officers fired over drug abuse

(dql) Eight high-ranking officers of the General Department of Immigration at the National Police have been fired for drug abuse and violations of the National Police's code of conduct.

Shortly after assuming office in August last year, Prime Minister Hun Manet had authorized the Ministry of Interior to fire with immediate effect any official found involved in drugs. [Khmer Times]

Indonesia: Civil society groups demand political parties launch probe into alleged election fraud

(jb) Civil society organizations are intensifying pressure on political parties in Indonesia to initiate a House of Representatives probe into allegations of election fraud, less than two weeks before the General Elections Commission (KPU) will announce official results.

A coalition of over 50 activists, civil society members, and experts penned a letter urging five political parties to initiate an inquiry into what they termed "strong indications" of fraud surrounding the recent presidential election.

While specifics of the alleged fraud were not detailed, suspicions have arisen during the campaign season, with accusations of state resource misuse favoring Prabowo Subianto and his running mate, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, President Jokowi's eldest son. Concerns have also been raised about voter intimidation and inflated tabulation figures for Prabowo.

The coalition warned that unaddressed suspicions could undermine Indonesia's democracy and erode public trust in the incoming government and House members.

Despite no formal motion tabled yet, some parties have expressed support for an inquiry. [The Jakarta Post] [Asia News Network]

Indonesia: Government to address mining concerns, approval of production quotas underway

(jb) Indonesia is moving swiftly to address mining concerns, with approval of production quotas from over 120 mineral firms underway, aiming for completion by March-end.

Delayed Rencana Kerja dan Anggaran Biaya (RKAB), i.e. mining and budget plan approvals, have triggered worries, particularly among nickel smelters facing dwindling ore stocks.

A mineral powerhouse, Indonesia mandates RKAB clearance for mining operations. According to the

energy approvals are ongoing, with 723 applications received although onnages remain undisclosed, coal quotas are finalized. Estimates suggest 259 million metric tons of nickel production may be approved. [Mining.com]

Indonesia: Incoming president pledges to ramp up economic growth to 8 percent

(jb) Prabowo Subianto, Indonesia's presumed next president, has pledged to ramp up economic growth to 8 percent within five years, emphasizing investor-friendly policies.

Speaking at a Jakarta investment forum on 5 March 2024, he vowed to leverage existing economic foundations.

Prabowo aims to prioritize inclusive growth, slashing inefficiencies, and fostering rational decision-making to overcome poverty and generate jobs. His ambitious growth forecast surpasses current levels, with the economy expected to grow by over 5.1 percent this year.

Prabowo also committed to maintaining fiscal strength, increasing tax collection, and pursuing reforms, including state-owned enterprise privatization. [Financial Times] [Ramadhan Republik]

Indonesia: Women human rights defenders network launched

(jb) On International Women's Day, March 8, Indonesia commemorated the inauguration of the Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRD) Network, a collaborative initiative led by International Bridges to Justice – a Geneva-based NGO dedicated to protecting the basic legal rights of citizens in developing countries – and LBH APIK Jakarta – an Indonesian NGO that seeks to create a just and democratic society and equality between women and men – and backed by the European Union.

The network, aimed at fostering inclusivity and support for female advocates across Indonesia, plans to carry out monthly online gatherings and regional meetings to unite women defenders from diverse backgrounds, bridging local and global efforts to champion human rights. [Delegation of the European Union to Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam]

Indonesia: Floods and landslides claim lives in West Sumatra

(jb) On 8 March 2024, Indonesia's West Sumatra province experienced floods and landslides, resulting in three casualties and leaving ten individuals missing. Heavy rainfall triggered the calamity across ten regencies and towns, causing bridges to collapse and homes to be swept away.

Transportation has been severely disrupted, with submerged roads and tens of thousands of houses affected, necessitating evacuations. Rescue and relief operations are underway, with government departments mobilizing aid including food, blankets, and medical supplies. [Xinhua]

Indonesia: Maritime surveillance with satellite network to be bolstered

(jb) Indonesia is seeking to bolster maritime surveillance with a satellite network launch plan, aiming to enhance monitoring of marine and fisheries resources. The country, with its vast archipelagic territory and the world's highest coral reef fish diversity, plans to deploy a constellation of 20 nanosatellites, with the first launching in July.

Equipped with radio frequency, imaging, and vessel-tracking gear, these satellites will enable real-time monitoring from a centralized data center. The initiative reflects efforts to actively manage conservation while ensuring economic benefits from marine resources. [Mongabay]

Laos: Alarming malnutrition data presented

(wn/dql) Lao Deputy Prime Minister Kikeo Khaykhamphithoune has affirmed that investing in nutrition remains a crucial part of the government's 2025 Socio-Economic Development Plan and the 2030 SDG targets.

Kikeo made these remarks during the 9th National Nutrition Forum and Annual National Nutrition Committee Meeting, which assessed progress in tackling malnutrition last year.

Presenting worrying findings, the report of the committee confirmed severe malnutrition, especially among children aged 6-23 months, with less than quarter percent of breastfed children and only one third of non-breastfed children within this age range meeting the minimum acceptable diet criteria. In addition, the data showed 30 percent of Lao children suffering from moderate to severe underweight conditions, while more than 43 percent of children under five experience stunting, indicating chronic or recurrent malnutrition.

All in all, the statistics reflect an alarming increase compared to 2022. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Trade in 2023 increased

(wn) Laos experienced a significant boost in its annual trade, reaching over USD 15.5 billion last year, marking a 3.5 percent increase from the previous year. This surge was driven by notable rises in both exports and imports, with exports reaching approximately USD 8 billion and imports surging by over USD 7 billion. Key export items included electricity, gold bullion, paper and paper products, gold ore, and iron ore.

The highest imported commodity was diesel, valued at USD 952 million, followed by mechanical equipment, land vehicles, iron and steel products, and gasoline. Notably, Laos maintains an annual trade surplus exceeding USD 1 billion.

Thailand emerged as the top export destination, accounting for USD 2.8 billion, followed by China, Vietnam, Australia, and Cambodia. Similarly, Thailand serves as the primary import source for Laos, with imports totaling USD 3.3 billion, followed by China, Vietnam, the US, and Japan. [Lao News Agency]

Laos: Companies fail to comply with government new wage initiatives

(wn) Recent inspections at firms in the capital of Vientiane, carried out by the Lao Federation of Trade Unions and the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, have revealed that just 10 percent of all companies had adjusted their minimum wage in line with the government's wage hike initiatives adopted last year.

In response to these findings, the Lao Employment Business Association is stepping up efforts empower local workers by organizing educational measures on

their rights and creating platforms for negotiation with employers and authorities. [The Laotian Times]

Malaysia: Cabinet approves amendments to citizenship laws

(ba) On March 8, Home Minister Saifuddin Nasution Ismail announced that the Cabinet has approved a constitutional amendment to Malaysia's citizenship law. One contentious aspect of the proposal is the requirement for proof that foundlings were born in Malaysia before their citizenship application can be submitted. This proposed amendment has raised concerns as it could potentially hinder stateless children from obtaining Malaysian citizenship.

The home minister disclosed that he has already met with the parliamentary select committee on human rights, women, and children, as well as Opposition MPs, to discuss the details of the proposed constitutional amendment. He also highlighted that citizenship applications for stateless persons under Article 15A have a 98 percent success rate, with a commitment to resolving the remaining 14,000 applications by December 31 of the current year.

Article 15A currently grants the government special powers to register individuals under 21 years of age as citizens. Saifuddin Nasution Ismail revealed that last year, 11,500 citizenship applications under Section 19B, Part III, Second Schedule of the Federal Constitution were successfully resolved. The proposed amendment aims to shift citizenship from operation of law to registration,resulting in foundlings and abandoned children no longer being automatically entitled to citizenship.

However, several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have expressed concerns, suggesting that these amendments may remove existing safeguards for stateless children. Experts caution that the changes could worsen the issue of statelessness among children in the country. If enacted, the amendments would subject abandoned children to discretionary citizenship, requiring them to prove their parentage.

Additionally, the backdrop of discrimination against Malaysian women with foreign spouses, whose children born in Malaysia lack automatic citizenship compared to those of Malaysian men with foreign wives, adds complexity to the proposed changes. [The Malay Mail] [The Star]

Malaysia: Sabah, Sawarak lawmakers optimistic over government addressing their states' rights

(ba) Parliamentarians from Sabah and Sarawak are hopeful that the Federal Government will continue addressing the needs of their constituents and prioritize the fulfillment of agreements outlined in the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63). The MA63 represents the agreement between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Federation of Malaya, North Borneo, Sarawak, and Singapore. This agreement facilitated the incorporation of North Borneo, Sarawak, and Singapore into the existing states of the Federation of Malaya, forming the newly named Malaysia. However, Singapore was subsequently expelled from Malaysia and achieved independence as a separate state on 9 August 1965.

Representatives from Borneo, emphasizing the importance of fostering public understanding about MA63, proposed initiatives to prevent any manipulation of national sentiments among Malaysians. Roy Angau Gingkoi Member of Parliament (MP) from Lubok Antu recommended the incorporation of a comprehensive overview of MA63's history, content, and significant figures into the school education syllabus. This, he believes, will ensure the recognition of those who made sacrifices for its establishment, including figures such as the Iban Trackers and Sarawak Rangers who resisted communist colonialism in Malaya from 1948 onwards.

Datuk Jonathan Yasin (MP from Ranau) urged the government not to postpone Sabah's demand for the return of 40 percent of the state revenue collected by the Federal Government. He called for fair consideration in line with MA63 rights, similar to the privileges enjoyed in the Peninsular.

Echoing this sentiment, Datuk Verdon Bahanda (MP from Kudat) highlighted the critical nature of settling tax payments to Sabah for the state's development. Datuk Anyi Ngau (MP from Baram) appealed to the government to address pressing issues in Sabah and Sarawak, such as road problems, substandard schools, outdated clinics, and the instability of the Internet network. His concerns gained attention in the Dewan Rakyat, with several Members of Parliament from the Peninsula and Deputy Digital Minister Datuk Ugak Anak Kumbong supporting his arguments.

During the debate, Rodziah Ismail (MP from Ampang) proposed redirecting new construction plans, such as roads or highways in urban areas, to places like Baram that are more in need.

Members of Parliament also expressed appreciation for the Federal Government's initiatives for Sabah and Sarawak, including subsidizing flight tickets during the upcoming Aidilfitri holiday season for the people in Sabah and Sarawak. [Astro Awani]

Malaysia: National Unity Minister reports more than 600 racial incidents last year

(ba) National Unity Minister Aaron Ago Dagang has revealed that in 2023, a total of 638 incidents characterized by racial elements were reported to the police and highlighted that Selangor had the highest occurrence with 170 incidents, followed by Johor (110), Perak (97), and Penang (80).

In response to a query by Dr. Halimah Ali (MP from Kapar) regarding the number and causes of racial incidents reported to the police, the minister explained that the cases encompassed various issues such as gangsterism, disturbances, intoxication, road accidents, criminal activities, debt collection, obscene behavior and language, religious and racial provocation, as well as dissatisfaction with services or facilities. This information was conveyed in a written parliamentary reply on March 7.

Shifting focus, Home Minister Datuk Seri Saifuddin Nasution Ismail stated that two investigation papers had been initiated against Pakatan Harapan political leaders for addressing matters related to race, religion, and royalty (3R) subsequent to the 15th General Election (GE15).

Both cases are being investigated under the Sedition Act 1948, Penal Code, and Communications and Multimedia Act 1998. Saifuddin Nasution noted that both investigation papers have been forwarded to the Attorney-General's Chambers. The minister responded to a question by Datuk Ahmad Yahaya (MP from Pokok Sena) who inquired about the number of 3R cases opened against Pakatan leaders post-GE15. [The Star]

Malaysia: Selangor Bersatu representatives express dissatisfaction with current leadership

(ba) Several assembly members from The Malaysian United Indigenous Party (Bersatu) in Selangor are reportedly dissatisfied with the party leadership regarding various issues. Allegedly, they are adopting a

wait-and-see approach before deciding where their support will lie.

Rashid, the assemblyman for Klang Strait, announced his endorsement of Selangor Chief Minister Amirudin Shari. He stated that his decision was influenced by a series of actions by Perikatan Nasional (PN), the opposition coalition of which Bersatu was part of it, particularly the silence of Selangor PN on accusations against the Malay Rulers. Regarding the statement from the president of the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), Abdul Hadi Awan entitled "The Importance of Upholding Islam," who is also a member of PN. Five additional Bersatu assemblymen were rumored to declare their support for Amirudin: Muhaimin Harith Abdullah Sani (Batang Kali), Wan Dzahanurin Ahmad (Sungai Kandis), Jamil Salleh (Dengkil), Harrison Hassan (Jeram), and Rosnizan Ahmad (Morib). However, Selangor opposition leader Azmin Ali and Wan Dzahanurin contradicted this information. Despite the conflicting reports, another source indicated that five assemblymen were being courted to support the Pakatan Harapan-Barisan Nasional administration in Selangor.

Rashid's decision to support Amirudin followed Bersatu's amendment to its constitution, stating that MPs or assemblymen would automatically lose their membership if they supported any other party or policy misaligned with Bersatu's position. This amendment is still awaiting approval from the Registrar of Societies. The constitutional amendment was prompted by six Bersatu MPs pledging their support for Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, namely Suhaili Abdul Rahman (Labuan), Dr Zulkafperi Hanapi (Tanjong Karang), Syed Abu Hussin Hafiz Syed Abdul Fasal (Bukit Gantang), Zahari Kechik (Jeli), Mohd Azizi Abu Naim (Gua Musang), and Iskandar Dzulkarnain Abdul Khalid (Kuala Kangsar). [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysia: Political activist files lawsuit against Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC)

(ba) Political activist Syarul Ema Rena Abu Samah, popularly known as Ratu Naga, has filed a lawsuit against the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), accusing it of infringing on her right to legal representation during an investigation conducted last month.

The originating summons was lodged at the High Court registry on February 26. Syarul Ema identified the MACC chief commissioner, Tan Sri Azam Baki, and the

government as the first and second respondents, respectively.

In an accompanying affidavit, Syarul Ema recounted being detained and brought to the MACC headquarters by its officers for questioning on February 16, following a raid at her residence. During the investigation, she asserted that she was denied the right to have a lawyer present, and her legal representative's request for access during the interrogation was also turned down. [The Star]

Malaysia: Investigation into PAS president now in Attorney-General's Chambers hands

(ba) The investigation into the president of the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), Abdul Hadi Awang, for a statement issued last month has been concluded by the police, according to Inspector-General of Police Razarudin Husain.

Razarudin stated that the investigation report has been forwarded to the Attorney-General's Chambers. Hadi was under scrutiny for his comments, and the charges considered were under the Sedition Act 1948 and the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998.

On March 5, investigators from the Royal Malaysia Police interviewed Hadi at the PAS headquarters in Kuala Lumpur regarding his statement in a release titled "The Importance of Upholding Islam," issued on February 20. Where in the statement Hadi 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. His remarks, particularly concerning the monarchy in the context of a Federal Court decision on Kelantan's shariah criminal enactment, drew criticism from Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah of Selangor. r. [AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1]

The Sultan deemed Hadi's comments as inappropriate and uncultured, expressing concern that they could potentially sow division within the Muslim community. [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysia: Former prime minister among 25 witnesses to be summoned in money laundering trial

(ba) The High Court has mandated that the prosecution in the money laundering case involving former prime minister Najib Razak's USD 5.8 million SRC International must prepare and deliver all witness statements to the defense by May 20.

Justice K Muniandy has scheduled a further mention of the case on May 27. Deputy Public Prosecutor (DPP) Ashrof Adrin Kamarul had initially requested a three-month extension to prepare and serve the witness statements, citing a total of 20 to 25 witnesses. He explained that some witnesses were not presently in the Klang Valley, and efforts were underway to locate them. However, Justice Muniandy directed the prosecution to expedite its preparations.

In addition, Ashrof informed the court that the Attorney-General has not reached a decision on representations submitted on behalf of Najib, seeking to have the charges dropped. Lead defense counsel Shafee Abdullah had earlier stated that these representations were filed in August of the previous year. The trial is scheduled to take place from September 17 to 19 and September 23 to 24. [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysia: Plans to reduce migrant workforce unveiled

(ba) Malaysia is planning to significantly reduce the number of low-skilled migrant workers in the coming years, according to the economy ministry. The move is a response to growing discontent and intolerance towards overseas workers, particularly in the Bangladeshi labor market, where a job scam crisis has unfolded.

Initially brought in during the 1980s to fuel Malaysia's economic growth, these migrant workers played a crucial role in developing the country's infrastructure. However, a shift in public perception now views them as low-wage competitors, with Bangladeshi workers being unfairly targeted for social and economic issues, leading to a rise in xenophobia.

Against this backdrop, Economy Minister Rafizi Ramli announced in parliament that Malaysia aims to achieve a "drastic and significant reduction" in foreign workers as part of its next five-year plan from 2026 to 2031.

Rafizi stated that the National Economic Action Council would initiate discussions next month to address the country's dependence on cheap migrant labor. The government has already implemented a cap on new

migrant worker intake, setting a target of 2.55 million, and May 31 as the deadline for employers to bring in new workers.

These developments coincide with allegations from rights groups, claiming that tens of thousands of Bangladeshi migrant workers were deceived and now find themselves in immigration detention centers or resorting to illegal means to repay debts owed to unscrupulous employment agencies in both Malaysia and Bangladesh.

Reports since December have highlighted the deceptive practices, with workers being promised non-existent jobs upon arrival. On February 27, a construction company faced investigation after 93 Bangladeshi migrant workers were rescued in Kuala Lumpur, having been brought in under a quota scheme but left without employment or income. [South China Morning Post]

Malaysia: Score improved in Pew Religious Restriction Index

(ba) Religious constraints in Malaysia have diminished over the years, as indicated by a recent study conducted by the Washington-based Pew Research Center on 198 countries, released last week.

The study utilized two indices, namely the Government Restrictions Index (GRI) and Social Hostilities Index (SHI). The GRI measures governmental actions limiting religious beliefs, while the SHI assesses acts of religious hostility in society.

In 2021, Malaysia scored 7.7 on the GR and 3.3 on the SHI, a decline from the 2020 scores of 8.5 and 3.5, respectively. Notably, these 2020 scores were higher than the baseline in 2007 (6.4 and 1.0), with a higher score indicating increased restrictions.

Despite this decline, the GRI indicated that government restrictions on religion in Malaysia persist at a "very high" level, placing the country in the same category as others scoring 6.6 and higher. In the Asia-Pacific region, only Afghanistan, China, Iran, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan ranked higher than Malaysia in GRI. Myanmar scored similarly, while Indonesia ranked lower at 7.4, followed by Singapore (6.9) and Brunei (6.5). For SHI, Malaysia fell into the "moderate" group, with a score ranging from 1.5 to 3.5.

The report also highlighted Malaysia's inclusion in a section analyzing 161 countries with governments

simultaneously providing benefits to religious groups. Notably, Pew cited instances of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (Jakim) funding mosque projects, with some funding also allocated to Hindu temples and churches.

Pew's overall findings revealed a global increase in the median level of government restrictions on religion in 2021. The global median score rose to 3.0 on the GRI from 2.8 in 2020 on a 10-point scale of 20 indicators, marking the highest since tracking began in 2007. The study emphasized that religious groups faced harassment by governments in 183 countries in 2021, the largest number recorded.

Article 3(1) of Malaysia's Federal Constitution asserts Islam as the religion of the federation, while allowing the practice of other religions in peace and harmony. [The Malay Mail]

Myanmar: Kachin rebels seize 14 camps in northern Myanmar amid intensified fighting

(jb/jw) In a bold offensive, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in Myanmar's north has captured 14 junta camps along a 120-mile road along the border with China and compelled the surrender of an entire battalion, reports Radio Free Asia.

The KIA's advance near Laiza city, close to the Chinese border, has triggered fierce retaliation from junta forces, with heavy artillery barrages targeting KIA headquarters and shelling residential areas of Laiza. These attacks have spilled over into Chinese territory, resulting in casualties and property damage.

The six-day assault saw the KIA, along with anti-junta People's Defense Forces (PDF), seize strategic positions along the Myitkyina-Bhamo road, disrupting junta supply lines. The surrender of Light Infantry Battalion No. 142 underscores the junta's weakening grip on the region.

The KIA aims to reopen key highways closed since 2011, further challenging junta control. [The Irrawaddy 1] [The Irrawaddy 2] [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: Resistance forces close in on Kani Town amid junta bombings

(jb) As resistance fighters edge closer to capturing Sagaing Region's Kani town after five days of intense fighting, the junta is responding with relentless airstrikes, reports a resident on March 7.

Allied resistance groups initiated the attack on March 2, gaining control of approximately 80 percent of the town by March 7. Despite resistance efforts to evacuate civilians to safety, the extent of civilian casualties and property damage remains unknown.

Sagaing Region, a stronghold for the resistance, has witnessed fierce battles in recent months. While resistance forces have seized several towns, junta reinforcements continue to escalate violence. [The Irrawaddy]

Meanwhile, the Arakan Army (AA) gained control of Ponnagyun town in Rakhine State on March 4 following a battle with the military junta's 550th Infantry Battalion. Situated just 33 km northeast of the state capital, Sittwe, Ponnagyun's capture places the AA within striking distance of the city, already encircled by AA forces.

Despite repeated airstrikes and naval bombardments by the junta during the battle, Ponnagyun fell to the AA. The victory enables the AA to threaten Sittwe and marks a significant advance toward their objective of capturing all of Rakhine State. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Arakan Army offers sanctuary to Rohingya dodging junta conscription

(jb) Amidst Myanmar's military conscription drive, The Irrawaddy reports that the Arakan Army (AA) is offering young Rohingya men in Rakhine State refuge in AA-controlled territories to evade conscription.

With the military's grip slipping in Rakhine, it is coercing Rohingya into combat roles. Over 400 have been seized from villages and displaced persons camps. Observers fear that they are being used as human shields. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Jade mine clashes claim one life, displace hundreds

(jb) A recent three-day raid by the military junta in northern Myanmar has resulted in the death of one man and the destruction of approximately 100 homes,

according to reports from local residents to Radio Free Asia.

The targeted village, located in Kachin state's Hpakant township, fell victim to a joint military offensive launched on March 2 (see AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1). The ongoing conflict between the rebel Kachin Independence Army and the local resistance group, the Kachin People's Defense Force, has made surrounding communities vulnerable to brutal attacks by the junta.

The area, renowned for its jade trade, has become a battleground as both rebel and junta forces vie for dominance over the lucrative gem mines. Troops deployed near Tar Ma Hkan village reportedly set fire to numerous homes and shops. Eyewitnesses recounted the shooting of a man in his forties by junta soldiers during the raid.

While locals claim that the junta camp near the village was seized by rebel forces, independent verification of these assertions remains elusive. [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: Border town hit by conflict fallout

(jb) Trade at the Myawaddy border town in eastern Karen State has taken a drastic hit, plummeting over 40 percent in the past year. The conflict near the Thai-Myanmar border, particularly in neighboring Kawkareik Township, has been cited as the primary cause.

Official data from Myanmar's junta's ministry of commerce reveals a staggering decline in trade value, dropping from USD 1.87 billion to USD 1.085 billion between April 2023 and February 2024.

Myawaddy, the largest border crossing between Thailand and Myanmar, bears the brunt of the ongoing military clashes with anti-regime forces, especially since December last year when the Karen National Union (KNU) intensified attacks in Kawkareik.

The closure of the Myawaddy trade zone has left legal border traders jobless, while unofficial trade persists through alternative routes bypassing conflict zones. However, prospects for trade revival remain dim, with infrastructure damage and continued hostilities impeding normalcy. [Myanmar Now]

Myanmar: Anti-regime activists face death sentences

(jb) Myanmar's junta has sparked outrage among legal experts and human rights advocates for imposing multiple death sentences on anti-regime activists. This harsh crackdown, seen as an attempt to instill fear, is drawing condemnation for turning the country's judicial system into a mockery.

According to the Burma Human Rights Network, 164 people have been sentenced to death since the military coup in February 2021, with some individuals receiving multiple death sentences.

In a recent case, seven activists were sentenced to death for the second or third time for their alleged involvement in the murder of two women believed to be junta informants. This repeated sentencing, coupled with lengthy prison terms, has been labeled as unprecedented and unjust by legal experts.

Calls for fair and lawful treatment of detainees continue amidst mounting concerns over the junta's increasingly draconian measures. [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: Junta forces accused of 210 massacres, over 2,000 deaths since coup

(jb) A recent report by the Nyan Lynn Thit Analytica group, a local Yangon-based monitoring organization, claims that Myanmar's junta forces have orchestrated approximately 210 massacres, resulting in the deaths of over 2,000 individuals since the military coup in February 2021. These massacres, defined as the killing of five or more unarmed people in a single incident, have predominantly targeted civilians, reflecting the regime's brutal tactics.

Over half of these massacres occurred in Sagaing Region, a focal point of resistance against the junta. The period from September to December 2023 witnessed 37 massacres nationwide, claiming 283 civilian lives. The victims include those killed in ground assaults, aerial bombings, and indiscriminate shelling.

The report also highlights the arbitrary killings of Rakhine civilians and the extensive destruction caused by indiscriminate airstrikes. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Pa-O army accuses military junta of using chemical weapons

(jw) According to the Pa-O National Liberation Army, Myanmar's military regime dropped chemical bombs on Hsi Hseng in southern Shan State on March 7.

Fighting between the junta and the rebel armed forces broke out on March 4 when junta soldiers attempted to reclaim the town that was captured by rebel troops in late January.

The Pa-O forces said on March 6 that junta drones attacked the town using chemical bombs that resulted in oxygen depletion, fatigue, dizziness, rapid breathing and itching.

The Irrawaddy could not independently verify these reports.

Last December, the Arakan Army also accused the junta of using chemicals weapons in Paletwa Township. The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army also previously accused the junta of attacking its Nant Zalat hill base from Hseni Township with chemical bombs. [The Irrawaddy]

The Philippines: Former senator De Lima to seek dismissal of last remaining drug case

(lb/lm) In the Philippines, court proceedings for the final charge against human rights advocate and former Philippine senator Leila de Lima are scheduled to resume, marking her legal battle's latest phase. This comes four months after she was granted bail in November 2023, which provided temporary relief from detention. De Lima's legal team intends to submit a demurrer to evidence, aiming to have the case dismissed due to insufficient evidence. [Amnesty International] [Manila Bulletin]

This remaining case is the sole survivor among the three initiated by the Department of Justice against De Lima. She faced allegations, stemming from her scrutiny of former President Duterte’s anti-drug campaign, of receiving bribes from incarcerated drug traffickers. Despite never being convicted, De Lima was detained at the Manila police headquarters from February 2017 until her bail release in November last year. The preceding two cases were dismissed by courts in 2021 and 2023, respectively.

The Philippines: Ex-president Duterte appointed as administrator of Kingdom of Jesus Christ properties

(lm) Former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has been appointed as the new administrator for the properties of *Kingdom of Jesus Christ* (KJC), a religious group known for its evangelical activities and extensive network of churches both within the Philippines and internationally. [Inquirer.net]

It is worth noting that this appointment follows shortly after Parliament's upper House sought the arrest of KJC founder Apollo Quiboloy, a close friend of Duterte's, for failing to attend an investigation into accusations of child abuse, human trafficking, and other related offenses. These allegations had surfaced in connection with an investigation by the Philippine Senate's Children, Family Relations, and Gender Equality committee.

Philippines: Human rights advocates seek UN support for abolition of NTF-ELCAC, anti-terror law

A delegation of human rights defenders from the Philippines has sought support from the United Nations Human Rights Council to abolish the government's anti-insurgency task force, the National Task Force to End Local Communist Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), and the controversial Anti-Terrorism Law of 2020 (ATL). The delegation plans to testify on ongoing human rights violations under the administration of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., citing findings by UN rapporteurs who recommended the abolition of NTF-ELCAC and the Anti-Terrorism Law. The government's actions have been criticized for red-tagging civilians and obstructing legislation aimed at safeguarding human rights defenders. The delegation aims to raise awareness internationally and meet with representatives from UN member states and civil society organizations concerned about the human rights situation in the Philippines. [Philstar]

The Philippines: Foreign exchange reserves drop for second month to USD 102.7 billion

(lm) In February, the Philippines' dollar reserves decreased for the second consecutive month due to government repayments of maturing foreign debts. Preliminary data from the central bank showed a decline in gross international reserves (GIR) to USD 102.7 billion, down from USD 103.3 billion in January. Similarly, net international reserves also slightly decreased to USD 102.66 billion. [Inquirer.net]

Despite this decline, the central bank remains sufficient to cover the country's import needs for 7.7 months and exceeds short-term external debt by a significant margin. The bank projects the GIR to end at USD 102 billion in 2024, based on expectations of a lower dollar surplus and improvements in the country's external position.

The Philippines: Military beings implementation of new archipelagic defense strategy

(lb/lm) The military in the Philippines has launched the "Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept" (CADC), aiming to protect the country's entire territory and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr. emphasized that the CADC is a strategic move to safeguard natural resources for future generations without constant directives. [Inquirer.net]

The Philippine Navy's flag-officer-in-command, Vice Admiral Toribio Adaci Jr., highlighted the potential role of naval reservists in the CADC. [PNA]

Singapore: Laws proposed to give police more powers to apprehend those with mental disorders

(lb) Singapore's is proposing amendments to empower police officers to apprehend individuals showing signs of mental disorders and posing a safety risk to themselves or others. The move follows concerns raised by the High Court over a case of wrongful arrest in 2017 and aims to align the powers of apprehension with the Criminal Procedure Code. [CNA]

Under the Law Enforcement and Other Matters Bill, police will be empowered to search, restrain, and use necessary force when apprehending such individuals. The amendments aim to clarify thresholds for apprehensions under the Mental Health (Care and

Treatment) Act and align police powers with those under the Criminal Procedure Code.

Singapore: Government to provide funding for companies to meet new climate reporting requirements

(lb) The Singapore government has introduced a new Sustainability Reporting Grant to assist companies in covering nearly a third of the costs associated with producing their initial sustainability reports. mandatory climate-related reporting requirements for listed and large non-listed companies, based on international standards, beginning in 2025. Large companies with revenues exceeding USD 100 million will be eligible for grants of up to 30 percent of the report preparation costs, while small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) will receive support for participating in a program to develop their sustainability reports. [ESG Today]

Singapore: Charity raises record USD 8.1 million in Gaza fundraiser; sum dispensed to UNRWA

(lb) A fund-raising campaign by the Rahmatan Lil Alamin Foundation (RLAF), a charitable organization based in Singapore, raised over USD 8.1 million in just under a month for communities in the Gaza Strip, where the humanitarian situation is deteriorating amidst ongoing hostilities between Israel and Hamas. [The Straits Times]

The funds raised by RLAF between October and November last year have been allocated to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). UNRWA serves as a critical lifeline for two million people in the Gaza Strip. However, the agency faced funding cuts in January following accusations by Israel against several of its staff for their alleged involvement in the October 7 Hamas attack.

Singapore: Government to inject USD 75 million boost into arts and culture over the next four years

(lb) Singapore is set to allocate an additional USD 75 million over four years to enhance the Our SG Arts Plan 2023-2027, aiming to strengthen various aspects of the arts sector. Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth Low Yen Ling outlined initiatives to expand arts access, develop artists, and promote arts for wellbeing. Efforts include partnering with healthcare entities, enhancing heritage-based interventions for seniors, engaging youth in heritage preservation, and creating transformative projects and heritage nodes. Support for self-employed practitioners will also be bolstered through enhanced training opportunities and increased funding access. [Yahoo News]

Thailand: Election Commission to seek dissolution of main opposition Move Forward Party

(bk/lm) Thailand's Election Commission (EC) has announced that it will seek the dissolution of the main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP), following a Constitutional Court ruling deeming the party's proposal to amend the royal anti-defamation law an attempt to undermine the constitutional monarchy. The EC also called on the Constitutional Court to ban MFP executives from contesting future elections. [The Straits Times] [Associated Press]

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.

Earlier this month, the EC stated that the dissolution case against the 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. [AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1]

Shortly before the EC's decision, Chaithawat Tulathon, the leader of the MFP, addressed speculation about the party's potential dissolution due to its stance against the royal defamation law. He expressed the party's readiness to face any outcome. These sentiments echoed earlier remarks made by former MFP prime ministerial candidate Pita Limjaroenrat, who, in an interview last month, mentioned that the

party had prepared a succession plan in case of dissolution, emphasizing that the party's ideology would endure. [Bangkok Post]

This move by the EC echoes the dissolution of the MFP's predecessor, the Future Forward Party, which was dissolved by the Constitutional Court in 2020. The dissolution came after the court found the party's co-founder, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, guilty of violating election laws by loaning money to the party. This decision led to widespread protests by pro-democracy activists who saw it as a move to suppress opposition voices.

Thailand: King's estranged son Vacharaesorn makes third visit to Thailand

(bk) Thailand's royal family dynamics have once again captured attention as Vacharaesorn Vivacharawongse, the second-eldest son of King Maha Vajiralongkorn, returned to the country on March 6, marking his third visit in under a year. He is expected to stay until April for the Songkran Festival and plans to return with his three brothers on future visits, although the dates are yet to be scheduled. [The Nation]

Vivacharawongse is one of four sons born to the king and former actress Sujarinee Vivacharawongse. The couple divorced in 1996 and the king disowned the four boys, stripping them of their royal titles. Since then, Vivacharawongse has been living in the United States.

However, recent events hint at a potential shift in familial dynamics. Vacharaesorn's visits to Thailand have grown more frequent, indicating reconnection with his homeland. In August in 2023, he made a surprise visit with his younger brother Chakriwat, about seven months after Princess Bajrakitiyabha, viewed by many as a potential successor, had been admitted to the hospital [see AiR No. 33, August/2023, 3]. In December 2023, Vacharaesorn made a second visit to join Thais in celebrating Father's Day in honor of his grandfather, the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej [see AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1].

Interestingly, according to unconfirmed reports, Vacharaesorn and his American wife have called off a divorce that they had initially planned to open the door of succession. Thailand’s law of succession dictates that descendants of the royal family “shall be excluded from the line of succession” if they are “married to a foreign consort.” However, the wife reportedly wants

her children to be recognized as royalty, while Vacharaesorn has allegedly been telling people that they are divorced. [New York Post]

Thailand: Prime Minister Srettha, ex-Premier Thaksin visits to Chiang Mai coincide

(bk) Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was released on parole due to his age and declining health in late February, has been granted permission by the Probation Department to travel to his hometown, Chiang Mai, from March 14-16. Coincidentally, Prime Minister Srettha is scheduled to visit Chiang Mai from March 15-17 and has suggested the possibility of a meeting with Thaksin during his visit. [Bangkok Post] [Thai PBS World]

Thaksin's planned trip to Chiang Mai has been criticized by the *Network of Students and People Reforming Thailand*, a group that had already voiced opposition against Thaksin's stay in the police hospital. [Bangkok Post 2]

During his stay in Chiang Mai, Thaksin will reside at his resort house in the Green Valley Golf Course, owned by automotive tycoon Sansern Chulangkul. Sansern's younger brothers include Suriya Juangroongruangkit, the current Minister of Transport from the ruling Pheu Thai Party, and Pattana Juangroongruangkit, the late father of Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit. Despite sharing ancestry, Sansern adopted the Chulangkul surname, while the other two chose Juangroongruangkit.

Suriya, a seasoned politician, previously served as the secretary-general of the Thai Rak Thai Party under Thaksin's leadership. During Gen Prayut Chan-o-cha's administration, he and his allies held influential roles in the ruling Palang Pracharath Party, with Suriya serving as Minister of Industry from 2019-2023. Meanwhile, his nephew, Thanathorn, founded the progressive Future Forward Party in 2018, succeeded by the Move Forward Party, which now rivals Pheu Thai.

Chiang Mai, known as Thaksin's stronghold, saw a significant shift in the 2023 election, with the Move Forward Party winning 7 out of 10 seats, leaving Pheu Thai with only 2.

Thailand: Main opposition Move Forward Party seeks censure debate for early April

(msz) Thailand's main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) has announced plans to submit a motion for a general debate, without a vote of no-confidence, in parliament. This debate is expected to take place during the first week of April, following the passage of the 2024 budget bill and before the conclusion of the current parliamentary session. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Parliament rejects MFP-sponsored labor welfare bill over cost concerns, agrees to two other

(msz) The lower House of the Thai Parliament has rejected a Move Forward Party (MFP)-sponsored labor welfare bill over fears that it could lead to a 30 percent rise in labor costs in the country. However, the House has agreed in principle on two other drafts – one proposed by the Bhumjaithai Party, the second-largest party in the ruling coalition, and another by the MFP. [Bangkok Post]

The rejected MFP bill aimed to mandate monthly contracts and minimum wage payments for employees, along with benefits equivalent to permanent counterparts. Additionally, it proposed a cap of 40 weekly work hours, except for hazardous jobs [see AiR No.5, March/2024, 1].

Meanwhile, the Bhumjaithai Party's draft focused on fully paid paternal leave for 49 out of 98 days and extending paternity leave rights to male workers. The second MFP-sponsored bill aimed to extend paternity leave to 180 days and require employers to pay workers for at least 90 days during paternity leave.

Thailand: Authorities announce crackdown on land encroachment in Khao Yai National Park

(lm) Authorities in Thailand have initiated an investigation into land encroachment in Khao Yai National Park, aiming to identify tycoons who improperly acquired farmland reserved for landless farmers and take legal action against them and all implicated officials. [Bangkok Post]

This probe follows findings by the agriculture ministry revealing numerous violations of land title regulations

under the Sor Por Kor reform initiative along the park's boundaries. Violations include illegal soil excavation for commercial use and unauthorized sales of land plots. In connection with this, two officials are anticipated to face arrest warrants for allegedly breaching laws related to land allocation near Khao Yai Park. [The Nation Thailand]

Thailand: Probe launched into legitimacy of Cape Yamu land certificates after assault incident

(bk) Officials from the Department of Special Investigation (DSI) and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment plan to scrutinize the legitimacy of Nor Sor 3 Kor certificates issued for over 16 hectares of land on Cape Yamu. Yamu beach is a popular tourist spot in Phuket, filled with luxury developments and upscale residences. Currently, a private villa occupies this plot of land and has been at the center of an investigation involving its Swiss tenant accused of assaulting a Thai woman on the villa's staircase, allegedly for trespassing, on February 24. The incident sparked local uproar, leading to calls for the tenant's expulsion. His visa was confirmed revoked on March 6, 2024. [Thai PBS World] [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Nor Sor 3 Kor is a form of land title certificate that grants the holder the authority to lease, purchase, and sell land, on the condition that the land must be utilized and not left neglected. For that reason, this type of land certificate is typically issued for actively utilized areas to legitimize them. However, according to official land survey records, this particular area on Cape Yamu is shown to have historically been minimally utilized and therefore should not have fulfilled the legal requirements for Nor Sor 3 Kor issuance. Without a valid Nor Sor 3 Kor, this plot of land would remain public property, open to everyone's use.

The DSI deputy director-general stressed that if officials were found complicit in the legally dubious issuance, they would face accountability, with the case forwarded to the National Anti-Corruption Commission for investigation. Additionally, he acknowledged suspicions of foreign organized crime groups utilizing illicit funds to acquire property in Phuket.

Thailand: Special unit formed to apprehend officials linked to drug trafficking in border regions

(lm) The Office of the Narcotics Control Board (ONCB) in Thailand has established a dedicated unit tasked with probing and apprehending government officials engaged in illicit drug activities along border regions. Notably, the ONCB has opted to undertake this initiative independently, without collaboration with other government entities, citing concerns about the effectiveness of joint efforts. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Court approves third detention extension of monarchy reform activists

(bk) In Thailand, the Criminal Court has granted the police's request for an extension of the detention of two monarchy reform activists, Tantawan Tuatulanon and Natthanon Chaimahabutra, until March 20. This extension, the third granted by the court, comes with a directive for the police to accelerate their interrogation process during this prolonged period. [Thai PBS World]

Tantawan and Natthanon are charged with violating Section 116 of the Criminal Code for allegedly disrupting the motorcade of Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn by honking their car horn on a Bangkok expressway. The pair was arrested on February 12 and has been on hunger strike since entering detention [see AiR No. 9, February/2024, 4].

Upon the court's decision announcement, prominent figures, including former Thammasat University rector Professor Charnvit Kasetsiri, social critic Sulak Sivaraksa and independent journalist Atukkit Sawangsuk, opposed the extension, arguing that the alleged offense was merely an ideological conflict and that the suspects, who have not yet been indicted, should be entitled to bail.

Thailand: 20 years since rights lawyer Somchai Neelapaijit disappeared, still no justice

(lm) Thai and international human rights activists have once again called for justice as March 12 marks twenty years since the disappearance of Somchai Neelapaijit, a prominent human rights lawyer and activist. Somchai vanished under suspicious circumstances in March 2004 while defending his southern Muslim clients

against torture and other rights violations during martial law. [Bangkok Post]

Following Somchai's disappearance, his wife, Angkhana Neelapaijit, emerged as a vocal advocate for human rights. She focused particularly on issues concerning enforced disappearances, torture, and justice for victims of human rights abuses. Angkhana co-founded the Justice for Peace Foundation, committed to advocating for the rights of victims of human rights violations in Thailand. In recognition of her unwavering dedication, Angkhana Neelapaijit was honored with the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 2019, often hailed as Asia's Nobel Prize.

Thailand: Seven projects planned to turn Phuket into regional economic hub

(bk) In the context of Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin's "Thailand Vision" plan, aimed at nationwide transformation across eight key sectors, the Transport Ministry has revealed seven projects to bolster transport infrastructure in Phuket province. These initiatives, requiring over USD 41.44 million in investment, encompass upgrades to Phuket International Airport, highway expansions, road construction, and the development of Andaman Airport as a second airport. Funding for these projects will be sourced from the fiscal 2024 budget, with implementation scheduled to begin in 2026. [The Nation 1]

Separately, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports revealed plans for the Thailand Film Office to engage at the Hong Kong International Film and TV Market (FILMART), one of Asia's largest entertainment industry events. The objective is to not only spotlight the Thai film and television industry but also to present filming locations and incentive measures, such as a 20 percent cash rebate, to foreign filmmaking crews. It is anticipated that this package will draw over USD 28 million investments from foreign filmmakers in 2024, mainly from China and Hong Kong SAR. [The Nation 2]

Thailand: More than USD 93 million seized from online scammers in past four months

(msz) During its operations between November last year and the end of February, the Anti-Online Scam Operations Centre (AOC) has seized over USD 93

million from call-center fraudsters. The AOC has successfully frozen a significant portion of targeted accounts and is working on legal amendments to expedite restitution to victims. Additionally, it is collaborating with the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) to deactivate suspect mobile numbers and has blocked numerous websites associated with online gambling and scams. [The Nation Thailand]

Thailand: Budget rejection 'wont halt' navy's frigate purchase plan, Defense Minister Sutin says

(msz) Thailand's Defence Minister Sutin Klungsan has said that the navy's plan to buy a new frigate will remain unchanged despite its request for a budget to fund the the purchase being rejected by the parliamentary committee vetting the 2024 budget bill. [Bangkok Post]

The Royal Thay Navy (RTN) had 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. However, the special committee denied funding for the acquisition of a new frigate, causing RTN commander Adm Adoon Pan-iam to appeal the subcommittee's rejection, saying in a letter that a new ship is needed [see AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1]. That appeal was also rejected by the committee on March 5.

Speaking against this backdrop, Minister Sutin said on March 8 that the House committee disagreed with the RTN's plan to buy both a frigate and a submarine in the same fiscal year as this would make the Defence Ministry's budget "overblown", which would run counter to the government's policy to cut budget spending and personnel. However, Sutin clarified that the purchase might happen in other fiscal years.

It is worth recalling that the Defence Ministry is expected to soon resolve the USD 310 million submarine procurement issue from China. Initially initiated by the Prayuth administration in 2017, the deal faced delays when Germany prohibited the use of its engines for Chinese military exports. Despite considerations to abandon the project in favor of acquiring another frigate, it appears that Bangkok is now leaning towards adopting a Chinese engine for the submarine [see AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1].

Meanwhile, the lower House committee on the armed forces, presently chaired by a lawmaker from the main opposition Move Forward Party, has endorsed the RTN's proposal to acquire a new frigate. The committee highlights that this new vessel would mark the inaugural instance of such a craft being assembled in Thailand, promising substantial economic benefits for local laborers. Moreover, the committee contends that imparting skills to domestic workers will contribute to long-term savings in maintenance expenditures. [Bangkok Post]

Vietnam: Two foreign-based groups labelled 'terrorist organization'

(lm) Vietnam has labeled two foreign-based political groups, the Montagnard Support Group Inc. (MSGI) and Montagnard Stand for Justice (MSFJ), as "terrorist organizations." [Radio Free Asia]

The term "Montagnard" refers to various ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. These groups, including the Jarai, Rhade, Bahnar, and others, have distinct cultures, languages, and traditions separate from the Vietnamese majority. The Montagnards have faced challenges in Vietnam, including issues related to land rights, religious freedom, and discrimination. Many have sought asylum or resettlement in other countries due to persecution and human rights abuses.

The decision to label the two organizations as terrorist groups comes after an attack in Vietnam's Central Highlands last June, which resulted in the deaths of nine people and dozens being arrested [see AiR No. 25, June/2023, 3]. Despite advocating for the rights of the mainly Protestant Montagnard ethnic minority, the groups have denied involvement in violence and assert that they operate peacefully to fight for human rights and religious freedom.

Vietnam: International rights organization call on government to release female political prisoners

(wn) The *Vietnam Committee on Human Rights* (VCHR), a France-based NGO monitoring human rights abuses in Vietnam, has marked International Women's Day by urging the release of all female prisoners of conscience in Vietnam. With over 30 women among the country's 200-plus political prisoners, the VCHR emphasized that

these individuals were advocating for fundamental rights, social justice, and environmental protection, rather than posing threats to national security. [RFA]

Vietnam: Woman fined for calling judges ‘idiots’

(lm) Nguyen Thi Chau, the wife of a political activist serving a six-year sentence for "anti-state propaganda," has been fined over USD 300 for posting a photo of her husband on Facebook with the text "Idiots judge the innocent." The fine was imposed under a regulation governing penalties for administrative violations related to postal services and telecommunications, alleging dissemination of false information and insulting the prestige of agencies and organizations. [Radio Free Asia]

Chau vehemently denies the accusation, asserting that she merely shared information about her husband's case. She contends that the fine infringes upon her freedom of expression, a right safeguarded by Vietnam’s constitution and international conventions. Additionally, Chau perceives the fine as an effort by authorities to silence her and curtail her ability to share information about her husband and engage in social commentary. She argues that ambiguous legal provisions empower authorities to stifle dissent while depriving citizens of their fundamental right to express themselves freely.

Vietnam: Released from prison, activist vows to fight on

(lm) Vietnamese activist Huynh Truong Ca, recently released from a five-and-a-half-year prison term, has committed to continuing his advocacy for human rights and democracy in Vietnam, despite facing three years of probation [Radio Free Asia]

Ca, a member of the Constitution group, known for advocating civil and human rights, as well as promoting democratic reforms within the country, was one of nine members of the group arrested in 2018 for participating in a protest against bills on Special Economic Zones and cyber security. Two members of the group remain imprisoned.

Vietnam: Two prominent political activists detained, charged with anti-state propaganda

(lm) In Vietnam, two prominent human rights activists, Nguyen Chi Tuyen and Nguyen Vu Binh, have been arrested made under charges of "propaganda against the state". International organizations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists and Human Rights Watch have condemned the arrests, urging Vietnam to respect freedom of expression and release those detained for exercising their basic rights. [Radio Free Asia]

Tuyen, known for his involvement in protests regarding national sovereignty and environmental protection, ran YouTube channels commenting on these issues. He had previously faced police questioning and travel restrictions. Meanwhile, Nguyen Vu Binh, is a former editor of Communist Review and blogger for Radio Free Asia.

Vietnam: Foreign workers play crucial role in enhancing labor productivity

(wn) Foreign workers in Vietnam have significantly enhanced the country's labor productivity and efficiency in production and business activities. This was highlighted at a dialogue in Ho Chi Minh City aimed at aiding enterprises employing foreign workers in navigating challenges. Approximately 30,000 foreigners in the city contribute expertise, management experience, and professional skills to meet international standards. Despite recent regulatory changes aimed at facilitating foreign labor, there are still challenges in implementation. Discussions at the dialogue centered on licensing, entry and exit procedures, tax calculation, and insurance payments for foreign workers, with relevant government agencies providing assistance to address these issues. [Vietnam News]

Vietnam: Seafood exports projected to reach USD 9.5 billion in 2024

(wn) Vietnam's seafood exports are projected to reach USD 9.5 billion in 2024. Early indicators show positive signals, with a 64 percent increase in demand in the first months of 2024, totaling USD 750 million. All major seafood product categories experienced significant growth compared to the same period last

year, with exports to China showing a remarkable threefold increase. In 2023, Vietnam's seafood export revenue reached USD 9 billion, marking an 18 percent decline from the previous year. [Xinhua]

Vietnam: Chamber of Commerce suggests zero value-added tax (VAT) for exported services

(wn) The Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) has recommended maintaining a zero value-added tax (VAT) rate for exported services to preserve the competitiveness of Vietnamese providers. This proposal comes in response to the Ministry of Finance's draft proposal to impose VAT on most exported services, shifting away from the current zero rate. VCCI argues that imposing a 10 percent VAT rate on exported services would hinder Vietnamese providers' ability to compete internationally, as most countries maintain a zero VAT rate on exported services. [Xinhua]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

Indonesian President Jokowi urges cooperation and solidarity at ASEAN-Australia Special Summit

(jb) On 6 March 2024, President Joko Widodo attended the plenary session of the ASEAN-Australian Special Summit in Melbourne, Australia. During the session, Jokowi emphasized the significance of collaboration

between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Australia, and their shared responsibility in maintaining regional stability, peace, and prosperity.

Highlighting ASEAN's projected global economic power by 2040, President Jokowi urged for stronger economic integration and investment opportunities in Southeast Asia.

President Jokowi reaffirmed Indonesia's solidarity with Palestine, calling for an end to the genocide in the Gaza Strip. He emphasized the importance of respecting international law and maintaining a rule-based order without double standards.

The summit, held to commemorate 50 years of partnership between ASEAN and Australia, saw discussions on various shared challenges and visions for the region.

Addressing Australia, Jokowi underscored the importance of its support in optimizing the potential of the region's young, literate workforce. President Jokowi lauded the negotiation of the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement, through which Australia could stimulate knowledge transfer and public and private partnerships.

President Jokowi encouraged inclusive cooperation to foster strategic trust, hoping for Australia to act as a bridge for ASEAN's engagement with the Pacific Islands Forum and the Indian Ocean Rim Association. [Antara News] [Antara News] [Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia]

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim advocates for lasting ceasefire in Gaza at ASEAN-Australia summit

(ba) Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim stressed the urgent need for an immediate and enduring ceasefire in Gaza during the ASEAN-Australian Special Summit 2024, urging all Asean member countries, and Australia, to actively advocate for this critical measure.

Highlighting the deteriorating situation in Gaza, Anwar pointed out the loss of over 30,000 Palestinian civilians, including more than 12,000 children, with the looming threat of famine. He called for the consistent provision of safe and unimpeded humanitarian aid to innocent civilians in Gaza.

Anwar emphasized the potential constructive role ASEAN and Australia could play on the global stage,

seeking a peaceful and lasting solution to the conflict. He underscored the importance of ending the long-standing Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories for a viable two-state solution and lasting peace in the Middle East. Anwar reiterated that Israel's aggression has exacerbated divisions and prejudices, contributing to the global spread of Islamophobia, a trend that must be halted.

Addressing the South China Sea issue, Anwar reaffirmed Malaysia's commitment to the peaceful resolution of disputes based on universally recognized principles of international law, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (Unclos).

Expressing concern about the protracted Myanmar crisis, now entering its fourth year without significant progress, Anwar stated Malaysia's dedication to implementing the Asean five-point consensus for a peaceful and enduring resolution. He pledged close collaboration with Laos and Indonesia to address the ongoing efforts to resolve the Myanmar crisis.

Anwar expressed gratitude to Australia for its support of Asean and the five-point consensus, emphasizing the shared vision for peace and stability in the region. Calling for increased dialogue and peaceful coexistence for a safer and better future, he affirmed Malaysia's commitment to playing a constructive and meaningful role. [The Star]

World Trade Organization (WTO) backs European Union in deforestation case against Malaysia

On March 5, an adjudicating panel of the World Trade Organization handed down a verdict, which dismissed a complaint from Malaysia regarding a decision of the European Union (EU) to exclude palm oil-based biodiesel from being categorized as a renewable biofuel, marking the WTO's first-ever ruling related to deforestation.

At the same time, the panel acknowledged Malaysia's grievances regarding the preparation, publication, and administration of the measures.

While the EU is required to make some adjustments to the measures, it is not obligated to retract them. The decision marks the WTO's first ruling concerning the differential treatment of products based on their greenhouse gas emission risks.

The crux of the dispute revolves around EU regulations mandating 10 percent of transport fuels to be derived from renewable sources, with crop-based biofuels deemed renewable if they meet sustainability criteria. The EU specifically excludes crops cultivated on deforested land or those posing a high risk of displacing food crops, which are subsequently grown on cleared land.

The EU had determined that palm oil-based biofuel should no longer qualify as renewable by 2030, while crops grown within the EU, such as sunflower or rapeseed, were exempt from this phasing out.

Malaysia and Indonesia, the world's top two palm oil producers, jointly responsible for 85 percent of global exports, contested the EU's decision at the WTO. [The Malay Mail]

EU agrees to global ban on forced labor in supply chains

(ms) The European Union's provisional agreement to ban goods made using forced labor, from March 5, represents a significant step in addressing human rights abuses in supply chains, with China's Xinjiang region being a key focus. While the ban is not explicitly aimed at any specific country, it is widely understood to be a response to allegations of state-sponsored forced labor in Xinjiang.

Unlike the United States' ban, which targets goods specifically made in Xinjiang, the EU's ban will apply globally, covering products from all over the world, including within the EU itself. This broad scope underscores the EU's commitment to combatting forced labor wherever it occurs.

The agreement outlines a framework for enforcement, with responsibilities divided between the European Commission and member states. National authorities will investigate suspected cases of forced labor in supply chains, while the Commission will focus on cases involving third countries. If forced labor is found to have been used, authorities can demand the withdrawal of goods from the market and impose fines on non-compliant companies.

Additionally, the Commission will identify specific economic sectors and geographic regions where state-imposed forced labor is prevalent. Importers and exporters will be required to provide extra details to EU customs for goods identified as high-risk.

The implications of this deal for countries in South, Southeast, and East Asia are significant. These regions are major trading partners with the EU, and many rely on exports to the European market. The ban on goods made with forced labor will necessitate stricter scrutiny of supply chains, particularly in sectors and regions where forced labor is prevalent.

The provisional agreement will now require final approval from both the European Parliament and Council. Subsequently, the regulation will be published in the Official Journal and come into effect the next day. Following this, EU member states will have a period of three years to begin implementing the new rules in their national jurisdiction. [European Parliament] [Reuters] [South China Morning Post]

China grants visa-free travel for six more European countries

(ms) After France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and Malaysia in the end of last year (see AiR No. 48, November/2023, 4), China has extended its 15-day visa-free travel policy to six additional European countries on a trial basis, effective from March 14 to November 30, 2024.

The countries included in this expansion are Switzerland, Ireland, Hungary, Austria, Belgium, and Luxembourg. This move aims to facilitate travel for ordinary passport holders from these nations, allowing them to enter China for purposes such as tourism, business, visiting relatives, and transit without the need for a visa.

The announcement was made by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on March 7. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasized the reciprocity of visa facilitation and expressed hope for similar measures from other countries to benefit Chinese citizens.

Additionally, Wang highlighted China's efforts to strengthen cooperation with foreign diplomats and promote high-standard free trade agreements to enhance the business environment and provide long-term benefits for investors and partners worldwide.

China's decision comes amidst its continued economic growth and commitment to quality development, positioning itself as a key contributor to global growth. Wang underscored the importance of China's openness to the world, stressing the interconnectedness of China's development with global prosperity and urging against pessimism

regarding China's role in international cooperation and development. [China Briefing] [Global Times]

China, Iran and Russia hold joint naval exercises

(ms) China, Iran, and Russia are conducting joint naval exercises in the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea this week. Named "Security Bond-2024" by China and "Maritime Security Belt - 2024" by Russia, these drills aim to enhance maritime cooperation and ensure the safety of maritime economic activities in the region.

The exercises involve warships and aviation from the participating countries. China has dispatched its guided missile destroyer Urumqi, guided missile frigate Linyi, and comprehensive supply ship Dongpinghu. Russia's grouping is led by the Varyag, a missile cruiser from its Pacific Fleet.

Observers from Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Oman, India, and South Africa are present during the drills. The practical part of the exercise will take place in the waters of the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea, according to statements from the Russian defense ministry.

The timing of these exercises coincides with heightened tensions in the region due to ongoing conflicts in Gaza and attacks on vessels in the Red Sea attributed to Iran-backed Houthi rebels. Houthi leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi has threatened further escalations if perceived aggression against Gaza continues.

These joint drills between China, Iran, and Russia have raised concerns among U.S. officials, who see them as potential challenges to American and western interests in the region. [Reuters] [VOA News]

Japan to export fighter jets jointly developed with Britain, Italy

(sh) On March 6, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio declared the government's commitment to developing a framework allowing the export of next-generation fighter jets to other nations, to be jointly developed with Britain and Italy.

Japan, Britain, and Italy's defense ministers signed an agreement on December 14, to form a joint organization for the development of an advanced jet

fighter. They had previously decided to combine their separate plans to develop a new combat aircraft by 2035 (see AiR No. 51, December/2023, 3).

While the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and the government aim to relax Japan's strict arms export guidelines, their coalition partner Komeito remains cautious.

In a session of the Diet, Kishida emphasized Japan's need for defense-capable aircraft and stressed the necessity for a framework facilitating direct transfers to third countries to ensure successful international collaboration. Kishida asserted that such a framework would enhance security, safeguarding lives and serving Japan's national interests.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Hayashi Yoshimasa revealed during a Wednesday press briefing that Britain and Italy see third-country transfers as essential for cost reduction, urging Japan to adopt a similar approach.

However, lawmaker Izumi Kenta of the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, the main opposition party, underscored the importance of Japan avoiding involvement in global conflicts with its weapons. [NHK]

Japan's central bank warns against risks of rapid digitalization of finance in Asia

(sh) On March 6, Bank of Japan (BOJ) Governor Kazuo Ueda voiced concerns regarding the rapid expansion of digital finance in Asia during the 18th iteration of the Asia-Pacific High-Level Meeting on Bank Supervision, held on March 6 in Tokyo. He emphasized the importance of striking a balance between the benefits and risks of financial innovation to ensure stability in the financial system.

Ueda highlighted the significant growth of digital financial services in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly among people in emerging nations who rely on smartphones for daily payments due to limited access to traditional banking services. While this fosters financial inclusion, Ueda cautioned against the rising cyber-security threats and underscored the need for stronger anti-money laundering regulations.

Amidst the increasing diversity of financial services and providers, Ueda emphasized the importance of implementing consistent regulations for similar financial activities and risks. However, he acknowledged the challenge of determining which

activities and risks should be treated similarly under this principle. [Reuters] [Bank of Japan]

Japan joins French space force exercise

(sh) On March 8, Japanese troops joined the French space force for training sessions at the Toulouse base, marking an unprecedented collaboration that also involved teams from the European Union, NATO partners, and South Korea.

The AsterX 2024 exercise, spanning two weeks starting March 11, comprises 23 scenarios, including simulated attacks on military satellites, aimed at enhancing coordination and establishing a joint space command among the participating forces.

Major General Philippe Adam, the French space commander, emphasized the importance of such drills in preparing for potential space conflicts, citing the growing congestion and threats in orbit.

Among the 150 participants from various nations, approximately 30 are from the armed forces of Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, Poland, Portugal, Romania, South Korea, Spain, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom.

The exercises, primarily conducted through computerized simulations, encompass virtual orbital combat, cyberattacks, and collisions with space objects, simulating a conflict against a fictional state aiming to destabilize countries and regions. [Nikkei Asia]

Japanese judge is elected as ICC president

(sh) On March 11, Japanese judge Tomoko Akane was elected as the president of the International Criminal Court (ICC), marking a historic moment as the first Japanese national to hold this position since the ICC's establishment in 2002.

Akane's presidency comes at a crucial time as the ICC addresses war crimes related to Russia's aggression against Ukraine and violations of international law in the conflict between Israel and the Hamas militant group.

The election took place through an internal vote among 18 judges, following the expiration of the term

of former ICC President Piotr Hofmanski, a Polish national. [Japan News]

Japan pledges for development assistance to developing countries

(sh) On March 12, Japan released a new Development Cooperation Charter policy guideline that presents a shift towards "offer-based" development assistance rather than solely relying on requests from developing countries.

The Foreign Ministry's white paper on development cooperation outlined plans to enhance the official development assistance system by blending proactive aid with the traditional request-based method. This change follows the revision of the Development Cooperation Charter policy guideline in June, prompted by China's growing economic influence in developing nations.

The document emphasized that fostering a peaceful, stable, and prosperous global community is crucial for Japan's national interests.

Commenting on the white paper, Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa underscored the significance of foreign aid as a key diplomatic tool, particularly in promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific region amid rising tensions with China.

Additionally, Japan reiterated its commitment to supporting reconstruction efforts in Ukraine following Russia's invasion, highlighting the importance of collaboration with private firms and attracting investment for sustainable development. [Kyodo News]

Mongolia receives aid from China, US to fight impacts of harsh winter

(fg) Mongolia receives financial aid from both China and the US amid current severe dzud.

Dzud, a Mongolian term, refers to mass deaths of steppe animals following dry summers or icy winters. This winter, intensified by heavy snowstorms, has seen over 3 million livestock losses in Mongolia. [France24] [akipress]

On March 4, Mongolian Prime Minister Erdene Luvsannamsrai met with Chinese Ambassador Shen

Minjuan, following which it was announced that China's central government will provide USD 200,000, and Inner Mongolia autonomous region will contribute USD 170,000 in financial support to Mongolia. [Montsame 1]

On the same day, Mongolian Prime minister met US Ambassador Richard L. Buangan, who pledged $700,000 in aid. This support aims at 2,700 herder households across nine Mongolian regions affected by dzud. [Montsame 2]

Parliamentary alliance calls for global attention to economic risks due to Taiwan Strait tensions

(fg) On March 8, members of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC) launched the "Operation Mist (Measure Impact of a Shock in the Taiwan Strait)" campaign to urge governments worldwide to assess the domestic economic impact of a possible conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

The campaign aims to compel governments to recognize that stability across the Taiwan Strait should be in the interest of every country globally. According to a report by Bloomberg Economics, a war over Taiwan would result in a USD 10 trillion shock to the world economy -- about 10 percent of the global gross domestic product. [Bloomberg]

The IPAC warns that ordinary people will bear the consequences if governments fail to de-escalate and avert conflict across the Taiwan Strait, highlighting the need for elected representatives worldwide to ensure this does not happen. The campaign was initiated by several co-chairs and members of the IPAC. [IPAC via X] [Focus Taiwan]

The IPAC is an international group of legislators working towards reform on how democratic countries approach China.

APPU supports Taiwan’s bid to join UN climate convention

(fg) The Asian-Pacific Parliamentarians’ Union (APPU) has voiced support for Taiwan's inclusion in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) during its annual meeting this year in Tokyo.

Taiwan's cross-party delegation of legislators emphasized Taiwan's active role in addressing and combating climate change, particularly through its support to Pacific Island nations with relevant technology. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan is also going to host next year's APPU meeting [CNA, in Chinese]

APPU, established in 1965, is a coalition of national parliamentary groups from the Asia-Pacific region dedicated to promoting freedom, democracy, and prosperity. Initially focused on Asia, it expanded its scope to include Pacific Island nations in 1975, aiming to strengthen solidarity and support freedom throughout the region. [appu-cs]

Bhutan mulls rejoining four-country vehicle agreement

(lm) Bhutan is contemplating rejoining the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement (BBIN MVA), which aims to regulate vehicular traffic among the four countries. Signed in 2015, the agreement has only been ratified by three parties due to concerns raised by Bhutan's domestic stakeholders, particularly related to the agreement's compatibility with Bhutan's development priorities and the potential impact on its infrastructure. [Dhaka Tribune]

The decision to reconsider participation was conveyed during a meeting in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where Bhutan attended as an observer. Discussions in the meeting revolved around progress made under the BBIN MVA and the formulation of a draft protocol for cargo vehicle movement.

Bhutan signs strategic partnership with regional intergovernmental ICIMOD

(lm) Bhutan has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), an intergovernmental knowledge and learning center serving eight regional member countries in the Hindu Kush Himalayan region, to establish a long-term collaboration. The agreement aims to drive progress and sustainable development initiatives in Bhutan by leveraging ICIMOD's expertise and resources. [Kuensel]

India, four-nation European Free Trade Association sign USD 100 billion trade deal

(fd) India has signed a landmark trade deal with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) comprising Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein, concluding nearly 16 years of negotiations. Under the agreement, EFTA will invest USD 100 billion over 15 years in India's fast-growing market. In return, New Delhi will lift most import tariffs on industrial products from these countries, excluding gold. The pact must be ratified by all signatories before taking effect, with Switzerland aiming to do so by 2025. [Al Jazeera] [The Hindu] [The Straits Times]

Bangladesh, Sri Lanka among countries looking to start rupee trade, Indian minister says

(lm) India's Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal has revealed that several countries, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Gulf nations, are eager to initiate trade in rupees with India. This move is anticipated to reduce transaction costs for businesses and is seen as a significant development in India's international trade. [Business Standard]

India has already begun rupee trade with neighboring countries like Nepal and Bhutan and has initiated the mechanism with Russia as well. The Reserve Bank of India's decision to allow settlement of international trade in rupees has facilitated this process, with several banks opening special Vostro accounts to facilitate overseas trade in the rupee.

India seeks Afghan Taliban cooperation in enhancing trade via Iran's Chabahar Port

(lm) India has initiated talks with the Taliban government in Kabul, represented by Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and Minister of Industry and Trade Alhaji Nuruddin Azizi, to enhance political and economic ties, aiming to bolster bilateral trade and transit via the Chabahar Port, a strategically significant deep-water port located in southeastern Iran. In parallel efforts, India also engaged with former Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai to discuss areas of cooperation and expressed gratitude for India's assistance to Afghanistan, particularly in education. [abp live]

The Chabahar Port, strategically vital for both Iran and India, plays a crucial role in facilitating trade with Afghanistan, circumventing the land route restrictions imposed by Pakistan. In 2016, India, Iran, and Afghanistan entered into a trilateral agreement to develop the port and establish a transit and trade corridor. India has made significant investments in infrastructure projects at the port, including the construction of terminals and berths. Moreover, New Delhi is actively pursuing the integration of Chabahar into the International North-South Transport Corridor, aiming to bolster regional trade. This initiative also serves as a strategic counterbalance to China's expanding influence, particularly its investments in the Gwadar Port in Pakistan.

Video shows alleged contract killing of Canadian Sikh leader

(lm) The assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a prominent Canadian Sikh separatist leader, was captured on exclusive security footage, revealing a meticulously planned attack carried out by multiple individuals. However, despite allegations from Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau accusing India of orchestrating the assassination, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police is yet to make any arrests or formally identified suspects in connection with the murder. [CBC]

Nijjar, the president of the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara in Surrey, British Columbia, was shot and killed outside the gurdwara on June 18 last year. The incident led to allegations from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau that the Indian government ordered the killing, severely damaging diplomatic relations between Canada and India.

Months later, evidence emerged in a United States indictment suggesting a broader conspiracy orchestrated by the Indian government to carry out additional targeted killings in Canada. The indictment detailed an alleged plot to assassinate another Canadian Sikh, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a key figure in the movement advocating for an independent Sikh homeland known as Khalistan.

China, India envoys call on Nepal's newly appointed Deputy Prime Minister following coalition change

(lm) Against the larger backdrop of a recent major change in Nepal's ruling two-party government coalition, which saw the country's two largest communist parties once again coming together to form a new coalition government, the envoys of Nepal and China separately met with some newly appointed ministers. [The Kathmandu Post]

During his meetings with Deputy Prime Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha and Finance Minister Barsha Man Pun, the Indian ambassador emphasized India's perspective on Nepal's political changes, viewing them as internal affairs. He reiterated the strong relationship between the two countries and India's commitment to supporting Nepal. Meanwhile, the Chinese ambassador congratulated Shrestha on his new role and discussed Nepal-China relations, although no further details were disclosed. [The Kathmandu Post]

The return of the so-called "Left Alliance" had raised eyebrows, particularly, in New Delhi and Bejing, precisely because the last time these two parties held power, from 2017 to 2021, China had anticipated a united leftist government in Nepal that would align with Beijing's interests and policies. Additionally, the realignment of the two communist parties resulted in the main India-leaning party, the Nepali Congress, being relegated to the parliamentary opposition.

Chinese military delegation visits Sri Lanka, Nepal as part of South Asia tour

(lm) A senior Chinese military delegation, led by Major General Zhang Baoqun, Deputy Director of the Office for International Military Cooperation of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, continued a tour of South Asia, focusing on Sri Lanka and Nepal, key arenas for regional competition between China and India.

Crucially, prior to visiting Sri Lanka and Nepal, the delegation had visited the Maldives, where the two countries signed a military assistance agreement with Beijing, marking the first time Maldives has signed a deal with China for military cooperation of this level. Previously, China had been exclusively known for its assistance towards urban and economic development of the Maldives. [AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1]

Sri Lanka

During their visit to Sri Lanka, Major General Zhang Baoqun engaged with various civil and military leaders, including Defence Secretary General Kamal Gunaratne and Navy Chief Vice Admiral Priyantha Perera.

Discussions centered on regional security challenges, with a focus on enhancing maritime security cooperation. Major General Baoqun praised Sri Lanka's efforts in fostering military-to-military cooperation and reiterated China's commitment to supporting such initiatives in the future. [Sri Lanka Ministry of Defence]

Nepal

In Nepal, this visit marked the first high-level engagement between the two countries following recent political developments, including the formation of a new government under Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal. During discussions in Kathmandu, Major General Zhang Baoqun and Nepal Army Chief Prabhu Ram Sharma explored various aspects of bilateral relations, with a particular emphasis on military cooperation and mutual interests. [The Kathmandu Post]

Sources within Nepal's security establishment indicated that the Chinese delegation is likely to advocate for the procurement of an armored personnel carrier (APC) from China, a matter that has been pending for some time. Other topics of discussion are expected to include military procurement procedures, the establishment of an ammunition plant for the Nepal Army, resumption of joint military exercises, training programs for Nepali Army officials, and the promotion of military-to-military cooperation.

Bangladesh emphasizes need for dedicated transmission line with Nepal via India

(lm) Bangladesh State Minister for Power, Energy, and Mineral Resources Nasrul Hamid has emphasized the necessity of a dedicated transmission line between Nepal and Bangladesh via India during a meeting with Indian High Commissioner Pranay Verma. [The Kathmandu Post]

Both countries have ambitious plans for power trade, with Nepal aiming to export electricity to both India and Bangladesh, with targets of 10,000MW and 5,000MW respectively by 2035. While Nepal and Bangladesh have never traded electricity directly, negotiations are ongoing for the export of 40MW of power from Nepal to Bangladesh through India's existing transmission infrastructure. However, both countries aim for a dedicated transmission line, which would require India's cooperation due to its geographic position between Nepal and Bangladesh.

Despite India's strategic approach to power trade, there are doubts regarding its willingness to relinquish control over such a transmission line. Nepal and Bangladesh have identified potential routes for the transmission line, but without it, large-scale power export to Bangladesh would be challenging.

Pakistani, United States IT firms partner with Saudi investment group to 'revolutionize' global health care delivery

(nw) InfoTech Group, a Pakistani IT firm, and United States-based Valyrian Systems Inc. have partnered with Saudi Arabia's Obeikan Investment Group to focus on the rapid rollout and seamless integration of Obeikan Digital (OD) Health Platforms to innovate global healthcare delivery. [Arab News]

Malaysian defense minister holds talks with Lao, Thai counterparts

(ba) Malaysian Defense Minister Mohamed Khaled Nordin engaged in discussions with Laos' Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister General Chansamone Chanyalath and Thailand's Minister of Defense Sutin Klungsang to bolster defense cooperation, particularly in fortifying security along border areas. Their meeting was on the sidelines of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Settlement Session in Luang Prabang, Laos, on March 5.

Proposing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Malaysia and Thailand, Mohamed Khaled envisioned strengthened relations and cooperation, especially in defense and military realms.

The proposed MoU aims to explore joint efforts in science and technology, sharing training and expertise, as well as advancing the local defense industry. [Astro Awani]

The Philippines says it won't let China remove a Filipino military outpost on a disputed shoal

(lb) In the aftermath of a recent clash between Chinese and Philippine ships near the disputed Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea, the Philippines has

asserted that it will not allow China to remove its military outpost. [Associated Press]

On March 5, PRC ships employed dangerous maneuvers and water cannons against Philippine vessels carrying provisions to Filipino service members stationed at the BRP Sierra Madre, a Philippine Navy ship that was deliberately grounded on the Second Thomas Shoal, also known as Ayungin Shoal, in 1999. The actions caused multiple collisions, damaging at least one Philippine vessel and injuring Filipino service members.

Against this backdrop, the Philippines officials lodged a strong protest with the Chinese embassy, while South Korea, France, and Canada expressed concern over the incident and called for peaceful resolution of disputes.

Of note, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. expressed growing concerns over the heightened risk of armed conflict with China in the South China Sea and called on Chinese President Xi Jinping to expedite the establishment of a hotline to ease rising tensions. [South China Morning Post]

At the same time, Vice Admiral Alberto Carlos, head of the Armed Forces of the Philippines Western Command, affirmed that operations in the West Philippine Sea will persist despite increased harassment from Chinese Coast Guard vessels and their maritime militia. [Philippine News Agency]

Meanwhile, the United States in a statement condemned Beijing's actions against the Philippine vessels and called on China to abide by international law and the 2016 arbitral decision. Washington also reaffirmed its commitment to the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, which extends to armed attacks on Philippine forces in the South China Sea. [U.S. Department of State]

Singapore's prime minister says South China Sea code of conduct will take time

(lb) Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, speaking during the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit on March 5, underscored the complexity of negotiations with China regarding a code of conduct for the South China Sea. Despite the formulation of a preliminary draft, Lee acknowledged the elusive nature of achieving consensus on key issues, indicating the need for further negotiations. [Associated Press]

The summit, commemorating 50 years since Australia became a dialogue partner of ASEAN, highlighted concerns over China's escalating military activities in the region, especially its aggressive posture towards neighboring nations with conflicting territorial claims. In light of these developments, ASEAN leaders, most notably Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., reiterated the importance of adhering to international law to address territorial disputes.

Of note, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong on the first day of the summit announced USD 41.8 million in funding for maritime security. 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. [AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1]

Singapore defends Taylor Swift's exclusive Southeast Asia stop after neighbors cry foul

(lb) Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has confirmed that a closed-door deal secured American singer Taylor Swift's exclusive performance in the city-state, preventing her from touring other Southeast Asian countries during her current tour. [CNBC] [CNN]

The controversy escalated when allegations surfaced regarding the size of the grant offered to Swift's team, with Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin claiming that Singapore paid up to USD 3 million per show. This has led to diplomatic tensions, with criticisms from Filipino lawmaker Joey Salceda and others, suggesting that such deals undermine ASEAN principles of regional cooperation.

Yemen's Houthi militants target Singapore-flagged ship in Gulf of Aden

(lb) In the Gulf of Aden, Yemen's Houthi militants launched an attack targeting a Singapore-flagged vessel, which evaded impact. The Houthi have repeatedly launched drones and missiles against international commercial shipping since mid-November last year, saying they are acting in solidarity with Palestinians to oppose Israel's military actions in Gaza Strip. [NPR]

Thailand to nominate Songkhla's ancient towns for UNESCO Heritage Listing

(bk) Thailand's government committee responsible for pursuing UNESCO recognition plans to nominate four ancient town areas in Songkhla, Thailand's Southern province, for UNESCO's Tentative List of World Heritage Sites. These areas include Phang Yang, Phakho, and Si Yang; Sathing Phra; Pom Khai Singkora and Laem Son; and Bo Yang. The nomination will put emphasis on their cultural and architectural significance, highlighting their historical roles in ancient trade routes. [The Nation]

If recognized by UNESCO, the sites could boost tourism in Songkhla, corresponding with Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin's "Thailand Vision," which seeks to advance eight pivotal sectors toward becoming regional hubs, including tourism. It also synergizes with the government's overarching "National Soft Power Strategy." [AiR No. 9, February/2024, 4] [AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1]

Bangladesh army chief returns from visit to Qatar

(lm) Chief of Army Staff of Bangladesh, General SM Shafiuddin Ahmed, returned home after participating in the Doha International Maritime Defence Exhibition and Conference (DIMDEX 2024) in Qatar. Additionally, General SM Shafiuddin held bilateral meetings with the Chief of Staff of Qatar Armed Forces and other senior military officials, as well as army chiefs from different countries during his visit, which commenced on March 3. [Dhaka Tribune]

Brunei, Japan to enter strategic partnership

(dql) During a meeting between Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Brunei Crown Prince Al-Muhtadee Billah on March 11 in Tokyo, an agreement was reached to upgrade their countries' relations to a strategic partnership.

Kishida and Billah also two agreed to deepen bilateral cooperation through stable liquefied natural gas supply of and aid in the field of maritime security. [Nippon.com]

Cambodia, South Korea discuss deepening labor cooperation

(dql) On March 8, Cambodia Minister of Labor and Vocational Training Heng Sour held talks with South Korea Minister of Labor and Employment Lee Jung Sik in Seoul. The meeting was part of Heng's visit to South Korea.

The focus of the discussion during the meeting was labor and vocational training cooperation, especially the issue of sending Cambodia workers to South Korea. [Khmer Times 1]

In an earlier meeting on March 6, Heng had discussed this issue with Lee Cheol Woo, the governor of Gyeongsangbuk-do province.

During their talks, the two sides agreed to continue to work together more closely and assist ech other in developing employment and vocational training.

Lee affirmed that he will look into the possibility of support though materials and equipment at the vocational training institutions, including creating exchange programs for students and technicians, sharing technology experience, and providing fire trucks and ambulances. [Khmer Times 2]

U.S. targets Chinese chipmaker, TikTok

(dql) The U.S. Department of Commerce is believed to consider imposing sanctions on several Chinese tech companies, including chipmaker ChangXin Memory Technologies, in a latest development of the U.S.-China tech war.

The semiconductor integrated device manufacturer is among six companies the Commerce Department is said to add to its so-called entity list that limits access to U.S. technology. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, a House of Representatives committee approved in a unanimous 50-0 vote a bill that could make the popular video-sharing app TikTok unavailable in the U.S., with lawmakers expressing concerns about the potential for the platform to surveil and manipulate U.S. citizens.

The bill demands that Beijing-based ByteDance Ltd., owner of TikTok, to divest TikTok and other applications it controls within 180 days following the

enactment of the bill. Otherwise, those applications will be prohibited in the U.S. In addition, it sets up a narrow process to allow the executive branch prohibit access to an app owned by a foreign adversary considered as posing a threat to national security. [AP]

President Joe Biden has already announced that he will sign the bill into law if it passes the Congress. [Asia Financial]

The U.S. is the country with the world's the largest TikTok audience, with nearly 150 million users engaging with the popular social video platform.

Charges against US Army intelligence analyst filed over selling military secrets to China

(dql) Following his arrest on March 7, U.S. federal prosecutors have filed charges against U.S. Army intelligence analyst Korbein Schultz accused of conspiring to sell sensitive defense information to China.

According to the prosecution, Schultz received some USD 42,000 for providing information about U.S. plans in the event of a military attack on Taiwan. [Reuters]

China targets three French liquor producing companies in anti-dumping probe against EU

(ms) China's commerce ministry announced on March 12, its intention to select Martell & Co, Societe Jas Hennessy & Co, and E. Remy Martin & Co as sample companies for an anti-dumping investigation into brandy imported from the European Union (EU). This decision comes amidst a trade dispute between Beijing and Brussels, with accusations of unfair competition and protectionism exchanged from both sides.

The investigation, initiated in January (see AiR No. 2, January/2024, 2), is seen as targeting France, which dominates 99.8 percent of all EU brandy exports to China. Brandy, particularly French cognac, holds significant importance in the Chinese market, making it a focal point of trade tensions.

The selection of Brandy and thus the targeting of France is probably not coincidental but is probably due to France's leading role in the EU initiation of anti-

subsidy investigations against Chinese electric vehicle imports in September (see AiR No. 38, September/2023, 3) and bio diesel in December of last year (see AiR No. 51, December/2023, 3) and is thus to be interpreted as direct retaliation against France. [Reuters]

India begins deporting Myanmar national who fled to Manipur state

(lm) India on March 8 begun the deportation of Myanmar nationals who sought refuge in the country following a surge in violence between the ruling military junta and rebel groups in a border region opposite of India's Manipur state. [The Straits Times]

The deportation comes amid India's decision to terminate a free movement border agreement with Myanmar, which allowed residents of border areas to enter each other's territories without visas. Additionally, India is in the process of constructing a fence along its porous border with Myanmar to enhance security measures. [AiR No. 7, February/2024, 2]

The unrest in Myanmar's border areas intensified after the Arakan Army launched attacks on security forces in November, following the military coup in 2021. This conflict has displaced hundreds of soldiers and civilians, prompting them to seek refuge across the border in India. Overall, the deportation of Myanmar nationals by India underscores the challenges and complexities of managing cross-border refugee flows amidst ongoing conflicts and political instability in the region.

The situation is complex due to the cultural and religious ties shared between communities in the border regions of India and Myanmar. For instance, Manipur has witnessed clashes between the predominantly Hindu Meitei majority and the mainly Christian Kuki community, resulting in over 200 deaths since May 2023. Many of those fleeing from Myanmar have ethnic connections with the Kuki community.

India says it busted 'major human trafficking network' duping people into fighting for Russia in Ukraine

(lm) India has uncovered a significant human trafficking network that deceived young men with

promises of jobs in Russia but instead forced them to fight in the war in Ukraine. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) revealed that around 35 individuals had been sent to Russia under this scheme, double the initial estimate provided by the Indian Foreign Ministry. At least two men recruited for army roles died in combat at the frontlines, prompting concerns about the fate of others involved. [The Straits Times]

The CBI is conducting searches at various locations, seizing cash amounting to roughly USD 600,000, along with documents and electronic records. Several suspects have been detained for questioning as part of the ongoing investigation. New Delhi has raised concerns with Moscow regarding each case of Indian nationals being deceived into participating in the war in Ukraine.

Indian Navy rescues merchant ship after missile attack in Gulf of Aden

(fd) The Indian warship INS Kolkata has rescued 21 members of the bulk carrier True Confidence on March 6 after the ship had been attacked by the Houthis.

Three members of the merchant ship's crew were killed in the attack. This is the first time since the Houthis started their attacks that civilians were killed. The INS Kolkata rescued the crew and provided them with medical care. [The Hindu] [The Hindustan Times]

22 Indian fishermen arrested by Sri Lankan Navy

(fd) On March 10, 22 Indian fishermen from Tamil Nadu state were arrested in three separate incidents by the Sri Lankan Navy and detained at the Kankesanthurai Naval base. The men were charged with trespassing the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) while fishing. The actions of the Sri Lankan Navy have been condemned by politicians who also demanded that the government secures the fishermen's protection in the face of repeated arrests. [The Hindu] [United News of India]

US Trade and Development Agency director visits Indonesia

(jb) United States Trade and Development Agency (USTDA) Director Enoh T. Ebong's visited Indonesia from 6-8 March, with a particular focus on sustainable development and Indonesia's new capital city, Nusantara.

The agency arrived in Indonesia highly interested in supporting power interconnection projects between Indonesia and Malaysia, and left having announced new support: a USD 2.49 million grant to assist in transforming the new capital into a smart city.

The initiative, announced by the U.S. Trade and Development Agency, marks America's first involvement in the endeavor to shift the nation's capital from Jakarta to East Kalimantan. Analysts have raised concerns over the feasibility and rationale of the project, citing environmental and social impacts, along with the need for public consultation. [Benar News]

During the visit, Ebong also inaugurated USTDA's Nusantara Business Forum, which showcases smart city solutions.

USTDA's initiatives reflect priorities of the Biden administration, promoting global infrastructure partnerships and climate-smart investments.

At the same time, China is emerging as a key investor in Indonesia's New City, indicating possible competition between the states. [US Embassy and Consulates in Indonesia] [Voice of America]

Indonesia, Australia forge energy transition cooperation in bilateral talks

(jb) On 6 March 2024, Foreign Affairs Minister Retno Marsudi engaged in discussions on energy transition cooperation with her Australian counterpart Penny Wong, during a bilateral meeting held on the sidelines of the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit in Melbourne.

Minister Marsudi highlighted the significance of collaboration in developing an electric vehicle (EV) battery ecosystem, but also emphasized the importance of lifting non-tariff barriers in bilateral trade and cooperation in biosecurity, particularly for fish and fruit products.

With Indonesia's expertise in nickel production and Australia's abundance of lithium reserves, the collaboration aims to strengthen the electric vehicle battery ecosystem and foster alliances in the global market. [Antara News]

The meeting came after President Joko Widodo had earlier called for the implementation of a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the electric vehicle ecosystem, signed last November (see AiR No. 49, December/2023, 1).

Indonesian House Speaker meets French President Macron, French counterpart

(jb) Puan Maharani, Speaker of the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR), met with French President Emmanuel Macron during the 2024 Women Speakers' Summit in Paris.

Held at the Elysee Palace on March 7, the meeting emphasized the longstanding positive relations between Indonesia and France, spanning over 73 years.

Maharani highlighted France's significance as a key partner in Europe and expressed her commitment to enhancing bilateral cooperation, particularly in political, defense, and economy. She emphasized the importance of collaboration in economic and investment sectors.

President Macron reciprocated the sentiment, expressing his eagerness to strengthen ties and affirming the expectation for future improvements in bilateral relations. [Antara News 1]

In a separate meeting on March 5, Maharani engaged in discussions on women's issues and electoral processes with Yaël Braun-Pivet, President of the French National Assembly. [Antara News 2]

Indonesia provides Afghanistan with polio vaccine doses

(jb) Through the Indonesian Agency for International Development (LDKPI), Indonesia has delivered 10 million doses of polio vaccine to Afghanistan.

The delivery ceremony, attended by Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi and Minister of Finance Sri Mulyani Indrawati, took place at Soekarno Hatta Airport in Jakarta on March 7.

This assistance, facilitated by UNICEF, targets 3.3 million children under the age of three. [Tempo.co]

Japanese and Indian foreign minister agree on deepening cooperation

(sh) On March 7, Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa and her Indian counterpart Subrahmanyam Jaishankar affirmed their commitment to enhancing cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region during their meeting in Tokyo.

Against the backdrop of China's growing military and economic influence, the two ministers discussed deepening bilateral relations in economic and security realms.

They pledged to bolster collaboration to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific and agreed to intensify defense equipment transfers and technical cooperation in areas such as outer space and cybersecurity.

Their discussions also touched upon the Quad framework, involving the United States and Australia, as a means of enhancing security cooperation.

Plans for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Japan later in the year were also reportedly considered during their meeting.

The foreign ministers' meeting reaffirms the growing strategic partnership between Japan and India amid evolving geopolitical dynamics in the region. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan] [Kyodo News]

Japan, US to expand cooperation on US warships repairing in Japan

(sh) On March 8, government sources disclosed that Japan and the United States are considering allowing U.S. Navy warships to undergo significant repairs at private shipyards in Japan.

This initiative aims to enable the ships to prolong their stay in Japanese waters without requiring them to return home for maintenance. The matter is scheduled for discussion during Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's forthcoming meeting with President Joe Biden in April, with expectations that the agreement will enhance the efficiency of U.S. military operations in Japan, particularly amidst China's escalating military assertiveness in the region.

Previously, Japanese private companies were responsible for repairing non-combat U.S. military vessels such as transport ships. However, the new arrangement is poised to expand this to include ships

like destroyers, facilitating comprehensive repair and maintenance work.

The plan primarily involves ships from the U.S. Navy's 7th Fleet, headquartered in Yokosuka, south of Tokyo, which operates in areas including the East and South China seas. Japan anticipates that conducting repair work domestically will benefit its economy, although it may raise concerns in the United States regarding potential job displacement. Further discussions will occur between Japanese and U.S. defense authorities to finalize the details. [Kyodo News]

Japan, Estonia to deepen economic and political cooperation

(sh) On March 11, Kamikawa Yoko, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, met with Margus Tsahkna, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Estonia, during his visit to Japan.

Both ministers agreed to enhance bilateral cooperation in various areas, including ICT, start-ups, cyber security, and economic security. They discussed initiatives such as establishing a Japan Chair in the International Centre for Defense and Security and launching a Japan-Estonia Business Square.

They also discussed global issues, including responses to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the situation in Israel and Palestine, as well as challenges in East Asia like North Korea's nuclear and missile issues. [Ministry of Foreign Affair, Japan]

Reaffirming that security in both the European-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions is interconnected, Kamikawa and her Estonian counterpart also pledged to support Ukraine against Russia’s aggression. The discussion also touched upon the situations in Palestinian territories and East Asia, particularly concerning China's growing military presence. [Nippon]

Japan, Romania discuss economic reconstruction of Ukraine, Women, Peace and Security (WPS) initiative

(sh) On March 11, Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa had a telephone conversation with Romanian counterpart Luminița Teodora Odobescu.

They discussed supporting Ukraine, highlighting the importance of unity among like-minded countries. Kamikawa explained Japan's efforts, including the "Japan-Ukraine Conference for Promotion of Economic Growth and Reconstruction," and emphasized the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) initiative. Minister Odobescu praised Kamikawa's WPS efforts, and they agreed to collaborate on supporting Ukraine and WPS.

Both ministers pledged to continue working closely to strengthen bilateral cooperation as strategic partners. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

Foreign ministers of Japan, Uzbekistan hold bilateral talks

(sh) On March 8, Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa hosted a working dinner with Uzbekistan Foreign Minister Bakhtiyor Saidov.

Minister Kamikawa outlined Japan's commitment to enhancing bilateral cooperation in various fields, including people-to-people exchange and economic collaboration.

Prior to the meeting the ministers signed the 2024-2025 "Cooperation Program between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan" to deepen diplomatic ties. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan] [Trend]

Japan provides medical Aid to Egypt

(sh) On March 10, Japan signed an agreement with the World Health Organization (WHO) to provide medical aid to Egyptian hospitals treating injured people from the Gaza Strip.

Japanese Ambassador to Cairo Oka Hiroshi stated that Japan would offer around USD 8 million worth of critical medical supplies.

Israel's conflict with Gaza has strained the region's healthcare system, with many hospitals damaged or overwhelmed. [Africa News]

Chinese mining companies required to carry out mineral processing within Laos

before exporting them

(wn) Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone has ordered the Ministry of Energy and Mines to require mining companies, particularly Chinese-funded ones, to process all raw minerals in Laos before exporting them.

The order aims to create more jobs for Laotians and comes at a time of a stagnant economy, with young Laotians thinking about leaving the country to find better employment.

Over the last 20 years, the Lao government has approved 1,143 mining projects and 1,336 mineral processing projects, covering more than 3 percent of the country's surface area. Most of the recently approved projects were for Chinese investors. Most projects extract gold, copper, silver, nickel, coal, iron, potassium, or zinc.

Complaints have arisen over large mining operations in Laos, as local workers have not been hired, and residents evicted and left without farmland or drinkable water.

In addition, heavy mineral-loaded trucks have been seen heading north to the China border for further processing outside the country. [RFA]

Laos, Australia upgrade bilateral ties

(wn) Laos and Australia have upgraded their relationship to a Comprehensive Partnership that focuses on four main pillars, including people, education, economics, and defence.

Lao Prime Minister counterpart Sonexay Siphandone and his Australian counterpart Anthony Albanese signed an agreement on elevating their countries' bilateral ties in Melbourne on March 6 on the sidelines of the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit.

During their talks, the two leaders committed to working together in long-term climate finance, to tackling transnational crime, and boosting people-to-people exchanges. They specifically underscored the importance of improving health outcomes in the ASEAN region. In addition, Australia hast allocated AUD 3 million to Monash University's World Mosquito Program to advance research work in a bid to support Laos in combatting dengue fever.

In fiscal 2022-23, Australia allocated approximately USD 46.5 million in total official development assistance to Laos, with USD 22.6 million designated for bilateral funding. [Prime Minister of Australia] [The Laotian Times]

Laos, Cambodia strengthen military cooperation

(wn) Cambodia and Laos have pledged to enhance military cooperation during a bilateral meeting between their respective defence ministers.

The pledge was made between Lao Defense Minister Chansamone Chanyalath and his Cambodian counterpart Tea Seiha during a meeting on the sidelines of the Asean Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) held on March 5 in Luang Prabang, Laos.

Chansamone in addition requested Cambodia's support for his country as it prepares to co-chair with Russia the the ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Groups on humanitarian disaster relief. [The Star]

Malaysian prime minister visits Germany

(ba) Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim extended an invitation for increased participation from German businesses in Malaysia's market, emphasizing the country's advantageous position in Southeast Asia and its well-developed infrastructure as an attractive investment destination.

Acknowledging Germany as Malaysia's primary trading partner within the European Union, Prime Minister Anwar highlighted the substantial investment of close to USD15 billion.

During a joint press conference with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin, Anwar expressed Malaysia's eagerness for enhanced collaboration, aiming not only to boost trade and investment but also to fortify bilateral relations across various sectors. He also reaffirmed Malaysia's commitment to student training, citing the presence of approximately 1,000 students in Germany engaged in training programs with German companies.

Anwar welcomed Berlin's interest in new investments in renewable energy and green technology, underscoring Malaysia's focus on these areas and citing Malaysia's strength in solar and green energy

that is being exported to Indonesia's new capital Nusantara and Singapore via undersea cable.

Anticipating substantial growth in data centers and AI in the region, particularly in Malaysia, Anwar stressed the vast potential for German investments in this sector, too.

Currently, over 700 German companies are operating in Malaysia, contributing to the creation of 65,000 jobs. Since 2000, Germany has been Malaysia's largest trading partner within the European Union, while Malaysia holds the status of Germany's largest trading partner among ASEAN member states. [Malay Mail 1] [Astro Awani]

During the press conference, Anwar reiterated his criticism against Western countries for their lack of action against Israel's in the ongoing conflict with Hamas. Identifying “Israel's decades-long policies against Palestinians and its atrocities,” as the root cause of the conflict, Anwar urged Western countries to abandon their “selective” and “ambivalent” attitude and “obsession” with the narrative, “as if the entire problem begins and ends with the 7th of October. It did not begin with the 7th October, and did not end with the 7th of October. It began four decades before that, and it is continuing daily.” [AA]

The press conference was held after Anwar’s meeting with Scholz during which the two heads of government discussed ways to further progress of Malaysia-Germany relations, focusing on economic cooperation, education, environment, export of palm oil and sustainability.

They also addressed on the humanitarian crisis in Palestine and other global issues of mutual interest. [Malay Mail 2]

German federal minister visits Mongolia

(fg) German Federal Minister for Digital and Infrastructure, Volker Wissing, visited Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, from March 5-7, where he was received by Mongolian Prime Minister Oyunerdene Luvsannamsrai among others.

The minister was accompanied by an economic delegation consisting of 14 representatives from German companies and associations. "We aim to establish contacts, expand existing cooperations, and learn from each other," stated Wissing. [BMDV Germany, in German]

During the talks, Oyunerdene underscored the nation's strategic initiative to enhance its automotive, aviation, and railway infrastructure, leveraging its landlocked yet vast territory. Highlighting Mongolia's critical role as a connector between Asia and Europe, he discussed the potential to significantly impact regional and international infrastructure networks.

The discussions also delved into increasing flight frequencies between the two nations, mitigating traffic congestion, and creating training opportunities for Mongolian youth in Germany in fields such as road construction, transport logistics, and digitalization. [Montsame 1]

During the visit, Wissing and his Mongolian counterpart Byambatsogt Sandag signed a memorandum of understanding aimed at intensifying exchanges in road and rail sectors, traffic safety, and congestion prevention. [BMDV Germany, in German]

This year also celebrates the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Mongolia and Germany. In February, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier visited Mongolia (see No. 7, February/2024, 2). [Montsame 2]

Mongolian parliament chairman's visit in Hungary enhances parliamentary cooperation

(fg) Zandanshatar Gombojav, Chairman of Mongolia's State Great Khural, the parliament of the country, visited Hungary on an official invitation Hungarian National Assembly Speaker, László Kövér.

During the talks between the two Speakers, Kövér underscored the significance of interparliamentary cooperation for improving bilateral relations, while Zandanshatar outlined Mongolia's present circumstances, expressing optimism that interactions between legislative leaders would foster enhanced mutual understanding and dialogue. He identified Hungary as a crucial partner in Eastern Europe, with aspirations to broaden relationships across various sectors.

A key achievement of their discussions was the formulation of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) aimed at deepening cooperation between the Parliaments' Secretariats. This MoU is designed to bolster day-to-day legislative operations through measures such as staff exchange programs and joint research initiatives, representing a significant

advancement in fortifying the parliamentary ties between Mongolia and Hungary. [Montsame]

Mongolian Finance minister meets Agriculture Minister of Hungary

(fg) In Budapest, Mongolia's Finance Minister Javkhlan Bold and Hungary's Agriculture Minister Istvan Nagy signed a memorandum of understanding to strengthen agricultural and food industry relations, focusing on modernizing farm machinery, preserving animal genetic resources, developing irrigation, and addressing forestry issues.

Hungary aims to share its expertise in agricultural technologies, including the poultry sector and seed production, with Mongolia. [Akipress]

Mongolian Prosecutor General visits Vietnam

(fg) On March 11, President Vo Van Thuong of Vietnam hosted Mongolian Prosecutor General Jargalsaikhan Banzragch in Hanoi. His visit aimed to strengthen ties between their countries, especially in the procuracy sectors, during the 70th anniversary of their diplomatic relations.

The meeting highlighted recent positive developments, including increased cooperation opportunities following the Mongolian President's visit to Vietnam last year (see AiR No. 45, November/2023, 1).

Vietnam aims to become a developed country by 2030, thereby underscoring the importance of the Supreme People's Procuracy in ensuring a rule-of-law state that is of the people, by the people, and for the people.

During Banzragch's visit bilateral cooperation was agreed to be enhanced such as in legal protection, combating transnational crimes, and promoting exchange programs for procuracy staff to share expertise. This cooperation is seen as a pivotal element in the Vietnam-Mongolia relationship, with both sides expressing a desire for continued partnership and skill development within their procuracy sectors. [vietnamplus]

Mongolia welcomes North Korean vice foreign minister of North Korea

(fg) President of Mongolia Khurelsukh Ukhnaa received Vice Foreign Minister of North Korea Pak Myong Ho on March 11.

During their meeting, they discussed revitalizing post-pandemic bilateral relations and enhancing cooperation across various sectors, including education, culture, sports, agriculture, and health, aiming to strengthen the ties between the two nations further. [Montsame]

29 Myanmar border guard personnel seek refuge in Bangladesh amidst clashes

(jb) Following clashes with Arakan Army fighters, 29 members of Myanmar's Border Guard Police (BGP) sought refuge in Bangladesh via the Jamchari border point in Naikhongchhari upazila of Bandarban. The Bangladesh Border Guard (BGB) confirmed their arrival, disarming them before relocating them to a secure shelter.

They originated from the Aung Tha Pyay border guard post in Rakhine State's Maungdaw township. This incident follows a similar one on February 15 when 330 Myanmar forces, including BGB and customs officers, crossed into Bangladesh during conflict, later repatriated.

Continuous gunfights and artillery shelling along the Teknaf border have heightened tensions, causing concern among Teknaf residents and limiting movement in border areas. [Narinjara]

Myanmar-Thailand: Mae Sot prepares for potential influx of refugees

(jb) As tensions escalate in Myanmar, Mae Sot district in Thailand's Tak province is bracing for a potential surge of refugees in March and April 2024.

A security expert has urged the Thai government to establish a safety zone or humanitarian corridor at the Thai-Myanmar border to accommodate up to 10,000 anticipated refugees.

The escalation follows Myanmar's announcement of mandatory conscription (see AiR No. 7, February/2024,

2), prompting fears of intensified fighting. Many Burmese have already sought refuge in Thailand to evade conscription, with some wealthy individuals purchasing properties in Bangkok and sending children to international schools.

The expert highlighted Thailand's apparent lack of preparedness and calls for inter-ministerial coordination to address the situation. He emphasized the need for ASEAN collaboration in managing refugee camps and sharing associated costs, urging the foreign ministry to convene discussions with regional counterparts. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar's National Unity Government criticizes Thai aid corridor

(jw) Thailand is aiming to launch a humanitarian corridor on its border to deliver aid to the people affected by armed conflict in Myanmar. Previously, the UN estimated that 18.6 million people need humanitarian assistance.

Dr. Win Myat Aye, minister for Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management in Myanmar's shadow National Unity Government (NUG) welcomed the Thai government's efforts but expressed concerns over implementation, citing concerns over the effectiveness of the measure.

He highlighted three key points. First, he said the aid must go through the military regime, thereby preventing aid from reaching the people in need effectively. Secondly, he said that aid agencies are under government control, so aid will not reach people in areas controlled by the NUG, ethnic rebels, or the People's Defense Forces. Third, he said that previous efforts have failed, and this time will be no different.

Dr. Win Myat Aye instead offered a proposal drafted by the NUG's Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management and ethnic rebel groups. He said that their proposal, by focusing on international NGOs, community-based organizations, and civil society organizations that have already been working on the ground, will allow aid to reach areas outside junta control.

He concluded, "We are not opposing the initiative announced by the Thai government. We have only presented a plan for how humanitarian assistance can be delivered to reach a wider population. We will continue to negotiate with the Thai government for that." [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar dissidents urge Thailand to review junta-supportive stance

(jb) Amid Thailand's initiation of a humanitarian corridor to aid Myanmar (see article above), dissidents gathered in Bangkok and urged a reevaluation of Thailand's supportive stance towards the Myanmar military junta.

Participants at a parliamentary seminar stressed the need for international cooperation to combat the ongoing crisis in Myanmar, framing it as a struggle for democracy against military rule.

Dissenting voices raised concerns about the effectiveness of delivering aid through junta channels. Participants emphasized a community-based approach to humanitarian assistance to ensure effective distribution to those in need, echoing broader calls for international support in addressing Myanmar's humanitarian crisis. [Thai PBS World]

Myanmar human rights organization calls on Italy to sanction daughter of junta arms broker

(jw) Rights organization Justice for Myanmar has called on Italy to expel Rachel Tayza, also known as Htoo Htwe Tay Za. Ms. Rachel Tayza is the daughter of Myanmar junta arms broker, Tay Za, and serves as a director for several firms owned by her family's EU-sanctioned Htoo Group of Companies.

French lawyers William Bourdon and Lily Ravon reported Tayza to Italian authorities on behalf of the rights group and submitted evidence to Ms. Tayza's bank, Banca Nazionale del Lavoro, to demand action under sanction laws. Justice for Myanmar demanded that the Italian government freeze Tayza's assets and expel her from the country.

Htoo Group founder, Tay Za, and his businesses were sanctioned by the EU, the U.S., the U.K., and Canada for providing financial support and arms to Myanmar's military regime. Ms. Tayza was also sanctioned by the US last January for her role in Htoo Group.

Justice for Myanmar said Ms. Tayza is the director of at least seven Htoo companies, including firms that formed after the 2021 military coup and businesses that deal directly with Myanmar's military. Currently,

Htoo Group's Ayeyarwady Resorts and Lodges Company Limited has several contracts with the military regime, including a build-operate-transfer contract with the military's Office of the Quarter Master General and a 50-year commercial project in Yangon.

The rights organization further accused Italy of allowing Ms. Tayza to conduct illegal business and continue supporting the Myanmar junta. It urged the EU to impose stronger sanctions on the Htoo Group and other junta arms brokers. [The Irrawaddy]

Russia pledges to act on Nepalis' pleas over kin in Russian Army

(lm) Russia has committed to addressing the welfare concerns of Nepali citizens serving in its military, following discussions between Nepal's Foreign Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov. This comes in the wake of the recent deaths of Nepali nationals in the Russian Army amid the war in Ukraine. [The Kathmandu Post]

Shrestha highlighted the urgency of expediting the repatriation process for deceased Nepalis, alongside providing adequate compensation to their grieving families. Notably, there remains a pressing need to ascertain the precise number of Nepali casualties, with several families awaiting official confirmation from Russian authorities.

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. [AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1]

Acknowledging the gravity of the situation, Russian authorities have pledged to offer compensation to the families of the victims. However, concerns linger regarding the recruitment practices of Nepali nationals into the Russian Army, prompting calls for stricter measures to curb such enlistment.

Russian cargo ship arrives at North Korean port

(dql) An analysis of satellite imagery indicates that a Russian cargo ship returned to the North Korean port

of Rason on March 10, suspected of facilitating arms transfers for use against Ukraine.

Observers believe this signals a resumption of the shipping operation after a one-month hiatus following the appearance of a vessel at the port on February 12.

Russian ship arrivals have been observed since last August, with vessels appearing to offload containers at Pier 1 before picking up containers at Pier 2 for delivery to Russia. [NK News]

Located in the Sea of Japan in the North Pacific Ocean, Rason port sits on the northeast tip of North Korea, near the border with Russia. Historically, before 1991, the port was utilized by the Soviet Union as an alternative warm-water port in case Vladivostok became unavailable.

Pakistan, Iran discuss further expanding trade

(tj) Muhammad Mudassir Tipu, Pakistan's ambassador to Iran, engaged in discussions with the Quetta Chamber of Commerce and Industry to explore ways to enhance bilateral trade between Pakistan and Iran. Despite recent tensions, Pakistan's imports from Iran have notably increased, indicating potential for further growth. In January 2024, imports from Iran amounted to USD 10.42 million, showing a 25 percent year-on-year increase. Both countries have set a goal to boost bilateral trade to USD 5 billion by 2028 and have recently devised a 5-year plan to strengthen trade cooperation. [Geo News]

IMF ready to assist new Pakistani government in formulating new economic program

(nw) Amidst the post-election uncertainty in Pakistan, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has announced its readiness to support Islamabad in crafting a new economic program, should the newly formed government led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif seek assistance. [Dawn] [The News International]

This statement comes amidst uncertainties following the February 8 elections, after which 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. [AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1]

Despite these challenges, the IMF remains committed to Pakistan under a USD 3-billion standby arrangement, aimed at addressing critical economic issues such as inflation, currency devaluation, and depleting foreign reserves. The completion of the first review in January led to the immediate disbursement of approximately USD 700 million, with total disbursements reaching USD 1.9 billion. The program is slated to conclude in April, with the remaining funds expected to be disbursed later this month.

In separate developments, Pakistani Senator Faisal Saleem Rahman has made history by becoming the first lawmaker from Pakistan to be appointed as a member of the parliamentary board of the (IMF) and World Bank. Senator Rahman, representing Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, assumed his Senate position in March 2021 and will serve until March 2027. [Business Recorder]

Pakistani business figure meets Saudi minister, discusses investment in diverse sectors

(nw) Azfar Ahsan, founder of a prominent Pakistani business conglomerate renowned for its strategic partnership services for businesses aiming for expansion, held discussions with Saudi Arabia's Investment Minister Khalid Al-Falih in Riyadh. Their conversation centered on exploring investment opportunities across various sectors including mining, agriculture, and food security. [Arab News]

Pakistan, Russia competition commissions initiate talks on bilateral cooperation

(nw) The Competition Commission of Pakistan (CCP) has initiated talks with the Federal Antimonopoly Service (FAS) of Russia to enhance bilateral cooperation and bolster its digitalization capabilities. The collaboration seeks to address emerging challenges in digital markets and cross-border

cartelization, while also fostering opportunities for Russian companies to invest in Pakistan and contribute to market development. This partnership is expected to facilitate capacity building for the CCP and pave the way for joint research projects to strengthen enforcement capabilities. [Arab News]

Cambodia, Philippines elevate ties in trade, defence, connectivity

(lb) Cambodia and the Philippines have recently expressed their mutual commitment to bolstering their bilateral relations across various domains, including trade, defense, and connectivity. This development emerged during a meeting between Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet and Philippine President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr, held on the sidelines of the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit in Melbourne. [The Star]

One of the focal points of their discussions was the promotion of trade between the two nations. Both leaders affirmed their intention to facilitate Cambodian milled rice exports to the Philippines, recognizing the economic benefits that such collaboration could bring to their respective countries. Additionally, they emphasized the importance of enhancing connections between their private sectors to foster bilateral trade relations further.

Furthermore, the leaders highlighted the significance of airway connectivity, particularly in the realm of tourism. They underscored the potential for increased direct flights between Cambodia and the Philippines, aiming to facilitate travel and tourism exchanges, especially to popular tourist destinations in both countries.

In the realm of defense cooperation, Cambodia and the Philippines applauded their existing partnership and expressed their commitment to strengthening and expanding it further. This included discussions on the possibility of conducting joint military exercises in the future, signaling a deepening of defense ties between the two nations.

However, it's worth noting that the relationship between Cambodia and the Philippines has faced challenges, particularly concerning their differing perspectives on the South China Sea conflict. While the Philippines has taken a firm stance against China's actions in the region, Cambodia has maintained a neutral position, refraining from aligning with any particular side.

Singapore steps up scrutiny of China wealth after money laundering case

(lb) Singapore's Monetary Authority (MAS) has intensified its scrutiny of Chinese wealth entering the city-state, rejecting two family office applications from Chinese-affiliated wealth since January. The rejections follow Singapore's ongoing investigation into a significant money laundering case, which led to arrests of individuals from various nationalities. The MAS stated that rejections occurred before the scandal; however, sources familiar with the matter noted a recent shift towards outright rejections rather than prolonged waiting periods. [Nikkei Asia]

Family offices in Singapore are private wealth management firms catering to high-net-worth families and individuals. They offer tailored services including investment management, tax planning, and estate planning. Regulated by the MAS, they benefit from tax incentives and contribute to Singapore's status as a leading wealth management hub in Asia.

South Korean foreign ministry announces restructuring of bureau managing North Korean nuclear issue

(oy) On March 7, South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that it is scaling back the Office of Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs, which currently manages North Korean nuclear issues. It will be replaced by a new department with a focus on foreign policy intelligence-gathering. This new department will include the new addition of diplomatic strategy, intelligence, and international security units.

The Office of Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs was originally created in 2006 to manage six-way talks between the North and South Korea, the US, China, Russia and Japan, regarding North Korea's nuclear weapons.

The restructuring reflects the prolonged impasse in nuclear talks with Pyongyang and aims to address peninsula issues from a more strategic perspective. The new strategy and intelligence office will gather and analyze intelligence to design foreign policy strategies, like the US State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research.

A new director position will also be created to oversee South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy. Additionally, South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affair plans to add a new unit responsible for managing economic security issues, such as supply chains. The ministry also plans to leverage its 167 diplomatic missions worldwide to bolster the country's exports and support South Korean companies' expansion into foreign markets.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs reaffirmed its commitment to disrupt North Korea's major illicit funding channels, such as cyber activities and ship-to-ship transfers, in order to delay and deter North Korea's nuclear and missile development. It also aims to raise international community's awareness of North Korea's human rights situation and protect North Korean defectors overseas. [Yonhap]

South Korea, US hope to conclude defense cost discussion before US election

(oy) On March 5, both South Korea and the US appointed experienced diplomats as their chief delegates for the upcoming negotiations for the new 12th Special Measures Agreement (SMA), a defense-cost sharing agreement.

Through the framework of the SMA, South Korea has been financially supporting the presence of approximately 28,500 US Forces Korea personnel by covering expenses related to labor, logistics, and construction. The SMA is subjected to periodic renewal with mutual agreement.

South Korea has appointed Lee Tae-woo, a career diplomat since 1996, while the US has appointed Linda Specht, a senior advisor and the lead negotiator for security agreements in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs. The South Korean delegation will include representatives from the Foreign Ministry, the Defense Ministry, the Defense Acquisition Program Administration, and the Ministry of Economy and Finance. The US delegation will consist of representatives from both the State Department and the Defense Department.

In contrast to prior agreements, the negotiations are taking place two years before the current 10th SMA expires. An anonymous official has stated that the timing of these discussions is not influenced by the upcoming US presidential election but is a mutual decision to ensure sufficient time for discussions.

The last round of negotiations for the 11th SMA during the Donald Trump administration was difficult due to demands for a substantial increase in South Korea's contribution. Negotiations began three months before the 10thSMA expired, with the agreement finalized 18 months later, shortly after President Joe Biden took office. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea's Foreign Minister Cho meets India's External Affairs Minister Jaishankar

(oy) On March 6, the foreign ministers of South Korea and India held their first dialogue in nearly six years to discuss ways to enhance bilateral ties.

South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul and India's External Affairs Minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, emphasized the importance of both countries' partnership in the Indo-Pacific region at the 10th Joint Commission Meeting. They agreed to strengthen their defense ties, defense industrial cooperation, and work towards upgrading South Korea-India bilateral free trade agreement.

On defense, Cho and Jaishankar pledged to ensure the smooth progress of the second phase of licensing South Korea's K-9 Howitzer. India is currently manufacturing its own variant, the K9 Vajra, using technology transferred from South Korean defense contractor Hanwha Aerospace. They also agreed to further develop defense and defense industrial cooperation and find ways to promptly resume a joint vice-ministerial level defense and foreign affairs 2+2 dialogue.

On the isuse of a bilateral free trade agreement, Cho and Jaishankar emphasized their commitment to pushing negotiations concerning upgrading of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement. Cho urged Jaishankar to quickly establish the Korea-India Ministerial Committee on Industrial Cooperation to strengthen economic relations.

Cho and Jaishankar agreed that the South Korea-India partnership could become a significant factor in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in building reliable and resilient supply chains. They pledged to work towards promoting peace, stability, and a rules-based order in the region, according to shared areas between South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy and India's Vision for Indo-Pacific.

India's External Affairs Minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar was on a four-day visit to South Korea and Japan, aimed at strengthening the Special Strategic Partnership between South Korea and India (see AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1).

This meeting was the first comprehensive dialogue on bilateral relations since December 2018. The bilateral relations were elevated to a Special Strategic Partnership during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to South Korea in May 2015. [Yonhap] [The Korea Herald] [India Ministry of External Affairs] [South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

South Korean foreign minister speaks with Philippine counterpart

(oy) On March 8, South Korea's Foreign Minister, Cho Tae-yul, held a phone call with the Philippines' Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Enrique Manalo. They discussed improving bilateral relations and noted the 75th anniversary of South Korea-Philippines diplomatic ties.

Manalo proposed active high-level exchanges to forge a deeper, future-oriented partnership. Both Cho and Manalo agreed to visit each other's country as soon as possible. Cho sought the Philippines' support for the upcoming Summit for Democracy, which Manalo promised.

The summit, a US-led initiative promoting democratic solidarity, is scheduled in Seoul from March 18-20. [Yonhap] [South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

South Korea, Uzbekistan customs agreement implemented

(oy) A mutual protocol between South Korea and Uzbekistan, which mandates administrative assistance in customs matters, came into effect on February 24. Signed by top customs officials, the protocol facilitates the exchange of information on goods and vehicles crossing customs borders and promotes law enforcement cooperation to simplify goods flow.

The protocol aims to enhance bilateral cooperation in combatting the trade of smuggled goods and intellectual property rights violations and streamline customs procedures for efficiency. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea and Kazakhstan agree to increase direct flights

(oy) According to a press statement from the Kazakh Embassy in Seoul, South Korea and Kazakhstan have agreed to increase the number of flights and introduce new air routes between both countries.

This decision was made during a meeting between South Korea's Deputy Minister of Land, Infrastructure and Transport, Lee Yoon-sang, and Kazakhstan's Vice Minister of Transport, Talgat Lastayev

Lee and Lastayev agreed to enhance aviation cooperation through regular consultations. Lastayev also met with leaders of T'Way Air and Sirius Airlines to discuss potential cooperation. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: President Yoon meets Governor of Michigan

(oy) On March 7, South Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol met Governor of Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer. They discussed cooperation between South Korea and Michigan, and support for South Korean companies and the South Korean community.

Yoon emphasized the strengthening of the South Korea-US alliance and economic cooperation, particularly in Michigan. He had made a state visit to the US in 2023 to celebrate the 70th anniversary of South Korea-US relations. Yoon then asked Whitmer for state-level government support for South Korean companies investing in Michigan.

Whitmer expressed gratitude for South Korea's investment and pledged to strengthen the South Korea-US alliance and economic cooperation. She expressed hopes that both parties can strengthen cooperation in economic security fields like electric car batteries.

In response to Yoon's request for state government support for the South Korean community in Michigan, Whitmer pledged to pay close attention to the rights and development of the South Korean community. [Yonhap] [South Korea Presidential Office]

Cross strait relations: China removes "peaceful" in "Two Sessions" government report on reunification

(fg) China has removed the word "peaceful" from its government report, presented by Premier Li Qiang at the “Two Sessions”, in the context of the issue of reunification with Taiwan, as it announced a 7.2 percent increase in the defense budget. [Taipei Times] [Focus Taiwan] [Reuters 1]

Additionally, China rejected the concept of the median line in the strait between China and Taiwan, which Taiwan regards as a maritime border and has reported on crossings by Chinese aircraft (see AiR. No. 10, March/2024). [Taiwan News 1]

In response, the Taiwanese Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) has called on China to recognize the status quo, under which "neither side of the Taiwan Strait is subordinate to the other," and instead to continue to strengthen dialogue between each other. It also emphasized that Taiwan would defend its sovereignty and democratic system. [MAC Taiwan] [Taipei Times]

Meanwhile, a report of Taiwan's Ministry of Defense submitted to the legislative Yuan, reviewed by Reuters, has underscored that China is stepping up the employment of grey-zone tactics aimed at wearing down Taiwan.

These tactics include deployments of reconnaissance balloons, drones, aircraft, civilian and military boats near the Taiwanese islands to keep Taiwan on high alert and to gather information, all while staying below the threshold of open conflict.

In response, Taiwan’s strategy remains in conducting military drills and strengthening the resilience of its military infrastructure to ensure its forces can withstand a prolonged conflict. [Reuters 2] [Taiwan News 2].

Taiwanese soldiers to be trained by U.S. military

(fg) On March 7, during a legislative hearing, Taiwanese Defense Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng stated that American military personnel are being rotated into Taiwan to train both conscripts and professional soldiers of the Taiwanese armed forces, with soldiers also receiving training in the United States.

These training missions are part of the exchanges between the armed forces of the U.S. and Taiwan.

Chiu emphasized that the U.S. personnel are in Taiwan solely for training purposes and are not being

incorporated into the Taiwanese armed forces.

Furthermore, Chiu confirmed media reports of Taiwanese units participating in U.S. training programs, including the training for the 333rd Mechanized Infantry Brigade, which took part in the exercise Northern Strike in Michigan, last year in August.

Additionally, Taiwan's 542nd Armored Brigade is undergoing training on M1A2 Abrams tanks, of which Taiwan has ordered 108. [Focus Taiwan]

Beijing-sanctioned US lawmaker to visit Taiwan for inauguration of President-elect Lai Chiang-te

(fg) Congressman Michael McCaul and Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee has announced that he will travel and lead a delegation to Taiwan for the inauguration of President-elect Lai Chiang-te on May 20.

He revealed this on March 6 at a US Capitol event commemorating the 45th anniversary of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA).

The TRA ensures continued support and provides a legal framework for trade, cultural exchanges, and mutual defense provisions without officially recognizing Taiwan as a sovereign state. [The Strait Times] [France24]

Michael McCaul visited Taiwan in April last year (see AiR No. 14, April/2023, 1) to meet President Tsai Ing-wen and high-ranking Taiwanese military officials. Subsequently, China imposed sanctions against him personally (see AiR No. 16, April/2023, 3).

Estonian members of Parliament visit Taiwan

(fg) An eight-member delegation from the Estonia-Taiwan Support Group of the Estonian Parliament Riigikogu visited Taiwan from March 4 to March 8 to bolster bilateral relations. Led by Chairman Kristo Enn Vaga, the visit focused on strengthening ties, discussing security, and exploring the business environment.

The delegation met with Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen, Premier Chen Chien-jen, and other top officials.

During the visit, the delegation explored opportunities for cooperation in areas like defense, digital affairs, science and technology, and health. Furthermore, plans for a representative office in Estonia were discussed and reinforced during the visit [Focus Taiwan 1] [Taiwan News] [Riigikogu Estonia]

The visit underscored the growing ties between Estonia and Taiwan. This follows Estonia's consideration for a Taipei non-diplomatic mission in Tallinn, prompted by Foreign Minister Wu's visit to Estonia last November. Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna expressed openness to this idea. China already warned Estonia against it (see AiR No. 46, November/2023, 2). [Focus Taiwan 2]

Taiwan maintains offices in the two other Baltic states Latvia and Lithuania.

Thailand, European Union to finalize free trade talks in 2025

(lm) Thailand and the European Union (EU) are aiming to finalize negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA) by 2025, according to Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin. The aim is to attract trade and investment to stimulate economic growth. Srettha, who also serves as the finance minister, made this announcement after discussions with French President Emmanuel Macron during a visit to France on March 11. [Bangkok Post]

Negotiations for the Thai-EU FTA resumed in September last year after a hiatus of nearly a decade following the 2014 military coup in Thailand. The second round of talks occurred in January, with the third round scheduled to take place in June in Brussels, hosted by the EU. Thailand is set to host the fourth round of negotiations in Bangkok in October.

Furthermore, President Macron expressed support for Thailand's request for visa exemption from Schengen area members. The request is expected to be considered after June and aims to be finalized by the end of the year.

China announces baseline in Gulf of Tonkin waters shared with Vietnam

(lm) China has recently declared a new baseline to delineate its territory in the northern section of the Gulf of Tonkin (known as the Beibu Gulf in China), an area it shares with Vietnam. While a previous

agreement between the two countries in 2000 demarcated the Gulf of Tonkin with a clear boundary line, Beijing now presented seven base points that, when connected, form the basis for its territorial claims in the Gulf. [Radio Free Asia]

A baseline under the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is the line that runs along the coast of a country, from which the extent of the territorial sea and other maritime zones is measured. Different maritime zones give a coastal state different jurisdictional rights, and the closer the zone to the baseline the bigger its associated jurisdiction rights. In May 1996, Beijing released 49 base points for the entire China's coast from Hainan to Qingdao but not the northern Gulf of Tonkin.

Vietnam, Australia upgrade relations to 'comprehensive strategic partnership'

(wn/lm) Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced on March 7 that Australia and Vietnam would elevate their relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership, the highest level of cooperation Hanoi enjoys only with the United States, China, India, South Korea, Japan, and Russia. This followed a meeting between Albanese and his Vietnamese counterpart Pham Minh Chinh, who had previously attended a summit of ASEAN leaders. [Vietnam News]

During the announcement, Albanese and Vietnamese Prime Minister Chinh witnessed the exchange of several cooperation documents spanning energy, minerals, agriculture, banking, and finance. Of particular significance is the focus on minerals, as both countries recognize the importance of critical minerals in modern technology, from smartphones to automobiles. [CNBC]

Vietnam boasts some of the largest untapped deposits of rare earth minerals in the world, making it an attractive destination for investment and partnership, especially for countries seeking to diversify their supply chains away from China. Australian companies, such as Blackstone Minerals Ltd. and Australian Strategic Materials, have already begun forging partnerships with Vietnamese counterparts to tap into these resources.

However, challenges remain, as exemplified by legal issues surrounding certain rare earth deals in Vietnam. Despite these challenges, both Australia and the United States are keen to strengthen cooperation with Vietnam in the rare earth sector, viewing it as a

potential alternative source to China, which currently dominates the extraction and processing of these critical minerals. [Associated Press]

Additionally, Australia's role as a key coal supplier to Vietnam highlights the broader economic ties between the two nations. With coal shipments from Australia to Vietnam on the rise, energy cooperation remains a significant aspect of the bilateral relationship.

Vietnam, New Zealand agree to strengthen, broaden relations

(wn) Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh and his New Zealand counterpart Christopher Luxon have pledged to strengthen the bilateral relationship between their countries, aiming to achieve USD 3 billion in two-way trade by 2026. During Pham Minh Chinh's state visit to Wellington on March 11, the two leaders held productive discussions, symbolized by a military welcome and followed by bilateral meetings. [The Post] [The Saigon Times]

Luxon announced a significant investment of USD 6.24 million in the "Vietfruit" project, aimed at enhancing climate resilience in Vietnam's passionfruit industry, with contributions from New Zealand's Plant and Food Research Institute. Three new agreements were signed between the countries in areas such as trade collaboration, education partnership, and finance, reflecting their commitment to deepen collaboration.

Discussions also covered the South China Sea issue, with both leaders emphasizing the importance of cooperation for peace and stability in the region. Plans were also announced for a bilateral Oceans Dialogue in 2024 on international law, maritime governance, and marine conservation.

Diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in 1975 and were upgraded to a comprehensive partnership in 2009 and a strategic partnership in 2020.

Announcements

Upcoming online events

14 March 2024 @ 3:30-5:00 pm (GMT+7), CPG, Thailand

Commercial Cross-Border Mediation – Insights from an Experienced Intercultural Mediator

This webinar will delve into the challenges of navigating cultural differences in cross-border business disputes. Iram will share real-world experiences, effective strategies, and practical insights gained from years of experience in international commercial mediation.

For more information, see [CPG].

13 March 2024 @ 10:00 -11:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Asia Society Policy Institue, USA

What's Driving Chinese Investment into the Mexican Automotive Sector?

Join the Washington International Trade Association (WITA) and the Asia Society Policy Institute for a Zoom webinar to look at trends and policy implications for investment into the Mexican automotive sector by Chinese and other foreign firms. These investments are, in part, a response to U.S. trade policies, specifically the China tariffs and the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement, but also the tax provisions in the Inflation Reduction Act, and the Biden Administration's efforts to shorten supply chains and bring more manufacturing to North America.

For more information, visit [Asia Society].

13 March 2024 @ 9:30-11:45 a.m. (GMT-5), The Heritage Foundation, USA

Seizing the Moment to Defeat DEI

Join us to hear from experts in national defense, medicine, and education, along with journalists uncovering DEI and CRT's capture of a wide range of institutions. From medical schools to the military and law schools to corporations, see how this pernicious ideology has made its way into every facet of American institutions and what can be done to reverse course.

For more information, visit [Heritage Foundation].

13 March 2024 @ 2:00-3:30 p.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Strategic Japan 2024: Japan and the Global South

Strategic Japan is a CSIS Japan Chair initiative to introduce research from Japanese scholars on regional and global challenges and the implications for the U.S.-Japan Alliance. This year, the Japan Chair invited two scholars to explore dimensions of Japan's strategic approach to the Global South, as highlighted in Prime Minister Kishida's speech during his visit to Washington, D.C. in 2023 and the G7 Hiroshima Summit. Join us for a discussion on their research.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

13 March 2024 @ 12:00-1:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA

The Future of American Innovation: A Conversation with Lina Khan

Join Chair of the Federal Trade Commission Lina M. Khan and Rana Foroohar, associate editor at the *Financial Times*, for a conversation on these and other issues. Dan Baer, senior vice president for policy research and director of the Europe Program at the Carnegie Endowment, will deliver introductory remarks.

For more information, visit [Carnegie]. Carnegie

13 March 2024 @ 9:00-10:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA

Can the United States and Europe Coordinate Counter-Coercion with Taiwan?

Carnegie's Evan A. Feigenbaum and Isaac B. Kardon will be joined by Gudrun Wacker and Enoch Wu to discuss whether and how Americans and Europeans can better understand and coordinate responses to Beijing's tools and tactics designed to coerce Taiwan short of using military force.

For more information, visit [Carnegie].

13 March 2024 @ 3:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

Baltic bulwark: Prime Minister Evika Siliņa on Latvia's transatlantic role

Prime Minister Evika Siliņa discusses her vision for the transatlantic alliance and Latvia's role in the Baltic region and beyond.

For more information, visit [Atlantic Council].

14 March 2024 @ 4:00-5:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Extremism in the West: International Influences, Local Challenges

Join the CSIS Transnational Threats Project for an online event on Thursday, March 14, at 4:00 p.m. on extremism in the West. CSIS senior fellow Dan Byman will sit down with Robin Simcox, Commissioner for Countering Extremism at the United Kingdom Home Office, to discuss trends in extremism and the state of counterterrorism.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

14 March 2024 @ 2:00-3:00 p.m. (GMT), Chatham House, UK

How has MENA turmoil affected external powers' interests?

The war in Gaza has taken a regional dimension that risks creating broader turmoil across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).Experts assess how China, Russia, the UK and the USA are responding to crisis in the region.

For more information, visit [Chatham House].

14 March 2024 @ 6:00-7:00 p.m. (GMT), Chatham House, UK

How safe is America's democracy?

Experts will discuss, what are the most prominent threats to American democracy today? Is the greater threat from abroad or at home? How has the security establishment responded since January 6th to country attempts to undermine the American electoral process? What can the American election tell us about the threat and potential responses to political violence?

For more information, visit [Chatham House].

14 March 2024 @ 10:00 -11:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Wilson Center, USA

Navigating Brazil's G20 Presidency: A Conversation with Ambassador Maurício Lyrio

To learn more about Brazil's ambitions for its G20 presidency, and how it plans to build consensus among the diverse G20 members, join the event for a fireside chat with Ambassador Maurício Lyrio, secretary for economic and financial affairs at Brazil's Foreign Ministry and Brazil's G20 "Sherpa."

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

14 March 2024 @ 10:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

Reporters at risk: On the frontlines in Ukraine and Gaza

Two years after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and five months into the Israel-Hamas war, the world continues to rely on journalists

for real-time insights in the fog of war. In this event leading journalists discuss covering the wars in Ukraine and Gaza.

For more information, visit [Atlantic Council].

15 March 2024 @ 9:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m. (GMT+1), European Council on Foreign Relations, Germany

Warsaw European Conversation 2024

There is an urgent need to engage in a critical conversation about the risks and trends shaping the European project. Participate in this online Conversation on issues preoccupying the community today, and awaiting it tomorrow.

For more information, visit [ECFR].

15 March 2024 @ 10:30 a.m.-11:45 a.m. (GMT+8), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Post-2024 General Elections and Indonesia 2045 Vision: Strategic Challenges and Opportunities

This webinar aims to identify and discuss strategic challenges surrounding the fulfilment of the Indonesia 2045 Vision. The webinar will assess the progress of achieving the vision in the defence and security sector, such as military modernisation and national security architecture. What are the targets of Indonesia 2045 Vision in defence and security sector? What are the obstacles to achieving the targets?

For more information, visit [Nanyang].

18 March 2024 @ 10:00 -11:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Stimson Center, USA

Japan's Nuclear Dilemma

Join the event for a discussion on the renewed global concerns surrounding nuclear threats and Japan's continued struggle with nuclear deterrence.

For more information, visit [Stimson].

18 March 2024 @ 10:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Foreign Policy Research Institute, USA

India's Influence in Africa

Join FPRI's Africa Program Chair Ambassador Charles A. Ray as he leads a distinguished panel of experts to discuss India's evolving relationship with Africa, its implications for US Africa policy, and the continent's development trajectory.

For more information, visit [FPRI].

18 March 2024 @ 9:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m. (GMT+9), Asian Development Bank, Japan

Food and Nutritional Security in Asia and the Pacific: Challenges and Opportunities

This virtual conference will explore food and nutritional security development, gaps, and opportunities for policy collaboration in Asia and the Pacific. It will draw upon research examining country-level experiences, lessons learned, and possible next steps.

For more information, visit [ADB].

18 March 2024 @ 2:00-5:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

From Terrestrial to Celestial: Unlocking the potential to enhance US-Latin American B2B collaboration

Join the CSIS Americas Program, in partnership with the Information Technology Industry Council's Space Enterprise Council, for an in-depth look at the business-to-business landscape in Latin America, with a particular focus on the space and technology sector.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

18 March 2024 @ 10:30 a.m. -1:15 p.m. (GMT-5), Wilson Center, USA

Iran, the Middle East, and the United States

The Middle East Program at the Wilson Center is pleased to present "Iran, the Middle East, and the United States." Amid a complex regional landscape and Iranian parliamentary elections, this half-day conference on March 18th is set to explore the intricate dynamics of Iran's relationships with its allies in the Middle East and how these proxies impact US national security interests.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

18 March 2024 @ 4:00 -5:30 p.m. (GMT-5), Wilson Center, USA

Days of Opportunity: The United States and Afghanistan Before the Soviet Invasion

Join the event to learn more about the profound and far-reaching impact of American diplomats, aid workers, and corporations, from the interwar years to 1979. Far from being marginal observers, Americans undertook significant, consequential efforts within Afghanistan.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

18 March 2024 @ 1:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

The Syria Strategy Project: A public launch

The Syria Strategy Project works with policymakers to develop a holistic strategy to sustainably forge a pathway to resolving the Syrian crisis. Join the event to learn more.

For more information, visit [Atlantic Council].

19 March 2024 @ 3:00-4:30 p.m. (GMT+8), Yusof Ishak Institute (ISEAS), Singapore

Thai Foreign Policy Under Srettha Thavisin: Continuity, Change and Challenges

This webinar examines the evolving dynamics of Thailand's foreign policy under the leadership of Prime

Minister Srettha Thavisin and the Pheu Thai coalition government.

For more information, visit [ISEAS].

19 March 2024 @ 9:00-10:30 a.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

USAID/MujerProspera: Advancing Gender Equality in Northern Central America

Join the Americas Program for a conversation on innovations made to advance women's economic security in Northern Central America, featuring a Keynote Address by Administrator Samantha Power, United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

For more information, visit [CSIS].

19 March 2024 @ 2:00-3:30 p.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Section 702 of FISA: Privacy and Civil Liberties Reforms

In mid-April, Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, which authorizes the U.S. government to collect communications from non-Americans overseas, is set to expire. Although Section 702 serves as a valuable tool to respond to cyberattacks and other emerging threats, it also raises critical questions over the appropriate boundaries of targeting non-U.S. persons and accessing data from U.S. persons who incidentally communicate with them. As Congress considers legislation to reauthorize Section 702, it is also essential to examine robust reforms that safeguard privacy, civil liberties, cross-border data flows, and national security in a more digital age. Join the event to learn more.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

19 March 2024 @ 11:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m. (GMT-5), The Heritage Foundation, USA

We Win, and They Lose: A Conservative Strategy to Win the New Cold War

Drawing inspiration from President Ronald Reagan's goal for the contest with the Soviet Union - "We win, and they lose" - Matthew Kroenig and Dan Negrea's new book, We Win They Lose: Republican Foreign Policy & the New Cold War, articulates a conservative strategy to defeat the Chinese Communist Party as America navigates a New Cold War. Join the event for a thought-provoking panel discussion on strategies to win the New Cold War.

For more information, visit [Heritage Foundation].

19 March 2024 @ 7:00 -8:30 a.m. (GMT-5), Asia Society Policy Institue, USA

China's Cooperation with Southeast Asia to Support More Ambitious Clean Energy Transition by 2030

This invite-only virtual program launches a new report, "China's Cooperation with Southeast Asia to Support an Ambitious Clean Energy Transition by 2030," detailing key insights from the project, gathered from three online convenings and private consultations.

For more information, visit [Asia Society].

Recent Book Releases

Mukund Padmanabhan, *The Great Flap of 1942: How the Raj Panicked over a Japanese Non-invasion,* Vintage Books, 270 pages, Published February 5, 2024, For a review, see [Asian Review of Books].

Michael Wahman, *Controlling Territory, Controlling Voters: The Electoral Geography of African Campaign Violence,* Oxford University Press, 272 pages, Published January 19, 2024, For a review, see [Foreign Affairs Review of Books].

Stephen Vladeck, *The Shadow Docket: How the Supreme Court Uses Stealth Rulings to Amass Power and Undermine the Republic*, Basic Books, 352 pages, Published May 16, 2023, For a review, see [Los Angeles Review of books].

Edited by Robert Jervis, Diane N. Labrosse, Stacie E. Goddard, and Joshua Rovner, *Chaos Reconsidered: The Liberal Order and the Future of International Politics,* Columbia University Press, July 4, 2023, For a review, see [Foreign Affairs Review of Books].

Barry Buzan, *Making Global Society: A Study of Humankind Across Three Eras,* Cambridge University Press, 522 pages, Published August 10, 2023, For a review, see [Foreign Affairs Review of Books].

Raymond Aron, *Liberty and Equality,* Princeton University Press, 120 pages, Published November 7, 2023, For a review, see [Foreign Affairs Review of Books].

Dr Pepijn Corduwener, *The Rise and Fall of the People's Parties: A History of Democracy in Western Europe since 1918,* Oxford University Press, 272 pages, Published November 10, 2023, For a review, see [Foreign Affairs 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 **Programme Associate** to be based in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Applications are accepted

until March 17, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Joint Project Coordinator** to be based in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Applications are accepted until March 22, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Project Analyst (EU Support to Confidence Building in the Western Balkans)** to be based in Podgorica, Montenegro. Applications are accepted until March 22, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Head of Operations (Hub) NOC** to be based in the UNHRD Brindisi Hub. Applications are accepted until March 24, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Programme Policy Officer (Private Sector Expert)** to be based in Maputo, Mozambique. Applications are accepted until March 20, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Legal Officer** to be based in Rome, Italy. Applications are accepted until March 24, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **Programme Specialist (Cross Sectoral)** to be based in Cotabato City, The Philippines. Applications are accepted until March 22, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **Child Protection Specialist** to be based in Bunia, Democratic Republic of Congo. Applications are accepted until March 15, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **Consultant on Inclusive Education in Emergencies** to be based in New York, USA. Applications are accepted until March 19, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Research Assistant (Data Management & Analysis)** to be based in Lyon, France. Applications are accepted until March 31, 2024. More information is provided at [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Partnership and Financing Officer** to be based in Berlin, Germany. Applications are accepted until March 30, 2024. More information is provided at [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Compliance and Risk Management Specialist** to be based in Kabul, Afghanistan. Applications are accepted until March 23, 2024. More information is provided at [WHO].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** seeks a **Director, Ethics** to be based in New York, United States. Applications are accepted until April 21, 2024. More information is provided at [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** seeks a **Development Coordination Officer** to be based in Sarajevo, Bosnia, and Herzegovina. Applications are accepted until March 14, 2024. More information is provided at [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** seeks a **Strategic Communications Officer** to be based in New York, USA. Applications are accepted until March 15, 2024. More information is provided at [UN].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Caseworker** to be based in New York, USA. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks an **Operations Coordinator** to be based in Sacramento, USA. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Supply Chain Coordinator** to be based in Mali. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks an **Operations Specialist** to be based in Botswana-Gaborone. Applications are accepted until March 23, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **Project Coordinator** to be based in Liberia-Monrovia. Applications are accepted until March 29, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **Communications Specialist** to be based in Bangkok, Thailand. Applications are accepted until March 29, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Project Officer (Project Management)** to be based in Islamabad, Pakistan. Applications are

accepted until March 21, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Consultant (Sexual Exploitation and Abuse**), homebased. Applications are accepted until March 16, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Chief Migration Health Officer (Health Assessment Programmes)** to be based in Islamabad, Pakistan. Applications are accepted until March 19, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a **Carbon Analyst** to be based in Nairobi, Kenya. Austria. Applications are accepted until March 21, 2024. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a **Risk Specialist (Planning & Reporting)** to be based in Copenhagen, Denmark. Austria. Applications are accepted until March 14, 2024. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

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].

UN Women seeks a **Partnership and Coordination Specialist** to be based in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Applications are accepted until March 29, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Women].

UN Women seeks a **Programme Manager** to be based in Kabul, Afghanistan. Applications are accepted until March 24, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Women].

UN Women seeks a **Consultant on Ending Violence against Women** to be based in Novi Sad, Serbia. Applications are accepted until March 13, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Women].

The **National University of Singapore (NUS)** welcomes application for a tenure-track position at the level of **Assistant Professor in the Department of Southeast Asian Studies.** Application submission deadline is June 15, 2024. For more information, see [NUS].

The **French National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food, and Environment (INRAE)**

welcomes applications for the position of an **European policy head.** Application submission deadline is March 31, 2024. For more information, see [INRAE].

The **Department of Gender Studies at Central European University (CEU)** welcomes applications for the position of an **Assistant Professor of Gender Studies**. Review of applications will begin on March 15, 2024, and continue until the position is filled. For more information, see [CEU].

The **Democracy Institute (DI) at Central European University (CEU)** welcomes applications for a **two-year position as a Post-doctoral Researcher** at the research group on Inequalities and Democracy. Application submission deadline is March 30, 2024. For more information, see [CEU].

The **Department of Sociology at Manchester Metropolitan University** welcomes applications for the position of a **Professor of Social Policy**. Application submission deadline is April 7, 2024. For more information, see [Manchester Metropolitan University].

Tampere University welcomes applications for a **tenure track position in Public Law (Associate Professor/Professor)**. Application submission deadline is April 4, 2024. For more information, see [Tampere University].

The **Department of Humanities, Social and Political Sciences (D-GESS) of ETH Zurich** welcomes applications for a **Postdoc position in political science**. Application submission deadline is April 15, 2024. For more information, see [ETH Zurich].

The **Department of Management, Technology and Economics of ETH Zurich** welcomes applications for the position of a Postdoctoral or PhD Researcher in Applied Macroeconomics and/or Political Economy. For more information, see [ETH Zurich].

The **Institute of Political Science of Leiden University's Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences** welcomes applications for the position of a PhD Candidate in Political Science. Application submission deadline is March 29, 2024. For more information, see [Leiden University].

Vrije Universiteit Brussel welcomes applications for the position of a **Professor "User Innovation in Media and Technology"**. Application submission deadline is March 24, 2024. For more information, see [Vrije Universiteit Brussel].

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