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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 Georgia's National Unity Day and New Year in various countries in Southeast Asia this week.

With best regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

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

China: Country Garden stops share trading in Hong Kong

(ms) In a latest development in the ongoing crisis of the Chinese property market, Country Garden, one of the country's largest developers, has halted trading of its shares on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. This move comes after the postponement of its annual financial results, signaling the challenges the company faces amid a restructuring of its debts.

The suspension of Country Garden's shares comes as no surprise given the grim outlook for the industry. With mounting debts and uncertain prospects, investors are left in limbo, unsure of the company's future direction. The upcoming hearing for the liquidation petition filed against Country Garden in the city (see AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1) adds further

uncertainty to the situation, raising questions about the company's resilience.

In the absence of this much-needed resilience Country Garden's future looks bleak. The Chinese government's strong action against Evergrande, China's other former real estate behemoth, suggests that there will be no more bailouts or a protective hand from the Chinese government (read more AiR No. 12, March/2024, 3). Therefore, if the petition is upheld by a Hong Kong court, as in the case of Evergrande, an actual liquidation is a possible fate for both companies. [BBC] [Channel News Asia] [South China Morning Post 1]

One potential victim of the Chinese government's hardening stance could be Shanghai-based developer Shimao Group Holdings. In a petition filed in Hong Kong on April 5, the state-owned China Construction Bank requested the liquidation of the company over outstanding debts of USD 200 million.

The application came just weeks after Shimao unveiled a debt reconstruction plan for its overseas bonds, which met with little enthusiasm among its creditors.

Shimao's case is particularly indicative of the shift in the government's approach to its debt-ridden real estate sector, as Shimao is responsible for 16 white-listed projects. At the end of January, the government introduced the white-listing mechanism which selects a range of projects and not only makes them eligible for funding but also urges financial companies to support them (see AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1).

With the liquidation request, which also concerns whitelisted projects, coming from one of the country's four major state investors, the question is whether the mechanism has already officially failed after about 2 months of operation. [Nikkei Asia] [South China Morning Post 2]

China: Increased push for semiconductor development independence may shift US-China tech war

(ms) According to reports, China’s push for self-sufficiency for semiconductor has taken a new turn with Beijing-based Naura Technology Group initiating research into lithography systems. This move, coupled with a patent application by Huawei Technologies for self-aligned quadruple patterning (SAQP) technology, underscores China's efforts to produce advanced chips independently of Dutch giant ASML, potentially reshaping the US-China tech war dynamics.

SAQP, a technique combining advanced etching and lithography, promises increased transistor density and chip performance, providing China a workaround to produce sophisticated 5-nanometre grade chips without relying on ASML's extreme ultraviolet (EUV) tools.

By utilizing SAQP with deep ultraviolet lithography (DUV) machines, China could bypass the need for ASML's EUV tools, which it has been denied access to under US-led restrictions. This strategy aligns with China's stockpiling of DUV machines amid concerns over tightening export controls by the US and its allies.

However, China's efforts to develop its own lithography machines, led by state-owned Shanghai Micro Electronics Equipment Group (SMEE), have faced obstacles. SMEE's capabilities fall short of matching ASML's, and its addition to the US trade blacklist further impedes progress in this area.

Despite challenges, other players in China's semiconductor supply chain are stepping up. Naura Technology Group's foray into lithography systems research signals the industry's determination to circumvent US sanctions aimed at limiting China's semiconductor advancements.

Yet, these efforts are shrouded in secrecy to evade further sanctions from Washington. The US government is reportedly considering blacklisting Chinese semiconductor firms linked to Huawei, further heightening tensions in the tech war arena.

While China's SAQP research is poised to advance with companies like Naura and SMEE contributing their expertise, challenges remain. Achieving 7-nanometre or even 5-nanometre grade chips still lags behind industry leaders like Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co (TSMC). [Bloomberg] [Reuters] [South China Morning Post]

China: Central Bank initiates USD 70 billion re-lending program to boost tech innovation

(ms) The People's Bank of China (PBC), China's central bank, unveiled a re-lending initiative of USD 70 billion, aimed at providing crucial financial support to small and midsize technology companies, fostering innovation, technical upgrades, and equipment modernization.

With an enticing interest rate set at 1.75 percent, the one-year loans offered through this program can be extended twice, providing support for emerging firms during their early growth phases.

The PBOC's move underscores China's determination to fortify its position as a global tech powerhouse. [Reuters] [State Council]

China: National Data Administration to increase computing capacities by 50 percent by 2025

(ms) China's National Data Administration (NDA) concluded its inaugural two-day annual meeting on April 2, revealing plans to increase the country's computing capacities by 50 percent by 2025. The NDA aims to expedite the construction of a nationwide integrated computing power network, focusing on optimizing data infrastructure distribution.

Already in October last year the Chinese authorities announced plans to increase the computing power to over 300 EFLOPS – a unit for measuring computer speed with 1 EFLOPS representing a system capable of performing 1 quintillion floating-point operations per second – by 2025, with a computing power of just under 200 EFLOPS in mid-2023 (see AiR No. 41, October/2023, 2).

This announcement underscores China's efforts to strengthen its technological capabilities and compete and even overtake the current global leader in computing capacities in form of the US. However, challenges persist, including the impact of ongoing hi-tech export controls by the US government, which prohibits companies like Nvidia to export their most-advanced products to China.

To counteract these issues, the NDA pledges to effectively utilize government investments and prioritize data production and circulation. [South China Morning Post]

China: Shanghai inaugurates data flow service center in Lingang free-trade zone to address foreign business concerns

(ms) Shanghai has inaugurated a data flow service center in the Lingang free-trade zone, aiming to address the concerns of foreign businesses and

facilitate freer cross-border data flows. The center pledges to adopt internationally recognized standards and seeks data cooperation agreements with countries including Singapore, New Zealand, and members of the BRICS economic bloc.

Applications of the center's services encompass electronic invoices, blockchain technology, and digital identity recognition. Trialed scenarios include providing easier access to overseas websites for foreigners staying in designated hotels and streamlining data exchanges for healthcare companies without compromising sensitive information.

According to its Director, the center is committed to aligning its services with international standards such as those outlined in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA). However, challenges remain, particularly concerning China's stringent data security regulations, which have been a concern for foreign businesses. [South China Morning Post]

The Lingang initiative signifies a step towards balancing data security with business facilitation, amid efforts by Chinese leadership to reassure foreign investors, during the ongoing economic struggles. While the move is seen as a positive development, concerns linger regarding the pace and scope of implementation, reflecting the ongoing complexities of navigating China's regulatory landscape. [more information on the Lingang free trade zone via China Briefing]

China: Premier promises consistency in macro-economic policies

(ms) Premier Li Qiang vowed during a symposium with economic experts and businessman on April 8, that China will make macro-economic policies more consistent and pay attention to precise policy implementation, thereby addressing foreign concerns about the lack of clarity in China’s handling of its economic challenges.

While acknowledging the global economic headwinds the country is facing, Li expressed confidence in China's ability to sustain growth, stressing the importance of proactive measures to bolster economic stability and stimulate market activity.

The premier outlined key priorities, including accelerating policy implementation, promoting

innovation-driven growth, and addressing structural issues. He also emphasized the importance of targeted measures to support technological innovation and improve people's livelihoods. [Reuters] [Xinhua]

China: Former executives of Chinese state-owned oil giants under investigation for corruption

(ms) Two former executives of China National Offshore Oil Corp. (CNOOC) are currently under investigation for suspected serious violations of law and discipline, as announced by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, China's anti-corruption agency. Fang Zhi, former vice president overseeing international operations, and Chen Ming, former deputy general manager at CNOOC's Tianjin subsidiary, are the subjects of the probe.

Fang Zhi played a pivotal role in CNOOC's acquisition of Canada's Nexen in 2013, while Chen Ming was responsible for oil and gas development in the Bohai Sea. This investigation is part of a broader anti-corruption campaign targeting high-ranking officials within China's state-controlled oil and gas industry.

The probe follows earlier instances of corruption allegations within the industry, including the investigation of Li Yong, former deputy Communist Party head and general manager of CNOOC, and Wang Yilin, former chairman of China National Petroleum Corp. (CNPC). [Nikkei Asia] [Upstream]

In a separate development, Xu Wenrong, a former vice general manager of CNPC, has been charged with taking bribes by state prosecutors. The prosecutor's statement on their official WeChat account revealed that Xu allegedly used his position to accept illicit property from others, with the value of the alleged bribes described as "particularly large."

The charges against Xu underscore the ongoing efforts to combat corruption within China's state-owned enterprises, with a noticeable crackdown on the country’s oil and gas sector. CNPC has yet to respond to requests for comment regarding Xu's case. [China Daily] [Reuters]

China: Trial of three minors over murder case spark questions about handling of juvenile offenders

(ms) China's legal system is confronted with a notable case in which three minors, all under the age of 14 at the time of the crime, are accused of murdering their middle-school classmate, prompting discussions regarding the handling of juvenile offenders within the country's legal framework.

China's decision to lower the age of criminal responsibility from 14 to 12 for specific cases, including those involving extreme violence resulting in death, came into effect in 2021. The application of this revised law in the Hebei case highlights its early implementation and its implications for the treatment of young individuals accused of grave crimes.

The provincial prosecutor, responsible for overseeing the legal proceedings, has confirmed the receipt of a police request to try the three suspects on criminal charges. After careful review, the prosecutor concluded that the accused were aged between 12 and 14 at the time of the alleged offense, thus warranting their criminal accountability.

In accordance with Chinese law, murder carries severe penalties, ranging from imprisonment to the death penalty. However, individuals under the age of 18 are exempt from receiving the death penalty.

The case is emblematic of broader societal issues, particularly concerning the well-being and upbringing of China's "left-behind children," who are often raised in rural areas by relatives while their parents work in urban centers. Such children may face heightened risks of mental health challenges, involvement in criminal activities, and exposure to bullying.

The legal proceedings in the Hebei case have reignited discussions on strategies for preventing juvenile delinquency and ensuring fair treatment within the criminal justice system. The provincial prosecutor has pledged to strengthen efforts aimed at addressing the root causes of youth crime while upholding the principles of legal accountability and rehabilitation. [Hong Kong Free Press] [The Guardian]

China: Prominent Tibetan-language blog banned

(ms) The Chinese government has shut down a prominent Tibetan-language blog, Luktsang Palyon, commonly known as "Tibet Sheep." The online platform served as an important source for Tibetan content, offering educational materials, articles, music lyrics, and translations, and had a rather big

readership both inside and outside Tibet since its establishment in 2013.

The administrator of Luktsang Palyon revealed on April 2 that the website, along with its associated WeChat blog, had been blocked by authorities on grounds of alleged copyright infringement. Despite filing a formal appeal for restoration, the administrator expressed little hope for a favorable outcome, citing the escalating efforts by Chinese authorities to suppress the Tibetan language and culture.

The closure of Luktsang Palyon adds to a list of Tibetan-language online platforms that have faced similar fates, including the removal of Tibetan language options from popular apps and the shutdown of video-sharing platforms. [Radio Free Asia]

This crackdown is part of a broader policy of censorship and assimilation that Beijing is enforcing in Tibet, but also in the Uyghur-inhabited region of Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia. In the regions, the government is slowly but consistently reducing the opportunities to live out or speak and learn the respective culture or native language by targeting the education system, local websites or other communication channels and slowly assimilating the locals into the dominant Han culture.

China: Rights activist Xu Qin sentenced to four years for subversion

(ms) Chinese activist Xu Qin has been sentenced to four years in prison by the Yangzhou Intermediate People's Court in Jiangsu province. She was charged with "incitement to subvert state power," a commonly used accusation against critics of the Chinese Communist Party.

Xu, a prominent figure in the Wuhan-based China Rights Observer group, founded by imprisoned dissident Qin Yongmin, was sentenced on March 29. Concerns over Xu's health, including a history of stroke and heart problems, were raised during the proceedings. Allegations of torture during her detention have been reported, that are said to have led to a further deterioration of her health.

Xu is just another case of the government's crackdown on dissent, which is underlined by the criminal offense of subversion, of which Xu was found guilty of. The offense is very vague in its definition, which makes it a flexible tool for the judiciary to crack down on opposition figures.

In the face of the sentencing Xu announced plans to appeal the verdict. [Radio Free Asia]

China: Hong Kong customs intensifies security measures amid national security law

(ms) Amidst the implementation of the city's national security law (see AiR No. 13, March/2024, 4), Hong Kong's Customs and Excise Department announced that it is intensifying efforts to prevent items deemed threatening to national security from entering the city. Commissioner of Customs and Excise, Louise Ho, emphasized the need for heightened vigilance during an interview with Cable TV, indicating revisions to guidelines and enhanced training for frontline staff.

The new national security law, enacted under Article 23 of Hong Kong's Basic Law, targets offenses including treason, insurrection, sabotage, external interference, and theft of state secrets and espionage, thereby adding on the 2020 by China implemented security law, covering offences of secession, subversion, terrorist activities and collusion with a foreign country or external forces to endanger national security.

The case of five speech therapists from September 2022 and their children's book about sheep and wolves revealed a glimpse of the extent of what customs control might mean under Art. 23. According to the Hong Kong court, the book, allegorical of the 2019 government protests, depicted wolves as the Hong Kong government and "effectively brainwashed" readers to incite fear, resulting in a 19-month prison sentence for the authors (see AiR No. 37, September/2022, 2).

Crucial to the tightening of import controls is the fact that, in addition to the authors, criminal investigations have also been launched against importers of the books, including a 38-year-old clerk who was arrested in early 2023 for importing 18 copies of the books in question for the "intention of bringing hatred to the Central and Hong Kong government" and is currently in custody. [Hong Kong Free Press] [I-Cable in Chinese]

China: Implementation of Article 23 sparks concerns for Hong Kong's autonomy

(ms) An interview with Economist Stephen Roach by Radio Free Asia (see full interview) gives insights into the imposed control about the political and economic discourse in the country as well as possibly the ramification the implications of Article 23 in Hong Kong might have on the country and the foreign businesses in the city.

Roach, a former chairman of Morgan Stanley Asia and currently a senior fellow at Yale University's Jackson Institute for Global Affairs, who attended the China Development Forum at the end of March (see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1). As part of his participation, Roach intended to express concerns about Hong Kong's autonomy, especially after the implementation of Article 23 (see AiR No. 13, March/2024, 4) but was stopped from doing so by organizers who insisted on that only topics aligning with China's interests should be brought forward.

This move underscores China's heightened scrutiny of criticisms of Kong Hong's Art. 23 and its impacts the city's political situation. Various companies have begun to review their presence in the city in the wake of the introduction of the National Security Law, and a decision to leave the city would not only be a serious blow to Hong Kong itself, but also to the mainland due to the city's role as an international economic hub for the Chinese economy.

To date, as outlined by Roach, both the mainland and Hong Kong have dismissed any references to Hong Kong's rapprochement with the mainland, discrediting it as agitation or smear campaign against them. However, foreign analysis paints a clear picture of Hong Kong's independence slowly dissolving and the tightening of Chinese control.

PLA heightens border vigilance amid Myanmar tensions

(yq) The People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China has announced a significant escalation in its border security measures with Myanmar, following the conclusion of a live-fire drill conducted in the vicinity on April 2.

The PLA's decision to intensify patrols and control along the Myanmar border is a direct response to the heightened tensions in the region, where conflict between Myanmar's military rulers and rebel factions has intensified. Earlier this year in January stray artillery shells from Myanmar injured five Chinese Nationals in Nansan, China, near the China-Myanmar

border (see AiR No. 2, January/2024, 2). [South China Morning Post]

Despite diplomatic efforts, including four rounds of peace talks, a lasting resolution remains elusive. A ceasefire agreement brokered during the third round of discussions was reportedly violated by the military junta a day later, highlighting the challenges in achieving peace. [The Diplomat]

Japan: LDP lawmaker challenges his penalty

(sh) On April 5, former education minister and senior Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lawmaker Shionoya Ryu hinted at appealing the party's disciplinary action against him.

The LDP's ethics committee recently penalized Shionoya and 38 others for not reporting revenues from fundraising events. Shionoya, once head of the faction led by late Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, faces the harshest penalty – urged to leave the party, the second-most severe punishment after expulsion.

While acknowledging the committee's concerns about his role in the ongoing political funds scandal, Shionoya emphasized that he didn't conspire or instruct members on illicit practices.

Shionoya's move hints at potential internal conflict within the LDP and raises questions about the party's handling of ethical issues. [NHK]

Japan: Real wages declines

(sh) In February, Japanese workers experienced a 23rd consecutive month of declining real wages, according to recent data released on April 8.

Inflation-adjusted real wages dropped by 1.3 percent compared to the previous year, marking the 23rd consecutive month of decline. Meanwhile, nominal pay increased by 1.8 percent year-on-year, the fastest growth rate since June of the previous year.

This ongoing trend suggests that rising prices have continued to squeeze consumers' spending power and highlight the ongoing challenges faced by Japanese workers amidst persistent inflationary pressures. [Reuters]

Japan: New immigration practice to be introduced

(dql) Japan is set to implement new refugee screening rules under which foreigners who seek asylum more than two times will be subject to deportation.

This follows an April 5 decision of the Japanese government to put the revised immigration law into effect on June 10.

Prior to the revision of the country's immigration law, asylum seekers were shielded from deportation while their applications for refugee status are being processed. This led to authorities arguing that applications were filed only to avoid deportation. The revised law now allows for deportation of those filing asylum bids for the third time or more, unless compelling reasons against such a deportation are presented.

At the same time, the revised law allows them to stay out of detention facilities and live under the supervision of authorized supporters, whereas thus far those facing deportation have been usually held in immigration detention centers. [NHK]

Japan: Lowe House passes bill on economic security clearance system

(sh) On April 9, Japan's House of Representatives approved a bill to establish a "security clearance" system, aiming to safeguard critical government information on economic security.

The legislation permits the government to classify data to restrict access, preventing leaks that might jeopardize national security. Penalties will be imposed for unauthorized information disclosure.

The law will penalize individuals leaking confidential data with up to five years in prison or a fine of JPY 5 million (USD 33,000). Moreover, private companies could face fines if their employees unlawfully obtain classified information for business advantage.

The bill's passage underscores Japan's commitment to enhancing security measures amid evolving global challenges. However, critics fear potential misuse of the system, raising concerns about transparency and infringement on the right of the public to know. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Destroyer fighter jet upgraded

(sh) The Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) has upgraded its largest vessel, the destroyer Kaga, to accommodate F-35B stealth fighter jets. The modified flight deck underwent its first stage of modification last month at the MSDF base in Kure City, Hiroshima Prefecture.

The trapezoidal deck was reshaped to a rectangular form to enable safe takeoff of fighter jets. Additionally, the flight deck received a heat-resistant coating to withstand the exhaust heat from the aircraft.

Further modifications are planned by Japan's Defense Ministry, including interior changes, expected to be completed over several years. MSDF Captain Kokubu Ichiro highlighted the enhanced flexibility and interoperability the modifications will bring to the Kaga.

The Defense Ministry has already conducted tests on the Izumo, a similar destroyer, paving the way for its own refurbishment to accommodate F-35B operations, while affirming that the vessels will not be used as full-time attack aircraft carriers to comply with Japan's Constitution. [NHK]

North Korea: Hypersonic missile test conducted

(yq) North Korea has recently conducted a missile test of its new solid-fuel hypersonic intermediate-range missile (IRBM) called the Hwasong-16B. State-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) confirmed the missile test on April 3, which took place amidst increased regional tensions and is part of North Korea's ongoing efforts to expand its military arsenal in response to perceived threats from Japan, South Korea, and the United States. [KCNA] [Aljazeera]

This comes after North Korea launched an intermediate-range ballistic missile that landed in the sea off its east coast on April 2, as detected by Japan and South Korea (see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1).

South Korea: General election early voting begins

(oy) On April 5, nearly 7 million voters participated in the first day of early voting for South Korea's National Assembly election, marking a record high turnout. The turnout for the first day was 15.61 percent, the highest for the first day of early voting in general elections since the system was introduced in 2014.

The election is crucial for the ruling People Power Party (PPP) as failure to secure a parliamentary majority could potentially inhibit President Yoon Suk Yeol's ability to carry out his policy agenda for the remaining three years of his term. Meanwhile, the main opposition Democratic Party (DP), which had a landslide victory in the previous elections, seeks to maintain its current parliamentary majority.

Both parties have actively urged voters to participate in the early voting, recognizing its potential implication on the final election outcome. PPP leader Han Dong-hoon told reporters that if people go to the polling station, PPE will win, otherwise, "the Republic of Korea will fail".

DP Chairman Lee Jae-myung, citing the high turnout rate, stated that it demonstrates the public's interest in politics. He encouraged people to actively participate in the voting process, making this appeal while on the campaign trail in Daejeon.

The early voting will end on April 6, with the full election happening on April 10. [Yonhap] [Korea Joongang Daily]

South Korea: Close election expected in 55 districts

(oy) According to the ruling People Power Party (PPP), the general election races in 55 districts in South Korea are very close, with a margin of just 3-4 percentage points. They stated that the situation is like a thin sheet of ice.

Cheong Yang-seog, Vice-Chair of the PPP's campaign committee, suggested that recent controversies and ethical lapses among opposition candidates, along with increased unity among supporters, could influence the election results. He emphasized that if the PPP defends well in highly contested areas, they could secure a definite victory. However, if they falter, they risk falling below the minimum threshold required to stop a constitutional reform.

The Democratic Party (DP) projected it had a definite edge in 110 districts. As the election approaches, the

number of swing districts is expanding. In a recent survey, the PPP's approval rating rose to 39 percent, while support for the DP stayed at 29 percent. [Yonhap]

South Korea: President Office says no plans to defer increase in medical school enrollment quota in ongoing doctor strike

(oy) On April 8, the South Korean Presidential Office stated that it has no plans to defer the medical school admissions quota increase, causing confusion within the government and medical community. The Presidential Office comment came after Second Vice-Health Minister Park Min-soo indicated possible changes in the scheme.

Earlier on April 7, the Korean Medical Association (KMA), the largest coalition of doctors' groups in the country, demanded that the government reconsider the quota increase and postpone the plan for a year. They also requested the formation of a committee to discuss an appropriate increase.

In response, Health Minister Cho Kyoo-hong stated that the government is ready to discuss the quota hike with the medical community in an open manner, and if the medical community provides a more rational and unified proposal, the government will participate in talks with an open-minded attitude. [Ministry of Health and Welfare] [The Korea Herald]

The junior doctors' strike, which started on February 20 due to disagreements over medical school admission quota, continues without a resolution in sight.

On April 4, President Yoon Suk Yeol engaged in a direct dialogue with Korea Intern Resident Association's (KIRA) head, Park Dan, to discuss medical reform and the contentious issue of increasing admission quotas for medical schools. Yoon stated that he would "respect the voices of junior doctors". Following the meeting, Park wrote on Facebook that "There is no future in Korea's medical services," without further elaboration. [Korea JoongAng Daily_1] [South Korea Presidential Office] [The Korea Times] [Korea JoongAng Daily_2]

Park's meeting with Yoon has created a rift within KIRA. Some KIRA members have circulated a statement calling for Park's impeachment, accusing him of unilateral decisions and lack of transparency regarding negotiations with the president.

Earlier on April 5, the South Korean government paused the suspension of medical licenses for junior doctors who are on strike and is considering lenient penalties. Second Health Vice-Minister Park Min-soo ststed that the government is planning to bolster regional healthcare services by allowing rural hospitals to accept more junior doctors for training. He added that the government plans to increase traineeship positions at hospitals outside the Seoul region and is considering "assigning a quota for the training program proportional to each region's medical school admission size". [Ministry of Health and Welfare]

The strike has resulted in financial strain on hospitals. Major hospitals like Asan Medical Center and Chungbuk National University Hospital are facing significant financial challenges, with mounting deficits and operational losses.

South Korea: Navy receives new 3000-ton submarine

(oy) On April 4, South Korean shipbuilder HD Hyundai Heavy Industries Co. delivered a 3,000-ton diesel submarine to the South Korean Navy. This submarine is the third and final one of the KSS III Batch 1.

The submarine, capable of carrying six vertical launch tubes for submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), is designed to deter threats posed by North Korea. It can accommodate a crew of around 50 and travel at a maximum speed of 20 knots. The submarine features an air-independent propulsion (AIP) system, allowing it to operate under water for weeks without snorkeling. The submarine is scheduled to be deployed after 8 months of operational testing.

HD Hyundai Heavy and Hanwha Ocean are currently offering to build submarines for Canada, Poland, and the Philippines. [Yonhap] [Korea Joongang Daily]

South Korea: Second spy satellite launched

(oy) On April 8, South Korea announced that it has successfully launched a second military reconnaissance satellite from the US. The satellite is expected to enhance its geospatial surveillance of North Korea and deter nuclear and missile threats.

This is South Korea's first satellite with Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) capabilities, allowing it to

penetrate through clouds, smoke and haze to create high-resolution images, crucial for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions.

South Korea is expected to launch a third military satellite later this year, followed by two more in 2025. All the satellites will have SAR capabilities. [The Korea Herald] [Ministry of National Defense]

Taiwan: DPP proposes stricter laws on treason and leaks

(ms) The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has introduced a set of legislative proposals aimed at strengthening laws related to treason and the prevention of leaks of classified information.

The proposed amendments, put forward by the DPP legislators, seek to increase penalties for treason under the National Security Act. If passed, the minimum penalty for offenses endangering national security or involving leaks would be raised from seven years to ten years in prison, with fines potentially reaching up to USD 3.1 million. [Taipei Times 1]

Additionally, the DPP has suggested amendments to the Organic Act of the Legislative Yuan and Legislators' Conduct Act to prevent leaks of confidential information during closed-door legislative meetings. These amendments would require attendees to sign non-disclosure agreements and prohibit the use of mobile phones or other communication devices. [Taipei Times 2]

Furthermore, amendments to the Act Governing Relations Between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area would address concerns regarding the residency rights of Chinese spouses involved in activities detrimental to national security. Under these proposed changes, Chinese spouses found to pose national security risks could face the revocation of their long-term residency rights.

The DPP has framed these legislative initiatives as necessary steps to safeguard Taiwan's sovereignty and national security, particularly amidst growing tensions in cross-strait relations. However, the opposition parties, the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), have criticized the proposals, alleging that they may be used to suppress political dissent under the guise of national security. [New Bloom]

Taiwan: President Tsai remembers democracy activist Cheng Nan-jung

(fg) On April 7, the 35th anniversary of the death of democracy activist Cheng Nan-jung, Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen commemorated his commitment to democracy.

Cheng, who set himself on fire on April 7, 1989, to avoid arrest, was honored for his courage and sacrifice for democratic values.

Tsai emphasized the importance of freedom of expression and democracy for Taiwan, which has established itself as an important center for democracy in Asia despite global challenges from authoritarianism and disinformation. The president reiterated the goal of making Taiwan a free country in line with Cheng's vision and mentioned the systematic promotion of transitional justice and the building of a more open society over the past eight years. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: Army to purchase new upgraded rifles

(dql) The Taiwanese Army is reportedly set to purchase 25,000 upgraded T112 assault rifles next year

Debuting at the 2023 Taipei Aerospace & Defense Industry Exhibition, the domestically developed and built rifle underwent a number of minor adjustments, including tweaks to the magazine release button and an improved sight that allows the user to measure the distance of a target.

The upgraded T112 rifle is said to possess improved accuracy and a longer life expectancy. [Focus Taiwan]

Meanwhile, a homegrown mobile air defense system is to be inaugurated this week as part of a live-fire exercise, according to a military source. The system in question is a car-mounted variant of the Tien Chien II (TC-2) air-to-air missile. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan: First live-fire drills with Land Sword II missiles

(fg) On April 9, the Taiwanese military conducted live-fire exercises with the new land-based Sky Sword II

missiles (Land Sword II) for the first time at the Jiupeng military base in Pingtung.

Developed by Taiwan's National Chung-Shan Institute of Science and Technology, the Land Sword II system can be used against aircraft, helicopters, unmanned aerial vehicles and cruise missiles and can be combined with the Avenger missile system and the twin-mounted Javelin missiles to improve air defense. The whole weapon system consists of a combat control vehicle, a radar and a missile launch vehicle. [Taiwan News 1]

In addition to these exercises, further live-fire missile drills are planned from April 9 to 17. The Lei Ting exercise will test land defense capabilities, such as the Thunderbolt 2000 multiple launch rocket systems. In the Shen Ying exercise, helicopters will train air-to-air fire, and the Shen Gong exercise involves soldiers engaging targets in the air with Stinger missiles in the shortest possible time. [Taiwan News 2]

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

Bangladesh: Nepotism by MPs, ministers in context of sub-district polls irks party leadership

(lm) The leadership of the Awami League (AL), Bangladesh's ruling party, has expressed its discontent with certain ministers and party legislators who have prematurely announced their close relatives as potential chairman candidates for the upcoming

upazila (sub-district) elections. This move has reportedly irked the party's high command, including Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who also serves as the AL president. [The Daily Star]

To address this issue, Sheikh Hasina is expected to outline the party's stance in a meeting of the AL central working committee following the Eid-ul-Fitr celebrations. It is anticipated that she will establish clear guidelines for selecting preferred candidates within the party ranks.

While the AL has decided not to field official candidates and allow the use of its electoral symbol in the local government elections scheduled in four phases starting from May 8, several ministers and lawmakers have already declared individuals from their families as "party candidates." This trend is perceived as an attempt to consolidate influence over local AL units.

The proliferation of candidate nominations, especially involving relatives of party officials, has raised concerns within the AL leadership about potential internal conflicts at the grassroots level. Consequently, the party has cautioned its members, particularly ministers and lawmakers, against interfering in the upazila polls and making premature candidate announcements.

Bangladesh: Ruling Awami League faces local election test in hill tracts, months after parliamentary polls

(lm) Following its success in parliamentary elections earlier this year, Bangladesh's ruling Awami League is now facing a local election challenge in the country's hill tracts region with upcoming sub-district (Upazila) council elections. [bdnews24.com]

The party decided not to nominate candidates for these elections to prevent internal rifts that could arise if certain factions were not endorsed officially. However, this approach has been met with concern from local lawmakers and grassroots leaders who proposed to support a single candidate to avoid further rifts within the party [see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1].

Additionally, the decision presents an opportunity for regional organizations, which had previously boycotted general elections, to make their mark in local governance by participating in the Upazila polls. In light of this, some quarters within the ruling party advocate for a tailored local election strategy specifically for the

hill tracts region to counter the influence of these regional parties effectively.

Furthermore, there are concerns about armed insurgent groups and the participation of other political entities, such as the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami, in the electoral process.

Bangladesh: BNP Joint Secretary General Rizvi defends call to boycott Indian goods

(lm) Without naming India directly, the Senior Joint Secretary General of Bangladesh's main opposition party BNP, Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, has accused Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government of pushing Bangladesh into cultural, political, and economic subordination to a neighboring country. He also defended his call for boycotting Indian goods, citing frequent killings of Bangladeshis by the Border Security Force (BSF). [Dhaka Tribune]

In a broader critique, Rizvi questioned India's commitment to democratic principles, alleging that it interferes in Bangladesh's internal affairs by favoring one political party over others. He accused India of undermining Bangladesh's sovereignty and democratic processes, asserting that it acts solely in the interests of a particular political faction.

After Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina secured her fourth term in January's general elections, boycotted by the BNP, an "India Out" campaign emerged, alleging Indian interference in Bangladeshi politics. The movement, propelled by the Bangladeshi diaspora and opposition groups, has advocated for boycotts of Indian products. The campaign in Dhaka is contextualized by India's strong ties with Hasina's government and strained relations with the opposition, leading to perceptions that New Delhi supports the existing political status quo.

Bangladesh: Ruling Awami League has destroyed democracy, main opposition BNP leader alleges

(lm) The Secretary General of Bangladesh's main opposition party BNP, Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, has reflected on the fundamental ideals of the country's war of independence (March-December 1971), emphasizing its core aspiration for the establishment

of a democratic state. He criticized the ruling Awami League of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for allegedly subverting this vision by establishing the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (Baksal), a political party that centralized power during the post-independence period. [Dhaka Tribune]

Baksal was formed in 1975 by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of Bangladesh and father of Prime Minister Hasina. It was established as a means to consolidate power and establish one-party rule in the country. Baksal aimed to unite various political factions under a single banner, effectively eliminating opposition parties and concentrating power in the hands of the ruling Awami League.

However, The formation of Baksal was met with controversy and resistance from opposition parties and civil society, who viewed it as undemocratic and authoritarian. Thus, Baksal's existence was short-lived: Following Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination in August 1975, the party was disbanded.

Bangladesh: Opposition BNP's chairperson Khaleda Zia returns home

(lm) Khaleda Zia, the chairperson of Bangladesh's main opposition party BNP, returned to her residence from Evercare Hospital in the capital late on March 2. Khaleda Zia, a former prime minister, was admitted to hospital on March 31, marking the second time in a month that she required hospitalization [see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1]. [Dhaka Tribune]

Her health condition has fluctuated since her imprisonment on February 8, 2018, with multiple hospital visits during the COVID-19 pandemic and treatment by specialist doctors from the Johns Hopkins Hospital in the United States. She returned home in January after a 156-day hospital stay and has since undergone periodic health check-ups at Evercare Hospital.

Zia was convicted and sentenced to jail in multiple cases. However, in October 2018, the High Court suspended her jail sentence for four months, allowing her to seek medical treatment. This suspension has since been extended multiple times, enabling her to remain out of jail on bail for an extended period.

Bangladesh: Government to provide USD 3.64 million monthly subsidy to cushion 40 million poor

(lm) In Bangladesh, the government is providing a monthly subsidy of approximately USD 3.64 million to support 10 million poor individuals with essential commodities through the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB). However, concerns have arisen regarding the proper distribution of benefits, prompting scrutiny of the beneficiary list. [Dhaka Tribune]

The list, which includes 10 million cardholders and covers 40 million family members, is being updated, with parliamentary committees emphasizing the importance of accurate distribution. The TCB is working to issue smart family cards to beneficiaries and ensure proper dealership arrangements. While food inflation remains a concern, experts suggest engaging grassroots stakeholders to ensure a leakproof beneficiary list.

Bangladesh: LPG price reduced following international market trends

(tg) The Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) has announced a reduction in the price of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) by approximately USD 0.03 per kg, setting the new rate at approximately USD 1.09 per kg. Notably, LPG prices marketed by the state-owned LP Gas Company will remain unchanged due to its local production and minimal market share, which is less than five percent. This decision to adjust LPG prices is attributed to declining costs in the international market, particularly linked to the increase in the Saudi CP (contract price), a benchmark for local operators importing LPG primarily from the Middle East. [Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Financial account deficit exceeds USD 8 billion

(lm) The financial account deficit in Bangladesh has exceeded USD 8 billion in the July-February period of fiscal year 2023-24, mainly due to increased trade credit deficit and loan repayment pressure. This deficit contrasts with a USD 2.32 billion deficit in the same period last fiscal year. The financial account balance is crucial for making foreign payments, and if it becomes

negative, payments are made directly from reserves. [The Business Standard]

At the same time, the country's external position has improved, with a current account surplus of USD 4.76 billion in July-February FY24, compared to a deficit of nearly USD 3.46 billion in the same period of FY23. The trade deficit for July-February FY24 decreased to USD 4.62 billion, down from $13.36 billion in the same period last fiscal year.

In related developments, the Ministry of Power, Energy, and Mineral Resources urgently seeks an additional USD 1 billion from the Ministry of Finance to settle the foreign debt of the energy and power sector, amid heightened demand for dollars due to increased oil and gas imports. The outstanding debt to foreign suppliers of oil and gas has exceeded USD 1.3 billion, with USD 700 million owed to the Adani Group of India, USD 280 million to fuel oil suppliers, and USD 320 million to gas and LNG suppliers. imports. Load shedding resurfaces as temperatures rise, exacerbating the situation. [The Business Standard]

Bangladesh: Three Transcom Group executives summoned to court amid fraud allegations

(tg) Following accusations of fraudulent breach of trust and fraud related to the company's shares and assets, three executives of one of Bangladesh's largest business conglomerates, Transcom Group, were ordered to court by the High Court. The lawsuits were filed against them while they were abroad, prompting separate petitions to the High Court for their return and trial participation. Following the High Court's mandate to ensure their prompt return and surrender within 72 hours, the executives adhered to the directive upon their arrival, appearing before the court and subsequently securing bail. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Hefazat leader Mamunul gets bail in rape case

(lm) A Bangladeshi court has granted bail to Mamunul Haque, former joint secretary general of Hefazat-e-Islam, an Islamic fundamentalist organization, in a rape case filed in 2021. Mamunul has been in jail since his arrest in April 2021. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: World Bank highlights strong recovery amid ongoing economic challenges

(tg) The World Bank's latest Bangladesh Development Update highlights the country's strong economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic but notes ongoing challenges, including high inflation, a persistent balance of payments deficit, and financial sector vulnerabilities. Urgent monetary reform and a single exchange rate regime are recommended to improve foreign exchange reserves and ease inflation. [World Bank]

Bangladesh: Armed group attacks check post in Bandarban's Alikadam

(lm) In the Alikadam sub-district of Bandarban, one of the three hill districts in Bangladesh, armed men attacked a check post in the early hours of April 5. This incident marked the latest in a recent series of criminal activities, including robbery and abduction committed by members of the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF), an ethnic insurgent group primarily active in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region of Bangladesh. [Dhaka Tribune]

In response, joint operations by the army and police led to the detention of 53 KNF members in separate raids, accompanied by the seizure of firearms and KNF-related gear. The operations targeted various villages, including Bathel Para in Ruma upazila (sub-district), where a stash of arms was uncovered. [The Daily Star]

Furthermore, seven individuals, suspected of KNF affiliation, were arrested following armed bank robberies in Thanchi and the abduction of a bank manager in Ruma. Additionally, the Rapid Action Battalion apprehended a chief coordinator of the KNF central committee. [The Daily Star]

Bhutan: Public loses over USD 108,000 to scammers within a year

(lm) Between 2023 and April 2, 2024, the public in Bhutan lost over USD 108,000 to scammers, with the number of victims increasing to 17 in 2024 compared to 11 in the previous year. Scammers used various tactics such as hacking email accounts, luring victims

into investment schemes, and exploiting online job opportunities. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Non-hydro debt capacity soars to USD 430.56 million amid rising concerns

(lm) The government of Bhutan is now capable of borrowing an additional USD 430.56 million in the fiscal year 2024-25, designated for non-hydro debt, based on projected GDP. This marks a notable 20.2 percent increase in borrowing capacity compared to GDP estimates for the same period. [Kuensel]

Non-hydro debt encompasses borrowing from various sources, excluding revenue generated from hydroelectric power projects, which Bhutan heavily relies on. This includes bonds, loans, and other financial instruments. However, there are rising concerns as non-hydro debt has surged by 65.13 percent over the past three years, reaching USD 1.13 billion last year.

Bhutan: World Food Programme to inject USD 14.6 million for national plans

(lm) The World Food Programme (WFP) is investing USD 14.6 million in Bhutan between 2024 and 2028 to address malnutrition, gender barriers, and promote sustainable food systems. The Country Strategic Plan (CSP) aims to achieve two outcomes by 2030: establishing climate-resilient livelihoods and enhancing food security and nutrition. Priorities include empowering women in food value chains, integrating nutrition into social protection programs, and strengthening emergency response systems. [Kuensel]

Despite progress, Bhutan faces challenges such as agricultural market limitations, gender disparities, and malnutrition. The CSP aligns with national strategies and plans, emphasizing collaboration among various stakeholders to achieve its objectives.

India: Prime Minister Modi could sweep away opposition Congress in election, says survey

(lm) India’s upcoming parliamentary elections are shaping up to potentially solidify Prime Minister Narendra Modi's dominance in the political landscape.

A recent survey indicates that Modi's National Democratic Alliance coalition, spearheaded by his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is poised to secure 399 out of the 543 seats in the lower house of parliament, with the BJP alone projected to win 342 seats. This projection underscores Modi's enduring popularity, buoyed by several factors including robust economic growth, governmental assistance programs, and symbolic gestures such as the inauguration of a Hindu temple on a historically contested site. [Reuters]

In contrast, the main opposition party, the Indian National Congress (INC), faces a daunting challenge, with predictions indicating a potential record-low performance. The INC party's projected decline in seats—from 52 in the previous election to a mere 38—underscores its struggle to regain political momentum and effectively challenge Modi's dominance. Internal divisions within the opposition camp, coupled with corruption allegations against its leaders, further weaken its ability to present a unified front against the formidable Modi-led coalition.

Geographically, the BJP is expected to perform strongly in key states such as Uttar Pradesh, where it could secure a significant portion of the available seats. Additionally, the party may make gains in the southern state of Karnataka, historically less receptive to its ideology, but where it currently holds local governance. These regional dynamics highlight the BJP's concerted efforts to expand its political footprint beyond its traditional strongholds.

Modi's government has also strategically leveraged economic policies to bolster its electoral prospects. Initiatives such as providing free rations to millions of Indians during the COVID-19 pandemic have endeared Modi to segments of the population, particularly those in rural areas grappling with economic hardships. Furthermore, the symbolic significance of Modi's involvement in the construction of a Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Ram—a long-standing promise of the Hindu-nationalist BJP—has resonated with many supporters, reinforcing his image as a champion of Hindu identity and cultural heritage.

As the election unfolds in multiple phases over the course of several weeks, the outcome remains uncertain. However, the survey results signal a potential continuation of Modi's political dominance and the BJP's ascendance, while posing significant challenges for the beleaguered opposition as it seeks to regroup and mount a viable challenge to Modi's hegemony.

India: YouTube approved ads promoting disinformation of upcoming parliamentary election

(lm) An investigation by *Global Witness* and *Access Now* has revealed that YouTube approved numerous ads promoting voter suppression and incitement to violence ahead of India's upcoming election, slated to occur in seven phases between April 19 and June 1. Despite submitting 48 prohibited ads in three languages, all were approved within 24 hours, raising concerns about YouTube's ability to combat disinformation. [TIME]

Google, YouTube's parent company, disputed the report's methodology, stating that the ads were withdrawn before routine enforcement reviews. However, the report authors argue that the approval process lacks adequate scrutiny, especially in languages spoken in countries like India. They urge YouTube to strengthen its efforts to combat election disinformation, particularly in regions where enforcement is lax.

India: BJP threatening poll officials with transfer, misusing poll body name, BJD alleges

(lm) The Biju Janata Dal (BJD), a regional political party in India, primarily active in the state of Odisha, has accused leaders of Prime Minister Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of misusing the Election Commission's name and threatening Odisha government officials on poll duty with transfers if they do not support the BJP in the simultaneous polls for the national and state parliament. [The Indian Express]

BJD leader Sasmit Patra wrote a letter to the chief election commissioner, Rajiv Kumar, stating that such tactics violate the Model Code of Conduct and constitute a criminal offense. He emphasized the importance of a free and fair election process and urged action against those involved in such activities. The BJD also claimed that similar tactics were employed by the BJP during the 2019 assembly and national parliamentary polls.

India: Supreme Court dismisses plea by AAP's Sanjay Singh over summons in defamation case

(lm) India's Supreme Court has rejected a plea filed by Sanjay Singh, a member of Parliament's upper House representing the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), challenging the summons issued against him in a defamation case. This case stemmed from comments made by Singh that allegedly defamed Gujarat University in connection with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's academic qualifications. [The Indian Express]

Previously, on January 16, the Supreme Court had temporarily halted the criminal defamation proceedings against Singh in a trial court in Ahmedabad. The court had also summoned Arvind Kejriwal, the Chief Minister of Delhi, in relation to the same matter. However, the Supreme Court declined to entertain Singh's request to transfer the trial to a different location. Instead, it deferred to the Gujarat High Court, which was already considering petitions filed by Singh and Kejriwal challenging the summons issued by the trial court in Ahmedabad. The Supreme Court directed the Gujarat High Court to adjudicate on their pleas within four weeks.

This development comes against the larger backdrop of a series of incidents targeting the leadership of the AAP. Kejriwal, a prominent critic of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was arrested on March 21 by the Enforcement Directorate (ED), on corruption charges linked to the city's liquor policy.

On April 9, the Delhi High Court dismissed Kejriwal's petition challenging his arrest by the ED in the excise policy case. The court clarified that Kejriwal's petition wasn't a bail application but contested his arrest, alleging a violation of Section 19 of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act. [The Indian Express]

The arrest of Kejriwal, who leads the AAP, means the main leaders of the party are in jail, following the arrests last year of two of Kejriwal's deputies in the same case [see AiR No. 13, March/2024, 4]. Kejriwal's came roughly 2.5 months after the ED arrested Soren on charges of corruption, hours after he resigned from the position of the chief minister of Jharkhand state.

India: Uttar Pradesh ex-top cop joins BJP, says will follow party call on contesting parliamentary polls

(lm) In a significant development in India's Uttar Pradesh state, former Director General of Police, Vijay Kumar, who retired two months ago, has joined the BJP along with his wife. Kumar cited the improved law and order situation under the leadership of Prime

Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath as a key factor influencing his decision to join the party. While he stopped short of confirming his candidacy in the upcoming parliamentary polls, Kumar expressed his willingness to take on any responsibilities entrusted to him by the party. Additionally, several other retired IPS officers have also aligned with the BJP in Uttar Pradesh. [The Indian Express]

India: Home ministry revokes FCRA licenses of five NGOs for alleged violations

(fd) In India, several prominent NGOs, including the CNI Synodical Board of Social Service (CNI-SBSS), Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI), Indo-Global Social Service Society (IGSSS), Church Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA), and Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFOI), have had their Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) licenses revoked by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) due to violations such as the misuse of foreign grants. The termination of licenses, reported on March 30, follows due process and prohibits the use of foreign funds unless reissued. [Times of India] [Hindustan Times]

Specific instances of violations include substantial foreign donations to CASA, collaborations with international organizations by VHAI, and rule violations leading to EFOI's license termination. These actions are part of a broader crackdown on over 100 NGOs in the past year, including organizations like Oxfam India and the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, over misuse allegations.

India: Supreme Court urges states and union government to internal solution

(fd) India's Supreme Court has underscored the imperative of collaborative efforts between the central and state governments regarding the disbursement of funds. This assertion came to the fore during the court's deliberation on a plea filed by the Karnataka state government, urging the central government to release substantial funding for drought relief in the state. [Times of India]

The Karnataka government's petition highlighted the failure of the Home Ministry to take decisive action despite the passage of six months since the submission of a report by the Inter-Ministerial Central Team. It criticized the delay in convening a high-level

committee meeting to approve relief from the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF).

Furthermore, the plea argued that the central government's inaction in releasing financial assistance for drought relief contravened fundamental rights guaranteed under Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution, pertaining to equality and life and liberty, respectively. It contended that the delay constituted a violation of citizens' right to life, adversely affecting their well-being and livelihoods.

This development comes in the wake of similar petitions from other states, including Tamil Nadu, which sought financial assistance for damages caused by Cyclone Michaung.

India: New rules for birth registration mandate separate recording of parents' religion

(fd) India's central government has introduced Model Rules requiring parents to separately record the religion of both the child's father and mother during childbirth registration, expanding beyond recording the family's religion only. These rules, part of the Registration of Births and Deaths (Amendment) Act, 2023, aim to maintain a national birth and death database. [The Hindu]

India: Supreme Court revoked HC verdict cancelling caste certificate of Amravati MP

(fd) India's Supreme Court has overturned the Bombay High Court's decision to cancel Navneet Kaur Rana's caste certificate. Rana, a lawmaker representing the Amravati constituency from Maharashtra state, faced allegations of fraudulent acquisition of the certificate, resulting in a fine of approximately USD 2,400. Previously an independent candidate, Rana recently joined the BJP and plans to contest from the same constituency she won in 2019. [The Indian Express]

India: Household debt hits record high as savings plummet

(lm) In a concerning revelation, a research report from an Indian financial services firm indicates that

household debt in India soared to an unprecedented high of 40 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by December 2023. This surge in debt coincided with a significant drop in net financial savings, plummeting to a mere 5 percent of GDP. Such trends highlight a growing financial strain on households across the country. [The Hindu]

The report attributes this alarming scenario to sluggish income growth coupled with robust consumption, which has eroded the capacity for savings. Despite a marginal increase in gross financial savings, the rise in financial liabilities has led to a notable escalation in annual household borrowings, reaching the second-highest level since independence.

India: Security forces foil infiltration attempt along LoC; 2 suspected terrorists killed

(fd) On April 5, security forces in the Uri sector of the Jammu and Kashmir union territory thwarted an infiltration attempt along the Line of Control (LoC), resulting in the deaths of two suspected terrorists. This operation, the first of its kind this year, yielded a cache of arms and ammunition, including AK rifles, hand grenades, and Indian currency. [Hindustan Times] [Kashmir Observer]

The LoC is the military control line between the Indian-administered union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh and the Pakistani-administered territories of Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan.

India: Clash claims 13 Naxalites in Chhattisgarh state; highest toll in a decade

(fd) On April 2, an operation in India's Chhattisgarh state resulted in the death of 13 Naxalites, marking the highest casualties in a decade. The operation was initiated following intelligence indicating the presence of members of the Peoples Liberation Guerilla Army (PLGA) – the armed wing of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) (CPI) and one of the most prominent Naxalite groups in the country – in the area. [Economic Times]

This year, a total of 46 Naxalites have been killed in various incidents, with 181 arrests and 120 surrenders reported. Naxalite activities typically intensify between

March and June, leading to heightened security measures during this period. [Deccan Herald]

In parallel, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) conducted raids across multiple locations in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar states as part of an anti-India conspiracy case involving the CPI. These raids, carried out at 11 locations in the Ballia district of Uttar Pradesh and one location in the Kaimur district of Bihar, led to the seizure of digital devices such as mobile phones, SIM cards, memory cards, and incriminating documents, including pamphlets of the proscribed Naxal outfit. [Times of India] [The Hindu]

Taking over the investigation on November 10 last year after the arrest of five individuals, the NIA has since charged four accused in the case. The agency's investigation indicates the banned outfit's active attempts to re-establish its presence in the Northern regional bureau, comprising Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh, with leaders, cadres, sympathizers, and overground workers contributing to this effort.

India: Civilian shot at by suspected militants in Jammu and Kashmir union territory

(lm) In India's Jammu and Kashmir union territory, a non-local cab driver was shot and injured by suspected militants on April 8. This marked the second attack on non-locals in the region, following the fatal shooting of two carpenters from Punjab in Srinagar two months prior. Security forces initiated a search operation following the attack. [The Indian Express]

India: Air force displays Emergency Landing Facilities operations in Kashmir Valley

(fd) In a demonstration of its capabilities, the Indian Air Force (IAF) conducted Emergency Landing Facilities (ELF) operations in the Kashmir Valley during Exercise Gangan Shakti-24. Utilizing Chinook, Mi-17 V5, and ALH Mk-III helicopters, personnel were successfully landed at night in the Wanpoh-Sangam area. Plans are in motion to activate ELFs across different sectors, bolstering operational readiness and equipping the IAF to effectively respond to disaster relief operations, thus enhancing its overall operational prowess. [The Hindu] [Times of India]

India: Agni-Prime ballistic missile successfully tested

(fd) India has achieved another milestone as the Strategic Forces Command (SFC) and the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) successfully conducted a test flight of the new Agni-Prime ballistic missile. Witnessed by senior officials, including the Chief of Defence Staff, the test confirmed the missile's reliable performance, meeting all objectives. This success bolsters India's nuclear weapons delivery capabilities, enhancing its nuclear triad and second-strike capability. [NDTV]

Agni-Prime is a two-stage canisterized solid propellant missile with dual redundant navigation and guidance systems, boasting a range of 1,000-2,000 kilometers. First tested in June 2021, it is lighter than previous Agni series missiles.

India: Need to develop joint culture in armed forces, says chief of defence staff

(lm) In the context of the ongoing theaterization process in the Indian military, Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan has stressed the need to foster a joint culture among the armed forces. This, he believes, is essential for capitalizing on the unique strengths of each service while preserving their individual identities. General Chauhan highlighted the importance of integrating service capabilities to bolster military efficiency, combat readiness, and interoperability. [The Indian Express]

The concept of Integrated Theatre Commands (ITCs) has been in discussion for several years, gaining momentum since mid-2020 under the leadership of the late General Bipin Rawat, then-CDS. Initially, the plan was to consolidate the existing 17 military commands into three: the Maritime Theatre Command, Western Theatre Command, and Eastern Theatre Command. However, revisions to these plans have been underway since late 2023, primarily due to challenges in determining the overarching operational leadership of the ITCs, a task that remains a key focus for the CDS.

The Maldives: Government’s pledges require enactment of over 200 laws,

president says

(lm) Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu has stated that the government aims to enact over 200 laws, including amendments to existing ones, to fulfill its promises to the people. Speaking at a campaign rally, he stressed the importance of securing a parliamentary majority in the upcoming elections to achieve this goal. Muizzu highlighted key bills such as the Land Bill and Housing Bill, emphasizing the need to elect MPs who align with the government's vision for progress. He acknowledged challenges posed by the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party's (MDP) majority in parliament, urging citizens to consider the government's legislative agenda when voting. [avas]

The Maldives: Three appointments made to Housing Committee

(lm) In the Maldives, three appointments have been made to the Housing Committee, which was established in response to complaints and intervention by the Anti-Corruption Commission regarding the allocation of flats under the so-called Gedhoruveriyaa Scheme during the previous administration. [avas]

President Mohamed Muizzu formed the ad-hoc committee on February 14, with five initial members. However, the committee's Chair, Aminath Aneesa, resigned due to medical reasons. The newly appointed members include Mohamed Mauroof Jameel, Fathmath Saeed, and Aminath Shaira.

The Maldives: *Transparency Maldives* accuses abuse of state resources for PNC campaign

(lm) *Transparency Maldives* has accused the Maldives' ruling People's National Congress (PNC) of President Mohamed Muizzu of what it perceives as the misuse of state resources in the lead-up to the parliamentary election. [The Sun]

In a statement released on April 4, the NGO highlighted the troubling trend of utilizing state resources for electoral advantage and emphasized that the customary promises and pledges made during election campaigns significantly influence voters' freedom to make unbiased choices. Of particular concern to *Transparency Maldives* is the recent surge in the announcement of large-scale developmental

projects and the proliferation of political appointees during the official campaign period. The transparency watchdog views these developments as further evidence of the government's attempts to leverage state resources for political gain.

To safeguard the integrity of the electoral process, *Transparency Maldives* has outlined a series of recommendations. These include urging the government to refrain from abusing state resources for electoral purposes, calling on the Anti-Corruption Commission to actively enforce guidelines on the misuse of state resources, and encouraging collaboration among relevant authorities to strengthen the legal framework governing electoral conduct.

The Maldives: World Bank revises GDP growth forecast figures

(lm) The World Bank has revised its GDP growth outlook for the Maldives due to changes in tourist preferences towards local guesthouses. The World Bank's "South Asia Development Update April 2024" report predicts a 4.7 percent growth in output for 2024, down by half a percentage point from previous forecasts, as tourists opt for lower-cost accommodations over high-end resorts. The forecast estimates Maldives' GDP to grow by 5.2 percent in the following year and 4.1 percent in 2026. [avas]

The Maldives: 15 hectares of land reclaimed from Hulhumale'

(lm) The reclamation of 15 hectares of land from Hulhumale', an artificial island located in the southern part of North Malé Atoll, has been successfully completed. Under the reclamation project, a total of 63 hectares of land will be reclaimed for the issuance of land plots under the former administration's "Binveriya" scheme to alleviate congestion in the capital, Malé. [The Sun]

The Maldives: Lowering age of criminal responsibility not the solution, former police chief says

(lm) In the Maldives, former Commissioner of Police Mohamed Hameed voiced his concern that reducing the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 15 to

12 years may not effectively address juvenile delinquency issues. [the edition]

Meanwhile, the government has revealed plans to amend the laws, setting the minimum age of criminal responsibility at 12 years, citing data from the Department of Juvenile Justice indicating that around 200 children, primarily aged between 12 to 14 years, are susceptible to engaging in criminal activities.

Nepal: Unified Marxist–Leninists defy top court precedent to form government in Gandaki province

(lm) In Nepal's Gandaki province, the appointment of Khagaraj Adhikari as chief minister by the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML) has stirred controversy. This decision, made despite previous Supreme Court rulings against involving the Speaker in government formation, deviates from established legal norms and constitutional principles, raising concerns about constitutional integrity and adherence to judicial decisions. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Adhikari assumed office on April 7 with the backing of 31 assembly members, comprising 22 from CPN-UML, eight from the Maoist Center – including the Speaker – and an independent member. To secure a government in Gandaki province, a candidate must garner support from at least 31 members in the 60-strong provincial assembly. [The Kathmanndu Post 2]

Given the Speaker's involvement in the vote, the Nepali Congress, the largest party in the assembly, strongly opposes Adhikari's appointment and intends to contest it in the Supreme Court.

Nepal: Opposition Nepali Congress says panel to probe minister is bottom line

(lm) In Nepal, the main opposition Nepali Congress continues to press for the formation of a parliamentary committee to investigate allegations against Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister Rabi Lamichhane. Despite warnings of lower House obstruction, the party has demanded swift action, emphasizing that this probe committee is their bottom line. However, the ruling parties have resisted, accusing the opposition party of adopting double standards. [The Kathmandu Post]

Lamichhane stands accused of embezzling hundreds of millions of rupees from various cooperatives, allegedly in collusion with Gitendra Babu Rai, the former chairman of the Gorkha Media Network, the parent company of a television channel where Lamichhane served as a managing director. The Nepali Congress has expressed concerns about Lamichhane's appointment, citing a conflict of interest, as Nepal Police, under the ministry's jurisdiction, is investigating his involvement in the embezzlement case. [AiR No. 12, March/2024, 3]

However, the ruling parties argue that the Nepali Congress's current stance contradicts its previous position and accuse it of applying different standards based on political convenience. They contend that if the Nepali Congress is advocating for accountability and resignation in one instance, it should have done so consistently when it was in power.

Against this backdrop, a meeting convened by Speaker Devraj Ghimire with leaders of Nepal's four major political parties ended inconclusively. [myRepublica]

Nepal: Much-anticipated by-polls kick off with nominations

(lm) In Nepal, much anticipated by-polls in Ilam district have commenced with the nomination process underway. The race for one seat each in the federal parliament and provincial assembly has attracted around three dozen candidates vying for the positions. [The Kathmandu Post]

In Ilam-2, a notable three-horse race is unfolding, with the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) federal candidate receiving support from the Maoist Centre, while the Nepali Congress is running independently. Similarly, the Bajhang (A) constituency sees candidates from different political factions vying for the provincial assembly seat.

Nepal: Lumbini, Sudurpaschim chief ministers quit without facing votes of confidence

(lm) In the wake of the formation of a new four-party alliance at Nepal's federal political landscape, the provinces of Lumbini and Sudurpaschim have experienced a consequential upheaval, leading to the

resignation of their respective chief ministers. [The Kathmandu Post]

In Lumbini, Chief Minister Dilli Bahadur Chaudhary, representing the Nepali Congress, chose to step down after his attempts to secure majority support in the provincial assembly were unsuccessful. This decision followed the withdrawal of support by the Maoist Centre, led by Prime Minister Dahal, on March 6, leaving Chaudhary's minority government vulnerable.

Similarly, in Sudurpaschim Province, Chief Minister Kamal Bahadur Shah, also affiliated with the Nepali Congress, faced a similar fate as his efforts to gain a vote of confidence from the provincial assembly fell short. Shah's resignation was prompted by internal disputes within the Nagarik Unmukti Party, further complicating the political landscape in Sudurpaschim [see AiR No. 11, March/2024, 2].

Nepal: Karnali Chief Minister Sharma resigns following pressure from his Maoist Centre party

(tg) The chief minister of Nepal's Karnali province, Rajkumar Sharma, has resigned, following pressure from membership of his political party, the Maoist Centre. Controversy was stirred after Sharma and other provincial representatives from the Maoist Centre refused to comply with the national party's national agenda. After initially seeking a vote of confidence in the regional parliament, Sharma has decided to renounce his position following dialogue with the chief of Maoist Centre and Nepali prime minister, Pushpa Kamal Dahal. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Rape, foeticide complaint lodged against Unified Marxist–Leninist party leader

(lm) In Nepal, Mahesh Basnet, a former minister of industry and a prominent figure in the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML), is facing grave allegations, including rape and foeticide. A female CPN-UML cadre has lodged a rape case against Basnet, alleging that he assaulted her twice and compelled her to undergo two abortions, resulting in the demise of a two-and-a-half-month-old foetus. The complaint contends that Basnet violated Section 188 of the National Penal Code (2017), which prohibits abortion without legal justification. Additionally, the

victim asserts that her apartment was burglarized on Basnet's instructions to eliminate evidence. [The Himalayan Times]

Nepal: Forex reserves hit record high of USD 13.8 billion, raises concerns over economic growth

(tg) In Nepal, foreign exchange reserves have surged to a historic high of USD 13.8 billion, nearing the USD 15 billion mark, largely fueled by remittances from Nepali migrant workers. While the government sees this as a positive development, economists are concerned, seeing it as a sign of economic stagnation. They argue that high reserves indicate a lack of investment, potentially leading to further economic decline. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

The increase in remittance inflows by 21.6 percent year-on-year to USD 6.3 billion in the first seven months of the fiscal year highlights the growing trend of Nepalis seeking better opportunities abroad. However, this has resulted in a decline in domestic consumption, impacting various sectors such as restaurants, dairy, retail, and footwear.

Import growth has also declined, signaling a contraction in consumption, which is a key driver of economic growth. The government's inability to spend its capital budget has further dampened economic activities, leading to fewer job opportunities and subdued demand across various industries. Additionally, problems in the financial sector, including rising non-performing loans and declining private sector confidence, have contributed to the economic slowdown.

In light of these challenges, the World Bank predicts slow economic growth for Nepal in the coming years, attributing it to declining private sector confidence, political instability, corruption, and climate risks. For the fiscal year 2023-24, the World Bank estimates Nepal's economy to grow by only 3.3 percent, half of the government's prediction. The World Bank report also sheds light on various scams and corruption cases within Nepal, including gold smuggling, embezzlement of cooperative funds, and the Lalita Niwas land grab. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Inflation on 30-month low but food prices refuse to come down

(lm) Despite Nepal experiencing a notable decrease in overall consumer inflation, with rates hitting a 30-month low, the cost of food continues to surge, presenting a significant challenge. Traders attribute this persistent food price inflation to the impending general elections in India, Nepal's crucial trading partner for food products. They argue that any protectionist measures adopted by India significantly impact Nepal's market due to its dependency on Indian imports. [The Kathmandu Post]

Rice prices, in particular, have witnessed a significant increase, with the retail price of a 25-kg bag reaching USD 18.38, compared to USD 17.25 just three weeks ago. Traders have highlighted that increased warehouse expenses in India have contributed to the rise in rice prices. Additionally, the market is facing challenges from smuggled rice, exacerbating the situation for genuine traders.

Pakistan: Letters with suspicious powder sent to superior judges, prime minister, others

(nw) Counterterrorism police in Pakistan are investigating a series of threatening letters sent to superior judges, the prime minister and the Punjab chief minister. The letters, attributed to a previously unknown group called Tehreek-i-Namoos-i-Pakistan, criticized the justice system and contained traces of anthrax. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif vowed to investigate the matter thoroughly. [Voice of America]

The first wave of threatening letters was received by all eight judges of the Islamabad High Court on April 2, followed by similar deliveries to Supreme Court judges, including Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa, and high court judges in Lahore the next day. Subsequently, on April 5, authorities discovered ten more suspicious letters containing toxic powder and threatening messages, targeting judges of higher courts, as well as Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and his niece, Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz. [DAWN 1] [DAWN 2] [DAWN 3]

The letters came a week after six IHC judges jointly wrote to the Supreme Judicial Council, which governs Pakistani courts, alleging persistent intimidation, including the abduction of a relative and surveillance of their homes, along with interference in judicial proceedings by the Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan's military-run spy agency.

The allegations of military interference prompted Sharif to initiate an inquiry, but a retired judge recused himself, suggesting that the Supreme Court investigate. The Supreme Court has formed a bench to address the matter, with the next hearing scheduled for April 29.

Pakistan: Opposition PTI to resume nationwide protests after Eid-ul-Fitr

(lm) Pakistan's main opposition part, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), has announced a nationwide protest movement against alleged election rigging, scheduled to begin after Eid-ul-Fitr, starting in Balochistan province. During a media briefing in Rawalpindi, PTI leader Asad Qaiser outlined plans for the inaugural rally in Pishin district, with further coordination set for a meeting at Balochistan National Party Chairman Akhtar Mengal's residence in Quetta on April 12. [Daily Times]

In a significant move, PTI founder Imran Khan approved the appointment of new focal persons, excluding Sher Afzal Marwat and Umair Niazi. PTI Chairman Barrister Gohar Khan confirmed the appointments, stating they were made in consultation with Imran Khan. This follows Imran Khan's decision to replace Marwat and Niazi as focal persons, appointing figures such as Shibli Faraz, Omar Ayub, and Barrister Ali Zafar.

Pakistan: 41 newly elected sworn in amid protest by opposition PTI

(lm) During a session of Pakistan's upper House of Parliament, 41 newly elected Senators took their oath, with the notable absence of the main opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which protested by boycotting the proceedings. This comes amid the Senate's recent challenges in functioning effectively following the retirement of half of its members a month ago. [DAWN]

Complicating matters, Senate elections were previously held in several regions, but not in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province due to controversies over the oath-taking process [see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1]. Despite these hurdles, the ruling coalition, led by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), secured a significant majority, controlling 59 out of 85 seats in the Senate.

Following the swearing-in, the session adjourned, with plans to reconvene for the election of the Senate chairman and deputy chairman. With no significant opposition presence, the ruling alliance is poised to secure both positions, with PPP's Yousaf Raza Gilani likely to become chairman and the deputy chairmanship expected to go to the PML-N nominee Seedal Khan Nasir.

Pakistan: Regulator exceeds quarterly tax target, collects additional USD 38.16 million

(nw) In Pakistan, the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) has outperformed expectations in the third quarter of the fiscal year, exceeding its tax target by an additional USD 38.16 million, as reported by state media. By the end of the quarter, the FBR had collected USD 24.16 billion in taxes, slightly surpassing the targeted USD 24.13 billion. [Arab New]

This accomplishment is notable given Pakistan's challenges with a narrow tax base and persistent tax evasion issues, which have historically led to revenue shortfalls and high fiscal deficits. To tackle these issues, the government is implementing digitalization measures within the tax system to curb leakages, with the aim of broadening the tax base and boosting revenue.

Despite having a population of 240 million, Pakistan's tax base remains narrow, encompassing only around 5.2 million individuals. Efforts are underway to expand this base by adding 1.5 million new taxpayers during the fiscal year.

Additionally, Pakistan is undergoing structural reforms as part of a USD 3 billion IMF program, aimed at stabilizing the economy and meeting fiscal targets.

Pakistan: Paramedics in Quetta protest against proposed privatization of government hospitals

(nw) Paramedics and nurses in the provincial capital of Balochistan, Quetta, protested against the proposed privatization of government hospitals in the city. Protesters demanded the removal of Balochistan Chief Minister Mir Sarfraz Bugti, labeling him as incompetent. They urged the government to reconsider its decision and vowed to resist

privatization, advocating for improved healthcare accessibility for the people. Additionally, they claimed to have conveyed their concerns to the provincial health secretary. [DAWN]

Pakistan: 10 terrorists killed in two intelligence-based operations

(nw) Two Intelligence-based Operations conducted in Northwest Dera Ismail Khan and Panjgur districts, located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces, respectively, resulted in the killing of 10 terrorists. [The News 1] [The News 2]

Pakistan: Police officer killed, six others wounded in grenade attack in Quetta

(lm) In southwestern Pakistan, a grenade attack at a mosque near Quetta left one police officer dead and six others wounded. No group has claimed responsibility for the attack, and authorities are investigating. This incident follows a motorcycle bomb blast in Khuzdar district, Balochistan province, which killed two people and injured five others. [Arab News]

Balochistan has been plagued by a long-standing insurgency, with separatist groups seeking independence from the central government in Islamabad. Despite government claims of quelling the insurgency, violence in the region persists.

Sri Lanka: Court temporarily bans former president Sirisena from chairmanship of SLFP

(lm) A Sri Lankan court has issued an injunction preventing former president Maithripala Sirisena from serving as the chairman of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, effective until April 18. This injunction was granted in response to a request by former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, who has formally petitioned the court seeking a permanent injunction to remove Sirisena from his position, citing his unsuitability. [Newsfirst]

The petitioner argued that Sirisena's continued occupancy of the chairmanship breached the party's constitution, as he is only eligible to serve as chairman during his tenure as president and is designated as

patron thereafter. He also highlighted previous legal judgments against Sirisena, including Supreme Court rulings on fundamental rights infringements and erroneous decisions made during a government upheaval. As a result, Kumaratunga sought a permanent injunction against Sirisena and requested an interim injunction to suspend his authority until the matter could be fully adjudicated.

Of note, this development comes amidst a growing divide within the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, particularly between Sirisena and other senior leaders. Just two weeks ago, three lawmakers were ousted from their party roles, including Senior Vice President, Treasurer, and National Organizer. The ousted lawmakers had expressed strong reservations about Sirisena's actions, raising concerns about possible inconsistencies or questionable conduct in his leadership [see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1].

Against the backdrop of these developments, Nimal Siripala de Silva, the Minister of Ports, Aviation, and Shipping, has been appointed as the Acting Chairman of the SLFP. [the morning]

Sri Lanka: No need for ex-president Sirisena to make fresh avowal to court over recent Easter Sunday attack claims

(lm) Sri Lanka's former President Maithripala Sirisena does not need to make a statement before the court regarding his recent controversial remarks about the Easter Sunday attacks. Sirisena, who held office from January 2015 to November 2019, disclosed during a public speech on March 22 that he was aware of those responsible for the attacks, stating, "I know who did it," contradicting his earlier denial of any prior knowledge of the events [see AiR No. 13, March/2024, 4].

The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) obtained a statement from Sirisena on March 25. The Magistrate had earlier informed Sirisena on March 28 that he could make a statement in court on April 5 if he wished. However, Sirisena's legal representatives informed the court on April 3 that he had already given a comprehensive statement to the CID, rendering another statement unnecessary.

Sri Lanka: Ex-health minister Keheliya, 7 others further remanded

(lm) Sri Lanka's former Health Minister Keheliya Rambukwella and seven others implicated in an alleged case involving substandard immunoglobulin vials have been further remanded until April 22 by the Maligakanda Magistrate's Court. [the morning]

Rambukwella was arrested by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) on February 2 in connection with the procurement of these substandard vials. His arrest followed pressure from civil society activists and health sector trade unionists. Prior to Rambukwella's arrest, seven others were also apprehended in connection with the drug procurement scandal, with one later released on bail.

Those remaining in custody include the former Health Secretary, the Director of the Health Ministry's Medical Supplies Division (MSD), three other MSD officials, and the owner of the company allegedly responsible for supplying the substandard batch of immunoglobulin vials.

Sri Lanka: HIV surge among youth

(lm) The latest data from the National STD/AIDS Control Programme indicates a surge in HIV infections among youths aged 15-24 in Sri Lanka. In 2022, there were 75 reported cases of HIV in this age group, which rose to 105 cases in 2023, marking a significant 40 percent increase. [Daily Mirror Online]

Sri Lanka: Investigators receive over 1,500 complaints of cybercrimes in first quarter of 2024

(lm) The Computer Crimes Investigation Division (CID) of Sri Lanka's Criminal Investigation Department received 5,243 complaints in 2023, indicating a significant rise in cyber-crime incidents. According to the CID, by the third week of March 2024, the division had already received over 1,500 complaints, suggesting a continuation of the upward trend in cyber-crime incidents. Notably, 63 percent of victims are women, with common complaints including threats to publish nude photos, cyber threats, and unauthorized access to social media accounts. [The Island]

Sri Lanka: IMF anticipates agreement with commercial creditors soon

(lm) The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has expressed optimism about Sri Lanka's economic recovery, stating that agreements with commercial creditors are expected to be reached by the completion of the country's second review. [Newsfirst]

IMF officials noted recent developments, including the approval of the first review of Sri Lanka's program by the IMF's Executive Board in December 2023 and a Staff-Level Agreement reached on economic policies in March 2024. However, they also emphasized that the completion of the review depends on the implementation of prior actions and a financing assurances review.

Sri Lanka: Organized criminal gang members among 23 arrested by special police teams

(lm) In Sri Lanka, special police teams have apprehended 23 individuals, including 13 suspected members of organized criminal gangs and 10 others suspected of aiding and abetting them. These arrests were carried out during raids conducted in the Southern and Western provinces as part of the ongoing "Yukthiya" anti-drug operation. [the morning]

Operation Yukthiya, launched in mid-December last year, has been touted as a success by the government, resulting in over 58,000 raids and 58,234 arrests by mid-February, along with significant drug seizures valued at approximately $25 million [see AiR No. 7, February/2024, 2]. However, the operation faces scrutiny for its effectiveness in reducing crime rates and has drawn criticism from both domestic and international human rights organizations for alleged rights abuses [see AiR No. 3, January/2024, 3].

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

Cambodia: Hun Sen becomes Senate President

(lvw) Less than a year after handing power to his son, ex-PM Hun Sen assumed the country's second highest ceremonial role, the Senate President, after a a unanimous vote by members of the Senate on April 3.

The role includes acting as head of state when King Norodom Sihamoni is out of the country, and the capacity to sign laws into parliament. While it may not be the most powerful legislative body in the country, political analysts emphasize that the senate is "the highest political symbol of the country."

The landslide victory of Hun Sen's Cambodian People Party in the February Senate election in which the party secured 55 out of 58 seats (see AiR No. 9, February/2024, 4) means that Hun Sen now leads the Senate without any opposition, while his son Hun Manet heads the government. This concentration of familial power has caused some to reiterate concerns about the role of nepotism in a political landscape that has been formed by Sen's decades-long iron-fisted rule. The family's political dynasty consolidates the concentration of power, with many of his allies and their children already filling key roles.

Since assuming power in 1985, Hun Sen has led the country for nearly four decades, bringing stability and modernity to a country ravaged by the violence and instability of the Khmer Rouge genocide, and civil war. His rule was also characterized by a history of environmental destruction, entrenched graft and a heavy handedness that stifled democracy by dissolving almost all political opposition.

Others remain optimistic, saying that the new senate will be more efficient and already showcases more political diversity, with members from the Khmer Will Party (KWP), while all the senators of the fourth mandate were from the Cambodian People's Party

(CPP). [DW] [Jakarta Post] [Khmer Times] [South China Morning Post]

Cambodia: Youth groups tackling poverty sign new MoU

(lvw) On the first of April, two prominent Cambodian youth groups, the Youth League of Peace Lovers and the Cambodian Muslim Youth Alliance, came together to sign a significant Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) focusing on the nation's 'Community Development and Humanitarian Affairs'.

The agreement outlines a shared commitment to fostering peace and advancing community development. The initiatives align with the government's Pentagonal Strategy Phase 1, which aims to build economic and human capital development spanning growth, employment, equity, efficiency, and sustainability. Additionally, both groups aim to combat poverty and propel Cambodia towards prosperity, in accordance with the objectives of the government's seventh mandate.

Activities include enhancing youth participation in capacity building and developing skills to enter the workforce, reducing poverty and achieving a better quality of life. The MoU also calls for joint humanitarian response and activities in emergency situations like natural disasters. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Gender equality strategic plan launched

(dq) Cambodia's Ministry of Women's Affairs has inaugurated the sixth edition of the "Neary Rattanak Strategic Plan (2024-2028)", a five-year strategic plan to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in the country.

A central feature of the plan is the increase in investment in gender equality and women's empowerment in economy, education, health, and public leadership.

In the 2023 UN Women Gender Inequality Index Cambodia is ranked 116 out of 170 countries. [The Star]

In a separate development, ACCESS 2, a joint Cambodian-Australian program aimed at supporting the government and civil society in Cambodia to

improve services for disabled persons and women affected by gender-based violence, has been launched.

In the frame of this program Australia will support Cambodia's National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and the National Disability Strategic Plan with AUD 30 million over five years (2023-2028) to run operations at the national level and across four targeted provinces.

Under this program persons with disabilities will receive physical rehabilitation and inclusive public services while gender-based violence affected women will be provided with health care, legal protection, social services and coordinated service delivery. [Khmer Times]

Indonesia: Ministers deny misusing social aid funds to influence presidential polls

(jb) Four Indonesian cabinet members testified before the Constitutional Court to refute allegations that social aid programs were misused to influence the recent presidential polls in favor of Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto.

Finance Minister Sri Mulyani confirmed that the social assistance funds, distributed in early 2024, were approved by the House of Representatives well ahead of the election. Airlangga Hartarto, the Coordinating Minister for the Economy, emphasized that the aid was aimed at mitigating the impact of El Niño on food production and rising rice prices. Muhadjir Effendy, the Coordinating Minister for Human Development and Culture, stated that the "Hopeful Family Program" aided 800,000 people across 40 locations, asserting that such distribution is unlikely to sway the national electorate.

The court is expected to deliver its verdict by April 22, with some urging President Jokowi's testimony to shed light on the matter. [Benar News]

Indonesia: Control of rice price successful

(jb) Arief Prasetyo Adi, Head of Indonesia's National Food Agency (Bapanas), announced on April 4 that the rice assistance program for citizens has positively impacted price control. From January to March 2024, 641,000 tonnes of rice have been distributed nationwide, in line with Law No. 18 of 2013 and Presidential Regulation No.66 of 2021.

Under this program, each beneficiary receives 10kg of rice, targeting 22 million people across Indonesia. Initiated in 2023 and continued into 2024, the assistance may extend from April to June 2024 if the state budget permits. President Joko Widodo suggested the possibility of extending the program until December 2024 should the budget allow. [Vietnam Plus]

Indonesia: Impact of surging global cocoa prices on domestic industry anticipated

(jb) Indonesia is bracing for the impact of a significant surge in global cocoa prices on its domestic food and beverage sector. The cocoa futures price has risen by over 130 percent, reaching around USD 9,900 per tonne in March 2024, as reported by Trading Economics. Market Insider data indicates the cocoa spot price surpassed USD 10,000 per tonne by the end of March 2024.

Industry Ministry's Agro-industry Director General, Putu Juli Ardika, stated that despite current stability in the domestic market, Indonesia will inevitably be affected soon. Currently, Indonesia imports 55 percent of its cocoa, a stark increase from a decade ago when it could meet 85 percent of its chocolate demand domestically.

The surge in global cocoa prices is attributed to the El Niño weather phenomenon affecting major producers like Ivory Coast and Ghana. As Indonesia's cocoa trees also age, the industry faces challenges in increasing productivity. To address this, the government has initiated replanting schemes to boost cocoa production from the current 200 kg per hectare to 600 kg per hectare. [Asia News Network]

Indonesia: NVIDIA and Indosat to invest USD 200 million in AI center in Central Java

(jb) NVIDIA, a leading company in AI chip technology, and Indonesia's telecommunications provider, PT Indosat Ooredoo Hutchison, are set to invest USD 200 million in establishing an artificial intelligence (AI) center in Central Java. As reported by the communication minister, Budi Arie Setiadi, the AI center could include telecommunication infrastructure or serve as a human resource center, and it will be located in Surakarta city.

Surakarta was chosen for this investment due to its readiness, excellent human resources, and advanced 5G infrastructure, according to the CEO of Indosat. The investment plan has been communicated to Surakarta mayor Gibran Rakabuming Raka, who is also Indonesia's vice president-elect and the son of the outgoing President Joko Widodo.

Both Indosat and Nvidia have yet to respond to requests for comments on this development. This initiative follows Nvidia's recent collaboration with Malaysian utility firm YTL Power International Bhd to build AI infrastructure that should bring supercomputers to Malaysia by mid-2024, further emphasizing the company's expansion in the Southeast Asia region. [TN Global 1] [Reuters] [TN Global 2]

Indonesia: Starlink seeks license

(jb) SpaceX has applied to Indonesia's government for an internet service provider (ISP) permit for its Starlink satellite unit, as per a statement from the country's communications ministry. Starlink plans to conduct internet service trials this year in Indonesia's new capital city, Nusantara, set to be inaugurated later this year.

Wayan Toni Supriyanto, a ministry official, mentioned that while Starlink has set up a local base of operations and acquired the necessary VSAT permit, further regulatory conditions need to be met for the ISP license application.

The company has applied for two licenses: to use VSAT technology and to operate as an ISP. Starlink's pursuit of these licenses underscores its interest in expanding into the Southeast Asia market.

Earlier in July 2023, Malaysia granted Starlink permission to operate in the country, primarily targeting remote locations like schools and higher education institutions. SpaceX had also launched the Starlink service in the Philippines in December 2022, utilizing satcoms to reach the country's remote areas. [Developing Telecoms]

Indonesia: Activist jailed for criticizing illegal shrimp farms

(jb) Daniel Frits Maurits Tangkilisan, an Indonesian environmental activist, has been sentenced to seven

months in prison for criticizing illegal shrimp farms in Karimunjawa National Park via a Facebook post. The Jepara High Court in Central Java province also fined him USD 315 on April 4, ruling that he had "created unrest" with his online comments. This decision was made under a contentious 2008 law on online speech, which critics argue has been frequently used to suppress environmental and human rights activists.

Three other activists also face similar charges for their involvement in the #SaveKarimunjawa campaign. This movement aims to protect the marine reserve from the detrimental effects of the burgeoning illegal shrimp farms. Greenpeace Indonesia has linked the rise in these farms since 2016 to environmental degradation, including harmful waste discharges impacting the marine ecosystem.

The court's decision has sparked outrage among fellow rights activists, who criticize it as a dangerous precedent for silencing individuals through exploitation of the justice system. [Mongabay]

Indonesia: Four arrested for smuggling Rohingya refugees

(jb) Four Indonesians have been detained for their involvement in the smuggling of Rohingya refugees, the police announced on April 2. In March, authorities rescued 69 Rohingya refugees off the coast of Aceh province, who were clinging to an overturned boat for over a day. Six others were saved a day earlier by local fishermen. The bodies of 16 Rohingya refugees were recovered following the boat's capsizing, with an estimated 150 people on board.

According to West Aceh police chief Andi Kirana, the arrested individuals had ventured out to sea to collect the refugees, who had arrived on another boat from Bangladesh. Their intended destination was Malaysia, with plans to transport the refugees to North Sumatra province by trucks.

One suspect revealed that he received five million rupiah (USD314) per refugee from a Malaysian agent. Authorities are actively searching for four additional suspects believed to be the masterminds behind this smuggling operation. [Arab News]

Laos: Government calls for the return of overseas workers during labor shortage

(lvw) Amid urgent labor shortages, the Lao government has urged Laos workers working internationally to return home to fill the need and support domestic business and production. Many Lao workers have left the country to pursue overseas jobs.

A report by the Lao Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare highlighted that this was largely in an attempt to secure better wages and working conditions abroad. The report further noted the lack of accurate employment and unemployment data as barriers to management of the domestic labor market, as well as problems around informality and employment protection.

On March 28, local Lao authorities were ordered by the Ministry to compile figures on employment, unemployment and low-income individuals in each village, to achieve a clearer picture of the labor market. [The Star]

Laos: Monthly living cost allowance for civil servants, retirees and volunteer teachers to be raised

(dql) The monthly cost of living allowance provided to civil servants, retirees, and volunteer teachers, will be raised by USD 80 to support them in coping with high inflation. This was announced by the Ministry of Finance on April 5.

In March, the country's inflation rate stood at 24.9 per cent, with the weak kip seen as one of the main factors driving inflation up.

In a previous move, the Lao government last year decided to increase the minimum wage for the third time in less than 18 months, in a bid to counter inflation and financial hardship. [The Star]

Laos: Forests generate climate credits

(lvw) The Lao government is in the process of drafting a decree on the buying, selling and verification of carbon credits from Lao.

The decree intends to support the investment and expansion and streamlining of greenhouse gas reduction programs like carbon credits. The draft of the carbon trading schemes is set to be finalized and released by June this year and will then open to an international market.

Law enforcement around forested areas remains difficult, particularly in rural regions where higher levels of poverty and subsistence farming often result in unauthorized land clearing.

While the decree may provide an opportunity to monetize Lao's forests without turning to extractive industries, environmental protection, land regulation and deforestation remain ongoing challenges. [Vientiane Times]

Malaysia: Opposition party's rogue MPs to face ouster

(dq) Muhyiddin Yassin, leader of the opposition Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) has reiterated that the six federal lawmakers of his party who announced their support for the government of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim must vacate their seats. Bersatu (Malaysian United Indigenous Party) is a major component party within the opposition Perikatan Nasional coalition.

He announced that Bersatu's legal team was ready to take action to oust these lawmakers from the party, citing amendments to the party's constitution that effectively closed the loophole for them to remain elected lawmakers despite crossing the political aisle to back the administration of Anwar. [Malay Mail]

Malaysia: UMNO Youth chief arrested

(dql) The Malaysian Police arrested on April 5 youth chief of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) Muhamad Akmal Saleh for an investigation under Malaysia's Sedition Act 1and Communications and Multimedia Act.

UMNO is Malaysia's oldest political party within Malaysia, it is the founding and the principal dominant member of the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, the third largest political coalition with 30 seats in the House of Representatives.

The arrest came after a picture on social media showing him holding a sword. Akmal had previously called for a boycott of retail chain store KK Super Mart that has come under scrutiny for selling socks bearing the word "Allah." [The Star]

In a separate development, the police reportedly have disclosed the seizure of more than 1,100 pairs of shoes

from shoe company Vern's Holding Sdn Bhd for a probe whether the shoe logo on its soles resembles the word "Allah" in Arabic calligraphy. [Malay Mail]

Malaysia: Controversy over amendments to Shariah Courts law

(dql) The Malaysian government has voiced criticism of a statement of the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST) on amending the country's Shariah Courts Act 1965.

In the statement, the Council argued the amendments to Act proposed by the government including the proposal to increase penalties for Shariah criminal offences, would contradict the constitution as such offences are already part of existing criminal laws enumerated under the Federal Constitution (FC), specifically in the Constitution's Ninth Schedule's List I (Federal List). It added that enhanced sentencing powers granted to Shariah Courts would allow for Hudud-related offences – like theft, robbery, adultery, sodomy and intoxication – to be tried under Islamic criminal law. [Malay Mail 1]

In response, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Religious Affairs) Mohd Na'im Mokhtar warned that the Council's statement risks misunderstanding and the creation of an atmosphere of disharmony in the country. He called on all sides to uphold the December decree of the Sultan of Selangor Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah that called on the people, especially those who are not Muslim, to respect and not to interfere in matters related to Islamic religious affairs in Malaysia.

Substantially, Mokhtar insisted that the power of the State Legislature to enact laws to establish offences and punishments for offences committed by Muslims against Islamic religious orders, except for matters included in the Federal List. He added that jurisdiction over punishment for offences provided for in State law shall be within the limits provided by federal law. [Malay Mail 2]

Malaysia: Social media giants TikTok, Meta urged to take action against harmful online content

(dql) The Malaysian government has called on online platform providers TikTok and Meta to address content related to the three Rs - Race, Religion, and Royalty (3R) - by adhering to platform guidelines and Malaysian laws. TikTok and Meta were also ordered to deliver comprehensive improvement plans and strategies to combat the dissemination of content that intersects with sensitive issues related to 3R.

Communications Minister Fahmi Fadzil highlighted the need to act against harmful content like scams and online gambling, citing an increase in harmful content on social media, with nearly 52,000 cases referred to online platform providers for further action in the first three months of this year. [Malay Mail]

Malaysia: Rollout of digital ID project postponed

(dql) Malaysia has postpone the introduction of its digital identity project MyDigital ID until May. Originally planned for March, the rollout has been delayed allowing for the integration of more websites and mobile apps.

Malaysian have remained cautious towards the digital ID system over concerns of its collection of data. Only some 50 percent of the targeted 22 million citizens registered for the Primary Data Base System (PADU) with which the digital ID is integrated before its three-month deadline ended last month. The registration required submitting information on household members, work and other details. [Biometric Update]

Myanmar: Junta military to lose impartant border position

(dq) Following the surrender of hundreds of soldiers, Myanmar's junta has evacuated personnel from a key border position, with the military believed to be close to losing control of Myawaddy, in Karen state, one of the most important border crossings in Myanmar, crucial to the flow of goods between the country and Thailand. Myawaddy has been controlled by the military for decades.

On April 7, authorities of Myanmar junta requested permission from Thai officials to land an evacuation flight across the border.

The permission was granted on humanitarian grounds, with Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin saying in an

interview that the time was good now for talks as the military junta's strength is beginning to weaken. [The Guardian] [Reuters] [The Diplomat]

Myanmar: Drone attack targets military-ruled capital

(jb) The opposition National Unity Government (NUG) of Myanmar has claimed responsibility for a rare mass drone attack on the military junta in the capital, Nay Pyi Taw. The NUG, representing the ousted civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, deployed 29 drones armed with explosives to key locations including the airport, air force base, and army headquarters. The junta reported intercepting and shooting down seven drones, with one exploding on a runway. No casualties were reported.

This incursion signifies the increasing effectiveness of the resistance groups opposing the junta, according to BBC News. Nay Pyi Taw, heavily guarded and previously shielded from much of the country's fighting, is the center of power for the military regime.

The NUG stated that the drone operations were planned in collaboration with various defense groups. [BBC News] [Al Jazeera]

Myanmar: Junta shelling destroys homes and lives in southern Mon state

(jb) In a devastating attack, Myanmar's military junta shelled Dhamma Tha village in Kyaikmaraw township, southern Mon state, killing five people and destroying around 400 homes. The assault, carried out from naval vessels on the Gyaing River in late March marks the first major attack in the relatively peaceful Mon state since the military coup in February 2021.

According to the Mon State Federal Council (MSFC), junta forces prevented fire trucks from reaching the area, exacerbating the destruction.

The attack is seen as retaliation against Mon resistance forces and communities for their support in seizing a nearby police station. The military council has not commented on the incident, while over 10,000 displaced residents have fled to Mawlamyine, the capital of Mon state. [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: Kachin residents flee key towns ahead of rebel offensive

(jw) About two-thirds of residents in Momauk town in Myanmar's Kachin State have fled as the Kachin Independence Army moves to control the town. Residents reportedly left because they were afraid of junta retaliation. Troops have begun regularly patrolling the town, encouraging more civilians to leave.

Since March 7, the Kachin Independence Army have seized major bases in Yawyone, Mada Bum, and Sein Long, as well as more than 10 other strongholds between Lwegel and Momauk.

Around 100 junta reinforcements have been sent from Bhamo and were patrolling around Momauk market as of April 1. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Junta airstrikes kill 32 civilians over five days

(jw) Myanmar junta airstrikes have killed at least 32 civilians between March 31 to April 5 according to The Irrawaddy. The ethnic rebel force said that the junta is attacking civilians in schools, hospitals, displacement camps, and religious sites. Primary targets have been Rakhine, Shan, Kachin, and Karen States, as well as the Sagaing Region.

Junta fighter jets bombarded Myitnar village on April 3rd. Villagers reported that there had been virtually no fighting in the area prior to the attacks. On April 5, planes bombed Thay van Village and destroyed 50 houses and a Buddhist monastery.

In addition, junta aircraft attacked Myebon, Ramree, Pauktaw townships. Airstrikes were also reported in Kyauktaw, killing two civilians and injuring eight. Residents also reported that no fighting had occurred in the area prior to the airstrike.

Six civilians were killed in Mabein Township after a junta airstrike on April 2. Another eight were killed in Papun Township after a monastery was bombed. Humanitarian NGO, Free Burma Rangers, said they were able to evacuate 200 people from the monastery before a second airstrike hit. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Buddhist monastery bombing in Myanmar's Karenni State claims eight lives

(jb) Myanmar's regime air force bombed a Buddhist monastery in Papun town, Karenni State, on March 31, killing eight civilians and injuring 15 others, as reported by The Irrawaddy. The monastery was sheltering people displaced by ongoing fighting in the region, local residents and resistance troops said.

The bombing occurred at Myoma Shwe Kyaung Monastery around 1 pm, as reported by a source from Brigade 5 of the Karen National Union (KNU). The KNU and allied forces have been engaging in clashes with junta troops in and around Papun for approximately two weeks.

Prior to the attack, KNU troops had advised residents to seek refuge at the monastery and subsequently evacuated them to safety. However, some residents chose to remain at the monastery, where they were tragically hit during the bombing.

The regime's airstrikes have intensified following resistance forces seizing a junta battalion and an armory on March 30. Evacuations of Papun residents began on March 25, with all remaining individuals at the monastery reportedly evacuated by April 1. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Arakan Army gains enough strength for self-rule in Rakhine

(jw) The Arakan Army (AA) made significant military gains in the Rakhine State since November. The AA has captured six of Rakhine's 17 townships, as well as many smaller towns. As of April, the ethnic rebel armed force has captured approximately 170 junta posts including several bases, battalion headquarters, and military training facilities.

Rakhine’s capital Sittwe is surrounded by rebels, and many government officials have fled. The Arakan Army previously expressed intent to capture the entire state. Whether they have the manpower to do so has not yet been confirmed.

Though a Chinese-brokered ceasefire between the Three Brotherhood Alliance and the military junta remains in place in the northern Shan state, the AA has exhibited no interest in honoring a ceasefire.

Meanwhile, the special economic zone in Rakhine's Kyaukphyu, representing an 8 billion USD investment from the Chinese government, is about to fail. In response, the United League of Arakan, the AA's political branch, pledged to protect "all foreign direct investment that benefits Rakhine and ensures the smooth continuation of their operations."

Currently, the AA is engaged in an offensive in Ann township. This location is not only the headquarters of the junta's Western Command, but also a critical point for trade with the Magwe region. The loss of Ann township would severely limit the military regime from transporting supplies over land to northern and central Rakhine. If the AA seized the town, the military regime would only be able to enter through the south via Bago region's Pyay township.

Overall, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, "[No] matter the final outcome, the AA's sweeping gains are already enough to enable self-rule over a large portion of the Rakhine homeland and to reshape the wider balance of power in Myanmar." [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: Deputy Defense Minister under investigation for online scam allegations

(jb) The deputy defense minister of Myanmar's junta, Major General Aung Lin Tun, is currently under investigation for his suspected involvement in online scam operations near the Chinese border in northern Shan State. This makes him the highest-ranking junta member to face scrutiny over such allegations.

According to sources, Aung Lin Tun had connections with telecom scam leaders during his tenure as vice quartermaster-general, aiding them in money laundering through military contracts.

Furthermore, Aung Lin Tun allegedly had ties with Bai Suocheng, the former chair of the military-backed Kokang Special Administrative Zone. Bai was arrested by the junta and transferred to China in January on charges of bribery.

The Chinese government has been pressuring the Myanmar junta to crack down on scam syndicates operating along the border. The investigation into Aung Lin Tun follows the regime's recent arrests and transfers of former USDP lawmakers and militia leaders for their alleged involvement in similar scams. [The Irrawaddy]

The Philippines: Not appropriate time to pursue political amendments to charter, lawmaker says

(lm) In the Philippines, lawmaker Janette Garin has reaffirmed the lower House's commitment to focusing solely on amending the economic provisions of the 1987 Constitution, rejecting calls for political amendments. Garin stressed that introducing political changes at this juncture could undermine public trust, citing a recent survey showing widespread opposition to constitutional amendments. [Philippine News Agency]

Marcos Jr., who assumed the presidency in 2022, has been advocating for revisions aimed at accommodating greater foreign investment to foster the development of one of Asia's fastest-growing economies. The Philippines has gained a reputation for imposing stringent policies on foreign investment, including limitations on foreign ownership across various industries, typically capped at 40 percent, and the prohibition of foreign equity in mass media.

Constitutional amendments, commonly referred to as "Cha-Cha" for charter change, have historically been a sensitive and contentious topic in the country of 110 million. This sensitivity stems from the memory of President Marcos Jr.'s father, who amended the constitution to extend his rule beyond the supposed limit of two terms, ruling for two decades from 1965 to 1986. A recent *Pulse Asia* survey highlighted the public's strong opposition to constitutional amendments at present, with 88 percent of respondents deeming it inappropriate timing [see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1].

Meanwhile, Presidential Adviser Larry Gadon proposed extending the terms of local officials but emphasized maintaining term limits for higher positions.

The Philippines: President Marcos Jr. Orders adoption of National Cybersecurity Plan 2023-2028

(lm) In the Philippines, President Marcos Jr. has issued an executive order, directing the adoption and implementation of the National Cybersecurity Plan (NCSP) 2023-2028. This plan, crafted by the Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT), aims to enhance the security and

resilience of the country's cyberspace. [Philippine News Agency]

All national government agencies, instrumentalities, and local government units are mandated to formulate, adopt, and implement cybersecurity plans aligned with the NCSP. The DICT is tasked with overseeing the effective implementation of the plan and providing technical assistance to other government offices.

Bi-annual reports on the NCSP's progress will be submitted to the President, and funding for its implementation will be sourced from existing appropriations and included in future budget allocations. The NCSP is part of the efforts outlined in the Philippine Development Plan 2023-2028 to ensure safety and security in cyber and physical spaces.

The Philippines: Drop in fertility rate below replacement level presents economic opportunities, officials say

(lm) The Philippines is seeing a drop in its fertility rate below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman, a trend that officials say brings economic opportunities. The Commission on Population and Development (CPD) points out that with the fertility rate at 1.5 children per woman, there's a chance to boost the working-age population, which can support dependents. This shift may lead to a favorable dependency ratio and unlock economic benefits through the demographic dividend. Economic uncertainties during the COVID-19 pandemic are seen as a contributing factor to the decline in fertility, which has also led to increased acceptance of modern family planning methods. [Philippine News Agency]

The Philippines: President’s ‘inaction’ emboldens local officials to justify ‘drug war’ killings

(lm) In the Philippines, a human rights group alleges that President Marcos Jr.'s failure to control violent anti-drug operations has emboldened local officials like Davao City Mayor Sebastian Duterte to reignite his father's contentious "war on drugs." [philstar]

Sebastian Duterte, son of Marcos Jr.’s predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte, declared a new “war on drugs” on March 22. Following his announcement, media

reported police killings during drug raids, with authorities claiming the victims had “fought back,” a common justification for such killings. This triggered an investigation by the Commission on Human Rights.

Despite Marcos Jr.'s emphasis on rehabilitation in his drug campaign, killings persist. Although the rate has decreased since Marcos took office in June 2022, over 600 people have been killed in “drug-related” incidents during his presidency. The new Philippine National Police chief, Police General Rommel Francisco Marbil, stressed the importance of reducing crime based on established parameters, aligning with Marcos Jr.'s more moderate rhetoric compared to his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte [see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1].

The Philippines: Armed Forces working overtime to eliminate remaining New People’s Army fronts

(lm) In the Philippines, National Security Adviser Eduardo Año has disclosed that the Armed Forces (AFP) are intensifying their efforts to dismantle the remaining 11 New People's Army (NPA) guerilla fronts by the end of the year. These efforts entail targeting not only the physical presence of the NPA but also disrupting their organizational structures, including vertical units and party organs within sub-regional and regional committees. [Philippine News Agency 1]

Established in 1969 during the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos Sr., the father of current President Marcos Jr., the NPA emerged as a communist insurgent group and the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Its main aim is to overthrow the Philippine government through guerrilla warfare and establish a communist state. Engaging in a prolonged insurgency against the government, the NPA has conducted various activities, including attacks on military and police forces, extortion, and recruitment.

However, the government's anti-insurgency task force recently reported that as of the end of 2023, the communist rebellion had dwindled to around 1,500 members and 11 "weakened" guerrilla fronts. This represents a significant decrease from previous years, with the number of rebels decreasing by 21.5 percent and rebel firearms dropping by 22.6 percent. The task force also claimed that there are no active guerrilla fronts remaining, with 78 fronts dismantled since 2017. [philstar]

Against this backdrop, Secretary Carlito Galvez Jr., from the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace,

Reconciliation, and Unity (OPAPRU), has urged the remaining members of the NPA to forsake their armed struggle and instead contribute to efforts towards unity, peace, and national development. Galvez emphasized the efficacy of dialogue as a superior alternative to armed confrontation, advocating for a shift towards constructive engagement. [Philippine News Agency 2]

Singapore: Ruling party activists step up presence in opposition wards

(lb) Activists from Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP) are resuming grassroots engagement in wards held by the main opposition Workers' Party. The decision to restart engagement comes after a pause following the 2020 election, where defeated PAP candidates ceased such activities, directing residents to elected WP MPs. Observers note that this renewed outreach indicates preparations for the upcoming general election, expected by November 2025. [The Straits Times]

Singapore: Controversial law allowing detention without trial renewed for 5 more years

(lb) Singapore's Parliament has approved a five-year extension of the Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) Act (CLTPA), allowing the detention of individuals associated with syndicates without trial. This marks the 15th extension since the law's inception in 1955. The extension, effective until October 20, 2029, empowers the Minister for Home Affairs to detain or supervise individuals in the interest of public safety, peace, and order. [The Straits Times] [Gutzy Asia]

Minister of State for Home Affairs and National Development, Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim, defended the extension, emphasizing the law's effectiveness in combating organized crime. He assured Parliament of existing safeguards and the law's careful application.

While the opposition Workers' Party expressed reservations about past amendments to the CLTPA, it cautiously supported its extension. The party sought further justification from the government and explored advancements in policing methods and technology to address gang-related issues. Opposition members pressed for specifics on when the detention powers might cease and advocated for increased safeguards,

including the involvement of Supreme Court judges in review committees and granting discretionary authority to the President over detention orders. These discussions reflect concerns over transparency and the potential abuse of power.

Singapore: Five citizens declared memberships in overseas political entities under foreign interference law

(lb) As of March 1, five Singapore citizens have disclosed their memberships in foreign political bodies, as mandated by the city-state's foreign interference law. Minister for Home Affairs and Law K. Shanmugam disclosed this information in response to a parliamentary question. [The Straits Times]

The Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (FICA), enacted in October 2021 and fully enforced since December 29, 2023, necessitates citizens involved in foreign political entities before February 1, 2024, to declare their affiliation by March 1. While citizens are not prohibited from joining foreign entities, they must declare their memberships to the government for oversight. The law aims to prevent foreign interference in Singapore's domestic affairs, particularly concerning politically significant individuals.

Notably, businessman Philip Chan Man Ping became the first person designated a politically significant individual under FICA on February 26, as he demonstrated susceptibility to foreign influence and a willingness to advance their interests. While the government did not specify which foreign country's interests Chan was promoting, he had attended the annual session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in Beijing in 2021 and advocated for an "alliance" among overseas Chinese representatives. [AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1]

Singapore: Second individual convicted in USD billion money laundering case

(lm) In Singapore, a 14-month prison sentence has been handed down to Su Haijin, marking the second conviction in the city-state's largest money laundering investigation. Su Haijin, a Cypriot national, was apprehended during coordinated raids last August, resulting in the seizure or freezing of assets totaling USD 2.2 billion, including luxurious properties, vehicles, cash, and jewelry. Initially facing 14 charges, including

resisting arrest and involvement in illicit gambling activities, Su Haijin's final sentencing was primarily based on his admission to resisting arrest and two counts of money laundering. [South China Morning Post]

In response to the substantial findings and implications of this investigation, Singaporean authorities have taken proactive measures to address deficiencies in anti-money laundering protocols. An inter-ministerial panel has been established to conduct a comprehensive review of existing anti-money laundering measures, with a particular focus on scrutinizing financial institutions suspected of complicity in such activities. Furthermore, governmental agencies have initiated a thorough examination of tax incentives designed for family offices, contemplating potential revisions to enhance regulatory oversight. Additionally, there are deliberations regarding the inclusion of high-value assets like luxury cars and prestigious bags under regulatory frameworks to mitigate the risks associated with money laundering activities involving such assets.

Singapore: Government seeks increased scrutiny of critical transport firms

(Ib) Singapore's government is proposing amendments to four Acts to designate critical entities in air, sea, and land transport to enhance the resilience of key firms and protect their ability to provide essential transport services. Under the proposed Transport Sector (Critical Firms) Bill, designated entities will face controls in ownership, management appointments, operations, and resourcing. The bill complements the Significant Investments Review Bill, which scrutinizes investments in entities critical to national security. Breaches of controls or remedial actions will result in penalties, with provisions for appeal to the Minister for Transport regarding designation decisions. [The Business Times]

In related developments, The Cybersecurity (Amendment) Bill tabled in Parliament on April 3 will require owners of critical information infrastructure (CII) to report more cybersecurity incidents, including those in their supply chains. This expands the oversight of the Cyber Security Agency of Singapore (CSA) to cover Systems of Temporary Cybersecurity Concern (STCCs), which are critical systems at high risk of cyberattacks. The Bill aims to update existing provisions and ensure that CII owners remain responsible for cybersecurity while adapting to new technological models. It also introduces light-touch regulations for Entities of Special Cybersecurity

Interest (ESCI) and Foundational Digital Infrastructure (FDI). [Channel News Asia]

Singapore: Accused persons receiving legal aid barred from casinos, Singapore Pools online gambling

(lm) Singapore's law ministry has implemented a new rule prohibiting individuals receiving criminal legal aid from accessing casinos, jackpot rooms, and online gambling accounts with the state-owned lottery and sports betting organization, Singapore Pools. This regulation, effective since April 1, applies to those receiving defense aid from the Public Defender's Office (PDO) and the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme (CLAS). The exclusion aims to protect the financial situation of aid recipients, particularly considering their vulnerable circumstances.[The Straits Times]

Singapore: No plans to review annual leave entitlements for now

(lb) Singapore's Senior Minister of State for Manpower Koh Poh Koon announced in Parliament that the government currently has no intentions to revise the minimum annual leave provisions. Although the Employment Act mandates a minimum of seven days of annual leave, Koh highlighted that over 90 percent of full-time resident employees aged 25 to 64 had more than the minimum, with 64.6 percent enjoying 15 days or more, according to a survey conducted by the ministry. He emphasized the need to consider various factors, including business costs, in any potential review, while urging employers to reassess their overall employment benefits to enhance talent retention in the competitive labor market. [Yahoo Finance]

Thailand: Constitutional Court accepts case seeking dissolution of opposition Move Forward Party

(bk) Thailand's Constitutional Court on April 3 accepted two petitions seeking the dissolution of the main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) and life bans for 44 of the party's current and former lawmakers, a significant blow to the anti-establishment movement advocating for institutional reforms. The MFP has 15

days to submit its defense, the court said in a statement. [Thai PBS World] [Reuters]

The first petition, filed by the Election Commission (EC), alleges that the MFP's involvement in advocating for amendments to the royal defamation law constitutes an attempt to overthrow the constitutional monarchy, as outlined in the Political Parties Act. This claim is based on a previous ruling by the court in January, which deemed the MFP's campaign on this issue as such an attempt [see AiR No. 6, February/2024, 1].

If the MFP is dissolved, its sitting lawmakers may have the option to join a new party within 30 days to retain their seats in the lower House, although the party's executive members could face a 10-year ban from politics.

The party also faces a probe by the National Anti-Corruption Commission that may result in a lifetime political ban on 44 of its current or former lawmakers who signed a draft amendment of the royal defamation law it proposed to parliament in early 2021.

Both cases are the latest in a series of setbacks for the MFP, which shook Thai politics by winning 151 seats in the 500-member parliament and almost 40 percent of the popular votes in May 2023. Its candidate Pita Limjaroenrat was blocked by pro-establishment conservative lawmakers from becoming the prime minister last year, before being cleared of allegations that he had violated election rules.

Against this backdrop, MFP's situation has been likened to that of its predecessor, the Future Forward Party, which was dissolved in 2020 over a campaign funding violation and whose key leaders were barred from political office for a decade. The dissolution of Future Forward in 2020 triggered widespread anti-government protests, and MFP's fate may fuel further opposition radicalization, potentially escalating political tensions in Thailand. [The Diplomat]

The decision by the Constitutional Court has drawn criticism from human rights organizations, including *ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights* (APHR) and *Fortify Rights*. They have urged the court to uphold democratic principles and expressed concerns about the potential negative impact of the MFP's dissolution on Thailand's international reputation, particularly its eligibility for a seat on the UN Human Rights Council.

Thailand: Lower House plans special session for first reading of 2025 budget bill

(lm) In Thailand, a special session of the lower House is being considered for the first reading of the budget bill for the 2025 fiscal year, potentially scheduled for next month or June. Alongside this budget proposal, other significant legislative matters may also be addressed during the session. The current parliamentary session concludes on April 9, with the new session set to commence on July 3. [Bangkok Post]

In January, the government approved a THB 3.6 trillion (roughly USD 98.71 billion) budget framework for the 2025 fiscal year, alongside revising the budget-making process. Earlier this month, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin's cabinet approved a widened budget deficit of approximately USD 4.2 billion to USD 23.6 billion to bolster the country's sluggish economy [see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1].

The government aims to conclude discussions on the spending plan by the end of May, paving the way for the special session if the cabinet submits the bill. Subsequently, the House's second and third readings are scheduled for late August, followed by Senate deliberations in early September. Upon parliamentary approval, the bill will be submitted for royal endorsement, ensuring it comes into effect at the start of the new fiscal year in October.

Thailand: Highlights of Parliaments' two-day general debate

(bk) Opposition leader Chaithawat Tulathon from the Move Forward Party (MFP) launched a two-day parliamentary debate, pursuant to Section 152 of the Constitution, where members of the House of Representatives, constituting at least one-tenth of the total membership, initiate a motion for a voting-free general discussion, aimed at investigating facts or presenting issues to the cabinet. The session took place from April 3-4. [Thai PBS World 1]

In his opening speech, Chaithawat criticized the government for failing to deliver on election promises, in particular the delay in implementing the "digital wallet" scheme and the lack of progress in reforming the justice system, which has led to the ongoing police conflicts and rampant corruption. In response, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin asserted his administration's transparency and dedication to economic, political,

and social progress, citing efforts initiated to tackle informal debt, control energy prices, and combat drug trafficking.

Here are some highlights of the policy discussions held during this two-day session.

Digital wallet scheme in a bind

A member of the House of Representatives Ad-hoc Committee on Annual Appropriations Bill for the 2024 fiscal year highlighted the government's challenges in securing the THB 500 billion needed for the "digital wallet" scheme. The funding details for the scheme have undergone five adjustments, with indications suggesting the government may utilize three potential sources. [Thai PBS World 2]

Firstly, the government might tap into the Central Fund for the 2024 fiscal year by introducing a bill to borrow additional funds, potentially up to THB 100 billion, and transferring an additional THB 40 billion from the Central Fund. Placing these funds into a Revolving Fund, such as the State Welfare Fund for impoverished individuals, could allow access to the budget for the 2024 fiscal year in the following year.

Secondly, with the recent revision of the mid-term fiscal framework by the cabinet to increase the 2025 fiscal budget by about THB 150 billion to a total of THB 3.75 trillion, this increment could be earmarked for the scheme.

Thirdly, the government may resort to the quasi-fiscal provision in Section 28 of the Financial Disciplines Act, delegating the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC) to implement the THB 10,000-handout policies by distributing digital money to agricultural households, totaling THB 210 billion. However, Sirikanya expressed doubts about the legal viability of the Section 28 route.

With a potential total of THB 140 billion, THB 150 billion, and THB 210 billion from these sources, the THB 500 billion scheme could be covered, albeit with some effort. Responding to Sirikanya's concerns, Deputy Finance Minister Julapun Amornvivat urged opposition MPs to await the scheme's policy committee meeting on April 10 for final decisions on funding sources and other key aspects.

Transnational scam network and its alleged link to domestic corruption

MP Rangsiman Rome, chairman of the House of Representatives Committee on National Security,

Border Affairs, National Strategy, and National Reform, condemned the government for its lack of tangible actions taken to crack down on transnational call center syndicates operating near the Thai-Myanmar border, which pose a growing threat. The number of fraudulent calls in Thailand surged tenfold from 2020 to 2022, resulting in damages worth at least THB 40 billion and, in some cases, leading to the victim taking their own life. [Bangkok Post 1]

According to Rangsiman, Myawaddy township in Myanmar, situated adjacent to natural passages connecting to Mae Sot District in Tak Province, has emerged as a hub for criminal activities, housing over 34 casinos and facilitating various illegal enterprises and human trafficking as it allegedly capitalizes on conveniently obtainable infrastructure necessities and lax immigration controls.

To alleviate the prevalence of scamming activities, Rangsiman proposed: firstly, emulating China's approach in leveraging diplomatic or military ties to reach an effective dialogue with Myanmar; secondly, enhancing border security measures to prevent unmonitored passage; thirdly, regulating the distribution of electricity, oil, and internet connectivity to Myawaddy; lastly, probing the financial transactions of government officials implicated in corruption in Mae Sot to identify and remove unlawful enterprise enablers.

The road to a new constitution

MP Parit Wacharasindhu, chairman of the House of Representatives Committee on Political Development, Mass Communications, and Public Participation, expressed concern about the government's sluggish efforts in drafting a new constitution, noting that prolonged delays could jeopardize its timely completion before the next election.

While the question 'When will the new constitution be ready?' is certainly a valid concern, what truly concerns him is the second question: 'What will the new constitution entail?' because the true measure of success in amending the Thai constitution and implementing political reforms lies not solely in the existence of a new constitution, but rather in its content and the design of the political system it encompasses. Given the government's articulated intention to designate Sections 1-2 of the Constitution as 'restricted areas', Parit questioned whether such limitations would also apply to the remainder.

The drafting process will involve three primary entities: the Committee on Constitution Drafting (responsible

for crafting the content and details of each clause), the Constitution Drafting Assembly (supervising the Committee and voting on issues) and the Senate (giving final approval or disapproval). The first two have not been established, and the selection criteria for membership remain uncertain. Nonetheless, the Pheu Thai Party's recent proposal advocating for the Committee to be substantially appointed, along with analogous inclinations regarding the composition of the Assembly, could ultimately diminish the people's authority in shaping the content of the new Constitution.

To preempt both the extended timeline and the muted content, Parit urged the government to: firstly, opt for inclusive yet straightforward questions for the mandatory referendum; secondly, affirm that the Assembly must be publicly elected in its entirety; thirdly, initiate parallel amendments to the active Constitution in areas where democratic principles could be enhanced; lastly, expedite amendments to the Referendum Act to streamline the referendum procedure. [X (formerly Twitter)]

Policy on insurgency in Deep South

Former Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai criticized the government for its lack of policy to address unrest in the Deep South. He disputed claims that the recent increase in rubber prices was due to a successful crackdown on smuggled rubber, stating that it was driven by market forces. Chuan emphasized the importance of addressing the Deep South conflict, urging the government to prioritize human lives over economic concerns. [Thai PBS]

Thailand: Deputy police chief surrenders for arrest warrant, faces disciplinary probe

(bk) Police General Surachate Hakparn, a deputy police chief in Thailand and a prominent candidate for the top position, surrendered to authorities on April 2 after an arrest warrant was issued for him on charges related to money laundering associated with an online gambling platform. The warrant was issued when Surachate failed to respond to multiple summonses for questioning. [see AiR No. 12, March/2024, 3]. [Associated Press] [Thai PBS World 1] [Thai PBS World 2]

Surachate's surrender followed a series of events that began with a raid on his residence in Bangkok last year, as part of an operation targeting an illegal online

gambling network. Eight police officers under Surachate's command were arrested on the day of the raid. This incident occurred amidst speculation regarding Surachate's potential candidacy for the position of national police chief, which was ultimately filled by Torsak Sukvimol.

Notably, the investigative process leading to penalization in this case is bifurcated, each with distinct and segregated rules governing the punishment: i.e. the country's legal and judicial system on one hand and the Royal Thai Police (RTP) internal disciplinary protocol on the other.

On the disciplinary front, the ad-hoc fact-finding committee, commissioned by Prime Minister Thavisin, disclosed to the press on March 5 that substantial evidence has been uncovered linking Pol Gen Surachate to the money laundering associated with the BNK Master. That said, according to Acting National Police Chief, Pol Gen Kitrat Panphet, Pol Gen Surachate has not yet been suspended as the RTP needs to follow procedures before any suspension. During the investigation process, Pol Gen Surachate will continue his duties as usual. The probe is subject to a 60-day time limit, with the possibility of extension upon request. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

In a separate development, since March 3, lawyer and activist Sittra Biabungkerd has continuously provided information regarding financial transactions related to illegal activities involving at least three police officers, including National Police Chief Pol Gen Torsak. This information has been submitted to Chaithawat Tulathon, the opposition leader from the Move Forward Party [see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1], the jurisdictional Taopoon police station, and the Police Complaint Review Board (in charge of exercising disciplinary discretion upon presentation of a malfeasance case).

Therefore, the arrest warrant marked a significant development in a broader feud within the upper echelons of the Thai police force, particularly concerning allegations of Surachate's involvement in an illegal online gambling operation. This internal dispute led to the suspension of both Surachate and the national police chief, Torsak Sukvimol [see AiR No. 13, March/2024, 4].

Thailand: Prime Minister Srettha claims opposition party held secret talks to join coalition

(lm) Thailand's Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin stirred controversy within the opposition Democrat Party last week by alleging that an opposition party engaged in clandestine discussions to join his Pheu Thai Party-led coalition government. However, he emphasized that he was not involved in these talks. [Bangkok Post]

The Prime Minister's comments surfaced amidst speculation that the Democrats were being courted to strengthen the government coalition's position in the lower House of Parliament. This speculation coincided with expectations of a cabinet reshuffle following the conclusion of a two-day general debate on April 4. The Pheu Thai-led coalition, comprising 11 parties, holds a majority in the House of Representatives with 315 MPs out of the 500-member chamber. If the 21 MPs from the Democrat Party were to join, the government's MP count would rise to 336.

Although the Democrat Party, now led by Chalermchai Sri-on, is speculated to join the Pheu Thai coalition, key figures within the party have publicly stated their opposition to such a move. Chalermchai's election in December last year prompted several senior party figures, including former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and former Deputy Leader Sathit Pitutecha, to resign from the party [see AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2]. It is notable that Chalermchai's candidacy was supported by a group of 21 out of the party's 25 Members of Parliament, despite a party resolution.

Thailand: Big parties 'abusing' upper House elections, outgoing senator claims

(lm) Senator Seree Suwanpanont, chair of the Senate committee on political development and public participation, alleges that prominent political parties with strong representation in Parliament's lower House are exploiting the new system for electing 200 members of the upper House. He claims that these parties aim to control the Senate with their own representatives while also exerting influence over local administrative bodies through the election of local leaders. [Bangkok Post]

The alleged manipulation is reportedly supported by major parties like Bhumjaithai, Pheu Thai, and the Move Forward Party. The upcoming election, expected within two months or in July, could result in a Senate predominantly filled with senators allied with these main political parties in the lower House, according to Senator Seree. He cites examples such as organizing seminars for prospective candidates to secure votes

for certain candidates supported by these parties, potentially disadvantaging independent candidates.

Thailand: Marriage Equality Bill secures upper House's acceptance in first reading

(msz) On April 2, the upper House of the Thai parliament, the Senate, voted 147-4 in favor of the Marriage Equality Bill, which would recognize same-sex marriage, in its first reading. The bill, passed in the lower House of Representatives on March 27, was referred to the 27-member vetting committee and is expected to be returned for passage in the next session in July. The committee will make suggestions in seven days before the bill proceeds to the second and third readings. If enacted, Thailand will be the first Southeast Asian country and the third Asian country after Taiwan and Nepal to legalize same-sex marriage. [Bangkok Post] [The Nation Thailand]

During the deliberation, Senator Seri Suwanphanon emphasized the importance of preventing potential social issues, while Senator Pol Lt-General Sanit Mahathavorn proposed raising the legal marriage age to 20 to address concerns of child abuse and sexual harassment. Sanit also suggested immediate implementation of the law after royal approval, bypassing the usual 180-day waiting period, considering the eagerness of same-sex couples to register their union. Senator Piyachat Wanchaleom, a member of the committee on law, justice, and police affairs, recommended extending the law amendment period to allow for a thorough study by all relevant state agencies.

Thailand: King's second-eldest son given honorary post by Lawyers Council

(lm) Vacharaesorn Vivacharawongse, the second-eldest son of Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn, has been named honorary advisory chairman to the president of the Lawyers Council of Thailand, a professional body representing lawyers in the nation. His appointment to this position is effective until 2025. [Bangkok Post]

Vivacharawongse is one of the four sons born to the king and former actress Sujarinee Vivacharawongse. The king disowned the four boys following his divorce from Sujarinee in 1996, which resulted in them losing their royal titles. While Vivacharawongse has resided in the United States since then, recent developments

suggest a potential change in familial relations. His visits to Thailand have become more frequent, indicating a reconnection with his homeland. His most recent visit began on March 6, marking his third trip to the country [see AiR No. 11, March/2024, 2].

Thailand: Election Commission charges 'ineligible' lawmaker

(lm) The Election Commission (EC) of Thailand has decided to initiate legal proceedings against former opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) lawmaker Nakhonchai Khunnarong and has demanded that he cover the expenses for a by-election. This action comes after the EC found him ineligible to contest a lower House seat. [Bangkok Post]

Nakhonchai resigned as a Member of Parliament (MP) in early August last year after acknowledging a conviction in a theft case, for which he served an 18-month prison sentence 24 years ago. Pursuant to Section 151 of the MP election law, running for a general election despite being aware of one's ineligibility is considered an offense. As per Section 420 of the Civil and Commercial Code, the candidate can be held accountable for any incurred costs during that period.

In response, the EC conducted a by-election on September 10 to fill the vacant seat and initiated an investigation. Additionally, the EC rejected Nakhonchai's assertion that he benefited from the 2007 law on the rehabilitation of former offenders, enacted to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej The Great's birthday. According to the EC, while the law regards him as never having been imprisoned, it does not override a court verdict.

Thailand: 15 police officials, 7 civilians jailed over dinner party murder

(lm) In a recent development, a Thai court has handed down prison sentences to 15 police officials and seven civilians for their involvement in the murder of a highway policeman during a dinner party held in September 2023 at the residence of a prominent community member, known as a gan maan in Thailand. [Bangkok Post]

Four policemen received two-year sentences, while the remaining 11 were each sentenced to 16 months for malfeasance, with three of the sentences being suspended. One police official was acquitted of the charge. Among the convicted police officials is Pol Maj Kiattisak Somsuk, previously serving as the chief investigator of Krathum Baen police in Samut Sakhon province.

Additionally, Praween Chankhlai, the gan maan hosting the dinner party, was sentenced to two years in prison. Five other defendants were handed one-year-and-four-month sentences, with three receiving suspended terms. Another individual was sentenced to one year, nine months, and 21 days in prison. However, Praween still faces a more severe charge as the alleged mastermind behind the murder of the slain police officer.

Thailand: Government THB 600 daily wage by 2027 on target, ministry says

(lm) Thailand's labor ministry is confident it will achieve the government's goal of raising the country's daily minimum wage to THB 600 by 2027. [Bangkok Post]

This comes after a recent decision by the tripartite Wage Committee to raise the minimum wage to THB 400 (approximately USD 11) in designated areas across 10 provinces known for tourism, set to take effect during the upcoming Songkran holiday. [AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1]

The decision has drawn criticism from the hotel industry, which argues that the timing is unjust given the varying levels of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic across these destinations. Additionally, the industry asserts that only a minority of hotels can adjust room rates to compensate for the wage increase. Labor groups have also expressed discontent, contending that implementing the minimum wage increase selectively rather than uniformly is unfair. They argue that wage disparities among workers in the same province, despite facing similar costs for goods and services such as water, electricity, and internet, would result in inequalities.

Thailand: Lung cancer, PM2.5 deaths surge in North

(lm) In northern Thailand, particularly in Chiang Mai and Lampang cities, there has been a concerning increase in mortality rates due to lung cancer, primarily attributed to the worsening PM2.5 pollution over the past decade. A study reveals a significant rise in the ratio of lung cancer-related deaths per 100,000 people in the region, from 20.3 in 2010 to 30.7 in 2019. Comparatively, Bangkok saw figures of 14.9 in 2010 to 22.6 in 2019, while the Northeast registered 10.2 in 2010 to 17 in 2019, and the South showed 9.5 in 2010 to 16.8 in 2019. [Bangkok Post 1]

Apart from lung cancer, a surge in respiratory ailments, ranging from nosebleeds to persistent coughs, has been observed during periods of heightened PM2.5 levels, particularly in March. Severe conditions such as exacerbations of emphysema, coronary heart disease, and strokes are notably prevalent during these pollution peaks, highlighting the acute health risks associated with elevated PM2.5 levels.

In related developments, hazardously thick smog shrouded 37 of the 77 provinces on April 8, mostly in the country's North. The worst level of PM2.5, 107.5, was measured in Chiang Rai, followed by 103.8 in Chiang Mai, 92.8 in Phayao, 87.8 in Mae Hong Son, 82.9 in Nan, 80.6 in Lamphun and 80.5 in Lampang. The government-set safe threshold is 37µg/m^3. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Up to 15,000 tons of highly toxic waste illegally sourced from Tak province

(lm) In Thailand, authorities have uncovered a concerning situation involving the illegal sourcing of up to 15,000 tons of highly toxic waste containing cadmium, a hazardous heavy metal linked to cancer in humans. So far, officials have found the tailings in different locations in Samut Sakhon and Chon Buri provinces, but an additional 1,500 tons of this waste is still being unaccounted for. [Bangkok Post]

The initial discovery of 2,500 tons occurred at two foundries in Muang district of Samut Sakhon province on April 4. Subsequently, on April 6, approximately 7,000 tons of the waste were found at a warehouse in Ban Bueng district of Chon Buri province, followed by the identification of another 1,000 tons at a foundry in Muang district. These findings suggest that the waste was illegally transferred from Samut Sakhon. [Thai PBS World]

During the April 6 raid, authorities arrested a Chinese owner of an unregistered warehouse, who confessed

to acting as a middleman. He admitted to purchasing the tailing from another Chinese individual in Samut Sakhon and was awaiting resale.

Thailand: South Korean NGO urges release of two imprisoned political activists

(bk) The *May 18 Memorial Foundation*, a South Korea-based organization commemorating the democratic struggle of the 1980 uprising in South Korea, has called for the release of Thai activists Anon Nampa and Sirapob Phumpheungphut. Both activists are currently detained pending appeal on charges of royal defamation. [Prachatai English]

Sirapob was sentenced by the Criminal Court on March 25 to two years in prison for criticizing the Thai monarchy while participating in a political protest in 2020. His application for bail has been denied. [AiR No. 47, November/2023, 3]

Having awarded Anon the 2021 Gwangju Prize for Human Rights, the *May 18 Memorial Foundation* asserts that the activists are defenders of democracy, calls for international solidarity to support Thailand's democracy, and urges the government to uphold the freedom of expression.

Thailand: Defence Minister denies graft accusations in navy frigate procurement

(lm) During Parliament's general debate on April 4, Thailand's Defence Minister Sutin Klungsang rejected allegations raised by the main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) concerning a supposed "change money" scandal related to the navy's procurement of a new frigate. The term "change money" refers to the practice where a buyer purchases an item at an inflated price, and the seller returns the excess money to the buyer, which is seen as potential embezzlement of state funds. [Bangkok Post 1]

Initially, the Royal Thai Navy (RTN) had requested THB 17 billion (approximately USD 475 million) from the 2024 budget for the frigate procurement, intending to allocate around 10 percent in the first year. However, a special parliamentary committee rejected the funding, and a subsequent appeal by RTN commander Adm Adoon Pan-iam was also denied in early March [see AiR No. 11, March/2024, 2].

Against this backdrop, during last week's parliamentary debate, an MFP lawmaker claimed to have information suggesting that someone from the government attempted to negotiate with the RTN for "change money" from the frigate procurement, which was allegedly declined by the navy. The MP also the new frigate, which would be assembled locally under the procurement plan, is crucial to the navy's core mission as the HTMS Rattanakosin is scheduled for decommissioning in two years. [Bangkok Post 2]

Of note, the defence minister repeated an earlier statement that the frigate purchase project will still go according to plan, but it may happen in other fiscal years, not the current 2024 fiscal year. He also stressed the close link between the frigate budget and the longstanding purchase of a submarine from China. Negotiations with China Shipbuilding & Offshore International Co are ongoing, with recent discussions indicating China's agreement to supply either offshore patrol vessels (OPV) or a frigate instead of the initially contracted submarine [see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1].

However, a disagreement has arisen between Suthin and Adm Adoon Pan-iam regarding the submarine procurement. Sutin favors canceling the submarine deal in favor of a Chinese-built frigate, whereas Adm Adoon insists on proceeding with the submarine acquisition, even with a Chinese-made engine.

On April 5, Sutin then made a surprise statement, announcing the potential procurement of two major warships, including a submarine and a frigate, within the upcoming fiscal year. [Thai Newsroom]

Thailand: Army launches probe into drunk conscript's beating in barracks

(lm) The Thai army has commenced an investigation into an incident involving the assault of a conscript by a duty officer on April 5. The conscript had left the barracks without permission and returned several hours later intoxicated. Upon encountering the duty officer, the conscript exhibited aggressive behavior. This prompted the officer to kick the conscript in the lower back, leading another conscript to report the assault to their supervisor. The incident was captured on video by the reporting conscript. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Soldier arrested on suspicion of murder

(lm) In Thailand, authorities have arrested an army lieutenant on suspicion of murdering a woman on April 7. The suspect has denied any involvement in the crime, and police have requested military investigators to join in the investigation. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Two killed, 9 soldiers hurt in southern ambush

(lm) In Thailand's southernmost province of Narathiwat, two Thai defense volunteers lost their lives, and nine soldiers sustained injuries during an ambush by gunmen on April 7. Authorities attributed the attack to insurgents, noting an increase in attacks during the last 10 days of Ramadan. [Bangkok Post]

Narathiwat is a province located in southern Thailand, bordering Malaysia. It is part of the region known as the Deep South, which has experienced a long-standing insurgency by separatist groups seeking greater autonomy or independence for the predominantly Muslim-majority region.

Vietnam: Authorities on alert as drug smuggling surges via maritime routes

(wn) Vietnam's Drug Crime Investigation Department has raised an alarm over a significant increase in drug smuggling via maritime routes, marked by the adoption of more sophisticated methods. Key ports such as Cat Lai, Hai Phòng, Tien Sa, and Cai Mep have been singled out as focal points for illicit activities. The surge in maritime drug trafficking is largely attributed to foreign criminal syndicates working in tandem with local accomplices. Furthermore, there has been a notable uptick in instances of drug packages washing ashore, underscoring a mounting concern across the central and southern coastal regions. [The Star]

Vietnam: Political prisoner denied traditional medicine

(wn) Nguyen Thi Tam, a political prisoner in Vietnam's Thanh Hoa province, is being deprived of traditional medicine to treat her uterine fibroids, as reported by her family. Tam, arrested in June 2020 for "propaganda against the State," is solely reliant on the prison's infirmary for medical care, which lacks necessary equipment. Despite her worsening condition, the

prison refuses the traditional medicine her family sends, citing inability to verify its contents. This denial, along with ineffective basic medicines provided by the prison, has resulted in prolonged bleeding for Tam. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Pro-government TikToker fined for saying Ho Chi Minh City is full of criminals

(wn) A Vietnamese pro-government TikToker with 900,000 followers, known as Nhat Hai Biet Tuot, was fined US$300 for claiming on the platform that Ho Chi Minh City, formerly known as Saigon, is a haven for criminals. The authorities charged him with spreading false information and insulting agencies and organizations. [Radio Free Asia]

The video in question, posted on March 14, criticized the city's culture for fostering crime. This is not the first time Hai has faced legal issues; in the past, he was sued for slander and has been known for criticizing Vietnamese celebrities while praising the country's leaders.

Vietnam: Heatwave threatens farmers' livelihoods, worsens challenges for Mekong Delta

(wn) A significant heatwave in Vietnam is amplifying environmental challenges confronting the Mekong Delta, a vital region for agriculture and livelihoods. The current conditions, intensified by the El Nino weather pattern, are inflicting hardships on farmers and laborers, leading to grueling working conditions and diminishing crop yields. This adverse weather pattern, characterized by hotter and drier conditions, is occurring earlier than usual, disrupting the traditional agricultural calendar and delaying the onset of the rainy season. [Voice of America]

Reports from local sources and experts indicate the severity of the situation. Farmers are struggling with parched soil, requiring frequent irrigation attempts to sustain their crops. However, despite their efforts, crop yields have plummeted by as much as 30 percent to 40 percent compared to previous years. This sharp decline in productivity not only threatens the livelihoods of farmers but also poses significant challenges for food security and economic stability in the region.

Adding to the woes, saltwater intrusion from coastal areas is encroaching into freshwater sources, exacerbating the water scarcity issue. The intrusion of saltwater, coupled with soaring temperatures and decreased rainfall, further compounds the challenges faced by farmers, making cultivation increasingly difficult and jeopardizing agricultural output.

Authorities are implementing measures to mitigate the impacts of these environmental stressors. Initiatives such as building dams, dredging canals, promoting water storage in orchard ponds, and establishing free water supply sites aim to alleviate the water scarcity crisis and support agricultural activities. However, these efforts may provide only temporary relief and may not address the underlying issues driving the environmental degradation in the region.

Moreover, human activities, particularly dam construction, sand mining, and groundwater extraction, are identified as significant contributors to the deteriorating condition of the Mekong River. The impact of these activities extends beyond national borders, affecting neighboring countries and exacerbating regional tensions over resource management.

Vietnam: Overseas graduates have difficulties getting employment

(wn) Overseas Vietnamese graduates are struggling to find suitable jobs back home due to challenges like cultural adjustment, salary expectations, and lack of practical experience. Despite prestigious degrees, many face difficulty securing positions matching their qualifications. Economic downturn and employer preferences for experienced candidates exacerbate the situation. [Vietnam Express]

Vietnam: Government targets all transport means to run on green energy by 2050

(wn) Vietnam aims to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, with a specific focus on transitioning all modes of transportation to green energy sources. By 2040, the government plans to phase out cars and motorbikes reliant on fossil fuels, aiming for a complete shift to electric and green energy vehicles by 2050. [The Star]

However, despite the increasing popularity of electric vehicles, the current infrastructure of charging stations falls short of meeting demand, particularly on highways. Efforts are underway to expand the network of charging stations, with rest stops on highways identified as promising locations. Nonetheless, challenges persist, including the necessity for robust government and private sector involvement, infrastructure investment, and effective management of the electrical system to prevent overloads.

Incentives such as tax exemptions and reductions are being proposed to stimulate private investment in charging stations. Furthermore, the implementation of smart charging systems could aid in efficiently managing vehicle charging and alleviating strain on the power grid.

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

China and Africa collaborate to enhance global AI governance

(yq) At the opening ceremony of the China-Africa Internet Development and Cooperation Forum on April 2 in Xiamen, China, the director of the Cyberspace Administration of China, Zhuang Rongwen, stated that China would collaborate with Africa to embrace the benefits of the information revolution and enhance the global internet governance system.

The conference was held by the Cyberspace Administration of China and the Fujian provincial government which brought together Chinese authorities and delegates from 20 African countries,

including officials from Benin, Gabon, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as African envoys to China and representatives from international organizations.

Leaders from Africa and China have jointly issued a statement urging for greater coordination and collaboration within multilateral frameworks, such as the United Nations. They also proposed the establishment of an international governing institution to regulate AI. [South China Morning Post]

China funds 112 projects in six member states of Mekong-Lancang Cooperation

(lm) China is funding a total of 112 projects under the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation Special Fund (MLCSF) this year. The MLCSF is a financial mechanism established under the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC), a sub-regional cooperation initiative comprising six countries: Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. Of the supported projects, 53 projects are from China itself, 18 projects from Thailand, 14 projects from Myanmar, 12 projects from Laos, nine projects from Cambodia and six projects from Vietnam. [Bangkok Post]

US and EU extend collaboration to address China's influence in semiconductor market

(yq) During the Meeting of the Trade and Technology Council of the United States and European Union in Leuven, Belgium on April 5, both parties agreed to extend their collaboration for three years with the aim of addressing the challenges posed by the advancement of Chinese semiconductor chips.

Central to their agenda is the mutual commitment to sharing market intelligence on China's "non-market" policies and practices, which are believed to contribute to distortions in the global market for semiconductors.

The U.S. Commerce Department raised concerns over China's extensive subsidization of its semiconductor industry, suggesting that such practices could lead to significant market distortions. To address these challenges, the U.S. has initiated a survey to evaluate the extent of market distortion, with the EU planning a similar investigation.

In addition to tackling market distortions, the U.S. and the EU have pledged to collaborate on research initiatives aimed at identifying alternatives to per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) used in semiconductor manufacturing, which are known for their persistence in the environment and potential health risks. [Reuters] [US Department of State]

US presses the Netherlands to limit ASML's servicing of chip equipment in China

(yq) The US is intensifying efforts to limit China's advancements in semiconductor technology, pressing the Netherlands to restrict its flagship chip equipment maker, ASML, from servicing certain machines in China. To this purpose, U.S. export policy chief Alan Estevez has been slated to hold discussions with Dutch government officials and ASML representatives in the Netherlands on April 8.

This move is part of a broader US strategy to curtail Beijing's tech sector growth by leveraging alliances to implement stringent export controls, with Washington citing national security concerns and the global semiconductor supply chain's integrity. The Netherlands, home to ASML, the world's leading supplier of advanced semiconductor production technology, finds itself at the center of a geopolitical tug-of-war. ASML's technology, crucial for manufacturing cutting-edge chips, has become a focal point of US efforts to impede China's tech ambitions.

The Dutch government appears to be cautious about making a definite decision but based on its public statements and national security interests it is likely to take a considerable amount of time to approve Chinese maintenance requests in the future. [Reuters 1][Reuters2]

Moreover, diplomatic interactions underscore the delicate balance the Netherlands seeks to maintain. Prime Minister Mark Rutte's recent meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on March 27 highlighted that the Dutch export measures are non-targeted and aim to minimize impact (see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1).

China conducts ‘combat patrols’ as Philippines, Japan hold drills with Australia, US in disputed waters

(lm/sh) On April 7, China conducted "combat patrols" in the South China Sea, as confirmed by China's People's Liberation Army Southern Theater Command. The purpose of these patrols was stated as maintaining control amidst ongoing military maneuvers in the region. However, specific details regarding China's activities were not disclosed, leaving some aspects unclear. [The Manila Times]

Coinciding with China's patrols were joint military exercises involving the Philippines, the United States, Japan, and Australia. Dubbed the "Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity," these drills took place within Manila's exclusive economic zone in the West Philippine Sea. They included communication exercises and division tactics, involving ships like Japan's Akebono destroyer, the U.S. Mobile combat ship, Australia's Warramunga frigate, and the Philippine Navy's Antonio Luna frigate. These activities preceded an anticipated trilateral summit between the US, the Philippines, and Japan, where tensions in the disputed waters were expected to feature prominently in discussions. [Philippine News Agency] [Kyodo News]

However, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) has asserted that the country's maritime drills with the US and other allies are not aimed at provoking China's aggression in the West Philippine Sea, emphasizing that Beijing's behavior in the region remains consistent regardless of Manila's security alliances. [Inquirer]

Aukus alliance expands security cooperation with Japan

(sh) The United States, Britain, and Australia have announced talks about potentially expanding their Aukus security pact, aiming to bring new members into the fold.

The US advocates for Japan's inclusion to serve as a counterbalance to China. This move is related to "Pillar II" of the pact, focusing on joint development in areas such as quantum computing, undersea technology, hypersonic systems, artificial intelligence, and cyber technology.

However, there are no plans to expand the first pillar, which involves supplying nuclear-powered submarines to Australia. Aukus alliances is part of efforts to counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific, although China has criticized it, warning of a potential arms race.

US President Joe Biden has been strengthening partnerships with allies like Japan and the Philippines in response to China's military expansion and territorial claims. Biden is expected to discuss the possibility of Japan joining Aukus during his meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in Washington. [South China Morning Post]

Japanese diplomatic efforts on conflict in Gaza

(sh) On April 2, Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa held telephone conversation with Mohammad Mustafa, Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of Palestine. She highlighted Japan's concern over the worsening humanitarian situation in Gaza, referring to Japan's role in the UN Security Council resolution passed on March 25, advocating for an immediate ceasefire during Ramadan and increased humanitarian aid.

Kamikawa emphasized Japan's decision to resume financial contributions to The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) on April 2, aimed at aiding the dire conditions in Gaza and improving UNRWA's governance. She pledged Japan's support through medical services and supplies for women and infants. Both sides discussed reforms within the Palestinian Authority (PA) and reiterated support for a two-state solution. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan 1]

On April 3, Kamikawa held talks with her Israeli counterpart Israel Katz regarding the Israel-Palestine situation. Kamikawa stressed Japan's concern for Gaza's humanitarian crisis and proposed a humanitarian ceasefire to facilitate aid delivery and release hostages. She urged adherence to international law and expressed Japan's dismay over aid workers' casualties. Katz responded with Israel's perspective on Gaza and its military operations. Both sides agreed to maintain close communication for regional stability. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan 2]

On April 4, Kamikawa continued diplomatic efforts in the Gaza conflict, holding telephone discussions with her Lebanese, Egyptian, and Jordanian counterparts Abdallah Bouhabib, Sameh Shoukry, and Ayman Safadi. These discussions centered on Japan's decision to resume funding to UNRWA and its commitment to aid Gaza's humanitarian crisis. Each minister expressed appreciation for Japan's support and discussed the severity of the situation in Gaza. Kamikawa emphasized Japan's commitment to a two-

state solution and proactive engagement in Palestinian Authority reform. The ministers also discussed potential regional implications and agreed to maintain close cooperation for peace and stability in the Middle East. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan 3]

European development bank boosts Mongolia's food security

(fg) The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) has provided an USD 8 million loan to Ulaanbaatar Flour (UBF), Mongolia's leading flour producer, to improve food security.

The loan will help UBF expand wheat sourcing and local wheat and flour production in a country that is heavily dependent on imports. UBF will also implement the FSSC 22000 standard for food safety.

In addition, UBF is working with the Institute of Plants and Agriculture to develop a training program for suppliers on topics such as wheat cultivation, seed quality management and advanced fertilizer technologies to increase farm productivity and improve livelihoods.

The EBRD has already invested EUR 2.3 billion in the Mongolian economy through 140 projects, mainly in the private sector. [EBRD]

The FSSC 22000 standard stands for "Food Safety System Certification 22000". It is an internationally recognized standard for the certification of food safety management systems. The standard is designed to ensure the safety of food along the entire supply chain, from production to the consumer.

UN Human Rights Council renews mandate on scrutinizing human rights situation on North Korea

(dql) On April 4, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted a resolution to renew the mandate of the UN special rapporteur on North Korea and to request the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' first comprehensive report on the North Korean human rights situation since 2014 report of the Commission of Inquiry (COI).

In the report, the COI confirmed the systematic violations of human rights in North Korea and crimes

against humanity committed by Pyongyang. Subsequently, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 69/188 in 2014 calling on the UN Security Council to refer the situation to the International Criminal Court (ICC). That same year, and for the first time, the Security Council convened to address human rights in North Korea. However, a resolution was not adopted.

Under the new resolution, for the 22nd consecutive year, the resources for the high commissioner's office to focus on criminal accountability for North Korea's rights violations are increased and the link between the regime's weapons program, international peace and security, and human rights are underscored.

North Korea condemned the resolution as a "politically motivated fraud document," that was "fabricated by the U.S. and its followers with the ulterior intention to overthrow the sovereignty of the dignified DPRK and its socialist system." [Human Rights Watch] [KCNA] [Yonhap]

South Korea, US and Japan conduct joint aerial exercise

(oy) On April 2, South Korea, the US, and Japan conducted a joint aerial exercise involving two nuclear-capable B-52H bombers and fighter jets. This exercise took place near the Korean Peninsula, specifically over waters southeast of Jeju Island.

The exercise's aim was to deter North Korea's nuclear and missile threats and enhance the three countries' response capabilities. This is the third such exercise following the trilateral summit at Camp David in August 2023 (see AiR No. 34, August/2023, 4).

The exercise comes after North Korea launched a ballistic missile on April 2. Military officials suspect that North Korea may have test-fired an intermediate-range missile with a hypersonic warhead. This is North Korea's third ballistic missile launch in 2024. [Yonhap]

South Korea Defense Minister meets UN Command member states ambassadors

(oy) On April 5, South Korea's Defense Minister Shin Won-sik met with ambassadors from 17 United Nations Command (UNC) member states to discuss peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula amid increasing North Korean threats.

The meeting, which also included UNC Deputy Commander Lieutenant General Derek Macaulay and former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, focused on deterring North Korean threats and maintaining peace through a strong defense posture, a robust South Korea-US alliance, and close cooperation with the UNC.

The envoys agreed that peace on the Korean Peninsula is crucial for global peace and pledged to work closely with South Korea to achieve this goal. The participants also discussed holding regular defense ministerial meetings with UNC member states, following the inaugural meeting held in 2023.

North Korea has long criticized the UNC and the defense ministerial meetings, viewing them as a potential trigger for a new war.

The UNC, established in July 1950, is a US-led multinational command created to support South Korea against North Korea's aggression. Its current members include the US, Britain, Canada, Turkey, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, the Netherlands, Colombia, Greece, New Zealand, Belgium, France, South Africa, Norway, Denmark, and Italy. [Yonhap] [Ministry of National Defense]

South Korea Foreign Minister attends NATO meeting

(oy) From April 3 to April 4, South Korea Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul attended a NATO Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Brussels, discussing security issues in Europe and the Indo-Pacific region, including support for Ukraine and Russia-North Korea military cooperation. A day later on April 5, Cho Tae-yul met NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Brussels to discuss bilateral cooperation and North Korea's military cooperation with Russia. [South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs_1]

During the April 5 meeting, Cho acknowledged the importance of cooperating with NATO and partner countries and expressed hope for meaningful outcomes at the upcoming NATO summit in Washington in July. He added that South Korea hopes to further cooperation in areas such as support for Ukraine, cyber, and hybrid under the Individually Tailored Partnership Program (ITPP) signed in 2023. Cho also sought cooperation opportunities between the International Cyber Training Center and the NATO Cyber Defense Cooperation Center.

Cho stated that South Korea is working with allied nations to create a new monitoring mechanism against North Korea after the UN Security Council failed to extend the mandate of the expert panel monitoring sanctions enforcement. He called for NATO's cooperation in holding a UN general assembly meeting to condemn Russia for vetoing the extension.

Stoltenberg agreed on the need for a unified response against the North Korea-Russia military cooperation and supported South Korea's peace efforts on the Korean Peninsula. He highlighted the significance of cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners like South Korea, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, and plans to strengthen these relationships further. [South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs_2][Yonhap_1]

During the April 3 to April 4 meeting, Cho announced that South Korea will provide a long-term support package worth USD 2.3 billion for Ukraine, along with a contribution of USD 12 million through NATO's Trust Fund to a Military Medical Clinical Treatment Rehabilitation Centre for injured Ukrainian soldiers.

Cho emphasized the negative impact of North Korea's weapon support to Russia on security in Europe, the Korean Peninsula, and the Indo-Pacific region. He criticized Russia's transfer of advanced military technology and oil supplies to North Korea, as well as Russia's recent veto against extending the mandate of the Panel of Experts under the North Korea Sanctions Committee at the UN Security Council. (see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1) [Yonhap_2]

South Korea Foreign Minister meets European counterparts at NATO meeting

(oy) On the sidelines of last week's NATO Foreign Ministers meeting in Brussels (see article above) South Korea Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul held bilateral meetings with European counterparts.

Czech Republic, The Netherlands, Belgium, EU

On April 4, Cho Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavsky and Dutch Foreign Minister Hanke Bruins Slot.

Cho and Lipavsky discussed strengthening high-level exchanges and cooperation in trade and investment. Cho expressed hope for a South Korean company to bid for the construction of a new nuclear power plant in Dukovany, Czech Republic. Lipavsky replied that he is aware of South Korea's advanced nuclear technology

and reiterated that the selection process will be fair and transparent.

Cho and Bruins Slot agreed to implement follow-up measures from President Yoon Suk-yeol's state visit (see AiR No. 51, December/2023, 3), such as the semiconductor alliance and progress in economic security, cybersecurity, and defense. They also plan to jointly host the second High-Level Meeting on the Responsible Military Use of Artificial Intelligence in Seoul.

At both meetings, Cho expressed concern about North Korea's threats to global peace and stability through its military cooperation with Russia and urged a strong message to North Korea to suspend this cooperation. He also expressed regret over Russia's veto of the resolution to extend the mandate of the Panel of Experts under the North Korea Sanctions Committee.

Lipavsky and Bruins Slot affirmed their continued support for South Korea's policies and efforts for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. They also welcomed Cho's participation in the NATO Foreign Ministers' Meeting and agreed to continue support restoring peace in Ukraine through cooperation between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, including NATO-IP4 cooperation. [South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs] [Yonhap]

On the same day, Cho also met Belgian Foreign Minister Hadja Lahbib and EU High Representative Josep Borrel at the sidelines of the NATO Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

Cho and Lahbib agreed to strengthen high-level exchanges and cooperation in high-tech industries, including education, semiconductors and artificial intelligence. Cho expressed hope for further development of South Korea-Belgium and South Korea-EU relations, as Belgium is chairing the EU Presidency in the first half of 2024.

Cho and Borrell appreciated the active exchanges between the EU and South Korea and agreed to strengthen their security partnership and support for Ukraine. They plan to sign a security partnership and hold the first strategic dialogue between their foreign ministers.

At both meetings, Cho voiced concerns about North Korea's provocations and its military cooperation with Russia, calling for continued cooperation with Belgium and the EU. He also expressed regret over Russia's veto of the resolution to extend the mandate of the Panel of Experts under the North Korea Sanctions

Committee. Borrell and Raviv affirmed their continued support for South Korea's policies and efforts for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

According to the South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, both talks are seen as an opportunity to further strengthen South Korea's partnership with Europe. [South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs] [Yonhap]

Italy, Turkey

A day earlier, on April 3, Cho held talks with Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani and Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan at the sidelines of the NATO Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

Cho and Tajani discussed increasing cooperation in trade and investment and aligning the outcomes of the Korea-Africa Summit and the AI Summit with the main agendas of 2024's G7 Summit. Italy is currently serving as G7 President and South Korea is reportedly discussing participation in the summit.

Cho and Fidan discussed deepening bilateral relations in various fields such as defense and nuclear energy, and creating a successful cooperation model between the two countries.

At both meetings, Cho voiced concerns about North Korea's provocations and its military cooperation with Russia, calling for continued cooperation with Italy and Turkey. He also expressed regret over Russia's veto of the resolution to extend the mandate of the Panel of Experts under the North Korea Sanctions Committee. Tajani and Fidan affirmed their continued support for South Korea's policies and efforts for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. [South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs] [Yonhap]

Nepal's lower House approves BIMSTEC charter

(tg/lm) Nepal's lower House during its session on April 2 approved the Charter of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). [myRepublica]

During the parliamentary session, it was disclosed that all BIMSTEC member nations, including Nepal, had signed the BIMSTEC Charter during the Fifth Summit held in Sri Lanka in 2022. The Charter stipulates that it will be enforced only after endorsement by respective parliaments. While the six other member countries – Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and

Thailand – have already endorsed the Charter, Nepal's endorsement is awaited. Upon Nepal's endorsement, the Charter will be implemented within 30 days.

Speaking against this backdrop, Nepal's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Narayan Kaji Shrestha has stated that Kathmandu would not support the replacement of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) with BIMSTEC. Even though Nepal is a member of both bodies, they do not want BIMSTEC to reduce SAARC to a "passive and ineffective" status, said Nepal's foreign minister. [The Kathmandu Post]

SAARC, which comprises Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, has been facing several challenges throughout is existence, most notably over tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad, the longstanding conflict between the two countries, particularly over issues such as Kashmir, has resulted in the postponement or cancellation of SAARC summits since 2014. The current chair sits in Kathmandu. This is a motivating factor for the Nepali government to revitalize the body.

Indian government ordered killings in Pakistan, intelligence officials claim

(lm/nw) *The Guardian* reported on revelations from Indian and Pakistani intelligence operatives, shedding light on a disturbing strategy of targeted assassinations in Pakistan allegedly carried out by India's Research & Analysis Wing (RAW). The aim was to eliminate individuals deemed hostile to India, particularly Sikh separatists associated with the Khalistan movement, along with those linked to militant groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, or acting as handlers for Kashmiri militants. Despite detailed documentation implicating India in nearly 20 killings since 2020, Indian authorities vehemently deny these allegations, dismissing them as propaganda. [The Guardian]

According to the report, the RAW initiated these operations post-2019, allegedly under the direct control of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's office. Sleeper cells in the United Arab Emirates were purportedly used to orchestrate these killings, with local criminals or impoverished Pakistanis hired to carry them out. Additionally, jihadists were allegedly recruited, with the killings framed as attacks on "infidels." The Pulwama attack in 2019 – a deadly suicide bombing in Jammu and Kashmir that resulted in the deaths of 40 Indian Central Reserve Police Force

personnel – seemingly served as a catalyst for India's intensified approach to perceived external threats.

These extrajudicial killings, if proven, would violate international law. They also raise questions about India's growing assertiveness in its foreign policy and its relationship with Western countries. Some speculate that India's actions are driven by a desire for great power status and a willingness to take extreme measures against perceived threats.

After the publication of the report by *The Guardian*, Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh stated that New Delhi would enter Pakistan to eliminate anyone who escapes across the border after attempting militant attacks. In response, Pakistan strongly condemned Singh's statement, calling it provocative and detrimental to regional peace. [Al Jazeera]

Furthermore, accusations from Canada and the United States last year added to the complexity. Canada claimed to be investigating "credible allegations" linking India to the death of a Sikh separatist leader, while the U.S. announced charges related to an alleged Indian plot to kill another Sikh separatist leader. These incidents underscore the growing international scrutiny and diplomatic challenges surrounding India's alleged involvement in targeted killings beyond its borders.

Brunei joins regional cross-border payment system

(dql) The Central Bank of Brunei, along with the Bank of the Lao PDR (BOL), has formally joined the Regional Payment Connectivity (RPC). This brings RPC group to a total of eight ASEAN central banks.

In initiative aimed at promoting faster, cheaper, more transparent, and more inclusive cross-border payments, the RCP was spearheaded by the central banks of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand in late 2022. Vietnam joined last year. [Technode Global]

Since its inception in 2022, the RPC has strengthened the central banks' ability to foster and accelerate the development of payment connectivity in the region through, among others, quick response (QR) code-based payment and fast payment modalities.

Cambodia, FAO to cooperate in community forest projects

(dql) Cambodia's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) has entered a cooperation with United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Representation in Cambodia, on a project aimed at strengthening community forest user groups and improving livelihoods. They also aim to and actively contribute to climate action and biodiversity conservation.

24 districts in five provinces are targeted, with some 86 000 people expected to benefit from the project. [FAO]

Indonesia supports Palestine's bid for full UN membership

(jb) The Indonesian Foreign Ministry announced on April 3 that it has actively lobbied other countries to back Palestine's full membership at the United Nations (UN).

The Palestinian Authority recently submitted an application for full UN membership after participating as a non-member observer state for the past 12 years. Amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine, with the death toll surpassing 33,000 people in Gaza and over 1,100 in Israel, the Palestinian Ambassador to the UN, Riyad Mansour, has demanded discussions on the membership to take place this month.

To achieve full UN membership, Palestine needs approval from the UN Security Council, where the US, a significant ally of Israel, holds veto power. Subsequently, two-thirds of the 193 UN General Assembly members must vote in favor of Palestine's membership. [Asia News Network]

Indonesia, along with China, Saudi Arabia, lobby EU to protect EUR 200 billion in Russian assets

(jb) Several countries, including China, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia, are reportedly pressuring the European Union to abandon the idea of confiscating Russia's EUR 200 billion frozen assets. These nations are urging the EU to resist the US and UK's calls for seizing the Russian state assets, which were immobilized following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Sources indicate that these countries are skeptical of the confiscation idea, fearing it could set a precedent and potentially make them vulnerable in the future.

Western EU countries are currently resisting the pressure to confiscate the Russian assets due to concerns about legal implications and possible destabilization within the eurozone. Additionally, there are fears that such actions could erode trust in Western financial institutions and prompt Moscow to retaliate against European business interests in Russia.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has suggested using a smaller portion of the assets to fund Ukrainian arms deliveries. The matter will be discussed at next month's G7 finance ministers meeting. Some speculate that these countries might be acting on behalf of Russian interests, aiming to sway Brussels' decision. [Politico] [Euromaidan]

Indonesia condemns Israeli attack on Iranian consulate

(jb) On April 3, Indonesia, along with Pakistan and Malaysia, jointly denounced the Israeli air strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus. According to Anadolu news agency, the foreign ministries of these nations released individual statements condemning the assault and extending condolences to the victims' families.

Pakistan's foreign ministry stated, "The attack is an unacceptable violation of Syria's sovereignty, undermining its stability and security. It also breaches international law and the UN Charter."

Indonesia's ministry of foreign affairs strongly condemned the attack, terming it a "direct violation" of international law. Malaysia's foreign ministry labeled the deliberate targeting of the Iranian consulate as "a violation of international norms and diplomatic protocols," urging all parties to respect international law.

Iran has blamed Israel for the strike, which targeted a building adjacent to the Iranian Embassy in Damascus, resulting in the deaths of two generals and five other officers from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). [Middle East Monitor]

ASEAN finance leaders meet in Laos

(lvw) Last week Laos hosted ASEAN finance ministers in Luang Prabang. At the conference, the ministers discussed the challenges of regional geopolitics and volatility of prices. While economic growth rates vary across the ten ASEAN member states, in 2024 they hover around a robust 5 percent, with economies stabilizing post-COVID due to export and tourism sectors.

Key points of discussion included developments in digitization, demographic shifts given the growing aging populations, and the economic impacts of climate change, and the financing of emission reduction. Also on the agenda were the political and trade shifts around the war in Ukraine and the US-China trade war.

Laos' Finance Minister Santiphab Phomvihane, emphasized persisting challenges to economic growth "due to adverse financial spillovers from geopolitical tensions, volatility in global commodity prices." [AP News]

Malaysia, WHO to work together on preventive healthcare

(dql) In cooperation with the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Malaysian government has launched a healthcare education program that seeks promote preventive healthcare practices and to raise awareness of the importance of early medical intervention.

Part of the program is the expansion of universal health coverage (UHC) and the improvement of the quality of healthcare services. It also includes efforts to empower individuals to make informed decisions about health matters to foster a culture of proactive health management and to spread the view that the right to health is a human right that requires recognition and fulfillment by all parties. [Malay Mail]

Malaysia, UNHCR close to agreement of refugee information sharing

(dql) An agreement to share data on refugees with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) is close at hand, according to Malaysian Home Minister Saifuddin Nasution Ismail who disclose the information after a meeting on this matter with the

representative of UNHCR High Commission, Thomas Albrecht.

The discussion during the meeting also revolved around aspects of capacity development and training, with a view to combining both sides' experience in managing refugees around the world. [Malay Mail]

This comes as the Malaysian government is facing accusations of “detaining about 12,000 migrants and refugees, including 1,400 children, in conditions that put them at serious risk of physical abuse and psychological harm,” and of running a “degrading and abusive immigration detention system, which treats migrants and refugees as criminals, denies them their rights to liberty, health, and due process.” [Human Rights Watch]

UN urges governments to halt jet fuel exports to Myanmar

(jb) The UN's Human Rights Council has called on member countries to stop exporting or selling jet fuel to Myanmar, fearing it could be used by the ruling military junta to violate human rights. This decision was backed by a consensus of the council's 47 member countries. The council also urged a cessation of the illegal transfer of weapons, munitions, and other military equipment to Myanmar.

An independent expert commissioned by the council recently warned of the escalating violence by Myanmar’s military government against civilians, especially as it faces increasing challenges from pro-democracy and ethnic armed groups. Since seizing power over three years ago, the military's repression has led to widespread nonviolent opposition, sparking armed resistance and plunging the country into civil war.

Amnesty International has previously highlighted illicit fuel shipments to Myanmar, pointing out efforts to bypass sanctions in the aviation fuel supply chain. Last year, at least seven fuel shipments with direct links to a storage unit in Vietnam were sent to Myanmar. [Channel News Asia]

Meanwhile, former Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has been appointed by UN Secretary General António Guterres as his special envoy on Myanmar.

Australian foreign minister from 2013 to 2018, Bishop succeeds Singaporean diplomat Noeleen Heyzer, who stepped down in June. [ABC News]

US petroleum giant Chevron hands Myanmar gas field stake to military junta, Thailand's PTTEP

(lm) United States energy company Chevron has officially withdrawn from the Yadana natural gas field in Myanmar, more than two years after condemning violence and human rights abuses in the country. Chevron's 41.1 percent stake in the gas field was not sold but redistributed to the remaining shareholders, Thailand's PTT Exploration and Production (PTTEP) and state-owned Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE). [CNBC]

The Yadana field, located in the Gulf of Martaban, has been a significant gas producer, with most of its output exported to Thailand and some supplied for domestic use in Myanmar. Chevron's decision comes amid ongoing accusations of atrocities by Myanmar's military junta against civilians and international calls for the cessation of hostilities. The move follows similar actions by other energy companies, such as TotalEnergies, which suspended payments to Myanmar's junta in 2021 and subsequently withdrew from the country in 2022.

Justice for Myanmar, a non-profit group, attributed Chevron's exit to sustained pressure from civil society over payments to the junta. Chevron stated that its withdrawal was conducted responsibly and in accordance with international law and trade sanctions. The US government had imposed sanctions on certain financial services to MOGE in November 2023, aiming to weaken the military junta's control over the enterprise.

(lm) Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance Lawrence Wong will embark on a visit to Germany from April 8 to 10 and France from April 10 to 13. Minister for Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan will accompany him during his visit to France. The visits aim to strengthen Singapore's longstanding ties with both countries. [ChannelNews Asia]

In Germany, he will meet with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and other officials, including President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and various ministers. Additionally, he will engage with German industry leaders and attend a reception with overseas Singaporeans.

During his visit to Paris, Wong will have meetings scheduled with French President Emmanuel Macron and Minister of Economy and Finance Bruno Le Maire. Additionally, he will attend the inauguration of

Temasek Holdings Private Limited's office in France. Temasek, known as one of the largest and most renowned investment firms worldwide, is a Singaporean sovereign wealth fund.

Singapore minister warns of growing security threat in prospering Asian economies

(lb) Singapore's Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam has cautioned that as economic opportunities burgeon in the region, so will the prevalence of tech-enabled crimes and security threats, exacerbating the challenges faced by homeland security departments with limited resources. Speaking at the Milipol Asia-Pacific and TechX Summit, Shanmugam emphasized the need for international collaboration to address these evolving security issues, particularly in technology development, as the borderless nature of such crimes requires solutions beyond national borders. [Dev discourse]

New Zealand prime minister to make week-long trip to Singapore, Thailand, Philippines

(lm) New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon is set to embark on a trip to Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines, accompanied by Climate Change Minister Simon Watts and MP Paulo Garcia. The delegation will meet with counterparts in each country, including Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Thailand Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin, and Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. This trip marks significant diplomatic engagements, aiming to enhance trade and bilateral ties with key partners in the region. Luxon's focus is on revitalizing offshore connections and fostering collaboration in various sectors. [The Post]

Singapore rules out hosting Commonwealth Games

(lb) Singapore has joined Malaysia in ruling out hosting the 2026 Commonwealth Games, casting further uncertainty over the future of the multi-sport event. The decision comes after Australia’s Victoria state, the original host, withdrew its bid due to escalating costs,

leaving the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) scrambling to find a replacement host. Despite the offer of financial support, Malaysia declined the opportunity last month, prompting Singapore to also forego bidding for the Games. [New Straits Times] [bbc]

With no confirmed host and just two years until the event, doubts persist about its future. Discussions are underway with potential hosts, with GBP 100 million available for support. The fate of the Commonwealth Games beyond 2026 remains uncertain, with issues surrounding relevancy and scale. The search for a host for the 2030 Games is ongoing after Alberta, Canada withdrew its bid.

Macao, India, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Philippines ranked five fastest-growing Asian economies in 2024

(wn) Macao, India, Cambodia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines have been identified as the top five fastest-growing economies in Asia for 2024, according to a recent report by Insider Monkey. Leading the list is the Macao Special Administrative Region of China, boasting an impressive Real GDP Growth Rate of 27.2 percent and a GDP Per Capita Growth Rate of 29.16 percent. India follows closely behind with a Real GDP Growth Rate of 6.3 percent and a GDP Per Capita Growth Rate of 9 percent, securing the second spot. Cambodia secures the third position with a Real GDP Growth Rate of 6.1 percent and a GDP Per Capita Growth Rate of 6.34 percent. Bangladesh and the Philippines complete the top five, each with Real GDP Growth Rates of 6.0 percent and 5.9 percent, respectively.

Other noteworthy entries include Vietnam, Uzbekistan, and Indonesia, which exhibit significant growth rates in both Real GDP and GDP Per Capita. Meanwhile, Thailand wraps up the list with a Real GDP Growth Rate of 3.2 percent and a GDP Per Capita Growth Rate of 5.94 percent.

In related developments, Vietnam’s Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính emphasized the country's target of achieving a 6.5 percent growth rate this year during a government meeting and online conference with provincial leaders. To meet this goal, he urged ministries to focus on implementing the "five determinations", "five assurances", and "five accelerations". [Asia News Network]

The "five determinations" include overcoming challenges, achieving set goals, protecting officials promoting common goals, improving the investment environment, and achieving the best results. The "five assurances" involve ensuring effective task implementation, macroeconomic stability, market transparency, new salary policy deployment, and social security. The "five accelerations" emphasize economic growth, resource mobilization, strategic breakthroughs, international integration, and digital transformation.

Vietnam-based hackers suspected of stealing business data across Asia

(wn) A group of hackers based in Vietnam, known as CoralRaider, is suspected of orchestrating a scheme to steal business data from financial organizations across Asia using social media platforms. Operating since May 2023, the hackers target victims in India, China, South Korea, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Vietnam. They focus on acquiring credentials, financial data, and social media accounts, including business and advertisement accounts. The stolen information is then traded in underground markets for profit. [Vietnam Express]

Diplomatic aftermath after the severe earthquake

(fg) On April 3, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake struck the east coast of Taiwan, hitting Hualien County in particular. At least 13 people have died, over 1000 are reported injured and more are trapped in tunnels [Guardian]. It was the largest earthquake in 25 years.

Internationally, Taiwan has received condolences from all parts of the world. In addition, Japan has already promised USD 1 million in direct aid, while Turkey sent a drone rescue team to Taiwan and the Philippine envoy in Taiwan visited the migrant workers from the Philippines living in Hualien County. [Presidential Office Taiwan 1] [Focus Taiwan] [Taiwan News] [Presidential Office Taiwan 2] [Taiwan News 2]

Bangladesh’s prime minister plans to visit New Delhi after India’s election in June

(tg) Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is set to visit India following the conclusion of India's elections later this year. While the exact dates are still pending, it's reported that the visit may take place in June. This trip would be her first to India since her victory in the national elections on January 7. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh wants Russia' Rosatom to build another nuclear power plant at Rooppur

(lm) Bangladesh's Prime Minister has requested Russia's state-run atomic agency Rosatom to consider constructing a second nuclear power plant at Rooppur during a meeting with Rosatom Director General Alexey Likhachev. She emphasized the importance of conducting technical surveys for setting up two new units and directed the completion of formalities for returning spent nuclear fuel to Russia. Science and Technology Minister Architect Yeafesh Osman was also present at the meeting. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh is currently building the first of two nuclear power plants in collaboration with Rosatom. Ninety percent of the USD 12.65 billion project is financed through a Russian loan repayable within 28 years with a 10-year grace period. Construction work for two units, each with a capacity of 1200MW, is in the final stage at Rooppur. The first unit is set to begin physical start-up in December this year, with commercial power generation planned for 2025 and 2026 from Unit-1 and Unit-2.

Electricity generation in Bangladesh is currently dependent on imported gas, which has risen sharply in price since the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Bangladesh, Brazil sign agreement to boost ties

(lm) Bangladesh and Brazil have enhanced their bilateral and commercial ties through an agreement signed during the first-ever visit of Brazil's Foreign Minister to Bangladesh. Mauro Vieira, the Brazilian Foreign Minister, and his Bangladeshi counterpart Hasan Mahmud inked the Basic Agreement on Technical Cooperation after a productive bilateral meeting in Dhaka. [Xinhua]

Discussions between Vieira and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud, and State

Minister for Commerce Ahsanul Islam Titu encompassed a wide range of topics, including agriculture, livestock, science, technology, education, climate change, and energy transition. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of enhancing bilateral trade and investments, exploring the potential for a preferential trade agreement between Bangladesh and MERCOSUR, a South American trade bloc. Additionally, plans for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Brazil in July were deliberated upon. [The Daily Star 1]

Of note, Mauro Vieira expressed strong support for Bangladesh's interest in joining the BRICS alliance during his visit, stating that Brazil would consider Bangladesh's inclusion in BRICS positively. The Brazilian top diplomat also talked about Bangladesh's participation in three sectors of the Group of Twenty (G20) under Brazil's Presidency: environment and climate sustainability working group; empowerment of women working group and the task force for the launching of the global alliance against poverty and hunger. [The Daily Star 2]

The visit came at a time when the bilateral trade between the two countries saw a significant rise in the aftermath of the Ukraine-Russia war. Bilateral trade between the countries reached USD 2.7 billion last fiscal from USD 1.5 billion in 2021.

Bruneian foreign minister meets U.S. Deputy Secretary of State

(dql) On April 5, Bruneian Foreign Minister Erywan Yusof met with U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell in Washington DC during the fifth US-Brunei Senior Officials' Dialogue in Washington.

During the meeting, Erywan and Campbell announced plans for an elevation of their countries' relationship to a strategic partnership aimed at advancing cooperation on cyber and technology, economic and commercial and other issues.

They also underscored the importance of increased cooperation on regional issues and discussed ways to work together to provide urgent humanitarian assistance to the people in Gaza. [Borneo Bulletin]

Hun Sen to strengthen ties with Japan, seeks meeting with Myanmar military

leader

(lvw) On April 2, Hun Sen, ex-prime minister and newly elected President of the Cambodian Senate (see article in this edition) received Atsushi Ueno, the Ambassador of Japan to Cambodia. Hun Sen and Ueno pledged to strengthen and elevate the countries' close bilateral ties in the wake of Mr Hun Sen's appointment as Senate President last week.

Last year the two nations elevated bilateral ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. [Khmer Times 1]

In a separate move, Hun Sen has disclosed his intention to hold a video conference with Myanmar's Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, Chairman of the State Administration Council, to discuss ideas for a resolution of the crisis in Myanmar.

Hun Sen spoke about his intention during a meeting with the Ambassador of Myanmar to Cambodia, Kyaw Soe Min, on April 8 at the Senate. [Khmer Times 2]

US offers Cambodia additional funding for demining work

(dql) Continuing is support for Cambodia's objective to become a landmine-free country by 2025, the U.S. has pledged to increase its funding for mine clearance activities in the country with USD 12 million for 2024.

This comes after Washington provided over USD 6 million for demining efforts in various provinces until 2025.

Largely located in the border districts close to Thailand and Laos, four to six million landmines and other explosive ordnance are believed to have been left in Cambodia, a result of protracted battles in the past century. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia invites Ukraine to 2024 demining summit

(lvw) The Cambodian Mine Action and Victim Assistance Authority (CMAA) is set to host this year's Summit on a Mine-Free World in November, extending an invitation to Ukraine. In the first week of April, a high-ranking delegation of Ukrainian officials and members of parliament, including representatives from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of

Economy, Centre for Humanitarian Demining, and Emergency Services, undertook an official visit to Cambodia.

Ly Thuch, the First Vice President of the CMAA, emphasized the importance of support from all stakeholders, both domestic and international, in achieving Cambodia's goal of becoming mine-free by 2025.

Given Cambodia's history of conflict, its landscape is littered with mines and explosive remnants of war. This is a situation which Ukraine will inevitably be left to deal with in the aftermath of the Russian invasion. Cambodia is committed to sharing its expertise in humanitarian demining to assist Ukraine in its eventual post-conflict reconstruction efforts and demining efforts, which the Ukrainian delegation expressed a keen interest in.

Notably, Cambodia has already provided demining technology training to the Ukrainian military, yielding promising results. [Khmer Times]

Biden-Xi phone call: Navigating complexities in US-China relations

(jm) On April 2, US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping engaged in two-hour phone call addressing various challenges in China-U.S. relations aimed to maintain stability in their nations' relationship. The call addressed topics such as Taiwan, artificial intelligence (AI), security concerns, and economic matters, with both leaders emphasizing the importance of communication to prevent tensions from escalating to direct conflict.

The leaders reviewed progress made since their past November 2023 summit in California (see AiR No. 47, November/2023, 3) and emphasized ongoing efforts in counternarcotics cooperation, military-to-military communication, climate change, and people-to-people exchanges.

Xi emphasized the need to respect each other's core interests, prioritize peace and stability, and uphold commitments made during their previous meeting in San Francisco. Taiwan emerged as a significant point of contention, with Xi stressing its importance as a "red line" and urging the US to refrain from supporting "Taiwan independence."

Meanwhile, Biden reiterated the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and raised

concerns over China's support for Russia's defense industrial base. While Biden reaffirmed the United States' "One China" policy regarding Taiwan, he raised concerns about China's trade practices, human rights issues, and practices in the South China Sea. Xi, in turn, criticized US sanctions on Chinese entities and efforts to restrict China's tech sector.

Despite areas of contention, such as human rights, trade practices, and defense relationships, both sides expressed a desire to advance cooperation while responsibly managing differences. The call preceded upcoming diplomatic meetings between top officials from both countries: US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen is scheduled to arrive in China on April 4 (see article below) with Secretary of State Anthony arriving in the following weeks.

However, underlying tensions and differences in priorities between the two nations underscored the complexities of navigating US-China relations. [The State Council of the PRC] [The White House] [AP News]

U.S. President Joe Biden reportedly to warn China about its actions in the South China Sea

(yq) President Joe Biden is set to hold a trilateral meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in Washington on April 11. The discussion will reportedly revolve around the ongoing tensions in the South China Sea, with China's actions being a significant topic of discussion.

At the heart of the discussions is China's intensified activity around the disputed territory, Second Thomas Shoal, where Chinese vessels have been reported to harass Philippine ships. This situation has raised alarms over potential threats to regional stability and the freedom of navigation, prompting President Biden to signal a robust stance on the issue.

The upcoming statement by President Biden is expected to express concern over the activities of China. The U.S. is reiterating its commitment to safeguarding Philippine interests under the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty. [The Diplomat]

Meanwhile, the Philippines held a joint maritime patrol with the U.S., Japan, and Australia in the South China Sea. The patrol involved six warships and four aircraft from the four nations and was held in response to

China's growing assertiveness in the disputed waters, especially around Second Thomas Shoal. [USNI News]

US Treasury Secretary Yellen in talks with Chines Vice-Premier He Lifeng

(jm/yg) From April 4-5, US Treasury Secretary Janet L. Yellen met with Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng in Guangzhou, China, for high-level talks, underscoring the importance of collaborative efforts between the US and China to address global challenges.

Yellen stressed the need for open communication and sought substantial discussions on economic relations, with a focus on crucial matters such as climate change, debt distress, overcapacity, and national security concerns. He Lifeng, a key figure in China's economic landscape, highlighted the significance of addressing crucial economic matters affecting both countries and the global economy. [The State Council of the PRC] [US Department of the Treasury]

Yellen also participated in discussions with economists and the US business community, underlining the US commitment to fostering a healthy economic relationship with China while addressing concerns regarding market access barriers and unfair economic practices. [SCMP]

Additionally, discussions touched on green energy exports, with Yellen urging China to address its green energy industrial strategy, which poses challenges to sectors like electric vehicles and solar power in the US. [US Department of the Treasury]

On April 5, in a separate meeting, Yellen also met with Wang Weizhong, governor of the Guangdong Province. During which, she emphasized the importance of fostering a fair economic relationship, stressing the need for transparency and addressing disagreements, again particularly regarding China's industrial overcapacity. [US Department of the Treasury]

Yellen's message aimed to balance economic diplomacy with US interests, advocating for fair competition while acknowledging China's significant industrial capacity. Despite warm receptions, tensions persist as the US considers targeting Chinese exports with tariffs. The discussions underscored the complexity of managing economic relations amidst differing industrial policies and trade concerns. [NY Times]

U.S.-China commercial talks address market access and regulatory concerns

(yq) On April 4, officials from the United States and China engaged in discussions in Washington to address concerns regarding market access and regulatory issues that impact American businesses operating in China. The meeting was led by U.S. Under Secretary of Commerce for International Trade, Marisa Lago, and Chinese Vice Minister of Commerce, Wang Shouwen. This was the first meeting organized under the newly established commercial issues working group with the aim of resolving longstanding barriers faced by U.S. companies such as restrictive cross-border data flows and a lack of regulatory transparency.

The U.S. Commerce Department highlighted the challenges posed by China's industrial overcapacity, which negatively affects American workers and businesses. [The US-China Business Council] [Reuters]

China expressed concerns regarding various issues including the US tariffs and sanctions on Chinese goods and enterprises.

Both parties agreed to support trade and investment promotion activities, cooperate in clean energy and women's health, enhance trade facilitation, and strengthen communication in export control. [The State Council, China]

China’s Huawei faces US trial over Iran dealings and trade secrets

(jm) Huawei, a prominent Chinese technology company, is facing a criminal trial in the United States over allegations related to its business dealings with Iran and accusations of trade secret theft. The trial, scheduled to begin in January 2026, follows failed settlement talks between Huawei and the US Justice Department.

The case originated in 2018, leading to the detention of Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou in Canada.

While charges against Meng were dismissed in a 2021 deal, the broader case against Huawei remains pending, with the company pleading not guilty. Prosecutors anticipate the trial to last four to six months. The charges against Huawei include bank fraud for misleading banks about its Iran business and

conspiracy to steal trade secrets from US technology companies.

Despite ongoing legal challenges, Huawei reported significant growth in 2023, rebounding from US restrictions and diversifying its business portfolio. [Asia Financial]

U.S. and China hold military talks in Hawaii to enhance operational safety

(yq) On April 5, military officials from the United States and China held discussions in Hawaii. The Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) working group met for the first time since 2021. This meeting provided an opportunity for both parties to address safety-related incidents that occurred in recent years and to commit to maintaining professionalism in their military interactions.

This follows US President Biden and Chinese President Xi's meeting on November 2023 in San Francisco, agreed to resume bilateral military communications (see AiR No. 47, November/2023, 3).

The U.S. side conceded China's unsafe behavior toward U.S. maritime and air carriers in the region has decreased in recent months but reiterated that it remains concerned about it.

The Chinese side stated that both countries had candid and constructive exchanges regarding the maritime and air security situation. However, China affirmed its strong opposition against any action that endangers China's sovereignty and security, under the pretext of freedom of navigation and overflight.

Both sides agreed to maintain open communication channels and manage relations responsibly. [Reuters] [Department of Defense, USA]

Chinese foreign minister to meet Russian counterpart amid growing geopolitical concerns

(jm) Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov is scheduled to meet with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in the near future, according to Russian Foreign Ministry. [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation]

The meeting aims to address various matters, including the situation in Ukraine and developments in the Asia-Pacific region. The discussions between Lavrov and Wang are anticipated to pave the way for a potential visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin to China in May.

Reports from sources familiar with the situation suggest that Putin's trip could involve talks with Chinese leader Xi Jinping and may mark his first official overseas visit since commencing his new six-year presidential term. [Reuters]

Chinese, Vietnamese foreign ministers meet to discuss strengthening ties

(jm) On April 4, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with his Vietnamese counterpart Bui Thanh Son to discuss bilateral relations and cooperation. During the meeting, both sides emphasized the importance of their relationship and expressed their commitment to implementing agreements reached by their top leaders. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC]

They highlighted the need for strategic communication, alignment of development strategies, and expansion of economic cooperation. Vietnam reiterated its support for China on key issues such as Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Tibet, while emphasizing its adherence to the one-China principle. [Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Government News]

Both countries pledged to manage differences, promote maritime cooperation, and safeguard peace and stability in the South China Sea. [Xinhua News]

Chinese President Xi Jinping meets with Vietnam National Assembly Chairman Vuong Dinh Hue

(yq) Vuong Dinh Hue, the Chairman of Vietnam's National Assembly, met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing on April 8.

This dialogue comes on the heels of Xi's visit to Vietnam last December, a trip marked by the signing of numerous cooperation agreements between the two neighbors (see AiR No. 51, December/2023, 3).

China, as Vietnam's largest trading partner and a crucial source of imports vital to its manufacturing

sector, plays a pivotal role in Vietnam's economic landscape. Hue's proposals during the meeting emphasized creating new momentum for trade development and integrating Vietnam into China's expansive development strategies.

In their meeting, President Xi reaffirmed the strong bond between the two countries, which is based on deep friendship and a shared future. He emphasized the importance of working together to achieve this shared future.

Xi Jinping also advocated for the expansion of governance experience exchange, the alignment of China's Belt and Road Initiative with Vietnam's Two Corridors and One Economic Circle strategy, and the increase of exchanges between young people and sister cities. [State Council, China] [Reuters]

China, Thailand collaborate on Lancang-Mekong Cooperation projects

(jm) Thailand and China are jointly spearheading development initiatives under the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) framework. The Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC) is a multilateral agreement between the six riparian countries of the Lancang River and Mekong River, established in 2016. The six countries are Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, Thailand, and China.

During the LMC Week 2024 that took place in Guangzhou on March 22, Thai-led projects funded by the LMC were launched through collaborative efforts between Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok.

Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok organized a ceremony to inaugurate these projects. The LMC special fund recently approved 18 proposals from Thailand, spanning various sectors such as education, tourism, science, research, public health, trade, investment, public affairs, and natural resources management.

With China as a key contributor to the LMC, over 780 development projects have been initiated across the sub-region, reflecting a people-centric approach aimed at fostering shared peace and prosperity. Thailand, being a significant initiator and participant in the LMC, has greatly benefited from enhanced livelihoods and well-being in the sub-region. [Bangkok Post]

The Chinese ambassador to Thailand emphasized the continuous development momentum, which is expected to fuel economic and social progress not only in Thailand but also in other LMC nations. China's funding commitment for the current year includes USD 4.1 million allocated for 18 local projects in Thailand under the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation Special Fund (MLCSF). Furthermore, as of 2023, the LMC special fund has supported Thailand in 77 projects, with a total funding of approximately USD 20 million. [The State Council of the PRC]

Chinese and Timor-Leste foreign ministers discuss cooperation

(yq) On April 4 Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held a talk with his counterpart from Timor-Leste, Bendito dos Santos Freitas in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China,

Wang emphasized the commitment to mutual trust and collaboration, outlining plans for agricultural cooperation, infrastructure development, and cultural exchanges. Highlighting China's role in supporting developing countries, he affirmed China's intention to assist Timor-Leste's development through various cooperative ventures.

Freitas expressed gratitude for China's support in Timor-Leste's national progress, reaffirming commitment to the one-China principle and eagerness to deepen ties under the Belt and Road Initiative. [Xinhua]

This comes after China and Timor-Leste upgraded their bilateral relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership in September 2023. [Foreign Ministry, China, in Chinese]

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets Lao Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith

(yq) On April 3, the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, held a meeting with the Lao Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Saleumxay Kommasith, in Guangxi, China. The meeting aimed to strengthen the economic benefits of the railway, enhance cooperation in various sectors, address transnational crimes, and reinforce the strategic partnership and shared future between China and Laos. [CGTN]

The China-Laos Railway, which is a significant part of the Belt and Road Initiative, has reported a new record of 1.38 million tons of goods imported and exported in the first quarter of this year. This is a 33.6 percent increase compared to the previous year. The railway, which connects Kunming, China, with Vientiane, Laos, has expanded its freight variety from 583 to 3,000 types since its establishment. Initially starting with two trains per day, it now operates 20 trains per day, exhibiting substantial operational growth. [Xinhua]

China expands lunar research alliance: Thailand joins international space exploration efforts

(jm/msz) On April 5, Thailand officially joined the China-led International Lunar Research Station (ILRS) initiative by signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the China National Space Administration (CNSA). This agreement outlines cooperation in the exploration and peaceful use of outer space, with a specific focus on the ILRS project. The collaboration encompasses various aspects, including demonstration, project implementation, and research spanning science, engineering, and international cooperation.

The ILRS project, announced jointly by China and Russia in 2021, aims to establish a permanent lunar base by the 2030s, with precursor missions planned for the 2020s, including Chang'e-7 and Chang'e-8 missions targeting the lunar south pole. This initiative is viewed as a parallel project to NASA's Artemis Program and seeks to attract partners primarily from the Global South. Thailand's participation makes it the ninth country to join the initiative.

Thailand's engagement in the ILRS builds upon its growing presence in space activities. Thailand has recently introduced legislation to promote its space-related economy and technologies, with strategic plans outlined for the development of its space industry. Collaborations with international partners, including Airbus Defence and Space and Thaicom, have contributed to enhancing Thailand's space capabilities. Additionally, partnerships with countries such as Japan and organizations like the European Space Agency (ESA) have contributed to the country's space infrastructure and expertise.

Meanwhile, China continues to advance its lunar exploration endeavors, with recent launches of communication relay satellites and navigation technology test satellites. Plans for a new-generation

crew launch vehicle, the Long March 10, underscore China's ambitious goal of landing astronauts on the moon before 2030. [Space News] [CGTN] [Bangkok Post]

German Chancellor Scholz to lead high-profile business delegation on a strategic visit

(yq) German Chancellor Olaf Scholz is set to lead a high-profile delegation of Germany's corporate elite to China later this month. The visit, emblematic of Germany's ongoing reliance on the world's second-largest economy, comes amid Berlin's broader strategy to diversify its global economic exposure. Siemens CEO Roland Busch, alongside Mercedes-Benz CEO Ola Kaellenius and Merck KGaA CEO Belen Garijo, will join the delegation, highlighting the profound business stakes involved.

This strategic outreach occurs against the backdrop of Berlin's nuanced stance towards Beijing, particularly after the formulation of a China strategy last summer aimed at "de-risking" economic dependencies. Yet, despite calls for economic distancing, German direct investment in China surged to a record USD 12.9 billion last year, underscoring the complexities of decoupling from a nation deemed a systemic rival. [Reuters 1]

Adding to the economic dialogue, German chemical giant BASF announced a pivotal 15-year natural gas supply deal with China's ENN Energy Holdings, further cementing bilateral economic engagements. The agreement, which includes the construction of a gas pipeline to BASF's Zhanjiang chemical complex in Guangdong province, signifies deepening energy cooperation amidst broader geopolitical recalibrations. [Reuters2]

This follows Bavarian Minister President Markus Söder's visit to China in late March, aiming to bolster economic and trade cooperation between China and Bavaria (see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1).

EU investigates Chinese solar panel subsidies amid fair competition concerns

(yq) The European Union initiated investigations into Chinese solar panel manufacturers on April 3 over concerns of unfair competition fueled by foreign subsidies. This inquiry targets two consortia, including

entities from LONGi Green Energy Technology Co. and Shanghai Electric Group Co., both known for their significant roles in China's expansive manufacturing domain.

These investigations aim to determine if these groups used foreign subsidies to offer "unduly" competitive bids for constructing and operating a solar park in Romania, an initiative partly financed by EU funds.

The European Commission, acting as the EU's executive body, highlighted "sufficient indications" that these consortia might have benefited from foreign subsidies, thereby distorting the EU market.

Solar panels are central to Europe's transition towards clean technology-driven economies, emphasizing the region's focus on sustainable energy sources, job creation, and securing energy supply.

This move aligns with the EU's broader strategy to address what it perceives as China's aggressive trade practices, including previous probes into China's electric vehicle sector and the alleged dumping of biodiesel. (see AiR No. 38, September/2023, 3).

China, maintaining its stance on promoting its "new trio" of export products - electric vehicles, solar panels, and lithium batteries - continues to advance its trade objectives. In response to trade tensions, China has also launched its own anti-dumping investigation into EU brandy imports, marking a tit-for-tat in the ongoing trade discourse between the two economies (see AiR No. 2, January/2024, 2).

European Defense contractors concerned over dependence on Chinese cotton for ammunition production

(yq) Amid the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, European defense contractors have raised concerns about the continent's heavy reliance on Chinese cotton to produce gunpowder essential for ammunition.

The current urgent requirement to increase ammunition production in order to support Ukraine has brought into focus a crucial bottleneck in the supply chain. This bottleneck is related to the availability of cotton linters from China. These linters are extremely important for producing nitrocellulose, which is used in explosives. Since China dominates almost half of the global trade in this commodity, several European manufacturers, including renowned

companies such as Swedish Saab and German Rheinmetall, have warned that this dependence on China for more than 70 percent poses a significant strategic vulnerability.

In response to the soaring demand and to bolster their military capabilities, European nations, through initiatives like the USD 2.17 billion ammunition production fund, are seeking to enhance their domestic production of explosives. However, the effort faces challenges due to the potential geopolitical leverage China holds over the supply of essential materials, prompting calls for the diversification of sources and the exploration of alternatives to reduce reliance on Chinese imports. [Financial Times]

Sweden expels Chinese journalist over national security concerns

(yq) Sweden expelled a Chinese journalist on April 8, accused of posing a national security threat, the unnamed 57-year-old female reporter, who has lived in Sweden for 20 years and has familial ties in the country, was arrested last October and recently expelled, barred from re-entry.

Intensifying the already strained relations between Sweden and China, this expulsion adds to a series of incidents heightening tensions between the two nations, including the controversial case of Gui Minhai, a Chinese-born Swedish citizen imprisoned in China, and the conviction of Dorjee Gyantsan in Sweden for spying for China. [ABC News]

Philippines strengthening northern defenses amid regional tensions with China

(jm) The Philippines is reinforcing its northern defenses amid escalating tensions with China, particularly regarding the South China Sea and Taiwan. Batanes, particularly Mavulis Island, has emerged as a pivotal location for the Philippines' strategic interests. The military detachment on Mavulis, consisting of about 15 soldiers, faces potential threats from China and plays a crucial role in the country's defense strategy.

Efforts to bolster defenses include plans for infrastructure improvements and assistance from the United States. The US military is set to construct new facilities, including warehouses and military outposts,

on the islands of Batan and Itbayat. Additionally, joint military exercises between the Philippines and the US are scheduled, aiming to enhance defense capabilities in the region.

China has vehemently opposed these military enhancements, as Batanes falls within its territorial claims in the South China Sea. Beijing's opposition includes diplomatic efforts to undermine ties between Batanes and the US. However, the Philippines remains committed to strengthening its defense posture, especially given concerns about potential Chinese aggression in the region.

Challenges facing the Philippines include logistical constraints and the need for improved infrastructure on Batanes. Despite these challenges, the Philippines continues to seek support from its longstanding military ally, the United States, in maintaining security and stability in the region.

Overall, the Philippines' efforts to reinforce its northern defenses underscore the complex dynamics of international relations in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly concerning China's assertiveness and the strategic interests of neighboring countries. [Aljazeera]

China's deepening support for Russia amid Ukraine conflict

(jm) China has reportedly increased its support for Russia in the Ukraine conflict, supplying military items such as rifle scopes, tank parts, and rocket fuel. This support comes amid a two-day visit by Russia's Foreign Minister to Beijing. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC]

While China refrains from overtly providing arms and despite US warnings, China continues to strengthen its relationship with Russia amidst Western sanctions. Russia has turned to China for economic support, with China becoming its largest gas client and yuan being extensively used in trade transactions. [The Telegraph]

Chinese investment boosts Zambia's economic development

(jm) Zambia National Commercial Bank (Zanaco) PLC has praised the significant contribution of Chinese investments and businesses to Zambia's economic development. According to Zanaco CEO Mukwandi Chibesakunda, Chinese investment and businesses

play a crucial role in driving growth, job creation, and infrastructure development in Zambia.

She highlighted the partnerships between Chinese companies and Zambian entities as key drivers of economic progress and strengthened trade relations between the two nations. Chibesakunda emphasized that Chinese investments not only fuel economic development but also facilitate skills and technological transfer.

Currently, Zanaco serves 219 Chinese companies across various banking sectors, with a total of 66 corporate accounts. The bank's loan book in the Chinese business sector amounts to USD 176.7 million, with active participation from manufacturing, agriculture, mining, and transport sectors. [Xinhua]

President of Suriname to embark on state visit to China

(jm) President Chandrikapersad Santokhi of Suriname has been invited by Chinese President Xi Jinping to undertake a state visit to China from April 11 to 17. This visit is significant as it coincides with the fifth anniversary of the strategic cooperative partnership between the two countries. Chinese officials, including President Xi and Premier Li Qiang, will hold meetings with President Santokhi to discuss bilateral relations and areas of mutual interest. The visit aims to strengthen political trust, enhance friendly exchanges, and expand cooperation between China and Suriname across various sectors. [The State Council of the PRC] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC]

Chinese president Xi Jinping meets with merieux foundation president

(jm) Chinese President Xi Jinping held a meeting with President of the Merieux Foundation, Alain Merieux, and his wife Chantal in Beijing. President Xi expressed gratitude for the foundation's longstanding support for China-France relations and the health sector in China.

Xi emphasized the global challenges facing humanity, including the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical conflicts, underlining China's commitment to peace and building a shared future for humanity. Highlighting the 60th anniversary of China-France diplomatic ties, President Xi expressed China's willingness to strengthen cooperation with France. He welcomed

further collaboration with the Merieux Foundation in health-related initiatives. In response, Merieux conveyed his admiration for China's progress and pledged continued efforts to enhance France-China friendship and health cooperation. [The State Council of the PRC]

Indian coast guard saves 27 Bengali fishermen in Indian waters

(fd) On April 5, the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) rescued 27 Bangladeshi fishermen after their boat had a steering gear breakdown in the Bay of Bengal. Due to the steering problems the boat had drifted into Indian waters. After the ICG rescued the fishermen, it handed them over to their Bangladeshi counterpart. [The Indian Express]

India lifts export restrictions on essential goods to Maldives amid tense relations

(fd) India has decided to lift export curbs on crucial commodities to the Maldives, signaling a positive move despite strained ties between the neighboring countries. Essential items such as eggs, potatoes, onions, rice, wheat flour, sugar, dal, stone aggregate, and river sand are among the goods affected. Quotas for several items have been increased, including eggs, potatoes, onions, sugar, rice, wheat flour, and dal, which see a 5 percent boost, while river sand and stone aggregate quotas have been raised by 25 percent. [Economic Times] [Times of India]

Meanwhile, in related developments, a suspended minister of the Maldives, Mariyam Shiuna, apologized on April 8 after facing backlash for a social media post targeting the country’s opposition party that featured a symbol resembling the Ashok Chakra, a symbol on the Indian flag. She expressed regret for any offense caused, clarified that it was unintentional, and emphasized the importance of the Maldives' relationship with India. [The Indian Express]

This incident isn't isolated for Shiuna, who had previously faced suspension alongside two other ministers for making disparaging remarks about Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Indian people in January this year. At the time, Shiuna alongside two other then-deputy ministers, referred to the Indian leader as a "clown," "terrorist," and a "puppet of Israel" in response to Modi’s social media post promoting

tourism in the Indian island chain of Lakshadweep, an archipelago off the coast of Kerala. The visit that was seen by some as an attempt to divert Indian tourists away from the Maldives [see AiR No. 2, January/2024, 2].

Indonesia, China vow to deepen cooperation

(jb) Premier Li Qiang of the State Council met with Indonesian President-elect Prabowo Subianto at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on April 2. The meeting came after Prabowo held talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the same day during which the latter emphasized the long-term and strategic nature of China-Indonesia relations and expressed its willingness to further deepen maritime cooperation with Indonesia (see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1).

Li praised the rapid development of China-Indonesia relations in recent years and highlighted Prabowo's decision to visit China as his first official trip after being elected. He reaffirmed that China seeks maintain high-level strategic trust with Indonesia and deepen mutually beneficial cooperation. He emphasized the need to strengthen policy communication, enhance synergy between the Belt and Road Initiative and Indonesia's development strategies, and expand cooperation in various fields including the digital economy, green economy, and traditional sectors like agriculture.

Prabowo, for his part, expressed Indonesia's appreciation for China's support and friendship, aiming to deepen bilateral cooperation in infrastructure, agriculture, poverty alleviation, and the green economy to contribute positively to regional and global peace and development. [Antara] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China]

In a separate meeting with Prabowo, Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun expressed China's readiness to strengthen military cooperation with Indonesia. Dong emphasized the desire to "consolidate mutual trust," enhance joint training and exercises, and bolster personnel exchanges between the two nations.

Dong highlighted the current global instability, stating, "The world is in chaos and the region is facing multiple challenges." He called for China and Indonesia to collaborate closely in safeguarding international fairness and justice, regional security, and stability, urging both countries to firmly support each other in

protecting their sovereignty, security, and developmental interests.

Prabowo reaffirmed Indonesia's willingness to further strengthen bilateral defense cooperation and pledged to promote stronger of ties between the armed forces of the two countries. [ABC News] [Agenzia Nova] [South China Morning Post]

Japan's Prime Minister Kishida and Indonesia's President-elect Prabowo pledge to strengthen ties

(jb/sh) Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Indonesian President-elect Prabowo Subianto have agreed to enhance cooperation in national security and other key areas. The agreement comes in the face of China's rising military and economic influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

During their meeting in Tokyo on April 3, Kishida and Prabowo discussed the situations in the East and South China seas, as well as North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. Both leaders pledged to maintain close collaboration, with Kishida emphasizing Japan's commitment to promoting the relationship with Indonesia as "partners sharing fundamental values and principles."

Prabowo, who is currently Indonesia's defense minister, called for the further strengthening of bilateral ties in defense and the economy.

In a separate meeting, Prabowo held talks with Japanese Defense Minister Minoru Kihara. Both ministers celebrated the elevation of bilateral relations to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" in 2023. They discussed strengthening defense cooperation and exchanges, including joint training and participation in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus. Additionally, they exchanged views on regional security, emphasizing opposition to unilateral changes in the South China Sea and a shared commitment to a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" based on the rule of law.

Prabowo's visit to Japan followed his trip to China (see article above). [Nippon.com] [Kyodo News] [Reuters] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan] [Ministry of Defense, Japan]

Indonesia's President-Elect Prabowo Subianto visits Malaysia for bilateral talks

(jb) Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim held a meeting with Indonesia's President-elect Prabowo Subianto on April 4 in Kuala Lumpur to discuss enhancing bilateral ties.

Anwar congratulated Prabowo on his election victory and expressed optimism about the enduring friendship between the two neighboring nations, emphasizing the potential for further strengthening mutual benefits. [Xinhua]

In a separate meeting, Prabowo and Malaysian Defense Minister Mohamed Khaled Nordin agreed to deepen defense cooperation and to elevate the defense relationship between their countries to new heights. [The Sun]

Indonesian, Chinese companies collaborate on green energy

(jb) PT PLN (Persero) through its Sub Holding PLN Indonesia Power has entered a Joint Development Study Agreement (JDSA) with state-owned China Energy Engineering Group Co., Ltd (CEEC) to advance green energy projects in Sulawesi. The partnership aims to support Indonesia's energy transition agenda and the government's goal of achieving Net Zero Emissions (NZE) by 2060.

PLN President Director, Darmawan Prasodjo, highlighted the strategic collaboration's significance, particularly in anticipation of the new National Electricity Business Plan (RUKN).

The plan outlines the deployment of 32 GW from hydro and geothermal-based generators and 28 GW from solar and wind-based generators. Establishing green transmission lines to connect various islands, including Sumatra to Java and Kalimantan to Sulawesi, is crucial for the seamless distribution of green electricity. [SolarQuarter]

Indonesia, Germany collaborate on industrial vocational training

(jb) The Indonesian Ministry of Industry has entered into a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Malikal Zentrum Institute (MZI), representing the

German Senior Experten Service (SES) in Indonesia, to enhance industrial vocational education and training. This partnership aims to prepare Indonesian vocational education graduates for the German labor market. The Senior Expert Service (SES) is the foundation of the German economy for international cooperation, the leading German sending organisation for voluntary specialists and executives in retirement.

Masrokhan, the head of the Industrial Human Resources Development Agency (BPSDMI) at the ministry, highlighted that the collaboration will offer preparatory training for the three-year Ausbildung program, aligning participants with 348 major options. Under the guidance of professional Meister-certified mentors, participants will undergo competency exams to ensure they meet German industry standards.

Adam Pamma, Director of MZI, emphasized the MoU's potential for further concrete collaborations between vocational education units in Indonesia and Germany. The agreement is expected to foster professional development and open doors for Indonesian alumni to study and work in Germany. [Antara News]

Indonesia, Kazakhstan strengthen bilateral cooperation at consultation meeting

(jb) Indonesia and Kazakhstan convened the 2nd Meeting of the Indonesia-Kazakhstan Bilateral Consultation in Jakarta on April 2. The meeting focused on enhancing political, economic, and socio-cultural ties. Both delegations acknowledged the robust relationship spanning over 30 years and emphasized the need for high-level official visits and business interactions.

Economically, the countries are focusing on increased collaboration in transportation, mining, energy, and the digital economy. They discussed potential partnerships between state-owned enterprises and chambers of commerce and prioritized finalizing the Bilateral Investment Treaty and the Indonesia-EAEU Free Trade Agreement.

Future initiatives for 2024 include the Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation, Kazakhstan's participation in the Indonesia-South and Central Asia Forum, and reciprocal high-level visits. Additionally, efforts to finalize an Air Service Agreement and a favorable visa policy to boost tourism and trade were highlighted. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia]

Five US halal bodies receive accreditation from Indonesia's food assurance agency

(jb) Starting October 2024, five U.S. halal certification bodies have received accreditation from Indonesia's Halal Product Assurance Agency (BPJPH). The accredited bodies include the American Halal Foundation (AHF), Halal Certification Department of the Islamic Society of the Washington Area (ISWA), Islamic Society of America (ISA), Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America (IFANCA), and Halal Transaction Omaha (HTO). [Tempo.co]

Indonesia delivers over USD 1 million humanitarian aid to Sudan amid health crisis

(jb) The Indonesian Government has delivered humanitarian aid worth USD 1 million to Sudan including 38 types of medicines weighing 12.44 tons and intended for emergency conditions, medical oncology, and chronic illnesses.

This move follows a previous aid provision in December 2023. [Africa.com]

Sudan's armed conflict is among the world's fastest-unfolding crises, with 25 million people affected, more than 14 million children in urgent need of humanitarian aid. The conflict has forced 8 million people have been forced to flee the conflict, marking the largest displacement crisis globally.

Indonesia purchases submarines from French Naval Group

(jb) The Indonesian Navy has finalized a contract with French state-owned shipyard Naval Group to acquire two "Scorpene" submarines, as announced by Naval Group on April 2. The contract's value remains undisclosed. These 72-meter submarines will be constructed in Indonesia, which has recently inked other significant defense deals with French companies. In 2022, Indonesia ordered 42 Dassault AM.PA-made Rafale fighter jets.

The "Scorpene" submarines are manned by a crew of 31 and feature six launch pads. They boast a capacity

for 18 torpedoes and missiles and can operate underwater autonomously for 12 days.

This defense collaboration between France and Indonesia is a strategic response to the new Indo-Pacific alliance between the United States, Britain, and Australia known as AUKUS, established in 2021. [The Jakarta Post] [Reuters]

Pope Francis plans visit to Indonesia

(jb) Pope Francis is set to visit Indonesia, as confirmed by the country's Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi on April 3. Discussions with the Vatican regarding the trip are currently underway, although no specific timeframe has been provided. The Vatican has not yet confirmed the exact dates for the Asia trip.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, has a Catholic population of around eight million, representing approximately three percent of its 270 million inhabitants. [Tempo.co] [The Advocate]

Hyundai Motor terminates aluminum deal with Indonesian miner after climate concerns raised by K-pop fans

(jb) South Korea’s Hyundai Motor Co has terminated its aluminum supply agreement with PT Adaro Minerals Indonesia Tbk, a unit of Indonesia's Adaro Energy Indonesia, due to environmental concerns. The decision came after a climate campaign backed by K-pop fans urged the automaker not to source aluminum produced using coal power.

Hyundai announced on April 2 the end of its non-binding memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Adaro, signed in 2022, to explore other opportunities independently. The automaker had initially sought aluminum from Adaro's subsidiary, PT Kalimantan Aluminium Industry, with expectations of meeting its carbon-neutralization policy amid the surging demand for aluminum in the global automotive industry.

Smelting aluminum via coal power results in substantial carbon emissions. In response to environmental concerns, Adaro plans to power the third phase of its aluminum smelter project using a hydropower plant under construction.

Climate activist group Kpop4Planet, which campaigned against Hyundai's aluminum agreement, welcomed the

carmaker's decision, describing it as a victory for thousands of K-pop fans concerned about the climate crisis. [Mining.com]

Japan assists emergency aid to Taiwan

(sh) On April 5, Japan's Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko revealed an emergency aid package totaling USD 1 million for earthquake-stricken Taiwan.

She outlined that the assistance would be delivered through the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association, targeting essentials like food, water, and healthcare supplies. Kamikawa expressed gratitude for Taiwan's earlier aid during Japan's Noto Peninsula Earthquake, emphasizing Japan's commitment to reciprocating support swiftly. She affirmed Japan's readiness to provide further aid tailored to Taiwan's recovery and reconstruction needs.[NHK]

Japan to support Italy's G7 presidency

(sh) On April 3, Japan's Foreign Affairs Minister Yoko Kamikawa held a phone call with Antonio Tajani, Chair of the G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting and Vice-President of the Council of Ministers and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy.

They affirmed their dedication to support Italy's G7 Presidency and agreed to address global issues collaboratively. Both ministers pledged to continue bilateral and G7 cooperation, underscoring their commitment to international affairs. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

Japan warned of Russia's nuclear activities

(sh) A Japanese expert on the Russian military has disclosed that ongoing construction activities at a nuclear test site in northern Russia since last year could indicate preparations for a fresh nuclear test.

Yu Koizumi, an associate professor at the University of Tokyo, based his analysis on satellite images revealing significant construction progress at the Novaya Zemlya archipelago in the Arctic Sea, likely related to nuclear testing. He speculated that Russia might be gearing up for a subcritical nuclear test, intended to intimidate

European countries and the United States amid their support for Ukraine in its conflict with Russia.

Satellite images from U.S.-based companies Maxar Technologies Inc. and Planet Labs PBC indicated the rapid development of a large facility at the test site since last summer. While Koizumi acknowledged no direct evidence of a nuclear test, he noted the advanced stage of construction and potential for further expansion, raising concerns about Russia's nuclear intentions. [Kyodo News]

Chinese, Lao foreign ministers hold talks on bilateral relations

(lvw) On April 3, Laos' Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith held a meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Nanning, China. The discussions primarily focused on strengthening cooperation between the two countries to foster greater economic benefits and connectivity, particularly in light of recent milestones such as the inaugural passenger trip of the Laos-China high-speed railway last month. Notably, this year marks the 15th anniversary of the comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership between Laos and China.

Key areas of cooperation discussed included energy, agriculture, and tourism, alongside joint efforts to combat transnational crime, aimed at ensuring regional safety and security. Wang emphasized the close ties between Laos and China, referring to them as 'good comrades and good brothers' sharing common development goals and a future. He also reiterated China's support for Laos' role as the rotating chair of ASEAN this year. Kommasith, for his part. affirmed Laos' adherence to the one-China policy and expressed support for China's stance on issues such as Hong Kong and Xinjiang. [Vientiane Times], [Xinhua]

Efforts to reopen of Thai-Laos border checkpoints

(lvw) The Lao ambassador to Thailand, Seng Soukhathivong and the Thai Commerce Minister, Phumtham Wechayachai, held discussions to facilitate the reopening of border checkpoints along the Thai-Laos border. These checkpoints have remained closed since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The total Thai-Lao border trade amounted to over USD 7 billion US, representing 98.5 percent of the total trade between the two countries.

Reopening and enhancing these border checkpoints will alleviate trade obstacles and facilitate smoother cross-border trade and investment. The majority of trade passes through these checkpoints on its way to markets with strong links to China. The two countries share a robust bilateral trade and diplomatic relationship, with Thai-Lao friendship bridges completed and under construction to enhance regional connectivity and trade. [Bangkok Post]

US vows support for Laos' mine clearance efforts

(lvw) On April 4, the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action, the U.S. pledged to support continued UXO surveys across Laos with an additional USD 36 million to ensure mine clearance efforts across the country's nine most heavily contaminated provinces. The funds will be put towards increasing UXO clearance capacity, expanding risk education and expanding support services for disabled people in conflict affected regions. [Laotian Times]

Mongolia receives Taiwan financial support over severe winter

(fg) On April 2, Anthony Ho, head of the West Asian and African Affairs Department of Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, visited the Ulaanbaatar Trade and Economic Representative Office in Taipei. In the presence of the Mongolian representative in Taiwan Gankhuyag Tumurbaatar, Ho announced the financial support of USD 100 thousand to Mongolia. Through the Mongolian Red Cross and Caritas Mongolia, the support will be used to alleviate the consequences of the severe winter.

This winter, Mongolia is suffering from the worst conditions in decades, a so-called dzud, in which large numbers of livestock have died (see AiR No. 13, March/2024, 4). [Focus Taiwan]

119 illegal migrants from Myanmar arrested in Thai province

(jb) Authorities in Kanchanaburi province have apprehended 119 illegal migrants from Myanmar during searches of five vehicles. The arrests come as many provinces along the Myanmar-Thailand border heighten vigilance against an influx of illegal crossings.

Most of the detained individuals entered Thailand via natural routes, notably through the Three Pagodas Pass in Sangkhla Buri District. Upon crossing the border, these migrants were guided by Myanmar nationals through forests to bypass checkpoints or were found hiding in wooded areas. They were reportedly en route to work in various Thai provinces, including Samut Songkhram, Samut Sakhon, Nakhon Pathom, southern provinces, and Bangkok.

The arrests also shed light on the exodus of Myanmar nationals fleeing political conflicts. This comes after the Myanmar government announced new conscription criteria, setting the minimum age for combat at 15 years old, leading many to seek refuge in Thailand. [Pattaya Mail]

Myanmar, China discuss border issues amid ongoing conflict

(jb) Myanmar's junta leader, Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, met with China's special envoy to Myanmar, Deng Xijun, in Naypyidaw on April 1 to address the border issues between the two countries.

The discussions followed a joint operation where police from both countries raided online scam centers in Myanmar's Shan state, resulting in the arrest of over 800 individuals, including Chinese nationals. Most of these illegal migrants entered through the Three Pagodas Pass in Sangkhla Buri District and were destined for work in various Thai provinces.

The ongoing conflict between the junta and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) has strained relations and border stability. The KIA recently seized nearly 60 junta camps in March, further complicating the situation. The reopening of border gates and combating shared issues, like the scam centers, remain crucial for both nations. [Radio Free Asia]

At the same time, Myanmar's military junta is reportedly urgently working to assure Chinese officials of security along the border, particularly around an USD 8 billion investment project in Rakhine State. The project, which includes a deep-sea port and special economic zone on an island off the coast of Rakhine, is

considered a vital component of economic cooperation between Myanmar and China.

The Arakan Army (AA) has recently encircled the site, with the armed wing of the United League of Arakan (ULA) aiming to drive junta troops out of the state. In March, the AA seized a town near the port. [The Irrawaddy]

China's military to hold live-fire exercise along Myanmar border

(jw) The Chinese military plans to conduct multiple live-fire exercises along its shared border with Myanmar. Exercises will take place on April 9 and 10 in Dehong Dai and Jingpo in Yunnan. The Southern Theatre Command of the People's Liberation Army confirmed that its navy and army would participate in the military drill. [The Star]

Myanmar junta strengthens ties with Russia

(jb) In a significant geopolitical shift, Myanmar's military junta is increasingly turning to Russia for support as its relations with China deteriorate, political analysts report.

Since the 2021 Myanmar coup, the country's ties with China have been marred by mutual mistrust, as noted by the International Crisis Group (ICG). Conversely, the junta's relations with Russia have flourished. In March 2024, junta chief Min Aung Hlaing told ITAR-TASS news agency that military and defense cooperation between Russia and Myanmar has intensified.

The deepening ties are evident from various agreements and interactions. In February 2022, an Intergovernmental Agreement on nuclear technology cooperation was signed between the two countries. Additionally, Myanmar has procured Russian military equipment, including Mi-35 helicopters, MIG-29 jet fighters, and YAK-130 trainers, according to a UN report by special envoy Tom Andrews.

Furthermore, during Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's visit to Myanmar in August 2022, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed to expand cooperation in political, economic, and social sectors. Russia and Myanmar are also discussing payment arrangements for oil in local currencies, the Myanmar kyat and the Russian ruble. [Mizzima]

North Korea, Russia discuss expanding student quotas suspicious of sanction bypassing

(yq) A North Korean education ministry delegation's visit to Russia to discuss increasing the quota for North Korean students at Russian institutions has raised suspicions of a strategy to circumvent U.N. sanctions.

During a recent meeting, Ambassador Alexander Matsegora of Russia met with a delegation led by DPRK Education Minister Kim Sung Du on April 8. The discussions primarily focused on education and language exchanges. This is in line with previous strategies employed by Russia to provide student and tourist visas to citizens of DPRK.

However, the move is being criticized for bypassing sanctions that prohibit the hiring of North Korean workers and aim to prevent the funneling of overseas earnings into North Korea's weapons programs. Russia has been accused of hiring North Korean workers on student visas to circumvent U.N. Security Council sanctions that prohibit member states from hiring them since December 2019.

Experts suggest that while cultural exchange may be a genuine aspect of the discussions, the primary intent likely involves creating legal and illicit cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang. [NK News]

This visit comes amidst strengthened ties between the two nations. Late March, Russia vetoed the renewal of a UN panel that was responsible for monitoring North Korean sanctions (see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1).

Pakistan, Turkiye presidents discuss bilateral relations in phone call

(tj) Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari held a telephonic conversation with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on April 7 to discuss bilateral relations and issues of mutual interest, stressing the need to strengthen bilateral ties in various fields. Zardari also extended an invitation to Erdogan to visit Pakistan. [The Express Tribune]

Earlier, Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said Ankara and Islamabad need to work together to achieve the annual target of USD 5 billion in bilateral trade. In a meeting with Turkish Ambassador Mehmet

Pacaci in Islamabad, Shehbaz called upon the two sides to enhance their bilateral cooperation in all areas of mutual interest including trade, defense, connectivity and culture.

Norway removes Pakistan from national threats assessment list

(nw) The Norwegian government has removed Pakistan from its national threat assessment list, which posed challenges for Pakistanis students, researchers and academics or to work in the country. It was reported that the decision followed by the effectiveness of diplomatic efforts to Norwegian authorities. The decision is anticipated Pakistan to gain a positive image globally and opened new educational opportunities for its students and researchers. The announcement was made in the latest report from Norway's Police Security Service, responsible for intelligence and security within the country. [Arab News]

Pakistan, Saudi Arabia reaffirm commitment to expedite USD billion investment package

(lm) Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman recently held discussions aimed at fortifying the strong ties between their countries. The meeting saw both leaders reaffirming their commitment to enhancing collaboration across various sectors and strengthening trade and investment ties. Of particular importance was the discussion on expediting a USD 5 billion investment package previously discussed, which holds significant potential for Pakistan's economy. [Arab News 1]

Apart from economic matters, the leaders also exchanged views on regional and global developments of mutual interest. They emphasized the need for international efforts to address the alarming situation in Gaza, calling for an end to Israeli military operations and the facilitation of humanitarian aid access. Additionally, they discussed the importance of promoting dialogue between Pakistan and India to resolve longstanding issues, particularly the Kashmir dispute, in order to ensure peace and stability in the region.

With over 2.7 million Pakistani expatriates residing in the Kingdom, the relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia holds immense strategic significance for Islamabad. In March, remittances from Pakistani workers abroad surged by 31 percent compared to the previous month, totaling USD 3 billion. Saudi Arabia emerged as the leading contributor, providing USD 703.1 million, followed by the United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and United States. [Arab News 2]

Philippines, Papua New Guinea eye 'greater cooperation' on critical minerals, fisheries

(lm) The Philippines and Papua New Guinea (PNG) are exploring opportunities for cooperation in critical minerals and fisheries sectors, according to Foreign Affairs Secretary Enrique Manalo. During a bilateral meeting with his PNG counterparty Justin Tkatchenko, they discussed potential collaboration in agriculture, fisheries, and critical minerals such as copper and gold. [Philippine News Agency]

Beyond economic realms, discussions also touched upon the importance of enhancing cooperation in defense and security matters. While these aspects require further deliberation, both sides acknowledged the significance of adherence to international law, particularly in addressing maritime disputes in the West Philippine Sea.

The visit of PNG's Foreign Minister also marks the commencement of inaugural policy consultations between the two states.

Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Heng visits China

(lm) Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat is currently on an official visit to China, scheduled from April 7 to 12. During this six-day trip, Heng, also serving as Coordinating Minister for Economic Policies, will engage with senior central and local leaders. the minister is accompanied by officials from various Singaporean ministries and agencies. [The Straits Times 1]

On April 9, Heng met with met with China's Vice-President Han Zheng in Beijing. Heng highlighted the significance of the Suzhou Industrial Park, a cornerstone of bilateral projects initiated by founding

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and the Chinese leadership. [The Straits Times 2]

The trip follows recent interactions, including Senior Chinese diplomat Liu Jianchao's visit to Singapore and Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean's official visit to China. The 19th Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation in December 2023 further solidified ties with the signing of over 20 agreements and the establishment of a mutual 30-day visa-free arrangement.

Singapore in talks with Vatican for anticipated Pope Francis visit in September

(lb) Singapore is in discussions with the Vatican regarding a potential visit by Pope Francis, anticipated to occur in September. Earlier reports suggested that Pope Francis would embark on a 10-day tour to Indonesia, Singapore, Timor-Leste, and Papua New Guinea. If health permits, Pope Francis, aged 87, is expected to spend at least a day in Singapore. [Gutzy Asia] [The Straits Times]

His potential visit comes after Minister for Culture, Community, and Youth Edwin Tong's audience with Pope Francis in January 2022 to reaffirm bilateral ties. The last papal visit to Singapore was almost four decades ago in 1986 by Pope John Paul II.

South Korea urges Russia to improve bilateral ties following sanctions

(oy) On April 4, South Korea called on the Russian side to take actions in managing their bilateral relations following Russia's warning of measures in response to South Korea's recent decision to impose sanctions on its individuals and vessels.

Russia's criticism of South Korea's sanctions comes after South Korea imposed sanctions on two Russian individuals, Sergey Mikhaylovich Kozlov and Aleksandr Fyodorovich Panfilov, and their companies, Intellekt LLC and Sodeistvie, respectively (see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1). These sanctions were due to their involvement in illegal activities that aided North Korea's weapons development program.

The Russian foreign ministry warned that these "illegitimate sanctions" will negatively impact South

Korea-Russia relations and vowed to respond to this "unfriendly step". [Yonhap_1]

South Korea's foreign ministry, for its part, emphasized that South Korea has been "making active efforts to manage ties between South Korea and Russia while strictly dealing with the illegal cooperation between Russia and North Korea." It reiterated that Russia should cooperate with North Korea in accordance with international law and UN Security Council resolutions. [South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

South Korea's sanctions came following the UN Security Council failure to extend the mandate of the Panel of Experts monitoring sanctions on North Korea due to Russia's veto (see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1). [Yonhap_2]

US State Department affirms defense cost-sharing with South Korea

(oy) On April 4, the US State Department affirmed that South Korea's financial contributions to the US Forces Korea (USFK) are a significant investment in the South Korea- US alliance, with over 90 percent of these contributions being spent in South Korea's economy. The statement was made in response to a question from South Korean Yonhap News Agency.

The US State Department remarks comes as the South Korea and US prepare for negotiations on the new cost-sharing Special Measures Agreement (SMA), to determine South Korea's contribution to the maintenance of the USFK. The current SMA will expire at the end of 2024 (see AiR No. 11, March/2024, 2).

The Department noted that past SMAs have "reflected our shared commitment to a stable stationing environment for U.S. forces in the Republic of Korea and a robust combined defense posture" since 1991.

The negotiations timeline will be jointly determined by the lead negotiators from both countries. There are concerns that if former President Donald Trump is reelected, he could be uncompromising over a new SMA, potentially causing friction in the alliance. During Trump's presidency, he reportedly demanded a five time increase in South Korea's share of the cost for USFK to USD 5 billion. [Yonhap]

Sri Lanka sees no need for talks with India on island New Delhi ceded decades ago

(lm) Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister, Ali Sabry, has stated that there is no necessity to reopen discussions regarding the island ceded to Sri Lanka by New Delhi five decades ago, despite it becoming a contentious issue in the lead-up to India's upcoming parliamentary elections. [Reuters]

India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has accused the opposition Congress party of mishandling the island, Katchatheevu, making it a focal point of their election campaign [see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1]. The issue surrounding the island revolves around its transfer from India to Sri Lanka in the 1970s. Katchatheevu, located between Rameswaram in India and Sri Lanka, was traditionally used by fishermen from both countries. However, in 1974, then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi – a key figure in the Congress party and daughter of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru – accepted Katchatheevu as Sri Lankan territory through bilateral agreements with Colombo.

This decision has been a point of contention, particularly in Tamil Nadu state, where fishermen have expressed concerns about losing access to traditional fishing grounds. Furthermore, the island has been a source of tension between India and Sri Lanka, with lingering Supreme Court challenges and occasional breaches of fishing rights by fishermen from both nations.

Sri Lankans present rare Buddha relics to Dalai Lama

(lm) A delegation from Sri Lanka presented relics of the Buddha to the Dalai Lama at his residence in Dharamsala, India. The relics, fragments of the Buddha's bones and teeth, hold immense historical and spiritual significance, connecting Buddhist worshippers to the legacy of Buddha. The relics, preserved at a Sri Lankan Buddhist temple, were discovered during British excavations in India and later presented to Sri Lanka in 1898. [Radio Free Asia]

US seeks to expand agricultural, environmental cooperation with Taiwan

(dql) In a signal of growing cooperation between the US and Taiwan, the former has presented a slew of proposals for bilateral cooperation in fields such as fair trade, labor, environmental protection, and agriculture

during last week's negotiations under the Taiwan-U.S. 21st Century Trade Initiative.

The proposed provisions seek to increase transparency and regulatory certainty for agricultural exporters and importers and to stimulate collaboration and innovation in areas such as sustainability and food security.

On the environmental front, the U.S. has put forth some provisions aimed at meaningfully contributing to environmental protection and responding to common sustainability challenges, including climate change.

In addition, labor-related proposals include provisions and initiatives that will benefit workers and ensure free and fair trade.

The Taiwan-U.S. 21st Century Trade Initiative was launched in 2022 under the auspices of the American Institute in Taiwan and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the U.S., the de-facto embassies on each respective side.

Last June, the first pact under the initiative was signed. The agreement covers customs administration and trade facilitation, good regulatory practices, domestic regulation of services, anticorruption, and matters relating to small and medium-sized enterprises. A second agreement is in preparation (see AiR No. 23, June/2023, 1). [Focus Taiwan]

TSMC expands in Arizona with USD 6.6 billion grant from the US

(fg) Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. (TSMC) is receiving a grant of USD 6.6 billion from the U.S. This investment is made via the CHIPS and Science Act.

TSMC subsequently announced in a press release that the company will build a third chip plant in Phoenix, Arizona. This will bring TSMC's investment in Arizona to over USD 65 billion and will produce the world's most advanced 2-nanometer chips.

TSMC plans to commission its first plant in Arizona to produce 4-nanometer chips by 2025. A second plant will be expanded to produce both 3- and 2-nanometer chips from 2028. The third plant now announced will also produce 2-nanometer chips and more advanced semiconductors.

For the USA, the amount of aid is the highest amount granted to a foreign chipmaker. However, this step is

seen as an investment in the US. economy and national security. Important customers of TMSC such as Apple, Nvidia and AMD also welcome the investment and the announcements by TMSC [Taiwan News] [Nikkei Asia] [TMSC]

The CHIPS and Science Act of 2022 is a bill signed into law by President Joe Biden in August 2022 to strengthen the United States in the areas of semiconductor manufacturing, research and development, and STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields. The Act aims to ensure U.S. national security and economic competitiveness by authorizing significant investment in domestic semiconductor manufacturing and research projects. [U.S. NFS]

Former Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou calls for peace during controversial visit in mainland China

(ms) On April 7, during a speech at the Museum of the War of the Chinese People's Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, as part of his 11-day long controversial visit to Beijing that started at April 1 (see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1), former Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou urged younger generations to learn from history and prioritize peaceful resolution of disputes. He emphasized the shared suffering of mainland Chinese and Taiwanese during the Sino-Japanese War, underscoring the futility of conflict.

The trip marks Ma's second visit to mainland China since leaving office in 2016. Ma's visit coincides with a delicate period in cross-strait relations, with Taiwan gearing up for the inauguration of Beijing-despised President-elect William Lai Ching-te in May.

At the Museum of the War of the Chinese People's Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, Ma delivered a poignant address urging younger generations to heed the lessons of history. Reflecting on the shared suffering of mainland Chinese and Taiwanese during the Sino-Japanese War, Ma emphasized the futility of conflict and the imperative of peaceful resolution.

"There are no winners in war and no losers in peace," Ma underscored, emphasizing the importance of avoiding the repetition of past mistakes. His call for peaceful dispute resolution resonates deeply, particularly given the simmering tensions surrounding Taiwan's sovereignty. [China Daily] [South China Morning Post]

However, the focus of the visit is on the speculation about a possible meeting between Ma and China's President Xi Jinping. According to reports, the meeting was supposed to take place on April 8 but has been postponed to April 10, although nothing has been officially confirmed. The implications of a meeting are difficult to foresee.

However, even without a meeting with Xi, his visit has already caused severe criticism in Taiwan. In particular, his speech during a ceremony to commemorate the Yellow Emperor in Shaanxi caused displeasure. During this speech, he emphasized that "most Taiwanese people have a strong belief in Chinese culture and national identity." Critics argue that his emphasis on a "Chinese" identity for Taiwan plays into Beijing's territorial claims, undermining Taiwan's sovereignty, especially in the face of the DPP presidency which is increasingly moving away from a Chinese identity towards the creation of a Taiwanese identity. [NHK World] [Radio Free Asia] [Taiwan News]

Chinese diplomat trails Taiwanese Vice President-elect during Czech visit

(ms) During Vice President-elect Hsiao Bi-khim's visit to the Czech Republic last month (see AiR No. 13, March/2024, 4), she was reportedly followed by a Chinese diplomat.

Reports indicate that a suspicious vehicle trailed Hsiao's convoy from the Airport to downtown Prague on March 19. Czech police intervened when the trailing vehicle ran a red light, identifying the driver as a diplomat from the military section of the Chinese Embassy in Prague.

Following the incident, the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the Chinese ambassador for clarification. While the details of the meeting were not disclosed, reports suggest that the expulsion of the diplomat is under consideration.

This event is reminiscent of previous instances where Chinese diplomats have engaged in surveillance and intimidation tactics against Taiwan's representatives abroad.

Taiwan's Foreign Ministry has called for a thorough investigation into the matter, emphasizing the importance of maintaining diplomatic protocols and respecting the sovereignty of nations involved. [Kyodo News] [Taiwan News]

India and Taiwan Sign MoU for direct recruitment scheme

(fg) Indian migrant workers are set to be able to work in Taiwan. India and Taiwan signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for this plan in mid-February this year. However, the implementation of this plan has met with criticism; labor activists in Taiwan have called for a so-called government-to-government (G2G) hiring process to protect workers' rights from exploitation (see AiR No. 11, March/2024, 2).

According to a new MoU, this G2G recruitment scheme is now to come and complement the existing recruitment channels. Accordingly, Taiwan also grants itself the right to determine how many Indian workers are to be recruited and in which sectors they may work.

However, the MoU only provides the framework for the project. For the formal announcement, corresponding regulations are still required. [Focus Taiwan]

Myanmar regime 'losing strength' says Thai prime minister, but Bangkok 'neutral' in conflict

(lm) Thailand's Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin, in an interview with *Reuters*, said that the military regime in neighboring Myanmar is "losing strength", presenting an opportune moment for diplomatic initiatives and peace talks to resolve the civil war. However, the Thai premier also highlighted the complexity of initiating dialogue between Myanmar's military junta and the anti-junta factions, emphasizing the necessity of engaging all parties involved in the conflict. [Reuters]

Echoing a similar sentiment, Thai Foreign Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-nukara reiterated Thailand's stance of neutrality in the Myanmar conflict. Nevertheless, Thailand stands prepared to offer assistance to up to 100,000 people displaced by the turmoil. Bahiddha-nukara urged all conflicting parties to prioritize negotiations and seek a peaceful resolution.

Myanmar currently faces a multifaceted insurgency, with various anti-junta groups, supported by a parallel pro-democracy government, seizing control of several military installations and towns. This includes recent

developments where parts of a strategic border town were taken over by these factions, raising tensions in the region [see AiR No. 12, March/2024, 3].

Under Prime Minister Thavisin's leadership since August, Thailand has actively engaged in diplomatic efforts concerning Myanmar. This includes delivering humanitarian aid as part of a broader initiative aimed at facilitating dialogue between the conflicting factions. [AiR No. 13, March/2024, 4]

Last month, despite objections from Myanmar's military junta, a Thai parliamentary committee, chaired by the country's main opposition party, organized a seminar focusing on the political landscape of Myanmar three years after the military coup. The seminar featured prominent figures from Myanmar's de facto government and various ethnic armed groups. [AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1]

China, Vietnam increase cooperation between localities

(wn) Vietnamese Minister of Foreign Affairs Bui Thanh Son met with the Secretary of the Party Committee of China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Liu Ning, on April 3 in Chongzuo city. Their discussions focused on strengthening cooperation between Vietnamese ministries and agencies and Guangxi province, which shares borders with Vietnam to the south and west. [Vietnam Plus]

Son emphasized Vietnam's support for local-level collaboration with China and proposed implementing agreements from high-level visits in 2022 and 2023. He suggested maintaining and improving existing cooperation mechanisms, facilitating customs clearance for Vietnamese agricultural products, and enhancing transportation infrastructure. Additionally, Son emphasized the importance of coordinating land border management and promoting people-to-people exchanges. Liu expressed support for Son's proposals and highlighted Guangxi's commitment to fostering mutually beneficial cooperation with Vietnam.

Laos, Vietnam sign new trade agreement

(wn/lm) On April 8, Vietnam's Minister of Industry and Trade Nguyễn Hồng Dien and Lao Minister of Industry and Commerce Malaithong Kommasith convened in Vientiane to sign a new trade agreement between their nations. The ministers pledged to bolster trade

promotion activities, enhance border trade infrastructure, and ensure the effective implementation of existing agreements. Additionally, they oversaw the signing of memorandums of understanding aimed at fostering cooperation in market surveillance, business competition, and infrastructure development [Vietnam News]

During his visit, Minister Dien also met with Lao Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone to discuss addressing obstacles in coal and electricity trade between Vietnam and Laos. Prime Minister Siphandone urged relevant ministries to tackle these challenges to strengthen bilateral cooperation in trade, energy, and minerals. Minister Dien highlighted Vietnam's growing demand for electricity, with plans to double by 2030, and underscored ongoing power purchase agreements between Vietnam Electricity (EVN) and Laotian hydropower plants. [Voice of Vietnam]

Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister meets with United States Trade Representative

(wn) Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister Lê Minh Khái met with United States Trade Representative Katherine Tai during his visit to Boston on April 2 as part of the Việt Nam Executive Leadership Programme (VELP), a program designed to enhance the leadership capabilities of Vietnamese officials and executives. Khái emphasized Vietnam's commitment to an independent economy while Tai expressed optimism about the growing Vietnam-US relationship. They discussed enhancing collaboration through agreements like the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF). [Vietnam News]

Additionally, Khái engaged with Vietnamese intellectuals at Harvard University and business leaders in Boston, discussing Vietnam's socio-economic progress and seeking their input for future policies.

Vietnam aims to strengthen relations with US, engage with leftist organizations, party official says

(wn) During a recent working visit to the United States, Ngo Le Van, Vice Chairman of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) Central Committee's Commission for External Relations, emphasized Hanoi's commitment to

strengthening its relationship with Washington and fostering cooperation with leftist organizations in the US. [Vietnam Plus]

Russian company considering investing in wind power in Vietnam

(wn) Russian energy firm Zarubezhneft, a partner of Vietnam's state-owned Petrovietnam for 40 years, is looking to invest in offshore wind power in Vietnam. Its CEO, Kudryashov Sergei Ivanovich, met with Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh in Hanoi on April 8 to discuss the company's plans and seek government intervention to overcome some of the challenges they face with their projects in Vietnam. Chinh approved the proposal and suggested that the company establish a joint task force with Petrovietnam to deal with the challenges in their joint ventures. [Vietnam Express]

According to a World Bank assessment, Vietnam has the highest wind power potential in Southeast Asia, with a capacity of 513,000 MW. The country aims to achieve a target of 6,000 MW offshore wind power capacity by 2030.

Vietnam strengthens cooperation with Russian city Ulyanovsk

(wn) The Governor of the Russian city Ulyanovsk, Aleksey Yurevich Russkich, led a delegation to the Vietnamese Embassy in Moscow on April 8. Ambassador Dang Minh Khoi underscored the robust relationship between Vietnam and Russia, noting significant political events between the two nations in 2023. The Ulyanovsk region aims to demonstrate its potential to Vietnamese partners, with a delegation scheduled to visit Vietnam on April 16 for the inauguration of a Vladimir Lenin statue. [Vietnam Plus]

Vatican foreign minister makes unprecedented visit to Vietnam

(wn) The Vatican's de facto foreign minister, Paul Richard Gallagher, arrived in Vietnam on April 9 for an official visit unprecedented six-day visit to the Southeast Asian nation, marking the first time a Vatican foreign minister has visited the Communist-ruled country. This visit is indicative of both sides' efforts to strengthen their diplomatic relations. While

in Vietnam, Gallagher is expected to engage in a series of high-level meetings, including discussions with Vietnamese counterpart Bui Thanh Son and Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh. Additionally, he will conduct mass at cathedrals in Hanoi, Hue, and Ho Chi Minh City. [Yahoo News]

Vietnam, with a population of approximately 100 million people, is home to a significant Catholic community of around 7 million individuals, making it one of the largest Catholic populations in Asia. However, relations between the Vatican and Vietnam have been complex since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, leading to a rupture in diplomatic ties. The Vietnamese government's historical distrust of the Catholic Church, perceived as having ties to former colonial powers, has resulted in certain restrictions on Catholic activities, such as limitations on the number of parishes.

Despite these challenges, recent years have seen positive developments in Vatican-Vietnam relations. In July, during a historic visit by Vietnam's then-President Vo Van Thuong to Pope Francis, the two leaders agreed to appoint Archbishop Marek Zalewski as the Resident Papal Representative in Hanoi, signaling a significant step toward improving diplomatic ties.

Announcements

Upcoming Online Events

10 April 2024 @ 3:00-4:30 p.m. (GMT+7), CPG, Thailand

Asia in Review event series on elections in 2024

Maldives Elections: Between Political Clans, Geopolitical Interests, and Religion

This webinar will unravel the Maldives political landscape to explore how the upcoming elections might unfold and impact internal socio-political dynamics.

For more information, see [CPG].

11 April 2024 @ 3:00-4:00 p.m. (GMT+7), CPG, Thailand

CMC Expert Talk: Mediation in Construction Disputes – A Malaysian Perspective

This Expert Talk will feature Shanti Abraham, a veteran mediator with over 27 years of legal experience, to explore the common types of disputes in construction projects, the benefits of mediation for resolving such disputes, as well as emerging trends in construction mediation.

For more information, see [CPG].

10 April 2024 @ 3:00 -4:30 p.m. (GMT+2), Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, Belgium

Understanding America's Congo Policy: From the 1960s to the 1980s to Now

The changing motivations and assumptions underlying U.S. policies towards the DRC have frequently been misinterpreted. Stephen R. Weissman provides a uniquely informed perspective on this issue based on his groundbreaking research on the CIA's Congo interventions of the 1960s, his work as the U.S. Congress's key staffer on Zaire from 1979-91 and his more recent leadership in a coalition of non-governmental organizations and experts attempting to influence U.S. policy towards the DRC.

For more information, visit [Egmont].

10 April 2024 @ 10:30-11:30 a.m. (GMT-4), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Senegal's Democracy: How Did We Get Here and What Shall We Expect?

The CSIS Africa Program will host a panel discussion with Gilles Yabi, Hawa Ba, and Gregory Kearns to unpack what this election means for Senegal and the region.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

10 April 2024 @ 9:00-10:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Chinese Interference in Taiwan's 2024 Elections and Lessons Learned

In January 2024, Taiwan elected William Lai as its next president, ushering in an unprecedented third consecutive term of Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) leadership. Throughout the elections, China employed a wide range of tools—including military intimidation, media interference, and economic and diplomatic measures—in an effort to shape public opinion in Taiwan. China's efforts to sway the election warrant study by Taiwan, the United States, and others to draw lessons for how to limit Chinese influence activities. To discuss these issues, the CSIS China Power Project is hosting a panel featuring five experts from Taiwan, join the event to hear more from them.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

11 April 2024 @ 9:00 -10:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Hudson Institute, USA

Chips and the China Threat

Senior Fellow Harold Furchtgott-Roth will introduce a discussion with Senior Fellow Jonathan Ward on his book *The Decisive Decade: American Grand Strategy for Triumph over China*. They will cover how the US can outcompete China on the world stage economically, diplomatically, militarily, and ideologically.

For more information, visit [Hudson Institute].

11 April 2024 @ 5:00 -6:30 p.m. (GMT+3), Hellenic Foundation For European & Foreign Policy, Greece

Key Lessons from Turkey's Recent Local Elections: Domestic and Foreign Relations

As Turkey's presidential and parliamentary elections were held in May 2023, Turkey's local elections of 31 March 2024 could be the last before a long period of uninterrupted government rule. This webinar brings together some leading Turkish politics experts, aiming to take stock of the election results and focus on their implications for Turkey's domestic and foreign policy.

For more information, visit [ELIAMEP].

11 April 2024 @ 9:30 -10:30 a.m. (GMT-4), Stimson Center, USA

South Korea's General Elections: Implications for Yoon's Foreign Policy

Join this online event for a discussion on South Korea's upcoming general elections, held on April 10, evaluating election outcomes and implications for the current ROK administration and for the US-ROK alliance.

For more information, visit [Stimson Center].

11 April 2024 @ 5:00-6:00 p.m. (GMT+1), Chatham House, UK

Global Instability and the Future of a values based International Order

Historically, the United States and Britain have shared a common vision of a values-based world order.

But in this moment of worsening global instability and violence, foreign policy practitioners are increasingly forced to reckon with conflicting values and painful trade-offs. Can the U.S. and U.K. recommit to a shared set of values and norms, or is the post-WWII system beyond saving? This panel will explore the role of the US and UK in shaping the rules-based liberal world order.

For more information, visit [Chatham House].

11 April 2024 @ 11:00 a.m. -12:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Wilson Center, USA

Ukraine's Global Identity: Eurocentric and Decolonial

The panel will propose theoretical and practical interpretations of Ukraine's complex and multivectoral historical, geographic, and political landscapes and discuss key transformative policies leading the resistance of Ukrainian society against external aggression.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

12 April 2024 @ 3:30 -4:30 p.m. (GMT-4), Stimson Center, USA

Prime Minister Kishida's Visit to Washington: A Way Forward for US-Japan Relations

Join Yuki Tatsumi for a conversation with Ambassador Masafumi Ishii, former Japanese Ambassador to Indonesia, for the assessment of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's state visit to Washington DC and the way forward for Kishida's foreign policy.

For more information, visit [Stimson Center].

12 April 2024 @ 10:00 a.m. (GMT-4),Foreign Policy Research Institute, USA

Commemorating the 45th Anniversary of the Taiwan Relations Act – Part I

Join the Foreign Policy Research Institute for a live virtual event as the Asia Program commemorates the 45th Anniversary of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) with esteemed guest, Matt Pottinger. Passed in 1979, the Taiwan Relations Act stands as a critical pillar of America's policy toward Taiwan. Congress recognized the importance of supporting Taiwan despite the lack of official diplomatic ties. As we reflect on 45 years since its enactment, the TRA continues to influence the trajectory of peace and stability in East Asia. This event will cover how the TRA has guided American policy since its inception and the role it will play in the next four years.

For more information, visit [FPRI].

15 April 2024 @ 5:00 -7:00 p.m. (GMT+2), Bruegel, Belgium

Visions for Europe: Economic expert debate for the 2024 EU elections

Bruegel and the Financial Times partner up to host a debate featuring representatives from EU political parties on EU economic issues.

For more information, visit [Bruegel].

15 April 2024 @ 2:30 -3:15 p.m. (GMT-4), Hudson Institute, USA

The Struggle for Freedom in Belarus with Andrei Sannikov

At Hudson, Sannikov will offer remarks on Belarus's strategic importance, Russia's regional ambitions, and prospects for political change in Minsk, followed by a question-and-answer session with Hudson Senior Fellow Tod Lindberg.

For more information, visit [Hudson Institute].

15 April 2024 @ 9:00-10:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Book Event - We Win They Lose: Republican Foreign Policy & the New Cold War

Join this event for a discussion on We Win They Lose: Republican Foreign Policy & the New Cold War written by Dr. Matthew Kroenig and Dan Negrea. Inspired by the foreign policy strategies championed by former presidents Trump and Reagan, this book proposes a straightforward goal for the struggle with China: we win, and they lose. We Win, They Lose outlines a comprehensive strategy for tackling major foreign policy issues facing the United States in the era of great power competition.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

15 April 2024 @ 11:30 a.m. -12:30 p.m. (GMT-4), Wilson Center, USA

The OSCE in 2024: A Conversation with Ian Borg, Minister for Foreign, Trade and European Affairs of Malta

Join the event for a fireside conversation with the OSCE Chair-in-Office, Minister for Foreign, Trade and European Affairs of Malta, Ian Borg, and Ambassador David T. Johnson, former US Ambassador to the OSCE, about the OSCE's unique role and potential as a critical part of Europe's security architecture.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

15 April 2024 @ 2:00 -3:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Wilson Center, USA

Weimar Triangle: Europe's New Engine

Join the event for a unique conversation with parliamentary leaders from each of the Weimar Triangle countries—for their first visit to the US in this newly revitalized format: Paweł Kowal, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Sejm of the Republic of Poland; Natalia Pouzyreff, Member of the National Assembly, Committee of the Defense and Armed Forces, France, and Norbert Röttgen, Member of Bundestag, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee (2014-2019). The discussion will be moderated by Global Europe Program Director, Robin Quinville. Introductory remarks by Katarzyna Pisarska, Chairwoman of the Casimir Pulaski Foundation Council and Chair of Warsaw Security Forum.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

16 April 2024 @ 11:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Hudson Institute, USA

The Battle for the Black Sea Is Not Over

Join Hudson for an event to present the results of an in-depth study written by a US–Romanian–Ukrainian team: Hudson Senior Fellow Matt Boyse, New Strategy Center CEO George Scutaru, New Strategy Center Senior Fellow Dr. Antonia Colibasanu, and New Geopolitics Research Network Director Mykhailo Samus.

For more information, visit [Hudson Institute].

16 April 2024 @ 9:00 -10:30 a.m. (GMT+8), Yusof Ishak Institute (ISEAS), Singapore

Myanmar's Relations with Russia and China: Convenience or Co-optation?

ISEAS Myanmar Studies Programme invites two expert analysts of Russia's and China's relations with Myanmar to provide their assessment on the outlook for the political-security and economic implications of Naypyidaw's relations with Moscow and Beijing.

For more information, visit [ISEAS].

16 April 2024 @ 6:00-7:00 p.m. (GMT+10), Australian Institute of International Affairs, Australia

Security, Defence and the New Lithuanian Geopolitical Reality: The 20th Anniversary of NATO Membership

Join this event with Lithuanian Ambassador to Australia, H.E. Darious Degutis, who will discuss the new geopolitical reality facing Lithuania, particularly amid regional tensions owing to the Russo-Ukraine War and a increasingly complex relationship with China.

For more information, visit [AIIA].

16 April 2024 @ 3:00-4:00 p.m. (GMT+1), Chatham House, UK

Israel-Palestine: The health of Gaza

Experts will discuss: What is the current state of the Gaza health care system six months into the conflict? What are the most pressing medical needs at the moment? How is medical aid getting into the country and what are the challenges? How can regional and international actors help support Gaza's public health system after a cessation of hostilities? join the event to learn more.

For more information, visit [Chatham House].

Recent Book Releases

Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, *Did It Happen Here?: Perspectives on Fascism and America,* W. W. Norton & Company, 384 pages, Published March 19, 2024, For a review, see [Forigen Affairs Review of books].

Peter Pomerantsev, *How to Win an Information War: The Propagandist Who Outwitted Hitler*, PublicAffairs, 304 pages, Published March 5, 2024, For a review, see [The Guardian Review of books].

Marcus Mietzner, *The Coalitions Presidents Make: Presidential Power and Its Limits in Democratic Indonesia,* Southeast Asia Program Publications, 306 pages, Published December 15, 2023, For a review, see [LSE Review of books].

Dan Kaszeta, *The Forest Brotherhood: Baltic Resistance against the Nazis and Soviets,* Hurst, 272 pages, Published November 1, 2023, For a review, see [Forigen Affairs Review of books].

Jeffrey J. Matthews, *Generals and Admirals, Criminals and Crooks: Dishonorable Leadership in the U.S. Military,* University of Notre Dame Press, 432 pages, Published October 1, 2023, For a review, see [Forigen Affairs Review of books].

Stian Kjeksrud, *Using Force to Protect Civilians: Successes and Failures of United Nations Peace Operations in Africa,* Oxford University Press, 240 pages, Published August 11, 2023, For a review, see [Forigen Affairs Review of books].

Portia Roelofs, *Good Governance in Nigeria: Rethinking Accountability and Transparency in the Twenty-First Century,* Cambridge University Press, 336 pages, Published April 20, 2023, For a review, see [LSE Review of books].

Alfred Tembo, *War and Society in Colonial Zambia, 1939–1953,* Ohio University Press, 256 pages, Published October 4, 2022, For a review, see [Forigen Affairs Review of books].

Calls

Florida State University College of Law and Loyola University Chicago School of Law invite paper proposals for the ***Fifteenth Annual Constitutional Law Colloquium***, to be held on November 15-16m 2024, at Florida State University College of Law. The deadline for abstract submission is June 18, 2024. For more information, see [Calling All Papers]

The **Persian Language and Literature Section at the University of Bucharest** invites paper proposals for its ***inaugural conference on Iranian Studies, titled "Bridging Past, Present, and Future,"*** and to be held on October 2-4, 2024. The deadline for abstract submission is April 11, 2024. For more information, see [University of Bucharest].

Jobs and Positions

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Emergency and Post Crisis Programme Support Officer** to be based in Bangkok, Thailand. Applications are accepted until April 11, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **International Writer Consultant** to be based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Applications are accepted until April 14, 2024. More information is provided at **[**UNICEF**].**

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** seeks a **Political Affairs Intern: Leadership Support and Outreach.** This position is a Remote, or Hybrid (remote and in-person) in New York, USA**.** Applications are accepted until April 14, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Secretariat].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Consultant - Engagement with non-state actors.** This position is a home-based position. Applications are accepted until April 14, 2024. More information is provided at **[**WHO**].**

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** seeks a **Political Affairs Officer** to be based in New York, USA. Applications are accepted until April 15, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Secretariat].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Project Manager** to be based in Dili, Timor-Leste. Applications are accepted until April 17, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** seeks a **Deputy Director, Political Affairs** to be based in New York, USA. Applications are accepted until April 17, 2024. More information is provided at **[**UN Secretariat**].**

The **Danish Refugee Council (DRC)** seeks a **Country Director** to be based in Yangon, Myanmar. Applications are accepted until April 17, 2024. More information is provided at [DRC].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** seeks a **Consultant to support the technical and material organization of workshops and retreats in the process of formulating the new 2025-2029 Cooperation Framework.** Applications are accepted until April 18, 2024. More information is provided at **[**UN Secretariat**].**

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Senior Protection Coordinator** to be based in Port Sudan, Sudan. Applications are accepted until April 18, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Programme Officer** to be based in Yangon, Myanmar. Applications are accepted until April 18, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Programme Support Officer (HRRD)** to be based in Islamabad, Pakistan. Applications are accepted until April 18, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Human Resources Officer**. The duty station will be IOM Somalia in Nairobi, Kenya. Applications are accepted until April 18, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Strategy Advisor** to be based in New York, USA. Applications are accepted until April 19, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Project Analyst** to be based in Tirana, Albania. Applications are accepted until April 20, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Project Analyst** to be based in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Applications are accepted until April 20, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **Danish Refugee Council (DRC)** seeks a **Country Director** to be based in South Sudan. Applications are accepted until April 21, 2024. More information is provided at [DRC].

The **World Bank** seeks a **Senior Counsel – Legal** to be based in Washington, DC, United States. Applications are accepted until April 23, 2024. More information is provided at [WB].

The **World Bank** seeks a **Senior Executive Assistant** to be based in Beijing, China. Applications are accepted until April 24, 2024. More information is provided at [WB].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Senior Caseworker. HSPRS to be located in** Glendale, United States. Applications are accepted until October 7, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **National Consultant for Gender Equality and Social Inclusion** to be based in Cambodia. Applications are accepted until April 26, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** seeks a **Programme Management Assistant** to be based in New York. Applications are accepted until May 2, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Secretariat].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** seeks a **Senior Development Coordination Officer – Crisis Management.** Applications are accepted until May 11, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Secretariat].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** seeks a **Security Coordination Officer** to be based in Geneva. Applications are accepted until May 17, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Secretariat].

UN Women seeks a **Country Programme Manager – Ending Violence Against Women**. The location for this position is New Delhi, India. Applications are accepted until May 1, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Women].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks an **Economist**. This position is remote. Applications are accepted until April 20, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **European Council for Nuclear Research (CERN)** seeks a **Human Resources Assistant** to be based in Geneva, Switzerland. Applications are accepted until May 5, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a **Partnerships Specialist** to be based in Amman, Jordan. Applications are accepted until May 7, 2024. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** seeks a Security and Justice (S&J) Officer to be based in Nepal. Applications are accepted until April 14, 2024. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

Ghent University is looking for an **Assistant department Criminology, Criminal Law and Social Law**. Applications are accepted until April 23, 2024. More information is provided at [Ghent].

The **Australian National University** seeks a **Senior Lecturer in International Business and/or Strategic Management.** Applications are accepted until April 23, 2024. More information is provided at [ANU].

Georgetown University is looking for a **Policy Analyst - Knight-Georgetown Institute.** The position location is hybrid. More information is provided at [Georgetown].

New York University is looking for a **lecturer in Postcolonial Visual Culture** to be based in NYU London. Applications are accepted until April 29, 2024. More information is provided at [NYU].

New York University is looking for a **Lecturer: "Migrations and Cultural Diversity in Spain: Anthropological Approaches".** Applications are accepted until April 22, 2024. More information is provided at [NYU].

The **Faculty of Social Sciences** at **the University of Sheffield** seeks a **Senior Lecturer**. Applications are accepted until April 23, 2024. More information is provided at [Sheffield].

The **Al-Quds Bard College for Arts and Sciences** seeks a **Part-Time Undergraduate Faculty - Social Sciences Division.** Job location is at Abu dis, Palestine. Applications are accepted until April 24, 2024. More information is provided at [Bard].

The **University of Glasgow** is looking for **Heads of Division (x3) School of Social and Political Sciences.** Applications are accepted until April 29, 2024. More information is provided at [Glasgow].

The **SOAS University of London** seeks a **Lecturer/SL in Political Economy of Development**. Applications are accepted until April 29, 2024. More information is provided at [SOAS].

The **Institute for the Law of Obligations** of **Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven)** welcomes applications for the position of **Scientific Officer for The Social Study.** Applications are accepted until May 5, 2024. More information is provided at [KU Leuven].

The **Faculty of Social Sciences** at the **university of Sheffield** seeks a **Senior Lecturer and Theme Lead**

in AI and In/Equality. Applications are accepted until May 6, 2024. More information is provided at [Sheffield].

The **Department of Political Science (IPZ)** and **the Institute for Asian and Oriental Studies (AOI)** at **the University of Zurich** seeks a **Head of Research Area "Politics of Contemporary China".** Applications are accepted until May 25, 2024. More information is provided at [Zurich].

Team:

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