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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 Syria's Evacuation Day and Zambia's and Zimbabwe's Independence Day this week.

With best regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

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

China: Economic data reveals persistent challenges for country's economy

(ms) The most recent economic data from China for March indicates ongoing challenges for the country's economy, especially consumer demand and deflationary pressures in the manufacturing sector remain key issue areas.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics, China's consumer prices rose by only 0.1 percent in March compared to the previous year, falling short of analysts' expectations. This subdued growth suggests difficulties in stimulating domestic consumption, a key priority for the Chinese government.

In addition, the producer prices index continued its downward trend for the 18th consecutive month in

March, declining by 2.8 percent year-on-year. This indicates persistent deflationary pressures in the manufacturing sector, which could hinder efforts to boost economic growth.

Despite some signs of recovery, such as expansion in the manufacturing sector, consumer sentiment remains cautious. Efforts to stimulate household spending through measures like easier car loan rules have had limited impact so far.

The contrast between China's low inflation and higher inflation rates in other major economies, such as the United States, underscores the complexity of China's economic challenges. While low inflation can help keep costs down for consumers, it also reflects weak demand and overcapacity in certain industries.

Looking ahead, addressing these structural challenges, including overcapacity and sluggish domestic demand, will be crucial for sustaining long-term economic growth in China. Additionally, external pressures, such as calls for greater market access from foreign leaders, add further pressure on the government to implement needed economic adjustments. [Financial Times] [National Bureau of Statistics] [Reuters] [South China Morning Post] [Xinhua]

China: Anti-corruption watchdog starts wide-ranging investigation in financial sector

(ms) The Chinese government has launched a series of inspections in its financial sector, targeting major economic and financial regulators, as well as state-owned banks. Led by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), the country's top anti-corruption agency, the campaign aims to strengthen oversight and ensure adherence to party directives within the financial industry, amidst ongoing economic struggles.

The inspections, which target entities such as the People's Bank of China (PBC), the country's central bank, regulatory bodies, and the four top state-owned banks, signify a renewed emphasis on bolstering the integrity of the financial system. It is part of President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign that began with his presidency in 2013.

The latest inspection wave aligns with broader reforms in the financial regulatory framework, evidenced by recent structural changes such as the establishment of the Central Finance Commission and the National

Financial Regulatory Administration during the "Two Sessions" last year (see AiR No. 10, March/2023, 1). These measures aim to centralize control further under the party and Xi personally and enhance oversight over the financial sector.

Several high-profile figures in the financial industry like the former party chief and chairman of the Bank of China, Liu Liange (see AiR No. 14, April/2023, 1) and the former deputy governor of the PBC, Fan Yifei (see AiR No. 24, June/2023, 2) have already come under investigation, highlighting the scope of the campaign.

Beyond regulatory enforcement, the campaign seeks to instill a culture of discipline and integrity within the financial sector. Professionals in state-owned financial institutions faced severe salary cuts last year according to reports from the beginning of April (for more, see South China Morning Post 1).

As China navigates economic challenges and pursues financial revitalization, the anti-corruption campaign serves as a crucial component of its strategy to safeguard financial stability and promote sustainable growth. With heightened scrutiny and accountability, stakeholders in the financial industry are compelled to adhere to stricter standards of governance and transparency. [South China Morning Post 2]

China: Surging coal capacity threatens global climate targets

(ms) Amid a global push towards cleaner energy sources, China's continues surge in coal-fired power plants poses a significant threat to international climate goals. Despite pledges to reduce coal usage, China's aggressive expansion of coal capacity stands in stark contrast to global trends, jeopardizing not only its own climate targets but also the collective efforts of the international community.

According to a recent report by the Global Energy Monitor (GEM), China accounted for a staggering two-thirds of the new coal-burning power capacity added worldwide in the past year. This surge, which saw the addition of 47.4 gigawatts (GW) of coal capacity, marks the highest annual increase in nearly a decade. Despite some coal plant retirements, China's net coal capacity still rose by 2 percent, highlighting the country's continued reliance on this fossil fuel.

This expansion comes at a critical juncture as the world strives to combat climate change. China's ambitious climate targets, including reaching net-zero

greenhouse emissions by 2060, face significant challenges with the ongoing proliferation of coal-fired power plants. The country had pledged to retire 30GW of coal power by 2025, but the actual retirement in 2023 of 3,7 GW amounted to a mere fraction of this goal, raising concerns about its commitment to cleaner energy.

The consequences of China's coal boom extend beyond its borders. The surge in coal capacity not only undermines global efforts to mitigate climate change but also exacerbates economic risks for China and the world at large. The continued investment in coal power infrastructure locks countries into a carbon-intensive trajectory, hindering the transition to sustainable energy and jeopardizing the health of the planet.

While China's dominance in coal consumption is well-documented, other countries also play significant roles in shaping the global coal landscape. Outside China, new construction of coal power plants has slowed considerably, however retirements failing to keep pace necessary to be on pace on achieving the climate goals.

In general, the overall trajectory of coal capacity growth remains alarming, with the world witnessing an 11 percent increase in coal power capacity since the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015, with China playing a key role in this negative development. [Global Energy Monitor] [South China Morning Post]

China: Stockbroker salary cuts continue amid regulatory pressure and economic slowdown

(ms) In the wake of a sluggish equities market and intensified governmental scrutiny on lavish corporate practices, China's stockbrokers experienced another year of salary cuts in 2023.

Data gleaned from the ten largest brokerages, including industry giants like Citic Securities and China International Capital Corp (CICC), reveals a pervasive reduction in salary expenditures in 2023. Even as some smaller firms are yet to disclose their annual figures, industry-wide wage cuts appear imminent, according to collected data.

The extent of pay reductions among the top ten brokerages ranged from 1.2 percent to a substantial 27 percent, with Shanghai-based Shenwan Hongyuan Group recording the most significant slash in salaries. At Citic Securities, China's revenue-leading firm,

average salaries dropped by 5.3 percent while Guotai Junan Securities witnessed a 10 percent and CICC's employees experienced a 15 percent decrease. These cuts are not confined to rank-and-file employees; even top executives saw their compensation shrink.

While the stock market is exhibiting tentative signs of stabilization, regulatory interventions aimed at enhancing listing quality might further strain the brokerage sector's prospects. With IPOs on mainland markets dwindling significantly, experts predict a bleak outlook for brokerages' salaries in 2024, despite potential market recoveries. [South China Morning Post]

The backdrop to these austerity measures includes a sustained market downturn and a governmental push for financial prudence. President Xi Jinping's emphasis on "common prosperity" against hedonistic lifestyles has underscored the need to narrow the wealth gap, making the financial industry a focal point of anti-corruption efforts.

Also, in response to President Xi Jinping's "common prosperity" initiative, several Chinese mutual fund managers are considering capping staff salaries at approximately USD 415,000.

These proposals, though preliminary, follow previous directives to establish reasonable pay structures to curb excessive rewards, particularly considering substantial losses incurred by mutual funds in recent years. This potential salary cap marks a departure from the era of exorbitant paychecks for star fund managers, signaling a recalibration of industry standards and priorities towards achieving greater economic equality. [Bloomberg]

China: Credit outlook downgraded by Fitch Ratings amid continuous economic uncertainty

(ms) Fitch Ratings downgraded China's credit outlook from stable to negative, citing mounting risks to the nation's financial health amidst ongoing economic challenges. The decision, while not immediately indicating a downgrade in China's credit rating, underscores concern about the country's economic trajectory.

Fitch pointed to China's transition away from a growth model reliant on the property sector as a key factor in the downgrade. The agency anticipates an increase in China's general government deficit to 7.1 percent of

GDP in 2024, up from 5.8 percent in the previous year, primarily due to pandemic-related fiscal pressures.

In response, China's Ministry of Finance expressed regret over the downgrade, arguing that Fitch's methodology failed to acknowledge the positive impact of fiscal policies on economic growth and stability and emphasized that the high local debt level is under control. The ministry also affirmed its commitment to maintaining a moderate deficit to support domestic demand and sustainable growth.

Despite the downgrade in outlook, Fitch maintained China's sovereign bond rating at A+, indicating a level of confidence in the country's economic fundamentals. However, concerns persist regarding the widening fiscal deficit and the prevalence of hidden debts, particularly associated with local government financing vehicles (LGFVs).

The proliferation of LGFVs, initially intended to finance infrastructure projects, has raised concerns about debt sustainability and fiscal risks. Beijing has taken steps to address these issues, including measures to rein in local authorities with precarious fiscal positions and facilitating the issuance of special refinancing bonds to manage LGFVs' debt.

The downgrade by Fitch comes at a delicate time for China's economy, which is expected to show signs of recovery in the first quarter of the year and might undermine the already damaged confidents of foreign investors, thereby underlining the desperate need for wide-reaching economic policy adjustments by the government. [CNN] [Fitch Ratings] [South China Morning Post]

China: Ministry of State Security warns of heightened foreign espionage threat to rare earth and food industries

(ms) China’s Ministry of State Security has issued warnings regarding alleged heightened foreign espionage activities targeting critical sectors such as rare earth and food industries. Reports from state media outlets CCTV and Global Times shed light on specific cases and the broader implications for national security and economic stability.

According to CCTV, individuals within China have been found guilty of leaking state secrets related to rare earth minerals, which are essential for advanced technologies. A deputy manager at a rare earth company is said to have received an 11-year prison

sentence for providing classified information to a foreign metals company. Similarly, an associated with a Shanghai subsidiary of a foreign non-ferrous metal company, faced charges of illegally providing state secrets.

At the same time Global Times reported on espionage activities within the agricultural sector, citing the case of a former general manager of an agricultural technology company, who was found guilty to have illegally sold patented rice seeds to foreign entities, thereby allegedly compromising China's food security.

In addition to these cases, the state media said that foreign intelligence agencies have targeted China's meteorological data networks, potentially undermining military operations and national security.

Furthermore, they state that foreign entities have engaged in ideological warfare, exploiting online platforms to recruit individuals for anti-China activities. Cases of domestic individuals being influenced by foreign propaganda highlight the challenges posed by ideological infiltration.

In response, Chinese authorities are implementing further measures to combat espionage and protect national interests. Legal actions and administrative penalties have been imposed on individuals found guilty of compromising national security. Educational initiatives aim to raise awareness among the public about the risks of foreign interference. [Global Times] [South China Morning Post]

Usually, China hardly publishes information about national court cases, especially in connection with espionage, instead such publications usually serve as a tool to legitimize certain political maneuvers. A possible background this time could be the on-going concerns about China's tightening of regulations against foreign actors and companies in connection with the Anti-Spionage Law, which was expanded at the end of April last year. It significantly extended the powers of the security authorities and stipulated that all "documents, data, materials, and items related to national security and interests" are to be protected in the same way as state secrets (see more AiR No. 18, May/2023, 1).

China: First production license for eVTOL aircraft

(ms) China has issued its first production license for electric vertical take-off and landing (eVTOL) aircraft.

The EH216-S, an unmanned eVTOL craft designed for passenger transport, received the production certificate from the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC). This move cements China's position in the global race for dominance in the emerging eVTOL market.

Manufactured by EHang Holdings Ltd., the EH216-S had previously obtained type and standard airworthiness certificates, prerequisites for commercial operations. The issuance of the production certificate signifies a crucial step for EHang, enabling large-scale production and facilitating further commercial ventures in the eVTOL sector.

China's focus on nurturing the "low-altitude economy," encompassing various industries operating below 1,000 meters, aligns with its broader economic strategy. The sector, including flight-related activities, is projected to attain trillions of yuan in value by 2030, mirroring the success of China's electric vehicle industry.

The growth of China's eVTOL sector has been substantial, with a 33.8 percent year-on-year increase in 2023, reaching USD 70 billion. Projections suggest this growth will continue, surpassing USD 140 billion by 2026. Supportive measures from local governments after the industry was listed as a strategic emerging industry in late last year, coupled with national guidelines for the general aviation industry, underscore China's commitment to fostering the low-altitude economy. [Drone XL] [Global Times] [South China Morning Post]

China: Supreme court proposes stronger post-divorce support for spouses

(ms) China's Supreme People's Court is currently seeking feedback on revisions to the marriage and family section of the Civil Code, a move that has sparked considerable debate, particularly regarding Article 20 concerning divorce economic assistance.

Article 20 proposes that in cases where one party in a divorce cannot sustain a basic standard of living with their personal property post-divorce, they can request assistance from the other party. The court would then be empowered to enforce this request, potentially requiring the economically advantaged party to provide support, such as housing assistance, to the disadvantaged party.

Legal experts have highlighted the importance of this clause in protecting vulnerable individuals and ensuring fairness in divorce proceedings. They argue that it aligns with the principle of upholding marital property and safeguarding the interests of economically disadvantaged parties.

However, public opinion remains divided. Some netizens draw parallels between this clause and spousal support systems in foreign countries, expressing concerns that it could deter couples from getting married, especially those with significant economic disparities.

The proposed Article 20 shares objectives with spousal support systems in various jurisdictions worldwide. While western legislation mostly aims to mitigate post-divorce economic disparities, Article 20 differs in its focus. It prioritizes favoring a basic standard of living over parity with the marital standard, potentially lessening the financial burden on the supporting party. [Global Times]

China: Rural women resist rising pressure for increased childbearing

(ms) Recent data analyzed by Washington, D.C.-based think tank Jamestown Foundation highlights a decline in fertility rates, both in urban and rural areas, posing challenges to hopes that rural women could offset the overall declining birthrate. This demographic decline has become a growing concern for policymakers, with the population shrinking for the second consecutive year in 2023 (see AiR No. 4, January/2024, 4).

Cultural and policy pressures, including the rising cost of raising children and traditional bad treatment of woman through the preferences for sons due to the “One Child” policy, have contributed to rural women's reluctance to have more children. Additionally, mistreatment of girls and women, compounded by factors like poverty and disability, has led to an exodus of women from rural areas, seeking escape from patriarchal constraints and seeking better opportunities in urban areas.

The Chinese Communist Party's recent policy shift towards strengthening reproductive support in rural villages marks a departure from the punitive "One Child" policy and aims to address the steep demographic decline. However, the reluctance of many women to conform to state-driven reproductive policies underscores deeper societal issues and

reflects a desire for autonomy and agency over their own bodies and lives. [Jamestown Foundation]

China: Appointment of new top diplomatic position in Hong Kong might signal strategic shift in the city

(ms) Beijing has appointed Cui Jianchun as the Commissioner of the Chinese Foreign Ministry in Hong Kong, filling a position that had been vacant since July of the previous year. Cui, a former ambassador to Nigeria, brings extensive diplomatic experience to the role.

The announcement, made by Xinhua news agency, comes after months of Deputy Commissioner Li Yongsheng temporarily handling the responsibilities of the top diplomat. Cui's appointment follows the transfer of former incumbent Liu Guangyuan to Beijing's liaison office in Hong Kong.

Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu welcomed Cui's appointment, citing his diplomatic expertise. Lee highlighted the importance of collaboration between the Commissioner's Office and the Hong Kong government.

Analysts suggest that Cui's appointment reflects Beijing's strategic priorities in Hong Kong and that it may signal a shift in the role encompassed for the city. Especially Cui's last work stands in Kuwait, Guyana and no Nigeria might be an indicator, that the priority for the city's future lays in the BRI and the Global South and less in western stakeholders.

A step that could be necessary in view of the growing concern, especially among Western companies in Hong Kong, about the development of the city under the new National Security Law and a possible alignment with mainland security standards. [Global Times] [South China Morning Post] [The Standard]

China-Hong Kong: Authorities deport Reporters without Border representative amid new allegations in Jimmy Lai trial

(ms) Hong Kong security officials deported Aleksandra Bielakowska, an Advocacy Officer from Reporters Without Borders (RSF), upon her arrival in the territory. Bielakowska's purpose was to monitor the trial of Jimmy Lai, a publisher facing national security charges.

Bielakowska was detained, searched, and questioned for six hours before being deported. RSF criticized the move, calling it unprecedented and raising concerns about its implications for press freedom in Hong Kong.

The incident occurred amidst a broader context of declining press freedom in Hong Kong, with the territory's press freedom index having significantly dropped in recent years. This development might continue in the wake of the recent implementation of the city's own national security law (see AiR No. 13, March/2024, 4), which further aligns with the mainland policies. China ranks the second last place in regard to press freedom out of all 180 monitored countries. [Radio Free Asia] [Reporters without Borders]

Meanwhile, Jimmy Lai's trial continues, with allegations emerging about his involvement in providing financial support to activists during the 2019 protests.

According to prosecution witness Chan Tsz-wah, Lai allegedly agreed to provide significant financial support, including a loan of around USD 200,000, to activists who participated in a global publicity campaign during the 2019 protests.

Chan, who was identified as a paralegal and acted as an intermediary between Lai and the advocacy group Fight for Freedom, Stand with Hong Kong, testified that Lai directed the group to seek foreign sanctions and other measures against Hong Kong and China.

Lai's trial, which has now lasted 59 days, centers on charges of conspiring to collaborate with foreign forces and publishing seditious material. Despite the accusations, 76-year-old Lai continues to insist on his innocence. [Hong Kong Free Press]

China-Hong Kong: First European citizen sentenced under national security law

(ms) The Portuguese national, Joseph John, has been sentenced to five years in prison under the Beijing-imposed national security law. This marks the first instance of a European citizen being jailed under this law.

John was convicted of conspiring to incite secession, with the responsible Judge arguing in the ruling that John had "distorted history, demonized China, and appealed to foreign countries to destroy [Hong Kong] and China by political or simply violent means."

The charges against John stemmed from his social media activities, where he advocated for Hong Kong's independence from China. He managed social media accounts for the UK-based Hong Kong Independence Party, which called for foreign intervention in China's rule over Hong Kong following the 2019 pro-democracy protests.

John's posts, deemed "secessionist" by the prosecution, included calls for foreign countries to send troops to Hong Kong and crowdfunding for an independent Hong Kong army. Despite pleading guilty to inciting secession, John's plea could not reduce his sentence below the mandatory minimum of five years for serious security law offenses.

The ruling highlights the sweeping powers granted to authorities under the national security law, which criminalizes subversion, secession, collusion with foreign forces, and terrorist acts. Since its enactment in 2020, over 290 people have been arrested under the law, with 112 convicted.

Critics argue that the law's vague wording allows authorities to target individuals who criticize the government, stifling freedom of expression and political dissent. The denial of bail to defendants charged under the law, as seen in John's case, has become standard practice, further raising concerns about the erosion of legal rights in Hong Kong.

The Portuguese Consul-General in Macau and Hong Kong, and the deputy head of office at the European Union Office to Hong Kong and Macau were present during John's sentencing trial, emphasizing international scrutiny of Hong Kong's legal developments. [BBC] [Hong Kong Free Press] [The Independent]

China-Hong Kong: Tiananmen vigil group appeals conviction

(ms) Three former leaders of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements, most famous as the organizers of Hong Kong's annual Tiananmen vigils, Chow Hang-tung , Tang Ngok-kwan, and Tsui Hon-kwong, will present their case to the High Court seeking a certificate to appeal to the Court of Final Appeal.

Their challenge stems from their refusal to comply with a data request from national security police, a defiance that led to their sentencing to four and a half months

in jail in March 2023 under Beijing's imposed security law in reaction to the 2019 anti-government protest.

Their conviction came after they rejected a police notice demanding information, alleging the Alliance's affiliation with foreign entities. Despite the prosecution's failure to establish such connections, the convictions were upheld, signaling the leeway the security authorities as well as the judiciary was granted under the National Security Law. [Hong Kong Free Press 1]

Meanwhile, time Jacky Ho, a 43-year-old accountant, has been sentenced to two years and nine months in jail for rioting, in connection to the 2019 Yuen Long mob attacks, which were considered a pivotal moment in the protests and unrest that gripped Hong Kong. This verdict marks a significant legal development.

The Yuen Long attacks saw over 100 armed individuals storming Yuen Long MTR station, leaving a trail of injuries and chaos. The police's delayed response on the attacks and alleged collaboration with the attackers fueled public outrage and accusations that the authorities were deliberately encouraging an escalation of the protests

During the trial, Ho claimed to have gone to the station out of curiosity after witnessing livestreamed videos of the attacks and only became violent out of self-defense. However, the responsible Judge found that Ho, among others in "black-clad" attire, participated in the subsequent rioting.

Ho sentence marks the first conviction of someone not directly involved in the initial attack on train passengers and protesters during the attack. [Hong Kong Free Press 2]

In connection with the anti-government protests, two university students were acquitted of charges of rioting after inconsistencies and falsified testimony from police officers involved in their arrests were found. This point to problems within law enforcement, especially in the prosecution of oppositional forces. [Hong Kong Free Press 3]

China: First use of 3D-printed storage Tank technology in space

(ms) China has successful operated a 3D-printed storage tank on the Tiandu-2 satellite. Developed by the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC), this marks the first time such

technology has been utilized aboard a Chinese satellite.

The propulsion subsystem, used in the satellite, incorporates an integrated 3D-printed aluminum alloy storage tank. This achievement underscores China's progress in satellite technology and propulsion systems.

The successful application of 3D-printed storage tank technology offers potential cost-effective solutions for satellite propulsion systems, with the advanced printing allowing for intricate internal connectivity, reducing development cycles and costs. [Global Times] [Space Daily]

Japan: Lower House approves bill on post-divorce custody

(dql) The Japanese House of Representatives passed on April 16 an amendment bill that allows divorced parents to choose either sole custody or joint custody.

The move follows calls for a reform of the country's Civil Code that only allows sole custody by one parent.

The bill will now be submitted to the House of Councillors, paving the way for its passage during the current Diet session through June. If enacted, the new legislation will enter into force by 2026, with retroactive application to those who have already divorced. [Kyodo News]

Japan: LDP leader seeks review of penalty over fraud

(sh) On April 13, the leader of the largest faction within Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) took action, contesting a recommendation for his expulsion amid a political fundraising scandal.

Ryu Shionoya, head of the faction previously led by the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, challenged the recommendation, citing alleged factual inaccuracies and demanded a fair assessment.

This move comes as part of broader repercussions affecting 39 LDP members implicated in the scandal which centers on political funds raised through party event tickets bought by individuals, companies and organizations. LDP lawmakers are alleged to have

pocketed profits from ticket sales as kickbacks by falsifying mandatory accounting reports.

Shionoya, alongside Hiroshige Seko, a prominent member of the Abe faction, faces expulsion recommendations. Shionoya also called for Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who thus far has been spared from disciplinary measures or punishment in the context of the scandal, to be held accountable, asserting that the scandal reflects on the entire party. He advocated for a comprehensive investigation by either the party or the Diet to address the matter thoroughly. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Lower House by-elections' official campaigning kicked off

(dql) On April 16, official campaigning for three House of Representatives by-elections kicked off, with 28 seats up for grabs in three electoral districts in Tokyo.

The elections are widely seen as a referendum on Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's leadership who doubles as leader of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) that is engulfed in political funds scandal (see article above).

Conceding to headwinds following the scandal in which LDP lawmakers are suspected of receiving kickbacks from undeclared funds, the party has abstained from fielding candidates in the Tokyo No. 15 and Nagasaki No. 3 districts. Only in the Shimane No. 1 district of the western prefecture, considered a conservative stronghold, is the party running in the by-election. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Population decreases for 13th consecutive year

(sh) Despite intensified government efforts to boost Japan's low fertility rate, the native population continues to decline at a staggering rate, as revealed by latest official data.

According to data of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan saw the largest annual decrease in population since records began in 1950, with 837,000 fewer individuals recorded in the year leading up to October 1, 2023. This equates to a daily decrease of 2,293 people or nearly 96 individuals per hour.

Japan's overall population stood at 124.3 million in October, down 595,000 from the previous year, marking a decline for the 13th consecutive year. The number of Japanese aged 75 or above saw a rise by 713,000 to about 20.08 million, while the number of people aged zero to 14 fell by 329,000 to about 14.17 million. This equals 11.4 percent of the total population, the lowest ever. Nationals aged between 15 and 64 dropped 256,000 to about 73.95 million, marking 59.5 percent of the total population.

Only the foreign national population rose by 243,000 to about 3.16 million. The number refers to foreign workers and students who had been in Japan for more than 90 days.

Japan's persistent population decline, coupled with its aging demographics, sets a precedent followed by other nations in Asia and beyond. [Financial Times]

Japan: Government to take action over volatility of yen

(sh) On April 12, Finance Minister Shunichi Suzuki announced that Japan will act to counter excessive volatility of the Japanese yen, promising to address the yen's decline against the US dollar.

This comes following concerns over the yen's plunge to a 34-year low of 153.32 against the US dollar. The government aims to mitigate negative impacts on people's livelihoods and the economy caused by the weaker yen.

Financial markets remain watchful for potential intervention by Japanese authorities to halt the yen's rapid depreciation. While a weak yen once benefited exporters, recent years have shown its drawbacks, including increased import costs for energy and raw materials. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Microsoft to invest in AI

(sh) On April 9, Microsoft announced a USD 2.9 billion investment over two years to enhance its cloud and AI infrastructure in Japan.

This marks the largest investment in the company's 46-year history in the country. The funds will also support the training of three million people in AI and the establishment of a Microsoft Research Asia lab in Tokyo.

This move aligns with the trend of tech giants expanding their global data centers and cloud computing assets to accommodate the rising demand for AI applications. Amazon's cloud unit is investing heavily in Mississippi and Saudi Arabia, while Google is building a USD 1 billion data center near London. [Reuters]

Japan: Tomahawk cruise missile drill conducted

(sh) Japan's Self-Defense Forces embarked on training to operate land-based Tomahawk cruise missiles, aiming to deploy them from fiscal 2025 to bolster deterrence against China and North Korea.

The initial drills, supported by the U.S. military, took place from March 25 to 29 at the U.S. Navy's Yokosuka base, with further exercises scheduled.

Japan plans to acquire 400 Tomahawks from the U.S. starting in fiscal 2025, aiming to obtain counterstrike capabilities for emergencies. This move aligns with Japan's updated National Security Strategy, reflecting a strategic shift under its peace-focused Constitution, amidst growing military activities by Beijing and threats from Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Military training site plan in Okinawa scrapped

(sh) On April 12, the Japanese Defense Ministry announced the abandonment of plans to construct a new training site for the Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) in Okinawa Prefecture due to concerns from nearby residents.

Initially proposed for a former golf course in Uruma, the plan aimed to enhance the GSDF brigade's capabilities amid rising tensions in Japan's southwest remote islands due to China's maritime activities.

However, opposition from Okinawa Governor Denny Tamaki, Uruma Mayor Masato Nakamura, and residents fearing environmental impacts led to the decision. Okinawa, hosting a significant portion of U.S. military facilities, has a history of anti-base sentiment, citing issues like noise and pollution.

Mongolia: Cabinet approves new law on livestock industry resilience

(dql) The Mongolian Cabinet adopted on April 10 a bill that identifies measures to strengthen the resilience of the livestock industry of the country against the negative impacts of climate change and to reduce and overcome risks.

The draft law on "Mitigating the Negative Effects of Climate Change on Traditional Livestock Husbandry" also aims to enhance sustainability and efficiency in developing Mongolia's livestock industry, by encouraging voluntary cooperation and establishing cooperatives among herders to meet their common needs and increase the economic returns of livestock products.

The bill, that will be submitted to the Parliament for approval, comes against the backdrop of increased frequency of droughts and "dzuds" (hard winters) that are caused by climate change and that severely affects the citizens of local areas.

The recent dzud, Mongolia harshest winter in nearly 50 years (see AiR No. 13, March/2024, 4) has resulted in the loss of 9.6 percent of the total livestock, or approximately 6.3 million. [Montsame]

In a separate development, Mongolian President U. Khurelsukh has vowed to push for the "White Gold" movement, in a bid to strengthen Mongolia's light industry sector. The initiative seeks to increase the utilization of sheep wool and other resources from the country's livestock population of over 70 million. While the country has over 50 million sheep, a major problem is the waste of the sheep wool resources due to insufficient processing capacity. [The UB Post]

North Korea: Kim Jong Un emphasizes war preparedness amid rising tensions with South Korea

(yq) North Korean leader Kim Jong Un called for heightened military readiness during his visit to a military university on April 10, stating that "now is time to be prepared for war than ever."

Kim's statement reflects ongoing escalations in the tension between North and South Korea, especially under the administration of South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, who took office in 2022 and has

pursued a more assertive policy towards North Korea compared to his predecessor Moon Jae In.

In response, Kim has not only ramped up his country's war preparations but also ordered the disbandment of agencies focused on reunification and outreach in January. He starkly warned of war over any minor territorial violations, signaling a zero-tolerance policy towards any infringement by South Korea. [AP News] [Aljazeera]

The situation is further complicated by North Korea's enhanced weapons development and its strengthening military and political cooperation with Russia. Notably, Russia recently used its veto power at the United Nations Security Council to end the monitoring of North Korean sanctions violations related to its weapons programs (see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1).

South Korea: Opposition party wins general election, retains majority in parliament

(dql) South Korea's main opposition Democratic Party (DP) emerged victorious in the April 10 general elections, retaining its majoarity in the National Assembly after securing together with its satellite party 175 out of 300 seats that were up for grabs. The rivaling ruling Democratic Party (DP) and its satellite party suffered a major defeat, garnering only 108 seats.

Furthermore, the Rebuilding Korea Party led by scandal-tainted former Justice Minister Cho Kuk, won 12seats. It is widely seen as belonging to the opposition bloc. The New Reform Party of ousted former PPP leader Lee Jun-seok won two seats, while the New Future Party and the Progressive Party each secured one seat.

With 67 percent of the total 44.28 million eligible voters casting their ballots, the election saw the highest voter turnout for general elections in 32 years.

The election was widely seen as a referendum in President Yoon Seok Yul of of the PPP who has been into the office for nearly two years, with three years of his term remaining. The election outcome reflects a seriously soured public sentiment toward the Yoon administration. And while the DP and its allies failed to gain a two-thirds majority that would have allowed for an impeachment of the president, Yoon will face challenges in legislative endeavors under a "divided

government," as the DP continues to hold the parliamentary majority.

During the campaign, the PPP sought voter support by making uncooperative parliament under opposition control responsible for the Yoon administration's failure to push its reform agenda properly forward. The DP, on the other hand, called on voters to make a strong judgment on the incompetence of the Yoon administration, and accused it of worsening the country's economy and the livelihoods of the people.

Taking responsibility for the electoral defeat, PPP leader Han Dong-hoon announced his resignation. [Yonhap 1] [Yonhap 2] [CSIS]

In a latest development, Yoon issued a televised apology for the electoral defeat, pledging to "take heed of the public sentiment and communicate more with people with humility and flexibility." [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Record high national debt unveiled

(dql) The South Korean finance ministry has revealed that South Korea's national debt reached a new record in 2023, amounting to KRW 1,126.7 trillion (USD 826.63 billion) and marking an increase of nearly KRW 60 trillion (USD 43.2 billion) compared to the previous year.

Of the total, debt incurred by the central government rose by KRW 59.1 trillion to KRW 1,092.5 trillion won, while provincial government debt was presumed to jump up by KRW 300 billion to KRW 34.2 trillion.

Meanwhile, the debt-to-GDP ratio stood at 50.4 percent in 2023, up from 49.4 percent in 2022 and marking an all-time high and the first time that the ratio was above 50 percent since the government began collecting relevant data in 1982.

Against this back, the administration of President Yoon Suk Yeol has pledged to maintain the managed fiscal deficit within 3 percent of GDP and to limit it to 2 percent if the government debt-to-GDP ratio surpasses 60 percent.

Analysts, however, have cautioned that it will be hard for the government to achieve the goal at an early date given that the country is facing weak domestic demand amid high inflation, along with longer-term challenges

including the low birth rate and population aging that require budget spending. [Yonhap]

Taiwan: New prime minister appointed

(fg) On April 10, Taiwan's President-elect Lai Ching-te appointed a number of key positions for his upcoming government.

At the helm of the new cabinet, Cho Jung-tai was appointed Prime minister. An experienced politician, Cho has served – among others – as Chairman of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DDP) from 2019 to 2020, Taipei City Councilor, member of the Legislative Yuan, Secretary-General of the DDP (2007-2008) and the Executive Yuan (2005-2006 and 2017-2018).

Cho has announced that he will participate in an "active and innovative cabinet" and that he was asked by Lai to form a new government with following goals: Communication should be improved, coordination within the government should be increased and efforts should continue to be made to form a common ground in society.

Cheng Li-chum, who was Minister of Culture from 2016 to 2020, will serve as Deputy Prime Minister. Kung Ming-hsin has been appointed to the post of Secretary General of the Executive Yuan. [Taiwan News 1] [Taiwan News 2]

Following his appointment, Cho announced on April 12 the appointments of several ministers at a press conference. Liu Shyh-fang will take over as Minister of the Interior. She had already worked together with Cho from 2006-2007 as Deputy Secretary-General under then President Chen Shui-bian.

Li Meng-yen, who was previously Secretary-General of the Executive Yuan, has been appointed as the Minister of Transportation and Communication, while Cheng Ying-yao, current President of the National Sun Yat-sen University, has been appointed as Minister of Education.

Cho, further, unveiled that writer Li Yuan will head the Ministry of Culture, and the Attorney General of Taipei City, Cheng Ming-chien, will be the future Minister of Justice.

The main opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), criticized the selection, questioning the competence of the selected ministers and complaining that the people

were also chosen because they have a long DPP past. [Taiwan News 3] [Focus Taiwan 1] [Focus Taiwan 2]

On April 16, Cho announced further appointments for his new cabinet.

Accordingly, J.W. Kuo will be the future Minister of Economic Affairs. He is the co-founder of the high-tech company Topco Scientific Co. Ltd.

Cho appointed Paul Liu as the new head of the National Development Council. He was previously chairman of PricewaterhouseCoopers Business Consulting Services Taiwan Ltd. Huang Yen-nun becomes minister of digital affairs. [Taipei Times] [Focus Taiwan 3]

Taiwan: Five of six by-elections won by opposition party

(fg) On April 14, six by-elections were held in Taiwan, which had become necessary after five regional offices fell vacant because candidates had been elected to the national parliament in January and one seat had become vacant due to a bribery scandal.

The candidates of the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) and the independent candidates supported by the KMT secured five of the six available seats.

Elected were the mayor of the city of Miaoli, the heads of the municipalities of Dawu in Taitung and Huwei and Mailiao in Yunlin, a seat on the district council of the fourth district of Yilan and another in the fifteenth district of the Taichung City Council. Only in Mailiao did a Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)-backed candidate, Hsu Chung-fu, win despite running as an independent.

Hsu Yu-chen, Chairman of the KMT Organizational Development Committee, interpreted the election results as a clear sign of the population's continuing dissatisfaction with the DPP. He particularly criticized the choice of Lai Ching-te's cabinet for showing little willingness to work together across party lines and called on the president-elect, who will take office on May 20, to reconsider his political course and face up to the new public opinion.

The DPP acknowledged that losses were due to several factors, including low voter turnout. However, the party emphasized that it is still working to deepen its connections at the local level to win back the public's

trust ahead of the next local elections in Taiwan in 2026. [Taiwan News] [Focus Taiwan]

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

(fg) As reported in March (see AiR No. 11, March/2024, 2), Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense announced that the computer-based tabletop war game phase of the annual Han Kuang military exercise will be extended to eight days, up from last year's five days.

Accordingly, the simulation exercises will be held from April 19 to 26 and the second part of the exercise, the live-fire exercises, will be held from June 22 to 26 this year.

The computer simulations will be carried out on the Joint Theater Level Simulation platform developed by the US. The main objective of this year's exercise is to test the (joint) operational readiness of the Taiwanese military in all branches of the armed forces, especially in a transition scenario between peacetime and wartime. The lessons learned from current conflicts such as the Ukraine war or the Israel-Hamas conflict are to be included in the Han Kuang.

The Han Kuang exercises have been held annually in Taiwan since 1984 and are this year in their 40th edition. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Successful live-fire test of new land-based air defense system

(fg) On April 15, Taiwan successfully conducted the first live test of the new Land Sword II long-range air defense system. The test was originally scheduled for April 9 (see AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1), but bad weather conditions forced the test to be delayed.

Three Land Sword II missiles were launched from the Jiupeng military base in Pingtung County, all of which successfully hit their aerial targets. The system, a further development of the Sky Sword II missiles, is intended to replace the outdated Chaparral air-defense system and can detect and intercept enemy aircraft, helicopters, drones and cruise missiles at a range of up to 15 km. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: Military to set up new combatant command in 2026?

(fg) Taiwan's military is set to establish a new combatant command in 2026, aimed at defending the country's territorial waters up to 24 nautical miles from its shoreline, although the final timetable is yet to be announced.

According to the unnamed source, the Naval Command Headquarters plans to combine maritime surveillance, strike, and communication capabilities, along with coastal mobile units, under this combatant command. It is expected to bring together existing fast attack craft and anti-ship missile groups, as well as the Navy's Maritime Surveillance & Reconnaissance Command. [Focus Taiwan]

Under international maritime law, coastal states can claim a territorial sea extending 12 nautical miles from their shores, with a contiguous zone extending up to 24 nautical miles.

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

Bangladesh: More than 1,800 candidates submit nominations for first round of upazila elections

(tg/lm) In Bangladesh, a total of 1,891 candidates have submitted their nominations to compete in the first phase of regional (upazila) elections, slated for early May. These elections will cover 150 upazilas, with

subsequent rounds scheduled for later in May and early June. [Daily Star] [Dhaka Tribune]

The main opposition party BNP, which previously boycotted the general elections held in January, has announced its decision to boycott the upcoming upazila elections. The decision was made during a virtual meeting of the BNP National Standing Committee, chaired by Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman. [The Business Standard]

In a more surprising turn of events, Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, a significant Islamic political party, has reversed its decision to participate in the upcoming upazila parishad election. This decision came after discussions within the party's central executive committee, with leaders expressing concerns about the controlled nature of the election, limited opportunities for opposition parties, and reported intimidation of potential candidates. [Prothom Alo]

Upazila elections in Bangladesh are an essential part of the country's local governance system. Upazilas are administrative regions below the district level and play a crucial role in local governance, service delivery, and development. The upazila parishad, the local government body at this level, is responsible for overseeing various administrative functions, including infrastructure development, education, healthcare, and local economic activities.

Bangladesh: Opposition BNP demands unconditional release of its detained leaders, activists

(lm) Ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr, one of the most significant festivals in the Muslim world, the Senior Joint Secretary General of Bangladesh's main opposition party BNP, Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, has urged for the immediate and unconditional release of detained party leaders and activists. [Dhaka Tribune]

Rizvi underscored the fundamental importance of upholding the rule of law and justice, noting that despite the BNP members appearing before the court for bail, they were unjustly sent to jail by what he termed as Sheikh Hanina's "subservient court." He lamented the prevalent suffering of the people under what he described as the oppressive rule of the "BaKSAL-2 government", an allusion to the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League that was formed in 1975 by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of Bangladesh and father of current Prime Minister

Sheikh Hasina to consolidate power and establish a one-party state.

Accusing the ruling Awami League of monopolizing political activities and privileges, Rizvi criticized the stark disparity in treatment, alleging that while AL enjoys unrestricted rights for gatherings and rallies, other political entities, including BNP, are suppressed. He further asserted that the AL government had obtained power through electoral malpractice, labeling their actions as "Awami terrorism" that has transcended all bounds.

Highlighting the widespread abuse of state power, Rizvi condemned the government's tactics of oppression, including forced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and the fabrication of false cases against opposition members. He alleged that over the past 16 years, the Awami League government had filed a staggering number of false cases, estimated at 150,000, targeting around 5 million BNP leaders and activists, including the party's chairperson, Khaleda Zia, and acting chairman, Tarique Rahman.

Bangladesh: Five arrested for gang-rape of woman; another killed in dispute over marriage proposal

(lm) In Bangladesh, authorities have arrested five youths, aged 18-19, in connection with the abduction and gang-rape of a married woman. Three other suspects are currently evading capture. The incident occurred after the woman, accompanied by her husband and child, attended a wedding dance performance. Following the event, the youths forcibly separated her from her family and perpetrated the assault in a village setting. [Dhaka Tribune]

In a separate incident, a disagreement stemming from a rejected marriage proposal led to violence, resulting in the death of a relative of the prospective groom and injuries to 15 others. The confrontation erupted following the groom's decision against the marriage after visiting the bride's family home. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Man kills himself after failing to buy beef for wife

(lm) A 26-year-old man, took his own life after failing to buy beef for his wife. Police found a suicide note where

the man expressed his love for his wife and asked his parents to take care of her. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Rural people in severe hardship, says leader of parliamentary opposition Jatiya Party says

(lm) The chairman of Bangladesh's main parliamentary opposition Jatiya Party has expressed deep concerns about what he described has the country's significant economic challenges, particularly impacting rural areas. [Dhaka Tribune]

Speaking during Eid, one of the most significant festivals in the Muslim world, GM Quader highlighted various hardships endured by the population. He criticized the government's agricultural policies, specifically the unjustifiable rise in fertilizer prices despite global decreases. Quader argued that such discrepancies burden farmers with higher costs without ensuring fair returns for their produce.

Additionally, Quader shed light on exploitative practices in urban markets, resulting in inflated vegetable prices and further marginalization of farmers. He emphasized the necessity for government intervention to regulate prices and dismantle monopolistic structures.

Aside from economic issues, Quader also addressed the upcoming sub-district elections, affirming his party's participation under their symbol, the plough. However, he expressed concerns about the fairness of the electoral process, fearing low voter turnout, and called for inclusive participation from all political parties to ensure transparency and fairness.

Bangladesh: Economy grows by 3.78 percent in October-December period; inflation persistently high

(lm) Bangladesh's economy experienced a notable slowdown in the October-December period of the 2023-24 fiscal year, with GDP growth halving to 3.78 percent, marking the slowest growth in at least three quarters. This deceleration was primarily attributed to a sharp decline in manufacturing output growth due to reduced domestic consumption and sluggish export performance. [The Daily Star]

The services sector also saw a significant slowdown, offsetting a marginal increase in agricultural production, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). Compared to the same period in the previous year, industrial production expanded by only 3.24 percent, significantly lower than the 10 percent growth recorded previously.

The BBS's quarterly GDP estimate comes amidst projections of below-average economic growth by international agencies, such as the World Bank, which forecasts a subdued growth rate of 5.6 percent for the current fiscal year. Looking ahead, the World Bank anticipates a modest recovery in private consumption, supported by a moderation in inflation, with growth projected to remain relatively slower at 5.7 percent in the next fiscal year of 2024-25 [see AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1].

Despite the government's upward revision of the inflation target to 7.5 percent for fiscal 2023-24, inflation remains persistently high, posing significant challenges to economic stability and poverty reduction efforts. In March, inflation in Bangladesh increased to 9.81 percent, compared to 9.67 percent in February. Both food and non-food prices rose, with food prices growing by 9.87 percent and non-food prices also rising at a higher pace. [The Daily Star]

In light of this, the World Bank warns that high inflation is exacerbating poverty, with approximately 500,000 people likely falling into extreme poverty and 840,000 joining the ranks of the moderately poor due to the erosion of purchasing power.

Bangladesh: Fire breaks out at readymade garment factory in Gazipur

(lm) A fire erupted last week at Nest Composite Ltd, a readymade garment factory in Bangladesh's Gazipur city. The fire was swiftly brought under control by firefighters. The cause of the fire remains unknown at this time. [The Daily Star]

Gazipur is a major industrial hub in Bangladesh, particularly renowned for its textile and garment industry. The city hosts numerous factories and manufacturing units, contributing significantly to the country's economy. However, despite its economic significance, the readymade garment industry in Gazipur, like elsewhere in Bangladesh, has faced safety challenges, including workplace accidents and fires. Factors contributing to these safety issues include inadequate building structures, lack of fire safety

measures, electrical hazards, and insufficient enforcement of safety regulations.

Bangladesh: Tourists banned from visiting Bandarban's Ruma sub-district

(lm) In Bangladesh, tourists are currently prohibited from visiting the Ruma sub-district in Bandarban district due to ongoing joint operations against Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF) activities. The ban follows recent KNF attacks on banks and police stations in Bandarban's Thanchi sub-district, resulting in numerous arrests by joint forces [see AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1. [Dhaka Tribune]

The KNF is an ethnic insurgent group primarily active in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh: Border guard chief visits remote border in Rangamati

(lm) The chief of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), General Major General Mohammad Ashrafuzzaman Siddiqui, visited remote hill areas in Rangamati, starting with the BGB Rangamati sector headquarters. He greeted BGB members at Parachhara and Uluchhari Border Outposts (BOPs), sharing Eid greetings and acknowledging their dedication despite challenges. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Arrest warrant for former student union leader issued over alleged derogatory remarks

(tg/lm) In Bangladesh, an arrest warrant has been issued against Nurul Haque Nur, a former vice-president of Dhaka University's Central Students' Union, allegedly making "derogatory remarks" about Education Minister Mohibul Hassan Chowdhoury Nowfel nearly two years ago. Nur, also a faction president of Gono Odhikar Parishad, a socio-political organization known for its advocacy on various social and political issues, faces charges under the Digital Security Act (DSA). [Daily Star] [Dhaka Tribune] [Business Standard]

Bangladesh: Member of rural administrative council shot dead in suspected case of political rivalry

(tg) A member of a Union Parishad, the smallest level of administration in Bangladesh, was shot dead in Narsingdi district on April 15. Rubel Ahmed, the man killed in the attack, was reportedly followed by a group of men in a private car when he was heading home by motorcycle. Local police have suggested that the killing may have been due to political rival in the upcoming Union Parishad election. The body was sent to a local hospital for a post-mortem. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bhutan: Government approved over 137,000 foreign workers in 2023 to meet economic sector demands

(lm) In Bhutan, the Department of Labour sanctioned 137,324 foreign workers in 2023 to address the requirements of vital economic sectors, according to official statistics. The majority of these workers were employed in construction, public administration, and manufacturing, underscoring the significance of these sectors for the country's economic progress. However, some observers worry that this influx of foreign workers could put local job seekers at a disadvantage and potentially contribute to a brain drain as skilled Bhutanese individuals pursue opportunities abroad. Additionally, there are concerns regarding worker rights and the possibility of exploitation. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Businesses call for policy reforms for economic development

(lm) The business community in central and eastern Bhutan, along with the southwestern border town Phuentsholing, has voiced concerns about policy reforms needed to overcome location-specific challenges and stimulate growth. These concerns were shared during a consultative meeting supported by the European Union, aimed at fostering a sustainable and resilient economy. [Kuensel]

The representatives emphasized the need for immediate interventions to promote tourism, including facilitating tourist entry and exit and establishing direct flights. The lack of adequate policies, particularly in tourism development, was highlighted as a barrier to economic progress. The businesses also called for

streamlined export routes, loan repayment deferments, and support for post-COVID-19 recovery.

India: Supreme Court to deliver verdict on validity of electoral bonds scheme on April 18

(fd/lm) India's Supreme Court is set to announce its verdict on April 18 regarding petitions challenging the validity of the electoral bonds scheme. [The New Indian Express]

Electoral bonds were introduced in 2017 by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and enabled individuals and companies to make unlimited and anonymous donations to political parties. Under the system, Indian citizens or entities incorporated in India could purchase interest-free, tax-exempt bonds from the state-owned State Bank of India (SBI) to donate to a political party of their choice which could then exchange the bonds for cash.

In a historic verdict on February 15, the Supreme Court scrapped the election funding system in a bid to introduce a base level of transparency to campaign financing. The court called electoral bonds unconstitutional and ordered the SBI to immediately stop issuing any more. It also told the bank to share the details of all bond purchases since April 2019 with the Election Commission—including the value, the date of purchase, and the name of the buyer—within a week. [AiR No. 8, February/2024, 3]

However, the SBI has so far refused to disclose details of electoral bonds furnished to the EC under the RTI Act, citing exemptions related to fiduciary capacity and personal information. This decision came despite the Supreme Court's direction to SBI to provide complete bond details to the EC, which were subsequently published on the EC's website. [The Telegraph]

Additionally, the SBI has declined to share information about the legal fees paid to senior advocate Harish Salve for representing the bank in the electoral bonds case before the Supreme Court. This decision was in response to an RTI query filed by an activist, who argued that the fees were taxpayers' money and questioned why SBI was withholding this information. [MSN]

India: Court extends judicial custody of key opposition leader Kejriwal until April 23

(lm/fd) A Delhi court has extended the judicial custody of Arvind Kejriwal, a key opposition figure and Delhi chief minister, until April 23 in connection with the money laundering case linked to a now-scrapped alcohol sales policy in the capital. Kejriwal, arrested on March 21 by India's financial crimes unit, the Enforcement Directorate (ED), has been in custody since April 1. Despite his plea for increased legal meetings being dismissed earlier, the Delhi High Court upheld his arrest, citing sufficient evidence of money laundering. [Hindustan Times]

Kejriwal's arrest came amid criticism from opposition parties that the government was stifling them ahead of general elections in April and May. His arrest marked the third of a leader of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) to be arrested over the alleged corruption case. When he was produced in court on March 28, Kejriwal said that the case against him was a "political conspiracy" and that there was no concrete evidence to back the claims against him.

In other but interconnected updates, the Supreme Court has sought a response from the ED regarding Arvind Kejriwal's arrest in the Delhi Excise policy case. Despite arguments from Kejriwal's legal team that the timing of the arrest aimed to impede his election campaigning, the court postponed the hearing to the week starting April 29. The ED has been instructed to provide their response by April 24, with Kejriwal's reply due by April 26. [The Hindu]

In separate developments, Kalvakuntla Kavitha, the daughter of a former chief minister and state lawmaker in Telangana state, has been sent to judicial custody until April 23 in connection with the Delhi Excise policy case. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) registered a case for the alleged irregularities in the formation and implementation of the stopped Delhi liquor excise policy 2021-22. [Mint] [The Hindu]

India: Ruling BJP's poll manifesto promises jobs, common civil code

(lm) India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) unveiled its poll manifesto for the forthcoming parliamentary elections. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during the manifesto launch in New Delhi, expressed his dedication to initiating policy implementations

immediately upon returning to office for a historic third term, with plans set for the first 100 days post-election. [The Hindu] [The Straits Times]

Notably, the release of the manifesto coincided with the birth anniversary of BR Ambedkar, the architect of India's constitution and an iconic figure within marginalized communities, especially Dalits (formerly known as "untouchables").

One of the central pillars of the BJP's manifesto is job creation, with a commitment to boost employment opportunities across various sectors of the economy. The party also pledges to prioritize infrastructure development, aiming to enhance the country's transportation networks, energy systems, and digital infrastructure.

A notable proposal in the manifesto is the introduction of a common civil code, which would standardize laws governing personal matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance across religious communities. The BJP argues that such a code is essential for ensuring gender equality and protecting the rights of all women in India. However, this proposal has sparked controversy, with critics expressing concerns about its potential impact on religious freedoms and minority rights.

Addressing the pressing concerns of unemployment and inflation, Prime Minister Modi has emphasized the BJP's commitment to tackling these issues through targeted policies and initiatives. The manifesto also highlights the party's focus on maintaining fiscal prudence and achieving high economic growth while ensuring low inflation rates.

In addition to economic and social policies, the BJP manifesto underscores the importance of welfare programs, including expanded health insurance coverage and housing initiatives for the poor. The party aims to continue its efforts to uplift marginalized communities and improve the quality of life for all citizens.

India: Tribunal upholds ban against Jammu and Kashmir Democratic Freedom Party

(fd) In India, a tribunal decided to uphold the central government’s declaration of the Jammu and Kashmir Democratic Freedom Party (JKDFP), founded by separatist leader Shabir Ahmad Shah, as an “unlawful association” under the anti-terror Unlawful Activities

(Prevention) Act. The ban, effective for five years, was supported by evidence from the National Investigation Agency (NIA), indicating Shah's involvement in promoting lawlessness and violence in the Jammu and Kashmir union territory. [Greater Kashmir] [The Hindu]

Shah, who has been in prison since 2017, has been involved in separatist activities and has advocated for the right to self-determination for the people of Kashmir. He has been arrested multiple times by Indian authorities on charges related to his involvement in separatist movements and alleged connections with anti-India activities. The NIA alleges that Pakistan had sent him funds to distribute among people who would attack security personal with stones after the killing of Burhan Wani, a commander of the militant Hizbul Mujahideen organization, in July 2016.

India: Ahead of general elections, Instagram boosts Modi AI images that violate rules

(fd) As India gears up for its parliamentary elections starting April 19, AI-generated images of Prime Minister Narendra Modi portraying him as a Hindu leader and a figure from Hindu mythology are gaining momentum on *Instagram*. However, the widespread use of such AI-generated content raises questions about its compliance with platform rules and its potential for political manipulation and propaganda. [Al Jazeera]

Meta, the parent company of Instagram, has implemented regulations requiring disclosure of AI use in political ads. However, the images do not always adhere to these disclosure requirements. While hashtags like #aiartwork are used to indicate AI involvement, *Meta* considers them insufficient disclosures.

Additionally, there are concerns about the authenticity and potential manipulation of these images, especially in the context of political propaganda. The images portray Modi in various roles, often with religious or mythological symbolism, aiming to influence public perception and shape political narratives. Despite these concerns, *Meta* has not explicitly addressed whether these images violate its policies regarding AI-generated content.

India: Human rights commission's spot inquiry reveals violations in Sandeshkhali region

(lm) In India, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) conducted an on-site investigation into a series of violent events in Sandeshkhali, a region in West Bengal. These incidents involved allegations of harassment, sexual assault, and other atrocities against women, allegedly perpetrated by a local gang associated with Sheikh Shahjahan, a suspended leader of the ruling Trinamool Congress party in the state. [The Indian Express]

Following these events, villagers protested, demanding legal action against the perpetrators due to the perceived failure of the local administration to address the situation adequately. The NHRC's subsequent report highlighted instances of atrocities, suggesting a violation of human rights due to negligence in prevention measures. The inquiry also found that that whenever local residents went with a complaint to the police, they were allegedly advised to approach the accused people, including Sheikh Shahjahan, and seek a compromise.

Based on these interactions, the NHRC on April 12 asked West Bengal chief secretary Bhagwati Prasad Gopalika and director general of police Rajeev Kumar to submit an action taken report in the matter within eight weeks while making several recommendations to restore law and order.

India: *BBC* splits operations after coming under regulatory scrutiny

(fd) The *BBC* has restructured its largest overseas news bureau in response to regulatory scrutiny from Indian authorities following the broadcast of a controversial documentary about Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The broadcaster is dividing its operations, creating a separate production company owned and operated by Indian *BBC* journalists. The new company, *Collective Newsroom*, will continue to provide news and programming under a service contract with the *BBC*. The split will see approximately 80 journalists directly retained by the *BBC*'s news operation, out of the previous 300 in India. [The Indian Express] [Financial Times]

The overhaul comes after the BBC's offices in New Delhi and Mumbai were raided following the airing of a documentary that was critical of Prime Minister

Narendra Modi's alleged role in deadly riots more than 20 years ago. The Modi government had blocked the documentary in India using emergency powers under the Information Technology Rules and compelled social media companies to take them down. At the time, the government denied any connection between the raids and the documentary, instead accusing the *BBC* of violating foreign investment rules.

India: Man in Kerala state booked for social media posts against Prime Minister Modi

(lm) In India's southern Kerala state, a man has been booked by the police for allegedly posting objectionable content on social media targeting Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The complaint, filed by a local BJP activist, accuses him of making false statements to tarnish Modi's image ahead of the parliamentary polls. The man faces charges related to provocation with intent to cause riot and making false statements in connection with an election. [The Indian Express]

India: Dalit man questioned in minor's murder dies in custody; two police officers booked

(lm) In India, a man from the Dalit community died in police custody at a station in Uttar Pradesh. While police say he complained of stomach pain and later died at the hospital, his family alleges he was severely beaten and subjected to electric shocks. He was being questioned about a murder case involving a five-year-old girl from his village. [The Indian Express]

The Dalit community has been historically considered to be at the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy in India. Previously known as "untouchables," Dalits have faced social discrimination, marginalization, and oppression for centuries. Despite legal protections and affirmative action measures, Dalits continue to experience various forms of discrimination and socioeconomic disadvantage in contemporary Indian society.

India: Assam Rifles report on violence in Manipur state, says BJP's chief minister inflamed conflict

(lm/fd) A recent report from the Assam Rifles, a paramilitary force in India that operates primarily in the country's northeastern states, has shed light on the prolonged violence in Manipur state, implicating the state's Chief Minister, N Biren Singh, for exacerbating tensions. [Al Jazeera]

The conflict, spanning over 11 months, has left a devastating toll, with 219 lives lost, 1,100 injured, and 60,000 displaced. At its core lies the deep-seated tension between Manipur's two major communities: the Meitei majority and the Kuki minority. The initial spark ignited in April last year, sparked by the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe status, vehemently opposed by other tribal groups, including the Kuki-Zo community. Subsequent riots and clashes escalated into widespread violence, resulting in casualties on both sides.

Contrary to narratives depicting the conflict solely through the lens of religious divisions, the report unveils a more intricate narrative. While religious identity certainly plays a part, the conflict is fueled by a complex interplay of political authoritarianism, socio-economic dynamics, and historical grievances. Chief Minister Singh, a member of Prime Minister Modi's BJP and a Meitei himself, comes under scrutiny for his hardline policies, particularly in drug control and stifling social media dissent, which are seen as exacerbating tensions. His aggressive measures, especially targeting poppy cultivation, have been interpreted as directed against the Kuki-Zo community, further stoking animosity.

Furthermore, the report highlights the involvement of armed groups from both communities, challenging the Hindu-Christian dichotomy. These armed factions, driven by diverse grievances and aspirations, have perpetuated violence and militarized the conflict landscape.

Meanwhile, efforts to quell the violence, including federal intervention and the establishment of a buffer zone, have been largely unsuccessful. Despite the deployment of armed forces and attempts to impose ethnic boundaries, the conflict persists. Most recently, two people were killed in a violent incident, reigniting tensions just days before the beginning of parliamentary elections in the country and an anticipated visit by Home Minister Shah. [The Indian Express]

Despite Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent assertion that the civil unrest in the region has been quelled, the state police have reported an influx of additional security forces in anticipation of the

upcoming national polls. These elections are scheduled to take place in four phases in the state, commencing on April 19. [The Hindu]

India: Navy chief inaugurates new facilities at Karwar naval base

(fd) Indian Navy chief Admiral R. Hari Kumar recently inaugurated new facilities at Naval Base Karwar in Karnataka state, including a 350-meter-long pier for Offshore Patrol Vessels and residential accommodations. These developments are part of Phase IIA of "Project Seabird", a strategic initiative of the Indian Navy aimed at developing Naval Base Karwar into a major naval base on the western coast of India. [The Hindu] [Times of India]

India: New Army division likely to be raised this year

(lm) Amidst ongoing tensions along the Line of Actual Control with China, the Indian Army is considering raising a new division, the 72 Division, to be deployed in eastern Ladakh under the Northern Command. This proposed division, initially intended to operate within the 17 Mountain Strike Corps based in Panagarh, West Bengal state, is expected to see implementation this year. [The Indian Express]

Unlike traditional recruitment drives, the formation of the 72 Division is likely to leverage existing personnel from other formations within the Indian Army. Additionally, the move is part of broader redeployment changes in the Northern Command, focusing on maintaining a stable deployment and ensuring readiness of strike corps elements.

India: Army conducts fields trials of anti-tank guided missile system

(fd) The Indian Army has successfully completed field trials of the domestically developed Man Portable Anti Tank Guided Missile (MPATGM) system, marking a significant step towards self-reliance in defense technology. [Times of India]

The Maldives: Fracture manifests between former president Yameen, current leader Muizzu

(lm) In Maldives, as the country is approaching parliamentary elections, a noticeable rift has manifested between former President Abdulla Yameen and his once political protégé, current President Mohamed Muizzu. Speaking at a People's National Front (PNF) rally, Yameen recently alleged that the ruling PPM-PNC coalition, once under his helm, aimed to implicate his spouse and son by urging their participation in rallies demanding his release. Additionally, at the same rally, the PNF alleged that President Muizzu requested his predecessor Ibrahim Mohamed Solih not to release Yameen from prison and called for the release of the agenda from a meeting between Solih and his cabinet prior to the handover to the Muizzu administration. [The Sun 1] [The Sun 2]

Both allegations were leveled after Abdul Raheem Abdulla, the PNC's chairperson, questioned during a campaign event earlier this month the loyalty of Yameen's wife and children, saying that it was the same PNC leadership, and not they, who took to the streets and sacrificed for him when he was imprisoned.

Yameen, the half-brother of former dictator Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, was ineligible to participate in the September 2023 presidential election due to an 11-year sentence for money laundering, issued in December 2022. Consequently, the two-party opposition coalition, consisting of his PPM and the PNC, selected Mohamad Muizzu, a previous minister under Yameen and then-mayor of the capital Male, as their presidential nominee. Muizzu emerged victorious in the runoff against Solih, after running on a campaign that heavily relied on leveraging Yameen's name and campaign promises, particularly emphasizing the 'India Out' pledge.

Yameen was transferred to house arrest from a high-security prison island the day after Muizzu's election victory. Following his transfer to home arrest, Yameen received additional concessions allowing movement within Male' City for medical purposes and essential matters. Additional allowances for medical treatment and exercise were later granted upon request. Despite warnings from corrections authorities against public appearances, Yameen attended rallies and addressed gatherings at his party office.

However, since Muizzu's election victory, the PPM-PNC coalition has largely sidelined Yameen, with former key

allies shifting their support to Muizzu and efforts to transfer former PPM members to the PNC. This rift came to a head last November when Yameen quit the PPM and formed the PNF. His son, Zain Abdulla Yameen, is officially listed as the main founder due to legal reasons, but Yameen himself remains the de facto leader.

The Maldives: Venue for PNF closed ahead of assembly

(aa) Senior members of the People's National Front (PNF), the new party of Maldivian former president Abdulla Yameen, reported that a planned event was disrupted on April 9 evening. The party's leadership accused the government of trying to obstruct their assembly, alleging that the state had ordered the venue's electricity to be cut off prior to the event. [The Sun]

In response, President Muizzu – once a political protégé of Yameen – expressed his concerns about Special Operation police acting against his instructions, thereby threatening public trust in the police institution. He promised actions based on a requested investigation report on the incident. In a first step, the sole authorization of SO Police action was handed over to the Commissioner of Police. [Sun Online] [The edition]

The Maldives: FENAKA corruption cases worth over USD 32.5 million submitted to anti-graft watchdog

(aa) FENAKA Corporation Limited (FENAKA), a state-owned enterprise in the Maldives responsible for providing electricity services to various islands and communities across the country, has submitted cases involving 25 projects to the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) for investigation, with a total cost exceeding approximately USD 32.5 million. These projects were awarded unlawfully to benefit certain parties during the tenure of former president Ibrahim Mohamed Solih. [The edition]

The projects, including power plants and office buildings in various islands, were carried out without bills of quantities (BOQs) or market price analysis, with most remaining less than 50 percent complete. FENAKA's Managing Director, Muaz Mohamed Rasheed, stated that additional funding will be

required to complete the halted projects. The cases also involve the purchase of engines and gensets, with up to 60 projects being awarded unlawfully during the previous administration. Muaz highlighted instances of inflated project costs, indicating massive corruption within the organization.

Additionally, there are 35 cases not referred to the ACC of the Solih administration unlawfully benefiting from the project allocation. With the board of FENAKA not authorizing the projects for power plants, power stations, and office buildings, it is assumed that at least eight employees were involved in the corruption cases. Additionally, a disproportionate number of new employees were hired for construction works that have not yet begun.

The Maldives: Elections Commission's secretary-general appointed as member

(lm) Hassan Zakariyya, former secretary-general of the Maldivian Elections Commission (EC), has been appointed as a member of the commission by President Mohamed Muizzu. The appointment, made on April 15, comes after it received parliamentary approval on April 1 with unanimous support. He was nominated by President Muizzu on February 20. Zakariyya, who was nominated by President Muizzu on February 20, replaces former EC vice chairman Ismail Habeeb, whose term expired in March. [The Sun]

The Maldives: Election Commissions seeks formal complaint regarding intimidation of government workers

(aa) The Maldivian Elections Commission (EC) has urged the submission of a formal complaint regarding remarks made at a campaign rally, suggesting that the People's National Congress (PNC) candidate for the Hinnavaru parliamentary seat should have "control" over employees of the Maldives Industrial Fisheries Company (MIFCO) fish factory. [The Sun]

At the rally, a speaker called for government intervention to ensure cooperation from all employees, even those supporting the opposition, and requested Fisheries Minister Ahmed Shiyam to appeal for presidential authorization granting control over the Felivaru fish factory. A viral video clip of the speech prompted concerns of voter intimidation, with EC

Chairman Fuad Thaufeeq calling for complaints to the National Complaints Bureau for further action.

Political partisanship in MIFCO's operation recently came to the forefront when the Chief Executive Officer of the state-owned MIFCO was placed under suspension by the Privatization and Corporatization Board (PCB). The suspension followed allegations against him, including nepotism and misuse of company resources for political purposes. Due to its significance for the local economy, MIFCO has come under pressure in recent years. Criticism also concerns intransparency regarding the company's finances and price control for the market. [AiR No. 13, March/2024, 4]

The Maldives: 30 hectares of land reclaimed from Maavah

(aa) Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu has announced the reclamation of 30 hectares of land on the island of Maavah in an address to the local population. Apart from coastal protection measures, Muizzu referred to road and resort constructions that should be aligned with the interests of the residential community. [PSM News]

Maavah lies in Laamu Atoll in the southern part of the Maldives and is part of a wider reclamation project comprising several islands. The reclamation of 15 hectares of land from Hulhumale' has already been successfully completed. It is part of a total of 63 hectares of land reclaimed for the issuance of land plots under the former administration's "Binveriya" scheme to alleviate congestion in the capital, Malé. [AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1]

Nepal: Lower House's winter session concludes amid criticism from main opposition Nepali Congress

(lm) In Nepal, the winter session of Parliament's lower House concluded on March 14, following the government's decision to end the session in a Council of Ministers meeting last week. Despite expectations for significant legislative progress, only three bills were passed during the two-month session, leaving numerous pending bills unresolved. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

The government's move to prorogue the session has drawn criticism from the main opposition party, Nepali Congress. The party is particularly displeased due to its demand for a parliamentary committee to investigate allegations against Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs Rabi Lamichhane. Additionally, the Nepali Congress has voiced concerns about the government's lack of dedication to improving the investment climate, especially with the Nepal Investment Summit approaching. The government is organizing the summit on April 28-29, presenting 132 big, medium and small projects before potential investors. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Main opposition Nepali Congress obstructs lower House over probe of home minister

(lm) Nepal's main opposition party, the Nepali Congress, has followed through on its threat to disrupt proceedings in Parliament's lower House, escalating tensions between ruling and opposition factions regarding the establishment of a parliamentary panel tasked with investigating fraud allegations against Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister Rabi Lamichhane. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

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]

Despite several rounds of negotiations and discussions, spearheaded by Speaker Devraj Ghimire, no consensus was reached between the parties involved. The Nepali Congress insisted on the creation of a comprehensive probe panel, which would not only investigate the specific case involving Lamichhane but also address broader issues related to cooperative fraud. Conversely, 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 [see AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1].

It is noteworthy, however, that the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) recently joined the Nepali Congress in

targeting Lamichhane over the alleged embezzlement. This came after police acted against thousands of RPP supporters who took to the streets in the capital Kathmandu to demand the restoration of Nepal's constitutional monarchy and the return of a Hindu state—both of which came to an end in 2008, when Nepal became a secular republic, ending a long-running civil war. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

In fact, both the Nepali Congress and the RPP have publicly demanded a high-level probe on all public officials who were in charge and held different positions after the restoration of democracy in 1990. However, constitutional and legal experts question the feasibility and effectiveness of such a broad inquiry, citing challenges in execution and potential delays in ongoing corruption cases. [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Nepal: Government transfers five secretaries

(lm) In Nepal, the government has transferred five secretaries in a recent Cabinet meeting. [The Kathmandu Post]

Dinesh Bhattarai has been moved from the Office of the Prime Minister to the Ministry of Women, Children, and Senior Citizens. Suman Raj Aryal will now oversee the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Arjun Prasad Pokharel has been reassigned to the National Statistics Office following Toyam Raya's resignation. Mukunda Prasad Niraula has been transferred from the Vice-President's Office to the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration, while Vinod Prakash Singh now serves at the National Natural Resources and Fiscal Commission.

Nepal: Nagarik Unmukti Party to lead Sudurpaschim provincial government; two lawmakers claim chief minister position

(lm) In an unexpected turn, the Nagarik Unmukti Party (NUP), a relatively minor political entity in Nepal, is set to spearhead the government in Sudurpaschim province. This decision emerged from a consensus reached during a high-level meeting attended by key figures, including Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) chairman KP Sharma Oli. [myRepublica]

Despite holding merely six seats in the 53-member provincial assembly, which currently stands at 51 members, the NUP's ascent to the chief minister position underscores its strategic importance in the assembly's seat allocation. With Prime Minister Dahal's Maoist Centre commanding 11 seats and Oli's Unified Marxist–Leninist holding 10, along with 18 seats held by the main opposition Nepali Congress party, the NUP's role in parliamentary seat distribution is pivotal. [khabarhub]

Crucially, however, two lawmakers from the Nagarik Unmukti Party have both staked their claim to the position of chief minister. Kailash Kumar Chaudhary and Laxman Kishor Chaudhary presented their claims to Provincial Head Najir Miya, with Kailash seeking support from the Unified Marxist–Leninist and Maoist Centre parties, and independent lawmakers, while Laxman has backing from the opposition Nepali Congress and Unified Socialist parties. This division within the party stems from a longstanding dispute between party chair Ranjita Shrestha and her husband Reshamlal Chaudhary. [The Kathmandu Post]

In separate but related developments, the Supreme Court has intervened to halt the dismissal of Indira Giri, a member of the Sudurpaschim provincial assembly, following a writ petition filed by her. Giri was relieved of her duties by Speaker Bhim Bahadur Bhandari on April 8, following a request from the chairperson of the Nagarik Unmukti Party, Ranjita Shrestha. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Writ petition challenges appointment of Gandaki chief minister

(lm) In Nepal, the former chief minister of Gandaki province, Surendraraj Pandey, has initiated legal action by filing a writ petition at the Supreme Court challenging the appointment of Khagaraj Adhikari as his replacement. Pandey contends that Adhikari's appointment violates constitutional provisions and seeks an order for his own reinstatement as chief minister. [The Kathmandu Post]

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. However, the decision to involve the Speaker in the voting process raised concerns about legal norms and constitutional principles. [AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1]

This legal dispute mirrors a previous case in Koshi province, where the Supreme Court annulled a government led by the Nepali Congress due to unconstitutional involvement of the Speaker in the government formation process, setting a precedent for similar cases.

Nepal: Yam Lal Kandel sworn in as chief minister of Karnali province

Meanwhile, Yam Lal Kandel, the newly appointed Chief Minister of Karnali province, was sworn into office on April 10. Kandel, who is the provincial assembly leader of the Unified Marxist–Leninist, secured the position after presenting his claim with the support of 23 assembly members. His appointment follows the resignation of the previous chief minister, Raj Kumar Sharma, on April 3. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Bimala Ghimire elected upper House vice chair

(lm) Bimala Ghimire from the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) has been elected as the Vice-Chairperson of Parliament's upper House, receiving 39 votes in her favor, while her competitor, Nepali Congress's Bishnu Devi Pudasaini, received 16 votes. The election saw a total of 55 parliamentarians participating in the voting process. [The Himalayan Times]

Nepal: Supreme Court orders imprisonment of rape-accused district judge

(lm) Nepal's Supreme Court has ordered the imprisonment of a suspended district judge accused of rape, overturning previous rulings by the District Court Kathmandu and the High Court Patan. The order cited evidence, including a physical examination report showing evidence of sexual assault, and the unusual circumstances of the accused visiting the victim during legal proceedings. [The Himalayan Times]

Nepal: Home ministry instructs district authorities to closely monitor religious

conversions

(lm) Nepal's Ministry of Home Affairs has directed all 77 district administration offices to monitor religious conversions closely and track the movements of foreign nationals without permits. The circular, issued on April 7, aims to curb religious conferences and orientation programs promoting conversion. [The Kathmandu Post]

Concerns about forced conversions, often involving foreigners entering Nepal for other reasons, have been raised by security agencies and semi-governmental organizations. The directive comes amidst reports of religious tensions in some districts, prompting curfew imposition in Sunsari after conflicts between Hindu and Muslim communities.

Nepal: Political influence hinders satisfactory participation of women, chief election commissioner says

(lm) In Nepal, Chief Election Commissioner Dinesh Kumar Thapaliya has voiced concerns over the insufficient involvement of women in politics, despite constitutional and legal safeguards aimed at fostering gender equality. Thapaliya highlighted a notable gap between the total female population and the number of female voters, suggesting a need for deeper examination into the root causes of this divergence. [The Kathmandu Post]

While acknowledging some progress, such as 42 percent representation of women at the local level and around 35 percent in provincial and parliamentary bodies, Thapaliya emphasized that these gains fall short of achieving genuine gender parity. He attributed this shortfall to the pervasive influence of political parties, which often prioritize other considerations over gender inclusivity.

Nepal: Dalit ex-chief of district body alleges cast-based abuse

(lm) In Nepal's Jhapa district, a former high-ranking official has lodged a complaint against a former vice-chairman of a local municipality, alleging verbal abuse with caste-related derogatory remarks. The complainant belongs to the Dalit community, historically marginalized and situated at the lowest tier

of the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy. [The Kathmandu Post]

Instances of caste-based discrimination and untouchability persist unchecked in Jhapa, located in the Tarai region bordering India. These practices entail considering certain castes as "polluting" or "impure." According to Dalit rights activists, most such cases seldom reach the police and are typically resolved within the village under the influence of local leaders.

Nepal: Revenue collection stands at only half of its target at third-quarter end

(lm) The Nepali government is facing a significant shortfall in revenue collection, with only half of its targeted amount collected by the end of the third quarter of the fiscal year. As of last week, revenue collection amounted to approximately USD 5.41 billion, representing 50.66 percent of the projected USD 10.67 billion. This shortfall is attributed to economic slowdown, government inefficiency in capital expenditure, and sluggish lending by banks. Additionally, capital expenditure stands at 31.4 percent, well below the target of USD 2.26 billion for development projects. [myRepublica 1]

At the same time, The Asian Development Bank (ADB) forecasts Nepal's economy to grow by 3.6 percent in 2024, up from an estimated 1.9 percent in fiscal year 2023. The projected growth is attributed to a gradual relaxation of monetary policy, improved consumer and investor confidence, and increased government capital spending. The service sector and agriculture are also expected to see growth, although risks such as a global economic downturn and geopolitical turmoil could affect tourism and remittance receipts. [myRepublica 2]

Nepal: Progress made on country’s first road tunnel

(tg) The Nagdhunga-Sisnekhola tunnel road in Nepal has successfully completed its final breakthrough, with Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal emphasizing its importance for the country's development goals. The tunnel, funded by a Japanese loan, aims to ease traffic, prevent accidents, and mitigate natural disasters like landslides. Despite facing delays due to various challenges, including the pandemic, the completed tunnel will provide a safer route between Dhading and

Kathmandu, bypassing hazardous terrain. [Himalayan Times] [The Kathmandu Post]

Pakistan: Experts alarmed by lack of protection for minority girls from forced marriages, conversions

(lm) Human rights experts from the United Nations have raised concerns about the lack of protection for women and girls from minority communities in Pakistan, highlighting their vulnerability to forced marriages and conversions. They noted particular risks faced by Christian and Hindu girls, including abduction, trafficking, early marriage, and sexual violence. The experts emphasized the need for stronger legal measures to prevent such abuses and ensure accountability for perpetrators. They called on Pakistan to enforce existing laws, raise the minimum marriage age to 18 for both genders, and uphold international human rights standards without discrimination. [DAWN]

The statement was endorsed by several UN experts, including special rapporteurs on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences; on trafficking in persons, especially women and children; on minority issues; and on freedom of religion or belief. Additionally, the chair of the working group on discrimination against women and girls and members of the working group also joined the experts in voicing concern on the situation.

Pakistan: Government to declare ‘education emergency’

(nw) Pakistan’s Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has declared an education emergency against the backdrop of the alarming number of 26 million out-of-school children, which the premier labelled "criminal negligence." His announcement includes plans to establish Daanish Schools, a network of educational institutions aimed at providing free education and accommodation to children from low-income families. These schools will be set up in regions like Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan, and remote areas of Balochistan and Sindh.

Additionally, Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai urged Prime Minister Sharif to increase education spending to at least 4 percent of the national GDP, emphasizing the importance of prioritizing girls' education. The

Malala Foundation donated USD 15 million to promote education in Pakistan, and she also requested the new government to prioritize girls' education. [Nation] [Dawn]

Pakistan: Senator urges to resolve Balochistan farmers' problems

(nw) Senator Muhammad Abdul Qadir, Chairman of the Senate Standing Committee for Petroleum and Resources, has concern about the risk of famine in his home province Balochistan and advocated for the installation of solar energy tube wells to alleviate farmers' financial burdens and increase crop yields. Senator Qadir also highlighted Balochistan's potential to enhance Pakistan's future, emphasizing that widespread affordable solar energy could boost agricultural and industrial sectors, reduce poverty, alleviate deprivation, and strengthen patriotism among the people. [The Express Tribune]

Pakistan: Electricity prices dip in April, but additional charges authorized for power distribution companies

(nw) In a positive development, Pakistan's Energy Minister Awais Leghari has announced a decrease in electricity prices for April's power bills compared to the previous month. However, despite this relief for consumers, power distribution companies linked to the state-owned Water and Power Development Authority have been authorized to collect additional charges from consumers in the April 2024 bills due to heightened power generation costs, particularly from expensive imported fuel. [Geo TV]

Pakistan: Asian Development Bank forecasts 1.9 percent growth amid warning inflation of 25 percent

(nw) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) forecasts Pakistan's economy is expected to grow by 1.9 percent in the current fiscal yearalthough inflation is expected to stay high at around 25 percent during this period but may ease slightly in the following financial year. The report by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) noted that real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is forecasted to grow by 1.9 percent in FY2024, driven by increased private sector investment

linked to reform progress and a transition to a more stable government. It highlighted a rise in consumer inflation to 28 percent due to energy price increases, along with elevated core inflation reflecting domestic recovery. It also emphasized Pakistan's low financial inclusion rates for women and called for gender-inclusive opportunities for small enterprises and expanded microfinance. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Man kills wife, seven children, says ‘unable to feed them anymore’

(lm) In a tragic incident in Pakistan's Punjab province, a poverty-stricken man allegedly killed his wife and seven young children with an axe due to financial distress and frequent fights with his wife. The suspect, now in custody, admitted to the crime, citing his inability to support his children any further. [NDTV]

Pakistan: Army allegedly assaults police, targets station in Punjab over weapon seizure dispute

(nw) In Pakistan’s Punjab province, a dispute over the seizure of an allegedly illegal weapon from a soldier's family escalated into the Pakistan Army allegedly assaulting police officers and targeting a police station. Videos of the incident circulated widely on social media, showing police officers being mistreated by army personnel. Allegedly, the police had detained three civilians and demanded money for their release, prompting the army's intervention. Four policemen, including the station house officer, were suspended and arrested, facing charges of unlawful detention and extortion. [mint]

Both the Punjab police and the Pakistan Army launched a joint investigation, resolving the matter peacefully. However, the main opposition PTI has demanded the resignation of the Punjab police chief over the incident. [Dawn]

Pakistan: More than 100,000 police, paramilitary forces deployed ahead of Eid-al-Fitr

(lm) Ahead of the Eid al-Fitr holiday in Pakistan, authorities have deployed over 100,000 police and paramilitary forces at mosques and marketplaces

across the country due to security concerns. In Lahore alone, the provincial capital of Punjab, more than 52,000 police officers have been deployed at mosques and sensitive areas as part of the security plan, with additional forces stationed at markets. Intelligence agencies warned of potential militant attacks during the holiday, prompting increased security measures. [Associated Press]

Pakistan: Authorities declare state of emergency in southwest as lightning, rain kill 36 people

(lm) In Pakistan, severe lightning and heavy rains have resulted in the deaths of at least 36 people, primarily farmers. The incidents occurred mainly in eastern Punjab province, where lightning struck farmers during wheat harvesting, and rain-triggered house collapses. The situation prompted authorities in the country's southwest to declare a state of emergency. [abc News]

The unusual April rainfall in Pakistan is attributed to climate change, as per environmental experts, recalling the devastating floods of 2022 that had significant human and economic costs.

Sri Lanka: Bid to align SLFP with UNP ahead of polls alleged

(aa) A senior leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), a constituent party of the opposition Freedom People's Alliance, has alleged an attempt to align the SLFP with the United National Party (UNP) of President Wickremesinghe ahead of the upcoming presidential election, aiming to weaken and ouster former president and SLFP party leader Maithripala Sirisena. [The Island]

According to Rohana Lakshman Piyadasa, a former General Secretary and Chairman of the SLFP, the UNP is trying to take over the SLFP through deceit after failing to sway a significant portion of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), the country's main parliamentary opposition party, to support President Wickremesinghe. Piyadasa also implicated former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga in the alleged political project, stating that she played a significant role and even took legal action against Sirisena.

These allegations come at a time when the SLFP has to fight internal discrepancies regarding Sirisena's leadership role. 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. Shortly thereafter, Kumaratunga petitioned the Colombo High Court, which led to the issuing of an interim injunction preventing Sirisena from functioning as the chairman of the SLFP [see AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1].

Against this backdrop, it is worth noting that President Wickremesinghe relied on the support of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) party, which currently holds 106 seats, to secure his presidency. However, the SLPP has faced growing unpopularity since then, particularly due to the economic crisis leading to the ousting of then-President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in 2022. Additionally, the SLPP has yet to formally decide on its support for President Wickremesinghe, and there are indications that the SLPP might not endorse Wickremesinghe as candidate for the upcoming election.

A case in point, Senior Presidential Advisor and UNP senior Ashu Marasinghe recently claimed that President Wickremesinghe is likely to contest the upcoming presidential election under a new symbol, representing various parties as a national candidate. Of note, Marasinghe said that over 80 percent of the SJB is expected to support Wickremesinghe in the election. [Daily Mirror 1]

Meanwhile, UNP General Secretary Palitha Range Bandara called for collaboration among all parties, urging them to prioritize the stability of Sri Lanka over partisan interests. He specifically invited MPs from the SJB experiencing internal conflicts to join the UNP and urged the SJB and the National People's Power (NPP) to cease their ongoing disputes, stressing that debating economic issues now is unproductive given their past refusal to govern during the crisis in 2022. [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: SLPP to take disciplinary measures against defecting MPs

(aa) The Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), the single-largest party in Sri Lanka's Parliament and key compontent of the government coalition, plans to take disciplinary action against G.L. Peiris – a former foreign minister – and other party lawmakers. These MPs, originally elected under the SLPP banner, earlier this

month signed an electoral pact with the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) party. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Wigneswaran considers himself best Tamil candidate to run for President

(lm) C.V. Wigneswaran, leader of the Thamil Makkal Thesiya Kuttani (TMTK) political party and Jaffna district MP, considers himself the best Tamil candidate for the presidential election, asserting that Sri Lanka's government is predominantly for the Sinhalese. [The Island]

The TMTK primarily advocates for the rights and interests of the Tamil community, particularly in the northern and eastern regions of Sri Lanka, including the major city of Jaffna, where the majority of Tamils reside.

Of note, Wigneswaran also commented on a call by a lawmaker of the United National Party of President Wickremesinghe – a party that historically had strong support from the Sinhalese community, the majority ethnic group in Sri Lanka – for Tamils not to field a candidate. Wigneswaran emphasized that Tamils have historically supported majority community candidates who promise to address their political issues but fail to deliver after elections.

Sri Lanka: *NextGenSL* facilitates cross-party collaboration

(lm) *NextGenSL*, a platform fostering cross-party cooperation, hosted representatives from 15 political parties for a two-day consultation, resulting in the development of an initial draft for a cross-party governance and economic development framework. Participants engaged in constructive discussions on governance, economic development, and social progress, drawing from various sources. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Mounting pressure to conclude agreements for IMF review

(aa/lm) Sri Lanka faces a tight deadline to reach agreements with creditors, including bondholders, before June, when the third tranche of the 48-month Extended Fund Facility (EEF) of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is due. This tranche amounts to

USD 337 million. Sri Lanka must finalize agreements with the so-called Paris Club of Nations and China for restructuring bilateral debts, along with arrangements with commercial creditors, before this deadline. [Daily Mirror 1]

However, debt restructuring negotiations with private bondholders face challenges due to disagreement on two key areas, while progress with bilateral creditors is proceeding smoothly, according to Chief of Staff of the President, Sagala Ratnayake. Details regarding the disagreement, whether with local or foreign bondholders, are kept confidential. [Daily Mirror 2]

The total amount of Sri Lanka's EFF Arrangement is about USD 3 billion as of the time of program approval on March 20, 2023. The IMF recently expressed optimism about Colombo's economic recovery after the declared bankruptcy of 2022. It notes recent developments such as 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, the IMF also emphasized that the completion of the review depends on the implementation of prior actions and a financing assurance review [see AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1].

In related developments, a recent Asian Development Bank report forecasts a moderate growth of 1.9 percent in 2024 and 2.5 percent in 2025 for Sri Lanka, following two years of economic contraction. However, sustained growth depends on ongoing reforms and positive consumer and business sentiment. [Daily Mirror 3]

Sri Lanka: Navy seizes large drug haul worth millions

(lm) The Sri Lanka Navy has intercepted narcotics, including crystal methamphetamine and heroin, with a street value exceeding USD 12.5 million. The seizure, part of an intelligence operation, occurred in the seas off Dondra. Suspects aboard fishing trawlers were apprehended, and the seized drugs were inspected at Galle Harbour. The Navy remains vigilant to thwart illegal activities, with the total value of seized drugs in 2024 exceeding USD 30.6 million. [Daily Mirror]

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

Cambodia: Prime Minister Hun Manet confirms major canal project to go ahead

(lvw) Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet affirmed in a statement on April 11 that the controversial construction project of the Funan Techo canal, a major Chinese funded canal, is set to go ahead. The 80 km waterway canal will link the capital with the coast, allowing access from inland Phnom Penh to the ocean at the coastal province of Kep, and the Gulf of Thailand. The estimated construction cost of the canal is USD 1.7 billion.

Cambodian officials say the Chinese-backed infrastructure company is expected to begin construction on the project later this year. The canal's access to the Gulf of Thailand is significant as it provides an alternative route for trade, bypassing Vietnam's traditional route.

This canal will mark the latest in a string of Chinese-backed infrastructure projects which have made headway under the strong Cambodia-China bilateral relationship under the leadership of particularly under the leadership of ex-PM Hun Sen. After receiving billions in investments and infrastructure over the past decades, Cambodia has grown to become a key ally to China.

The canal project has come under scrutiny by the U.S., Vietnam and has faced internal Cambodian critique too. The move is being seen by some as a way for Beijing to boost its military influence in Phnom Penh and facilitate an expanded naval presence in the Gulf

of Thailand. Washington in particular is alert to what an increase in Chinese naval presence would mean for the evolving geopolitics of the region and has urged Cambodia for greater transparency regarding the project, its financing and its intended use.

Hun Manet is backing the project, calling it a “historic project that will provide benefits to our people" and stimulate the trade and agricultural sectors. He also denied claims that the canal would affect the water flow of the Mekong River or be used for Chinese warships. He also rebutted claims that the port would be used by any foreign power, “let alone a military”.

The controversy around the project illustrates the geopolitical tug-of-war for influence in the region as both world powers vie to extend their coverage, reach and surveillance capacities. [Channel News Asia] [South China Morning Post]

Cambodia: Court to try Candlelight Party President

(lvw) Teav Vannol, President of Candlelight Party, the key political opposition party to PM Hun Manet’s party, appeared on April 10 at the Phnom Penh Municipal Prosecutor’s Office to be tried for deformation.

The case was brought to court by a government lawyer and concerns remarks made by Vannol on a radio programme in February. The government’s prosecuting lawyer alleges that Vannol’s comments were made with malicious intent and constitute defamation as they tarnish the government’s reputation.

In an interview with Nikkei Asia of Radio France Internationale, Vannol stated that there was “no democracy in Cambodia” and accused Prime Minister Hun Manet of having tightened controls on opponents compared to previous leaders and of arresting political opponents, including CP members.”

The party contends that the case shouldn't have been brought to court, citing the right to express political opinions and persecuting opposition will only lead to a fragile democracy. [Camboja News], [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Concerns over relocation of communities for newly listed UNESCO site

(lvw) Rights groups have raised concerns over the uncertain fate of the relocated families to make way for an Angkor site recently listed as a UNESCO world heritage site. Such a UNESCO listing requires the host country to fulfill certain conditions, including the removal of dwellings and villagers throughout the site.

The Angkor site is one of the largest archeological sites in Asia and is critical for Cambodia's tourism industry. The move was signed off on by Hun Sen in 2022, while he was still Prime Minister.

Cambodian authorities say the relocations are justified, as they are protecting heritage land from the 10,000 families who are illegal squatting on the site. The families who consented to moving from the UNESCO site were given small parcels of land and essential food supplies in the Run Ta Ek village, 25 km away.

However, an Amnesty report from November 2023 questioned the veracity of such consent, saying that some cases constitute “forced evictions in disguise.” A further concern is the conditions of the camps that the families move into, where precarious and vulnerable living situations are exacerbated during monsoon seasons. This is proving a contested issue, which will require a sensitive approach that ensures both human rights and cultural preservation. [Laotian Times]

Cambodia: Arbitrary detention of NGO leader criticized

(lvw) The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights reports their concern at the recent arbitrary arrest and detention of Cambodian human rights defender Koet Saray.

Saray is a Buddhist monk and the president of the Khmer Student Intelligent League Association (KSILA), a group working to build the capacity of students to engage in social justice, development and governance issues.

He was arrested on April 5 outside the KSILA office on charges of “incitement to cause serious chaos to social security”, after which he was detained and taken for questioning. If convicted, he could face between six months and two years prison time.

Rights groups call for his release, condemning the arbitrary arrest, harassment and intimidation of activists and human rights defenders. [International Federation for Human Rights] [World Organisation against Torture]

Cambodia: 130 Chinese nationals extradited amidst fraud crackdown

(lvw) On April 13, 130 Chinese nationals involved in gambling, scam and fraud activities in Cambodia were extradited back to China.

This occurred during a larger, coordinated crackdown on illicit fraud and gambling dens in the provincial city of Preah Sihanouk. The operation was jointly carried out by the Cambodian police and Chinese Public Security authorities. [China Daily]

Indonesia: Nickel boom raises environment and social concerns despite economic growth

(jb) Indonesia's rapid ascent to becoming the world's leading nickel refiner has transformed the nation's landscape but at a significant cost to the environment and local communities, The Guardian reports. The Indonesian islands of Sulawesi, Halmahera, and Obi have seen an industrial boom with about 200 smelters and 200,000 factory workers, thanks to the country's cheap coal, ore, and labor, as well as Chinese investment.

Upin, a Bajau fisherman, laments the impact of the factories on his livelihood, citing warmer, more polluted waters that have decimated the local fish population. In villages like Kurisa, the air is thick with the smell of metal due to the proximity of smelters and coal power plants. Water pollution is also a major concern, with samples showing high levels of heavy metals.

Despite these environmental and social challenges, Jakarta sees nickel as a crucial industry for the nation's development, especially with the rising demand for electric vehicles. However, critics argue that the industry's practices, which include using coal power for refining and covering up accidents to avoid compensation, are incompatible with the green transition. As global auto companies like Volkswagen and Ford invest directly in Indonesian refineries, there is increasing pressure for responsible mining practices. [The Guardian]

Indonesia: Child killed and another injured in clash between rebels and Indonesian soldiers in Papua

(jb) In a recent outbreak of violence in Indonesia's easternmost region of Papua, a 12-year-old boy was tragically killed, and a 6-year-old girl was injured during a gunfight between separatist Papuan rebels and government security forces. The incident occurred on April 8 when rebels attacked a security post in Intan Jaya, Central Papua province, attempting to free Bui Wonda, who was arrested on suspicion of supplying weapons to the group.

Papua, a resource-rich region on New Guinea island, has been plagued by a separatist insurgency since its incorporation into Indonesia in 1969. Indonesia designates the TPNPB as a terrorist organization and maintains a significant military presence in the region. [Benar News]

Laos: World Bank confirms changing employment landscape, sustained inflation

(lvw) The latest data from the World Bank households survey details the consequences of Laos' struggling employment market and sustained inflation. The latest round of data was collected during January and February revealing significant shifts in employment dynamics, coupled by the country's shifting socio-economic landscape.

As a consequence of inflation, many more people are seeking work in the manufacturing and agricultural sectors, which are deemed less volatile in terms of inflation. The report also indicated a significant increase in the number of self-employed workers, from 29 percent to 45 percent year on year. Self-employment, as well as working in family businesses were seen as ways to buffer against the decreasing purchasing power and inflation, which exceed average wage increases.

Low-income families are feeling the strain the hardest, with the financial burden impacting children's education and nutrition, putting improvements in development on risky footing. [Laotian Times]

Laos: PM orders railway growth to enhance and modernize logistics

(lvw) Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone is enhancing construction of national transport and logistics systems, in an attempt to modernize the infrastructure to herald a new era of growth and connectivity. In a joint meeting with the Ministry of Public Works and Transport on April 9, he outlined efforts to speed up the modernization of transport and logistics systems and maximize the potential provided by the rail network to drive growth.

In line with China's Belt and Road Initiative and Laos' national agenda to progress from a 'land locked' to a 'land-linked' country, Sonexay emphasized this saying that the "country's strategic location is favourable for regional and global connectivity and integration." At the meeting, he also discussed the need for construction and maintenance of large infrastructure projects to be properly managed environmentally and in line with town planning regulations during rapid urbanization.

There have, however, been difficulties in the security management of railway construction. The theft of equipment and building materials poses an issue to the construction of the Chinese-Laos railway. More private security will be hired to be stationed along all the railway's ten Laos stations.

In 2023 police arrested 71 people along the railway route on charges of theft. Scrap metal operators have been warned to enhance diligence on sourcing, it being illegal to buy scrap metal stolen from properties and state-owned entities. [Radio Free Asia] [Vientiane Times]

Malaysia: Major non-Muslim native-based parties to cooperate in next year's Sabah state election

(dql) Ending months of negotiations, Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) and Sabah STAR – two major non-Muslim native-based parties in Malaysia – have agreed to sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) reflecting efforts to seal cooperation in the Sabah state election due next year.

With the agreement, the two parties, which are currently part of the seven-member Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) ruling coalition government, seek to boost their native bases in 23 non-Muslim native-majority areas of predominantly ethnic Kadazandusun, Murut and Rungus communities in Sabah.

In the 2020 snap state elections, the two parties appeared to have blocked each other's efforts, with some placing candidates against the GRS' choice in certain constituencies. [The Star]

Malaysia: Date to hear Najib's appeal to recuse judge in 1MDB trial set

(dql) August 20 has been set by Malaysia's Court of Appeal, the country's highest court, as date for the hearing of former Prime Minister Najib Razak's appeal to recuse judge Collin Lawrence Sequerah from presiding over his ongoing 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) trial.

Najib is appealing against the decision of the Kuala Lumpur High Court in August last year which dismissed his application to recuse Sequerah from hearing his trial. Najib had argued Sequerah revealed that he and Jasmine Loo Ai Swan, a former 1MDB general counsel, had been partners in a law firm.

In dismissing Najib's application to recuse him, Sequerah, now a Court of Appeal judge, stated there has been no communication either on a professional or personal basis with Loo after she had left the legal firm in late 2008. Loo has testified in the ongoing trial as the prosecution's 50th witness.

Najib is facing four charges of using his position to obtain USD 566 million in bribes belonging to 1MDB and 21 charges of money laundering involving the same amount. [Malay Mail]

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

Najib Razak became Prime Minister of Malaysia in 2009. In his first year in office, he created the 1Malaysia Development Berhad as part of his economic liberalization policy and trademark 1Malaysia program. The fund had a budget of USD 1 billion to invest, with Najib having the sole authority to sign off investments and manage the personnel on its board and management team.

Malaysia: Fear of job loss widespread

(dql) A recent survey of Randstad, a Dutch multinational human resource consulting firm, has revealed that one in two Malaysians fear losing their jobs.

The survey result is attributed to growing concerns over how Malaysia's economy will impact their job security, with the fear of job loss being notably higher among Gen Z (59 per cent) and Millennials (57 per cent). [Malay Mail]

Malaysia: High rise in data thefts in 2023 recorded

(dql) According to data of CyberSecurity Malaysia (CSM), Malaysia national cyber security agency, the number of reported data thefts in the country saw a 1,192 percent hike in 2023, with a total of 646 data thefts compared to only 50 cases in the previous year.

A total of 646 data thefts were reported last year, according to reports received by CMS's Cyber999 helpline.

For the first three months this year, 142 data theft cases have been reported out of 1,555 cyber security incidents. [Malay Mail]

Myanmar: Rebels claim to take control of last military base in key border town

(jb) Myanmar rebels have claimed to have taken control of the last military base in the key border town of Myawaddy, dealing a significant blow to the country's military junta. The Karen National Union (KNU) stated that about 200 soldiers abandoned their base following an attack by Karen resistance fighters and have been pushed towards the No 2. Friendship Bridge linking Myanmar to Thailand. While the KNU claims control of Myawaddy, they do not yet control the border bridge.

Myawaddy, strategically located with a population of 200,000, is a major trading point with Thailand and home to numerous online scam factories. The UN estimates that up to 120,000 people could be held in these compounds. Video footage shows Myanmar citizens crossing into Thailand amidst the ongoing conflict.

The junta, facing increasing opposition and territorial losses, has been warned by Thailand's Third Army

Region Commander against any military airstrikes encroaching into Thailand. [CNN]

Myanmar: Resistance forces strike regime's Southeastern Command with drones

(jw) Rebel forces attacked the military junta's Southeastern Command in Mon State's Mawlamyine Township with drones. Deputy junta chief Soe Win was present to oversee operations at the Thai border earlier last week.

A unit of the Shar Htoo Waw Technical Force resistance group carried out the April 8 and 9 attacks. The unit claimed that the deputy junta chief and other top military officers were injured in the attack, but the claims have not yet been verified.

Information regarding the extent of damage or the number of casualties has not yet been confirmed. Residents said that the road by the Southeastern Command has been closed off, and military vehicles have left for the Mawlamyine Airport. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Rebel army seizes junta base in jade mining hub

(jw) The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) seized a junta base that controlled the main road to Hpakant town, a major jade mining hub. The town was captured on April 11 after two days of attacks.

The military base was located in Namtyar Village and served as a checkpoint to control traffic on the Hpakant-Kamaing route. Around 200 junta troops were stationed there. Colonel Naw Bu, spokesperson for the KIA, said that the junta "earned a lot by collecting money from civilians and vehicles using the route."

Despite attempts by the military regime to defend the base with fighter jets, KIA troops captured it and arrested junta soldiers. [The Irrawaddy]

Singapore: Prime Minister Lee to step down on May 15, hand power to his deputy Lawrence Wong

(lm) Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has announced his intention to step down from his position on May 15, marking the end of his two-decade-long tenure as the country's leader. He will be succeeded by his deputy, Lawrence Wong, who currently serves as the Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister. Wong's appointment has garnered unanimous support from lawmakers within the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) - making Wong only the second non-heritage leader in Singapore's history. [Associated Press] [TIME]

Lee, 72, had initially planned to retire earlier, before turning 70, but the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted those plans. He announced his retirement last November, designating Wong as his chosen successor. Wong, a member of the fourth generation of leaders who are expected to take the helm of the country's government, rose to prominence for his pivotal role in coordinating Singapore's response to the COVID-19 crisis.

The Lee family's influence has been significant in Singaporean politics since the nation's inception. Lee Kuan Yew, Lee Hsien Loong's father, held the position of Prime Minister from 1959 to 1990. Following Lee Kuan Yew's tenure, Goh Chok Tong served as Prime Minister until 2004, when Lee Hsien Loong took over. While Lee Hsien Loong's leadership has been associated with Singapore's impressive economic progress, it has also been criticized for its firm governmental control, media restrictions, and legal actions against critics.

Singapore: Opposition Workers' Party member Terence Tan leaves party due to personal reasons

(lb) Terence Tan, a member of Singapore's main opposition Workers' Party (WP), s confirmed his departure from the political party in January this year due to personal reasons. Tan joined the Workers' Party in 2011 and contested in the 2015 and 2020 general elections, albeit unsuccessfully. His decision comes amid anticipation of an upcoming general election, with political parties already gearing up for potential contests. [The Independent]

Singapore: Inderjit Singh urges PAP leaders to connect with ground issues

(lb) In a recent interview with *Rice Media*, former People's Action Party (PAP) MP Inderjit Singh stressed the necessity for PAP leaders to reconnect with grassroots issues and regain trust from Singaporeans. Singh, who served from 1996 to 2015, emphasized the importance of conveying empathy and assurance to address pressing concerns such as the cost of living and housing. He cautioned against relying solely on budget allocations for electoral gains and highlighted the increasing strength of the opposition Workers' Party (WP), particularly with well-qualified candidates. [Rice]

Singh's remarks resonate with a recent decision by the PAP to ask its activists to resume grassroots engagement in wards held by the WP. The decision to restart engagement came 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. [AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1]

Singapore: Two lawyers suspended 3 years each for misleading court, wasting time of five judges

(lm) Two lawyers in Singapore, Paul Seah Zhen Wei and Chandra Mohan Rethnam, each received a three-year suspension for misleading the country's highest court and wasting the time of five judges during a Court of Appeal hearing. They failed to disclose a settlement agreement between their clients that rendered the appeal purely academic. [The Straits Times]

Singapore: Human rights group writes open letter to Prime Minister Lee

(lm) A United States-based human rights group has written to Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, urging him to allow opposition leader Chee Soon Juan to attend the Oslo Freedom Forum. Chee, the secretary-general of the Singapore Democratic Party, was barred from attending the event due to bankruptcy restrictions. The group argues that this restriction violates Chee's freedom of expression and criticizes Singapore's human rights record. Chee asserts that the travel ban is political rather than practical. [yahoo!news]

Singapore: Air Force's new helicopters achieve full operational capability

(lb) Singapore has elevated its air force capabilities with the integration of two new transport helicopter types, the Airbus Helicopters' H225M medium-lift and Boeing's CH-47F Chinook heavy-lift helicopters, into the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF). These helicopters, renowned for their versatility, have already demonstrated their effectiveness in critical tasks such as medical evacuations and disaster relief operations. [YTech] [The Straits Times]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

The Philippines: Election commissions sees 70-80 percent overseas voter turnout in 2025 polls

(lm) In the Philippines, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) aims for a 70 to 80 percent voter turnout among overseas Filipinos in the 2025 midterm elections, facilitated by the pilot implementation of internet voting. This goal represents a significant increase from the 38 percent turnout in the 2022 polls. [Philippine News Agency]

The Philippines: Former vice president open to working with government for mental health services

(lm) Philippines' former Vice President Leni Robredo, who held office between 2016 and 2022, has expressed openness to collaborating with government agencies to address the increasing demand for mental healthcare and intervention. Her foundation, Angat Buhay, is considering reviving the so-called Bayanihan e-Konsulta initiative, which aims to provide mental health services to communities. These services are expected to launch in the second quarter of 2024. [ABC CBN]

The Philippines: Asian Development Bank tempers country's 2024 growth forecast to 6 percent

(lm) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has revised down its 2024 growth forecast for the Philippines to 6 percent, citing inflation and global economic slowdown as key concerns. In its "Asian Development Outlook" report, the ADB trimmed its GDP forecast from 6.2 percent previously. Inflation remains a significant threat, projected at 3.8 percent for the year. [Inquirer]

Despite the adjustment, the Philippines is expected to perform well compared to other Southeast Asian economies, with a projected growth rate matching the lower end of the government's target. However, the ADB anticipates a faster expansion of 6.2 percent in 2025, driven by government efforts to improve budget execution and investment climate.

The Philippines: USD 3.6 million loan released for 'Pambansang Pabahay' projects

(lm) In the Philippines, the Home Development Mutual Fund, also known as Pag-IBIG Fund, has disbursed approximately USD 3.6 million in developmental loans for housing projects under President Marcos Jr.'s Pambansang Pabahay Para sa Pilipino (4PH) Program. These loans were issued to two private contractors working on 4PH projects in Luzon and Visayas. Additionally, Pag-IBIG Fund previously approved revolving credit lines totaling nearly USD 234 million for the National Housing Authority and the Social Housing Finance Corporation to support their 4PH projects. [Philippine News Agency]

4PH is a flagship housing program initiated by President Marcos Jr. It aims to address the country's housing backlog by constructing one million housing

units annually until 2028. With over 30 ongoing 4PH projects across the country, the initiative is led by the 4PH-Project Management Office under the Department of Human Settlements and Urban Development.

The Philippines: President Marcos Jr. orders review of soldiers' benefits

(lm) President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. of the Philippines has initiated a review of soldiers' benefits, particularly focusing on the reassessment of separation benefits for soldiers with total permanent disability. Additionally, he has committed to improving healthcare access for war veterans and has earmarked approximately USD 2.7 million for the procurement of a new MRI machine at the Veterans Memorial Medical Center. [Inquirer]

Thailand: Opposition Move Forward Party may get more time to file dissolution defence

(lm) Thailand's Constitutional Court may allow the country's main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) more time to file its defence in the dissolution case against it, the court's president said on April 10. He said if the MFP seeks more time to submit its defence, the court will consider extending the deadline for submitting the documents by another 15 days, starting on April 17. This follows the court's acceptance of a petition by the Election Commission (EC) on April 3, which sought the dissolution of the MFP and initially granted the party 15 days to prepare its defence. [Bangkok Post]

The dissolution petition, filed by the 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 [see AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1]. 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.

Thailand: Ruling coalition to discuss potential cabinet reshuffle after Songkran holiday, prime minister says

(msz) Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin addressed recent speculations about a potential cabinet reshuffle on April 15. He mentioned that discussions among coalition partners regarding this matter will occur after the Songkran holiday. This comes after previously dismissing rumors of any imminent changes in the cabinet lineup. [Bangkok Post 1]

The rumors suggested changes including Srettha possibly relinquishing his finance minister role to assume the defense minister position currently held by Sutin Klungsang. Additionally, it was speculated that Pichai Chunhavajira, the premier's adviser and chairman of the Stock Exchange of Thailand, could replace Srettha as finance minister. Furthermore, there were indications that Public Health Minister Cholnan Srikaew might also lose his portfolios, with new roles assigned to him and Sutin related to overseeing parliamentary affairs and strategies within the ruling coalition. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Former premier Thaksin expects fugitive sister Yingluck to return this year

(lm) Thailand's former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was paroled in February, said that he was working to bring his sister Yingluck Shinawatra back to the country this year, adding that he would have answers for the "majority of the society" and opposition from the "minority" would be normal. [Bangkok Post]

Yingluck, who served as Thailand's first female prime minister from 2011 to 2014 before her government was ousted in a coup, fled the country in August 2017, shortly before a court was set to announce a verdict in a negligence trial against her. The charges stemmed from her government's rice subsidy scheme, which caused significant losses to the Thai state. In her absence, she was sentenced to five years in prison.

However, in December of the previous year, the Supreme Court acquitted Yingluck of malfeasance in her 2011 transfer of a National Security Council secretary-general, following two prior postponements. Furthermore, the court rescinded an arrest warrant for Yingluck, which had been issued when she did not appear in court for her trial in the case back in November of the previous year [see AiR No. 52, December/2023, 4]. Last month, the Supreme Court acquitted her and five others of malfeasance and collusion in the awarding of a THB 240-billion (roughly USD 6.7 billion) campaign to promote her government's infrastructure projects [see AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1].

Still, for Yingluck to return to Thailand without facing imprisonment, she would require a pardon from King Maha Vajiralongkorn or other forms of clemency due to her previous sentencing in absentia in 2027 for alleged negligence related to the rice subsidy program.

Nonetheless, both rulings were marked as significant legal success for the influential Shinawatra family. In February, Yingluck's brother Thaksin – a two-time prime minister and figurehead of the ruling Pheu Thai Party – was released on parole after serving six months into a commuted prison sentence for abuse of power and conflicts of interest. Thaksin had spent 15 years abroad after fleeing in the wake of his 2006 overthrow but made a surprise return in August to face justice. He was transferred to hospital on his first night in jail and soon after, his eight-year term was commuted to one year by the king. These developments have fueled persistent rumors that the tycoon made a behind-the-scenes deal with his powerful enemies, claims his allies and rivals have denied.

Speaking against this backdrop, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin said he would welcome former premier Yingluck and others convicted for political reasons home on condition that they strictly followed Thai law. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Government seeks legal counsel on loan for digital wallet scheme

(lm) Thailand's government is seeking legal counsel from the Council of State regarding its plan to borrow THB 172.3 billion from the Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperative (BAAC) to partially fund its THB 500 billion digital wallet handout scheme. [Bangkok Post]

The program to give away THB 10,000 (around USD 285) to 50 million Thais to spend in their local communities was the signature election campaign policy of the ruling Pheu Thai party. Registration will commence in the third quarter, with distribution facilitated through a "super app" developed by the Digital Economy and Society Ministry. The government intends to establish a committee to prevent fraud, anticipating a 1.2-1.6 percent boost to the country's GDP.

The government says the digital wallet scheme will be financed by three sources of funding. A total of THB 152.7 billion will be drawn from the budget for the 2025 fiscal year, while another THB 172.3 billion will be borrowed from the BAAC's budget for the 2025 fiscal year. This amount will be given to 17.23 million farmers. The other THB 175 billion will come from the reallocation of the budget in the current fiscal year.

Critics have raised concerns about borrowing from the BAAC, drawing parallels to the rice-pledging program during former prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra's administration. Introduced in 2011, the scheme aimed to boost farmers' incomes, reduce rural poverty, and spur economic growth in Thailand. It involved the government purchasing rice from farmers at prices well above market rates, which was then stockpiled to elevate global rice prices. However, the scheme incurred substantial costs for the government, leading to significant budgetary burdens. Ultimately, it played a role in the downfall of Yingluck's government, with her indictment for negligence by the National Anti-Corruption Commission in 2014 and subsequent removal from office by the Constitutional Court sparking political instability and protests.

Thailand: Cabinet endorses special committee report on legalization of casino complexes

(lm) In Thailand, a special House committee report on legalizing entertainment complexes with casinos in the country was endorsed by the country's Cabinet on April 11. Additionally, the finance ministry was assigned to conduct an additional study on the

feasibility of the investment, which must be done within 30 days. [Bangkok Post]

The push for legalizing casinos in Thailand comes amid growing momentum for the idea, despite their current prohibition except for state-controlled horse races and lotteries. Yet, illicit gambling activities persist, including soccer betting and underground casinos. Advocates of legalization, including Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin, argue that it could enhance tourism and position Thailand as a competitive player in the gaming industry, aligning with other Southeast Asian countries like Cambodia, Singapore, Myanmar, and the Philippines, where casinos are already legal [see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1].

According to the committee's report, the proposed entertainment complex scheme has the potential to increase tax revenue for Thailand, thus enabling broader government support. However, public engagement through hearings will be essential to determine the public sentiment towards the casino proposal.

Additionally, the Cabinet emphasized the importance of private sector involvement to mitigate new budgetary pressures on the government. It suggested joint investments with private partners, coupled with the establishment of a "casino tax" to regulate the business effectively. Furthermore, the Cabinet recommended creating a specific government organization to address any negative impacts of the proposed entertainment complex and passing a dedicated law to regulate this new industry.

However, it's worth noting that the House committee's report faced opposition from a group of university academics, particularly from Chulalongkorn University. These academics raised concerns about the potential harms of legalizing casinos, disputing the notion that it aligns with economic stimulus efforts.

Thailand: Indictment decision on former prime minister Thaksin's royal defamation case postponed

(lm) Thailand's attorney-general has delayed the decision on whether to indict former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra for alleged royal defamation until May 29, awaiting an additional interrogation report from the police. [Bangkok Post]

Thaksin faced charges in 2016 based on statements he made to journalists in Seoul, South Korea, the previous

year. Initially a fugitive, the former premier returned to Thailand in August last year after 15 years in self-imposed exile abroad to begin serving a prison sentence for corruption cases from his tenure as Prime Minister from 2001 to 2006. Initially sentenced to eight years, his term was reduced to one year through a royal pardon, and he was granted parole in mid-February [see AiR No. 8, February/2024, 3].

On February 19 - a day after his release on parole - prosecutors announced they would assess the royal defamation further and summon Thaksin in April, with possible prosecution pending the investigation's outcome [see AiR No. 7, February/2024, 2]. Thaksin himself had acknowledged and denied the charges in January and had filed a written petition for fair treatment.

Thailand: Democrat Party expels ex-candidate over extramarital affair with monk

(msz/lm) In Thailand, the opposition Democrat Party has made the decision to expel a former female MP candidate due to allegations of her involvement in an extramarital relationship with a Buddhist monk. The decision came after a video surfaced on social media on April 10, purportedly showing evidence of the affair. The accused party member, whose identity was not disclosed, is additionally noted to be the monk's adoptive mother, a fact that has drawn considerable public scrutiny. In response to these developments, a fact-finding panel conducted an investigation and concluded that the woman had breached party regulations, specifically those pertaining to actions that could potentially damage the party's reputation. [Bangkok Post] [The Nation Thailand 1] [The Nation Thailand 2]

Thailand: Public input invited on proposed labor law amendments

(lm) In Thailand, the public is being encouraged to provide feedback on proposed amendments to the labor relations law, with input being accepted until May 8. The proposed changes encompass 11 key aspects, including the rights of state workers to assemble or strike, methods for resolving labor disputes, and penalties for unauthorized work stoppages. [Bangkok Post]

One significant amendment aims to establish a law recognizing the right of state officials, employees of public organizations, and workers in state enterprises to assemble without political motives. Additionally, the definition of "employer" will be revised to align with that provided by the labor protection law, with the goal of safeguarding subcontracted workers involved in such activities.

Regarding labor dispute resolution, an alternative proposal suggests that both parties negotiate or request a committee to mediate on their behalf. If workers decide to exercise their right by participating in a work stoppage that does not affect essential public services, they must inform their employers 24 hours in advance. However, if a work stoppage impacts critical public services like healthcare, electricity, or water supply, a contingency plan for maintaining essential services must be prepared in advance, with public notification required at least 7 days prior. Furthermore, such plans should undergo annual review.

Thailand: Ruling Pheu Thai Party leader criticized for planned trip abroad during Songkran holiday

(bk/lm) Thailand's ruling Pheu Thai Party leader, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, faced criticism for her scheduled trip abroad during the Songkran holiday. This drew attention because she plays a significant role in promoting Thailand's soft power, particularly after the announcement by the National Soft Power Strategy Committee, where she serves as deputy head, to organize a major celebration this month. The Songkran festival's recognition as an Intangible Cultural Heritage Item by UNESCO in December last year added to the importance of her presence during this time. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Locals test positive for hazardous heavy metal following illegal sourcing

(bk/lm) At least 16 people living near a smelting factory in Thailand’s Samut Sakhon province have recorded excessive levels of cadmium, a a hazardous heavy metal linked to cancer in humans. Earlier, 19 workers at the factory had been found to have high levels of cadmium, with eight having excessively high levels. [Bangkok Post]

The tests were conducted after authorities uncovered a concerning situation involving the illegal movement of up to 15,000 tons of highly toxic waste containing cadmium from a company in Tak province to various locations around the capital, Bangkok. In addition to the questionable relocation of the hazardous waste, transactions between the company and Chinese entities were also uncovered, suggesting that Chinese-owned companies were buying the cadmium waste. [AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1]

Against this backdrop, a public complaint was lodged with the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC), requesting the formation of an investigative committee to determine whether state officials from the Tak Provincial Industry Office and the Ministry of Industry, as well as the involved companies, engaged in corrupt or negligent activities associated with the relocation of cadmium waste.

Additionally, the health department of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration issued a warning to residents downstream from a factory in Bang Sue district, advising against using raw water from the river due to potential cadmium contamination. This came after officials discovered around 300 tons of cadmium waste at the factory. [The Star]

Meanwhile, the main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) stressed the imperative for Thailand to establish the Pollutant Release and Transfer Register (PRTR) system – i.e. an environmental database that tracks potentially hazardous substances released into the air, water, and soil -- akin to the European Pollutant Release and Transfer Register (E-PRTR) and the Global Inventory of Pollutant Releases maintained by the OECD. In addition, the entity responsible for issuing industrial permits should be distinct from the regulatory body overseeing industrial waste management. Currently, the Provincial Industry Offices are endowed with both powers. The MFP suggested transferring the latter power to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment to improve checks and balances. Two legislative drafts constituting these proposals have been submitted for parliamentary reading. [X (formerly, Twitter)]

Thailand: Group urges more jail time for drivers who are drunk and cause fatal accidents

(lm) In Thailand, there is a call for the government to impose stricter penalties on drivers who cause fatal accidents while under the influence of alcohol. The

proposal suggests extending the current jail terms of 3-10 years to a range of 11-13 years for such offenders. [Bangkok Post 1]

During the Songkran festival in Thailand, road accidents often see a surge, mainly due to the widespread travel as people journey long distances to reunite with family or join in the festivities. With more vehicles on the roads, the risk of accidents naturally escalates. Additionally, as alcohol consumption increases, there is a rise in incidents of drunk driving during this period.

During this year's Songkran period, between April 11-14, traffic accidents claimed 162 lives and injured 1,279 others, with holidaymakers starting to return to their workplaces on April 15. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: More voluntary conscripts this year

(lm) This year, more Thai males are volunteering to join the army during the conscription season compared to last year. Official figures show that from April 1 to 12, a total of 38,160 males nationwide volunteered, marking an increase of 2,543 individuals from the 35,617 volunteers recorded last year. At five conscription venues, including locations in Chon Buri, Songkhla, Nakhon Pathom, Nonthaburi, and Bangkok, the voluntary enlistment quota has been fully met. [Bangkok Post]

The Thai conscription system is based on a lottery system, where all Thai males aged 21 must attend a draft lottery to determine if they are selected for military service. This typically occurs annually. However, exemptions or deferrals are granted for various reasons such as education, health, or family circumstances. Those who are selected must undergo military training for a period of around two years, after which they may serve in the military reserves. Additionally, there is an option for voluntary enlistment, where individuals can choose to join the military outside of the conscription process.

Thailand: HTMS Sukhothai sinking investigation unveiled

(bk) The Royal Thai Navy (RTN) disclosed the findings of its inquiry into the sinking of the HTMS Sukhothai in 2022, which resulted in the loss of 29 lives, including

five missing personnel (now presumed dead). The sinking was attributed to a combination of factors: i.e. severe weather conditions (including strong winds and waves reaching up to 6 meters, far surpassing the ship's designed capacity of withstanding waves up to 2.5 meters), limited visibility due to the darkness of the night and cloudy skies (exacerbating the navigation), wear and tear on the ship (potentially allowing seawater ingress from below the ship, causing buoyancy loss, or from above the vessel's center of gravity, resulting in tilt), and misjudgment by the ship's commander (opting to return to Chonburi's Sattahip Naval Base amidst the storm, rather than heading to the closer Bang Saphan Port). [The Nation]

Upon the RTN's press briefing, the commander of this frigate announced his resignation from the Navy to demonstrate accountability for the incident but will not be subjected to punishment as his mistakes were deemed unintentional.

According to the RTN, salvaging the entire ship was deemed too dangerous, so the navy collaborated with its United States counterpart to decommission US-made equipment on the ship [see AiR No. 5, January/2024, 5] Limited salvage efforts yielded evidence but did not locate the five missing personnel.

While the RTN assured that the investigation had uncovered the full truth of the sinking without any manipulation or omission of evidence, the opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) raised concerns about the RTN's investigation committee, citing the absence of participation from the Navy Inspector General's Department, and also questioned why the Royal Thai Fleet Command, responsible for ship maintenance, had not faced scrutiny in the investigation. The MFP stated their intention to present the RTN's report to Parliament's ad hoc committee on military affairs and push for an independent investigation led by lawmakers.

Vietnam: Tycoon Truong My Lan sentenced to death in USD 12.5 billion fraud case

(lm) Vietnamese property tycoon Truong My Lan has been sentenced to death for her central role in a USD 12.5 billion financial fraud scheme, which stands as the largest corruption scandal in the country's history. At the conclusion of her trial, Lan, who serves as the chair of major developer Van Thinh Phat, was found guilty of multiple charges including embezzlement, bribery, and violations of banking regulations. [Al Jazeera]

Lan's criminal activities involved her illicit control over the Saigon Joint Stock Commercial Bank (SCB) from 2012 to 2022, during which she funneled funds through thousands of phantom companies and paid bribes to government officials. This scheme, orchestrated by Lan, resulted in a financial appropriation equivalent to approximately 3 percent of Vietnam's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2022. As a consequence of her actions, prosecutors seized more than 1,000 properties owned by Lan.

The severity of Lan's sentence reflects the gravity of her offenses, as the court deemed her to be the mastermind behind a sophisticated criminal operation that inflicted substantial harm with little prospect of recovering the misappropriated funds. Moreover, her actions were deemed to have not only violated property rights but also undermined public trust in the leadership of the Party and the State.

Lan's arrest in October 2022 marked a high-profile development in Vietnam's ongoing anti-corruption campaign, known as the "Blazing Furnace" initiative. This campaign, launched in 2016 and intensified in 2022, has targeted corruption at the highest levels of Vietnamese politics, resulting in the resignation of two presidents and two prime ministers, along with the disciplining or imprisonment of hundreds of officials.

Among those implicated in Lan's case were her husband and her niece, who served as the CEO of Van Thinh Phat. The trial saw a total of 86 defendants, with sentences ranging from probation to life imprisonment for 84 individuals.

Vietnam: Jailed writer honored with international award

(lm) Pham Doan Trang, a Vietnamese author, journalist, and dissident serving a nine-year prison sentence for "anti-state propaganda," will be honored with the 2024 PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Award by PEN America. Trang, known for her writings on democracy, human rights, and women's empowerment, has been recognized for her activism despite government persecution. Trang's lawyer and a friend will accept the award on her behalf at a ceremony in New York. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Coalition urges *Apple* to call out country's persecution of climate activists

(lm) A coalition of 61 environmental and human rights organizations has called on tech giant Apple Inc. to denounce Vietnam's persecution of climate activists, citing the country's ambiguous laws and unjust arrests. The group asserts that *Apple*, as Vietnam's primary manufacturing hub outside of China, has a responsibility to uphold its environmental and human rights policies. [Radio Free Asia]

In a letter, the coalition specifically highlights the imprisonment of several prominent activists, including Nguy Thi Khanh, Dang Dinh Bach, and Hoang Thi Minh Hong, who have been targeted for their efforts to promote clean energy and environmental conservation. Furthermore, the coalition points out that Apple's stated commitment to transitioning its suppliers to renewable energy and achieving a net-zero carbon impact by 2030 is at odds with the reality on the ground in Vietnam.

In parallel to the release of the letter, *Apple* CEO Tim Cook visited Vietnam for two days, during which the company announced plans to increase spending in the country. The tech giant intends to boost spending on suppliers but did not specify the amount or focus of the investment. *Apple* has already spent nearly USD 16 billion in Vietnam since 2019 and has doubled its annual spending in the country during that period. [Al Jazeera]

Vietnam: Authorities order *Netflix* to stop advertising, distributing its games

(wn) Vietnam's broadcasting authority, the Authority of Broadcasting and Electronic Information (ABEI), has ordered *Netflix* to stop advertising and distributing its games in the country by April 25, as the streaming platform has yet to be granted a license for gaming services. *Netflix*, which has faced previous orders to restrict content access, is reportedly seeking to establish an office in Vietnam. [Bangkok Post]

China and India lead Russian seaborne fuel oil imports in February

(jm) China and India maintained their positions as the top buyers of Russian seaborne fuel oil and vacuum gasoil (VGO) in February, according to data from London Stock Exchange Group (LSEG). Following the European Union's embargo on Russian oil products in

February 2023, Russia redirected the bulk of its fuel oil and VGO exports to other regions, primarily Asia.

Direct shipments of fuel oil and VGO from Russian ports to India and China increased in February, with India receiving 0.7 million metric tons and China receiving a similar volume. These fuels are utilized for refining purposes in both countries, serving as a partial replacement for more expensive Urals crude oil.

Additionally, a significant portion of Russian fuel oil and VGO was transported via ship-to-ship (STS) loadings near the Greek port of Kalamata, with most of these cargoes destined for Asia. However, exports to Turkey declined in February, while shipments to Senegal surged due to increased bunker demand and the redirection of cargoes around Africa. [Reuters]

China criticizes US comments on Taiwan and AUKUS as “dangerous”

(jm) On April 10, China has criticized the US’s remarks regarding the AUKUS submarine project, branding them as "dangerous." The AUKUS project involves Australia, Britain, and the United States collaborating to acquire nuclear-powered attack submarines as a response to China's increasing influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

The US Deputy Secretary of State’s statement that the submarines could deter Chinese actions against Taiwan was deemed risky by China's Taiwan Affairs Office. China views the AUKUS partnership as a provocative move aimed at instigating military conflict. [Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council]

The absence of formal diplomatic ties between the AUKUS countries and Taiwan hasn't deterred their support for the island, with both Britain and Australia expressing concerns over Chinese military pressure. Despite China's objections, Australian Senator Dave Sharma noted that AUKUS and the Quad provide stability in the region, signaling a unified stance against potential threats to security in the Taiwan Strait. [Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan)] [Reuters]

EU Commission updates economic distortion report on China

(yq) The European Commission released an updated 712-page report detailing state-led economic distortions in China on April 10, now including telecom

equipment, semiconductors, rail, renewable energy, and electric vehicles, in addition to the previously covered steel, aluminum, chemicals, and ceramics sectors. This comprehensive report serves as a basis for EU industries to file anti-dumping complaints.

Observers suggest that the inclusion of new sectors may motivate more industries to explore anti-dumping complaints. The Commission, which launches approximately ten anti-dumping investigations every year, is currently investigating subsidies granted to Chinese wind turbine suppliers. Additionally, an anti-subsidy probe has been initiated against Chinese electric vehicle imports by the commission (see AiR No. 38, September/2023, 3).

Amidst international scrutiny over its industrial policies, China's National People's Congress pledged to curb overcapacity in March. This move was seen as a response to criticisms made by the U.S. and EU that China's overcapacity would harm Western businesses by saturating the market with low-priced exports

However, Chinese state media dismissed the concerns as an attempt to hinder China's growth. [Reuters]

China accuses US and Japan of smear campaign over regional security initiatives

(jm) On April 11, Beijing has accused the United States and Japan of engaging in a "smear campaign" following the leaders' pledge to enhance military and economic cooperation to counter China's influence in the Asia-Pacific region during Washington summit. The Chinese Foreign Ministry expressed strong dissatisfaction, stating that the actions of the U.S. and Japan interfere with China's internal affairs and violate international norms. The Chinese Foreign Ministry also emphasized China's opposition to the "cold war mentality" and urged against actions that undermine peace and stability in the region. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC]

The criticism from Beijing comes after U.S. President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida unveiled a series of agreements covering defense, space, culture, and diplomacy during a Washington summit on April 10. These agreements were described by Biden as the most significant upgrade of the U.S.-Japan alliance to date. The joint statement issued by the U.S. and Japan expressed concerns about China's nuclear policy, which Beijing dismissed as divorced

from facts and driven by malicious motives. [The White House]

Furthermore, on April 11, later that same day, the summit between the U.S., Japan, and the Philippines took place, focusing on regional security concerns, particularly in the South China Sea. Biden commended Japan for its support in maintaining freedom of navigation and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

Since assuming office, the Biden administration has strengthened alliances in the Indo-Pacific region to counter China's influence. Initiatives like the Aukus military pact and trilateral agreements between the U.S., Japan, and South Korea have raised concerns in Beijing about the encroachment on its strategic interests. [SCMP]

China expresses confidence in Iran's management of regional tensions in the Middle East

(jm) On April 16, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, had a phone conversation, where they addressed the escalating tensions between Israel and Iran. During the call, Amir-Abdollahian briefed Wang on Iran's perspective regarding the attack on the consular section of the Iranian embassy in Damascus, emphasizing Iran's right to self-defense. Wang condemned the attack, labeling it a serious violation of international law, and expressed China's support for Iran's commitment to restraint and peaceful resolution of the situation. [The State Council, the PRC]

Overall, Wang expressed China's belief that Iran has the capability to manage the situation effectively and prevent further tension in the Middle East while safeguarding its sovereignty and dignity. China appreciated Iran's stance on not targeting neighboring countries and urged Iran to handle the situation while preserving regional stability.

Wang also engaged with Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister, discussing the importance of avoiding further escalation in the region. Saudi Arabia expressed its trust in China and its willingness to enhance cooperation for mutual development.

The exchanges come against the backdrop of ongoing conflicts in Gaza and clashes between Israel and Iran-aligned groups across various Middle Eastern countries. [Reuters]

China expresses strong opposition over Japan's interference in Taiwan affairs

(sh) On Apr 11, China has expressed its strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition to Japan and the United States following their recent meeting in Washington. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and U.S. President Joe Biden emphasized the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.

However, the Chinese foreign ministry objected to external interference in Taiwan affairs, urging Washington not to support Taiwan's independence and cautioning Tokyo due to its past colonial rule over Taiwan.

Taiwan, meanwhile, expressed gratitude for the support for cross-strait peace, highlighting China's military expansion as a threat to regional stability and pledging to collaborate with the U.S., Japan, and like-minded partners to promote peace and prosperity. [Kyodo News]

Japan, Philippines, United States hold first trilateral summit amid China's growing assertiveness

(lm/sh) Leaders of the United States, the Philippines, and Japan convened for their first trilateral summit in Washington DC on April 11, with all three leaders signaling that many more meetings would follow in the years to come. Welcoming Filipino President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to the White House, US President Biden highlighted the historical significance of their gathering and said that Washington's commitments to the defense of Japan and the Philippines remain "ironclad." [Associated Press] [Nikkei Asia]

The leaders collectively voiced concerns over China's "aggressive tactics" in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone. This statement follows a joint drill conducted days earlier by the US, Japan, the Philippines, and Australia in the South China Sea. [NHK] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

Japan and the Philippines both have separate territorial disputes with China, in the former's case the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea and in the latter's areas of the South China Sea. Thus, the meeting

was held against the backdrop of heightened maritime disputes, notably in the South China Sea, where China's assertive actions have led to persistent skirmishes between Philippine and Chinese coast guard vessels. Biden made it clear that any attack on Philippine aircraft, vessels, or armed forces in the South China Sea would invoke the mutual defense treaty between the US and the Philippines. [ABS CBN]

In addition to security matters, the leaders discussed economic cooperation and infrastructure development in the Philippines. The announcement included the Luzon Economic Corridor, the first economic corridor in the Indo-Pacific region under the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII). The PGII, founded by the G7 countries, aims to mobilize up to USD 600 billion by 2027 to help narrow the infrastructure investment gap in partner countries. [Voice of America] [CNN]

The corridor will support connectivity between Subic Bay, Clark, Manila, and Batangas, focusing on infrastructure projects such as rail, ports modernization, clean energy, semiconductor supply chains, and agribusiness. The partnership also aims to attract quality investments through cooperation with multilateral organizations and the private sector. Additionally, plans include opening a regional office in the Philippines by the US International Development Finance Corp. and expanding connectivity initiatives by Japan. [Philippine News Agency]

This development is particularly noteworthy, coming just months after the Philippines' decision in late October to withdraw from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Transport Minister Jaime Bautista cited Beijing's lack of response to funding requests for railway projects as the reason for the sudden withdrawal. Beijing had pledged nearly USD 5 billion to construct three rail lines, two in Luzon and one in Mindanao, under the BRI.

UK to conduct joint military drills with Japan, US in Indo-Pacific

(sh) Starting in 2025, Britain plans to conduct frequent joint military exercises in the Indo-Pacific alongside the United States and Japan, according to the British Ministry of Defence. This initiative aims to enhance regional security.

Defence Minister Grant Shapps emphasized the significance of these exercises, stating they convey a robust message against those challenging the rules-

based international order. Shapps highlighted Britain's readiness to counter threats globally, emphasizing the enduring nature of its defense partnerships. [Reuters]

Mongolia co-hosts international workshop on combating CBRN Terrorism, alongside with the US and Vietnam

(fg) From April 16 to 18, the United States, Mongolia and Vietnam are co-hosting an ASEAN Regional Forum workshop entitled "Steppe Lotus" in Ulaanbaatar.

The aim of this event is to improve the legal framework for dealing with chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) terrorism. Participants from 16 countries are expected to attend, including specialists from several US authorities, Indonesia, Mongolia, Vietnam and UN bodies.

The focus will be on refining legal measures and promoting international cooperation to effectively prevent, detect and manage CBRN threats. The workshop will also focus on strengthening global cooperation and information sharing to combat CBRN terrorism and prevent the spread of CBRN by non-state actors.

This workshop is supported by the United Nations Office on Counter-Terrorism and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and is co-funded by the European Union. [Akipress]

UN Security Council divided over Russia's veto on North Korean sanctions

(yq) Recent meetings of the UN Security Council on April 11 underscored the divisive issue of veto power among its permanent members, particularly concerning the situation in North Korea.

This follows Russia's veto of resolution for the renewal of a UN panel responsible for monitoring North Korean sanctions on March 28, effectively smashing the panel that has been scrutinizing Pyongyang's sanctions breaches since 2006 (see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1).

Russia's veto against extending the mandate for experts monitoring North Korea's sanctions was justified by its Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia, who argued that the sanctions were ineffective and overly harsh, causing humanitarian issues. He also

stated that Russia intends to submit a draft resolution to extend the panel's mandate for one year and update the parameters of the sanctions regime.

The Democratic Republic of Korea condemned the double standards of sanctions, citing that North Korea has the right to defend itself.

In contrast, representatives from the U.S. and the Republic of Korea emphasized the necessity of these measures to deter North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

China, meanwhile, called for a reevaluation of the sanctions, advocating for dialogue and a political resolution to security concerns on the Korean Peninsula. [UN News]

Concurrently, the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) will continue to enforce UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea by deploying maritime surveillance aircraft, which will be conducted during April and May. These efforts aim to monitor and prevent illicit activities such as ship-to-ship transfers of banned goods like oil and coal. [NZDF]

In a latest development, the U.S. envoy to the UN stated on April 15. that the U.S. and its allies are looking for new ways to enforce the sanctions as the envoy is visiting South Korea and soon Japan to cooperate to find alternatives to create reports on sanctions. [Reuters]

South Korea named potential partner for Aukus

(dql) On April 10, the U.S. announced that it is considering South Korea, among other countries, as a partner for Aukus — the military alliance of the U.S., the United Kingdom and Australia — aimed at cooperation in the development of cutting-edge military technology.

The announcement follows a joint statement of the three countries on including Japan as a partner for Pillar II projects that focus on joint development in areas such as quantum computing, undersea technology, hypersonic systems, artificial intelligence, and cyber technology (see AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1).

In response, the Chinese Foreign Ministry voiced "grave concerns" about Japan's participation in the Aukus Pillar II. [Korea JoongAng Daily]

South Korea, Latin American nations to deepen customs cooperation

(dql) On April 9, South Korea and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to deepen cooperation that seeks to extending Seoul's assistance in education and systems establishment on customs affairs in Latin American nations.

The agreement focuses on digital-based education and training programs in the field of customs administration as well as on creating electric customs clearance systems. It follows a first MoU for cooperation on those issues signed in 2018. [Yonhap]

International delegations to attend Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te's inauguration

(fg) On April 15, Foreign Minister Joseph Wu announced that over 40 international delegations with 400 foreign dignitaries are expected to attend the inauguration of President-elect Lai Ching-te, including heads of state and government from eight diplomatic partner countries.

Confirmed guests include the President of Palau, Surangel Whipps Jr and the Prime Minister of Tuvalu, Feleti Teo. In addition, US Representatives Andy Barr and Mike McCaul have already announced that they will represent the USA during the inauguration (see AiR No. 11, March/2024, 2; AiR No. 12, March/2024, 3). [Taiwan News]

The inauguration will take place in Taiwan on May 20.

Further aid for Taiwan due to the earthquake

(fg) Just a few days after the earthquake, Japan promised on April 5 to provide Taiwan with USD 1 million in financial support for relief efforts (see AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1).

Further support from other countries has been added in the past week:

South Korea, for example, announced on April 11 that they will support the reconstruction costs from the

earthquake damage with a sum of USD 500 thousand. [Focus Taiwan] [MOFA Taiwan]

On April 12, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania promised to contribute USD 53 thousand to the reconstruction effort. Thailand also promised financial support of USD 31 thousand. [Taiwan News] [Focus Taiwan 2]

On April 3, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake struck the east coast of Taiwan, hitting Hualien County in particular. It was the largest earthquake in 25 years.

Seven Asian nations among top ten countries with highest burden of viral hepatitis B, C

(lm) A recent report by the World Health Organization sheds light on the substantial burden of hepatitis B and C infections, notably in seven Asian nations—Bangladesh, China, India, Pakistan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia—ranking among the top ten countries globally with the highest number of cases. This data, presented at the Global Hepatitis Summit in Geneva, emphasizes the pressing need for universal access to prevention, diagnosis, and treatment in these countries by 2025, alongside intensified efforts in Africa. [The Daily Star]

Viral hepatitis stands as the second leading infectious cause of death worldwide, claiming 1.3 million lives annually. Hepatitis B alone accounts for 83 percent of these deaths, while hepatitis C contributes to the remaining 17 percent. Although there have been slight improvements in diagnosis and treatment coverage since 2019, the report highlights the persistent gap in meeting global targets. The challenge is compounded by insufficient funding, posing a significant obstacle to effectively addressing the epidemic.

Bangladesh declares wish to make sea routes safer

(tg) In the wake of shipping crises in the Red Sea, with Houthi attacks and a resurgence of piracy, the Bangladeshi shipping minister, Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury, said that his ministry is working on a proposal to make sea routes safer.

Somali pirates recently captured a Bangladeshi merchant vessel, MV Adbullah, taking its 23 sailors

hostage. The ship is now being safely escorted to a UAE port by two EU warships. [Dhaka Tribune] [Dhaka Tribune]

India sends defense attaches to countries in Asia, Africa, Europe

(fd) India is deploying defense attaches to Ethiopia, Mozambique, Ivory Coast, Philippines, and for the first time to Armenia, and Poland. Across the globe India is planning 26 new missions are planned, including 18 in African nations.

Defense attaches analyze military intelligence and foster relationships between militaries. The decision to send defense attaches to Armenia and Poland comes admits the recent weapons deal with the Armenia and increased importance of Poland in the European Union. To counter China's growing influence in Africa and the South China Sea, India increases its ties with Ethiopia, Mozambique, Ivory Coast and the Philippines. [Mint] [Times of India]

India's ruling BJP invites 25 foreign parties to witness parliamentary elections

(lm) India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has extended invitations to ruling parties from over 25 countries to witness the upcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled in seven phases starting from April 19. Thirteen parties have confirmed their attendance thus far. [The Daily Star] [The Indian Express]

Notably, the BJP's outreach includes all major political parties from Nepal, while Bangladesh's ruling Awami League received an invitation. However, the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was excluded, likely due to its association with a recent social media campaign urging the boycott of Indian goods. Despite this, prominent political parties from Nepal and Sri Lanka were included in the invitations.

The absence of invitations to US parties is explained by their ongoing presidential elections and the differing party structures compared to India and Europe. However, the UK's Conservative and Labour parties, as well as Germany's Christian Democrats and Social Democrats, received invitations. Conversely, no invitations were extended to political parties from Pakistan or the Communist Party of China.

During their visit to India in May, the foreign delegates are expected to observe polling centers and attend rallies featuring prominent BJP leaders such as Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, or BJP President JP Nadda, providing them with insights into India's electoral processes and political landscape.

Maldives' Islamic Minister appointed to Supreme Council of Muslim World League

(lm) Mohamed Shaheem Ali Saeed, Maldives' Islamic Minister, has been appointed to the Supreme Council of the Muslim World League (MWL) by its Secretary-General, Dr. Mohamed bin Abdul Kareem al-Eesa. The MWL's Supreme Council, comprising 60 members, is the NGO's highest authority responsible for approving all plans. It includes prominent Islamic figures representing Muslim communities worldwide and operates under the leadership of the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia. [The Sun]

The MWL is an international Islamic organization headquartered in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Founded in 1962, its primary aim is to promote Islamic solidarity and cooperation among Muslim countries and communities worldwide.

Canada accuses India, Pakistan of election interference

(lm) Canada's national intelligence agency, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), has publicly accused both India and Pakistan of attempting to interfere in the country's recent general elections. This revelation emerged as part of a broader federal inquiry examining foreign interference in the 2019 and 2021 national votes, which also includes scrutiny of China and Russia's alleged involvement. [Al Jazeera]

According to CSIS reports disclosed earlier this month, India was purportedly involved in clandestine activities aimed at influencing electoral outcomes in specific districts and swaying the political preferences of certain candidates. The alleged objective was to align Canada's policies with India's interests, particularly concerning issues related to Khalistani separatism. The CSIS documents suggest that India utilized proxy agents and illicit financial support to advance its agenda, with a focus on electoral districts housing Indo-Canadian communities supportive of the Khalistani cause.

On the other hand, Pakistan stands accused of covertly attempting to influence Canadian politics to bolster its own strategic objectives and counter India's growing global influence. The CSIS identified Pakistan's interference as primarily aimed at promoting political, security, and economic stability in Pakistan while thwarting Indian interests. Previous interference efforts by Pakistan reportedly involved supporting candidates perceived to be pro-Pakistani or anti-Indian.

These allegations mark a significant departure from Canada's traditionally amicable relations with both India and Pakistan. They come at a time of heightened tensions between Canada and India, exacerbated by previous disputes such as accusations of Indian government involvement in the killing of a Canadian Sikh leader. While Canada has long regarded India and Pakistan as valued partners, these accusations underscore broader concerns within Canada regarding foreign interference in its electoral processes.

In response to these allegations, India swiftly denied the accusations, labeling them as baseless and asserting that it is not its government's policy to interfere in the democratic processes of other countries. However, the strained relations between India and Canada could further complicate diplomatic ties, especially as India prepares for its own national elections.

Meanwhile, Pakistan has yet to respond officially to the allegations leveled by the CSIS.

Pakistan, Sri Lanka could benefit from debt-for-nature swaps to fight climate change, report claims

(lm) The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) has released a report suggesting that debt-for-nature swaps could serve as a significant source of funding, potentially generating USD 100 billion to combat climate change. This mechanism involves forgiving debt owed by poorer nations in exchange for their commitment to protect vital ecosystems such as barrier reefs or rainforests. Several countries, including Belize, Ecuador, Barbados, Gabon, and Cabo Verde, have already implemented such swaps in recent years. [Arab News]

The report highlights that many of the 49 less developed countries facing debt crises are also most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. These nations collectively owe approximately USD 431 billion,

mainly to wealthier governments, the International Monetary Fund, and various financial institutions. However, their access to climate finance remains inadequate, with less than USD 14 billion received in 2021 according to OECD figures.

Countries identified as potential candidates for debt swaps include Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and The Gambia, particularly due to their susceptibility to sea-level rise and urgent need for investment in flood prevention and wetland preservation. Ghana, currently restructuring its debt, is also mentioned as a viable candidate, given the potential benefits to its vital cocoa bean exports through rainforest protection.

Pakistan seeks to boost economic relations with Gulf countries, Malaysia in Eid diplomatic push

(nw) Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif exchanged Eid greetings and discussed enhancing economic and trade relations with leaders of Gulf countries – United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait – and Malaysia. The prime minister highlighted Pakistan's close cultural and historical affiliations with these nations, aiming to transform fraternal ties into mutually beneficial economic partnerships. [Arab News]

Discussions with leaders from the Gulf nations focused on enhancing trade, investment, and implementing agreements signed previously. Additionally, during the phone conversation with his Malaysian counterpart, Anwar Ibrahim, Sharif invited a trade delegation to visit Pakistan and proposed launching translations of Pakistan's national poet Muhammad Iqbal's works in the Malaysian language.

Muslim World League secretary-general meets key Pakistani religious leader, scholars in Islamabad

(lm) Mohammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa, the secretary-general of the Muslim World League (MWL), concluded his nine-day visit to Pakistan by meeting Maulana Fazl-ur-Rehman, head of the JUI-F party, and other religious scholars in Islamabad. Rehman welcomed Al-Issa and highlighted the significant role of Pakistani scholars in the Muslim community. They discussed the Gaza crisis, with Rehman condemning Israel's actions and calling for unity among Muslims. [Arab News]

During his visit, Al-Issa aimed to promote interfaith harmony and strengthen bilateral ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. He delivered the Eid Al-Fitr sermon at the Shah Faisal Mosque, urging Muslims to support Palestinians. Al-Issa also visited an orphanage and attended the foundation laying ceremony of the Seerat Museum in Islamabad, which will exhibit relics related to Prophet Muhammad's life.

The MWL is a non-governmental organization based in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, representing followers of Islam worldwide. It aims to foster unity among Muslims, promote interfaith harmony, and strengthen Islamic solidarity globally.

ASEAN growth, with Cambodia taking lead

(lvw) The recent meeting of the ASEAN finance ministers, and central bank governors took place in Luang Prabang, Laos. The attendees deliberated on growth forecasts for the region and addressed various risks and challenges. Regional economic growth has been a solid 4.9 percent, spurred on by rising domestic and regional demand as well as increased investment activity and a reinvigorated international tourism sector. Cambodia's IMF growth projection took the lead with a growth rate of 6.1 percent, the highest of any Southeast Asia country.

In their April 5 joint communique, the attending finance ministers, and bank governors highlighted the export performance of the ASEAN countries and expressed optimism over a return of tourism to pre-pandemic levels that would boost the growth in the region. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia enhances US-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

(lvw) Cambodia is committed to strengthening the ASEAN-U.S. Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, of which they are the current country coordinator. A meeting to boost the partnership held in Cambodia on April 13 was attended by the U.S. Ambassador to ASEAN, Yohannes Abraham and hosted by Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Sok Chenda Sophea.

During the meeting the attendees discussed the promising momentum and mutual benefit of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which was established in 2022. For the next three years (2024-

2027), Cambodia will assume an expanded role as the country coordinator of ASEAN-U.S. Dialogue Relations. During this time, it aims to continue pushing towards mutual growth and development milestones. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia to enhance bilateral ties with the European Union

(lvw) On April 10 during a courtesy call to Cambodia, fruitful discussions were held between Igor Driesmans, Ambassador of the European Union (EU) to the Kingdom of Cambodia and Sok Chenda Sophea, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. The discussions enabled representatives from Cambodia and the EU to commit to strengthening bilateral ties and cooperation.

The bilateral relationship between Cambodia and the EU is characterized as a long standing and reliable partnership. The deputy Prime Minister extended gratitude to the EU for its efforts supporting post-conflict rehabilitation and the economic development of the Kingdom.

Both parties reaffirmed the commitment to continuing building constructive dialogue and action plans at the 12th Cambodia-European Union Joint Committee Meeting, which is scheduled for April 22-25 in Brussels. A particular area of priority is supporting Cambodia's green transition and climate change adaptation, through a substantial reduction in CO_2 and by fostering sustainable growth. [Asian News Network] [Khmer Times]

Indonesia denies reports of normalizing ties with Israel for OECD membership

(jb) Indonesia has denied recent reports suggesting it is considering diplomatic relations with Israel to secure OECD membership. While formal talks for Indonesia's OECD accession have begun, unanimous approval from all members, including Israel, is required. Israeli media Ynet had reported discreet negotiations involving Indonesia, Israel, and the OECD, proposing Indonesia might normalize ties with Israel in exchange for OECD support.

The Indonesian Foreign Affairs Ministry clarified Jakarta's unwavering stance on Palestine, emphasizing no plans for diplomatic ties with Israel, especially

amidst Israel's Gaza actions. Indonesia continues to support a two-state solution and has defended Palestinian rights.

Israel's claim of progress in normalizing ties conflicts with Indonesia's position. Despite this, Indonesia remains committed to its historical stance on the Palestinian issue, asserting no change in its position since the 1955 Asia-Africa Conference. [Jakarta Globe] [The New Arab]

Indonesia drops humanitarian aid to Gaza in collaboration with Jordan

(jb) The Indonesian government has successfully delivered humanitarian aid to Gaza, Palestine, by air, on April 9. Indonesian National Armed Forces Commander General Agus Subiyanto stated that the aid, consisting of 20 packages weighing 160 kg each, was transported by an Indonesian Air Force Hercules C130 J aircraft, in collaboration with the Jordanian army. A team of 27 Indonesian contingents, led by Aviation Colonel Noto, managed the aid delivery, using the low-cost low-altitude (LCLA) method from King Abdullah II Airbase in Zarqa, Jordan. [The Star] [VOI.ID]

Calls for conservation and cooperation on Mekong Day

(lvw) Countries from the Mekong River Basin region met to discuss the future, importance and sustainability of the Mekong River, its delta and the communities along its banks. The meeting was hosted on April 9 – the Mekong Day – by the Mekong River Commission (MRC), an NGO based in Vientiane, Laos, which coordinates diverse stakeholders and the countries; Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, along with the two upriver states, China and Myanmar, acting as dialogue partners. The focus of the discussion revolved around issues of regional integration, resource management and leadership and decision making.

The annual dialogue also saw the 2024 Mekong Atlas unveiled as well as an overview of the key management issues and opportunities. Another key theme was the pressing need to safeguard the river environment, and cooperation to address the interlinked issues of damming, privatization and overfishing and biodiversity loss as well as pollution.

The Mekong Delta is the region's largest food bowl, ensuring nutrition and livelihoods, food and natural resources to millions across multiple borders, with Mekong Delta's average annual economic output of USD 63 billion.

Anoulak Kittikhoun, the CEO of the MRC Secretariat stressed the need for transboundary cooperation, responsible involvement of upstream players like China, and building ties with ASEAN. Widening the diversity of stakeholders in such projects is critical, as is the international support seen in Canada and Germany's commitment to basin-wide engagement. [Laotian Times] [Mekong River Commission]

Former Australian foreign ministry appointed by the UN Secretary-General as new UN special envoy on Myanmar

(jb) Julie Bishop, former Australian Foreign Minister, has been appointed by the UN Secretary-General as the new UN special envoy on Myanmar. She succeeds Singaporean Noeleen Heyzer and Switzerland's Christine Schraner Burgener. Bishop's appointment comes at a crucial time as Myanmar's security environment rapidly changes due to clashes between the Tatmadaw and resistance forces.

Since October 2023, resistance forces have escalated attacks, gaining control of nearly 60 townships. This follows Naypyidaw's recent participation in an ASEAN foreign ministerial retreat, marking its first involvement in an ASEAN meeting in three years after being banned post the February 2021 coup. Despite the ASEAN's Five Point Consensus adopted in April 2021, which aimed to resolve Myanmar's conflict, progress in the peace process remains minimal.

Bishop is known for strengthening engagement with regional partners and leading international negotiations, including the first-ever United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Her role is hoped to make significant progress in resolving Myanmar's crisis and coordinating with ASEAN to establish peace. [Thai PBS]

UN issues warning over poverty increasing in Myanmar

(jb) The UN Development Programme (UNDP) has issued a warning that poverty is rapidly increasing in

Myanmar, with the middle class "disappearing" due to escalating insecurity and conflict. A recent report revealed that the middle class has halved since the 2021 military coup, and nearly three-quarters of the population is either in poverty or dangerously close to the poverty line.

According to UNDP less than 25 percent of Myanmar's population now has a stable income above the poverty line. Immediate interventions such as cash transfers, food security, and access to basic services are needed to prevent the situation from worsening further. The report estimates that USD 4 billion annually is required to address the growing poverty crisis.

The dire economic situation has forced households to resort to unsustainable coping mechanisms, resulting in – among others – the near absence of spending on education and healthcare and a "learning and health deficit" in an entire generation.

Conflict-affected regions like Kayah, Chin, and Sagaing have the lowest per capita incomes, coupled with destruction of homes, restricted access to farmlands, and a surge in internally displaced people. Additionally, Myanmar is facing challenges from rising organized crime, making the situation even more precarious. [UN News]

Myanmar junta rejects UN criticism of human rights record as “one-sided”

(jw) The UN Human Rights Council has adopted a resolution criticizing the Myanmar military regime of "systematic human rights violations." The resolution also said that the junta was strangling humanitarian assistance and exacerbating a major crisis that has already displaced millions of people.

In response, Myanmar's junta said on April 9 that the UN's criticism of the regime's human rights record was "one-sided," and that the government received no communication over the appointment of a new special envoy. [The Irrawaddy]

Thailand and Vietnam push for ASEAN consensus to address Myanmar conflict

(jb) Thailand and Vietnam are pushing for an ASEAN consensus to address the escalating conflict in Myanmar. At the 5th Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC-5) in Bangkok, chaired by the two

nations, Thai Foreign Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-nukara and Vietnamese counterpart Bui Thanh Son expressed their shared goal of achieving peace and unity in Myanmar.

Parnpree emphasized the urgency of the situation, stating that both countries agreed on the necessity for a joint ASEAN statement. Vietnam also pledged support for Thailand's "humanitarian corridor" initiative near the Thai-Myanmar border, viewing it as part of ASEAN's collective efforts for regional peace. The ministers didn't specify ASEAN's exact actions to ensure Myanmar's peace.

Concurrently, Thailand announced elevating its ties with Vietnam to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, marking Thailand's first such partnership with an ASEAN member. Both nations also discussed enhancing cooperation across various sectors, including labor, transport, and education. [Nation Thailand]

Philippines' ex-president Duterte amidst deal with China's Xi on West Philippine Sea status quo

(lm) Former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte disclosed that he agreed with Chinese President Xi Jinping to maintain the status quo in the West Philippine Sea, preventing any movement or armed patrols in the area to avoid conflict. This agreement included refraining from bringing construction materials to repair the BRP Sierra Madre, a Philippine Navy ship that was deliberately grounded on the Second Thomas Shoal, also known as the Ayungin Shoal, in the West Philippine Sea. [ABS CBN]

Despite his acknowledgment of the deal, Duterte emphasized that the Philippines had not conceded any territory to China and stressed the country's inability to afford a war with Beijing. He recounted his discussions with Xi, where he expressed the Philippines' claim over parts of the South China Sea but was cautioned by Xi about potential trouble if they insisted on it.

Meanwhile, the Philippine ambassador to the United States, Jose Manuel Romualdez, expressed that the patience of Filipinos regarding China's aggression in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) "is stretched to the limit". Romualdez stated that Filipinos won't tolerate the continued suffering of their fishermen and are determined to protect their territory and sovereign rights. [Philippine News Agency]

Singapore to upgrade bilateral ties with key countries Germany, France

(lb) Following his visits to Germany and France last week, Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong revealed plans to strengthen ties with both nations, particularly in areas such as artificial intelligence, sustainability, and defense. Wong underscored the significance of engaging with Europe amid shifting global dynamics, highlighting discussions with key leaders and initiatives to capitalize on opportunities in digital trade and energy. [Business Times]

Germany

During his visit to Germany from April 8 to 10, Wong met with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin, where they agreed to pursue an upgrade of bilateral relations to a strategic partnership. If successful, this move would mark Germany as only the second European Union member state to establish such a strategic partnership with Singapore, alongside France. [The Straits Times]

Wong also engaged with German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and German Vice-Chancellor and Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Action Robert Habeck, while also meeting with overseas Singaporeans, stressing their role as valuable ambassadors.

France

In France from April 10 to 13, Wong met with French President Emmanuel Macron, and they concurred that their countries are poised to elevate their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) by 2025, coinciding with the 60th anniversary of diplomatic ties. France will be Singapore's second CSP partner after Australia. Both leaders acknowledged the substantial progress made in bilateral cooperation since elevating their relations to a strategic partnership in 2012. Additionally, they inaugurated the France-Singapore Joint Year of Sustainability, focusing on sustainable development initiatives aligned with the green transition. [The Straits Times]

Pope to visit Indonesia, Singapore, Timor-Leste in September as part of four-nation Asia and Oceania tour

(lb) Pope Francis is set to embark on a Apostolic Journey to Asia and Oceania in early September, accepting invitations from heads of state and local Church authorities. His itinerary includes visits to four nations: Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, and Singapore. [Vatican News]

The Pope's visit to Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, is symbolically significant, with over 8 million Catholics comprising 3.1 percent of the population. In Papua New Guinea, about 32 percent of the population is Catholic, presenting an opportunity to engage with a community of around 2 million. Timor-Leste, where Catholics represent 96 percent of the populace, offers a unique chance for connection with a predominantly Catholic nation. Lastly, in Singapore, approximately 3 percent of the population is Catholic, totaling around 395,000 individuals.

Southeast Asia ‘woefully off track’ on green investment, global consultancy firm says

(lm) Southeast Asia faces significant challenges in meeting its green investment targets, according to a recent report by global consultancy Bain & Company, green investment group GenZero, Standard Chartered Bank and Temasek. With energy consumption projected to increase by 40 percent this decade, carbon emissions continue to rise, largely due to the region's reliance on fossil fuels. Despite a 20 percent growth in green investment last year, it falls far short of the USD 5 trillion required this decade. If current trends persist, emissions could exceed 2030 pledges by 32 percent. [Bangkok Post]

The report recommends stronger policies, incentives, regional cooperation, and investment in deployable technologies. It identifies 13 "investable ideas" that could generate USD 50 billion in revenue by 2030, including sustainable agriculture and large-scale renewable energy projects.

Southeast Asia ranks as the second lowest region in renewable energy investment, after Sub-Saharan Africa, according to a separate report by Singapore's Economic Development Board and McKinsey consultancy. To meet net-zero pledges, annual solar installations need to increase from 5 gigawatts to 35 GW by 2030-2050.

Thailand pushes for Schengen-style visa system in Southeast Asia

(lm) Thailand is spearheading a proposal for a Schengen-style visa system in Southeast Asia, aiming to facilitate tourism and economic growth in the region. This initiative involves collaborating with neighboring countries, including Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Laos, to streamline visa processes and make cross-border travel easier. Under this proposed scheme, tourists would potentially benefit from longer stay durations, with discussions leaning towards offering 90-day visas to encourage exploration of multiple countries within the region. [Euronews]

While the concept holds promise for bolstering tourism and trade, the practical implementation may encounter hurdles inherent to regional diplomacy and administrative coordination. Nevertheless, recent visa-related agreements between Thailand and other nations, such as China and India, showcase a trend towards visa liberalization. These agreements have not only simplified travel procedures but also contributed to significant boosts in tourism numbers, evident in Thailand's recent surge in international visitors.

Songkhla settlements to be submitted for UNESCO world heritage list

(msz) Thailand's Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment will reportedly nominate Songkhla and its associated lagoon settlements for UNESCO world heritage site listing within the deadline set on April 15. Since the UNESCO world heritage site committee usually takes around a year to consider sites on the tentative list, Songkhla settlements could be recognized as a world heritage site by 2025.

Songkhla Lake is a large lagoon complex covering 1,040 square kilometers and is connected to the Gulf of Thailand. It is the only inland lake in Thailand with brackish (slightly saline) water producing a unique and diverse ecological system. [Thai PBS World] [The Nation Thailand]

Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam agree to promote trade, investment, tourism in the region

(wn) Officials from Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam reaffirmed their commitment to cooperation on trade, investment, and tourism to accelerate the development of the East-West Economic Corridor and the triangle area. At a forum held in Champassak province, chaired by local and Vietnamese officials, leaders from various sectors discussed enhancing relations and strengthening ties between provinces and cities. [Asia News Network]

The East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC) was established in 1998 to enhance economic cooperation, trade, investment, and development along a transportation route that stretches from Myanmar through Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. The EWEC is part of broader efforts to integrate the economies of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and promote regional cooperation and development.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun manet says country to build Funan Techo Canal

(lm/wn) Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet reaffirmed the nation's commitment to constructing the USD 1.7 billion Funan Techo Canal, connecting Phnom Penh to Ke province with Chinese backing. Construction of the project, known as the Funan Techo Canal, is set to commence later in 2024. Crucially, despite Cambodia's positive outlook, the project has raised significant concerns in Vietnam regarding socioeconomic, environmental, and geopolitical effects. [The Straits Times]

Of particular concern is the potential for the canal to serve as a strategic asset for Chinese military presence, especially in the context of the South China Sea dispute. Vietnam is apprehensive about implications for Chinese warship access near its coastline. However, Hun Manet dismissed these concerns, pledging that Cambodia would not permit its territory to be used as a military base.

Vietnam also worries about environmental impacts, such as changes to the Mekong River's water flow, which could harm agriculture and ecosystems. Economically, Vietnam fears disruptions to its shipping earnings as Cambodia shifts reliance from Vietnamese ports. [Vietnam Briefing]

Against this backdrop, Vietnam has asked Phnom Phen to cooperate and share information with both Hanoi and the Mekong River Commission to assess the project’s impacts, ensuring the harmony of interests

among riverine countries and local communities. [Vietnam News]

Khmer Krom group petitions for Vietnam to be removed from United Nations human rights body

(lm) The Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation, representing Vietnam's Khmer Krom indigenous people, has initiated a petition urging the United Nations Secretary-General to suspend Vietnam's membership in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Citing widespread reports of arbitrary arrests, unjust imprisonment, and religious persecution targeting their community, the group emphasizes Vietnam's failure to uphold its obligations as a UNHRC member. Additionally, the petition calls for the release of imprisoned activists, including Khmer Krom Buddhist monks. [Radio Free Asia]

In late 2022, Vietnam secured 145 of 189 valid votes, becoming one of 14 countries elected by the UN General Assembly to a three-year term on the UNHRC starting January 2023. Earlier this year, the government declared its intention to seek reelection for the 2026-2028 term.

Vietnam contemplates territorial response following China’s Gulf of Tonkin baseline move

(wn) Vietnam considering establishing its own territorial baseline in the Gulf of Tonkin in response to Beijing's announcement of a new baseline for China's territorial sea in the same area. The move follows concerns raised by Vietnamese officials and experts about China's unilateral action, which they fear could lead to pressure to amend previous agreements and expand China's maritime zone. [Radio Free Asia]

In March, China presented seven base points that, when connected, form the basis for its territorial claims in the Gulf of Tonkin. The delineation, which employed straight lines extending far from the coast, was purportedly conducted in accordance with international law [see AiR No. 11, March/2024, 2]. Before Beijing’s announcement, neither Vietnam nor China had formally registered any baselines in the Gulf of Tonkin. However, in 2000, the two countries signed a Delimitation Agreement aimed at delineating their respective shares of the gulf's waters from their

respective mainland territories to the mouth of the gulf.

Experts have pointed out that China's new baseline extends into international waters by an average of 20 to 30 nautical miles, impeding freedom of navigation through the Qiongzhou Strait. While the actual maritime delimitation line between Vietnam and China remains unchanged, China's new baselines exceed the limits set by UNCLOS, raising concerns about future negotiations and maritime disputes. Therefore, Vietnam has called on China to respect previous agreements and international law, but Beijing insists on its right to determine territorial sea baselines [see AiR No. 12, March/2024, 3].

More members of Myanmar Border Guard Police taking shelter in Bangladeshi territory

(tg) Five more members of the Myanmar border police have fled onto Bangladeshi territory. They were swiftly met by members of Border Guard Bangladesh, who took their weapons and placed them in custody. In recent months, many Myanmar nationals have sought refuge from the conflict between the Myanmar military government and the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed organization within Burmese territory. [Daily Star]

US President Biden urged to ban Chinese electric vehicles and limit China flights

(yq) US Senator Sherrod Brown, chair of the Senate Banking Committee, has urged President Joe Biden to ban imports of Chinese-made electric vehicles (EVs), labeling them an existential threat to the American auto industry.

Brown's call for an outright ban is the strongest call yet by any US lawmaker on the issue. Thus far, others have suggested steep tariffs to keep Chinese electric vehicles (EV) out of the country.

In an earlier move in February, the White House opened an investigation into whether Chinese cars pose a national security risk due to their ability to collect sensitive data (see AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1). [BBC]

On the aviation front, on April 11, major U.S. airlines and aviation unions urged the Biden administration to

pause the approval of additional flights between China and the United States. Citing anti-competitive policies by the Chinese government, these groups are concerned about the disparity in market access and the advantage Chinese airlines gain from continued access to Russian airspace – a route currently closed to U.S. carriers due to geopolitical tensions. [Reuters]

US considers easing China travel advisories

(yq) The United States is contemplating softening its travel advisories to China.

Speaking at an event of the non-profit National Committee on U.S.-China Relations on April 9, Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell noted the possibility of softening these travel advisories, acknowledging their role in hindering educational and cultural exchanges.

Campbell highlighted the significant imbalance in educational exchanges and expressed concerns over China's considerable support for Russia's military efforts, hinting at possible repercussions for the bilateral relationship. He also noted a marked increase in Chinese migrants to the US due to economic instabilities back home, viewing it as an emerging concern. [Reuters]

Washington has repeatedly issued tiered warnings for US citizens traveling to China, citing risks of "arbitrary enforcement of local laws," exit bans and wrongful detentions. However, Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Biden's agreed at their meeting in San Francisco last November to encourage more people-to-people exchanges, especially among young individuals, as part of efforts to manage geopolitical competition between their countries (see AiR No. 47, November/2023, 3).

On April 10, the Chinese Foreign Ministry pointed out that the US travel advisory was unjustified and urged the US to withdraw it as soon as possible. [Foreign Ministry, China, in Chinese]

EU investigates Chinese wind turbine influence amid fair competition concerns

(yq) The European Commission is scrutinizing the potential market impact of Chinese wind turbine manufacturers in five EU nations. The EU's

Competition Commission has highlighted Spain, Greece, France, Romania, and Bulgaria for this preliminary review, though specifics on the selection remain unclear.

With about 2.6 gigawatts of Chinese wind turbines slated for European soil, the move reflects concerns over market distortion given the small yet growing presence of Chinese products in an EU market predominantly controlled by European firms like Vestas and Siemens Gamesa. The inquiry addresses competitive pricing and payment terms by Chinese companies, amid Europe's substantial annual wind capacity installations.

Chinese suppliers such as Goldwind and Envision, among others, cater to a broader European and non-EU region, raising questions about their competitive practices. The focus is particularly on onshore wind projects in the specified countries, with several parks already operational or under construction. [Reuters]

This follows the EU investigations into Chinese solar panel manufacturers on April 3 over concerns of unfair competition fueled by foreign subsidies (see AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1).

In response, on April 10, the Chinese Foreign Ministry expressed concerns over the European Union's investigations into Chinese wind turbine suppliers and other new energy sectors, viewing them as protectionist measures that discriminate against Chinese enterprises. [Foreign Ministry, China, in Chinese]

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz visits China

(yq) German Chancellor Olaf Scholz led a diplomatic visit to China between April 14 and 16, 2024. He was accompanied by a delegation that included ministers of environment, agriculture, and transport, as well as business executives from manufacturing giants such as Siemens, BMW, and Benz.

His visit started in Chong Qing City on April 14 and Shanghai on April 15 where he visited local German factories. He called for open and fair" competition between European and Chinese automakers but added that dumping, overcapacity, or infringement of intellectual property rights will not be tolerated. [South China Morning Post]

His statement comes amid the European Union's investigations into Chinese electric vehicles in September 2023 and solar panel manufacturers in April 2024 over concerns of unfair competition fueled by foreign subsidies. (see AiR No. 38, September/2023, 3) (see AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1)

On April 16, Scholz continued his visit in Beijing, where he met with Chinese President Xi Jinping. During the meeting, Xi emphasized that steady relations require mutual respect, common ground, communication, learning, and win-win cooperation and expressed the willingness to deepen bilateral cooperation.

Scholz responded to Xi's offer to strengthen relations and expressed hopes to enhance exchanges between the two countries, especially in facing the challenge of climate change. Both sides also agreed to remain vigilant against the increasing threat of protectionism.

Additionally, in the context of addressing the Ukraine issue, Scholz warned that the ongoing war undermines the entire international order and emphasized the importance of not threatening the use of nuclear weapons. Xi agreed that Russia shouldn't threaten to use nuclear weapons and urged to work together for the early restoration of peace.

These statements come as Western governments accuse China of providing economic help to Russia, which would support Russia's war economy. [DW] [Süddeutsche Zeitung, in German][Reuters][Foreign Ministry, China, in Chinese]

Canadian prime minister dismisses reports of Chinese interference in elections

(jm/yg) On April 10, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau refuted intelligence reports suggesting Chinese interference in Canadian elections, asserting that past elections were conducted fairly. Testifying at a federal inquiry into foreign interference, set up last year under significant political pressure from opposition figures, Trudeau acknowledged the threat of foreign meddling but claimed insufficient evidence to act against reported Chinese interference in the 2019 and 2021 general elections. He dismissed reports of the Canadian intelligence report detailing Chinese attempts to influence the selection of a Liberal member of Parliament in Toronto during the 2021 election.

Despite reports indicating Chinese preference for the Liberal Party, Trudeau deemed it improbable for the Chinese government to have an election preference.

Trudeau's testimony marked a significant moment in the ongoing public hearings investigating foreign interference in Canadian politics. However, on April 12 following Prime Minister Trudeau's remarks, the head of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) appeared before the foreign interference inquiry and defended the agency's work. CSIS Director David Vigneault emphasized the complexity of intelligence gathering and asserted confidence in his agency's professionalism.

The investigation report is scheduled to be released by the end of 2024. [Global News] [NY Times][Aljazeera] [CBC]

China has denied all allegations of meddling in the electoral process rejecting them as "groundless" (see AiR No. 10, March/2023, 1).

China-France satellite collaboration advances

(jm) According to the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Innovation Academy for Microsatellites, the joint Sino-French satellite project, known as the Space Variable Objects Monitor (SVOM), will launch in June. Developed in order to study gamma-ray bursts, the spacecraft combines small telescopes designed for observing distant star explosions. From the Xichang Satellite Launch Center, the SVOM project is scheduled for deployment via a Chinese Long March 2C carrier rocket. The SVOM project began in 2010 through collaboration between the China National Space Administration and France's National Center for Space Studies; now the project includes the Research Institute in Astrophysics and Planetology in Toulouse and the Institute of High Energy Physics in Beijing.

Weighing 930 kilograms, the SVOM will carry the ECLAIRs coded mask camera and the Microchannel X-ray Telescope developed by French scientists, as well as the Gamma-ray Burst Monitor and the Visible Telescope built by the Chinese team. Both China and France will contribute to ground control, data reception, and further observations of gamma-ray bursts.

This satellite venture follows the China-France Oceanography Satellite launched in 2018, which provided significant data for studying ocean dynamics

and climate change. Pang Zhihao, a space exploration expert, highlights the complementary strengths of both countries in space technology and scientific instrument development. [The State Council of the PRC]

Italian automaker Stellantis warns of potential factory closures due to increased competition from Chinese automakers

(yq) On April 10, Stellantis, a major Italian car manufacturer, warned of potential factory closures due to increased competition from Chinese automakers in Italy.

The Italian government's discussions with Tesla and China's Chery Auto, aimed at boosting the automotive sector, may compel Stellantis to consider plant closures, as articulated by its CEO Carlos Tavares. [Reuters]

Xi Jinping meets Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov

(yq) Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Russia's top diplomat Sergey Lavrov on April 9 in Beijing.

During the discussions, Xi expressed support for Russia's efforts to maintain social stability and jointly reform global governance, reflecting a shared agenda to counter Western influence. Lavrov reaffirmed that enhancing ties with China remains a cornerstone of Russian foreign policy.

Lavrov's visit was framed as a prelude to an anticipated state visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin, following his election victory last month. The meeting comes after Lavrov's meeting with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi. During the meeting, Wang Yi highlighted the countries' ties as being at "the highest level in history" and opposed a Cold War mentality (see AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1).

The meeting also set the stage for further diplomatic engagements, including a potential peace conference on Ukraine, demonstrating the deepening partnership as both nations navigate global geopolitical challenges. [CNN] [Foreign Ministry, China, in Chinese]

China and Vietnam establish naval hotline amid rising South China Sea tensions

(yq) China and Vietnam have agreed to establish a naval hotline. The deal was reached as Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun met his Vietnamese counterpart Phan Van Giang at the border between the two countries on April 11-12.

This strategic communication line between the Vietnamese Navy and the People's Liberation Army's Southern Theatre Command will facilitate direct dialogue aimed at preventing maritime conflicts.

Minister Dong emphasized China's commitment to deepen military cooperation with Vietnam. He assured support for Vietnam's core interests and expressed China's willingness to elevate strategic mutual trust between the two armies to a new level. [Reuters]

Minister Giang reiterated the significance of China in Vietnam's foreign policy. He emphasized the importance of defense friendship exchange in building mutual political trust and understanding. Additionally, he invited Minister Dong to the upcoming military and national celebrations in Vietnam.

The two countries have vowed to intensify their exchanges and strengthen annual cooperative mechanisms such as the defense strategic dialogue and joint patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin. These measures aim to ensure that disputes in the South China Sea do not undermine their broader bilateral relations,

Observers note that the strengthened Sino-Vietnamese military ties and the establishment of the hotline could serve as a cautionary measure towards the Philippines, signaling a unified front among China and its neighboring countries in the South China Sea disputes. [South China Morning Post]

Rwanda maintains neutral stance amid US-China Rivalry

(jm) On April 11 during an exclusive interview with the South China Morning Post, Rwanda's ambassador to China, James Kimonyo, emphasized Rwanda's neutral stance in the rivalry between the United States and China, stating that both nations are considered friends and valuable partners to Rwanda. Kimonyo highlighted the importance of addressing tensions between major powers through systematic frameworks. He also noted the ongoing dialogue between the US and China, citing

high-profile meetings and discussions, (see AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1) indicating that Rwanda prioritizes its own sovereign decisions.

Regarding controversial issues such as China's alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang, Kimonyo stated that Rwanda views them as internal matters of China. He defended China's investments in Africa, including those under the Belt and Road Initiative, rejecting claims of "debt-trap" diplomacy as illogical.

Kimonyo praised China's historical support for Africa and highlighted China's contributions to Rwanda's socio-economic transformation. He underscored the positive and productive nature of Rwanda-China relations, emphasizing mutual benefits and cooperation across various sectors. Additionally, he expressed Rwanda's eagerness to further enhance collaboration with China, especially in areas such as infrastructure, education, healthcare, and technology.

At a commemorative event on April 7, Chinese officials reiterated China's commitment to supporting Rwanda's development and strengthening bilateral ties, emphasizing cooperation and mutual benefit. [Rwanda in China] [SCMP]

China strengthens ties with Micronesia

(jm) China and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) are strengthening their bilateral relations with a focus on mutual cooperation and development. Premier Li Qiang and President Xi Jinping affirmed China's commitment to supporting the FSM's sovereignty and independence while deepening collaboration in various sectors.

On April 9, Chinese President Xi Jinping held talks with FSM President Wesley W. Simina, expressing China's willingness to elevate bilateral ties to new heights. Both sides agreed to maintain exchanges and dialogues, strengthen cooperation across multiple sectors, and adhere to the principles of the comprehensive strategic partnership. China offered assistance to the FSM in addressing climate change and capacity building. Additionally, Xi emphasized mutual respect and non-interference in the internal affairs of Pacific Island countries. [Embassy of the PRC in the Federated States of Micronesia]

On April 10, Chinese Premier Li Qiang met with Wesley. Li emphasized the substantial progress made in bilateral relations over the 35 years since the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and

the FSM. Li expressed readiness to deepen cooperation in various fields, including infrastructure, agriculture, fisheries, healthcare, and education, under the Belt and Road Initiative. [The State Council, the PRC]

The partnership, highlighted during the 35th anniversary of diplomatic ties, has been marked by discussions on expanding cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative. China's assistance to Micronesia is characterized by a focus on sustainable development without political conditions. [Global Times]

China-Georgia visa exemption to boost tourism

(yq) The Foreign Ministry of China stated on April 11 that China and Georgia implemented a mutual visa exemption policy. This agreement, effective for up to 30 days per visit with a cap of 90 days within a 180-day period, was signed by Zhou Qian, China's Ambassador to Georgia, and Georgia's Foreign Minister Ilia Darchiashvili on April 10. [Foreign Ministry, China, in Chinese][Global Times]

China expresses concern over escalating tensions in the Middle East

(jm) On April 14, China expressed deep concern over escalating tensions in the Middle East following Iran's retaliatory strikes against Israel using drones and missiles earlier that Sunday morning. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC]

This marked Iran's first direct attack on Israeli territory, raising the specter of wider regional conflict. As a mediator in the region and a significant importer of energy from the Middle East, China emphasized the importance of calm and restraint among all parties involved.

Moreover, China called on influential countries to play a constructive role in maintaining regional peace and stability. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC] Notably, the current tensions were viewed as a spill-over from the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, which has also affected fronts with Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq.

China previously mediated between Iran and Saudi Arabia and had urged Iran to curb attacks by Iran-backed Houthis in the Red Sea to avoid harming

business relations (see AiR No. 5, January/2024, 5). In response to the heightened tensions, the Chinese embassy in Iran advised Chinese nationals and companies to enhance security measures. China Southern Airlines and Hainan Airlines adjusted their flight schedules, with China Southern canceling a flight to Iran and Hainan Airlines monitoring the situation closely regarding an upcoming flight to Israel. [Reuters]

China-Laos railway marks one-year anniversary

(jm) On April 13, the China-Laos Railway celebrated the first anniversary of its international passenger service by expanding its operations. The railway added a new pair of trains between Xishuangbanna, China, and Luang Prabang, Laos.

Over the past year, the railway has facilitated over 110,000 cross-border passenger trips, boosting tourism and enhancing socio-economic development in Laos.

The China-Laos Railway, a project under the Belt and Road Initiative, commenced operations in December 2021, connecting Kunming, China, with Vientiane, Laos. [The State Council, the PRC] [Xinhua]

China and Tanzania mark 60 years of diplomatic relations

(jm) On April 15 in Tanzania, Dar es Salaam, China and Tanzania commemorated the 60th anniversary of their diplomatic relations with a reception, attended by Tanzanian Minister for Foreign Affairs January Makamba and Chinese Ambassador Chen Mingjian, along with government officials and overseas Chinese. The formal establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries occurred on April 26, 1964. [The State Council, the PRC]

Indian Prime Minister Modi urges for peace at India-China border

(fd/lm) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi stressed the urgent need for India and China to address their longstanding border disputes to enhance bilateral relations. In a rare interview with Newsweek magazine, Modi emphasized the importance of peaceful relations

between the two countries, highlighting the significance for regional and global stability. He expressed hope for positive engagement at diplomatic and military levels to restore and sustain peace along the border. [BBC]

Echoing Modi's sentiments, India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar recently drew attention to the substantial increase in India's budget allocated for border infrastructure with China since Modi assumed office as Prime Minister. Jaishankar underscored the importance of adopting a pragmatic and realistic approach towards Beijing, citing historical contexts such as the period following China's annexation of Tibet in 1950 and the events leading up to the 1962 war. He also highlighted the significance of economic competition and manufacturing capability in shaping India's policy stance. [The Hindu businessline]

These statements come amidst allegations from opposition parties regarding reported Chinese incursions into Indian territory, which were not directly addressed. Observers have noted claims of significant land loss to China as politically motivated exaggerations, citing a lack of tangible evidence. However, they acknowledge recent disputes at various Patrol Points along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).. [The Indian Express]

In significant developments, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) has pinpointed 19 "sensitive" locations along the China-India border, stretching from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh. These areas are earmarked as potential sites for Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) incursions during the summer months, particularly as snow begins to melt. To strengthen defenses, both the ITBP and the army are deploying additional personnel and enhancing infrastructure in these vulnerable areas. Additionally, central intelligence agencies have been instructed to intensify surveillance along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) to monitor PLA activities. [The Telegraph]

Indian army representative visits Nepal; New Delhi gifts 35 ambulances, 66 school buses to Kathmandu

(tg/lm) Lieutenant General Pradeep Chandran Nair, Director General of Assam Rifles, the oldest paramilitary force in India, embarked on an official visit to Nepal, commencing on April 8. During his five-day stay, he visited various military establishments and addressed ex-servicemen rallies in Kathmandu, Pokhara, and Dharan. Additionally, he held meetings

with key officials, including Ambassador of India to Nepal Naveen Srivastava and Chief of the Army Staff of the Nepali Army General Prabhu Ram Sharma. [Himalayan Times]

In other news, India recently donated 35 ambulances and 66 school buses to Nepal through its embassy in Kathmandu, demonstrating its ongoing support for the country's health and education sectors. Notably, two ambulances were specifically designated for earthquake-affected areas. Since 1994, New Delhi has gifted over 1,000 ambulances and 300 school buses to Kathmandu as part of its assistance efforts. [The Kathmandu Post]

British candidate for next INTERPOL Secretary General visits India

(fd) Stephen Kavanagh, the current Executive Director of Policing Services at INTERPOL, visited New Delhi for high-level meetings with the Indian government regarding international crime-fighting. He engaged in bilateral discussions with senior Indian officials, including the Director of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), Praveen Sood, focusing on enhancing cooperation to address terrorism, drug smuggling, and technology-enabled crimes. [The Print] [GOV.UK]

Kavanagh emphasized India's pivotal role in global law enforcement initiatives and expressed his vision for INTERPOL if elected as Secretary General, highlighting principles of operational impact, innovation, inclusivity, and integrity.

US Embassy in Jakarta and Wild Projects collaborate to enhance environmental resilience in Indonesia

(jb) The US Embassy in Jakarta, in partnership with Wild Projects, is set to bolster youth leadership in East Kalimantan and West Java through a unique STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) education program. Starting on April 23, Wild Projects, a California-based arts and social practice non-profit, will conduct a series of workshops both virtually and in-person.

These workshops aim to merge cultural insights with responses to environmental challenges, employing contemporary dance, music, and local sports. Working

alongside six Indonesian partners, the initiative seeks to cultivate leadership and critical thinking among high school students, emphasizing STEAM education, environmental concerns, and the integration of traditional culture. Students will produce a short film showcasing their progress and future plans.

Indonesian partners in this endeavor include Technonatura Madrasah School (Depok), Sekolah Alam (Bogor), Borneo Orangutan Survival Foundation (Bogor-Kalimantan), and artists Endo Suanda (Bandung) and US Fulbright alumnus Eko Supriyanto (Solo). High school students from Tenggarong and Samboja (East Kalimantan) and Depok and Bogor (West Java) will participate in the program. The involvement of Sekolah Alami and the Gubang Arts Community is made possible with the support from United Tractors (Indonesia) and the Consulate General Republic of Indonesia, San Francisco. [US Embassy & Consulates in Indonesia]

Japan, US strengthen defense cooperation during Kishida's state visit

(sh/jm) During his state visit to Washington last week, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida held a summit with US President Joe Biden on April 10. The two leaders pledged to bolster defense cooperation amid rising tensions with China, emphasizing a "new era" of strategic cooperation, aiming to address complex global challenges.

They outlined initiatives to address complex global challenges. These initiatives include upgrading military command-and-control frameworks, expanding defense communications networks, and enhancing air defense capabilities. The leaders also discussed joint projects in missile development, jet trainer production, and space exploration, aiming for a Japanese astronaut to be the first non-American to land on the moon. Additionally, they highlighted the importance of their alliance in responding to potential threats from China and other regional challenges. Discussions also touched on ongoing conflicts globally, including concerns about Russia's aggression in Ukraine and maintaining the international order based on the rule of law. Economic aspects of the relationship were also discussed, with a focus on investments and trade ties. [Ministry of Foreign of Japan] [White House, US] [BBC] [Reuters]

Prior to the summit, on April 9, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson and Japan's Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) Masahito

Moriyama signed an agreement to propel sustainable human exploration on the Moon.

Under the agreement, Japan will craft, develop, and operate a pressurized rover for both manned and unmanned lunar missions. Meanwhile, NASA will oversee the rover's launch and delivery to the lunar surface, offering two chances for Japanese astronauts to embark on lunar ventures.

The pressurized lunar rover aims to extend astronauts' reach and duration of work on the Moon's surface. This pact aligns with the "Framework Agreement Between the Government of Japan and the Government of the United States of America for Cooperation in Space Exploration and Use of Outer Space, Including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies, For Peaceful Purposes," signed in January 2023.

This framework fosters an array of collaborative efforts spanning space science, Earth science, space operations, aeronautical science, and beyond. Future endeavors include Japan's involvement in NASA's Dragonfly mission, the Nancy Grace Roman Space Telescope, and joint ventures on JAXA's SOLAR-C satellite for solar atmosphere exploration. [NASA]

Speaking on April 11 in the US Congress, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio pledged Japan's commitment to shouldering greater responsibility in maintaining global order. [NHK 1]

Kishida’s speech emphasized Japan's role as a "global partner" of the U.S., advocating for the preservation of international order based on freedom and democracy. He highlighted the significant contributions made by the US in shaping the postwar international order, citing its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological prowess

The prime minister also addressed emerging challenges to this order, notably citing China's assertive external stance and military actions, as well as North Korea's nuclear and missile program. Additionally, he reiterated Japan’s condemnation of Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine.

On Japanese-U.S. relations, Kishida underscored Japan's economic contributions to the US, with Japanese companies having invested approximately USD 800 billion and creating nearly one million American jobs. He expressed optimism about further enhancing economic cooperation between the two nations.

Furthermore, Kishida highlighted the expanding collaboration between Japan and the US in outer space, particularly through participation in the Artemis lunar exploration program. [NHK 2]

Japan-UK navy cooperation on investigating violations of UN sanctions

(sh) Between late March and mid-April, the Royal Navy HMS SPEY, a River-class offshore patrol vessel, carried out surveillance operations to counter illicit maritime activities in waters near Japan, particularly the East China Sea.

These activities included monitoring ship-to-ship transfers involving North Korean-flagged vessels, which are prohibited by United Nations Security Council resolutions (UNSCRs). This marked the eleventh instance of such actions by the UK Royal Navy since 2018.

Japan appreciates these efforts as they contribute to the effective enforcement of relevant UNSCRs. These actions align with the international community's goal of urging North Korea to dismantle all weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles in a complete, verifiable, and irreversible manner.

Additionally, Japan is actively engaged in gathering information on vessels suspected of violating UNSCRs, collaborating closely with the UK and other relevant countries and international organizations.[Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

New Zealand's maritime surveillance aircraft to patrol for Japan

(sh) Since 2018, the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) has been actively involved in enforcing Security Council sanctions against North Korea. Despite these efforts, North Korea has persisted in launching ballistic missiles, defying Security Council resolutions.

The sanctions aim to pressure North Korea into dismantling its nuclear arsenal and ceasing ballistic missile tests. Rear Admiral Jim Gilmour, Commander Joint Forces New Zealand, affirmed NZDF's commitment to collaborative enforcement operations. Maritime surveillance patrols conducted by NZDF personnel and aircraft focus on international waters to detect violations, including illicit ship-to-ship transfers of prohibited items like oil and coal. These actions

underscore New Zealand's dedication to upholding the rules-based international order and fostering regional stability. [Naval News]

Laos, Vietnam sign new trade agreement, increase mutual judicial assistance

(lvw) Ministers of industry from both Vietnam and Laos signed a new trade agreement following their talks in Vientiane, Laos on April 8. The talks, led by Vietnamese Minister of Industry and Trade Nguyen Hong Dien, and Lao Minister of Industry and Commerce Malaithong Kommasith called for the scaling up of their bilateral trade and for the effective implementation of the January 2024 Memorandum of Understanding on the development and connectivity of cross border trade. The new agreement includes a framework of best practices to enforce penalties on business and trade violations and coordinated approaches to tackling cross-border crimes such as smuggling, fraud and illegal transport of goods.

In a separate move, on April 6, Vietnam's deputy PM Tran Luu Quang agreed to a plan to implement mutual judicial assistance on civil matters with Laos. The body of the plan was laid out in a document signed in January this year outlines the need for and steps towards enhanced coordination and cooperation in regard to the handling of legal matters and civil cases that pertain to both countries, and foreign nationals.

Designed to raise the efficiency of legal matters regarding both nations, the latest document, signed by both nations of April 6, urges the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Supreme People's Court of the two countries to accelerate the implementation of their work in carrying out their socio-legal mandates. [Lao News Agency] [Vientiane Times]

Laos to enhance East-West Economic Corridor

(lvw) On April 10 in Pakse, in Champasak province, Laos held a multinational trade, investment and tourism forum. At the forum, representatives from Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam discussed one of the region's key flagship development projects, the East - West Economic Corridor (EWEC).

The EWEC is a train line across the Greater Mekong Subregion, connecting Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. Expanding in scope from a transport corridor to an economic corridor, the project seeks to boost the region's connectivity, efficiency, and facilitate regional trade and development. Since its initiation in 1998, the corridor aims to strengthen and streamline economic and trade, the regional transfer of goods, and the international tourism sector. The initiative also seeks to facilitate the growth and development of localities along the 1,450-kilometer track, drawing in investment, trade and tourism opportunities.

The Asian Development Bank, one of the key financiers and partners in the megaproject, has emphasized the need for 'sustainable and balanced' development to underpin the project's vision and construction. The project has achieved many of the infrastructure targets and construction is ongoing.

However, completion of the project has been stalled in the Myanmar section due to the ongoing ethnic armed conflict, unrest and state violence of the military junta. Thus, the project has been prevented from reaching its full economic and geographic potential. [Asian Development Bank], [Lao News Agency], [Nikkei Asia]

Malaysia's prime minister calls Iran's drone attack on Israel "legitimate"

(dql) Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has defended Iran's use of drones at the past weekend to respond to Israel's attack of its embassy in Damascus, Syria, as a legitimate act.

In a statement made on April 15, Anwar added that Malaysia welcomes Iranian assurances that its response would be the extent of their action, provided Israel will not further provocations. [The Star]

Malaysia as a Muslim-majority country does not recognize Israel and have consistently expressed support for Palestinian rights and causes.

Anwar has recently expressed strong criticism against Western countries for their lack of action against Israel in the ongoing conflict with Hamas. Identifying "Israel's decades-long policies against Palestinians and its atrocities," as the root cause of the conflict, Anwar urged Western countries to abandon their "selective" and "ambivalent" attitude and "obsession" with the narrative, "as if the entire problem begins and ends with the 7th of October. It did not begin with the 7th October, and did not end with the 7th of October. It

began four decades before that, and it is continuing daily." [See AiR No. 11, March/2024, 2]

Singapore cracks down on arms sales to Myanmar

(jb) Singapore has intensified its crackdown on arms sales to Myanmar in response to United Nations pressure, significantly impacting the military junta's access to weapons. This follows the United Nations' 2023 report revealing Singapore as the third-largest source of weapons materials to Myanmar's military, exports have dropped by 83 percent.

The reduced weapon supply poses challenges for army chief Min Aung Hlaing, who faces mounting opposition and territorial losses to a coalition of resistance forces. In a desperate move, the junta has implemented sweeping conscription laws to bolster its ranks.

The UN report detailed over USD 1 billion in arms transfers to the ruling generals, with 138 Singapore-based firms involved in transferring USD 254 million in weapons materials from 2021 to 2022. Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed its principled stance against the Myanmar military's use of lethal force and acknowledged ongoing investigations into potential violations of Singaporean law. [Al Jazeera]

Thai prime minister urges Myanmar to prevent conflict spilling over into Thailand

(jb) Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin has urged Myanmar to prevent the conflict in Myawaddy from spilling over into Thai territory. The town, where the Myanmar military is clashing with the Karen National Union, is just 7 kilometers from Mae Sot.

Srettha instructed the Foreign Ministry and Army to engage with Myanmar officials on the matter. Despite reports of the 275th Infantry Battalion in Myawaddy being seized, Myanmar denies losing control. Srettha described it as an internal issue for Myanmar but emphasized Thailand's need to ensure the conflict doesn't cross the border.

He also plans to discuss potential combat situations with the Royal Thai Air Force commander, asserting that Thailand's airspace is non-negotiable. While using F-16 fighter jets to manage the airspace is an option, Srettha prefers not to escalate tensions.

The Foreign Ministry stated that Thailand is prepared to host up to 100,000 refugees from Myanmar due to the ongoing conflict. Lt-General Prasarn Saeangsirirak, the 3rd Army Area commander, confirmed movement and trade continue across the border, despite transportation challenges. The military is on standby at Pha Sone Camp, but no incursions have been reported yet. [Asia News Network]

Myanmar searches for business opportunities with Russia's Eurasian Economic Union

(jw) The military junta is seeking to find new business partners in the Eurasian Economic Union. The union is a network comprised of Russia and four former Soviet republics: Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan.

A joint working group aiming to deepen Myanmar's ties with the Eurasian Economic Commission met on April 9 in Myanmar's capital Naypyitaw. The junta's investment and foreign economic relations minister, Kan Zaw, and the union's commissioner for integration and macroeconomics, Sergey Glazyev were among the officials who attended the meeting. Executives from the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry were also in attendance.

Junta news reported that the meeting discussed cooperation in manufacturing, agriculture, energy, tourism, and more. The relationship between Russia and Myanmar's military regime has grown since the 2021 coup. The combination of economic sanctions and withdrawal of foreign investments in the country has forced Myanmar to seek closer relationships with countries like Russia and other former Soviet republics. [The Irrawaddy]

Controversy surrounds Nepali government's decision on work permits for Russia amid ongoing protests

(lm) Against the backdrop of ongoing protests by families of Nepalis serving in the Russian Army, a controversy has emerged regarding the government's decision to issue work permits for travel to Russia. [The Himalayan Times]

The Nepali embassy in Moscow confirmed that it had endorsed demand for workers for a petrochemical

project in Russia's Amur region in February 2023, predating the issues related to Nepalis joining the Russian Army. However, since then, they have refrained from endorsing further demand letters or issuing recommendation letters for a No Objection Certificate (NoC).

In the fiscal year 2023/24, 53 individuals departed for Russia in Shrawn (July-August), 161 in Bhadra (August-September), 47 in Asar (June-July), 43 in Kartik (October-November), and 39 in Mangsir (November-December). However, until January, only 2 individuals had obtained approvals for work permits according to government data.

Amidst this controversy, National Congress lawmaker Pradeep Paudel has voiced opposition to the government's decision to issue work permits for Russia during a parliamentary session. Paudel argues that instead of dissuading youth from going to Russia, the government's actions have facilitated it, despite ongoing issues faced by Nepalis in Russia.

Chinese top official visits North Korea

(yq) Zhao Leji, the chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China, the country legislature, and third highest-ranking member of the Communist Party of China, concluded a three-day visit to North Korea from April 11 to 13. Zhao's trip marked the highest level of bilateral exchange in five years since the Covid-19 pandemic.

On April 11, Zhao met with his North Korean counterpart senior official Choe Ryong Hae, and emphasized cooperation across political, economic, and cultural dimensions. [AP News]

On April 13, Zhao met with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, emphasizing China as the North's most important source of economic aid and diplomatic support, and expressed willingness to deepen the bilateral cooperation. [Foreign Ministry, China, in Chinese]

Amidst North Korea's continued missile tests earlier this month, which have stirred concerns in South Korea and Japan the U.S. (see AiR No. 13, March/2024, 4), Zhao's trip signals China's intent to solidify its relationship with Pyongyang. This alliance is crucial as North Korea seeks to navigate its standoffs with the U.S. and bolster its ties with both China and Russia.

This visit also follows Kim Jong-un's trip to Russia in September 2023, indicating North Korea's strategy to enhance cooperation with key allies amidst its ongoing nuclear program and international isolation (see AiR No. 38, September/2023, 3).

Pakistan probes shooting of accused in 2013 murder of alleged Indian spy

(lm) Pakistani authorities are investigating the shooting of a citizen who was suspected of involvement in the killing of Sarabjit Singh, an alleged Indian spy who died in a prison in Lahore, Pakistan, in 2013. The death of Amir Tamba occurred in Lahore where unidentified gunmen entered his residence and fatally shot him before fleeing the scene. Pakistani officials have accused India's intelligence agency of involvement in killings inside Pakistan previously. [Al Jazeera] [Arab News]

Sarabjit Singh's case dates back to 1991 when he was convicted of espionage by a Pakistani military court and sentenced to death. However, Singh's fate took a turn when he was attacked and killed by fellow inmates while incarcerated in a Lahore prison in 2013. Tamba had been suspected of involvement in Singh's death, although he had not been formally convicted in connection to the incident.

This development comes after the British newspaper *The Guardian* reported on revelations from Indian and Pakistani intelligence operatives, shedding light on a strategy of targeted assassinations in Pakistan allegedly carried out by India's Research & Analysis Wing (RAW). The aim was reportedly 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. [AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1]

Pakistan bans Iran-backed Shiite group fighting in Syria; Iran’s president to visit Islamabad on April 22

(nw/lm) Iran’s President Ibrahim Raisi is scheduled to visit neighboring Pakistan on April 22, where he will

meet with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Pakistani military leadership – a development that can be considered the latest effort to rebuild bilateral ties following tit-for-tat missile attacks on one another's border regions in January that saw relations nosedive and tensions spike. [News18]

In January, the two Islamic nations exchanged air strikes – the highest-profile cross-border intrusions in recent years – which targeted what both sides called "terrorist" groups in the regions around their mutual border. Both sides claimed there were civilian casualties, and the attacks saw a swift and sharp deterioration in diplomatic relations between Islamabad and Tehran, with ambassadors withdrawn, official ties severed, and rhetoric raised in tone. [AiR No. 4, January/2024, 4]

In the latest of actions broadly aimed at national security, Pakistan recently banned the Zaynabiyoun Brigade, an Iran-backed Shiite militant group operating within its borders. Reports suggest that the organization has been actively mobilizing fighters in Pakistan and among Pakistani refugees residing in Iran. These individuals are allegedly trained by the Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps for combat operations in Syria. In addition to its involvement in Syria, the group has been implicated in domestic incidents, including an assassination attempt on a prominent cleric in Pakistan's southern Sindh province. [Voice of America]

Despite fears these developments would open a new front in the ongoing conflict and instability in the Middle East, both parties have maintained a relatively calibrated response and have since worked to de-escalate tensions and restore diplomatic relations [see AiR No. 5, January/2024, 5]. In the latest of developments, Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari recently engaged in a telephone conversation with his Iranian counterpart, Ebrahim Raisi, during which they discussed various issues, including security cooperation. During the call, Zardari also highlighted the vast potential for expanding bilateral economic cooperation between Pakistan and Iran in various fields. [The News] [Dawn]

However, the primary obstacle hindering improved bilateral relations is arguably the longstanding gas pipeline project, commonly referred to as the "Peace Pipeline." Initially agreed upon in 2009, Iran completed its portion of the pipeline in 2011. However, Islamabad delayed its construction due to concerns regarding potential United States sanctions against Tehran. In response to a notice of potential arbitration and a compensation claim from Tehran, Pakistan's outgoing

caretaker government approved the construction of an 80-kilometer section within its borders in February [see AiR No. 9, February/2024, 4]. Despite this decision, the US expressed opposition to the project's continuation and cautioned against engaging in business with Tehran, citing the risk of sanctions [see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1].

Saudi Arabia's foreign minister leads high-level delegation on Pakistan visit

(lm) Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, was set to visit Pakistan on April 15 for a two-day official visit aimed at bolstering bilateral economic cooperation. The Saudi delegation, comprising several key ministers and officials, will engage in meetings with Pakistani government officials, including the president, prime minister, and foreign minister, to discuss economic partnerships and investment opportunities. [Arab News] [News18]

This visit follows discussions between Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, where Saudi Arabia reaffirmed its commitment to expedite a USD 5 billion investment package in Pakistan [see AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1]. Additionally, Saudi Arabia is reportedly considering investing USD 1 billion in Pakistan's Reko Diq mining project in Balochistan province.

Japan, Philippines agree to hold 2+2 foreign, defense meeting in 2024

(lm) Japan and the Philippines have agreed to convene a '2+2' ministerial meeting in 2024 to strengthen their growing economic and defense collaboration. Manila will host this meeting, following the inaugural encounter held in Tokyo in April 2022. The decision was reached during discussions between Foreign Affairs Secretary Enrique Manalo and Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa, held on the sidelines of a significant trilateral summit involving the Philippines, Japan, and the United States. [Philippines News Agency]

During their talks, Secretary Manalo recognized Japan as one of the Philippines' most dependable partners, citing Tokyo's substantial contributions in areas such as Official Development Assistance (ODA), maritime security, trade, investments, and the recent Official Security Assistance (OSA) agreement. The OSA, signed

in 2023, facilitated the acquisition of a coastal radar system, bolstering the Philippines' maritime domain awareness capabilities.

Foreign Minister Kamikawa stressed the importance of enhancing bilateral and trilateral cooperation between Japan, the Philippines, and the United States in addressing complex global challenges. They also discussed various regional and international issues, including concerns in the West Philippine Sea, the Gaza conflict, disarmament efforts, peace initiatives in the Korean peninsula, and tensions in the East China Sea.

Philippines, United States nuclear energy investment

(lm) President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. of the Philippines recently engaged in discussions with executives from Ultra Safe Nuclear Corp. (USNC), a Washington-based company specializing in nuclear technologies and services. Their dialogue centered on the advancements made in the planned nuclear energy investment by USNC in the Philippines. [Philippines News Agency]

This meeting builds upon their initial talks in May 2023 and the subsequent signing of a nuclear cooperation agreement between Manila and Washington. The pact aims to leverage US investment and technologies to aid the Philippines in transitioning to cleaner energy sources and enhancing its power infrastructure. Notably, USNC also participated in a trade mission to the Philippines in March this year.

Additionally, Energy Secretary Rafael Lotilla provided President Marcos Jr. with updates on legislative initiatives in Parliament aimed at supporting the project. The lower House has already passed bills laying out the legal framework for USNC's investment. President Marcos Jr. is optimistic about securing approval from the upper House to move forward with the project.

Philippines, United States fighter jets hold combat maneuvers over Basa Air Base

(lm) Fighter aircraft from the Philippine Air Force (PAF) and the United States Air Force (USAF) conducted "basic fighter maneuvers" (BFM) over Basa Air Base in the Central Luzon region of the Philippines as part of the two-week Cope Thunder-Philippines exercise.

These maneuvers, involving the PAF's FA-50 and the USAF's F-16, aim to enhance pilot capabilities in aerial combat scenarios through tactical maneuvers and techniques. [Philippine News Agency].

Senior Chinese official meets with Singaporean deputy PM

(lb) In a significant diplomatic meeting, Senior Chinese official He Lifeng convened with Singaporean Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Economic Policies Heng Swee Keat in Beijing on Wednesday. Delving into the macroeconomic landscape and financial cooperation between the two nations, the discussions underscored the depth of their partnership. He Lifeng, a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, emphasized China's commitment to implementing key agreements between the leaders of both countries and fostering high-quality collaboration across various sectors. Echoing this sentiment, Heng Swee Keat reaffirmed Singapore's dedication to enhancing bilateral relations, particularly in the realms of economy, trade, and finance, with the aim of advancing mutual development. [CGTN]

New Zealand Prime Minister visits Singapore on first leg of Southeast Asia tour

(lb) New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon concluded the first leg of his Southeast Asia tour with an official visit to Singapore on April 16. During his time in the city-state, Luxon held discussions with Singaporean leaders, including President Tharman Shanmugaratnam and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. The visit underscored the robust relations between Singapore and New Zealand, emphasizing the Enhanced Partnership established in 2019. [The Straits Times]

Luxon, accompanied by Climate Change Minister Simon Watts and MP Paulo Garcia, will now proceed to Thailand and the Philippines. In these countries, he is set to meet with Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin and President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., respectively, aiming to strengthen trade and bilateral ties with New Zealand's key partners in the region. [AiR No. 15, April/2024, 1]

South Korean president meets US envoy to UN

(dql) On April 15, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol held a meeting with US envoy to the United Nations (UN) Linda Thomas-Greenfield at the presidential office in Seoul. The meeting was part of Thomas-Greenfield's visit to South Korea this week.

Yoon and Greenfield discuss various issues including tensions in the Middle East and UN sanctions against North Korea, his office said.

Sharing concerns over Middle East crisis affecting other areas, such as the economy and supply chain, they agreed on joint efforts to help resolve the crisis and extend comprehensive and strategic cooperation between their countries.

Yoon, furthermore, expressed hope for close cooperation between Seoul and Washington in sustaining the UN's sanctions regime against North Korea. Thomas-Greenfield, for her part, reaffirmed support for South Korea's efforts to deter the North's nuclear and missile developments and enhance its human rights conditions. She added that the U.S. remained committed to closely working with South Korea on North Korean and global issues. [The Korea Herald]

In a separate meeting, Thomas-Greenfield and South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul discussed a potential new mechanism for monitoring the enforcement of U.N. sanctions imposed on North Korea.

With South Korea being an elected member of the U.N. Security Council (UNSC) for 2024-25, Cho affirmed Seoul's commitment to using the platform to deepen the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral cooperation to address to pending global issues at the UNSC level. [Yonhap 1]

The meeting between Cho and Thomas-Greenfield came shortly after Russia vetoed a UNSC resolution to extend the mandate for the U.N. Panel of Experts on North Korean sanctions (see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1) The veto reflects growing cooperation between Moscow and Seoul, carefully watched by the U.S. and its allies see.

Meanwhile, South Korea Industry Minister Ahn Duk-geun and U.S. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo agreed in a meeting on April 13 on holding bilateral talks on supply chain and commercial issues and a trilateral industry ministers' meeting with Japan in the

first half of the year. The agreement was reached during Ahn's visit to Washington last week.

This comes as Seoul, Washington and Tokyo are seeking to boost bilateral and trilateral cooperation in line with the U.S. push to build network of allies to confront regional and global challenges. [Department of Commerce, USA] [Yonhap 2]

South Korea, US conduct joint mine warfare drill

(dql) South Korea and the U.S. have carried out a joint marine warfare exercise in the East Sea aimed at improving skills in deterring maritime security threats.

The nine-day annual drill kicked off on April 1 run in waters off Pohang, 262 kilometers southeast of Seoul, and involved nine naval ships and four helicopters from the two sides.

The combined drill focused on exercises to practice skills in mine laying, mine detection and mine removal, along with logistics support and helicopter's landing on a vessel. [Yonhap]

Meanwhile, the South Korean and US navies along with the Japanese self-defense maritime force conducted trilateral exercise in the high seas south of Jeju Island on April 11 and 12. The drill was a combined effort to counter underwater as well as nuclear and missile threats by North Korea.

The exercise involved six warships from the three countries participating in the exercise. Among these warships were South Korean Aegis destroyer Seoae Ryu Sung-ryong; the U.S. nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt and Aegis destroyers Howard, Russell, and Daniel Inouye Russell from the US; and Japan's destroyer Ariake. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea, UK to host AI summit

(dql) Marking the next round of global discussions on artificial intelligence (AI) safety, the UK and South Korea will jointly host the AI Seoul Summit, scheduled for May 21 and 22 and to be co-chaired by British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol. The summit will see on its sidelines an in-person meeting among the Digital Ministers of the two countries.

Building upon the Bletchley Park declaration which was signed at the last summit in the UK last year and which committed to developing AI in a safe, trustworthy, and responsible manner, the summit aims to ensure a balance between the benefits of AI advancements for humanity and potential risks. [Independent]

Sri Lankan President's advisor talks with United States National Security Advisor

(lm)Sagala Ratnayaka, Sri Lanka's President's Senior Advisor on National Security, recently held a meeting with his United States counterpart, Jake Sullivan, focusing on regional security concerns. The dialogue also explored opportunities for enhanced cooperation between the two nations across different domains. [EconomyNext]

Of note, this meeting followed Sri Lankan Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena's recent visit to China, where discussions with President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang centered on debt restructuring and cooperation under Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. [AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1]

Former Taiwanese President Ma's journey to China culminates in Beijing meeting with Xi Jinping

(fg/yg) On April 10, former Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou met with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. The meeting was their second face-to-face meeting after the first meeting in Singapore back in 2015 when Ma was President.

The meeting was part of Ma's 11-day "Journey of Peace" to China, which began in early April (see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1). The aim of the trip was to promote cultural exchange and understanding, especially between young people on both sides of the strait (see AiR No. 13, March/2024, 4). Leading a student delegation and representing the Kuomintang (KMT) party known for advocating closer ties with China, Ma visited cities such as Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Zhuhai and Xi'an before reaching Beijing.

During their talks Xi and Ma underscored the common ground between China and Taiwan, with Xi appealing to compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Strait," and affirming that "[t]here is no grudge that cannot be

resolved. No problem that cannot be talked through. And there are no forces that can separate us." He added that "foreign interference" cannot prevent "family reunification" and "peaceful reunification."

Ma, for his part, emphasized that disputes should be settled peacefully, and that war is "unbearable," expressing confidence in the ability of people on both sides to settle their disputes amicably. [South China Morning Post] [Taiwan News 1]

Taiwan's Foreign Ministry has "taken note" of the meeting between Ma and Xi, expressing concerns that intimidation by the Chinese military was increasing and that such meetings were being used to promote its own views instead of engaging in dialog with the democratically elected government. [MOFA Taiwan, in Chinese] [Taiwan News 2]

Analysts view the meeting as serving as a platform for China to influence Taiwan's internal politics, particularly in light of the upcoming presidential inauguration of Beijing-despised Lai Ching-te of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) next month. They argue that while Beijing aims to present a conciliatory front through the meeting, it simultaneously seeks to weaken Taiwan's current government and bolster the KMT's position as a peacemaker in cross-strait relations.

Meanwhile, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen pointed out on the same day of the Ma-Xi meeting the importance of the US Taiwan Relations Act as it marked its 45th anniversary. Through this legal framework, the US coordinates support for Taiwan, including providing arms sales. Tsai stated that the U.S. has been persistently working to enhance bilateral cooperation and friendship, and Taiwan, in turn, will collaborate to protect peace and stability in the region. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan navy commander at US conference seeks for global support

(fg) During his visit in the US last week, Taiwan Navy Commander Admiral Tang Hua expressed the need for increased cooperation with the US and other nations to counter China's increased military pressure.

He outlined his plan to meet with naval personnel from the US and other countries, accompanied by defense attaché Rear Admiral Chung-Hsing Wei, to discuss this at the Sea-Air-Space conference hosted by the Navy League of the US. [Voice of America]

Australian parliamentary delegation calls for enhanced cooperation with Taiwan on cybersecurity

(fg) An Australian parliamentary delegation visited Taiwan from April 8 to 12. During the visit, the Australian parliamentarians called for closer cooperation between the two sides in areas such as cybersecurity as well as in their trade and economic relations.

The five-member cross-party delegation, representing the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defense and Trade, and the Committee on Intelligence and Security, met with President Tsai Ing-wen, Foreign Minister Joseph Wu, and Speaker of the Legislature Yuan Han kou-yu. [Taiwan News] [MOFA Taiwan]

One focus of the visit was cooperation on strengthening of cybersecurity. Australia is complaining about cyber espionage on its industry and cyber-attacks from other nations. The existing police cooperation on cyber security was emphasized during the visit.

Joint trade was also addressed. The Australian representative admitted that the initial aim is to reach a free trade agreement with the European Union, but that in the long term the aim is also to strengthen economic and trade cooperation with Taiwan. [Focus Taiwan]

Paraguayan parliamentary delegation visits Taiwan to deepen bilateral cooperation

(fg) A parliamentary delegation from Paraguay led by the President of the Paraguayan Senate, Silvio Adalberto Ovelar Benítez, arrived in Taiwan on April 14. The visit runs from April 14 to 18 and includes meetings with Taiwan President Tsai-Ing-wen, President-elect Lai Ching-te, Legislative Speaker Yuan Han Kou-yu, and Foreign Minister Joseph Wu. [Taiwan News 1]

The delegation has planned visits to certain places, such as the National Taiwan University of Science and Technology, where Paraguayan students from the Taiwan-Paraguay Polytechnic University in Asución are studying in Taipei as part of bilateral educational cooperation.

In terms of content, this visit focuses on areas of cooperation such as education, energy and health care. [Taiwan News 2] [Focus Taiwan]

A Paraguayan delegation led by Minister of Information and Communication Technologies Gustavo Villate already visited Taiwan in March (see AiR No. 13, March/2024, 4).

Parliamentary delegations from New Zealand and Israel are also currently in Taiwan. [Taipei Times] [MOFA Taiwan] [Focus Taiwan 2]

Petition at Thailand's Constitutional Court challenges maritime MoU with Cambodia

(lm) Thailand's Ombudsman has been asked to petition the country's Constitutional Court to rule whether the Thai-Cambodian memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed in 2001 on joint development in the Gulf of Thailand is in breach of the constitution. [Bangkok Post]

The 2001 MoU had not been approved by the Thai parliament before it was signed, which has resulted in it "having no legal effect from inception", according to petitioner Paiboon Nititawan, the deputy leader of the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP). Paiboon named the Department of Treaties and Legal Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the first and second parties to be held responsible for what he believed was a breach of the constitution.

Paiboon said that despite previously acknowledging that the MoU had not won parliamentary approval, the two parties continue using the MoU as a reference to what has been agreed by both nations regarding the 27,000 square kilometers of disputed territorial waters in the Gulf of Thailand, which, according to Paiboon, Bangkok has sovereignty over.

Against this backdrop it is worth remembering that the 2001 MoU aimed to address the longstanding maritime dispute over the Overlapping Claims Area (OCA), dating back to Cambodia's claim in the 1970s under the Convention on the Continental Shelf of 1958. However, flare ups in political tensions and issues over land border demarcations between the countries – particularly around the Preah Vihear temple – meant that formal discussions never progressed beyond high level "talks about talks" and the presentation of initial proposals by working groups.

In 2009, in the midst of exacerbated tension between the two countries, the Thai Cabinet voted to scrap the 2001 MoU, adding further uncertainty as to how both countries would formally handle the dispute. Only recent talks between Thai and Cambodian leaders in February indicated a willingness to explore joint hydrocarbon exploration alongside discussions on maritime boundaries in the disputed area [see AiR No. 7, February/2024, 2]. However, concerns have been raised in Thailand about potential conflicts of interest, particularly regarding negotiations over the Gulf of Thailand's OCA, amid fears of prioritizing the interests of former Prime Minister Shinawatra's family.

Thailand, Vietnam give ties big boost

(lm) Thailand and Vietnam have agreed to elevate their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, aiming to achieve goals in bilateral trade, sustainable development, and defense security cooperation. Thailand, according to Foreign Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-nukara, would be the first ASEAN country to establish such a partnership with Vietnam. [Bangkok Post]

The announcement came during the 5th Joint Commission on Thailand-Vietnam Bilateral Cooperation, co-chaired by Parnpree and Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son in Bangkok. Discussions included measures to enhance market access, such as increasing import quotas for livestock and mutual recognition arrangements for seasonal local products.

Additionally, Minister Bui Thanh Son expressed admiration for Thailand's post-COVID-19 recovery and met with Thai Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn to discuss continued support for Vietnam's socio-economic progress. [VietnamPlus]

Thailand tightens border security amid Myanmar conflict escalation

(bk) On April 12, Thailand’s Foreign Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara flew to the country’s Mae Sot district of Tak province, situated adjacent to the Moei River across from Myanmar’s Myawaddy city, to assess the situation following further territorial losses by Myanmar's beleaguered military government in recent clashes. He was joined by Pol Gen Roy Ingkapairote, the secretary-general of the National Security Council, as well as armed forces representatives. [CNA]

Despite reports of Karen rebel forces capturing Myawaddy township and the last Myanmar government military camp, fighting persisted on its outskirts. Border pass applications from Myanmar citizens to enter Mae Sot in Thailand surged to 4,000 per day since the onset of the battle for Myawaddy. Wealthy Myanmar citizens have increasingly purchased condominium units in Thailand, with ownership now reaching 564 units worth THB 3.7 billion, driven by concerns over mandatory military conscription. [Thai PBS World]

Vietnam, Cuba hold 41st session of intergovernmental committee

(wn) Vietnam and Cuba recently held their 41st session of the Intergovernmental Committee in La Habana, led by Vietnamese Minister of Construction Nguyen Thanh Nghi and Cuban Deputy Prime Minister and MINCEX Minister Ricardo Cabrisas. The primary focus was on enhancing economic ties to complement their strong political relationship. Positive outcomes were underscored, including the signing of nearly USD 1 million worth of commercial contracts and the successful operation of six Vietnamese investment projects in Cuba. Efforts continue to strengthen collaborations in agriculture, biotechnology, and healthcare. [Voice of Vietnam]

Concurrently, Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister Tran Luu Quang undertook a visit to Cuba from April 14 to 16 to bolster cooperation between the two nations. Quang's schedule featured courtesy meetings with prominent Cuban leaders including First Secretary of the Communist Party of Cuba and President Miguel Diaz-Canel, as well as Prime Minister Manuel Marrero Cruz. Additionally, discussions were held with Cuban Minister of Foreign Affairs Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Trade and Investment Ricardo Cabrisas Ruiz. [Vietnam Plus]

Vietnam’s deputy prime minister to visit Venezuela

(wn) Vietnam’s Deputy Prime Minister Tran Luu Quang is set to embark on an official visit to Venezuela from April 17-19, following an invitation from Venezuelan Vice President Delcy Rodríguez. During his visit, Quang will engage in talks and meetings with key leaders of Venezuela's ruling United Socialist Party, government, and National Assembly. Both nations plan to sign new

cooperation agreements in various sectors such as oil and gas, telecommunications, agriculture, and construction. [Vietnam Plus]

The visit coincides with the 35th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations and 17 years of comprehensive partnership, reflecting the continued promotion and strengthening of relations across party, state, and people diplomacy.

Notably, this year also marks the 60th anniversary of the so-called Nguyen Van Troi operation, an attempted assassination of then-United States Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara during his visit to South Vietnam in 1964. Nguyen Van Troi, a Vietnamese revolutionary and member of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, planned and executed the operation. However, the assassination attempt failed, and Nguyen Van Troi was captured by South Vietnamese authorities. He was subsequently executed for his involvement in the plot.

The Nguyen Van Troi operation became a symbol of resistance against foreign intervention and imperialism, garnering support from leftist and progressive forces worldwide, including in Venezuela. The operation also underscored the solidarity between the Vietnamese people and other nations struggling against colonialism and imperialism.

Announcements

Upcoming Online Events

17 April 2024 @ 3:00 p.m. (GMT+2), Italian Institute For International Political Studies, Italy

Unfolding Tragedy: Gaza's Humanitarian Crisis

This event delves into the crisis affecting the Gaza Strip, focusing on the humanitarian impact of the conflict, the management of aid in the Strip, and the politisation of humanitarian efforts since the outbreak of the conflict.

For more information, visit [ISPI].

17 April 2024 @ 12:30 -2:00 p.m. (GMT+2), Bruegel, Belgium

Halftime for the European Union's recovery fund: is the glass half full or half empty?

How has the RRF performed at its halfway point in terms of implementation, results orientation and additionality for future EU funding instruments? Experts will discuss this and more in this online event.

For more information, visit [Belgium].

17 April 2024 @ 11:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m. (GMT-5), ODI, UK

Maximizing the developmental value of MDB callable capital: Project findings and policy options

The aim of the workshop will be to highlight the project's research findings, engage relevant stakeholders and influence policy discussions on callable capital.

For more information, visit [ODI].

17 April 2024 @ 4:00 -5:00 p.m. (GMT+1), The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, UK

Should the Government Ban Ransomware Payments?

RUSI is convening a group of experts to discuss the pros and cons of a ban, how it might be implemented, and what other options are available to policymakers to reduce the profitability of ransomware for cybercriminals. Join the event to learn more.

For more information, visit [RUSI].

17 April 2024 @ 9:00-10:30 a.m. (GMT-4), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Quality Education for Security and Economic Growth

Join the CSIS Project on Prosperity and Development for a discussion on the role that education plays as an enabler for national security and the stability of countries. This event will be informed by the recently published CSIS policy brief entitled Investing in Quality Education for Development, Peace, and Stability.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

17 April 2024 @ 2:00 -3:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Wilson Center, USA

"Foreign Agents" Legislation: Between Democratic Resilience and Weaponized Transparency

Using the Russian example, Galina Starovoitova Fellow Maxim Krupskiy will discuss how non-democratic regimes have effectively used foreign agents legislation and its weaknesses as a tool of repression against dissenters and civil society. This presentation will demonstrate the risks that this legislation entails, as well as possible approaches to its improvement from the perspective of the resilient democracy concept.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

17 April 2024 @ 4:00 -6:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Wilson Center, USA

New Cold Wars: China's Rise, Russia's Invasion, and America's Struggle to Defend the West

Join this event for a conversation among David Sanger, Mary Brooks and Robert Litwak, followed by a book-signing and celebration of this work of history, scholarship, and journalism.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

18 April 2024 @ 12:00-13:30 p.m. (GMT+2), The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Sweden

United States Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific and emerging challenges in Asia

In this webinar, two of the handbook's editors are joined by three international scholars and experts on US foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific. They will discuss the contributions of the book in connection to the emerging challenges concerning US policy in the region.

For more information, visit [SIIA].

18 April 2024 @ 10:00 a.m. (GMT+2), Istituto Affari Internazionali, Italy

EU and Ukraine in the Multipolar and Turbulent World: Challenges for Global Security

The ongoing open warfare in Europe, conflicts in the Middle East and growing tensions in different regions all over the world threaten the international security order and the system of international law. In the Public Event organized by School for Policy Analysis - National University Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, in the framework of the JOINT project, led by Istituto Affari Internazionali, this event will discuss how the EU, Ukraine, and others are responding to these challenges.

For more information, visit [IAI].

18 April 2024 @ 10:30 a.m. (GMT-4), Foreign Policy Research Institute, USA

The US-Africa Leadership Summit: Engagement with the African Diaspora

Among the many ambitious goals coming out of the December 2022 US-Africa Leaders Summit was a focus on working with the African diaspora and young African leaders. Just over a year after the summit, Michael Walsh, Melvin Foote, Wendy Wilson, Krista Johnson, and Sinfree Makoni, noted experts on Africa, join FPRI's Africa Program Chair Charles Ray to discuss the status of this initiative.

For more information, visit [FPRI].

18 April 2024 @ 9:30-10:15 a.m. (GMT-4), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Unpacking the 2024 South Korean Elections: Capital Cable

Join the event for a special discussion on South Korea's 2024 National Assembly election, which occurred on April 10, with Dr. Kim Jiyoon, a distinguished political analyst celebrated for her expertise in electoral and public opinion analysis.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

18 April 2024 @ 1:00-2:00 p.m. (GMT+1), Chatham House, UK

How India's democracy shapes its relations with the West

As India goes to the polls in April, in the world's largest democratic exercise, this event – which will launch a forthcoming Chatham House research paper – will discuss the opportunities and challenges facing Western governments in their engagement with New Delhi based on India's democratic credentials.

For more information, visit [Chatham House].

18 April 2024 @ 10:00 -11:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Wilson Center, USA

How Will Russia Pay?: Making Seized Russian Financial Assets Work for Ukraine

Join the event for a discussion with distinguished panelists from Ukraine and the US, moderated by our Global Fellow Mariana Budjeryn, on the international legal, financial, and political aspects of repurposing Russia's frozen assets.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

18 April 2024 @ 10:00 a.m. -12:30 p.m. (GMT-4), Wilson Center, USA

Election Series | Border Policy, Organized Crime, and Migration Between Mexico and the US

To assess the overall landscape of criminal activity related to migrants, the Mexico Institute will host a webinar with scholars and experts from the US and Mexico moderated by Wilson Center Global Fellow Eric Olson. Join the event to learn more.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

18 April 2024 @ 3:00 -4:30 p.m. (GMT-4), Wilson Center, USA

OECD Expansion in Latin America

Join this event for a special discussion about the OECD's Latin America agenda and the future of its regional expansion.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

18 April 2024 @ 3:30 p.m. (GMT-4), Atlantic Council, USA

A conversation with General Jim Hockenhull on an innovative UK Strategic Command

Join us for a discussion surrounding Strategic Command's priorities in today's threat environment and future war-fighting given the changing nature of conflict.

For more information, visit [Atlantic Council].

19 April 2024 @ 3:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Foreign Policy Research Institute, USA

Commemorating the 45th Anniversary of the Taiwan Relations Act – Part II

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, Laura Rosenberger.

For more information, visit [FPRI].

19 April 2024 @ 10:00-11:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Modernizing Army Software Acquisition: Panel Discussion with DASA(SAR) Margaret Boatner and PEO IEW&S BG Ed Barker

The discussion will focus on the historical approaches the Army used to develop software, the key principles of the new policy and how it seeks to disrupt the status quo, and the measures the Army will take to successfully implement the policy. The discussion will be moderated by Dr. Alexis Lasselle Ross, a Senior Associate (Non-Resident) at CSIS.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

19 April 2024 @ 2:30 p.m. (GMT-4), Atlantic Council, USA

Iraq's prime minister on building a stronger relationship with the United States

Al-Sudani will join the Atlantic Council to round out his week-long visit to Washington, DC, which will include a meeting with US President Joe Biden to discuss a number of issues, including enhancing the bilateral relationship between Baghdad and Washington, Iraqi financial sector reforms, and initiatives aimed at fostering economic development.

For more information, visit [Atlantic Council].

22 April 2024 @ 11:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m. (GMT-4), The Heritage Foundation, USA

Ten Years to Save the West: Former Prime Minister Liz Truss on Fighting the Global Left

Join the event for the formal U.S. launch of Ten Years to Save the West: Leading the Revolution Against Globalism, Socialism, and the Liberal Establishment, a new book by the Rt Hon Liz Truss MP, 56th Prime Minister of Great Britain.

For more information, visit [Heritage Foundation].

22 April 2024 @ 4:00 -5:00 p.m. (GMT+1), The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, UK

The New Politics of Russia: Interpreting Change

In this wide-ranging conversation, Dr Monaghan will challenge conventional wisdom and unpick the complex dynamics at play in the relationship between Russia and the West. The webinar will be moderated by Sir John Scarlett, RUSI Distinguished Fellow and former Chief of the British Secret Intelligence Service.

For more information, visit [RUSI].

23 April 2024 @ 4:00 -5:00 p.m. (GMT+3), Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Finland

The Supreme Court in a maelstrom: What is at stake for American justice and governance?

This webinar is a part of a webinar series Transatlantic Currents featuring American experts of political science and international relations organized by the Center on US Politics and Power at FIIA.

For more information, visit [FIIA].

23 April 2024 @ 1:30 -2:30 p.m. (GMT-4), Stimson Center, USA

Maritime Power for Global Security: A Conversation with U.S. Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro

Join for a one-on-one conversation with U.S. Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro with Susan Chodakewitz, Chair of Stimson's Board of Directors. Secretary Del Toro will outline his vision for bold, resilient, and adaptable U.S. maritime statecraft that effectively leverages the power of naval diplomacy to secure a safer and more prosperous world for all.

For more information, visit [Stimson Center].

23 April 2024 @ 2:30-3:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Navigating the Seas with Admiral Lisa Franchetti, Chief of Naval Operations of the U.S. Navy

Join the event for a virtual Smart Women, Smart Power conversation with Admiral Lisa Franchetti, Chief of Naval Operations of the U.S. Navy. Admiral Franchetti will sit down with Dr. Kathleen McInnis, Director of the Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative, for a discussion on the U.S. Navy's priorities as they operate far forward, around the world and around the clock, from seabed to space, in cyberspace, and in the information environment to promote our nation's prosperity and security, deter aggression, and provide options to our nation's leaders.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

23 April 2024 @ 2:00-3:00 p.m. (GMT+1), Chatham House, UK

Israel-Palestine: How regional instability is impacting Syria?

In this webinar, a panel of experts will examine: What is Syria's role in the current regional landscape? How are various actors, including state entities and armed groups, involved in escalating or defusing tensions? How is the conflict impacting the Syrian regime and its relationships with regional countries? What are the possible scenarios for further escalation and the implications for Syria's stability?

For more information, visit [Chatham House].

Recent Book Releases

Hannah Proctor, *Burnout: The Emotional Experience of Political Defeat,* Verso, 272 pages, Published April 9, 2024, For a review, see [Los Angeles Review of books].

Stephen Breyer, *Reading the Constitution: Why I Chose Pragmatism, Not Textualism,* Simon & Schuster, 368 pages, Published March 26, 2024, For a review, see [The New York Times Review of books].

Katie Rogers, *American Woman: The Transformation of the Modern First Lady, from Hillary Clinton to Jill Biden,* Crown, 304 pages, Published February 27, 2024, For a review, see [Los Angeles Review of books].

Lauren Markham, *A Map of Future Ruins: On Borders and Belonging,* Riverhead Books, 272 pages, Published February 13, 2024, For a review, see [The New York Times Review of books].

Jonathan White, *In the Long Run: The Future as a Political Idea,* Profile Books, 271 pages, Published February 1, 2024, For a review, see [LSE Review of books].

Steve Tsang, Olivia Cheung, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping,* Oxford University Press, 294 pages, Published December 7, 2023, For a review, see [Los Angeles Review of books].

Geoffrey M. Hodgson, *The Wealth of a Nation: Institutional Foundations of English Capitalism,* Princeton University Press, 304 pages, Published September 26, 2023, For a review, see [LSE Review of books].

Bruce Robbins, *Criticism and Politics: A Polemical Introduction,* Stanford University Press, 272 pages, Published September 13, 2022, For a review, see [Los Angeles 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 **Department Cultures and Societies at Palermo University** invites paper proposals for its international conference ***"Narratives and the Social Sciences. Interdisciplinary Perspective,"*** to be held on June 26-26, 2024, at Palermo University. The deadline for abstract submission is April 20, 2024. For more information, see [Palermo University].

Jobs and Positions

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **UN House Project Manager** to be based in Cairo, Egypt. Applications are accepted until April 21, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Consultant – Legal gap analysis**. This position is Home-based.Applications are accepted until April 22, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Project Analyst (Business Development)** to be based in the Republic of Moldova. Applications are accepted until April 27, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)** seeks a **Legal Affairs Specialist** to be based in New York, USA. Applications are accepted until April 25, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** seeks a **Consultant - Strategic Knowledge Hub** to be based in Manila, Philippines. Applications are accepted until April 27, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** seeks a **Principal Political Affairs Officer** to be based in New York, USA. Applications are accepted until May 26, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Secretariat].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** seeks a **Senior Legal Officer** to be based in New York, USA. Applications are accepted until April 19, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Secretariat].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** seeks a **Human Resources Officer** to be based in New York, USA. Applications are accepted until April 19, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Secretariat].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** seeks a **Senior Political Affairs Officer** to be based in New York, USA. Applications are accepted until April 18, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Secretariat].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** is looking for an **Associate Legal Officer** to be based in New York, USA. Applications are accepted until May 23, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Secretariat].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** is looking for a **Political Affairs Intern**. This position is

hybrid. Applications are accepted until April 22, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Secretariat].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Programme Policy Officer** to be based in ARUSHA, TANZANIA. Applications are accepted until April 26, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** seeks a **Head of External Relations CST II** to be based in Chisinau, Moldova. Applications are accepted until April 22, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)** seeks a **Senior Regional Advisor** in Dakar. Applications are accepted until May 12, 2024. More information is provided at [UNESCO].

The **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)** seeks a **Project Officer** to be based in Paris. Applications are accepted until April 26, 2024. More information is provided at [UNESCO].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Staff Attorney** to be based in Baltimore, MD USA. Applications are accepted until June 11, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Senior Staff Attorney** to be based in Baltimore, MD USA. Applications are accepted until June 11, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Policy Advocacy and Communication Director.** Applications are accepted until May 8, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks an **Immigration Intern** to be based in the USA. Applications are accepted until May 15, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** seeks a **Safeguarding Manager** to be based in New York, USA. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)** is looking for a **Programme Management Assistant** to be based in Montreal. Applications are accepted until May 7, 2024. More information is provided at [UNEP].

The **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)** is looking for a **LEGAL OFFICER** to be based

in Nairobi. Applications are accepted until April 22, 2024. More information is provided at [UNEP].

The **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)** is looking for a **Programme Management Officer** to be based in Nairobi. Applications are accepted until April 22, 2024. More information is provided at [UNEP].

The **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)** is looking for a **Programme Management Officer** to be based in Geneva**.** Applications are accepted until May 7, 2024. More information is provided at [UNEP].

The **Danish Refugee Council (DRC)** seeks an **Economic Recovery Officer** to be based in Kenya**.** Applications are accepted until April 19, 2024. More information is provided at [UNEP].

The **Danish Refugee Council (DRC)** seeks an **Intern** to work in the **DRC Global Protection Unit** based in Copenhagen. Applications are accepted until April 24, 2024. More information is provided at [UNEP].

The **SOAS University of London** seeks a **Lecturer / Senior Lecturer in Politics and/or International Relations** to be based in London. Applications are accepted until June 15, 2024. More information is provided at [SOAS].

The **University of California Berkeley** is accepting applications for the position of **lecturer of Ethnic Studies**. Applications are accepted until June 15, 2024. More information is provided at [UC].

The **University of Glasgow** is accepting applications for the position of **Lecturer in Economics (R&T**). Applications are accepted until April 28, 2024. More information is provided at [Glasgow].

New York University is looking for a **Part-Time Instructor: "Global Works and Society: Antiquity"** to be based in Madrid. Applications are accepted until May 16, 2024. More information is provided at [NYU].

Cambridge Judge Business School (CJBS) at the University of Cambridge is looking for an **Associate Professor in Finance.** Applications are accepted until October 11, 2024. More information is provided at [Cambridge].

The **University of Oxford** welcomes applications for the position of **Head of Academic Programmes.** Applications are accepted until 18 April 2024. More information is provided at [Oxford].

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